

The eighth chapter concerns the French South Pacific and French writing about the area from Bougainville to Gauvain. Edmond reveals the different degrees of skepticism and delight in these writings. Dumont d'Urville, a nineteenth-century explorer, combined fact and fiction to present an indigenous perspective in *Les Zélandais*. Later French writings however such as Pierre Loti's *The Marriage of Loti*, did not subscribe to this approach. Instead, they showed the Pacific as a melancholic and dying place. The exception to this trend was Paul Gauguin. His paintings and writings reflected one who was obsessed with the idea of Tahiti as the primitive female body. Edmond discusses the exotic pictures of the Pacific and the possible ideological assumptions underlying them which gave rise to tropes of Polynesians as "unreliable," "child-like," "savage," and other debasing adjectives that are responsible for reinscribing racial hierarchies and stereotypes.

Finally, Edmond closes with an epilogue discussing the current Western perception of the South Pacific. He laments the recent French nuclear tests in the region and the British support of these tests. They show "a view of the South Pacific as an almost vacant ocean thinly populated by peoples who counted for very little. Oceania continues to be regarded as a space rather than a place" (265).

Edmond's book is encouraging because it raises questions about the tendency to abstract and generalize common in postcolonial studies. The book avoids opacity by combining historical research with insightful textual readings and critiques. And while indigenous perspectives remain blanks to be filled, Edmond carefully differentiates between French and British representations of the South Pacific according to their awareness of cultural difference. On the other hand, as mentioned in the beginning of this review, the brief consideration of indigenous literatures has privileged one way or the other European representations of the Pacific and therefore continues to ignore the "other" perspective.

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Vijay Prashad. *The Karma of Brown Folk*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. Pp. xvi, 253. \$25.95.

This is a timely and interesting exposition of the doings of the South Asian diaspora in the US. Additionally, the author seeks to unfold for us the very much less-than-just behaviour of the US towards this group of relative new-comers to that land. If we revisit, as we surely must, the prevalent practices of historical writing in order to interrogate easy assumptions about centres and margins, and to reposition the writing self in locations other than those of automatic privilege, a study like this one can provide useful insight into the processes whereby such ventures might be carried out profitably. At the same time, *The Karma of Brown Folk* glaringly illustrates how even such necessary projects can

go quite wrong. These errors of judgement, reach, and narrative decisions are likely to be less evident to Vijay Prashad and other Americans of South Asian diaspora as they are to this non-American reader.

To speak to the strengths of the book first, it is important to realize that the adequate and appropriate historical narrativization and documentation of displaced minority experiences call for fresh generic definitions of the mode. This kind of writing enterprise is related, no doubt, to the much talked about phenomenon of “history from below” — at least, there are several obviously shared ideologies and intentions between them. In particular, these include a determination to destabilize, if not actually dismantle, the authority of official histories and mythologies. The cunning use of the latter by the majority culture — passing mythology as history, and mischievously blurring any distinction between them — is an especially favorite strategy to maintain in place an advantageous state of unequal power distribution and a profitable condition of disparate opportunities. Vijay Prashad is an energetic and committed portrayer of majority culture’s conspiracies that allow minority diaspora only limited and pre-determined functions in the overall social project of the US, and force it into roles that encourage almost voluntary self-forgetting and self-refashioning. Effectively transgressing fastidious disciplinary boundaries and demarcations, the author traces aspects of what he believes to be involuted American compulsion about India and Indians in “fields” as diverse as literary history, contemporary sociology, electoral behaviour, and race relations. But, as I will argue below, it is debatable that the US has or has had a widely shared pre-occupation with India or with its Indian immigrants. It is sad that the author himself promotes a couple of shaky mythologies of his own construction.

