

# “We Cannot Write About Complicity Together”: Limits of Cross-Caste Collaborations in Western Academy

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Article abstract

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# **“We cannot write about complicity together”: Limits of Cross-Caste Collaborations in Western Academy**

**Shaista Aziz Patel, Dia Da Costa**

**ABSTRACT** Grounded in a friendship that began in the academy, we write together to problematize collaborative writing across our distinct caste positionalities. Writing as caste-oppressed Pakistani Muslim settler (Patel) and dominant caste Indian settler (Da Costa), we write primarily across caste power lines to focus on the failure in our own efforts at collaborative writing. This article, initially meant to focus on our complicities in white settler colonialism in its present form, reflects on the detours we undertook to arrive at this place of certainty that “we cannot write about our complicity together.” Specifically, we reconsider some assumptions underlining prominent methodological commitments of transnational collaborative writing across uneven locations in, for, and beyond the academy. Collaborative writing has been championed for its capacity to generate dialogue across disagreements, praxis grounded in social change, a challenge to the academy’s notions of individual knowledge-production and merit, and as a means of holding people across hierarchies accountable to structures of violence that remain at work within social movements and collective struggles. Considering the contours of what Sara Ahmed (2019) calls structural “usefulness” of collaborative writing to the colonial and neoliberal academy, we use historical and life-writing approaches to make caste violence legible in order to refuse the cover that collaborative writing provides to dominant caste South Asians engaged in research with Indigenous, Black, Muslim, caste-oppressed and multiply and differentially colonized communities. Our purpose is to foreground the historical and ordinary violence of caste as it shapes North American academic relationships, intimacies, and scholarship, in order to challenge the assumption that caste-privileged South Asian scholars of postcolonial and transnational studies in western academia are best poised to collaborate with Indigenous, Black, other racialized, and Dalit scholars and actors toward a decolonial, abolitionist, and anti-casteist feminist praxis. While focusing on writing across caste lines, our analysis can also be read as offering a space to engage ethically with complexities informing collaborative projects across differential horizontal and vertical power relations informed by race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship, north/south and other differences. In the process of writing this article, we have also paid particular attention to our citational practices.

**KEYWORDS** caste, Brahminical supremacy, transnational feminism, collaborative writing, South Asian studies, complicity, people of colour, diversity, friendship

Reading the following lines in the Canadian Caribbean poet and novelist, Dionne Brand's thought-provoking and humorous book, *Theory*, brought us to a halt. She writes: "One has no friends in academia. One has colleagues. One has assassins" (Brand, 2018, p. 66). *Theory*, a work of fiction, traces the struggles of a Black non-binary Ph.D. student who has been working on their dissertation for 15 years in a university which encourages innovation (in theory) but also imperils critical and revolutionary world-building practices. Brand's narrative presents a picture of academia that many people situated on the margins of academia recognize. That is, the academy is both a terrible place of apathy and cruelty, of belittling, and of buzzwords with no action in suit, and yet, can also be a site of invention, possibilities, giving voice to one's histories, and perhaps, also of finding collaborators among accomplices-parading-as-colleagues-and-friends.

Despite this reminder by Brand, in the context of a friendship that began in Canadian academy, we, Shaista and Dia, decided to write together to question the ethics of collaborative writing. We hold onto the limits and contradictions of an 'academic friendship' upfront and work through its contours through our argument. As a caste-oppressed Shi'a Pakistani Muslim settler (Patel) and dominant caste Bengali Brahmin settler (Da Costa), we write across multiple power lines to focus on the rough edges, limits, and what felt like outright failure in our own efforts at collaborative writing for this article, which was initially focused on thinking through our complicities in white settler colonialism. While we had many conversations in the process of coming together, we will discuss some of the detours we undertook to arrive at this place of certainty that "we cannot write about our complicity together." Specifically, we reconsider some assumptions underlying prominent methodological commitments of collaborative writing across uneven locations in, for, and beyond the academy. While we will discuss some particular texts to make our arguments, we also want to share that, even though we reviewed many recent publications on academic friendship by South Asian scholars, we decided not to cite from them in order to i) avoid the *predatory citational practices* of citing texts from racialized scholars on the margins only to criticize and make our analysis stand out as sanctimonious; and ii) allow these more recent texts to circulate and build a life of their own in the lives of scholars. We engage with these cited and uncited texts by South Asian scholars in our article with a lot of respect for the struggles they are engaged in, and with a genuine desire to have a conversation with them and to be their ethical interlocutors.

Instead of intending a prescriptive article on how to do collaborative work, we hope that our transparency in this piece can encourage the reader to pause, question, and maybe even resist the imperiling seduction of doing collaborative research without writing in one's complicity, or clear goals working across power lines in academia. While writing this article, we have found ourselves asking about the most productive ways to challenge the circulation of collaborations across difference as a radical praxis of interdisciplinarity in academia. Collaborative work is, of course, already exemplified in a long history of Indigenous, Black, and Latinx writings that did not live along the binaries of academia and taking to the streets. The more recent phenomenon of making collaborative scholarship commonplace is also a welcome sign of a hard-won struggle on the part of those feminists whose interdisciplinary work brought texts and contexts into a continuum with the streets and academia. These women and non-binary

thinkers amplified the testimonials of Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and other women and non-binary people transnationally, and helped make polyvocal knowledge-production matter in the academy for challenging prevailing canons and encouraging critical thinking and social change. These feminist scholars taught us how to pay attention not just to what we know, but, more importantly, *how* we know. It is this practice which has guided our collaborative writing on why we cannot write together about our complicity in holding up white settler colonialism.

