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Reading Dalit Feminist Praxis as Strategic Essentialism

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Introduction

In the 1990s, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) became the subject of immense controversy among different feminist groups around the world. Institutional actors like states, inter-governmental organisations, and international financial institutions seemed to praise NGOs as 'magical bullets' where nothing short of miracles were to be expected, while critical feminist scholarship often problematized the work of NGOs as corporatized and ineffectual through the introduction of terms such as 'NGO-ization' (Alvarez 2009, 175). Analyzing the academic scholarship on this era of international feminism, Sonia Alvarez (2009) explains that "blanket assessments of feminist NGOs as handmaidens of neoliberal planetary patriarchy" emerged, especially in the Latin American context where NGOs were considered "veritable traitors to feminist ethical principles who depoliticized feminist agendas and collaborated with neo-liberal ones" (176).

A similar discourse has spread in the Indian feminist context, as Srila Roy (2009) explains that present-day narratives regarding 'co-option' and 'depoliticization' of the Indian Women's movement "constitute a narrative of loss in which a politically more 'authentic' past functions as a normative standard for feminist politics in the present, and as a prescriptive model of feminism's future" (341). The ageing of the women's movement into an apolitical present is often marked by the decade of the 1990s, where globalization, liberalization of the economy, and a deepening of caste and religious based cleavages seen through the rise of Hindu nationalism all meant that it was increasingly difficult to see revolutionary futures come out of Indian activism. Roy demonstrates how a sense of melancholic loss dominates the Indian Women's movement today, promoting "a potentially conservative politics that seeks to contain feminism in a once loved but now lost 'home'" (ibid.).

While we can empathize with this sense of loss, this proposal argues that understanding the emergence of dalit feminist standpoint in the 1990's and its methods of activism reveals how the melancholic characterization of the Indian Women's movement ignores critical theoretical interventions in the feminist movement by dalit women. Rather than ignore the contributions of dalit feminist activists, I choose to critically engage with their praxis, offering tools for understanding their complex discursive strategies and inviting more scholarship that grapples with the nuances of their standpoint, instead of relegating them in the binary of good/bad NGO actors.

By re-reading acts of dalit feminism in the 90's, the goal is then *not* to invert general opinion from perceiving this era of 'bad' NGOs to actually containing 'good' NGOs, but rather to give back agency to this historical moment and the legacies it contains. Through an analysis of the work of representatives from the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) from 1992-2001, I show how technical professional organizations like the NFDW are simultaneously critical actors in radical feminist theorization. Reading the actions of the NFDW at the Beijing Women's Conference as an articulation of dalit feminist standpoint, I argue that the emergence of dalit feminist standpoint involved a shift from a relatively homogenizing discourse around dalithood as indigeneity to a renewed focused on dalithood as a condition of being oppressed. This shift is enabled by acts of historical recuperation that aim to construct a sense of cultural identity, a process I understand through the lens of Gayatri Spivak's term 'strategic essentialism'. Strategic essentialism is to be understood as a deconstructive move performed within a constrained situation; an act of identification which leads to contentious and provocative negotiations about the temporality of culture and possibility for belonging, producing possibilities for further change even while understanding the limits in its epistemic potential.

Ultimately, by engaging with this moment in history we not only provide inspiration for resistance against melancholic conservativism, but also address substantive questions regarding how marginalized groups deal with questions of sameness and difference in the historical efforts that characterize their revolutionary praxis.

In part one, I offer brief background on how ideas around caste will be used throughout the paper.

In part two, I walk through a canonical debate on understanding dalit feminist standpoint and their relationship to *difference* that occurred between prominent scholars of dalit study Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege, and Chhaya Datar. Before we attach labels to dalit feminist praxis, we must first understand the histories it emerges from and its visions for change, clarifying the subject of study. This debate is a unique discursive moment as it unfolds between scholar-activists of dalit study who are engaged in the work themselves and is sparked by the same moment that this proposal offers an alternate reading of, the 1995 conference at Beijing. I draw from their insights in my eventual analysis in part five.

In part three, I define my use of the term 'strategic essentialism', synthesizing across different revisions that Spivak has made to the term. I clarify the problem-space of essentialism and strategy to argue that it can be understood as a method by which marginalized identities reclaim their agency through the act of self-identification.

In part four, I situate strategic essentialism in the specific context of dalit feminist activism. Relying on Aniket Jaaware's conception of caste as touch, Ruth Manorama's writings on dalit self-image, and Franz Fanon's theorizations on the relationship between marginalization and historical recuperation, I aim to understand the intentions through which dalit feminists choose to put forth their strategically essentialist positionality.

In part five, I analyze three key moments of dalit feminist activism across the 1990's, focusing primarily on the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing. I track a shift in dalit feminist discourse that comes with the consolidation of different viewpoints into dalit feminist standpoint, as represented by the actions of the National Federation for Dalit Women (NFDW). I show that NGOs like the NFDW are engaged in projects of radical feminist theorization, and as such remembering their actions can help us navigate a political era where means of transformation seem absent.

I. Background

Caste is a complex social phenomenon that exists as a defining feature of Indian society. As Anand Tetumble (2020) explains, the category of caste is constituted by understandings of at least two more terms: *varna* and *jati*. Varnas were brought into India by conquering tribes of Aryans, creating a graded hierarchical system of occupation split into four groups: Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra. The upper three castes are given rituals of initiation, while the shudra is excluded from this process of being 'twice-born'. Jatis are a more local conception of caste that are widespread throughout India and carry further notions of social standing. Varnas can be seen as defining the borders of Hinduism, whereas jatis (castes) are often confined to borders of ethnolinguistic regions, and often map hazily onto intermediate varnas depending on the region (ibid.).

'Dalits' then are a product of the Indian caste system as they are excluded from definition. Tetumble explains that "the etymology of 'Dalit' is traced to the root dal in Sanskrit which means split, break, crack or crushed. As an adjective Dalit came to signify broken or ground down and evolved to mean oppressed, exploited and downtrodden" (2020). It is a term whose present usage to describe the identity of 'outcastes' can be traced to the ideas of social

reformer Mahatma Jotirao Phule as well as the emergence of dalit literature coming out of the Dalit Panther movement in the 70's (ibid.). Caste is canonically understood as guided by rules of purity and pollution that reproduces itself through an enclosed system of endogamy, summarized by Partha Chatterjee (2020) as: "the biological reproduction of the human species through procreation within endogamous caste groups that ensures the permanence of ascribed marks of caste purity or pollution" (194).