The sections of the book that seek particularly to illustrate the place of India in American literary imagination constitute to my mind the better parts of it — even though Prashad’s method of approaching and interpreting links in imaginative culture are too narrow and rather doggedly empirical. The discussion of Thoreau’s *Walden*, while providing reliable enough background information about the rise of industrialism in the US, too quickly labels the author’s pragmatic experiment at living a determined and fully conscious life as romantic escapism. Prashad correctly points out that Thoreau was very sceptical about the evils wrought by the “factory system,” but he fails to see this as a criticism of the self-alienation and faceless mass personality such system generates and thrives on, and imagines Thoreau to be a transcendentalist who failed to appreciate the progressivist scientific spirit. While Whitman does seem to Prashad to approve of industrial progress, he is seen as seeking from India only a supplementary function of spiritual input into the West’s “one-dimensional modernity”

(18). So, Whitman's India is "a site of pure spirituality, [of] pure fantasy" (19).

This lack of adequate discrimination in the analysis of very complex works of imagination marks Prashad's treatment of much literature in the book. For example, what might have emerged as a really strong aspect of the book, a properly attentive and socio-critical reading of William Du Bois' virtually unknown 1928 novel, *The Dark Princess*, leaves me particularly unsatisfied. The novel, we understand, gives a particularly enabling role to an Indian princess, Kautalya, who supports the work of the radical Black American hero Matthew, and their child Madhu is, at the end of the novel, the new Maharaja of Bwodpur! Prashad finds all this quite appealing, and uses this fanciful evidence to further his notion of historically grounded Black and Indian solidarity, even of metaphorical racial twinning. Similarly, Langston Hughes' well-meaning but slight poem on Gandhi's fast is quoted in full (172) to illustrate the same idea of solidarity between Indians and American Blacks. It matters little to Prashad that the poet has also written elsewhere: "You are white — /yet a part of me, as I am a part of you." Interestingly enough, in his short poem on Gandhi, Hughes misspells the Indian leader's name three times as "Ghandi" — which must be similar to calling [Martin Luther] King, "Knig" — and without disturbing Prashad in any way. Sure, it may be seen as a small matter, but it might also be seen as a lack of attention that seriously compromises the sense of kinship that Hughes claims. (F. R. Scott, not known for sentimentality, makes no such mistake in his poem "On the Death of Gandhi" in which he writes "The white of my landscape was tinged with his colour./ My mountains were taller.") Elsewhere, though, Prashad is scandalized that some callous and racist American whites hollering "Go back to India" at a group of South Asians in California should not have been able to tell that some of these coloured men came from Pakistan (89).

The Karma of Brown Folk seeks to establish two different arguments, or rather, narratives. First, that the South Asian community in the US has so well established its identity in America as the model citizen of the land that white America routinely uses the examples of extraordinary and remarkable success to further its propaganda against the supposedly inferior character traits of Black Americans. Second, that a long tradition of the Black political movement exists in the US which argues for not only a solidarity between the people of India and the American Black, but also that, according to some versions of this argument, a case can be made for a common racial identity joining the two peoples. This latter position forms the underpinning of some of the literary discussion I have cited above. Starting with the first "myth," one can see that it privileges a racial stereotype even when asking for it to be seen as potentially sinister, especially in the use supposedly made

of it by the American establishment. Comforting as it must be for South Asian seekers of unprecedented material success in America to feel that they have achieved the holy grail in reaching that land, it is far from true that the community is especially admired or even noticed by the masses of that country. A good part of this narrative buys into the myth of the American dream all too readily, and in the process subscribes willy-nilly to a narrow US ideology and chauvinism. It would be hard to ignore an element of oblique self praise in all of this. Moreover, the basis for Prashad's position is a questionably thin thesis drawn from two disparate historical statements. At the start of his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk* — a title echoed by the present study — William Du Bois asked in 1903, "How does it feel to be a problem?" In 1997, a notoriously conservative American politician told a group of immigrants from India "You understand the free enterprise system far better than a lot of people who were born and raised in this country." It is quite likely, Jesse Helms was thinking of Black Americans when he made that remark. Assuming from this that the American system was systematically using the example of Indian immigrants to attack the Black population, Prashad asks rhetorically, "How does it feel to be a solution?" (viii). The trouble is that Prashad reads as well as produces narratives quite irresponsibly — basing his constructions on slight bits of rhetorically attractive sound bites.

