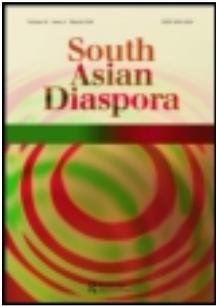


This article was downloaded by: [The University of Pune], [Mangesh Kulkarni]  
On: 16 May 2012, At: 00:04  
Publisher: Routledge  
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered  
office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## South Asian Diaspora

Publication details, including instructions for authors and  
subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsad20>

### BOOK REVIEW

Mangesh Kulkarni <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Pune, India E-mail:

Available online: 11 May 2012

To cite this article: Mangesh Kulkarni (2012): BOOK REVIEW, South Asian Diaspora,  
DOI:10.1080/19438192.2012.675730

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2012.675730>



PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any  
substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing,  
systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation  
that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any  
instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary  
sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings,  
demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or  
indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## BOOK REVIEW

**Un/common cultures: racism and the rearticulation of cultural difference**, by Kamala Visweswaran, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010, XII + 341 pp., US\$ 25.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780822346357

The notion of culture is central to the disciplinary practices of Anthropology. The volume under review contains a set of interlinked essays which subject these practices to a searching scrutiny by exploring ‘the ways in which uncommon cultures have been articulated through forms of differentialist racism or culturalist explanation’ (p. 16), while also uncovering ‘the possibilities of culture in common through the enactment of new forms of political alliance’ (p. 16). Kamala Visweswaran – a well-known American anthropologist – pursues this agenda by locating her inquiry at the intersection of ethnic/diaspora studies and area studies, and illuminates the connections among culture, race, caste, class and gender. Her analytical frame is truly global and she engages a broad spectrum of social theorists in the USA (Franz Boas, Clifford Geertz), France (Claude Levi-Strauss, Louis Dumont) and India (B. R. Ambedkar, M. N. Srinivas).

At the outset, Visweswaran briefly sketches the autobiographical and academic matrix which shaped the ideas developed in the book. This is followed by an introduction to the key themes and arguments. The first chapter examines the ambivalent role of pioneer white women anthropologists in the USA, whose racial ‘positioning in the field . . . alternately gendered them as maternal or masculine’ (p. 22), while their assimilation of the late American settler ideology rendered them incapable of grasping the patriarchal roots of women’s oppression. Concomitantly, ‘the impetus for cultural relativism, the quest to portray cultures as meaningful, coherent wholes . . . emerged from the need to understand sexual difference’ (p. 51). In the second chapter, Visweswaran argues that the vacuum created by the failure of the anthropological notion of culture to radically deploy racial identity was filled with the rise of multiculturalism and cultural studies as ‘counter disciplinary formations’ (p. 53). She advocates a socially dynamic and historically meaningful conception of race as culturally constructed, which would put questions of gender and sexuality in the forefront.

In the third chapter, Visweswaran points out that Claude Levi-Strauss’s understanding of racism was based on a Rousseauian theory of human nature seen in terms of identity and difference. She argues that Levi-Strauss failed to ask the most vital questions as to the origin and dynamics of the racist malaise. In the following chapter, she compares the views of Louis Dumont with those represented by the African-American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois. While Dumont saw caste as a uniquely Indic institution rooted in a distinctive conception of hierarchy, and racism as a pathology stemming from modern egalitarianism, Du Bois perspicuously considered caste and race to be coterminous structures of oppression.

In Chapter 5, Visweswaran interrogates the Indian state’s oppositional stance vis-à-vis attempts to treat caste-based discrimination as a form of racism. To this end, she explores

the encounter between a 'national sociology' shaped by a Dumontian framework and an emerging 'dalit sociology' which in her opinion gives an accurate account of the social reality and specifically of caste oppression, thereby opening up a space for transnational subaltern alliances. The subsequent chapter exposes the complicity of Geertzian symbolic anthropology in 'displacing anticolonial formulations of national culture . . . which threatened to destabilize the cultural project of progress instigated by the West' (p. 186). Visweswaran deconstructs the absolutist notion of culture propagated by the former and projects a politically informed ethnography of Ambedkarite vintage as an emancipatory mode of cultural analysis.

In Chapter 7, the author asks 'how culture is gendered such that particular countries . . . are marked by their crimes against women' (p. 189). The ensuing examination of 'the politics of culture in human-rights feminism' (p. 204) leads to the conclusion that this strategy of labelling signals the cultural thrust of globalisation, and the rights norms sought to be imposed on the global South mask the operation of a neo-liberal order which aggravates or even creates the social cleavages responsible for the violation of rights. The epilogue focuses on forms of popular mobilisation, which cut across national and cultural boundaries, generating 'trans-status subjects [and] new forms of singularity or solidarity' (p. 223). Visweswaran holds that such movements reclaim the Commons for the social good, thereby contributing to the emergence of common cultures.

*Un/common Cultures* exemplifies a genre of anthropological scholarship that is cosmopolitan, yet attentive to local nuances, rigorous as well as committed to a politics of emancipation. The book draws on and productively complicates a variety of theoretical positions from a broadly social constructivist standpoint. Though written in a somewhat meandering style, it is held together by a set of recurring themes and concerns, and by its robust intellectual anchorage evident in the detailed footnotes and bibliography which take up nearly a hundred pages. Visweswaran's polemic against 'uncommon cultures' draws much of its fire from a *marxisant* political economy; but it is not clear that the latter provides sufficient grounds for her optimism about 'cultures of the common'.

Mangesh Kulkarni  
University of Pune, India  
Email: mangshra@yahoo.co.in  
© 2012, Mangesh Kulkarni

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2012.675730>