

## Sunburned

*Color Lines in the Sand*

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**ABSTRACT** This essay considers how travel and mobility inflect our politics of alterity through changing skin color. It asks how globality is rendered through the prism of epidermal vulnerability, the sunburn. When is this affliction of skin desirable and what cosmopolitan relations does it engender? It asks how skin transforms, and transforms us, when it travels. It considers what it means for brown skin to be marked by vacation travel. How is it coded differently than tanned white skin? What experiences are ascribed or denied to brown skin that has been marked by travel under the sun? **KEYWORDS** Travel; Colorism; Race; South Asia; Subculture

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As a way of “thinking through the skin,” we ask: How does the skin come to be written and narrated? How is the skin managed by subjects, others and nations?

~SARA AHMED AND JACKIE STACEY<sup>1</sup>

### DERMAL ONTOLOGIES

Skin grows in storied layers. It pulses beyond the epidermis where the gaze falls. It simultaneously reveals and conceals the histories of changes that have come and gone, and some that have remained. It keeps you from spilling out and falling apart in pieces, while splitting you up from within. Skin is where touch translates into relation, where affects rest and leave. Skin turns itself over completely in seven years, but is betrayed by the irreversible propulsion towards disintegration. And yet, skin tells the stories of where we have been and where we hope to go. Skin travels. It transforms, as we move.

This essay considers how travel and mobility inflect our politics of alterity through changing skin color. It asks how globality is rendered through the prism of epidermal vulnerability, the sunburn. When is this affliction of skin desirable and what cosmopolitan relations does it engender? It asks how skin transforms, and transforms us, when it travels. It considers what it means for

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brown skin to be marked by vacation travel. How is it coded differently than tanned white skin? What experiences are ascribed or denied to brown skin that has been marked by travel under the sun? Although much has been written about the practice of skin lightening in the global south and particularly in Indian society, this essay asks how a purposeful darkening of the skin on brown bodies reorders their relationships to colorism, modernity, and global capitalist formations. How do liminal spaces and the atemporality of vacation time shape how altered skin is made a unit of social capital that accrues (cosmopolitan) value outside the mainstream hegemonies of colorism in India? Reading the suntan as a vehicle of social and economic mobility, I ask whether we can begin to think about the ways in which brown skin reimagines its place on the global color line through neoliberal tourist practices of epidermalization.

Critical race studies have long considered how the racialization of bodies move and shift within geopolitical emplacements and localized contexts. Certainly, racism in India coincides with casteism and colorism in complex ways, where correlations between skin and identity are discursively and ideologically reproduced, rather than rendered materially. Dark skin, despite being pervasively linked to lower-caste and lower-class identity, remains a wildly unstable signifier across every Indian regional, ethnic, and socioeconomic category. Therefore, taking a cue from Radhika Mohanram, who argues for an understanding of racialization as it emerges in relation to space and place,<sup>2</sup> I explore particular embodiments of race and color in the liminal zone of the tourist beach, asking how brown bodies negotiate (temporary) transformations of skin as transformations of social identity and capital. I consider how the tourist beach serves as a paradoxical location of postcolonial imagination, one that purportedly reverses the everyday diktats of colorism in India, albeit in ways that unsurprisingly intersect with the privileges afforded by middle-class participation in neoliberal leisure practices and ideologies.

The postcolonial critique I undertake necessarily accounts for a class-based resistance to the nexus of caste–color–class in neoliberal India. The classed body that is multiply coded as “empowered” or “free to move” must recognize the liberties it is afforded by the cultivation of an elite cosmopolitan affect, in a nation characterized by Purnima Mankekar as “aspirational India.”<sup>3</sup> That unwieldy class category in India, loosely defined through desire for a neoliberal modernity rather than economic status, invokes this aspirational affect through the everyday performances that unfold in call centers, shopping malls, and cinema halls. An aspirational affect emerges from the cultural and linguistic mimetic strategies a postcolonial nation adopts to be legible in a neoliberal ethnoscape, in

which Western cultural imperialism and consumer culture entice and seduce. Aspiration is an affect of sensuality that floats across the body without ever settling on it firmly.

Radhika Parameshwaran notes that media representations of Indian modernity often rely on the consumer being able to perform the aesthetics of Western cultural globalization, which does not necessarily mimic the West, but rather networks with it.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, in this essay, I ask how beach tourism as an “other” form of play is deeply rooted in a socialization towards leisure and mobility that seeks to replace Western cultural hegemony in India, even while (re)producing it. Therefore, I illuminate that brown bodies do not simply mimic or yearn for whiteness per se, but seek the performative gestures of neoliberal power implicit in the practice of sunbathing. I imagine how sun exposure moves from being an undesirable assault on the Indian body to a sensuous and fleshy aspiration.

Like the emergence of spots, freckles, and moles, this essay calls upon auto-ethnographic and ethnographic moments of exposure to slowly allow the darkening of this idea—the idea that the further browning of brown skin exposes a cultivation of Otherness, specifically the material vulnerability of white (and brown) skin burning under the sun. While a well-documented fetish for skin-lightening accompanies the desire for upward class and caste mobility in India, I argue that subcultural beach tourism reflects neoliberal conditions wherein the further darkening of dark skin ironically becomes a marker of upper-middle-class status. In doing so, I highlight the minor movements of color consciousness in India through the prism of the suntan and its more aggressive relative the sunburn, which uneasily and paradoxically develop on brown bodies vacationing from the more quotidian implications of color in India.

## SUNBURNED

How do strange encounters, encounters in which some-thing that cannot be named is passed between subjects, serve to embody the subject?