Of course, Prashad strongly maintains that the South Asian diaspora in the US is not a particularly nice lot, and beyond making money it is little interested in the political life of the state they have adopted, and that they express their "cultural" life through stultifying and sectarian religiosity and ultra conservative social actions. True as that may be, Prashad still considers the diaspora in the US as a specially privileged lot, even in the eyes of the American majority. One senses a sort of US obduracy in this remark, for it is easy to point out that while the same diaspora in Canada is perhaps not making it into the Fortune 500 — or whatever the Canadian equivalent might be — it is certainly reaching unprecedented high elected public positions, from a Federal Minister (Dhaliwal: Fisheries; Revenue), to the highest elected office, that of the chief executive of a major province, in any First World jurisdiction: Doshanjh, as Premier of British Columbia. Clearly, the reach of the diaspora in Canada far exceeds that of the diaspora in the US, which must have something to do our different orientations in politics and government.

For me, the chapter that holds the most interest deals with the power strategies and cultural agendas of the South Asian diaspora itself. Entitled "Of Yankee Hindutva," this section of Vijay Prashad's book describes a very conservative, mainly patriarchal community of new Americans hailing from the Indian subcontinent. While I am not certain that the phenomenon described by Prashad as "Yankee" is

particular to the US, American perceptions of uniqueness, widely shared even by the very immigrants who are otherwise unhappy in that country, one might reasonably point out that the Indian community in, say, Canada is also similarly affected by a cultural sentimentality that translates into oppressively conservative social activities, especially in the areas of religious belief and family relationships. Still, the depiction of the degree to which Prashad sees the US diaspora infiltrated by regressive Hindu political movements based in India seems frightening. One is aware of the presence of the Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in Canada, but it is a stretch to suggest that they have infiltrated Indo-Canadian cultural bodies, or even temples, in any pervasive way. Similarly, it will be hard to maintain that many, if any, Canadian university campuses house Hindu Students Councils; HCS, it appears from Prashad's description, is quite another thing from the nearly ubiquitous Indian Students Associations we know.

Relying as it frequently does on a deluge of bitty anecdotal "evidence," *Karma* tends to blur the difference between argument and hearsay. Also, it rarely develops in any real sense the inherent narrative potential of the disturbingly numerous "stories" it thrusts upon the reader. The reader's response to this conglomerated mass of minutiae can be quite unnervingly visceral. For example, during a recent flight on an US airline I was rereading parts of Prashad's trendily and rather too conveniently titled chapter, "Of a Girit Consciousness," that lists dozens of sentence-length episodes of racist behaviour of American white people towards South Asian immigrants (87-89). The overall spirit of despair and cynicism that this highly rhetorical section of the book generates forced me, I am embarrassed to admit, to note that the other four passengers seated in my row were also non-whites. At such an unguarded moment I began to doubt that this was coincidental: the American corporate establishment had done it to us again. Did not this humiliating experience confirm what I had just been urged by the book to believe? Only an apprehensive look around the cabin assured me, much later during the flight, that quite a few "people of colour" were also sitting beside white folk!

In making the above observations I purpose only to highlight the rhetorical excesses of Vijay Prashad's exposition that appears to depend more on slight information and high degree of emotion rather than on well thought out arguments. Needless to add, neither this reviewer, nor any other serious reader of the book, will argue in support of racism. But Prashad makes readerly consent difficult by his reliance on slim and peculiar evidence. As I have pointed out earlier, he is unduly impressed by odd and far from verifiably standard arguments — as with the matter of projecting a tradition of Black belief in Black-Indian solidarity and brotherhood, even of a prevalent mythology of a common racial bond between them. Or, on the other hand,

Prashad's view that immigrants of South Asian origin are commonly seen by white Americans as a particularly valuable and noteworthy group in US society. This latter view, which is hardly self evident, is as hiddenly racist as the former one. And neither can be said to have much historical import. We have, then, a historian who ignores historical niceties in favour of novel narrative constructions, but he shows himself also to be an impatient and careless interpreter of his own narratives and the impulses that go into their making.

