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Published version

RAGHAVAN, Anjana and PRASAD, Pavithra (2019). Dark Looks: Sensory Contours of Racism in India. In: EGUCHI, Shinsuke, CALAFELL, Bernadette and ABDI, Shadee, (eds.) De-Whitening Intersectionality: Race, Intercultural Communication, and Politics. Lexington books.

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Dark Looks: Sensory Contours of Racism in India

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the intersections of caste, color, and class that become visible on the bodies of brown and black women moving through public spaces in India. The authors argue that a pervasive “haptic gaze,” that deploys staring as a prosthetic of touch, informs the varied registers of violence sensed and felt by different women. Drawing from Dalit and Black feminist theories, the authors draw a conceptual map of relations between caste-based patriarchy and anti-blackness, furthering an understanding of intersectional identities as shifting, fluid, and locational, specifically in relation to the global south.

KEYWORDS

Caste – Blackness – South Asia - Haptic Visuality – Coalitional Feminism

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Submitted as a book chapter for

De-Whitening Intersectionality: Race, Intercultural Communication, and Politics

Editors: Eguchi, Calafell, & Abdi

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Pavi: December, 2007, Baga Beach, Goa, Western Coast of India

A group of my friends from Chennai are visiting Goa for the New Year's Eve. They are staying in Baga where the tourist crowds are mostly made up of middle class and working class Indians who have come to walk on the beach, try jet-skiing, and eat well on the oceanfront. I take a break from the white hippie enclaves in Anjuna and Vagator where I am doing fieldwork on rave tourism, and head south to meet them. It is winter, but the heat presses the thick ocean air onto my skin. The loose palazzo pants and a tank top I am wearing stick to me in spots – I pull them away from my sun-darkened body and put on a pair of shades to shield my eyes from the midday sun. It is a relief to get on my scooter and let the speed of my ride lift the sweat off my neck. The 30 minute ride to Baga also brings with it a palpable shift away from the orientalism and racism of trance freaks towards Indians that I've been documenting for the past six months. The bodies get browner, the crowds get denser, and the style of clothing get less pseudo-tribal boho chic the closer I get to Baga.

I ride up to a beach shack to meet my friends, but they are not there yet. I settle down at a table just off the sand and order a snack while I wait for them. I am not nervous, but I do notice that I am the only woman in the less-than-busy tent. Small groups of young and middle-aged men sit at a few tables on either side of me. I don't own a smartphone so I look at the sea instead. A few minutes pass by and I turn to find a middle-aged man in a polo shirt tucked into full pants standing by me and smiling with all his teeth. I glance at him with a reluctant half-smile and turn back to the ocean view. "Excuse me, madam," I hear him say his voice dripping with a kind of obsequiousness that sets my hair on end. I tense up immediately but turn towards him anyway. "Madam, you don't mind..." He

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gestures to a camera in his hand and simpers through his leering smile, “One photo please?” I swallow a rising panic – I know what he is asking, but I try to play dumb and reach for the camera and look around him to his companions. “No problem, I can take a photo of you all.” “No, no!” he says. “You,” he says pointing at me. I shake my head, no, but he is already clicking away. Still simpering, he says, “Thanks-ah, thanks” and walks away hurriedly to join his table where is greeting with hand-slaps and guffaws. I feel myself glowing bright red, ashamed and self-conscious about my bare arms, my exposed clavicle, cursing myself for forgetting another layer of cover. “At least he asked,” I tell myself as I shrink into the plastic chair, the cheers of the men slapping at my back like the rough waves of the ocean in front of me.

I become acutely aware of how my body is being seen. A sunburned brown woman, by herself, wearing sunglasses and a tank top, showing her arms, exhibiting brazenness reserved only for white bodies – to be alone and just sitting, to be alone and spending money, to be alone and dressed in western clothes, to be alone and unafraid, to be alone and brown and female. An oddity, a novelty, a freak just like the white hippies, a testament to the “freedom” of expression that is possible in Goa. A sight to be seen. A souvenir.

Anjana: January, 2019, Kochi Biennale, Kerala, Southern India

I am wearing a turquoise blue, crushed cotton, sleeveless dress. It is ankle length, and flowy. The relative lightness of my skin-tone, my clothes, and other, less obvious, but deeply embodied cues mark my caste and class privileges in this southern Indian city. The women’s bodies are like mine, but they are dressed mostly in podavai or salwar kameez. I make eye-contact with all the not-white women I see. My transnational and

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caste privileges enable me to do this; my exhaustion with relentless whiteness encourages me to do this. Those presenting as women mostly return my smiles. I am trained not to make eye-contact with those presenting as men. I have not left home so long as to forget this. Evening falls, dusk gathers, and suddenly I can feel eyes everywhere. This dress was a mistake. I feel the v-neck gaping too much, I feel my arms, with no sleeves to hide them, grow grotesquely large. I see the white bodies around me sauntering around in teeny-tiny shorts, and transparent sarongs, bustiers, and tank tops. They move with a freedom I find offensive just now.