~ SARA AHMED<sup>5</sup>

Goa is a place where white skin comes to brown. The soft white sands of the western coast of India host Western tourists seeking tropical tans and spiritual enlightenment through ritual parties. Here, the promise of spiritual alterity that orientalist visions of India generate meet the party culture of other global destinations like Ibiza, Bangkok, and Rio. Here, the parties are tinted with the veneer of spiritual transcendence—parties are prayers. Here, the mimicry of Hindu ritual aesthetics performs an interpretive authority

that renders white subculture more Indian than Indians. Here, subcultural shamans invoke the aura of ascetic style and deistic iconography, and conjure into being embodied artifacts of orientalist fantasy. Here, mimesis operates as a form of magic; magic that transforms skin and self, even temporarily, towards a mythos of shared humanity and multiculturalism that relies on whiteness for authentication. Here, *mala* beads swing to psychedelic trance, Shiva dances atop a UFO, and LSD powers yoga. Here, the allure of an alternative India is apparent—Goa is a place out of place—it is somewhere you go to get away from the rest of India. Goa is a state of mind, they say. Goa is state of skin, I say.

It is sometimes hard to tell when white folks are actually white in Goa. Their sun-blasted skin is often as dark as ours although if you look closely, it betrays its layers. What really gives away whiteness though is the bareness of the skin. Few Indians, men included, remove most of their clothing in public. White “goa freaks” by contrast cover as little of their bodies as possible, allowing the sun to penetrate every fold and crease. It is almost as if the vulnerability of white skin is put on display as proof of white freedom in a brown country. *The skin may burn, but it is free!*

Brown skin on the other hand is tentative. It is thought to burn less quickly, and yet, the specter of colorism regulates how long it can lie exposed to the fiery embrace of the sun. Brown skin will, however, come out to play in Goa where naked skin can flaunt a particular kind of status to others—the privilege of being free of shame, which is, after all, the cornerstone of Indian moral codes. Whether in bikini-tops, mini-skirts, short-shorts, or barely-there tanks, brown bodies in articles of Western aesthetics that may only be commonplace at a nightclub invite the gaze of both hippie and yuppie, and seem to say *Look, here it is; my freedom that is unyoked from India and set loose on a white beach!*

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In December 2007, in the three days before the New Year, PDM Entertainment (an event management company) and Smirnoff Vodka joined together with Nikhil Chinapa (a video jockey on MTV India) to host Sunburn, India’s first electronic dance music (EDM) festival. Despite the headliners being internationally known house DJs Carl Cox, Axwell, and Above and Beyond, the roster of performers featured mainly Indian DJs all spinning a variety of genres, among which goa trance was noticeably absent. In being bigger, better funded, and fully backed by corporations, Sunburn distanced itself from the shadow of white psychedelia, which undoubtedly had set up Goa as the *ur*-destination for party culture in India. Sunburn traded in the affects of white global party culture while excising ones that lay just outside the festival enclosure.

A friend, Brute Force, who was part of Submerge India, a DJ collective founded by Chinapa, had invited me to the festival. Sunburn was their first attempt to take national the nascent techno and house scene in the metropolitan cities (metros), and announce EDM's arrival on the map of Indian popular music, which had been and still continues to be dominated by Bollywood. The buildup to the festival was marked by repeated claims that this was an initiation of sorts for India into the global club scene, radiating the same promise and aura of those sites of excess that were located on beaches around the world. The implication of sun and water (Sunburn and Submerge) was not lost on Indian audiences who buzzed with the anticipation of finding their own Ibiza closer to home.

EDM culture in India is, unlike its history in the West, an elite pursuit. Vinyl, crossfaders, and turntables were artifacts of international travel; souvenirs brought home by those privileged enough to take leisure far from home. Equipment, access to clubs, social capital, and knowledge of the music were (and still are) expensive and inaccessible to most young Indians to whom EDM addresses itself. Coupled with the gender regulations of nightclubs in the metros (men often have to be accompanied by women to enter the hipper venues in five-star hotels), the class-based dress codes and communal social performances demanded of club-goers make nightclubs effectively elite and exclusive spaces. They are spatial and performative epitomes of neoliberal cosmopolitanism, measured in Western-centric consumer affects and aesthetics. By contrast, Sunburn offered access to clubbing to anyone with a ticket. While festival passes and travel to Goa were also not cheap, attending Sunburn proved relatively easy when compared to the social and economic capital needed to experience clubs in the metros or overseas. For these reasons, Sunburn drew (and continues to draw) a diverse Indian crowd of young professionals and a broad swath of the middle class. It drew curious tourist bystanders as well, including those who were unfamiliar with the music and codes of the elite nightclub, and who happened to be in Goa for a different kind of cosmopolitan experience—being in proximity to a subcultural whiteness expressed through the extant psychedelic trance party culture, and the sight of white bodies tanning on the sand.<sup>6</sup>

I had ridden my motorbike from the hippie enclave of Anjuna where I was doing fieldwork, about five miles down to Candolim Beach where Sunburn had positioned itself. Candolim was just south of Baga and Calangute, the most thickly populated villages in racially segregated tourist Goa. While Anjuna was filled to the brim with white hippie expats and trance freaks, Baga and Calangute had become the mainstay of domestic middle-class Indian

tourists. The higher-end resorts catering to wealthier visitors were three hours south in Palolem. Candolim was, at the time, mostly residential and quiet. The beach here was relatively uncrowded and the freaks were few and far between, most of them having opted to head further north to Arambol and Morjim for the New Year.