In the current environment of universities and granting agencies obsessed with Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), writing collaboratively across unequal locations has gone from being a challenge to the neoliberal western academy's conception of individual merit and knowledge-production to what Sara Ahmed (2019) calls being structurally "useful" to a colonial and neoliberal academy. For example, in the social sciences and humanities, academia's increasing familiarity with collaborative projects is apparent in the number of competitive granting programs oriented toward collaborative research, the sprouting of "collaboratories" at various universities, and the prevalence of collaborative research approaches on syllabi for research methodologies. Despite the growing familiarity of this practice of collaboration, there are still disputes over whether such forms of writing count as scholarly enough to constitute meritorious academic knowledge. In pre-tenure and tenure review files in Shaista's university for example, faculty are required to state exactly what percentage of the planning, ideological, and written work on a collaborated article was done by each listed author. This predominantly hard sciences model of acknowledgement of division of labour deters scholars in fields such as Ethnic Studies who constantly struggle to hold onto the ethics of intersectional, feminist, and queer analyses. Such moves encourage academics to become transactional and less creative in how we approach collaborations with thinkers from our programs, departments, divisions, universities, and beyond. Having noted the limits on making collaborative work 'count' in tenure-granting processes, we, as feminists attuned to decolonizing scholarship, can also imagine that our political innovations for collaborative writing in solidarity for social change are subject to the always-voracious appetite for new *frontiers* of value (data, community relationships, funding) within a heteropatriarchal colonial and capitalist academy. If collaborative writing increasingly occupies that space, it should not be surprising.

It is in this context that we use historical and life-writing approaches to make caste violence both visible and legible, in order to refuse the exceptionalist cover that collaborative writing provides to caste-privileged brown South Asians engaged in research with Indigenous, Black, Muslim, caste-oppressed and multiply- and differentially-colonized communities.

Our purpose in this paper is to foreground the historical and ordinary violence of caste as it shapes North American academic relationships and scholarship, in order to challenge the assumption that racialized, postcolonial studies scholars are best poised to collaborate with Indigenous and/or Black scholars and actors toward abolitionist and decolonial feminist futurities. While focusing on writing across caste lines, our analysis can be read as offering a space to engage ethically with complexities informing collaborative projects across differential horizontal and vertical power relations, as informed by race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship, north/south and other differences.

In the next few sections, we discuss in more detail what caste is and how it is intricately tied to knowledge production, labour, and also the category of labourers, as a site of consolidating the human and its others. For us to make caste legible as a vertical hierarchy of power and not simply as a vestigial South Asian cultural formation, we have to do this preliminary work before giving more poignant examples of how caste-dominant South Asian scholarship works transnationally to maintain caste power. Using a couple of examples from anti-racist and transnational feminist scholarship, we intend to make clear why we, two authors from different castes, religions, and countries of origin, could not readily collaborate to write about our complicity in upholding systems of domination. We make brief pauses to open up about our feelings in the process—the anger, the quiet, the fears, all while recognizing that this interpersonal friction, temporary abandonment, friendship, and love have to be rooted in an analysis of caste relationalities.

### **On Caste, Knowledge Production and Dehumanization**

Caste is one of the oldest forms of violence, segregation, and incarceration in the world. It affects millions of people worldwide, whether they belong to dominant castes, or those made into lowered caste peoples called *Bahujan*. Dalits comprise approximately 260 million people worldwide, while the word *Bahujan*, meaning “many (*Bahu*) people (*jan*),” comprise the majority of people in the caste-based society of India.<sup>1</sup> Brahmins make up less than 5% of the total Indian population and yet, have the most institutional power.<sup>2</sup> While not unique to South Asia, the deep dehumanizing hierarchy of this 2,500-year-old caste system structures South Asian lives in minute and banal ways, scripting our access to land, labor, education, other state institutions, and even love and other intimacies. It is difficult to explain the expanse, depth, and intimacies of caste in the lives of South Asians back home in the subcontinent and in the diaspora, because caste underwrites every public and private expression of our living.<sup>3</sup>

There is a vast archive of scholarly books, articles and documents discussing both caste and casteism (caste-based violence) from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onward in particular.<sup>4</sup> In this

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1 Patel is grateful to Kashmiri Muslim feminist scholar, Huma Dar, for reminding her of the meaning of the term Bahujan.

2 “Who are the Brahmins?” ThoughtCo. (Jan 28, 2020). <https://www.thoughtco.com/who-are-the-brahmins-195316> (Accessed July 11, 2021). While this article lists the population of Brahmins at 5% of Indian population, other articles also released within last 10 years list the population to be anywhere between 4.3% and 5%.