I walk into a shop. In the corner I spot a Black couple; a man and a woman, both look to be in their sixties, and are dressed in western clothes. I notice them being watched. I catch their eye and smile. There is also a young woman, no more than sixteen, a local who will most likely be identified as working-class, with the brown-black skin common in this part of the country, who is being watched. I smile at her, too. Across from us, a clutch of white tourists, both men and women, are exclaiming loudly over some trinkets. The shopkeepers are entirely preoccupied with them, but they watch all of us. They are most suspicious of the young local woman. They are suspicious of the Black couple; but wait to see if they will buy things. They tolerate me because they know I can afford to buy things. They do not volunteer to speak with any of us, but look me up-and-down, their eyes glinting with part disgust- part leer. I feel myself shrink, and grow enormous, all at once.

I. Between Self and Scholarship: The Scope and Limits of this Chapter and its Milieus

The desires to co-write this piece are messy, thorny, and viscous. We write our opening narratives and what follows from complex and variegated privileges of *savarna*

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caste¹, English language ability, economic and symbolic class, and global-northern geographic locations and careers in academia. We write from the margins of gender-sexual-political queerness, brownness, transnational liminality, Tamilness, and radical anti-caste/anti-national/decolonial feminisms. The brief anecdotes we narrate above illuminate intersections that we were always aware of, and many that we are still learning about, as we examine our own privileges and locational blank-spots. In doing so, we seek to complicate the understanding of race, color, and caste in India through the affects generated by a violent form of looking. We began this chapter with two such affective moments, not to center ourselves in this analysis, but to reveal the extent to which women's bodies that do not conform to rules of invisibility (even ours that have caste and class privileges), move into a field where gaze and touch blur together through hierarchies of power. We also speak from a place which recognizes that our articulations are firmly located in our caste, class, and locational privileges; knowing that our capacities to 'voice' are inextricably linked with the enforced silence upon Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, queer, and other marginalized subjectivities in the Indian context. We work from a position of resistance to these cultural norms, not to over-generalize the scopic culture of India, but to point to the embedded colonial, anti-Black, casteist, white-supremacist vestiges of colorism that inform this culture. While this might appear as an obvious space of intersectional inhabitation, this chapter explores the particular need to reconnect with and build on Dalit and Black Feminist articulations and practices of

¹ The term *savarna*, collectively refers to various caste communities self-identifying as "higher" castes. Derived from the Sanskrit word for color and caste, *varna*, *savarna* stands in for privileged caste groups who benefit from systemic social, economic, and cultural privilege. The literature and distinctions between *varna* and caste are complex, and we do not have room to address these here. For this paper's purposes, we wish to highlight that those who do not conform to *savarna* categories, such as Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi (indigenous) peoples, call for the naming of *savarna* privilege as crucial to any discussion about injustice and inequality in India and the diaspora. For an incisive Dalit Feminist reading on *savarna* accountability, see Soundararajan and Varatharajah (2015).

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intersectionality, even as we resist the relentless ways in which whiteness appropriates intersectionality as part of its ever-expanding tool-kit. The resistive core of Black Feminist thought that emerges throughout multigenerational works from Sojourner Truth to Toni Morrison and many more, informs our own resistance to centering whiteness as the point of departure when mapping injustice and oppression. Rather than bifurcating feminist and anti-racist work, we attempt to map the ways in which caste-based and anti-Black racism in India coincides with the variegated oppressions of women² in public spaces. Furthermore, we elaborate how the privileges of speaking from the global north inflect how we understand feminist concerns in the global south.

We write as transnational academics experiencing mobilities of symbolic and spatial capital and from spaces defined by mobility. We begin with our experiences in tourist contact-zones, where we necessarily come face to face, with our racialized selves. Sekimoto (2018) observes that racial awareness is activated by sensorial experiences, thereby framing the body as “and anchor of sensory knowing vis-à-vis race” (p. 84). In this vein, we strive to lay open the contours of a pervasive scopic culture that inflects public life in India, from which caste and class privilege enormously protect, though does not totally immunize us. We argue that when othered subjects across a spectrum of privilege move through fields of visibility, they are touched by a “haptic visuality” (Marks, 2000) that is felt on the body in violent ways. We explore how the gaze that strikes women’s bodies in India reveals a complex web of relationality between casteism and racism. We do so with an acute awareness of how our experiences as women living

² We acknowledge that our discussion does not directly address *hijra*, *thirunangai*, transgender, and non-binary wmxn and peoples who are also very much harmed by the scopic regime we map. However, our positionalities and the scope of this chapter limit our ability to honor those experiences. We hope in this writing, however, to hold space and openings for their experiences.

in the global north can never be approximated alongside the depth of trauma experienced by Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi and Black women living in India. While we cannot and do not, speak for or as these women, what we can show is that a manner of *being looked at* coats the surface of discriminatory violence across a range of our identities and bodies. We therefore, also map a growing anecdotal archive of phobic experiences that Black bodies experience while moving through India, not to conflate these experiences with ours, but to question the global north's logic of racism that is unable to grapple with the very real color/caste/class nexus of oppression in India. Since color/caste/class operate as variable nodes of intersectional identities, it is extremely difficult to make clear the relationships between each of these markers. Here, we use the phrase intersectional identities to denote the embodied- performative iterations of intersectionality, which cannot be reduced to neatly demarcated categories of experience. Color does not always correspond to caste, just as caste does not always reveal social-economic class. As Jayawardene (2016) notes, "constitutive of colonial racist ideology and the ensuing onto-colonial sociality of the present moment, colorism in South Asia is not simply characterized by a yearning for lighter skin, but is far subtler and severe" (p. 338). The nexus between caste, color, race, class, and gender are deeply complex, and historically blurry.