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The midday sun hammers down on Candolim. There is a hip-looking couple behind me in line for tickets. They both have on huge sunglasses that look expensive, and are dressed strangely for the beach. She is in a shiny, sky-blue metallic dress with chains for straps, and he is in a tight, black button-down shirt with the collar popped to show off a gold chain. Their outfits seem to thumb a nose at sartorial time—nightlife moves into the glare of the sun—her dress reflecting light in every direction, his absorbing it. They are bickering loudly about whether to pay the 2500 rupees each (about US\$63) for a day pass. *“I don’t want to stay all day, I want to go jet-skiing. Let’s call the driver and go now itself, no?” she says. “Come on, yaar. You come all the way to Goa and don’t want to party? This is what it’s all about,” says he. She: “It’s a waste of money!” He: “How much did you spend on that dress? Don’t you want to show it off?”*

There are a few groups of young men, not much older than 20, who stand off to the side. They make no move to get in line, but cluster around near the ticket booths. Maybe they are waiting for someone, maybe they are self-conscious about being there stag. One group of five boys stands nearby, tightly knit, with their arms around each other. They are in loose-fitting shorts and display a dazzling array of brand names on their off-brand, stretched-out t-shirts—Adidas, Nike, Gucci, Versace, Tommy Hilfiger, Ralph Lauren. The clothes hang off their thin frames, the colors vivid against their black skin. The knock-off brand names and the lack of gender variation in their group painfully indicate their failure to pass in this upper-middle-class scene, where those particular social gestures of upward mobility are decidedly uncool. Their dark skin itself says little, but how it is covered speaks volumes. I watch them as they try to peer past the tall metal gates that block the festival ground from being seen from outside. A metal boundary has been erected around a large portion of the beach-front land, and security patrols the edges that stop just before the water. It muffles the steady beat of some techno track that is playing on the inside. The aura of exclusivity is palpable. The line does not seem to be moving even though there are no more than ten people waiting for tickets. I watch the boys as their resolve to join the line diffuses and they turn around, with arms still slung around each others’ shoulders, and wander away from the gates.

I am by myself, tugging at the wristband I have grudgingly purchased as I enter the festival enclosure. There are at least a thousand people there already, mostly between the ages of 20 and 30, and I begin spotting people from Madras, Bangalore, Mumbai, and Delhi who I knew from the EDM scene. I see Brute Force hanging out with some of his fans by the food stands and I make my way over. He greets me with *“Everyone ditched Anjuna this year! This is the place to be! We’ve been waiting so long for this!”*

There are two stages, 20 feet off the sand, with elaborate rigging for lights and speakers. Indian DJs are playing on both and the music feels pretty good for the afternoon. Nothing too heavy, lots of melodic interludes over unchanging techno beats. I look around at the crowd and notice that not many people are dancing. They are standing in groups with beers or cocktails, chatting or yelling across the grounds at someone they know whom they have spotted. Some groups are hanging out in the VIP boxes—raised covered platforms with sofas and cushions, literally towering over the others sweltering under the sun. The familiar performances of sociality—of seeing and being seen—dominate the mood. Women are squealing and waving, men are bumping chests and slapping backs. The whole scene is sharply alien to the subculture in which I have been immersed in Anjuna. The vibe at the festival is charged with something different from the freak scene; it is. . . glittering. . . the air is thick with smells of cologne and perfume. I feel suddenly out of place in my messy top-knot, prescription spectacles, and salt-worn cotton palazzo pants, almost as if in culture shock. I hear a comment from another time that triggers a sharp but fleeting embarrassment in me, *“Aunty, you’re going to maths tuition or what?”* I think of the boys who left and suddenly want to leave too. I stand slightly apart from the loudly chattering group around Brute Force—they are talking about people I don’t know. *“Is so-and-so here yet? That chooth better come! So-and-so is here. He’s a real trip, no?”* I am about to fade quietly away from them, when a shiny woman I do not know, with creamy skin and perfectly straitened hair, turns to me and says, *“Come with me to the loo. I need you to hold my purse.”*

*There is an abundance of bare skin here—shoulders and chests and legs and arms and backs. I see a few bikini tops and too many tattoos to count. Some are temporary and many others are real. I wonder how black ink will age on brown skin. Will it grow vague and less noticeable over time as the sun blurs the lines into the skin, darkening them to muddy stains whose borders melt and blend them out of visibility? I think about these tan lines and tattoos and when they will return to the urban mundane, respectably hidden under half sleeves and high collars and long pants.*

Here the darkness of skin is chosen—more specifically, it is chosen by those with the light-skinned privilege of being able to reverse it. This deep color is temporary, not dubious proof of an ineradicable caste stain, or of classed labor and toil, but of upwardly mobile tourist leisure and pleasure. Bare skin—sunburned skin that is displayed rather than unclothed out of necessity (like the farmer or the day laborer)—is the accessory of the day, its acquisition and discarding made possible through the mechanisms of class privilege. It is the performative whiteness of the subcultural beach that makes the sunburn capital; a kind of performative whiteness that flaunts its epidermal fragility as a marker of cosmopolitan mobility. Of course, performing a white subculture, (incorrectly) known for its self-proclaimed colorblindness, only reinforces the futility of assuming cosmopolitanism to be an erasure of racial striations, whiteness to be an absence of color, or sunburned brown skin to be proof of a dismantled caste-color-class system. But such is the fantasy of the tourist beach.

