

Transnational Solidarities

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ABSTRACT

The author responds to Jedediah Purdy's *This Land Is Our Land* by (1) elaborating on Purdy's insight connecting land and racial injustice to include the situation of Dalits, the more than 16 percent of India's population historically discriminated against and treated as "untouchables"; (2) drawing parallels between indigenous communities in North America and in India; and (3) offering a commentary on transnational solidarity-building. "Wounds are everywhere," and those that we can heal most effectively are those closest to home—and the most difficult to name and redress. Transnational solidarities are not impossible, but they are difficult.

Introduction

Of the many things I appreciate in Jedediah Purdy's *This Land Is Our Land*,¹ the most poignant for me as a Dalit scholar of religion is the connection between racial injustice and the physical environment. In conversation with India's caste system and its injustices, this essay will respond to Purdy's book in three parts. First, it elaborates on Purdy's generative insight connecting land and racial injustice to make some connections to the Dalit situation. ("Dalit" is the name given to themselves by communities that were historically discriminated and cruelly treated as "untouchables.") Dalits account for more than 16 percent of India's population and are connected to indigenous people in India through shared histories of oppression and resistance. In the second part, the essay draws parallels between indigenous communities in the North American context and India. Indigenous communities in India are also called Tribals or *Adivasis* ("original inhabitants") and make up more than eight percent of the country's population. Finally, the essay offers

¹ Jedediah Purdy, *This Land is Our Land: The Struggle for a New Commonwealth* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2019).

a commentary on transnational solidarity-building that I hope will spark conversation.

Dalits and Land

I begin with a quotation from Purdy that describes the land that Pauli Murray—civil rights activist, lawyer, and Christian minister—grew up in and that makes an explicit connection between the topography of land and racialized social landscapes.

Like many black Durhamites, her family lived in “the bottoms,” the downslope flats where small, dirty creeks flood when summer thunderstorms, fall hurricanes, or winter rains saturate the red-clay soil. Murray’s childhood home was just downhill from a grand, then-segregated cemetery that still occupies acres of land a short walk from Duke university’s campus. In rains, she recalled, the water that poured into the lawn and flooded the family garden came down from the white graves up the slope. It was as if other people’s deaths filled the soggy bottom and made it not the Murray’s own, left them with no home they could shape in their own image. The caste system of race and class in this country have always been shaped by unequal answers to some of the oldest questions in human settlement: whose waste is carried away, invisible to them, and who carries and absorbs it? Who can control the boundaries of their own land and water, and finally the boundaries of their bodies, and who is susceptible to permeation, or ends up being treated as matter out of place, a kind of human pollution?²

Murray’s childhood neighborhood is similar to India’s casteist landscapes which unequally distribute vulnerability. The flowing down of waste from upper slopes and the unchosen absorption of this waste by marginalized communities at lower levels—as in the case of many black homes in Murray’s Durham—are features that are very familiar to the Dalits even today. The parts of the village where dominant castes live are often on a higher sea level and those where Dalits live are on a lower level. When it rains,

² Ibid., 42.

dirt washes down towards Dalit households. Caste-ridden topographies thus force Dalit homes to stand right next to stagnating puddles and ponds of drainage, making them susceptible to infectious permeation by casteist waste.

Dalits continue to suffer caste-based discrimination that ranges from various sorts of daily humiliations to brutal forms of violence. Overtly, casteism includes lynchings and murders (by members of dominant castes) of persons deemed to violate dominant caste norms. Covertly, caste-based oppression operates through many means, including endogamous marriages, caste-based political loyalties, and seemingly benign but nevertheless violent actions whitewashed by the label “culture.”³

In a typical Indian village, the part where Dalits live is separated by a tract of land from the area where dominant caste communities live. Quite literally, the land that connects the dominant castes to Dalits is the same land that separates them. Indeed, what Purdy observes about land has an eerie resonance in caste-ridden Indian landscapes: “Land is perennially the thing we share that holds us apart.”⁴

Caste-ridden landscapes are both humiliating and frightening, as I will illustrate with an instance of each of these categories. In a typical Indian village/town, bodies are segregated by land according to the arbitrary ranking of caste-based hierarchy and power. When one uses the word “village” in the local vernacular, its meaning is layered. A first meaning, somewhat benign, conveys that the village is a small municipality of a larger district or state. A second level of meaning—one that often escapes notice—refers to *that part* of the village where dominant caste persons live. In the dominant caste understanding, the “village proper” is only that part where dominant castes live. In other words, it is possible to describe a “village” without any reference to Dalits who also live in it, as if they don’t count.