While Jayawardene conditionally accepts the "Aryan" theory of colorism in India,³ scholars like Darity & Deshpande (2003) and Pandian (2007) are much more

³ The "Aryan/Dravidian" discourse in India has a complex and contentious status. Scholarship (Deshpande, Jayawardane, Klass, Ghurye, Thapar, Pandian etc.) remains undecided on the unipolar understanding of "Aryans" as a "fair-skinned" people who dominated "darker" skinned, indigenous peoples. While the migration of "Aryan" peoples into India, and the subsequent othering of local peoples is generally agreed upon, it is not unilaterally agreed that skin-color was a clear marker of differentiation.

ambivalent about this view. What is agreed upon however, is that coloniality and European discourses of white supremacy are deeply embedded and intertwined with those of caste supremacy in contemporary Indian socio-political life. Additionally, one must also account for the complexities of color and race that came with the Indian Ocean Slave Trade, and Mughal rule in India, which account for Indian and Sri Lankan communities of African heritage in present-day South Asia (Jayawardene, 2016). In contemporary South Asia, there is also medical, educational, and economic migration from the African continent, as well as the movement of Black peoples by way of tourism from the global north. In parallel, there is steadily growing anger, articulation, and resistance led by Dalit, Adivasi and Bahujan communities in response to Hindutva (Hindu Fundamentalism) articulations of an exclusionary and heteronormative “Indianness.” While this is in no way an exhaustive examination of contextual complexities and nuances, it helps to remind us that doing the work of radical intersectionality, particularly in postcolonial spaces, often involves a morass of external and internalized discourses of coloniality, violence, and racialization.

Radical intersectionality, as we articulate it here, requires us to hold intersections as different, yet intimately connected to one another, without conflating, or flattening the politics of any one inhabitation. For example, the critiques of colorism in India tend to foreground the idea of a collective aspirational whiteness. However, as Prasad (2018) has shown, the complex epidermalization of the Indian aspirational class can also shift the meanings of darker skin color towards an upwardly-mobile class aesthetic and a performance of neoliberal power. The intersections of class, caste, and color in India

therefore defy generalization, and yet exert a palpable force on people's everyday performances of identity. To understand how these forces play significant roles in how sexism is felt and sensed in public spaces, we must adopt a radically fluid deployment of intersectional method, which reflects this slippery terrain and resists a neocolonial codification into a lexicon of the 'other'. So rather than use whiteness as a point of departure to talk about color-based sexism in India, we instead seek to center the geopolitical location and socioeconomic mobility of brown bodies between the global north and south, which reveal how certain privileges complicate the understanding of anti-black/caste/regional sexism in India. We write this piece as an interruption to a scopopic regime, revealing how the privileges afforded by a relationality to the global north co-produces sexism, desire, and xenophobia. We frame this writing as a preliminary, and speculative exploration of optics: the politics of gazing, being seen, and being invisible. This introductory section has provided some reflections on positionality, as well as how and why we want to do this work of reimagining intersectionality in the specific context of haptic visibility in India. The next section will focus on locational, socio-cultural, and identity-based specificities that are essential to any fruitful practice of intersectionality in a global context.

II. Intersectional Contours in India

This section is intended as a broad contour of contexts. We recognize that the preliminary work we are undertaking, along with fellow scholars in thinking through anti-Blackness and casteism in India, is a tall order. The ways in which racialized hierarchies operate, mean that postcolonial societies cast in the 'middle' of the racial pyramid by extant racial logics, are often characterized by complex desires for whiteness that are deeply rooted in

anti-Blackness. In India, these complexities are exacerbated by casteism, sexism, regionalism, colorism, as well as religious multiplicities. Jayawardene (2016) articulates the intersections of race, coloniality, caste, and class as “racialized casteism”, which is the frame she uses to articulate the intimacies between anti-Blackness, caste, and coloniality in India and Sri Lanka. She examines the ontological politics of communities of African heritage in both Sri Lanka and India. Noting that the Siddi community in India is listed as a Scheduled Tribe by the Indian Government, she writes, “Society conceives of them as inferior alongside the Sudra and Dalits (untouchables) who are also in similar socioeconomic positions and are lower castes” (p. 335). Jayawardene’s astute, nuanced, and intersectional analysis however, does not discuss the specificities of regional and linguistic politics of identity that reflect more informal taxonomies beyond the juridical – such as the coding of South Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils as also black-skinned and socially inferior in the national consciousness. In the context of Tamil peoples of southern India and Sri Lanka, we see on the one hand that dark skin is celebrated as a marker of Dravidian cultural-political identity, while on the other, Tamil popular culture, television, and film constantly equate fairness of skin-tone with beauty⁴.

