

THE KARMA OF BROWN FOLK

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## PREFACE

### KARMA SUTRA: THE FORETHOUGHT

I first stumbled upon W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) some two decades ago in a cluttered bookstore on Free School Street in Calcutta. Why I selected that book instead of the many tattered novels that I normally purchased, I cannot say. My only recollection is that after I read the book, even so far away, it moved me deeply. Part of the magic was the style, the sheer exuberance of the prose, but the main reason was the way Du Bois so lovingly offered his sharp criticism of the effects of white supremacy. Reading the book over and over again, I cherish the throaty cadences of Ma Rainey mixed in with the stern dialectics of Hegel, the popular traditions that Du Bois sought after and the elite theories that provided him with a framework. The book you hold in your hand is offered as my flawed attempt to draw from Du Bois as I write of my South Asian American brethren whose presence in the United States complicates the narrative Du Bois offered a century ago. "How does it feel to be a problem?" Du Bois begins *Souls*.<sup>1</sup> White supremacy treats black folk as if they are themselves a problem, a history that lingers on as more and more is said about "personal responsibility" and as the U.S.

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government divests itself and the economic system of any culpability in the genocide against blacks.<sup>2</sup> As South Asians have entered the United States in the past thirty years, there has been a tendency to compare our destiny with that of black folk. If these brown folk can make it, say people like Thomas Sowell, Dinesh D'Souza, and the neoconservatives, then why can't black folk? A hundred years after *Souls*, Du Bois's question remains.

But there is also another question that needs to be asked, and this book will take it as its central problem: "How does it feel to be a solution?" Addressed to all Asians, but increasingly with special reference to South Asians, this question asks us brown folk how we can live with ourselves as we are pledged and sometimes, in an act of bad faith, pledge ourselves, as a weapon against black folk. What does it mean, this book asks, for us to mollify the wrath of white supremacy by making a claim to a great destiny when we are ourselves only a product of state engineering through immigration controls and of the beneficence of more socialized systems of education in South Asia, or when we are but the children of those who have accumulated a certain amount of cultural capital because of those processes? This book, then, is about the feelings, the consciousness of being South Asian, of being desi (those people who claim ancestry of South Asia) in the United States. It is also a set of *sutras* (aphorisms) of the *karma* (fate) of desis, who must now imagine ourselves within the U.S. racial formation and seek to mediate between the dream of America and our own realities.

In 1938, while fascism crept into place in Europe, while imperialism continued to do its dirty deeds in India, and while Jim Crow preened over black folks in the United States, Du Bois bemoaned India's "temptation to stand apart from the darker peoples and seek her affinities among whites. She has long wished to regard herself as 'Aryan,' rather than 'colored' and to think of herself as much nearer physically and spiritually to Germany and England than to Africa, China or the South Seas. And yet, the history of the modern world shows the futility of this thought. European exploitation desires the black slave, the Chinese coolies

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and the Indian laborer for the same ends and the same purposes, and calls them all 'niggers.'"<sup>3</sup> Du Bois opened his heart to a wide solidarity, an invitation that desis and others need to accept even at this late date. Since we, as desis, are used as a weapon in the war against black America, we must in good faith refuse this role and find other places for ourselves in the moral struggles that grip the United States.

This book emerges from participation in that moral struggle, especially in the time I have spent with my fellow desis in our various political activities. Many of the ideas that follow developed in discussions with activists and students across the country, and some saw the first light of day in our community periodicals. In June 1998 I sat with my computer and my many notes to lay bare some of these ideas and to offer a view on the trials of desis in the United States. There are several good historical overviews on the same topic, and there are also many fine essays that sketch out some of the points that I will simply indicate in the text that follows. Though this book does offer a historical look at U.S. desi life, it attempts to address the dilemmas of desi life in the United States and it suggests passages to transform our current aporias.

There is much in this book that may appear parochial, but if we are to be truly critical multiculturalists, we must be willing to enter domains without safe translations so that we can understand and engage with the complexities that affect the lives of others. There is, in other words, something refreshingly educational about "parochiality." Given other circumstances, I would have much rather addressed this book to an unmarked human subject, one who is like the Subject of so much European philosophy, but such a choice is not available as long as "race" continues to be a searing category through which we are so habitually forced to live.<sup>4</sup> As a social fact, race organizes the way we are viewed in society, how we often produce our own cultural communities, and how we struggle against the supremacist parochialism of many of our institutions (that, for all their openness, continue to support unspoken forms of whiteness).<sup>5</sup> The resilience of race in our lives cannot be easily dismissed in favor of an imputed universalism,

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since we might want to allow those who fight from standpoints of oppression to come from concrete identities (such as race, but also ethnicity, regions, sexuality, gender, and class) to produce forms of unity that can only be seen in struggle rather than in some abstract theoretical arithmetic. Most notions of identity are not unalloyed, and many celebrate the importance of the politics of identification; we must learn to harness these identifications in the hope of a future rather than denying the right of oppressed peoples to explore their own cultural resources toward the construction of a complex political will.

The ethos of identification requires that we be scrupulous about the different histories of differentiated groups, that we not assume that all people come at identification from the same place. Such an exercise allows us to see the specific cultural locations of groups and provide some avenues toward the creation of a moral solidarity for our present struggles. *The Karma of Brown Folk* begins, therefore, with an assessment of the place of the "Indian" in U.S. thought, first among the intellectuals (such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson) and then in popular culture. My argument is that though desis are seen as nonwhite, they are also seen as bearing an especial spiritual patina, one that is sometimes seen as worthy and other times seen as undesirable. Both intellectual and popular culture approach the desi as something fundamentally different from the "American" (a word that is often used to index whiteness); and both subscribe to the belief that though the latter is practical and worldly, the former is spiritual and ethereal. The distinction of geography (East/West) and of values (practical/spiritual) allows us to see such thought as a specie of "orientalism," and I will show how this U.S. orientalism differs in some measure from that developed in Europe (and, indeed, how the "East" is in many ways constitutive of American culture).<sup>6</sup> When desis come to the United States in large numbers, I argue, they sign a social contract with a racist polity by making a pledge to work hard but to retain a social life at some remove from U.S. society (one that is sanctified as specially spiritual and thus an acceptable, even if lesser, lifeworld).<sup>7</sup> When the desis find that the

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racist polity simply wants their labor but does not care too much for their lives, the social retreat sanctioned by U.S. orientalism provides a space to develop a life, even if this is a space under constant threat from educational and other institutions. The claim to a higher spirituality (and civilization) allows the desis to be positioned in such a way that they are seen as superior to blacks, a social location not unattractive to a migrant in search of some accommodation in a racist polity. The tragedy of this social compact is that it perpetuates and reproduces antiblack racism. This book unravels and argues against the logic of this racist contract and it offers some traces toward a renegotiation of it.