The Dalit side of every village is often referenced through various othering terms. The idea of “our side” and “their side,” by virtue of being part of the village’s geography, is deeply inscribed into epistemological and

³ For a more elaborate discussion, see chapter two, “Wrongs and Formation of Violent Identities,” in Sunder John Boopalan, *Memory, Grief, and Agency: A Political Theological Account of Wrongs and Rites* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 21-74.

⁴ Purdy, *This Land Is Our Land*, x.

tactile engagements that constantly assess self and other. Because this “us-them” difference is so entrenched, crossing borders of caste often meets with negative, including lethal, consequences. Post offices, banks, schools, and other places of public importance and access are often located in the “village”—away from othered Dalit hamlets, separated by land. Dalits going to the post office must walk through streets lined with dominant caste homes and petty shops on either side. When passing through these streets, Dalit children and youth are often ridiculed and taunted: ridiculed if their clothes are not up to par, taunted if they are. These streets are evidence of the many acts and affects of violence and hatred that make me agree with Purdy that if human persons are to engender a commonwealth, “we would need,” as he puts it, “first, to be a we.”⁵

There is no “we” on casteist streets. There is only “them” and “us.” Importantly, this us-them is neither an accident nor the consequence of some unforeseen contingency. It is intended. This is where land is both witness and evidence to histories of structural violence. Such landscapes are, in Purdy’s words, “the material legacy of cruel and fully intended inequality.”⁶ Caste-ridden landscapes are also frightening because they can be lethal spaces. Dalits are often landless. In households with inadequate sanitation, they use surrounding open lands and fields to relieve themselves. In other instances, they also use these lands and fields as walking paths to other surrounding destinations. Danger lies in each of these excursions; murdered Dalit women’s lives haunt these lands.⁷ Despite such occurrences of brutal injustice, widespread denialism both in India and the US in dominant caste and other circles takes the form of questions like, Did that really happen? or Where is the evidence?⁸ Although these women are missing and missed, the

⁵ Ibid., 96.

⁶ Ibid., 131.

⁷ For a recent example of this widespread casteist violence, see Billy Perrigo, “A Fatal Gang Rape Is Forcing a Reckoning in India Over the Caste System,” *Time*, <https://time.com/5900402/hathras-rape-case-india-violence/>, accessed March 1, 2021.

⁸ See also Sunder John Boopalan, “Religions and the Production of Affect in Caste-Based Societies,” in *Global Vision of Violence*, forthcoming; Richard Fox Young and Sunder John Boopalan, “Studied Silences? Diasporic Nationalism, ‘Kshatriya Intellectuals’ and the Hindu American Critique of Dalit Christianity’s Indianness,” in *Constructing Indian Christianities: Culture, Conversion and Caste*, ed. Chad M. Bauman and Richard Fox Young (New York: Routledge, 2014), 215-38.

land stands as a witness to continuing violence.

When couples fall in love across caste-based divisions, families of the partner from the dominant caste often intimidate and threaten the couple, including carrying out “honor killings” of the less dominant caste person or of both persons. I offer just one example. Shankar, a Dalit man, and Kaushalya, a dominant caste woman, married in 2015 against the wishes of her family. Her family reportedly asked, “Aren’t you ashamed to bear the Thali⁹ tied by a Pallar¹⁰ guy?” Her father’s insulting and injurious words were, “Bearing the child of a Pallar in a Kallar¹¹ womb is blasphemous, don’t you know that? I am ashamed that you were born to me.” Less than a year after their wedding, the couple was attacked by a group of men in broad daylight. The gang hacked Shankar to death, shouting, “How dare you love, you Pallar son-of-a-bitch!”¹²

Dalit filmmaker Nagraj Manjule’s 2016 film *Sairat* portrays the violence of such “honor killings.”¹³ In the story, an inter-caste couple defy all odds and marry each other. For their physical safety, they cross the border to a different state. The girl’s dominant caste family pursues them. In a chilling last scene, her male relatives, under the pretext of a friendly reconciliatory visit, pull out machetes and hack the pair to death and leave. The couple’s young child crawls over his dead parents’ pool of blood and exits the threshold of their modest home leaving a trail of blood on the ground, on the land. Blood cries *from* the ground and *with* it.