For this paper, I rely on Aniket Jaaware's *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching*, a book that uses phenomenology, structuralism, and post-structuralism to characterize caste a practice of regulating touch. In understanding the intentions behind dalit activism, I concur with Jaaware's suggestion that what is needed is not solely a study of caste's origins, but also a historicizing of its practice: caste as embodied in the everyday lives of people (Jaaware 2018, 125).

Crucial to Jaaware's discussion of touch is the idea of "trace". He writes that trace "works fundamentally with the cause-effect metonymy, where the cause can be deduced from the effect." The example given is a fingerprint found on a glass: the existence of my print on a glass implies that the glass was touched, and moreover, it implies that I was present beside the glass in order to touch it (excluding the case of falsification, where someone else 'plants' my print) (ibid., 155). Knowing that my fingerprint is attached to my hand is attached to my body, one can deduce traces of my presence everywhere. Now, if we let fingerprint become a metonym for any and all recognizable markers that indicate presence, then our conception of trace can be found in abundance, everywhere.

Regulations on touch then become regulations on presence and absence, broadening the discussion of caste much beyond inter-marriage and inter-dining, as it is often canonically

understood. Inter-marriage and inter-dining seem to operate as higher-level social phenomena that arise from pre-conceived socialization regarding touch, rather than the other way around. Caste in its lower-level character feels infinite and carries randomness, including "the accidental but scathingly erotic touch of a table, or a cousin or some other person, a cushion perhaps, or the door handle or tap if it matters or, as always, the painful cut from the knife accompanied by onion smell and tears, distraction and randomness" (ibid., 160). Seeing how touch leaves trace, implying presence, reveals how the act of touching others is then also read as an act of touching oneself. Caste can then be seen as a system that centers around regulating the presence of ourselves towards others, others' presence towards us, and our own presence towards ourselves. "Untouchability then, in both its forms [higher and lower social phenomenon], seems to be a denial of bodily presence. It is not surprising at all therefore, that metonymies of bodily presence are submitted to similar regulations" (ibid.) In this context, any trace of bodily presence must be understood through its diffusion, intentional or unintentional.

Having this understanding, we can now discuss explicitly the character of dalit feminist standpoint, drawing out the reasons for its emergence as well as pointing towards the aims of the movement.

II. Understanding Dalit Feminist Standpoint

From 1995-2000, a debate took place between prominent scholars of dalit study Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege, and Chhaya Datar. The debate focused on questions regarding the recent emergence of autonomous representation of dalit women at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing. Analyzing the tensions between each author's positions sheds light on the questions: what caused dalit women to advocate for their own forms of autonomous representation, and what visions of change does dalit feminist standpoint offer? Through

addressing these questions, we will subsequently be able to analyze the actions of practitioners of dalit feminist standpoint in more representative context.

The debate was sparked by Gopal Guru's 1995 article "Dalit Women Talk Differently", an article released nearly a month after the Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing. In it, Guru discusses the realization of independent and autonomous forms of representation for dalit women. He notes that the integration of women's issues into the global public agenda in the last several decades has relied on a discursive politics of "difference" in order to mobilize support. This has meant that Indian women have been able to particularize themselves as subjects who face the similar oppression of patriarchy, but with specific differences in the Indian context that demand attention in the global sphere. Given the rise of this discursive framework, Guru (1995) argues that "the organization of dalit women around the notion of difference is bound to be a logical outcome" (2548). Here, Guru is alluding to the fact that just as the global category of 'woman' is unstable, the particularized category of 'Indian woman' is also an unstable one, marked with stark differences between dalit and non-dalit women. Historically, he pinpoints the first "independent and autonomous assertion of dalit women's identity" in the formation of National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) at Delhi on August 11. Guru's central claim is highlighted from the outset when he remarks that "Dalit women justify the case for talking differently on the basis of external factors (non-dalit forces homogenising the issue of dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the dalits)" (ibid.).

In regard to "external factors", Guru highlights how mainstream Indian feminism's (also referred to as *savarna* feminism, often meaning caste-ignorant feminism; akin to the discourse of 'white feminism' in the US context) discussion of rape and sexual violence is confined to discussions of either class, criminality, psychological aberration, or illustrations of male

violence. However, “the caste factor also has to be taken into account which makes sexual violence against dalit or tribal women much more severe in terms of intensity and magnitude” (ibid.). Moreover, despite appreciating the early radicalism of the rural women’s movement in Maharashtra, dalit women found themselves unable to relate to issues raised regarding land and crop prices, as they have been systematically denied access to land under the justification of caste. These examples illustrate that “beneath the call for women’s solidarity the identity of the dalit woman as ‘dalit’ gets whitewashed and allows a ‘non-dalit’ woman to speak on her behalf” (ibid.).

Guru’s discussion of “internal factors” focuses on how dalit political movements are dominated by patriarchal biases that have suppressed the expression of dalit women. Although brief, Guru mentions the exclusion of dalit women from electoral politics (a representational issue is still visible today) and also in cultural movements. In the latter, dalit men are not only more frequently recognized, but their writings are often seen as portraying reductive images of dalit women that are unable to move beyond representations of victimhood and subjugation. In separating from dalit men, Guru argues that dalit women are not engaging a divisive project, but rather, they are using their “epistemic privilege” as members from a more marginalized positionality in order to carry forward positive emancipatory energies.

Underlying this argument is the idea that social location rigidly determines one’s perception of reality, making “the representation of dalit women’s issues by any non-dalit woman less valid and less authentic” (ibid.). Despite the strength of this assertion, Guru seems to complicate a hermetic conflation of experience and authority by the end of the piece. For example, he points to how dalit women from Maharashtra are better educated than counterparts from Karnataka, leading to potential conflicts that must be negotiated through active grassroots

incorporation. Moreover, he warns dalit feminists of the issue of co-optation by male dominated state politics. Despite these complications, Guru celebrates the work of the NFDW as a movement committed to egalitarian social transformation. He ends the piece with a call for dalit women to mobilize as a collective critical of the homogenization within dominant discourse, refusing to fetishize their own reality, and therefore avoiding the "ghettoization of dalithood" (ibid., 2549). While Guru raises important concerns regarding the phenomenon of self-ghettoization, he is mistaken in assuming that it is the only problem with a politics fixated on identity.

Three years later, Sharmila Rege would respond to Gopal Guru with her article "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position." Here, she agrees with Guru's basic premise that dalit feminism is born out of a process of exclusion (from savarna feminism as well as masculinized dalithood). She develops this critique by attributing the 'stasis' in western feminism to be the result of the alliance between feminism and post-structuralism that encourages an ideological position of holding multiple/plural feminist standpoints without interrogating their relationality (Rege 1998, 39). She faults the postcolonial ("Saidian") framework for being unable to accommodate the histories of non-brahman movements and their use of colonial law, justice, and administration as major resources given its excessive focus on colonial domination. This absence of exploration, from savarna feminists as well as dalit men, hinders the dialectics of revisioning contemporary feminist politics as well as the sharpening of the positions put forth by autonomous dalit women's organisations (ibid.).