3 For a one-of-its-kind survey of the impact of caste in the U.S. see Equality Labs (2018) “Caste in the United States: A survey of caste among South Asians”. <https://www.equalitylabs.org/caste-in-the-united-states> (accessed Dec 13, 2019). Comprising of 47 questions engaged with by over 1,500 respondents in the U.S., the results from the survey illustrate how casteism underwrites every intimate and public aspect of South Asian life in America.

4 For example, we encourage readers interested in learning more about caste to begin with the many powerful Dalit autobiographies which clearly relay the spectacular violence of caste at other intersections of oppressions, such as Bama’s (2000) *Karukku*, Baby Kamble’s (2008) *The Prisons we Broke*, Sujatha Gidla’s (2017) *Ants Among Elephants*, Vasant Moon’s (2001) *Growing Up Untouchable in India*, Urmila Pawar’s (2009) *The Weave of My Life* among many others. There is a vast archive of written work by Babasaheb B.R. Ambedkar, and most of his writings are available free of cost on the internet. There are many other contemporary Dalit scholars whose work needs to be engaged with in order to understand casteism including Shailaja Paik (2011, 2014, 2016), Sunaina Arya (2020), Sanobar John Boopalan (2017), Chinnaiiah Jangam (2017), and Ramnarayan Rawat (2011). I also want to mention the powerful Dalit-American visionary and leader, Thenmozhi Soundararajan, whose critiques have been central to the consolidation of anti-caste movement since the early 2010s in the U.S. Her numerous public media articles and projects are also available online.

article we are not able to capture the historical, political, regional, and religious complexities of caste and its manifestations across different parts of South Asia or even in India, but we want readers to understand that caste is a systemic structure of social hierarchy that defines a person's societal rank and occupation, based on the family into which they are born. The caste one is born into determines their occupation, the people they can marry, who and where they can worship, the foods they can eat, and the spaces they can access. Caste is about the power to thrive, to kill with impunity, and to let live under asphyxiated conditions for Dalits. Caste, therefore, is about power, about the systemic; it is historical, political, socio-economic, and consolidates future-restrictive power, targeting caste-oppressed people. At its core, caste is about dehumanizing the majority of Indian society's population as undeserving of dignity and life. Caste, while not the same as race, is about access to life and living in the same ways that racial hierarchies structure life and living.

In western academia, South Asians are flattened into the EDI categorizations of brown or Asian, and circulate as hailing from the same or similar cultures, histories, racial and political locations. In North America, Brahmins presenting themselves as injured racialized people of white supremacist universities, and touting postcolonial and subaltern theories, pretend to present seemingly 'alternative' archives of history from those of their British colonizers. There is much respect for the field of Subaltern Studies in South Asia and in the western academy. However, this field has been led by Brahmin and other Indian academics.

Our concern for some time has been with this figure of the Subaltern and its placement within and across systems of domination and subordination. What has been taken for granted, especially by Western scholars and students reading Subaltern Studies, is an understanding of the subaltern as a colonized figure, marginalized in terms of gender, class, and coloniality with little attention paid to caste or to the complexities of Indigeneity. There seems to be an assumption that the subaltern is a colonized and racialized figure, indigenous to South Asia by dint of not being British, rather than considering the specific histories of caste and Indigeneity to the region. The anti-British-colonial, nationalist, and Marxist frameworks employed by Subaltern Studies do not let these scholars place themselves more honestly within the contexts of the politics they theorize. While we suggest turning to the scholarship of Uday Chandra (see 2013a, 2013b, 2015a, 2015b 2017, 2019) for learning about how subaltern studies essentialized the figure of the Adivasi (Indigenous peoples of India), here, we will give an example to show how caste complexities were also erased.

How many of us know to ask what kind of subaltern Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is talking about in her essay, "Can the Subaltern speak?" In that essay, the primary subaltern that the argument rests on, Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, is a young woman who took her own life in 1926 Bengal, apparently after a failed attempt at political assassination for which she had promised herself. That subaltern woman who commits suicide while menstruating was Spivak's relative, one of her grand aunties. As Spivak notes in a 2016 interview with the *Los Angeles Review of Books*:

She [Bhaduri] left a letter for my grandmother. I heard the story from my mom, but I did not reveal that the woman in the essay was my great aunt. As a



subaltern completely outside of these structures, she had spoken with her body, but could not be heard. To say the subaltern cannot speak is like saying there's no justice.

She talks about this woman, her aunt, as a subaltern, while mentioning that, for millennia, subaltern groups have been kept away from accessing “intellectual labor” by her “own ancestors—caste Hindus.” The fact that Bhaduri’s caste (and she could have been from an oppressed caste since we do not know the caste of Spivak’s maternal side of the family), effectively tells us that caste-as-complicity is a nod and not a positionality from which the study of the ‘Indian’ subaltern is approached.<sup>5</sup> We appreciated reading this acknowledgement and mention of casteist exploitative accumulation of intellectual property in Spivak’s family. However, when she writes later that “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow” (1988, pp. 82-83), this undifferentiated female subaltern figure is colonized, anticolonial, postcolonial, but can also be casteist and a Hindu nationalist.