Tribals/Adivasis and Land

A focus on land puts into question the legitimacy of modern nation states. In the US and Canada, colonists justified taking the lands of indigenous people

⁹ “Thali” refers to a thread tied by the man around the woman’s neck during a wedding ceremony, symbolizing union. While this symbolism is rooted in patriarchy and heteronormativity, it continues to be a major feature in many weddings.

¹⁰ The Dalit community Shankar belonged to.

¹¹ The caste community Kaushalya belonged to.

¹² Kathir Vincent, “They Killed My Husband, Saying, ‘How Dare You Love?’: Udumalpet Caste Killing Survivor Recounts What Happened,” *Huffington Post India*, https://www.huffingtonpost.in/kathir-vincent/they-killed-my-husband-sa_b_9900086.html, accessed November 1, 2020.

¹³ Available on YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57BBtJCzmIQ>.

“by insisting that only settlers and farmers could properly own and rule a terrain.”¹⁴ Genocidal tropes of “empty land” (*terra nullius*) buttressed such claims. Purdy reminds us that key figures in the U.S. understood “getting free” as amounting to “getting free of other people.”¹⁵ This led to a situation like that when “the people who created the parks and monuments and wilderness areas also wanted to be free of inconvenient kinds of people.”¹⁶ Today’s “wilderness” in North American contexts did not simply arise out of nowhere but rather is the result of violent genocidal strategies against indigenous people forced out of their ancestral lands. Purdy offers a poignant account of how for notable conservationists “it was a short step from managing forests to managing the human gene pool.”¹⁷

Indigenous people today are reclaiming their identities and ancestral lands. Their reclamation efforts put them into direct conflict with nation states and pull away the veil of empty rhetoric about democracy. Theologian George E. “Tink” Tinker helps frame this point:

We must be clear about this one thing: states *must necessarily* oppress indigenous people, must destroy our self-identity, our cultures, and our religious and spiritual traditions. States have no choice but to oppress and suppress precisely because our ancient claim to land is a constant and persistent challenge to the legitimacy and coherence of the state and its claim by virtue of discovery (read conquest) of our territories.¹⁸

Indigenous peoples’ claim to land is indeed “a constant and persistent challenge” to modern nation states’ legitimacy. Tinker’s astute observation that nation states must “necessarily oppress indigenous people” proves to be a reality. India’s recognition of indigenous people is an interesting case in point. The Indian government voted in favor of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), but with a condition in the form of an innovative but oppressive argument. India argued that all Indians after

¹⁴ Purdy, *This Land Is Our Land*, ix.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁸ George E. Tinker, *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 25.

1947, the year India gained independence from the British, are considered indigenous, thus erasing the claim of first peoples or original inhabitants.

Nevertheless, many indigenous communities use the term *Adivasis* (“first inhabitants” or “original inhabitants”) to refer to themselves. It is a political term that asserts rights of occupancy to ancestral lands. However, when indigenous people assert their land rights, they are often penalized under draconian sedition laws from the colonial era that punish persons who “attempt to excite feelings of disaffection against the government.” Under such laws, to offer one example, India charged 10,000 indigenous people of sedition in the state of Jharkhand.¹⁹ Such are the oppressive ironies in modern democracies.

When seen through the lens of land, such injustices are not failures of an ill-functioning democracy but rather the direct consequence of how modern nation states constitute themselves. This is why I appreciate what Purdy calls “a favorite liberal story” that blames societal polarization and division on “a crisis of norms” or the “loss of stabilizing political virtue.”²⁰ Loss of political virtue or not, structural injustice in regard to land continues to be an original sin with recurring unpleasant consequences. Modern democracies often mistakenly believe that democracies work merely because citizens have the ability to vote and in principle can participate. In practice, however, the weight of structural injustice and the shadow of an unequal history often reveals the lurking specter of an intended unequal democracy.

Two methods or motifs of liberalism marginalize indigenous and other oppressed communities who live on land. The first occurs in the name of “development.” Someone always pays the price for development in a democracy, as Purdy observes. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, spoke of big dams as “temples” of development.²¹ Naming “temples” as a positive feature is counterintuitive; it makes Dalit ears prick up because actual temples were (and still are) at the heart of caste-based

¹⁹ Supriya Sharma, “10,000 People Charged with Sedition in One Jharkhand District. What Does Democracy Mean Here?,” November 18, 2019, <https://scroll.in/article/944116/10000-people-charged-with-sedition-in-one-jharkhand-district-what-does-democracy-mean-here>, accessed March 1, 2021.