However, Rege charges Guru's over-reliance on identity politics as reproducing this set of hindered dialectics, using black feminist thought in order to complicate Guru's notion of

'difference'. She invokes Patricia Hill Collins's famous *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*: "Black feminist thought represents only a partial perspective…by understanding the perspectives of many groups, knowledge of social reality can become more complete" (Collins 1990, 234). That is, Rege seeks to transform 'difference' into 'standpoint' by working out the cultural and material interactions between different hierarchies of class, gender, race, etc. as it experienced by different groups. In this way, Rege seeks to name the difference that constitutes dalit women's subjectivity, but not necessarily privilege it over other frames of being that may contribute to the emancipatory potential of dalit women's organisations and their epistemological standpoints. As such, she concludes that

> The dalit feminist standpoint which emerges from the practices and struggles of dalit woman, we recognize, may originate in the works of dalit feminist intellectuals but it cannot flourish if isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups who must educate themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations and utopias and the struggles of the marginalized. A transformation from 'their cause' to 'our cause' is possible for subjectivities can be transformed. By this we do not argue that non-dalit feminists can 'speak as' or 'for the' dalit women but they can 'reinvent themselves as dalit feminists'. Such a position, therefore avoids the narrow alley of direct experience based 'authenticity' and narrow 'identity politics'…This process, we believe is one of transforming individual feminists into oppositional and collective subjects (Rege 1998, 45)

I quote this at length to underscore the 'anti-essentialist' characterization of dalit feminist standpoint as not confined to dalit women themselves. This process of transforming subjectivity implies a constant task of reflexivity that non-dalit women must take up in their praxis. In this process, dalit feminist standpoint should always be open to emancipatory revision while nevertheless emphasizing the importance of uplifting the unique voice of 'dalit women'.

One year after Rege's article, Chhaya Datar published a response directed towards Rege with her essay "Non-Brahman Renderings of Feminism in Maharashtra: Is It a More Emancipatory Force?" Her central argument is that dalit feminist standpoint, by focusing merely on the project of cultural revolt, ignores the project of ecofeminism, which offers a materialist

alternative paradigm to the modern capitalist system that is necessary for the liberation of all marginalized groups, including dalit women (Datar 1999, 2964-2965). For example, Datar critiques Ambedkar's endorsement of industrialization and urbanization as a path for the liberation of dalits by noting the present reality that dalits are pushed to slums and often displaced in this process of migration to megacities. For Datar, this standpoint might be limited by dalit feminism's cultural focus and embracement of Ambedkar's modernity. As such, she argues that a cultural revolt is necessary, but ultimately should be part of a broader search for alternative paradigms offered by material standpoints like ecofeminism. Finally, Datar claims that a significant limitation of dalit feminism is its abstraction of the category of 'dalit women'. She explains that the conditions of lowest caste groups have nothing in common with and are often opposed to women of different groups (particularly higher-caste). In this way, to claim that the interests of dalit women are the most emancipatory visions for all women would mystify the reality of caste and difference (ibid.).

The final moment of this dialogue is Rege's response to Datar in 2000 titled "Real Feminism and Dalit Women: Scripts of Denial and Accusation". I focus on how Rege clarifies two key components of dalit feminist standpoint: first, that it sees caste as cultural without ceasing to be material (i.e. brahmanism, a cultural phenomenon, carries material impacts in its production, distribution, and effect); second, that the reflexivity required in the transformation of non-dalit women's subjectivity to dalit feminist standpoint is also required of dalit women themselves.

First, Rege claims not to have ignored eco-feminism, but rather to have collapsed it as a variant of cultural feminism. In her perspective, "alternatives to global capitalism cannot view environmental degradation as merely a result of industrial growth and technology or faulty state

policies but have to locate the degradation as an integral part of the existence, growth and constitution of contemporary capitalism" (Rege 2000, 493). By working outside of the binary between 'material' and 'cultural', Rege is able to address Datar's concerns about Ambedkar's modernity as well, noting that "questions that are posed as 'to be for' or 'against' modernity underrate the dialectics of modernity and development and overlook the possibilities of reflexive development" (ibid.). Dalit feminist standpoint therefore embraces Ambedkar's *reflexive* modernity, giving it a dialectal nature, open to the changing conditions of history shaped by a cultural-material nexus.

Second, it's important to note that Rege does not dismiss the value of ecofeminism, but rather is able to situate it within the way dalit feminism negotiates tensions of sameness and difference. In rejecting the dichotomization of the material (as environmental degradation) and the cultural (as brahmanism), dalit feminist standpoint instead seeks a historical interrogation of what divides/connects different women and in doing so, is itself open to radical interrogations, such as those posed by ecofeminists. Instead of arguing over who has the more or less complete standpoint, Rege calls for an understanding of how social movements have failed to incorporate each other's issues (ibid.). This engagement with Datar draws out a powerful extension of Rege's original piece, namely that even as dalit feminist standpoint organizes around the issues of dalit women as a subject position, "it is a collective subject position that requires an always contingent transformation of complex subject positions…the standpoint is a project not an inheritance, it is achieved, not given" (ibid., 495).

Through Guru, we understand that dalit feminism emerges out of the exclusion from savarna feminism and dalit politics. Rege then argues that dalit feminism must be understood as 'standpoint', implying that it is a positionality that asks to be taken up by all identities.

Moreover, Rege's discussion with Datar elucidates how for dalit feminist standpoint to maintain its radical edge, it must not just call for, but also continue to embrace an approach to reflexivity within itself. Given this framing, we can now ask, how do dalit feminists deploy this reflexivity? What language can we develop to understand how it is embodied in their practice? Do we think that actors who claim dalit feminist standpoint (like the NFDW, which kickstarts the entire discussion between Guru/Rege/Datar) successfully engage in praxis as outlined by Rege? In an attempt to build vocabulary that allows scholars to engage in a serious evaluation of dalit feminist praxis, I argue that organisations such as NFDW employ 'strategic essentialism' in their attempts at mobilization and advocacy across nation-state borders. Given that strategic essentialism is a term that is identified with postcolonial theory and carries many different connotations, it becomes important to situate the context in which we understand it before attaching this label onto dalit feminist praxis.