As the afternoon lengthens endlessly, I have talked to a few people, and gone down to the beach to get away from the clubby atmosphere of the festival. I am sitting on the sand, when a DJ from Calcutta I know only by name, sits down nearby. I call out to him and ask if he is playing that day, and we get to chatting. He is up in about two hours, so I suggest we check out the other acts. We head back and the DJ on the smaller stage has just ended his set. My friend suggests we migrate to the mainstage, but I say, *“I just want to stay a bit to see how the next guy starts his set.”* “Oh,” he replies, *“you know your stuff! Not bad for a southie.”*

The crowd has become denser and more people start moving towards the stage as Chinapa officially opens the festival, yelling into the microphone: *“Welcome everyone! It’s here, it’s finally here! Sunburn, India’s first ever electronic music festival, is now officially here! Six years of dreaming and planning has all led up to this moment. Finally, we have a festival that we can call our own, by Indians for Indians! So get on your feet and let’s dance!”*

The aggressive energies of a goa trance party are mirrored in those of Sunburn. Where the goa trance party demands a certain psychic and physical endurance from its participants in order to cultivate its spiritual and ritualistic aura, Sunburn asks for that endurance to be dedicated to an aura of cosmopolitanism and un-Indian performativity. Bodies move not with the sinewiness of Bollywood or folk dance, but with a militant thudding of repeated movements. Feet pound the earth over and over in the same spot, arms flail up in the same direction, seldom wavering from a pattern that seems almost work-like. The choice of name seems appropriate for a festival that is explicitly about an aggressive *exposure* staunchly discouraged in everyday Indian life. If the suntan signifies a leisured stillness, then Sunburn has

been aptly named to match its robust kinesthetic vigor. This is a performance of leisure that Sunburn attendees *work* at. As in the trance party, fatigue and boredom are kept at bay with alcohol and drugs, which are as abundant as the ocean behind us.

The festival management's compliance with the Goa Tourism Board and the local police is in full view—a deliberate effort at distancing the event from Goa's white freak subculture. Chinapa points out the care with which the Goan government had been appeased, particularly in light of all the bad press around drug use and trade that Goa tourism had received over the years. He says:

We have gone to great lengths to prove to the Goa Government that electronic music can be enjoyed and be out in the open as a positive influence in people's lives, and that we can create a great creative space with music and foster a sense of community and harmony. We really believe that people can have a good time just getting high on the festival atmosphere, the positive vibes and some seriously great music.<sup>7</sup>

Police patrol visibly inside the festival grounds. There are about 50 policemen on all three days monitoring the attendees, an occurrence that is anathema to the more loosely organized and anarchist formulation of the psychedelic subcultural scene.

*Someone offers me cocaine. I decline, but tell this Bombay bro to watch out for the many uniformed cops within the festival enclosure. He laughs and tells me, "Don't worry, take some, they're only looking at the goras (white people)!"*

The few white freaks who have braved the experience out of curiosity or dedication to all manner of partying in Goa, blink in and out of visibility, their burnt white skin only occasionally discernable as white amidst the throng of brown bodies. They are working hard too, laboring furiously to bring their ritual energy to a corporate event, dancing intently, solitary and hapless. One by one, I see them peel off and eventually leave. I am on my own too, and I feel some empathy for them, but it is mixed with another sensation—perhaps a sly satisfaction of seeing neocolonial freak tourism challenged in Goa, even if it is accomplished by a megalithic corporate festival that brandishes Indian neoliberal power unabashedly in a tourist economy.

It is almost 10p.m., when the festival will close for the day in compliance with local government noise ordinances. There are constant reminders from the emcees that festivities will end promptly, and they are demanding that the crowd obey. We are being scolded, disciplined, by the festival organizers. I decide to leave a little early, and as I wend my way towards the monstrous gates I bump

into a couple, Australian filmmakers, with whom I have been working in Anjuna. They are standing stock still, looking at the now-raging swell of bodies in front of them. The clubby beach scene is familiar to them, yet overwhelmingly Indian this time. They turn towards me quite slowly and mouth, “*Oh my god!*” I laugh, and nod my head, “*Yeab!*” She leans in and yells in my ear, “*This is baffling! I feel like I walked into a very strange dream.*”

Ten years later, Sunburn is the longest running EDM festival in India. Under new management after a contentious split with its founders, it is now a brand that competes with other EDM festivals in Goa and in beach cities like Chennai. But while EDM culture has greatly matured and grown in India and has tried to weave daytime festivals into urban settings, the beach still offers subcultural tourists a particular autonomy that is harder to come by in cities. For instance, when Sunburn tried to establish itself in Pune, local right-wing opponents fought back (somewhat unsuccessfully), citing the depravity of such events and their corrupting influence on youth. An article in *The Wire*, on Sunburn’s perceived attack on Indian values, is worth quoting at length:

Pratiksha Korgaonkar, state coordinator of Ranragini, the women’s wing of the Hindu Janjagruti Samiti, said, “Sunburn festival is known for availing free ground to consume and sell drugs. That is the exact reason why so called music lovers attend the event and not to enjoy the western music. Last year, drugs, especially ketamine, worth crores was seized by the Goa police during a raid. They caught hundreds of so called music lovers who were consuming drugs on beaches and even in makeshift washrooms. In 2013, the Goa police caught drugs worth over Rs one crore at the venue of Sunburn. In 2009, as we all know, a Delhi girl, Neha Bahuguna, died at the venue due to overdosing on drugs.”

Sarita Ambike of Durga Vahini, the VHP’s [Vishwa Hindu Parishad] women’s wing, added, “Youngsters can be seen dancing in an obscene manner to electronic music. Events like Sunburn or rave parties organised for New Year’s Eve and Christmas offering drugs, smoking and dance are a direct attack on Hindu culture. They are ruining the lives of youngsters across the country. We will not allow them to attack our culture, religion, society and nation.”<sup>8</sup>

In what seemed like an appropriate, and completely understandable malapropism, the first run of the article mistakenly labeled the drug ketamine as *keratin*. The interchangeability of perversions—purposely burning the skin and eroding “Indian values” through drug use—is delicious, dangerous, and highly revealing of the anxieties that accompany the neoliberal transformation of a nation.