The internalization of whiteness as an ideal, Nadeem (2014) argues, is less about a hatred for the self and more about an “anxious love for the other” (p. 225), where she describes the desire for whiteness as a desire to liberate oneself from the barriers of caste, class, and region that are inscribed into skin-color. This desire for liberation-oppression is a complicated one, as in contemporary India, the valorization of “fairness” involves an intricate dance of amnesia in regard to whiteness. The elision of race and whiteness from

⁴ See also Parameswaran & Cardoza (2009), Verghese (2017) and Guha Ray (2010) for discussions of skin-lightening across regions in India.

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the vocabulary of fairness is not accidental. For fairness of skin to emerge as a neoliberal-cosmopolitan ideal of freedom, its connections to whiteness must necessarily be forgotten (Paul, 2016). This forgetting then allows for the discourse of fairness to be re-inscribed into purely “local” systems of violent categorization, thus rendering coloniality and whiteness irrelevant to casteist- regionalist-colorism.

Pre-colonial systems of caste used violent discourses of othering and purity/pollution, which varied between regions and kingdoms (Darity & Deshpande, 2003). Combined with Empire’s use of eugenics and race-science, caste was further transformed into a logic of socioeconomic categorization and hierarchy, yielding what Jayawardene terms “racialized castesim” (p. 341) in contemporary India. Suna (2018) makes the important point that whiteness and coloniality were deeply complicit and invested in systematizing casteist hierarchies, thus aligning themselves with existing savarna hierarchies and institutions of power. Behl (2011), in her work, alludes to the deep embeddedness of casteism when she discusses the ways in which her Sikh participants adopt a “caste-blind” approach to casteism, thereby ignoring the foundational structures that already privilege those from savarna lineages, regardless of religion. With privileged-caste Hindu communities we see a wide spectrum ranging from explicit bodily caste supremacy and violence to more sophisticated forms of epistemic and symbolic caste violence, as well as a non-recognition, and forgetting: a caste-blank approach. These mechanisms of privilege and denial are a serious impediment to challenging structural violence, as well as to coalition building. It is in this context that Dalit feminist Lata P.M’s (2015) reminder serves us well: “Dalit-Bahujan feminist thought articulates the primacy of caste, class and gender in the Indian context [...] Any materialist and

layered analysis of our lived reality has to engage with the voices, analyses and theories of Dalit Bahujan feminists” (para. 8). Prashad (2000) in turn, discusses anti-Black racism amongst South Asians, noting that South Asia internalized the racist matrix in the particular modality of the ‘model minority’. This modality of internalizing white supremacy is closely tied to the hierarchical quality of racialization, which produces a particular form of fictive seduction for those who are not at the very bottom of the hierarchy. “It is of course,” as Prashad notes, “far better to be acknowledged as having some value than to be denied having any at all” (p. 160). This fictive seduction of belonging operates with great efficacy in India, particularly through narratives of violent nationalism. The composite of caste-race-class-gender in contemporary India is also deeply affected by these imaginaries of nationalist-xenophobic-belonging (Prashad, 2000; Bannerjee, 2005; Ramaswamy, 1997). The combination of internalized white supremacy, casteism, and classism, which produces the desire for fair skin, aligns perfectly with contemporary Hindutva nationalist agenda that is essentially invested in producing a hyper-patriarchal, xenophobic, exclusively savarna nation-state.

These observations draw our attention to the ways in which different identifications are always in contact and tension with one another, producing heteromasculinities and heterofemininities which, if not adhered to have deadly consequences particularly for dark, femme, queer, trans, Muslim, and many Other bodies. While the deeply patriarchal-misogynistic narrative of fundamentalist and nationalist discourses of Hindutva are well-established (Bacchetta 2002; 2004; Bedi 2006), it is also important to note that these movements and political parties actively solicit the support and participation of women as well. In her work, Bedi (2006) notes that Hindu women

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who join the ranks of Hindutva parties like the *Shiv Sena*, perform a complicated set of negotiations which involve internalizing misogyny and patriarchal nationalism. This manifests as social and material attacks against Dalit women (Rege, 1998, 2000) on the one hand, and performing agency and resistance against savarna male cadres, on the other. In her incisive critique of the savarna portrayal of ‘marginalized women’ in the film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), Rahmath E.P. (2016) notes this complexity to powerful effect. Noting the stereotypical, fetishistic, casteist and Islamophobic ways in which the women in the film are portrayed, Rahmath simultaneously teases out the ways in which the focus on ‘marginalized’ women’s bodies by savarna lenses is also an erasure of the violences that savarna patriarchy visits upon savarna women. She asks, “Why are they hiding the damn Brahmin patriarchy? Why wasn't even a single women from this class/caste portrayed in this movie? [...] Why don't they bother about the sexual lives of savarna women? Why don't you show that boldness to talk about the widows in Vrindavan or women under khap panchayats?” (para. 10). This nuanced and contradictory understanding of the ways in which women are simultaneously weaponized and victimized, is key to unpacking the haptic-optic complexes that are projected on to women’s bodies, which forms the basis of the next section. Rahmath’s critique is also why we narrate and locate our own positionalities in relation to our experiences. The ways in which we, as savarna women, are consumed by patriarchal haptic visibility must be held together with the ways in which we are constantly also protected by the structural privileges put in place by that very same patriarchy. The work of de-whitening and decolonizing intersectionality lies primarily in the *practice* of intersectionality. In this

particular case, that requires understanding intersectionality as applicable *both* to privilege as well as marginality.