It has also been troubling that Spivak argues that she’s at the very lower echelons of Brahmin hierarchy. A *New York Times* article quotes her as saying, “I am, unfortunately, a Brahmin, but from an inferior sect of the Brahmin cast (sic).”<sup>6</sup> There is nothing unfortunate about being a Brahmin in terms of how the world becomes one’s oyster, up for taking, using, and discarding. While Dalit and other caste-oppressed scholars are forced to commit suicide in India because of the rampant casteist harassment, Spivak cannot refer to herself, ethically, as “unfortunately a Brahmin.” Despite the fact that Spivak is frequently self-reflexive about her own privileged academic position working as a “native informant” in the Western academy, Brahmins like her nonetheless circulate under the guise of people of colour “from former colonies”, carefully erasing their own ancestral and ongoing complicities within casteist and anti-Muslim systems of intellectual, economic, and political dispossession. Spivak’s critique of postcolonial, imperial and liberal reason fails to confront its casteism.

As Dilip Mandal (2020) notes of canonical Indian sociology on caste, it was studied “not as a problem, but as a system” (para 14). Some Brahmin scholars reject the existence of brutal violence, while others study caste as a benign “cultural” formation in which casteism exists without casteists. These Brahmin and other caste-privileged scholars may stand with *Black Lives Matter* or *Idle No More* movements or with Palestine, while staying silent on the matter of caste, intense Islamophobia, and colonialism happening in their own backyard, by them and

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5 We use single quotes around the term ‘Indian’ in this context because we are critical of its coherence as a postcolonial secular democratic nation-state. Many people(s) in India live under occupied conditions, such as in Kashmir Valley, Jammu, and Ladakh, and in the northeast (of) colonial India, including Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura, and Chhattisgarh. The Indigenous peoples of India, known as Adivasis, who according to the 2011 census, account for at least 104.3 million distinct Indigenous people(s), actively resist being referred to as Indians while continuing to fight against constant colonial encroachment upon their lands and lives. In our theorizing, as in the work of these scholars from occupied homelands, India is a casteist and colonial occupation.

6 Dinita Smith, (Feb 9, 2002) “Creating a Stir Wherever She Goes,” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/09/arts/creating-a-stir-wherever-she-goes.html> (accessed Jan 17, 2022).

their kin, and in their names, such as in the example of Indian-occupied Kashmir (Da Costa, 2020). Furthermore, when trying to explain caste to non-South Asians, particularly white people who racialize and Orientalize us, we are heard as saying that caste is a case of lateral violence within a singular racial group, leaving us perplexed about where our description of caste violence went wrong.

After briefly discussing the politics of seemingly liberatory knowledge production that is underwritten by caste hierarchies, here we would like to outline a particular feature of caste-based societies: that of division of labourers. Ambedkar's too-radical-to-be-delivered at the time speech from 1936, *Annihilation of Caste*, serves as the classic text for all students of Dalit and anti-caste theory. Here we discuss just one vignette from that text's theorizing of labour relations. For Ambedkar, caste was the *division of laborers*, thus, a divided humanity itself. Its foundation in ascription-based class position contrasts poignantly with conceptions of class that are grounded in divisions of labour, understood in relation to capitalist accumulation. Ambedkar (1936) wrote:

...that the caste system is not merely a division of labour. *It is also a division of labourers*. Civilized society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilized society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into watertight compartments. Caste system is not merely a division of labourers—which is quite different from division of labour—it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other. In no other country is the division of labour accompanied by this gradation of labourers. (n.p., emphasis original)<sup>7</sup>

This division of labourers on the Brahminical principle of predestination (the belief that one was supposed to be born into their caste based on good or evil deeds in a previous birth) has intimately infused into all seemingly secular South Asian institutions, including that of academia, whether in South Asia or everywhere in the diaspora where Brahmins and savarna [caste-privileged people] go. Ambedkar captures the singularity of a division of labour founded upon inalienable characteristics of whole groups of people, reproduced as such, in perpetuity. Based on a violently-enforced caste system consolidated at the site of occupation, endogamy, control over women's sexuality, and rituals of purity, a casteist division of labourers continues to hold sway across time and space, so that losing capital fails to dismantle this Brahminical patriarchal supremacy (Chakravarti, 1993), and accumulating capital and moving overseas fails to relieve Dalit people of the everyday materiality of casteist dehumanization. Ambedkar was clear that political organizations that did not confront the problem of caste first, would not be able to pursue their policies of material improvement for the masses in India. As Gail Omvedt (1994) reflecting on Ambedkar's thinking of caste as the base of social inequity writes:

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/02.Annihilation%20of%20Caste.htm>



The ‘class’ category provided a marvellous tool for Indian Marxists to interpret what they saw around them within one grand framework of a theory of exploitation and liberation, but at the same time blinding them to other factors in their environment, so that instead of being inspired by the multifaceted struggles of low-caste peasants and workers to develop their own theory and practice, they instead sought to narrow these struggles and confine them within a ‘class’ framework. In one form or another they said, seize state power, redistribute land and your problems will be solved. ‘Marxism’ was taken in practice as a closed theory, not a developing science. As a result, there could be no dialogue with leaders like Ambedkar. Thus, when Ambedkar reacted to Marxism, he reacted to it only as a closed system which was at crucial points not simply indifferent but in opposition to struggles of the Dalits. He borrowed themes from Marxism, as we shall see later, but he never took it as a resource for analysis and action. (p.185)

Our intention is not to set up a binary between Marx and Ambedkar or between class and caste. We are arguing that class and caste struggles, while intertwined, cannot be collapsed into each other or necessarily interpreted through a reductive understanding of ‘class.’ Caste violence is foundational to economic disparities for Indians back home and in diaspora. Caste is not only about class—no matter how many stories of the class struggles of their immigrant parents “with only a few dollars in their pockets at the time of arrival in North America”—caste-privileged Indian academics tell their friends, colleagues, and students.

