



Review of

Gyanendra Pandey, editor,
Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories: Investigations from India and the USA
(New York: Routledge, 2010).

Reviewer: Kristine Suna-Koro, ksunakoro@gmail.com

Citizens, histories, investigations. The nouns that gravitate around the socio-historical locations and various scholarly constructions of subalternity in the title of this multifaceted volume are all in plural. It is no accident. This collection of essays, edited by Gyanendra Pandey, highlights the plurality of subaltern condition and its historical inscriptions with a particular attention to the changefulness of subaltern lifeworlds in the era of arduous globalization. Emerging from the subaltern studies workshops held at Emory University in 2006 and 2009, the volume opens wide the theoretical floodgate for exciting transdisciplinary interactions in the

studies of subalternity regarding both what/who is recognized and studied as subaltern, as well as how the theoretical enterprise itself is to be done in the least distorting way.

Pandey's suggestive Introduction sketches the crucial leitmotifs that emerge at the intersections of varieties of subaltern predicaments. The immediate theoretical thrust of the volume is to promote the emergent conversation between South Asianists and North Americanists as vectored toward the interrogation of subalternity through its shared dimensions of marginality, subordination, privilege, and socio-political agency as they present themselves in historically diverse, and seemingly surprising, locations. Subalternity is a fluid condition and as the relation of dominance and subordination, it is "always negotiable and negotiated" (4). The notion of citizenship qualifies subalternity as a theoretical tool for the analysis of subaltern agency in its negotiations of (dis)enfranchisement with the state, ruling classes, races, castes, and other socio-political stakeholders. Subalternity, in these perspectives, emerges as an uncannily textured condition in multiple and fluid manifestations. It requires, in turn, a sufficiently fluid critical historiography that aims at reaching into the darkest forgotten and overlooked corners in the histories of the subjugated.

Part I introduces the expected but also an innovative range and texture of subaltern locations under consideration. Pandey (Ch. 2) investigates the life-forms of subaltern middle classes in the comparative context of India's dalits and African Americans with a full acknowledgement of their exceptionally late arrival on the scene of modernity during its postcolonial stage. To talk about both of these groups is absolutely unsurprising in subaltern context. But the interrogation of the connotations of elite, of middle classness regarding these segments is historically acute and theoretically refreshing. Given that middle classness coincides with modernity's imaginary of respectable life, caste-and-race-defined subaltern citizenship entails a DuBoisian "double consciousness" or multipositionality of being embedded in both the subaltern origins, that reflect the particular internal colonization of these groups, and the political and economical franchise that they have at their disposal today. The theme of multipositionality of African American subaltern elites is further intensified to produce "a more textured view" (32)

by Earl Lewis (Ch. 3) in his investigations of the identity constructions and forms of (dis) empowerment among Black school teachers during the first half of the twentieth century. The participation in the economic and political status of the middle class by racial subalterns is a conflictual participation. Yet precisely in a broader context of subalternity “dichotomies lose their power as appropriate analytical categories” (44) in the critical study of the race/class intersection. Another vintage locus of subalternity, gender, is richly texturized by Ruby Lal (Ch. 4) in her explorations of the compound figure of “girl-child/woman” of the nineteenth century reformist texts from India and their patriarchal colonial and postcolonial commentaries. The sad multipositionality of the gendered subaltern is elucidated here as a compound temporal bind, within which women are endlessly cajoled into temporal displacement, as child, wife, and mother, and that belongs to others and effects the erasure of their agency. The grim monotony of multipositional displacement of these textual not-yet-even-subaltern-citizens is interrupted by rare yet sufficiently untamed literary figures from the same period which can serve as apertures of a Hegelian slave restlessness, and thus, of emancipatory endeavors. Part I concludes with Colin R. Johnson’s innovative essay on the multipositionality of homosexual subalterns and the surprisingly rural connotations surrounding the history of homosexuality during the first quarter of the twentieth century among the itinerant male casual laborers, including both white citizens as well as non-white immigrants.

Part II, *Writing the Subaltern*, presents a catalogue of disappointments and aspirations about writing subaltern histories. Milind Wakankar (Ch. 6) explores the role of prehistory at the cusp of the developing inquiry toward dalit-black solidarity through a dense analysis of the radical poetry on mourning, associated with the now extinct sect of the Kapalikas. The analysis is contextualized by the “simultaneity of subaltern complicity and subaltern emancipation in contemporary Indian politics” (83). Two very timely chapters by M.S.S. Pandian (Ch. 7) and Prathama Banerjee (Ch. 9) resonate exceptionally well in their explorations of what it takes to produce theoretical sensibilities and disciplinary normativities that could be “morally and politically enabling” (96) as well as could qualitatively advance the ethically inflected debate

about “how oral traditions can become sources of history” and what “alternative forms of evidentiality historians must engage with” (135) to hear the subaltern “speak” in a way that does not require a preemptive dismissal of their lifeworlds and testimonies. A performance of such a history-writing appears in Leslie Harris’ richly woven autobiographical exploration of the subaltern histories of the urban citizens of African descent in New Orleans (Ch. 8) with the paradoxical and complex conclusion that, in the aftermath of the civil rights legislation, the processes of desegregation actually “re-segregated the city in deeper ways than the legal segregation that preceded it” (121).