The messy privileges of both women who conform, and the explicit dangers that beset women who do not, demonstrate the ways in which institutionalized misogyny is an inherent part of the dynamics of anti-Blackness and casteism in the Indian context. In the next section, we examine how being “looked at” functions as a method of disciplining the othered bodies of women through hypervisibility. Specifically, we theorize towards an understanding of the “haptic gaze” as a prosthetic for physical touch, wherein the hypervisible markers of color, race, caste, and class on gendered bodies become justifications for varying degrees of symbolic and literal invasion, abjection, and physical violence these bodies experience as they move through public space.

III. Theorizing Haptic-Optics in the Matrices of Race-Caste-Gender

The feeling of being looked at is not to be conflated with that of being seen. Intersectionality demands we see rather than merely look at the many vectors of difference that shape our lives. It demands an empathic being-with those who ask to be seen in their multifaceted subjectivities. To be looked at, however, presumes an ontological separation and distance between the subject and object of a gaze. To be looked at as woman is to be constructed as an object of pleasure, especially while we are also expected to derive pleasure from it. Mulvey (1989) constructs “woman... as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (p. 7) in the context of scopophilia, which then opens up space to consider what the implications of a “bearer” are. What is being borne and what kind of body is able to be seen as doing the bearing? Metz (2004) in his critique of the psychological framings of scopophilia, reminds us to be cautious about the distinction

between normative and pathological scopophilia, as itself being a symptom of institutionalized misogyny. While Mulvey suggests that “we can begin to make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides” (p. 7), we follow Lorde’s (1984) important declaration that the master’s tools are ontologically violent. Rather than examine scopophilia on its terms, we use the resistant methods of feminists of colors, to expose the ways in which the gaze constructs its subjects in a careful hierarchy, privileging certain bodies over others. This hierarchization of the body is underpinned by an immutable, essentialist view of the body in patriarchy. Ahmed and Stacy (2001) call for a “skintight politics” to critique feminist discourses of the body that frame bodily difference as resolute and irrevocable, rather than constantly coming into being. They write, “For in some sense, the very argument that ‘the body’ has been elided, negated and devalued in masculinist thought can fetishize the body, can allow it to appear as if it is an object that could be simply missing” (p. 3). We follow this call to ask how the body, skin, and color emerge interstitially, shifting between locations of subjectivity, especially when they are being looked at. For instance, our opening narratives indicate the movements between when our skin “disappears” and “reappears” in various contexts, where we are read either as dark, fair, savarna, Indian, western, shaping what parts of our subjectivities are on display and when. This has less to do with our own sense of identity, than it does with how we are marked by others’ desire, disgust, fascination, or scorn. The kind of scopophilia we recount does not simply land on our skin, but sweeps across it with a palpable affect. The skin therefore is not merely marked by color but also by a form of deferred touch, much in the way that Marks (2000) remarks about “haptic visuality” where “the eyes themselves function as organs of touch”. She writes that haptic visuality

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“more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze rather than gaze” (p. 162). While Mulvey and Marks are concerned with cinematic image, we extend their thinking to argue how scopophilia does in fact construct the body/skin as a screen upon which pleasure and desire are projected via a haptic gaze. This kind of looking at does not seek depth or even touch, rather a morbid and prosthetic extension of a panoramic vision that takes in not just the body but also its surrounding context. The woman’s body in a public space is available as a screen because it is moving in public – the color or quantity of her skin also absorbing and projecting those who surround it. It is an image so real that you can reach out and touch it.

Scopophila⁵ undergirds the deployment of the haptic gaze in India. Women’s bodies are paradoxically constructed as objects to be looked at while simultaneously being expected to repel the optical touch. Chawla (2017) recounts incidents from her childhood, in which her mother chides her for smiling back at a man in the market where they are shopping, saying “who knows what people want” (p. 9). The implication that touch cannot be far behind the gaze sits heavy in the admonition. Indeed, returning a gaze itself is somehow constructed as an engagement with and acquiescence to being touched by vision, an accusation that is often heard under patriarchy in any part of the world – that a woman being looked at or stared at is implicitly asking to be touched or assaulted. Our own introductory anecdotes, and those that we have gathered via conversation or reading reflect this same knowledge, a lesson taught very early and held very deeply within the bodies of those presenting as women, though of course varying significantly in degree. The corporeal burdens of visuality are of course not the same for all bodies, in

⁵ Since this essay is not concerned directly with Mulvey’s framing of cinematic scopophilia, we want to leave room for different negotiations and interpretations of the term.

fact, we note that color and race often predicate how a body becomes visible or invisible, touchable or untouchable. Ironically, in India where fair skin is exalted, meeting this standard of desirable color is accompanied by the expectation that women use their color to “disappear” into the “privilege” of not being stared at. Some have the class privilege to disappear from the public spaces of roads, busses, and trains, by quite literally becoming invisible inside cars with tinted windows⁶. Haptic vision seeks out unruly bodies that are dark, Black, Dalit, fat, queer, poor, foreign or diasporic and reaches out to touch them with impunity.