Caste continues to play a central factor in Indian and Indian diasporic economic life (Guérin et al., Iversen & Raghavendra, 2006; D’espallier & Venkatasubramanian, 2015; Oh, 2019). Suanna Oh’s (2021) India-based study, entitled, “Does Identity Affect Labor Supply?” asked 630 daily wage labouring men in Odisha, India, to review real job offers that have been hereditarily assigned to particular caste groups. As Oh (2021) notes in their findings:

Despite having interest in an [*sic*] one-day manufacturing job, many workers are averse to taking up a similar job when it requires spending just ten minutes on caste-inconsistent tasks. This tendency is present even when the castes linked to the tasks rank relatively higher than the workers’ own castes, but is stronger when they rank lower. Nearly half of the workers are willing to forego ten times their daily wage—nearly a months’ wage income in the agricultural lean season—in order to avoid working on identity-violating tasks, claiming that they would never engage in such jobs regardless of wage offered. (pp. 35-36)

This study clearly helps us to understand why caste, while constituting the terms of capitalist modes of living, is also more than about structuring division of labour in society. Notions of purity and pollution, while not discussed in Oh’s study, centrally determine which castes are allowed to take up which occupations. Moreover, the threat of casteist violence as an

ever-present reality also deters lowered caste people from taking up job opportunities reserved for dominating caste people. As Ambedkar notes in his conception of graded inequality, there is an ordaining, a descending scale of humiliation, of dehumanization, through which the untouchable became the linchpin of the entire caste system, as it was their manifest impurity against which other castes were defined and ranked. So strongly was this dehumanization structured into everyday life and institutions that Ambedkar noticed that the division of labourers produced preordained divisions *among* the proletariat. Thus, Ambedkar questioned Indian socialists asking how, without the annihilation of caste, people struggling for the equalization of property can know that “after the revolution is achieved, they will be treated equally, and that there will be no discrimination of caste and creed” (Ambedkar, 1936, n.p.).

To reiterate what we have explained above, caste is not about South Asian “in-fighting” or lateral violence. Caste is necessarily a vertical hierarchy of dehumanization. We cannot understand the limits of cross-caste collaboration between the two of us without understanding the preordained inequalities actively reproduced within material social relations and knowledge production through millennia, within and beyond South Asia. In the next section, we briefly consider what it means to think about caste as instituting a division of labourers within the Canadian state and academe.

### ***Caste and Labour in Canada***

Although caste has varying manifestations across varied contexts, can we trace the principle of division of labourers within Canadian state-formation, given South Asian presence on these lands since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century? Because caste is the entrenched division of labourers, for many caste-oppressed people, even indentured labour provided a possibility of escape from centuries of oppression of colonialism, casteism, and feudalism (Gupta, 2016; Lal, 1985), which was apparent also in their refusal to return to the subcontinent after their contracts were over (Dua, 2003, p. 49). Black Caribbean historian, Shona Jackson draws attention to the ways in which the Hegelian and Marxian fixation on labour as the teleological mode of acquiring humanity toward “Progress,” sanctifies the civilizing and modernizing claims of the colonial state and anti-colonial nationalist political subjectivity (Jackson, 2012; King, 2019). Within this frame, labour has performed an indigenizing function through the logic of “I have worked hard, therefore I belong,” which ultimately reproduces white settler ideology (Jackson, 2012, p. 33). But what is important to note is that the myth that one loses their caste when crossing *kala pani*, prevented caste-privileged Hindus from leaving India. In Caribbean diasporas, *at least temporarily*, Dalits and lowered caste people got relief from the violence of Brahminism (Misrahi-Barak & Bharadwaj, 2021). It was not just their labour, then, but also finding a place where they could, even under destitution and mistreatment by their new white masters, find some shelter from casteism, that allowed these labourers to find a sense of home. Jackson, when read alongside Ambedkar, makes it crucial to notice that the hierarchical difference within the South Asian diaspora—for example, between the descendants of indentured labourers and the cosmopolitan dominant caste scholar who travelled abroad for education—is not just a matter of division of labour, but also of division of labourers. Escape from casteism and the

monetizing of labour, performed an indigenizing function for these 19<sup>th</sup> century Indians in the Caribbean. Structures that keep caste violence intact, yet invisible to broader society, thus variously deepen labour's indigenizing function across lines of Brahmin entitlement and the Dalit search for liberation.