III. Understanding Strategic Essentialism

Strategic essentialism is a term made famous by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Its first articulation seems to come from a 1984 interview with Elizabeth Grosz, where Spivak is asked about her characterization of the 'universal' oppression of women under patriarchy, namely in context of her reading clitoridectomy as a universal metonym for women's social and legal status. Spivak (1990) defends her claims of universality by situating her remarks as attempting to engage in opposition to the 'hegemonic space of feminist discourse' (10). She argues that her personal work deeply engages with the heterogenous production of sexed subjects but given the universalizing audience she was speaking towards and from in that moment, she opted to essentialise 'strategically': "you pick up the universal that will give you the power to fight against the other side, and what you are throwing away by doing that is your theoretical purity.

Whereas the great custodians of anti-universal are obliged therefore simply to act in the interest of a great narrative, the narrative of exploitation, while they keep themselves clean by not committing themselves to anything. In fact, they are actually run by a great narrative even as they are busy protecting their theoretical purity by repudiating essentialism" (Spivak 1990, 12). Strategic essentialism is then understood as a deliberate act of side-stepping theoretical purity in order to advance political goals. Since her original articulation, Spivak has revisited the term and added crucial nuances to her interpretation of it. This paper focuses on understand the term through Spivak's most thorough revision, which seems to come from the first chapter of Spivak's *Outside In the Teaching Machine*: an interview between Ellen Rooney and Spivak titled *In a Word*.

In the interview, Rooney characterizes essentialism as a refusal of context and a corresponding fixation on form. She uses Frances Furgeson's "Rape and the Rise of the Novel" to show how the intense formality in the legal definition of rape serves to foreclose the question of consent. This intensification of form converts the body into evidence, a text which must be formally legible, and excludes the consideration of individual psychological states where consent is negotiated and understood. This exclusion allows the act of sex to imply with it the inevitability of consent; form seeks to obscure context, disappearing the subject (women) through this process of essentialization, where the woman becomes essentialized as the body. Despite recognition of the harm of this essentialism between 'woman' and 'body', Rooney comments that feminisms find it difficult to engage in politics if not 'as a woman', where the body embodies the 'womanness of woman'. This difficulty can be understood through the desire to find a connection between what unites women (as feminists) that pre-dates the desire to *be* feminists: an 'essence' which connects women as 'woman', and not merely 'feminist'.

Essentialism can then be read as “a dream of the end of politics among women” (Spivak 1993, 2). This goal is shared even by the ‘anti-essentialists’ who seek to diagnose essentialism’s form (give context). Spivak’s discussion of essentialism then lies in the problem-space of what words (forms) do we embody, for what ends, and in what manners?

Given an understanding of essentialism, we should turn towards a discussion of its qualifier: the notion of strategy. For Spivak, strategy is defined as clearly opposed to theory, and in this way also carries with it the weight of critique. She writes, “Strategy works through a persistent (de)constructive critique of the theoretical. “Strategy” is an embattled concept-metaphor and unlike “theory,” its antecedents are not disinterested and universal.” (ibid., 3). If theory is meant to be understood as broad, universal, and lasting, then strategy should be considered fitted, particular, and bounded. Strategy is deployed to undermine the vanguardism of theory, a concept-metaphor that de-naturalizes ‘essence’ and outlines its motivations. She is forced to revisit this definition because of what she sees as a misunderstanding of the term strategy: “that strategies are taught as if they were theories, good for all cases” (ibid., 4). She points to a rigidity in US academic feminism that claims that one is only able to speak from one’s own ground, rather than being able to map tricks onto different situations. However, even this latter process requires critique: “At any rate, the critique of the “fetish-character” (so to speak) of the masterword has to be persistent all along the way, even when it seems that to remind oneself of it is counterproductive. Otherwise the strategy freezes into something like what you call an essentialist position, when the situation that calls forth the strategy is seemingly resolved” (ibid.). Here, Spivak is warning us not to fetishize the ‘difference’ that characterizes the moves of the strategic, reminding us that critiquing essentialism is not just a process of revealing error, but rather, it also must acknowledge itself as participating in an unavoidably

'dangerous' situation that remains unresolved. The strategic essentialism is still an essentialism, enacted to appear representative, but always carrying risk in its political nature. Unlike the original characterization of strategic essentialism between Spivak and Grosz, this characterization doesn't limit its usage as opposition to existing social constructions, but also leaves open the possibility of using strategic essentialism in the process of self-identification.

This painstaking articulation of the meanings carried by the term 'strategic essentialism' is made necessary by popular misunderstandings of the term. Notably, in the SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies published in 2004, strategic essentialism is repeatedly characterized without any reference to Spivak's articulations, reducing it in examples such as the following:

> A stress on the practical value of conventionalized meaning has given rise to the notion of strategic essentialism, by which we act as if identities were stable entities for specific political and practical purposes. Thus it has been suggested that while we can deconstruct the notion of 'woman' this does not stop people from mobilizing around the idea of 'woman' for political purposes. This argument has some merit for practical purposes and may be what happens in practice. However, strategic essentialism is open to the criticism that at some point certain voices have been excluded. Thus, the strategic essentialism of feminism, that it takes women to be an essential category for tactical reasons, may lead to some women, for example black or Hispanic women, saying to white women they have not taken account of our differences as well as our similarities. As such, strategic essentialism tends towards ethnic or gender 'absolutism'. (Barker 2004, 162)

As Sangeeta Ray (2009) points out, characterizations such as the one above "fail to engage with the very questioning of the hypostatization of essentialism as such in the very moment that one articulates it strategically; this lies at the core of Spivak's formulation" (110). The above definition seems to treat strategic essentialism as a choice that 'may' or may not contain risks, but 'tends' towards absolutism. It does not acknowledge essence is a category one cannot not use. For example, it does not see that the subject of 'woman' is locked into the 'body' before the desire to escape (through essentialism) emerges. Essence is therefore *always* over/under-determined, while strategy seeks to give agency to those marginalized in their efforts of

transformation. As Spivak (1990) eloquently remarks: "Since one cannot not be an essentialist, why not look at the ways in which one is an essentialist, carve out a representative essentialist position, and then do politics, according to the old rules, whilst remembering the dangers in this?" (45).

With these delineations, we can now ask, how are we to understand strategic essentialism in the dalit feminist context? What histories shape the reality of 'dalit woman' as a category of identity that one cannot not use?

IV. Strategic Essentialism Situated in Dalit Feminism

Dalit Women have articulated themselves as oppressed on three axes: caste, class, and gender. We've already seen how some of these categories intersect in order to characterize the specificity of dalit women's subjugation. For example, their exclusion from savarna politics shows how politics of gender and caste combine to demand their own autonomous representation. However, we should remember Jaaware's account of caste as touch in order to more deeply understand the caste aspect to dalit subjectivity.