## MA(R)KING THE COSMOPOLITAN BEACH

Nowhere is the suntan more emplaced than at the beach. Because the resonance of cultural space is often channeled through the body, we might think as Orvar Löfgren does, of the modern beach as inextricable from the making of the modern body.<sup>9</sup> The appeal of the beach to Indians has arguably grown in response to neoliberal changes to the economy. Increased middle-class spending power has shaped travel aspirations through exposure to global flows of culture, aesthetics, and consumer practices. Subculture and style particularly enable the performance of a cosmopolitanism that is consumerist in nature. While urban life generally supports social and aesthetic variation, performative expression is still contained by entrenched moral codes and the troubled (re)negotiations between tradition and modernity. Under these contradictory conditions, the beach emerges as a crucial site upon which these negotiations take place.

*The coastal city of Chennai where I grew up and grew out, sits on the edge of the Bay of Bengal, on wide, coarse beaches. Within city limits, people flocked to Marina beach or Elliots beach when the sun had gone down a little from its scorching height. The air filled with the tinkling of bells from food carts selling sliced raw mangoes and boiled groundnuts, the maniacal tunes of rickety merry-go-rounds, and the howl of the sea breeze coming off the water. The sand would frequently swallow cricket balls lobbed too far by groups of boys playing their evening game, while courting couples walked side by side, never touching, the space between them thick with tension. I would watch as the strong winds pressed their clothes to their bodies in a way that the stifling city streets never did. Nobody wore bathing suits, and if you did get in the water, you did so with all your clothes on. There was a measured and cautious ease on the beach, one that was punctuated by the same codes of decorum that permeated all other parts of social life in Chennai.*

Now, no two beaches are the same, but there is a shared ethos of integration with the urban terrain in Indian beach cities. Urban beaches are not truly cleaved from the crush of the everyday, and this is most visible in the ways that bodies traverse them. The culture of sunbathing or suntanning, laying supine on the sand, acquiring an even coat of brown, or swimming nearly naked in the rough sea are virtually absent on Indian beaches. These are spaces of communality, not escape. In Chennai, if you wanted to be alone on the sand or wear a bathing suit, or take a class at a newly opened surfing school, you needed to travel outside the city limits and stop somewhere along the expansive coastline that stretched for miles in either direction. There the beaches became touristic, unregulated and utopic, what Hakim Bey has called “temporary autonomous

zones,” noting that they are “like an uprising which does not engage directly with the state, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself, to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the state can crush it.”<sup>10</sup>

Bodies on the tourist beach perform in ways that break from the everyday, and enter into the liminal temporality of the “escape.” With the rise of neoliberalism in India, escape from the harsh temporalities of late capitalist work life has become crucial to the experience of socioeconomic mobility, especially for the rapidly growing consumer middle class. The consumer classes of post-economic liberalization in India have responded to the call of neoliberal cosmopolitanism by claiming formerly elite practices such as the “vacation,” replacing once primary modes of travel such as pilgrimage or familial trips to native places. In this ideoscape of modernity, the beach vacation promises to enliven Bey’s “anarchist ontology”<sup>11</sup> that simultaneously escapes and illuminates the long arm of the neoliberal state.

That the beach vacation has emerged as performative modernity for younger generations of working- and middle-class people echoes similar developments in Euro-American leisure pursuits of the early twentieth century. Seaside trips that were once considered by continental Europeans ordeals undertaken to treat ill-health were eventually (re)framed as an elite pastime for the leisured classes of the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Later, the imperialist romanticism of war campaigns in the South Seas and Pacific “paradises” propelled returning GIs to perform their utopic ideals on local sands. The reclamation of public beaches by servicemen also transformed the beachside into spaces of populist fun, driving elites to more exoticized locales to which their resources enabled them to travel.<sup>13</sup> The circuitous history of the “escape” as it passes through currents of globalization ultimately leads to beaches in developing and postcolonial countries, where the veneer of elitism on beach tourism is buffed and shined, aided in its utopianism by the privileges of the international color line.

In India, this matrix of white pleasure coalesced in Goa in the 1960s, while it was still under Portuguese colonial rule. The cultural attitudes towards whiteness, while markedly different from the rest of newly independent India, smoothed the sands for hippie expats, the flower-power generation, and white spiritual seekers to establish a temporary autonomous zone of psychedelic freakiness in Goa, a subculture that has continued to shape the tourist desires of not only other white tourists and backpackers, but also the emergent consumer class of India. While both kinds of tourists flock to these beach villages, they

are drawn by contrasting fantasies—white psychedelia to the rejection of late capitalist social formations, and brown consumerism to the cosmopolitan aesthetic of neoliberal compliance. The irony of both failed fantasies can hardly be captured better than by the deployment of the sunburn as a form of social capital.

#### ALTERITY AS APPROPRIATION

The beaches of Goa, by virtue of their subcultural affects, occupy an important position of alterity in the Indian imagination.<sup>14</sup> Goan beaches have been narrativized, particularly through the influential medium of Bollywood, as radically other to the Indian metropolis.<sup>15</sup> Cast as a space of self-discovery, transformation, and performative expression, Goa promises the fulfillment of cosmopolitan desires through proximity to white subculture. In short, Goan beaches promise a certain kind of white-mediated alterity that Indian tourists learn to perform alongside.