There is another aspect to caste which we would like to highlight here. The “global” in global capitalism is not just about European orchestrations of genocidal conquest, exploitation, extraction, and enslavement, and the displacements that generated immigrant labour to do the work of settler colonization (Sharma, 2006). It is also about noticing the foundation of caste in the ways in which Brahmins and other dominant caste rulers and merchants collaborated with Europeans to then dig the violent lines of caste deeper into the flows of labour across seas and into lands across every latitude and longitude of the globe (Gupta, 2016; Patel, 2016). Patel's previous writing explains the relationship between caste and colonialism — building on Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd's (2011) conception of “horizontal relations of violence” — capturing the ways in which variously racialized and colonized people engage in “zero-sum struggles for hegemony,” and in so doing, invest in Indigenous peoples' erasure and the ongoing colonization of Indigenous lands (p. xxxiv). Patel's scholarship foregrounds histories of caste-oppressed and Muslim people considering the conventional flattening of non-Indigenous, non-Black people under the homogenizing umbrellas of “South Asians,” “racialized,” “brown” and “people of colour,” and discusses the ways in which whiteness and caste fashioned each other in South Asia. This is also why we want to refuse the exceptionalism afforded to intra-racial collaborations. For dominant caste South Asians who come to the Americas and operate as casteless to evade their anti-Indigenous and anti-Black histories, Dalit feminist scholarship highlights that caste and various converging *colonialisms* (the coloniality of caste, British colonialism, ongoing Indian colonialisms, as well as settler colonialism in North America)—are each vertical forms of violence that play out and converge in complex and obscured ways in the diaspora.

It is difficult to trace the exact contours of the relationship between the Canadian state's white settler ideology and its seemingly inadvertent, but de facto, casteism. Sunera Thobani's (2007) careful study of Canadian nation-building demonstrates that racially ‘non-preferred’ immigrants, such as South Asians, were nonetheless relatively exalted as outsiders-turned-insiders (compared to Indigenous insiders-turned-outsiders) within the white settler ideology of the Canadian state, which was founded upon Indigenous peoples' dispossession and genocide (pp. 74-75; see also Bannerji, 2000). Furthermore, as Enakshi Dua's (2003) work has shown, early 20<sup>th</sup> century Canadian immigration policy debates on who counts as a British “subject” and “alien,” were underpinned by transnational white settler ideologies. Yet, caste-differentiated data and analysis is hard to locate within such Canadian state-formation processes. However, there are clues that this absence of caste as a category of Canadian state policy is not necessarily a passive absence, even if it is an obscured one.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century British colonial state in the subcontinent has been characterized as an “ethnographic state” obsessively producing knowledge about caste and religion, as this caste-based census/knowledge was important for continuing to divide-and-rule the subcontinent

(Dirks, 2001). It was no secret that caste and whiteness were in deep collusion in the workings of the British Raj. If we are to understand that white settler colonialism in Canada was not cut off from other transnational colonial and imperial projects, how then is it possible that the British Canadian colonial state could be oblivious to the caste of South Asians coming to its shores? While we do not have a concrete answer to this question as yet, we raise it to note that in the subcontinent, modern casteism came to be institutionally-entrenched through what Satish Deshpande has called “castelessness” in the course of anti-colonial nationalist movements against the British Raj, beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. By castelessness, Deshpande (2013) means the self-interested dominant caste institutionalized misrepresentation that caste only shapes the lives of the caste-oppressed.<sup>8</sup> As he explains, “upper caste identity is such that it can be completely overwritten by modern professional identities of choice, whereas lower caste identity is so indelibly engraved that it overwrites all other identities and renders them illegible, along with the choices they may represent” (p. 32). The caste-privileged (racialized) subject is the Cartesian subject of sorts who can move around and mark his territory in both national and international contexts while the Dalit subject remains constricted and immovable under the caste burden.

Both colonialism and anti-colonial movements of Indians were scripted by caste. There are also deep histories of collusions and collaborations between Brahmin families and British colonizers in India (Chandra, 2011). These were often the same Brahmins who turned to Indian nationalism once they began to experience the kind of humiliation from the British, which they had bestowed on Dalits and Bahujan for centuries. We want to quote at length from Dalit leader, Mata Prasad’s 2002 autobiography here. He notes:

These privileged young Indians [studying in England] during English rule [*gulami*, or slavery] in India had to suffer humiliation [*apaman*] at every step of their stay in England, unable, for example, to travel by first class even though they had a first-class railway ticket. They could not enter some hotels. They had to listen to the humiliating [*apaman-janak*] English term “Indian dog”. Such humiliation [*apaman*] enraged them. These elite Indians didn’t know that Dalits in India had to suffer the worst kind of humiliation... (Mata Prasad, cited in Rawat & Satyanarayana, 2016, p. 1)

It was the refusal to be treated as outcasts by the British that infuriated and created the category of Indian nationalists, with caste Hindus as the main contributors to the movement. And yet, it is not the case that caste-oppressed peoples did not participate in anti-colonial struggles, and made a commitment to human dignity and egalitarian democracy for all. For the caste-oppressed people, anti-colonial nationalism against the British was not possible without anti-caste commitment of Indian nationalists developing an anti-caste commitment. Yet, as Chinniah

8 For a powerful and illuminating study on how mid 20<sup>th</sup> century South Asians carried caste in Canada, see Cecil Patrick Pereira’s dissertation from 1971, titled, “East Indians in Winnipeg: a study in the consequences of immigration for an ethnic group in Canada” from The University of Manitoba.

