



Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar
1891–1956

“Untouchable,” *dalit* scholar, anti-caste activist, first Minister of Law and Justice, architect of the Indian Constitution.

Introduction & Significance

Using his seminal 1916 essay, “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis, and Development,” as the focal point, my research places B.R. Ambedkar on a vibrant lattice of 20th-century intellectuals and activists in the United States, where Ambedkar spent his graduate student years at Columbia before embarking on a trailblazing career of social and legal reform on issues of untouchability, women’s rights, and civil liberties in his native India.

Ultimately, my project seeks to establish Ambedkar as a cosmopolitan intellectual, whose reverberant legacy can inform our discussions about social justice and democratic thinking today. In the process, I uncover other hidden figures who have been hitherto similarly excluded from this lattice of ideological and rhetorical exchange.

B.R. Ambedkar’s “Castes in India”

Literary and Ideological Genealogies

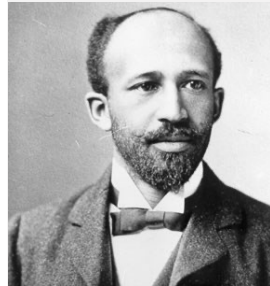
Suan Lee, with Prof. Anupama Rao & *The Ambedkar Initiative*, Columbia University

Ambedkar’s “Surplus Woman”

The husband may die before the wife and create a surplus woman, who must be disposed of, else through intermarriage she will violate the endogamy of the group.

“Castes in India”

Interlocutors



W.E.B. DuBois
1868-1963

These left-over, or to-be-left-over, Negro women miss the inhibitive restraint of culture and social pride... the surplus city spinsters¹

You know what they say about us—call us “surplus women”... “denied our natural functions”... “an economic burden on the state”²



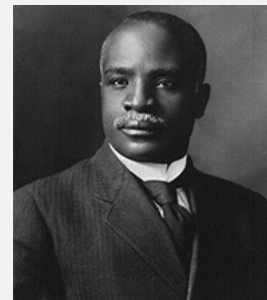
Charlotte Perkins Gilman
1860–1935



Anna Julia Cooper
1858–1964

As colored wage-earners, we are today under a double disadvantage... naturalness of living is a more facile remedy... than by killing off the surplus women³

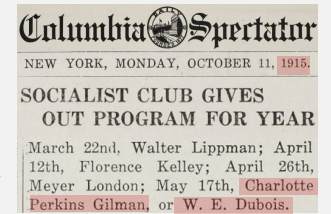
The social degradation of Negroes in cities is the excess of the female⁴



Kelly Miller
1863–1939

Methodology & Ongoing Work

- Annotated reading of John Dewey’s lecture notes for his course *Philosophy 131–132*, which Ambedkar took in 1916. Dewey, one of Ambedkar’s greatest mentors, informed much of the Indian scholar’s own rhetoric and vision of a radical democracy.
- Tracing the usage of “surplus” and “surplus woman” on ProQuest, a vast historical database of newspapers and journals.
- Annotated readings of Ambedkar’s interlocutors and in-depth study of their personal archives and biographies.
- Tracking Ambedkar’s interlocutors through *Spectator* archives to identify physical points of contact with Ambedkar.



References

- [1] W.E.B. DuBois, “Surplus Negro Women” (1909)
- [2] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “A Surplus Woman” (1916)
- [3] Anna J. Cooper, “Colored Women as Wage Earners” (1899)
- [4] Kelly Miller, “A Review of Hoffman’s Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro” (1897)

Acknowledgements



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