Our bodies come into a differential awareness of identity when we meet a haptic gaze. Marks notes, “The haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative” (p. 163). Reversing this perspective to consider the living body as the haptic image, we might see how narratives of identity and experiences that construct the *subject* are elided in favor of viewing eye’s terms of engagement and contemplation with the *object*. Our narratives that began this chapter demonstrate at least for a short temporal span, how a sense of how we were being looked at transports us unwillingly into a field of perception that is not our own. The haptic gaze encroaches on women’s bodies; an encroachment which often breaches into actual physical violence, ranging from self-harm to sexual assault. However, we must return to an intersectional analysis of this violence to reveal how Black, Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi women experience this violence differently from savarna women like ourselves. In the next

⁶ The complexity of these intersectional positionalities can be traced in the coverage of the 2012 Nirbhaya case, where a young savarna woman was brutally raped to death on a public bus. Nirbhaya, was both savarna and lacking the privilege of being able to “disappear” into the safety of more private modes of transport. Dalit feminist activists provided a critical intersectional intervention here, in pointing out that similar cases involving Dalit victims who were both violently erased by caste and class, received little to no such attention locally or globally.

section, we hold space for the experiences of women whose bodies are assaulted by haptic violence in different ways, and for whom such violence is deeply racialized. While we account for the differential experiences of women (including trans and non-binary people), we recognize that under a Hindu nationalism aligned with white supremacy, misogyny, and Islamophobia, we cannot offer a simplified white/brown/black lexicon with which to understand haptic visuality in India. Instead, we decode the heterogeneous contexts under which critical intersectional analysis leads us to decolonial solidarity.

IV. Dark Looks, Dark Bodies: An Intersectional Articulation of Haptic-Visual Violence

We began thinking about the resonances between our shared yet different experiences of the haptic gaze, after the publication of an article by the BBC. In the piece, Butterfield (2018) articulates what it was like to travel in India and endure the affective violence that touched her Black female body. She writes,

“I had been travelling around Asia since August 2017. Like many tourists venturing into communities lacking diversity, I've been used to being stared at, but the attention I received in India felt different. The looks didn't seem like expressions of curiosity. They seemed sinister and unwelcoming. When people (young and old) see someone with black skin they stare, point, laugh, make jokes, clear paths, run as if you are chasing them, and fix their face to display an overall look of disgust. Too many people were rude, incredibly childish and treated me poorly. When not being ostracised, I was fetishized” (para. 30).

What Butterfield narrates is not singular in its observations. The blogosphere abounds with similar accounts of Black women charting the challenges of “travelling while black” (Chideya, 2014) in India, in which their being looked at generated everything from acute discomfort to physical harm. A Duke University student doing fieldwork in India notes, “In India, the staring is quite ridiculous. Whether they are walking or driving, people slow down to catch a long glimpse. They get close and look at you straight in the face and look away when you look back.” (Barry, 2018, para. 6).

A solo-traveler, Le'Ana Freeman says,

“Being a Black woman in India was a multifaceted experience. I did find myself more sexualized here because most people’s only real frame of reference of black women were from music videos, media, and pornography (so I was told)[...] You also get quite a few stares and people asking to take photos with you; especially when you travel the rural areas” (qtd. in Taylor n.d, para. 4).

While white women have also documented this haptic gaze, their narratives account for their whiteness as the source of fetish that results in sexual harassment, preferential treatment, or even distance, rather than in the particular sensation of a proximal haptic gaze itself (Merelli, 2017). The narratives offered by Black women are distinct in their naming of the affect as threatening, uncomfortable, and aggressive. Travel writer, Maya (n.d.) notes,

“Usually when people ask to take a picture with you, it’s pretty harmless. But in India I found it to be overwhelming. I’d say yes to one person and soon people were lining up to take a picture with me, making seeing some sites a lengthy process. While there were some families that asked for pictures, the majority were groups of young men. I said yes to some, but after a guide told me that many men Photoshop the pictures to look inappropriate, I started declining. I don’t know how much truth there is to this claim, but I do know that it didn’t feel right” (para. 3).

We note here, the use of Black bodies as screens upon which fictions about Blackness are projected (Young, 2010). The material remnant of the groping gaze, the photograph, turning the body from flesh into image. The affect the gaze produces for bodies, to whom the photograph is never available, is significant precisely because it alone remains as evidence of the encounter. This affect is also expressed uncomfortably through narrative, for narrative often fails to capture the visceral familiarity of this gaze. These singular narratives instead reflect the alienation and isolation experienced by the Black women who write them, heightening their visibility even to themselves. Maya writes, “It may

seem strange, but I had never been so conscious of the fact that I'm a black woman as I was in India" (Maya, n.d., para. 1)

The narratives of travel we include here, are written by Black women from Europe and the United States. We make this distinction because this transitory mobility renders "visitors' bodies visible in very different ways than resident Black diasporic communities. The gaze that falls on the Black tourist body ascribes and projects a much different version of "touchability" and fetish than it does on Black bodies that live and work in India. The markers of the global north tourist/backpacker are subtle, yet candidly apparent in women traveling by themselves, a rarity amongst resident populations. The class-consciousness of the gaze sees what we sometimes miss in our exclusive focus on race. Chideya (2014) writing for the *New York Times* recollects,