Jangam (2017) powerfully notes in his study, “if one consults the canon of nationalism in India, Dalits as political actors and visionaries fail to even feature in the footnotes” (p.1). As our discussion on Indian subaltern studies above, clearly shows, caste Hindus can become the colonized, the subaltern, and the anti-colonial subjects in Indian history and politics, but Dalits are to remain the specters in these archives. Caste, as Ambedkar (1936) noted, was and is so pervasive, that there is no outside to it unless it is annihilated. Therefore, we allege that caste was never absent, even if not publicly documented or acknowledged by white people, in how the immigration authorities viewed immigration patterns of South Asians in the 19th and 20th centuries. From the late nineteenth century arrival of people from the subcontinent to the points system of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the present moment, there is no outside to race, caste, and gender, which has informed Canadian immigration policies.

Taking the liberty to apply the category of castelessness to early 20<sup>th</sup> century immigration to Canada allows us to consider the ways in which caste informs Canadian state-formation, even if the lack of data obscures specificity and does not permit concrete analysis because of the use of racialized colonial categories such as “Hindoos” to refer not just to Hindu South Asians, but South Asians of all backgrounds. For example, Dua’s work on early twentieth century debates “across virtually all sectors of Canadian society,” including colonial officials, shows that competing views on the question of allowing “Hindoo” women to join their husbands in Canada were equally committed to keeping Canada white—detractors did not want to allow women of colour to corrupt whiteness, and proponents thought miscegenation would do the same (Dua, 2000, p.59). Here, the intensely-racial category of “Hindoo woman” is haunted by the “family values” of Brahminical and British patriarchy, even if we do not know her specific religion or caste in this case. Dua (2000) notes:

the question of South Asian women migrating into Canada was limited to the entry of the spouses of Asian men already residing in the country. ... single Asian women or those women with spouses elsewhere were prohibited from entering Canada. *It is important to note that the South Asian community failed to address these barriers*, as South Asian men focused on the legislative prohibitions against the entry of their spouses—not on the prohibitions against the entry of all South Asian women. Thus, the gendering of South Asian women in Canada was limited to that of a spouse. (p. 59, emphasis added)

The mobility and “protection” afforded to the South Asian woman was thus subject to the collaborative Brahminical and British patriarchies, through which men defined the “family values” appropriate to their respective communities via hetero-patriarchal casteist, racist, and imperial logics. The triangulated dynamics of race, caste, and sexuality have to be held together in our analysis of Canadian immigration policies with respect to South Asians.

Focusing on state policy, we can see a contradiction. At the time when British patriarchy was defending the migration of indentured labouring women from the subcontinent to plantations across the world, the migration of South Asian women to Canada was seen as such a threat

to the white colonial world order (Dua, 2003, p. 60). In the case of indentured labourer women, Charu Gupta (2016) shows that most were sex workers, widows, and Dalit—caught between the moralizing tones of nationalists who wanted to save Indian women from white sexual and labour exploitation, and the deceptions of the British who claimed that there was no exploitation of indentured women. Placing Gupta's work in conversation with Dua's, we can surmise, then, that Canada's prohibition against the migration of "single Asian women or those with spouses elsewhere," was effectively a prohibition against the immigration of those most likely to travel to the diaspora without husbands, who were also those most adversely-affected by Brahminical patriarchy—sex workers, widows, and caste-oppressed women (see also Bahadur 2014). The white geography of Canada with its miscegenation policies, while very racist against all migrants (caste privileged or not), still did not want caste-oppressed Indian women outside the fold of heterosexual marriages with Indian men.

If racist and, as we note, casteist heteropatriarchy shaped immigrant labour for colonial settlement in early Canadian nation-building (Bolaria and Li, 1988, Dua, 2000), the same is true of liberalized Canadian immigration addressing the desperate shortages of labour in the Canadian economy in the 1960s onwards (Cohen, 1994; Sharma, 2000; Trumper & Wong, 2007). Beginning in the 1990s, there has been an over-representation of Indian immigrants among the hi-tech and professional sectors, compared to other immigrants coming to do agricultural and service/domestic work (Trumper & Wong, 2007, pp. 164-165). Thus, Canadian immigration policy in the service of white capitalist economy did not simply consolidate along the lines of race and gender, but also caste. As we discussed above too, what is crucial in any analysis having to do with South Asians and diasporic nations' immigration policies, is the foundational ideology of division of labourers as it structures public and intimate expressions of life, labour, and living. In not explicitly acknowledging caste in various local and transnational sites of data collection and analysis, caste is made illegible, and whether they are cognizant of it or not, contemporary institutions are keeping alive an age-old collaboration of Brahminical supremacy and white supremacy (Patel, 2019b; Chandra, 2011). This filters into the university context in which the transnational formation of race by caste histories remains obscured.