Indian tourists use these beaches in ways they would not in urban contexts—being out in the sun all day, swimming in the ocean, and going to outdoor parties are all activities that expose the skin to darkening and even burning, an effect much desired by white tourists. Rather than interpret this as a flattened mimicry, I suggest that Indians performing alterity on Goan beaches tap into the transformative capacities of this mimesis. What is different about their practice of white beach culture, however, is that the material effects of sun on skin produce vastly different outcomes for Indians. The white suntan is a show of health and vitality, whereas among Indians it is coded as a degradation of appearance or an affliction. Thus, I contend that cultivating this affliction of whiteness recuperates the suntan as a color (and caste) defect and propels the brown body towards bare-skinned epidermal cosmopolitanism.

Pau Obrador points out that the beach mobilizes certain “sensuous dispositions” in its visitors.<sup>16</sup> He theorizes that leisure does not indicate the absence of affective depth, rather it demands richly textured experiences of stillness and kinesthesia. The cosmopolitan beach engages both—being caressed by the sun (sunbathing) and being assaulted by the sun (sunburn). The more aggressive form of sun exposure is not always coded as undesirable though, especially when it is seen as a virtuous form of endurance—a dedication to the practice of an epidermal cosmopolitanism. The weathered white hippies stand testament to this modality, which is also at times adopted by the more hardcore Indian elites who can commit temporarily to disrupting the Indian caste/color hierarchy (from which they are of course protected).

Exposing the skin to the sun is one thing. But when the act is steeped in a mode of resistance to normative expectations, it disrupts brown respectability (as dictated by casteism and colorism). Where most Indians go to city beaches fully clothed, on the global beaches of Goa, alterity from these norms is articulated by the visibility of skin. Men and women bare more skin on vacation, and dislodge their situatedness from the libidinal economy of the urban mundane. This is a space of cosmopolitan fantasy. However, the freedom from full-length gloves, masks, and other covers employed by Indians in their everyday lives comes at the expense of bodily vulnerability—channeled through a fragility so equated with white skin—the sunburn. So, while the resistive potential of the sunburn is perhaps a reversal of what Frantz Fanon describes as imprisonment in the skin,<sup>17</sup> it is the purposeful endangering/further darkening of brown skin that repairs the abjection of darkness. It mocks the exact arrangements of relations that code darkness as imprisonment. Ironically, it is one's position of privilege on the color line that makes this resistive signification possible; a status of privilege shared by whiteness. Like many other liberal ideologies operating under global neoliberalism, this seemingly empowered disavowal of colorism must be understood intersectionally, and as a sensuous practice if not as a wholly noble one.

### THEORIZING THE BURN

Thinking about color in India is uniquely challenging. The frameworks within which race operates in India (and its diaspora) are often unstable and mercurial. Depending on the political ends that critiques of racial and ethnic inequality hope to achieve, race and color emerge almost impressionistically, obfuscating more than they reveal. Racial striations across the intersections of ethnic, caste, and class identities within India remain contested and divisive, especially in the current moment of heightened nationalist sentiment in the subcontinent.

Populist discourse repeatedly aligns fairness of skin with class and caste privilege, situating color as a signifier of upward mobility or elevated status, and even heightened morality. The market for skin-whitening creams has not seen any measurable deceleration despite urban (elite) media campaigns that celebrate dark skin. Bollywood stars continue to be extremely fair-skinned, some even biracial or white, while South Indian heroines continue to be cast as the creamy-skinned (upper-caste) virtuous objects of love against darker (lower-caste) heroes and villains who are saved or undone by these fair maidens. Whether this is a hangover of racist colonialism or traces of much earlier Indo-Aryan taxonomies of beauty has been debated,<sup>18</sup> but origins are less of a concern

when illuminating the cruelty of color consciousness that continues to dominate contemporary cultural practices in South Asia.

Meanwhile, a pervasive regional colorism persists. *Kallu* (black), *blackie*, *southie*, *madrasi* (Tamil), *chinky* (people from Northeastern border states) are all common racialized insults that pepper everyday language across the nation. Darkness of skin is indelibly (if unstably) associated with tribal populations, Dalits, South Indian Dravidians, and “lower caste” communities, many of whom strategically resist emplacement in the system of Indian colorism by identifying as “black” rather than “brown.”<sup>19</sup> Unsurprisingly, racist dispositions against these communities perpetuates a class striation along the color line, with upper-class and upper-middle-class status and aspirations being reproduced (quite literally) by a bias towards fair skinned or even “wheatish” complexioned bodies.

Invariably, in the complex matrices of color and caste, some people “pass” and others do not, most often aided by their class status. In an age of global neoliberalism, which masquerades and seduces with its promises of egalitarianism through capitalist power, the logic of economic and social mobility encourages a capitulation to the extant (color) hierarchies of power if one wishes to play (and win) the game of upward mobility. It is no accident then that studies of racialized globalization graze frequently, if tentatively, against the unstable epidermis as a site of analysis and attend to the slippery oppressions of colorism that play out in the contexts of beauty, labor, education, or kinship.<sup>20</sup>

So, how and when does the darkening of skin become a stain that is desirable? Is it when the stain sits on fair skin that holds the privilege of reversal? Do Indians who want to stain themselves do so only under the auspices of class and caste privilege, when their laboring lives do not create inevitable conditions for it?

In the context of tourism, the acquisition of the suntan may trace its affective history to the leisure practices of white privileged classes. Therefore, I consider how these skin stains move closer to symbolic whiteness, especially when they are sympathetically reproduced by brown bodies. Ironically, the affective power of whiteness—vis-a-vis the suntan—emerges from an epidermal vulnerability that networks with whiteness rather than transforms into it. While all skin burns, the tourist sunburn in India is specifically courted by the elite classes/castes who labor furiously towards a particular kind of cosmopolitan leisure, which supplants white presence on Goan beaches while simultaneously reproducing it.