"Brown skin that's often perceived as "otherness" in parts of America is not seen that way in much of the world [...] I experienced it in southern India, where many people were similar shades of brown as me or darker. I was not mistaken for being a local, but I could circulate less conspicuously than fair-skinned visitors. I took advantage of my skin color (and some common-sense cultural and street smarts, like dressing modestly, showing no valuables and staying alert) to go solo and explore low-income areas of Mumbai that the guards at my luxury hotel had warned me against visiting. My reward: I was invited to lunch at the home of a family, where an older couple and their son and daughter-in-law shared a two-room house" (para. 13).

Each of these narratives also reflects a particular mode of mobility – the ability to travel as citizens of the global north. An attention to global class hierarchy reveals the experiences of Black travelers, while targeted in specific ways by the haptic gaze, still reenact some other familiar projections – the global north's images of an "authentic" India located in the dissonances between luxury and poverty. The very appearance of global north travelers as socio-economically advantaged, complicates our reading of how

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the haptic gaze negotiates with racialized bodies. Very many of the women travelers we acknowledge here, distinguish themselves as members of a mobile class - Ivy league scholars, Fulbright fellows, or upper middle-class professionals. Boutique travel companies and collectives, like Travel Noire and Nomadness Travel Tribe, specifically characterize Black travel as rite of empowerment, vision, and symbolic wealth. However, class identity makes Black travelers visible to locals in ways that foregrounds their race and gender alone. The haptic gaze takes in their class as well as race, where class privilege potentially subdues far more aggressive engagement, like that experienced by African diasporic subjects living in India.

African diasporic peoples living in India, have been subjected to visceral violence as a manifestation of anti-Blackness. Across the country, there have been attacks against Black people, both professionals and students, living and working in major cities (Jaiswal, 2016; Prabhu, 2017). Stephen (2016) in her reportage of anti-Blackness in India documents African diasporic peoples in India describing the ways in which they experience anti-Black violence in India, how surprised they are at the levels of ignorance about Africa in Indian media and educational discourses, and that Indians appear to associate Africans with “drugs, violence, and prostitution” (Stephen, 2016, para 10). While we do not have the space to articulate the full depth of African diasporic people’s experiences in India, we want to mark this narrative as connected to, yet different from the previously discussed narratives of Black women from the global North *travelling* in India. Once again, we see how the complex nexuses of white supremacy, savarna-supremacy, colorist and gender produce a very specific discourse of anti-Blackness in the Indian context.

The amputation from a Hindutva nation is even more acutely experienced by Dalits, especially women (Pasricha, 2015). While women with class, caste, and/or color privilege do feel flashes of the haptic gaze, we are able to step out of those in ways that dark skinned and black-skinned Dalit women cannot. The gaze lands on these bodies in far more visceral and violent ways. The distance between gaze and touch collapses as Dalit women are simultaneously hypervisible as “non-caste” and “impure” while also being vigorously erased from visibility. The highly visible narrative platforms that we as diasporic savarna women, Black women tourists, and fair-skinned upper class/caste Indian women are afforded, are denied to Dalit women. Their narratives do not circulate in the academy or global platforms, despite the violence they face for being “seen” in spaces, and despite the violability that is projected onto their bodies being well documented. The ubiquity, frequency, and normalization of violence against Dalit and Bahujan women’s bodies in India cannot be emphasized enough. As Thaali (2015) notes, “punishing Dalit women is the duty of caste patriarchy” (para. 7).

Like Butterfield, Kumar (2017), a Dalit feminist scholar-activist writes of her own recollections of festival-time. We find points of connection to Butterfield’s narrative, and also points of deep unarticulated distinction and specificities, which separate the two.

“I had seen men dance like this on the road during Ganesh Chaturthis. And when I watched the men, there was always a distance that I had to keep—sitting by the window of a moving car, I’d gape at them enviously, safely. On the bike, too worried – there was always the fear of being groped by one of the thousands of hands dancing in the air – fear of an anonymous hand plucking at my body – afraid of the helplessness that’d come from not knowing whom and how many to fight if a hand did grope. Perched safely in balconies, I’d also watched men dance like this at Holi” (para 41-42).

The consequences for Dalit women, and for Kumar, as we read her account, are distinctly different from those for Butterfield, even as we can sense the connections in the sense of

danger, violation, and fear. When Kumar writes of the “helplessness that’d come from not knowing whom and how many to fight”, she is writing of a long, horrific and traumatic enactment of caste violence, both as history, and as present. Rege (1998) argues that this is precisely why Dalit women need to and do talk, and act “differently”. She writes that, this “'different voice' of the Dalit women is not an issue of identitarian politics; some 'authentic direct experience' but from a long lived history of lived struggles” (p. 42). The hyper-sexualization of Dalit and Bahujan women, and the marking of their bodies as sexually accessible, and ‘promiscuous’ is, in part, “because of their participation in social labour” (Rege, 1998, p. 44), and the ways in which savarna caste hierarchy systematically dehumanizes Dalit and Bahujan women’s bodies. Rege’s observation connects powerfully with the ways in which Black feminism critiques the race-blankness of white supremacy, and these shared understandings of resistance – of knowing that no woman is free when a Black or Dalit woman is violated – are illustrative of the importance of intersectional coalitions, and activism. Soundararajan (2014) makes precisely this link when she writes: “Just as there is no way to understand sexual violence in the history of the United States without understanding racism, there is no way to understand the frequency and lack of punishment of violence against women in India right now without understanding caste” (para. 2).

