

flexible identity without succumbing to the old essentialism of national authenticity. Cosmopolitics occupies a ticklish position. It renounces two arrogant attitudes — cultural essentialism on the one hand, “the imperial pedigree of universalism” (Scott Malcomson 237) on the other — which it seeks to replace with two imagined communities, one local, the other global, only to confess that at present these new communities are unimaginable. They can be named: “non-imperial (and non-rational) cosmopolitanism,” “our new worldliness,” “translocal connecting,” “a density of overlapping allegiances,” “deterritorialized nationalisms,” “rooted cosmopolitanism.” But these freshly-minted words do not create the (imaginary) social realities that they name. The world may be a text, but it is not one that we are free to write at will. Consequently, Malcomson modestly recommends a “cosmopolitanism of pedagogical patience” (236). Spivak advises that Westerners have fallen prey to their own intricate theories; they will just have to leave the job to others, who can form “a global movement for non-Eurocentric ecological justice” (338).

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Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside The Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998. Pp. xx, 332. \$45.00.

Gauri Vishwanathan's study is a sensitive and compelling treatment of the complexity of conversion and belief in modern society. In her view, religious conversion is one of the most unsettling events in the life of a society, and her study raises the important issue of the place of minority religious groups in the secular nation state. The fundamental issue is the failure of governments and majorities to allow the right of self-definition to minorities. Minorities, or those who convert to minorities, tend to insist that they can at one and the same time be members of a minority tradition and loyal citizens of the nation or larger society in which they live. This is a particularly contentious issue in India (the focus of most of her cases or examples), where adherence to a minority religion, particularly if that religion is perceived in some sense as foreign, is often regarded as an anti-national activity.

Viswanathan argues for the recovery of the subjective in the experience of conversion. Conversion, she contends, is rarely, if ever, simply an act of assimilation; nor, on the other hand, is it an entirely spiritual act undertaken without relationship to cultural, economic, social or political contexts. Rather, conversion can be an act of cultural, political and social criticism as well as a statement of allegiance to a deeply felt religious conviction. As such, conversion is a destabilizing act in modern secular societies, “altering not only the demographic patterns but also the characterization of belief as communally sanctioned as-

sent to religious ideology" (xvi). Conversion can and does function to restore belief, not as assent to a communally sanctioned collection of propositions, but as a subjective act which involves one in "worldliness," that is, issues surrounding civil and political rights. The author asks, "Why, for instance, does history throw up so many instances of conversion movements accompanying the fight against racism, sexism, and colonialism" (xvi)? Viswanathan's concern is to allow the convert to speak for herself or himself rather than allowing the narrative contained in court documents, government legislation and censuses, or the narrative provided by the majority community, to define the act of conversion or belief. Such narratives tend to subvert the religious identity of the convert, and to challenge thereby the right to "the centrality of belief in self-constitution" (240).

Viswanathan's emphasis on recovering the voice of the convert involves her in a discussion of the meaning of belief and conversion. Belief, as she describes it, is a part of "the aspirations, understandings, expectations, needs, imagination and goals that constitute the self-definition of people" (52-53). It is "a dynamic activity capable of producing knowledge" (240), rather than merely the mental consent to a set of communally sanctioned propositions. By thinking of belief in this way, Viswanathan rejects the common, secular understanding of belief as a state of mind and religion as a private act. She also rejects the one-dimensional view of conversion as spiritual awakening; according to Viswanathan, conversion is both an assimilative act and a critique or oppositional activity. As an act of opposition, conversion functions as a critique of both the renounced religion and the adopted religion. In the Epilogue, Viswanathan speaks of conversion as a metaphorical crossing of borders. This image implies movement, dynamism and complexity; it also calls attention to the individual doing the crossing. Viswanathan thinks of conversion as the ongoing attempt of individuals to redefine and remake themselves. She sees it also as "primarily an interpretive act, an index of material and social conflicts" (4).

To convey the complexity of conversion as an interpretive act and belief as a dynamic subjective activity, Viswanathan has organized the volume in contrapuntal style. Borrowing the term "overlapping territories" from Said, she proposes to discuss ideas, movements, lives, countries, and cultural histories that intersect. For example, in the context of India and England, she discusses the overlapping narratives constructed by converts, and constructed about them. These narratives make it evident that not only England and India, but also Hinduism and Christianity, are overlapping territories. As overlapping territories, they were and are meshed together in more intricate ways than court documents, government legislation, censuses, or majority opinion are willing or able to comprehend.