#### TACTICAL MIMESIS

Tanned skins are out of focus under the Goan sun. There is only a sense of impressionistic racialization that blends together a range of brownness—racial

identification therefore rests on top of the skin, in fabric and adornments, and eschews a precision of vision regarding the details of embodiment. A multiracial race crowd in Goa is both performatively white and brown, brown and white, in a Bakhtinian chaos of inverted signifiers.<sup>21</sup> This is the allure of Goa, perhaps, where bodies can become the desired Other explicitly by turning the same shades of brown.

It is in a sense what Michael Taussig invokes (via James George Frazer) as being “sympathetic magic.”<sup>22</sup> Taussig argues for mimesis as a recuperative mode through which an imitation (performative or material) acquires and even surpasses the power of the original; that alterity is rendered potent not by producing difference, but by enabling sameness. Mimetic faculties open up a channel to the Other. Taussig’s framework also releases mimesis from Walter Benjamin’s preoccupation with the loss of the object’s original aura (here, the aura of “race” on a body).<sup>23</sup> In moments of tourism, there is no danger of losing sight of the original because it is the presence of the original that enables and encourages mimesis. Object aura is made irrelevant also because the moving body is not an object, and it comes into varying modes of subjecthood constantly. Therefore, I locate sympathetic magic in the sunburn as it transforms bodies that are coded as both white and brown into versions of each other. The sunburn then, is a tactic of racial obfuscation, of embodied prevarication. A blatant yet agreed upon lie, much like tourists’ acceptance of staged authenticity to which Dean McCannell points.<sup>24</sup> The magic of this mimetic/staged performance of tanning lies in its ability to accrue tourist agency itself, rather than transformation into a white or brown body per se.

For Indian tourists, the choice to darken the skin is less about becoming white, and more about accessing the agency that white bodies have always had in Goa. By exercising the emergent neoliberal muscle of the middle class, Indian tourists subsume and transform Goa subculture often to the chagrin of the white settlers.<sup>25</sup> The sunburn is but a particularly epidermal manifestation of this power that has changed hands. Toni Morrison describes discourse on blackness as a stain, which cannot be removed, yet must be bleached if it is to accrue any value.<sup>26</sup> Because blackness (or darkness) “is itself a stain, and therefore unstainable,”<sup>27</sup> it can only be *acted upon*, through mimicry, transference (of stigma), and transformation. In other words, through dark forms of sympathetic magic. By acting in ways that whiteness does when marking tourist skin, the stain of darkness is sublimated, if not erased, and may even become more powerful for having mastered the hegemonic paradigm—the fetish for dark skin.

Brown skin in tourist Goa seems to have marshaled the full potential of a commonly used descriptor of the Indian color spectrum: “wheatish.” The word encapsulates a range of possibilities for coding brown skin euphemistically—it purports to describe the color of wheat, which of course is as difficult to fix as the color of sand. In an essay about Neymar da Silva Santos Júnior, Achal Prabhala points out a similar slippery nomenclature for the increasingly whitened racial presentation of the Brazilian football star.<sup>28</sup> Prabhala introduces readers to a particular color—*Burro-quando-foge* (the disappearing donkey)—a sly jibe at a color that does not rest stably on the skin, which ducks and covers, dodges and blends. “Wheatish” is the disappearing donkey of Indian colorism, gliding glibly over a manner of describing a skin color that sits anywhere between fair and dark. An embedded vernacular tone of ridicule in the usage of the word “wheatish” also helps us understand why deliberate darkening functions as a rebellion against this tenuous expectation of Indian bodies to reproduce (often literally) class/caste boundaries based on skin color.

*The sunburn that is deliberately acquired marks labor differently on the body. There are those lines created by the hem of a half-sleeved shirt on the motorcycle rider going to and from an office. This is a city-dweller’s suntan. An urban burn. A metropolitan markup. The kind of coloring that is frequently relegated to the invisible backrooms of outsourced soft services like call centers—where skin matters far less than the fleshy performances of voice and accent. The tourist sunburn is for display however, bisecting the body at different places—the shoulders, the knees, the stomach, upper thighs, breasts—parts of both men’s and women’s bodies that work at cultivating an affect of cool modernity in scorching tropical heat.*

The tourist sunburn blurs the distinction between the darkening of skin under conditions of labor versus leisure. For subcultural tourists in Goa, cultivating the party scene is a kind of work. The sense of “working hard at partying” permeates the goa trance parties organized by white freaks as well as the urban tourist-run Sunburn festival. The festival represented to me a kind of elite performative labor that sought to dispute the claim white psychedelic subculture had on Goa by (de)(re)colonizing its beaches. But the festival also seemed to favor a subtle (if unintended) resistance to colorism that upper-middle-class Indian bodies are afforded. So, to enter the festival grounds and be sunburned promised a tenuous release from the confines of neoliberal work, the always-alreadyness of the aspirational class, and the marginality of color-based class and caste abjection. It served as a necessary embodied resolution of changes the young professional class was experiencing in their urban work lives.

## POSTCOLONIAL BROWN

The emergence of the beach as a place of alterity does not happen in isolation from other locations of middle-class imagination. Since the 1990s, India's steady turn towards neoliberalism and the promise of socioeconomic advancement have been accompanied by a revisioning of what class mobility can look like. The observations and critiques of aspirational performance in the emergent workplaces of India serve as reminders that the project of constructing a new middle class tries to collapse the tension between work and leisure, temporality and atemporality, night and day, virtual mobility and bodily stasis.<sup>29</sup> Mimesis, impersonation, and racialized performances in call centers, for example, show us the sanctioned ways brownness is taught to disorient and disidentify itself while working with(in) whiteness. In contrast, my focus on the illicit spaces and practices of new modernity in India asks how brownness plays with and reproduces the compulsory edification of white cultural forms under neoliberalism through an ironic investment in brownness.