Part III explicitly adds the legal and economical dimensions to the study of subalternity in India and the USA. Sudipta Sen (Ch. 10) investigates the instrumentality of fear and the “residuum of legal agency of the indigene” (151) in the highly complex colonial legal system in India. The question of writing legal histories of subalternity is no less problematic than political or literary histories since, again, “it remains unclear how far historians are able to trace such disarticulated, resistant subjects in their archival residue” (157). To delve deeper into the legal aspects of contemporary varieties of subalternity, Mary E. Odem (Ch. 11) explores the abject moments of the US immigration history in relation to the Latino immigrants in their anxious multipositionality as they simultaneously enter the lines of upward mobility, as well as being illegal aliens and an indispensable economical segment of consumer society. Steven Hahn (Ch. 12) investigates the limits of political agency of subalterns through the exploration of attempts by slaves in the pre-Civil War American South to enfranchise themselves through rumors, resistance, and rebellion. Partha Chatterjee’s essay (Ch. 13) highlights the contemporary internal diversity of the Third World and exposes the complex political choreography of compensatory reversals of the negative economic impact of primitive capital accumulation by the Indian state upon the various subaltern groups in the climate of political and civil consensus regarding the presumed panacea-like gains of capitalist industrial growth. Subaltern agency, violence, and solidarity acquire different goals and motivations under the auspices of the current social transformation in China and India which is “unprecedented in human history” (193).

The strengths and weaknesses of *Subaltern Citizens* as a single volume overlap at the expected junctures. Namely, its broad transdisciplinary reach, from law to literature, from the early twentieth century American popular parlor tunes to Indian medieval poetry, from North America to India, captivates the theoretical imagination as it opens up subaltern studies to exciting conversations beyond some rather entrenched and unproductive disciplinary divides that fragment reality in surprisingly reductive and homogenizing ways. As the complex historico-cultural lifeworlds of race, gender, class, ethnicity, caste, religion, and sexuality empirically intertwine in the lived political experiences of the global subalterns so must the theories that aspire to conceptualize these experiences with any degree of adequacy. In this regard, the volume serves as an exemplary performance of interdisciplinarity as it interrogates both the typical as well as untypical locations of subalternity. On the other hand, as is often the case with interdisciplinary work, from the reader it requires an impossibly broad expertise to appreciate the full merit of the various essays, their styles and methodologies. Some of the essays can be useful as stand-alone, sufficiently compact and accessible, texts for pedagogical purposes in higher education settings (for example, chapters by Odem, Lewis, Pandian). Others would most likely exert the most productive appeal on fellow scholars within their respective fields (for example, Wakankar's chapter).

The overarching merit of the collection is nevertheless the consistency with which all contributions appropriately complexify the condition of subalternity across all the most important arenas of human life. They work with realization that in the present era of global postcoloniality it is no longer ethically accountable nor even theoretically fascinating to deal with subalternity as a monochromatic phenomenon, as if it would be frozen in time, in certain canonized geographical or racial spaces, and as squeezed between the tired radical contrasts of revolutions, be they Marxist, neo-liberal or otherwise. This collection emerges as a sign of the "cusp" of the emerging reflexive disposition that may well see subalternity as a fruitful interpretive trajectory that can facilitate knowledge and perhaps even political good will by talking about the interface of race, class, gender, creed, ethnicity, sexuality, domination,

subjugation, disenfranchisement, empowerment, and privilege in a decidedly interrelated and historically nimble way.

The theoretical masterstroke (of the visionary Gyan Pandey) is to underscore the lived viability – sustainable and desirable or not – of the seemingly contradictory realities of subaltern middle class across the thornily globalized world and therefore the challenge that this existential actuality increasingly poses to scholarship that lacks contextual mobility and theoretical vitality. But precisely in this context, is it also time to open up debate about the lifeworlds of subaltern elites, about the subaltern upper class that is inscribed in the snarl of identities and legacies of unbelievable complexity. Last but not least, for those scholarly minds who take this volume as a foretaste of more to come from the critical paradigm of transdisciplinary subalternity in historical and area studies as well as critical theory, the question that Jonathan Prude asks in his Afterword should instill quite substantial humility: “Is there a sense in which... the condition of subalternity has itself become a commodified performance” (219)? The present collection of essays does not offer a soothing answer to this question that ought to rattle the edifices of knowledge production as much more than a mere standard academic gesture of high theoretical good manners. What it does is that it articulates the itinerary of very careful reading of and occasional listening to the themes of subaltern condition to remind us all that when the subaltern speak it is not always easy to hear them, let alone read and write their histories.