It is fitting, therefore, that Viswanathan begins her study with the conversion of John Henry Newman, a conversion that illustrates her conception of conversion, not as assimilation, but as a complex act of dissent. Her discussion of Newman's conversion sets the stage for a discussion of conversions on the subcontinent. She discusses three court cases from the 1800s dealing with the rights of converts from Hinduism to Christianity; census reports issued between 1872 and 1901; and the conversion stories of Pandita Ramabai, Annie Besant, and Ambedkar. In the court cases, the British attempted, by way of a legal fiction, to equate conversion with civil death, thus depriving converts of their right to property. For legal purposes, and to ameliorate the disruptive potential of the act of conversion, the converts were to be regarded as still Hindu in spite of conversion to Christianity. Thus, for the sake of preserving the right to inheritance, the newly found religious identity of the converts was not only denied, but also recast in terms of the religion being rejected. The census reports undermined the subjectivity of individuals and groups through the creation of over-arching and frequently oppositional categories. These categories in turn became part of the "contrived memory of the population" (157), creating between religious groups, conflicts that continue to this day.

Accounts of Pandita Ramabai's conversion ignore her search for freedom, a search that becomes a profound critique of priestly and patriarchal religion, colonialism, Christian dogma, and the Orientalist construction of Hinduism as sublime philosophy. Annie Besant's multiple conversions have been regarded as arbitrary acts, rather than as complex choices motivated by a pattern of consistently held values that tie together the many apparently disparate phases of her life. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism has been described as a knee-jerk reaction to the failure to secure separate electorates for the untouchables, an approach which overlooks the significance of the twenty or so years it took for him to make the move to Buddhism. His conversion is not simply a rejection of Hinduism, but a rewriting of Buddhism to create a new identity for the political mobilization of the Dalits. In all these cases, the silencing of the subjective voice serves to underline the disruptive nature of the act of conversion.

A recurring issue in these case studies is the question of dual allegiances. As Viswanathan notes, Henry Newman argued, against those who saw adherence to Catholicism as adherence to a foreign creed, that one could be Catholic and truly English. Ambedkar, in the face of charges that his championing of the Dalits was separatist and anti-national, maintained that one could be Buddhist and truly Indian. Both Newman and Ambedkar explored "the possibilities offered by conversion (especially to 'minority' religions) in developing an alternative epistemological and ethical foundation for a national community" (213).

Outside The Fold is, then, a fascinating study of the intersection of histories, cultures, movements and lives. I find somewhat problematic, however, its Saidian juxtaposition of "overlapping territories" against a monolithic Orientalist scholarship which allegedly silences the voices of those it wishes to represent. Said has been criticized, and rightly so, for making out of Orientalism the kind of monolith to which he himself takes exception. Certainly Orientalist scholarship, particularly as it pertains to the study of India, is more complex than such an approach makes it out to be.

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Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss, eds. *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*. Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1998. Pp. vii, 488. Aus \$49.95.

Twenty-five or so years ago I was introduced to Australian literature through the fiction of Patrick White. In search of a guide that would tell me what to read next, I went to the university library, where I discovered H. M. Green's two-volume *History of Australian Literature* (1961), a leisurely, old-fashioned account of all forms of literature written in Australia from 1788 to 1950. A few months later I picked up, in a used bookshop, a battered copy of the 1964 edition of *The Literature of Australia*, edited by Geoffrey Dutton (rev. 1976). Both books stressed major writers and texts; both proved enlightening and helpful. In setting out to review the most recent *Literary History of Australia*, I wondered how I would react to this book if I were approaching it with the same lack of knowledge and eagerness to learn that I brought to my initial reading of Green's and Dutton's books.

In the introduction, "Making Literary History," the editors, Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss, promise that their *History* "is designed to provide a readable and enjoyable entry into the creative spirit of Australia" (5). They warn the reader, however, that they "have not attempted to give a comprehensive coverage of individual writers and their works," and that "major writers or texts" do not engage all of their attention (1). For such coverage, they recommend *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* (1st ed., 1985; 2nd ed., 1994). So this new book is not so much a "history of Australian literature" as it is a "literary history," with the emphasis on "history." It focuses on the broad picture and provides little assistance to the reader interested in a specific writer or text. As a novice all those years ago, I might have found the present volume daunting, perhaps overwhelming, and would have, as advised, sought out the *Companion* as my guide.

But a quarter of a century later, having read much Australian writing and an abundance of criticism, I suppose I have become a little more knowledgeable. So maybe I am ready for a more sophisticated approach — and possibly today's explorer is better prepared than I