In her complex, nuanced, and powerfully critical work, Rege (2000) argues for the centering of Dalit Feminist Standpoint theory, arguing, in similar lines to Black Feminism, that the violence of casteism, and savarna oppression of Dalit, and Bahujan communities are foundational to the possibility of coalition, justice, and liberation of any kind. She reminds us that, the transformation of our own subjectivities, and the

dismantling of privileges is the first step in intersectional practice. We want to conclude this section with this complex, and difficult understanding of intersectional practice; of our own complicity as savarna women, and our simultaneous commitment to doing the work of dismantling privileges, and building ethical, and accountable coalitions. We want to follow Rege (2000) in her reflection that internal/reflexive critique is neither about “freezing” nor an “uncritical celebration”, nor a submission to “authenticity politics” “it means a recognition of connections of power that exist between women. It means speaking, not just ‘as one’ or ‘for the other’ but within and about the space between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’” (p. 493).

V. Enacting Radical, Intersectional Coalitions

The import of this work within intercultural communication leads us to a critical intervention – to rethink how identity is written about in relation to geopolitical location. While scholarship in intercultural communication has made great strides to identify the many forms of oppression using intersectional approaches, it must also contend with how to map intersectional privileges. Here, we strive to show how our positions speaking to and through western academic discourses of intersectionality interrupts monolithic understandings of South Asian, Black and Dalit experiences. We argue that the deterritorialized global north (vis-à-vis traveling bodies) must be entered into the field of interrogation, particularly when dealing with the visibility or invisibility of certain violences against women. For intercultural communication to be cleaved from whiteness as its point of departure, we must more thoroughly understand how race, caste, and class arranges bodies of color in relation to *each other*.

Thus, as we examine the contours of these stories, what emerges is not just a map of widespread anti-Blackness, and casteism in India, but also a map of a very familiar affect that coalesces around the very experience of being stared at. Women of all backgrounds report anecdotally on this “culture of staring” that touches us in varying ways. And yet, we struggled to find writings that theorized this experience in ways that acknowledged the anecdotal nature of how these experiences were being documented. We ourselves were frequently paralyzed as we grappled with how to describe these anecdotes that defied generalization or categorization. This is not to obscure or deny the everyday resistances, solidarities, and emergent resistances that othered bodies enact everyday, but rather, to draw attention to the absence of both the articulations of haptic-optic experiences, and the resistances and solidarities that are responses to them.

The intersectional feminist framing of the gaze demands a thick, longform narrative – narratives that account for our differential experiences. How then, do we theorize the immediacy of haptic-optics that unfold and close at a rapid pace? How do we contend with the inability to document these moments that generate an affect so palpable yet fleeting, arising in one instance only to be redacted by another (either by an act of kindness or indifference)? How do we remain allied to each other through failures, as we resist the imperative to “gloss over difference because cultures of domination teach us to”? (Ghabra & Calafell, 2018). To do this work of transnational, interracial, and anticaste solidarity we defend the anecdote, as an empirical locus of coalition rather than as detritus of the western academic archive. We approach anecdotes of experience as synapses from which to theorize. The flashes of haptic-optics that encroach onto bodies unfold with an immediacy that is best documented retroactively. The body registers these

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synapses before anything else happens. These are deep, yet brief, affective flashes that offer intersectional analysis another layer where we see experiences coalesce before they diverge. Anecdotes of optical affects thus permits us to explore the experiences of identity markers like caste, class, race, gender, sexuality, age, disability etc. in a form that does not demand, or privilege linearity of narrative, or even a verbal-written articulation. These experiences are viscerally embodied, and often, women and queer peoples traverse and navigate the optics of dangerous, desiring, and despising gazes with no time, or space to speak. We also want to clarify that in referring to a politics of optics, we are not performing a form of “ocularcentrism”(Ono, 2000, p. 136) that equates ‘seeing’ with ‘knowing’. Rather, we are using the politics of seeing and being seen as a way of displacing the legitimacy of the spoken/written, and to open up the interiority of the experience of the gaze, which is not always co-constructed. Tracing and understanding the extent and variegated contexts of caste, coloniality, nationalism, gender, class and region are crucial to an intersectional analysis of anti- Blackness in South Asia. Simplifying or flattening any of these identifications, or conflating one with another might mean that we use a frame of “race” as it operates in societies where whiteness visibly inhabits a space, to understand “color” in a society where whiteness and Blackness are not highly visible tourists, but an invisible ontological- epistemological measure. Dismantling these structures of violence to form effective, and meaningful coalitions will take enormous work because “solidarity is not ‘natural’” (Prashad, 197), no matter how deeply we desire it.

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