²⁰ Purdy, *This Land Is Our Land*, 19.

²¹ Brij Kishore Sharma, “Jawaharlal Nehru’s Model of Development,” *Indian History Congress* 73 (2012): 1292-1302.

discrimination. Dalits were disallowed from entering Hindu temples and punished for doing so. It is no surprise, then, that dams as modern “temples” discriminated against similar others on the margins.

Indigenous communities often pay the price for so-called development in modern democracies because their claim to land comes into conflict with national desires. Similar to how development on, and of, sacred grounds of indigenous people in North America is a source of displacement, big dams in India are notorious for displacing indigenous communities.²² When seen transnationally, it is frightening to consider how national development often violently displaces indigenous communities from lands and spaces they have stewarded for centuries.

The second method of marginalization occurs in the name of conserving land. Thus, conservation often becomes development’s leftist-posing liberal partner. In the state of Madhya Pradesh in 2014, government authorities evicted indigenous people from their traditional lands in the name of conservation in order to create the Kanha Tiger Reserve.²³ This presents a dilemma, because indigenous people have sophisticated practices that maintain the integrity of forests and land. Tinker is again helpful here, noting that “when [indigenous people] are presented with the concept of development, it is *sense-less*.”²⁴ As one envisions a commonwealth in conversation with Purdy, it is thus essential to insist with Tinker that “there are peoples in the world who live with an acute and cultivated awareness of their intimate participation in the natural world as part of an intricate whole.”²⁵ Degradation of these very persons nevertheless persists violently and often with impunity. Purdy’s recognition of this degradation is generative and opens up cross-disciplinary and transnational conversations.

²² Shone Satheesh, “Hundreds of India Villages under Water as Narmada Dam Level Rises,” *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/23/hundreds-of-india-villages-under-water-as-narmada-dam-level-rises>. accessed March 1, 2021.

²³ Abhijit Mohanty, “Tribal Communities Suffer When Evicted in the Name of Conservation,” *DownToEarth*, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/forests/tribal-communities-suffer-when-evicted-in-the-name-of-conservation-64376>. accessed March 1, 2021.

²⁴ Tinker, *American Indian Liberation*, 82.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Alternatives: Whither from Here?

Envisioning alternatives is not straightforward. One should pay heed to Purdy's warning against looking to "a movement of professionals and lawyers."²⁶ In the pursuit of alternatives, therefore, one ought not to be enamored with elitist approaches that "have limited interaction with, and do too little to empower"²⁷ the people whom they say they are concerned about. If liberal democracies are to truly become commonwealths, privileged persons constituting these landscapes cannot simply speak beautiful words by lobbying at a high level.²⁸ As Purdy notes, we need to "make enough room for popular engagement."²⁹

As I bring this essay to a close, I'd like to sketch the possible conditions of such popular engagement. My first observation concerns the reality of exhaustion among those who bear the weight of the struggle. The struggle for a new commonwealth is not new, and the voices of those articulating it are often faint because their visions are "blocked again and again."³⁰ Treated as "matter out of place" (recall Purdy's description of Pauli Murray's childhood home), those on the margins are often weary. *Song in A Weary Throat*, the original title of Pauli Murray's autobiography, captures the feeling often expressed by those on the underside of power. As Dalit activist Christina Dhanaraj puts it:

This is what is asked of us—to get up after being beaten, to dust off the dirt after being pushed, to keep trooping against an army of hateful caste soldiers, every day. This might seem inspiring for some, but for us, it's tiring. It's wearing us out, like it did our mothers and grandmothers.³¹

Envisioning an alternative must start with deep gratitude to, and solidarity with, those at the margins. It is by centering those on the margins of power—and holding oneself accountable to them—that agential possibilities might arise.

²⁶ Purdy, *This Land Is Our Land*, 109.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., xiv.

³¹ Christina Dhanaraj, "Red Earth and the Sky a Dalit Blue," *Outlook India Magazine*, October 19, 2020, 28.