As is clear from Jaaware's account of caste as the regulation of touch, the practice of touchability/untouchability operates *many times* more frequently *below* the level of inter-marriage and inter-dining, since acts of touching/untouching are much more frequent and carry with it randomness (unpredictability). While caste as inter-marriage and inter-dining is less random, and hence more legible and therefore institutionalized, caste as touch is able to reflect the everyday experience of those living in its grasp. His insights clarify that those who did not want to be touched by certain kinds of other people "ended up with a schema, which in history became a scheme and later a framework, and even later led to a social practice and custom, ending up as "tradition" (self-legitimizing)": caste (ibid.). The ubiquity of touch then comes to

represent the crushing ubiquity of the dalit's oppression. Dalits are denied a right to bodily presence in every space they occupy. Brahminism seeks to establish its presence through the construction of dalit absence.

Ruth Manorama, president of the NFDW, writes clearly about the effect of caste on dalit self-image:

> Dalits are made to accept a new self-understanding. A false image is infused into their very consciousness, which made it impossible for them even to think in human terms. This mark must be removed. In other words, the real image, the real selfhood of dalits must be revealed to them. Dalits have been the victims of systematic indoctrination done by the oppressive culture makers in traditional India…Today, their predicament can be described in terms of a lost humanity, a dispossessed community, an oppressed psyche and a segregated condition. They lost their human standing along with other Indians, deprived of means of production and alienated from sharing political power. (Manorama 1992, 447-448)

Manorama faults brahmanical culture and its assimilatory politics for the construction of this false consciousness, making reference to its impositions of purity/pollution in various modes of life (worship, occupation, dress/ornaments, food, etc.). We can arrive at the understanding that the caste nature of dalit subjectivity involves not only the loss of one's own humanity through domination, but also the imposition of 'false images' through assimilation. For a deeper understanding of how a politics of domination/assimilation motivate marginalized constructions of history, we can turn to Fanon's discussion of race, the Negro, and the lived experience of blackness under colonialism.

The application of Fanonist identity politics and critique to caste society has grounds in contemporary activism as well as academic literature. In an essay titled "The Wretchedness of Caste – Ambedkar, Fanon, and the Blocked Indian Revolution", Vijay Prashad recounts Indian Communist leader Hiren Mukerjee's 1981 BR Ambedkar Memorial Lecture in Delhi. In the lecture, Mukerjee declared that dalits are "in the predicament of what Franz Fanon described in

celebrated words as *the wretched of the earth*" (Prashad 2021). Speaking about untouchability, Mukerjee vividly remarks that "it is gangrene in the body politic that has to be rooted out by hot iron, a kind of cancer that can only yield to social surgery, a malignity malleable to no moderate measures" (ibid.). The co-constitutive nature of social hierarchy and class that comes out of Fanon's work seemed to strike a chord with Mukerjee, who believed that the Indian Communist movement was too hesitant in its attack on Indian social hierarchy. Just as Fanon posits race as a reason Marxism must be 'slightly stretched' every time we deal with the colonial problem, Ambedkar posits the caste system as the key barrier to the Indian revolution while also borrowing from Marxist tradition, with Prashad noting that Fanon's investment in the anti-colonial struggle as a solution to the French colonial project mirrors Ambedkar's hope in anti-caste revolution (ibid.).

Academic anti-caste literature has also read Fanon as a humanist thinker with valuable insights in regard to the relationship between universality and particularism in the goal of constructing a post-caste society (e.g. Vijayan 2017, Manoharan 2017). For example, an essay by Karthick Ram Manoharan titled "Anti-Casteist Casteism" published in *interventions*, an international journal of postcolonial studies, reads famous Tamil social reformer 'Periyar' E.V. Ramaswamy's discourse on caste and offers critique based on Fanon's 'identity politics'. Manoharan points to how Ramasamy's discursive strategy fixed the brahmin as 'Other' to the shudra, while also relegating the dalit as a particularized subject whose difference must be respected. Fanon's insights on critiquing whiteness beyond the mere fact of being white in order to create a universalism that all can aspire to are used to explain what Manoharan sees as an insufficiency in Ramaswamy's project: that it doesn't leave room for the shudra and the dailt to

explore their relationality and as such creates grounds for opposition between the two (Manoharan 2017, 16-17).

In our context, its useful to look at Fanon's description of the marginalized subject, a victim of linked class discrimination and social hierarchy, and how they must re-establish a relationship with history in their journey towards transcendence. As Fanon succinctly explains, "Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (Fanon 1961, 210). This reads similarly to Manorama's explanation of 'false images' imposed by Brahminism through caste. Blackness and dalithood are comparable in that they seem to be experiences of marginalization under hierarchical systems of domination that aim to displace the presence of their histories, cultures, and essences. Fanon's observation that the Negro's customs "were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him" is also comparable to the subjectivity of dalit's struggle against the ideology of their 'Other', Brahminism (Fanon 1952, 83). Similarly, the regulation of race forces the Negro to understand himself as less than human: "A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence" (ibid., 106).

The recognition of these similarities allows us to use Fanon's characterization of his search for a past to shed light on dalit activism's approach to reconstructing history. Fanon explains that historical recuperation of culture is a "passionate research…directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation, and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others" (Fanon 1961, 210). His dialogue with Sartre in chapter 5 of *Black Skin, White Masks* reveals that the positioning of cultural identities, such as negritude,

must be such that it reflects a permanence and finality, rather than a fleeting moment within a dialectic. The romance of culture lies in its promise of permanence, compelling us to move forward through allusions to positive collective memory (history). As long as the conception of oneself is only forged out of the tools and politics of assimilation, marginalized subjects will not have the capacity to challenge the dominant universalisms. It is by positing another version of the self, as an essence with history, that one gains even the opportunity to revise, to engage in reflexivity. Subjects of caste, and colonialism, have had their histories erased and in this way are bound to the feeling of loss: loss of humanity, loss of potentiality, loss of the self. Acts of cultural production are then to be understood not as strictly a choice*,* or an (in)accurate construction, and rather as a commitment to the actualization of the self with the goal of establishing future presence.

> And so it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me. It is not out of my bad nigger's misery, my bad nigger's teeth, my bad nigger's hunger that I will shape a torch with which to burn down the world, but it is the torch that was already there, waiting for that turn of history…The dialectic that brings necessity into the foundation of my freedom drives me out of myself. It shatters my unreflected position. Still in terms of consciousness, black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes. I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It *is.* It is its own follower (Fanon 1952, 103).