Unlike the vestiges of the colonial leisure class, such as exclusive gymkhanas, country clubs, and tea plantation holidays that the color conscious middle class aspired to before neoliberalization, the tourist beach represents a burgeoning embrace of the outdoors usually coded as detrimental to social mobility rooted in colorism. Beaches, suntans, and the slickness of sweat on burnt brown skin upend the compulsory caste-color-class continuum endemic to India. Under neoliberalism, therefore, the color line shifts by leaning into a valorization of damage, trauma, and duress. My interpretive moves in theorizing the sunburn mean to peel back the fraught and contradictory layers of shifting color consciousness in India. The illicit embrace of the sunburn in India forcibly draws out into the light (both figuratively and literally) the postcolonial reliance on connectivity with whiteness to rearrange and challenge the hegemony of caste-color-class mobility implicit in the broader culture. It is with a sense of sadness that I conclude this essay with a remembrance of something familiar to a generation of Indians coming of age in the 1990s—an inkling of the color consciousness that shapes and is shaped by colonial nostalgia and a yearning for white experience in brown bodies.

*My best friend's mother comes to pick us up from the Central Railway Station in Madras. It is our first time being away by ourselves and coming home from a week-long camp in the Nilgiris hills in the south of India. The camp is run by an educational non-profit that encourages "lateral thinking," whatever that means. It means, at least, that the 1990s are emerging as a period of social experimentation in India. Most of these forays into uncharted territory*

don't last more than a few years, fizzling out after the novelty wears off. But between the "free your mind" camps, Indipop music (that rebellious and eventually disinherited cousin of Bollywood), pool halls, bowling alleys, and soft-serve ice-cream parlors, it is an exciting time for adolescents training for the arrival of neoliberalism in India.

My friends and I pester our parents into letting us go to this unheard-of escape to the semi-wilderness of Ooty. We are performative girls at 12 years old, the four of us—we are less drawn to the promise of "lateral thinking" than to the actual place we will be staying, a run-down boarding school where all our Enid Blyton, English countryside, postwar bildungsroman dreams of boarding school and dormitories, and nature walks, and midnight feasts, and quotidian tests of moral character would come true. We are ready to play this game, primed for another kind of girlhood than ours, by what we've been reading along with every other English-speaking girl in the country. We are ready to run amok—a jolly good time, old thing!—getting "brown as a nut" just like Pat and Isabel and Darrell and Elizabeth. We give ourselves names like Stephanie, Gloria, Linda, and Laura. We are only mildly disappointed when there is no lacrosse, but horrified when it turns out that the final test of "lateral thinking" is survival-camping in the forest (how beastly!)—getting dumped at the bottom of a steep mountain with no trails and being told to climb up to meet the van that will take us to the train station and back home. Miss it, and get left behind. It was brutal, but it made an impression, because we all still think laterally to this day.

Many scratches, wails of hopelessness, tears, declarations of impending death, and a whole lot of upper-body strength later, we flop onto the top of the cliff. We crawl into the van and roll into the train compartment. Early the next morning, we arrive in Madras, only a little worse for wear and thinking that the camp leaders may have been onto something after all. It had all been so much better than taking those obligatory summer tuition classes in maths and science so you could get a head start on the next school year.

We're grinning like idiots and waiting for my friend's mother to locate us on the platform amidst the throngs. We wait. And wait. When she finally does find us, it's because we've fallen into a fit of giggling, not because she's recognized us. She comes up, first tentative then relieved, and says, "It's you! I've been looking for an hour on this platform!"

"We were here only, aunty!"

"I didn't recognize you at all. You've all become black!"

"No, aunty. We're brown as a nut."

I remember this moment as if it were etched onto my body, as if the memory of an abundance of melanin had never faded from my skin. It feels like a tattooed layer of an English narrative so long before my time and so far from my home, which I never fully experienced but inhabited nonetheless. It has come to signify that space between skin and flesh, where imagination cleaves from sinew but remains trapped (always) behind colored skin. It is in a sense what Fanon describes as epidermalization, the externalization of an inherited inferiority (and impossible aspiration) that emerges on the surface of colonized skin.<sup>30</sup> Inescapably, we return to the skin as a site of intersubjectivity, of relationality rather than individuality.

Consequently, I prefer to think as Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey do, through skin-tight politics as “a thinking that attends not only to the sensuality of being-with-others, but also to the ethical implications of the impossibility of inhabiting the other’s skin.”<sup>31</sup> What is noticeable in the draping of color upon skin is the “fit”—the elasticity of skin that is neither absorbed nor dissolved by the flesh; rather, it is plainly visible, stretching and wrapping around subjecthood like a rubber-glove barrier. Skin performs subjectivity that is at once inescapable yet superficial. Skin-tight politics are thus imminently malleable because of this pronounced layering of difference and distance. Michelle Ann Stephens takes up just such an inquisition into the performativity of racialized skin, noting: “The skin reminds us of ourselves in a way that differs from how we think of ourselves in the abstract; the skin brings us back in touch with ourselves, literally, as bodies.”<sup>32</sup>

I end this exploration of skin-tight politics in Indian tourism with a caveat. By no means does this essay mean to suggest that race is immaterial. Rather, I hope these interpretive gestures open up perspectives on how brownness (re)negotiates its relationality to whiteness in specific contexts of globalization. Moreover, the instability of color under neoliberalism should only strengthen our resolve to counter casteism, colorism, and classism as it manifests variously in the often-ambivalent terrain of intersectional social formations. In offering a critical interpretive reading of the sunburn, I ask that we consider how illicit forms of play help to shift the color line (even temporarily, even problematically) within the imagination. ■

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