I offer another nod to Purdy's insights. "Because our problems are global," I agree that we need "an internationalism that raises questions of distribution and justice within the limits of an ultimately finite planet."³² It is this logic that has informed my response in this essay to make transnational connections. Although transnational solidarities are not novel, they face risks. Purdy is well aware of this, and names several: the left, the neoliberals, the neoconservatives, and the new populists.³³ Speaking of anything "transnational" from a US location is fraught with danger, given America's historical role in overthrowing democratically elected leaders and crushing mass movements in the name of fighting communism or some other imagined danger.³⁴ One thus needs viable alternatives to the "selfish nationalism"³⁵ that powerful nation states offer their subjects. To put it differently, how might voting citizens of empires like the US forge transnational solidarities with integrity, when their very desires are constantly shaped by the forces of empire?

Forces of empire not only spur misrepresentations of "outsiders" but also invisibilize othered subjects within nation states themselves. Indigenous people in the US are often invisibilized in mainstream politics, academia, and even activist circles. For instance, I witness colleagues describe "eastern" spiritualities (Buddhism is a popular candidate) as wholistic. But aren't indigenous spiritualities within the US just as wholistic, if not more so? Why the fascination with religions of the east rather than with indigenous spiritualities within the US? Tinker has asked and answered this very question. He notes that colonial ways of thinking have a history of debunking indigenous knowledge and that "today's liberals among the colonizers more often dismiss our best intellectual reflection with the cursory judgment of 'interesting.'"³⁶ In short, perceptions of what power is and where it lies are shaped by imperial frameworks rather than by impulses and desires for solidarity. Thus I appreciate Purdy's critique of liberals and liberalism as

³² Purdy, *This Land Is Our Land*, 101.

³³ See for instance Purdy, *This Land is Our Land*, 100.

³⁴ Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997); Kyle B. T. Lambelet, *¡Presente!: Nonviolent Politics and the Resurrection of the Dead* (Washington: Georgetown Univ. Press, 2020).

³⁵ Purdy, *This Land Is Our Land*, 101.

³⁶ Tinker, *American Indian Liberation*, 18-19.

much as his indictment of right-wing majoritarianism.

In desiring to form relationships of solidarity with those who suffer the most, one must be wary of mere appearances of solidarity. Otherwise, commonwealths become a mirage. Let me now shift our attention to some predicaments in the Indian context to offer an example from the other side of the transnational conversation generated in this essay. The Black Lives Matter movement has galvanized popular movements globally, impacting several countries, including India. Indian Twitter handles owned by dominant caste persons—including notable celebrities—were hot with #BlackLivesMatter hashtags. An uncomfortable question arises, as some of those tweets came from Indian celebrities who endorsed fairness skin creams. These creams (“Fair and Lovely” is one of many) are essentially bleaching products that damage human skin.³⁷ The question that many Dalits and others asked was simply, How can one say Black lives matter when simultaneously endorsing skin creams that promote anti-blackness? Furthermore, if solidarity with those on the margins was really what the celebrities were after, why do instances of caste-based violence not gain as much traction among media-savvy Indians?

Writer-ethnographer Temsula Ao’s caution that globalization when uncritical can make communities “commodity markers stripped of all human significance”³⁸ is useful to remember. Disembodied global imaginations can create optical and other illusions. While being positively affected by global movements is better than recoiling from them, we must guard against illusory visions of a commonwealth that are not ethically sensitive to what is happening on the ground locally. Disembodied visions and aspirations might inadvertently become manifestations of a rejection of interdependence. Real interdependence that believes that “everyone alive has an equal claim to thrive in this world”³⁹ will need to focus on local

³⁷ Sakshi Venkatraman, “Bollywood Actors Called out for Protesting Racism While Promoting Skin Whitening Creams,” *NBC News*, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/bollywood-actors-called-out-protesting-racism-while-promoting-skin-whitening-n1226211>, accessed March 1, 2021.

³⁸ Cited in Keneipfenuo Rüpreo Angami, “COPIOUS AMIDST CHAOS: A Tribal Postcolonial Feminist God-Talk from Northeast Indian Perspective,” Doctoral Thesis, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands (2018), 36.

³⁹ Purdy, *This Land is Our Land*, 99.

material realities and wounds. The weight of structural injustice will have to be borne through concrete actions attentive to local on-the-ground realities. Wounds are everywhere, and those that we can heal most effectively are the ones closest to home. They are also the most difficult to name and redress. This does not mean that transnational solidarities are a lost cause, only that they are difficult. Purdy's book evocatively articulates this difficulty. I am most moved.

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