Holding this reality, we can now invert the motivating question behind this section to ask: how have dalit women shaped their realities through the use of strategic essentialism? What final positions have been put forth, and what futures are upgraded/suppressed in these visions? I seek to address this question primarily through an analysis of the NFDW at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing and briefly touching on the 2001 World Conference Against Racism at Durban.

V. Dalit Feminist Activism in the 1990s: NFDW at Beijing and Durban

In this section, I argue that a shift occurred in how dalit feminist activists treated their relationship to concepts of indigeneity, marked by the NFDW's keynote speech at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing. I show that prior articulations of dalit identity from these activists relied on constructing a relatively more homogenous conception of dalits-as-indigenous peoples with a singular common history, versus a more 'strategically essentialist' position that de-centers a focus on origins and instead incorporates a broader conception of dalit as the condition of being oppressed, without abandoning their original principles. This shift can be read as the expression of dalit feminist standpoint in ways outlined by Rege: namely, a commitment to the transformation of complex subject-positions that leaves the standpoint open to radical interrogations.

The first articulation of dalit indigeneity I focus on comes from one of the only available essay publications from the president of the NFDW, Ruth Manorama, in 1992 titled "Dalit Women: The Downtrodden Among the Downtrodden." The essay is published in a collection that aims to establish the identity of women's studies in India. As explained in the introduction, the goal of this collection can be reasonably understood as a form of outreach that links politically aware classes of women and men to the lives and realities of other women. It aims to create a deeper connection between research and activism with the goal of social change, whether that be in the form of changing state policy or sparking new discourses within the feminist movement. The essays contained within it are described as being fueled by a widely expressed need for new knowledge about women in all arenas, international, domestic, political, civil, etc. (John 2008, 8).

The essay begins with a section titled “Introduction: Origin, features of caste system” which states “By way of introduction, I thought it relevant to briefly trace the origin and features of the caste system, before I deal with the topic 'dalit women.’ The caste system is probably the longest surviving hierarchical system in existence in the world today; its roots can be traced back to the Manusmriti, a sacred document of the Hindus dating back to the period between 200 BC and 100 BC” (Manorama 1992, 445). Manorama introduces caste in reference to classical text (Manusmriti), giving the social phenomena a stable historical place. Accounts such as these come with an understanding that caste is the result of specific grammatical interpretations that develop logical consistency through time. In the following paragraphs, she puts forward Prabhati Mukherjee’s theory on caste origins, which states that “the Aryans came to India, inhabited the territory, had brushes with the indigenous population, came to terms with them or even beat them back.” Aryans introduced social structure (caste) through this process of conquest, intimidation, and appeasement. In fact, Manorama reflects that “pre-Aryan communities had a culture of their own…dalits are the descendants of pre-Aryan Indians. As such, they found no place in the varna system which was a post-Aryan creation of their ancestry. One can, without any controversy, claim that theirs was an autonomous and egalitarian culture” (ibid., 446). The history outlined here sets up two clear groups: pre-Aryan original inhabitants and Aryan invaders that brought with them the hierarchical social category of caste, justified by classical texts. Hierarchical differentiation disrupts a singular, previously egalitarian culture that dalits of today can apparently trace their ancestry from.

In dalit activism, conceptions of original inhabitancy seem to have been popularized in the initial phase of the dalit movement in the 1920’s through ‘Adi’ (original theory) movements (Channa 1995, 263). As pioneering scholar of dalit study Gail Omvedt explains, in the 1920s and

30s militant Dalits thoroughly rejected the 'Panchama' and 'Harijan' identity that was ascribed to them by non-dalit spokespeople. Instead, many dalits across south India began to embrace the term Adi-Andhra (meaning 'the original people of Andhra') in a move influenced by the 'non-Aryan' themes of the Dravidian movement which was also widespread. While Adi-Andhra was only coined in 1917, by the 1931 census, 665,000 people categorized themselves as 'Adi-Andhras'. Despite the popular Telugu consciousness absorbing more Hindu values and the spread of Brahminism, the Adi-Andhra movement held conferences practically every year in an attempt to grow consciousness. Even though there is little written historical documentation in the decade of the 1920s, these conferences and the census numbers reveal the broad rural base of the movement (Omvedt 2014).

While accounts of indigeneity such as the one above can be relatively clear and easily understood, more recent scholarship has produced compelling evidence to be skeptical of such sweeping articulations of origin. Gail Omvedt (who is cited throughout Manorama's 1992 essay as well), analyzes the various theorizations of caste that have emerged in order to reveal the nuances and diversity in pre-Aryan/indigenous and Indo-European/Aryan cultures. She explains how the development of surplus production from agriculture led to notions of hierarchy between pre-Aryan communities, writing that "This locates the most important causal feature (or more accurately, a necessary condition for the emergence of caste) in the specific characteristics of pre-state South Asian society, prior to the Indus civilization and prior to the Aryan conquest" (Omvedt 2014). While the largest indigenous peoples of the subcontinent, ancient Dravidians, supported an egalitarian/equalitarian culture through much of history, the introduction of hierarchy and occupational differentiation seems to pre-date the Aryan conquest. While Aryan conquest undoubtedly exploited, reshaped, and gave increasingly explicit form to this type of

social categorization, "the Brahmans (seen as of Aryan/northern origin) picked up concepts of purity/pollution from the indigenous Dravidians and then exaggerated them to maintain their own superiority. The origin of purity/pollution hierarchy is seen in the notion of sacred power [which was native to Dravidian society]" (ibid.). While Indo-European conquests solidified a Brahmanical nature to caste, the claim of autonomous egalitarian culture being disrupted by notions of hierarchy seems to flatten historical reality through the imposition of narrative form: an essentialism.