In spite of the reasonable enough authorial sentiment that "the very conceptualization of a people as having discrete qualities is an act of racist thought" (4), *The Karma of Brown Folk* is the product of an exaggerated racist subjectivity. Moreover, the perspective is markedly "nationalistic," being willy-nilly subsumed by self-alienating US national and parochial predilections. Be that as it may, it seems to me that in spite of all fashionable liberal talk about the evils of nationhood, and the dawn of the post-national world, "nationalism" is the US's primary character and goal — more so than most other countries to which Indians have migrated. It is a nationalism that requires, and gets for the most part, almost total compliance — even when that compliance is resisted or seemingly refused. Hence, it is impossible that the South Asian diaspora in that country, in particular, can ever effectively offer postcolonial resistance to the mainstream. Such resistance, as Gayatri Spivak has recently argued requires not only a keen and knowledgeable interest in the "matter of the other," but also a corresponding "impatience with the matter of [the West; here, the US]."

Now the project of revaluation Prashad is involved in is entirely contained by the matter of the state called the United States of America. Unlike, say, Spivak, he has no commitment to action involving the poor and the exploited outside of the country in which he resides. This leads to absurd statements about the "Communist" movement shaping itself in the United States, about the "vibrancy of the US left" to and the call to "victory" Prashad extends to his "comrades" in arms. (It should not surprise us that an admiring American reader of this book has gone on the Internet to assure his compatriots that the author is really *not a communist*; rather he is a well-meaning liberal who wants to make America a better place for everyone!) No one can seriously believe that a viable "Communist" movement can flourish in that country, unless in typical American fashion one is debasing that term, and in the characteristic American way asserting that unlimited freedom is available to everyone in his country — one, presumably not available even to communists elsewhere — choice, opportunity and liberty being more fully guaranteed by the American nation than by any other. Not surprisingly, Prashad, no more or less than any other American, cannot escape that all-engulfing nationalist trap. This fact

is clear also to anyone who has seen the PBS documentary called "Deshi" in which Prashad figures prominently and which deals with South Asian immigrants in New York City. No matter what minor criticism the production offers of American life and manners, its primary business is to make the newcomers admit in front of the camera that they could not have found a more exciting and promising haven than the unique and diversity-embracing city of New York. One wonders, then, what spin Vijay Prashad might put on the award of this year's Pulitzer prize for fiction to the hitherto unknown Indian-America author Jhumpa Lahiri.

SHYAMAL BAGCHEE

Anuradha Dingwaney Needham. *Using the Master's Tools: Resistance and the Literature of the African and South-Asian Diaspora*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000. Pp. 176. \$45.00.

This slim monograph endeavours, with some success, to examine the varied ways "resistance" may be conceptualised in the work of five writers. Despite the broad sweep of its subtitle, the book's primary focus is quite specific: two texts each by C. L. R. James (*Beyond a Boundary* and *The Black Jacobins*), Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children* and *Shame*), Ama Ata Aidoo (*Our Sister Killjoy* and *No Sweetness Here*), Michelle Cliff (*Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*), and Hanif Kureishi (*The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album*). Needham begins with a rather unconvincing rationale for this selection: she has taught and consequently come to know these books well. However, by the end, her idiosyncratic choice has been validated by the wide range of national affiliations, political stances, and forms of belonging in these writers' work.

Needham's approach to the concept of "resistance," which has a substantial tradition in postcolonial writing and theory, is paradoxically both narrow and broad. It is narrow in its restriction to writers with "Third-World" origins who dwell in the "First World," and whose modes of counter-hegemonic resistance-writing are seen to be direct functions of their location in "the metropole." It is broad in its articulation of the diverse literary and political responses that result and the spectrum of resistant positions from which these authors speak: from James's immersion in metropolitan culture to Aidoo's aggressive hostility towards it.

For Needham, although the gendering here seems accidental, the three male writers in different ways can be seen "inhabiting the dominant or hegemonic forms of belonging" (17) in order to offer "insider" critiques of Britain, Englishness, (neo)colonialism, racism and, in the case of Rushdie, India and Pakistan. (Her avoidance of Rushdie's representation of Britain in *The Satanic Verses* seems odd, however, given her interests.) Needham's female authors, by contrast,