Moreover, as we've seen, the move by dalits to claim original inhabitancy also involves positioning the Aryans as a cohesive group of invaders who assimilated indigenous subjects into inferior caste positions through conquest. However, it becomes difficult to map this theory neatly onto the history that has been recovered regarding the distribution of caste hierarchy and development. As Omvedt explains, "there was neither exactly an 'Aryan invasion' or an 'Aryan conquest'; it would be wrong to see the Aryans as a consistent ethnic group throughout…The Indus civilization did not fall as a result of Aryan raids, but rather, apparently, through environmental degradation associated with deforestation and changing river courses; the Aryans may have given the finishing touch." Analyzing the distribution of indigenous peoples from pre-Aryan civilization onto a solidly post-caste civilization, Omvedt also points out that "the major twice-born varnas also had mixed origins. Large numbers of Brahmans were absorbed from pre-Aryans; the common term for merchant, vani, apparently derives from a term pani used for the richer of the pre-Aryan enemies; even a number of Ksatriyas may have had pre-Aryan or mixed origins" (ibid.). These nuances make clear that the categorization of dalit/non-dalit as being represented by a neat pre-Aryan/post-Aryan divide is a homogenizing one. The cultures, histories, or realities of different tribal groups such as Adivasis aren't given historical space in

these articulations. Narratives such as the one constructed in Manorama's essay then imposes a historical rigidity onto a group of peoples whose histories are united by more diverse realities. The growth in scholarship critical of this approach within the movement seems to recognize that this essentialism goes beyond the inevitable homogenization required of identification, and instead potentially poses trouble in the goal of collective liberation. With this in mind, we can see how the same representative of the NFDW, Ruth Manorama, chooses to present dalit identity three years later at the Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most significant moments for autonomous representation of dalit women occurred in the international sphere. Gopal Guru remarks that the National Federation for Dalit Women's presentation at the UN's 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing represented the first "independent and autonomous assertion of dalit women's identity." While the opportunity the conference presented served as a catalyst for the creation of the NFDW itself, it's important to remember the numerous mobilizations of dalit women prior to 1995 that shaped their motivations. These mobilizations occurred across the country from Bangalore to Delhi to Pune. In 1993 Bangalore, there was a public hearing on Violence Against Dalit women, which in part led to the establishment of a "coordination unit" the following year which sought to mobilize NGOs all across India on issues unique to dalit women. It was through this coordination unit that Ruth Manorama and other feminist leaders participated in workshops and meetings that eventually shaped the agenda for the Beijing conference (Manorama 2006).

While analysis of the NFDW's actions at the Beijing Conference remain sparse, it is often characterized by the desire to find receptive spaces abroad that were often unavailable at home, a moment of forging transnational solidarities. Scholars (Mehta 2013, Smith 2008) have mobilized Keck and Sikkink's "boomerang theory" to explain the NFDW's engagement as

"domestic NGOs bypass[ing] their state and directly search[ing] out international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 12). These analyses provide great insight on how the NFDW is able to de-emphasize the uniqueness of caste through integration into a global human rights framework. However, given that the Fourth World conference was also arguably the *first* substantial collective articulation of dalit women's subjectivity, it also becomes important to understand how their notion of identity was constructed and meant to be received, both at home and abroad. The aims of the NFDW at Beijing are comparable to the aims of Manorama's previous essay then: to expand the knowledge of dalit women's subjectivity across diverse groups (national and international, women and non-women, etc.) with the goal of inspiring social change.

Fortunately, the keynote speech delivered by Ruth Manorama, titled "Dalit Women in Struggle: Transforming Pain into Power" was distributed as a pamphlet six years later at the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, giving us the opportunity to participate in such analysis. Manorama begins this pamphlet with a different approach, directly addressing the audience of the United Nations and spending time explaining caste in terms of existing internationally legible terms. However, the first substantive section also seeks to introduce the audience to the identity of dalits as a specific category, titled "WHO ARE DALITS?", and reads as follows:

> Dalits are the indigenous people of India comprising 200 million and they form one-third majority in Indian population. Dalit means "oppressed"/broken in many Indian languages. Understood as embodying a sense of being oppressed and therefore the need to revolt against oppression, Dalit implies double oppression in social and economic terms of the low caste. The word Dalit thus became a symbol of assertive pride and resistance to the linked oppressions of caste and class. They are exclusively known as Schedule Caste, listed for socio- economic uplift under the State policy of protective discrimination. (Manorama 1995)

This opening is distinct from Manorama's earlier essay in that it seems to abandon the approach that centers a discussion of historical origin and an emphasis on classical texts. While dalits are still clearly claimed to be indigenous, there is a new focus on dalit as a phenomenological position: the sense of being oppressed. This articulation is layered with more affective descriptors by comparison and seems to allow more space for conceptualizing untouchability as uniting the oppressed in their negative conditions. This narrativization is undoubtedly attached to the NFDW's goal to place caste within human rights discourse, as it more easily allows interpretations of caste beyond a specifically sub-continental experience by being defined in terms of understood categories of oppression such as class or race (which also occurs in the section before). Recent ethnographies of dalit feminist activism also explain how the heterogeneity of caste as an experience seems to have led activists to focus on global human rights interpretations of the social phenomena in hopes of building larger coalitions against the Indian state (Mehta 2013).

The NFDW's approach here is not only distinct from the approach in 1992, but also from other groups that would follow which also adopt a 'human rights perspective', namely the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR). The NCDHR was founded in 1998 and describes itself as committed to dismantling the "exceptionalism" and "uniqueness" of caste discrimination through adopting "a human rights perspective" for dalit issues (Mehta 2013). The NCDHR's *Black Paper* was a series of factsheets and a manifesto that laid out their theory of change, where Dalits were conceptualized as "the earth dependent indigenous people" suffering from centuries of "subjugation." They envisioned an Ambedkar Yuga (age of humankind) where dalits would "take pride in asserting our indigenous culture which was wantonly and systematically destroyed by the invading alien culture" (ibid.). It's important to note that

Ambedkar himself never subscribed to the positioning of dalit as indigenous groups of India, despite the invocation of Ambedkar in the NCDHR's philosophy. Accounts like these engage in historical recuperation in a manner that locates a fixed, homogenous essence/culture that pre-dates an invasion from foreigners. They assert a unity and connection between those who deem themselves 'dalit' before the necessity for anti-caste activism.

The dalit feminist standpoint embodied by the NFDW is distinct from positions taken like the NCDHR's then. Even in the clear articulation of dalits as the indigenous people of India, dalithood is also "understood as embodying a sense of being oppressed and therefore the need to revolt against oppression." The latter interpretation aligns more closely with Ambedkar's views around the term Dalit, as Ambedkar remarks that "Dalithood is a kind of life condition that characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalit people by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes' Brahminical ideology" (Guru 2005). The definition of dalithood as experience of exploitation, rather than being confined to a particular historical lineage, was also popularized by organizations like the Dalit Panthers who even argued that "the caste nature of the term dalit is breaking down" (Raiot 2016**)**. The focus by the NFDW now is not necessarily on setting up a local vs. invader framework, but rather providing a place in history for dalits while acknowledging the diverse lived experience of oppressed peoples today. We see this continued in the next paragraph:

> Historical evidence points to the fact that Dalits were the original inhabitants of India which is being actively and even aggressively articulated and reaffirmed today amidst both national and international forums to establish the self-identity and to empower the powerless Dalits in their struggles for liberation. Dalits are a heterogeneous people even in the same region in terms of ethnic roots, cultural identity, and other material conditions. They still preserve distinct ethnic and religious cultural heritage in various degrees despite their absorption into Sanskritic Hinduism and other religions. (Manorama 1995)

This excerpt starts off by making clear that the position of original inhabitancy isn't just confined to presentation in international forums. Hence, it is insufficient to point out the NFDW's articulations of caste as merely attempts to become more legible in global contexts through historical reduction. Rather, we should also unpack the articulation of historical evidence as it relates to national efforts to establish self-identity. The most crucial moment in this excerpt is Manorama's open acknowledgement that dalits are a heterogenous people not just across, but within the same regions. Once again, this is distinct from characterizations like the NCDHR's that impose a homogenous identity in the search for history, even though it claims the same project of locating sameness between dalits, as indicated by the following sentence's assertion that "they still preserve distinct ethnic and religious cultural heritage". It is also distinct from the previous characterization by Manorama in her 1992 essay, as it chooses to focus on diversity in cultural identity as a reality for dalits today, rather than emphasizing a singular egalitarian culture which all can be traced back to. Even the rhetorical acknowledgments of multiplicity are absent in the previous text, and as such this represents a shift in the presentation of dalit women as diverse yet distinct beings.

The pairing of these two ideas next to each other seems to acknowledge the inherent instability of the category of 'dalit'. One recalls Spivak's comment about reflexivity even when potentially seen as counter-productive. Heterogeneity may make it harder to spell out a unitary culture, but the goals of the movement seem to be adaptive and expansive, and in that way, it serves as important recognition of identity's multiplicities. Even as the characterization of dalit as indigenous imposes an intuitive dichotomy between original inhabitants and invaders, references to diverse ethnic roots make it such that claims by differently marginalized groups, such as adivasis, are not necessarily erased. This lies at the core of Spivak's notion of strategic

essentialism: that in the original articulation of identity, one is able to see the dangers in its presentation.

The final part of this section re-communicates the perspective from which dalit peoples are forced to speak:

> Today's Dalit literature and movements have inherited traditional values, which shows their deep yearning and aspiration for human equality, human dignity, and justice. Its details can boast of Dalit identity, culture, and past heritage. Today their predicament can be described in terms of a lost humanity, a dispossessed community, and living in segregated condition. Continuous economic exploitation and sociocultural oppressions have rendered them politically voiceless. At the level of consciousness, the sense of "no person" and "powerlessness" has permeated every aspect of their life. (Manorama 1995)

This concluding passage explicitly links the goals of dalit cultural production to their state of lost humanity. We are reminded of Manorama's previous writings on dalit self-image but now offered a glimpse of the dalit response to this condition: the recognition of identity, culture, and heritage through engagement with literature and social movements. This idea of gradually developing identity through struggle is synthesized by the title of the speech: transforming pain into power. Declarations like these ground Rege's insights of dalit feminist standpoint when she remarks that it seeks to transform subjectivity, internally and externally. The repetitive characterization of dalithood as embodying a sense of no person/no consciousness also stands in tension with overtly homogenizing assertions that all dalits must already have an egalitarian culture buried within them (a torch that was already there). It instead focuses on struggle and its ability to transform even as it is situated in an unavoidably essentialist context.

Overall, this section of the speech has as its goal the definition of who is a dalit. In this process of definition, the NFDW deploys a strategic essentialism that constructs the category of the dalit as original inhabitant. It is essentialist in how seeks to provide imaginary coherence onto the process of disruption and fragmentation that was the violence of caste imposition. While a

final position is clearly put forth, it appears to be responsive to the issue of homogenization and treats identity as an ongoing process of becoming. One does not get the impression that claims to indigeneity by groups such as adivasis (scheduled tribes) would be incommunicable under the frameworks set up by the NFDW. 'Dalit' is therefore treated as unstable but inevitable, necessary for the project of transcendence beyond Brahminism that is required of the annihilation of caste. These moments of implied deconstructions that I allude to seem to be clarified in the NFDW's approach at the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, where dalits and indigenous groups even achieve rhetorical/conceptual separation throughout their presentation in passages such as the one below:

> And whereas all these forms of racism and racial discrimination are gendered, and have specifically troubling consequences for women of dalit, indigenous, and religious and ethnic minority communities in the fields of employment, right to life, livelihood and dignity, housing, education, political participation, to name a few. (Rao 2003)

This rhetorical separation between dalit/indigenous groups happens from the opening paragraphs from the preamble and stays consistent throughout the rest of the statement. Although they are categorically separated, they are mentioned together in order explore commonalities experienced by different groups suffering from descent-based discrimination. This is a considerable shift from the initial presentation of dalithood as a specific historical condition of indigeneity in Manorama's 1992 essay. As dalit feminists continue to collaborate and share their experiences within structures like the NFDW, it seems that their external articulations of identity become more nuanced and responsive to the heterogeneity within the movement, a hallmark of reflexive feminism as outlined by scholars like Rege.

Conclusion

By tracing the shifts in the meaning of the term 'dalit' as used by dalit feminist activists, we're able to see how discursive formations reflect cultural ideas about historical recovery and

identity. The way that belonging is negotiated, whether it is through indigeneity, subalterneity, or otherwise, is through a politics of relational difference. That is, it is through identifying the gaps in dalit politics and savarna feminism that dalit feminist standpoint initially emerges as a necessary epistemic intervention, and their subsequent interventions offer lessons that must be taken up by all engaged in revolutionary politic.

The use of strategic essentialism represents a choice to reclaim agency in the marginalized subject's self-perception, providing fertile grounds for projects of transcendence. We see that universalisms are unavoidable and necessary in the goal of reclaiming dignity, yet they must be always cognizant of others' particularities. Dalit feminist standpoint's commitment to retelling history while maintaining a reflexive edge reminds us of Stuart Hall's (1990) comments on marginalized cultural identity as "always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence, but a *positioning*" (226). Melancholic remembrance is unable to engage in the nuance required in understanding these positionings, as it relegates the work of radical feminisms as that of neoliberal instrumentalization. Discourses which seek to homogenize the actions of all NGOs as merely technical and untheoretical are then clearly ahistorical and counter-revolutionary. Moreover, discourses that fail to interrogate the temporally-specific positionings of dalit feminists risk mistaking 'strategy' for 'theory', collapsing the work of these transnational feminists into essentialist discourse. Remembering dalit feminist standpoint as a project of both recognizing and deconstructing essence allows us to envision radical futures in a moment where many feel beholden to an eternal present.

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