### **The Il/legibility of Caste in the Canadian EDI University**

A growing body of literature has significantly advanced the conversation on equity by focusing on race and colonialism in the Canadian university, and challenging the unmitigated re/production of cis white heteropatriarchal approaches to gender inclusion (Henry & Tator, 2009; Henry et. al., 2017). Consider Toronto-based Caribbean sociologist, Camille Hernandez Ramdwar's words in Henry and Tator's volume about racism in the Canadian university. She notes:

Divisions between racialized peoples operate to ensure a 'divide-and-rule' status quo which allows white supremacy to operate un-contested. One of the ways that racism is constructed in Canada is to maintain discrete boundaries between racialized groups (such as Aboriginal, Black/African, South Asian,



Asian, European) when, in the case of the Caribbean, many of these racial groups share a similar cultural background. The ethno-racial divisions between students which operate through the propensity of student groups on campus can also work in a similar fashion. Instead of racialized students uniting to combat the larger structural oppressor, inner divisions and competition for resources keep students who are all affected by racism continually divided. (Ramdwar, 2009, p. 117)

While refusing the lateral violence which whiteness generates, we might also remember that white people are not the only ones who uphold white supremacy. Colonized collaborators/native informants, and postcolonial nationalist elites actively reproduce colonial continuities and world orders, as the Martinican psychiatrist and anti-colonial revolutionary thinker Frantz Fanon (1963/2004) pointed out long ago. In Ramdwar's account, "South Asian" is not only a homogenous category; it is included as one among many forms of racial heritage that a person from the Caribbean may embody. But to acknowledge the multiplicity of racial and ethnic groups in the Caribbean is not the same as attending to the very different histories which brought white people as colonizers, Black people as enslaved, and Indians, Chinese, Filipinos and other people as indentured labourers, post the so-called 'emancipation' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to different parts of the Caribbean.

Our call to look searchingly at the history of relationships among variously racialized and colonized groups (Alexander, 2005; Byrd, 2011; Lowe, 2015; Patel, 2019a) is a call to understand the pre-existing ideologies, beliefs, and power relations through which white supremacy has exploited differentially racialized people and gained traction among us. We also want the reader to know that those South Asian scholars who work on the assumption that South Asian can be a monolithic category of people, usually mean caste Indian Hindus.

As we have been saying, caste is so invisibilized and illegible that it is not understandable even as "institutional cultural work." Brahminical patriarchal supremacy (Chakravarti, 1993)—that is, gender and sexual relations organized along the lines of caste—is so carefully disappeared through the labor of Brahmins and dominant caste people that it first needs to be made legible, if not familiar, to become something that can be seen and witnessed by non-South Asian anti-caste allies in academia and beyond. And it is Dalit Bahujan people who bear that workload, in the academy, and beyond, as we discuss below. An analysis of racism alone is not sufficient to understand Brahmin networks operating in Canadian universities and how labour gets not only distributed, but also upholds the dehumanizing of Dalit, Bahujan, and caste-oppressed Muslims and others considered religious minorities in India. It is within these deeply intersectional and complicated systems of violence that we have been wondering about whether collaborative writing amounts to "willing helpfulness" (Ahmed, 2019) to colonial and casteist institutions of education. To raise the question of caste is not intended to dilute the force of anti-racist critiques of universities, but in fact to consider their inextricable relationship to the question of racialized colonial capitalism. It is to "thicken" our descriptions of what diversity work does and does not do in Canadian universities (Ahmed, 2012).

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Consider some inadvertent but ordinary manifestations of casteism in the Canadian university:

- Brahmin scholars cite and collaborate with Indigenous and Black scholars, but very likely cannot name any Dalit scholars whose work they engage with, ethically.
- White faculty assume that students interested in South Asian studies should use postcolonial theoretical frameworks without understanding these as casteist and erasing Dalit-Bahujan interruptions and liberation project.
- South Asian studies scholars teach everyone from Gandhi to Marx and Agamben, but not Ambedkar; they especially never teach Dalit feminist scholarship, even when mentioning caste, because their caste-privileged friends writing about caste do the work more “gently.”
- Marxian and postcolonial scholars resist teaching about caste for fear of reproducing Orientalized views of South Asia.
- South Asian faculty on admissions and hiring committees read applicant profiles in ways familiar to them, grounded in names that Brahmins know—i.e., names of casteist academic institutions in India, and people of prominence in the academy who tend to be from dominant castes.
- Dalit students and faculty are patronized as tokens on conference panels and edited volumes by Brahmin scholars, who with entry of Dalits into academia, feel the pressure to perform their anti-casteism and solidarity.
- The academy in general and EDI leadership, in particular, tends to see caste as a cultural thing among South Asians, without understanding its broader, systemic implications, on rare occasions when they know what caste is.

We list these actively-voiced and practiced positions, not to disparage but to highlight the pervasive and myriad texture of its ordinary existence among South Asians and non-South Asians alike. They demonstrate that the structural need to not know about caste, or “Brahminical ignorance,” following Charles Mills work (Da Costa, 2021), reproduces Brahminical supremacy in higher education, and inadvertent non-South Asian ignorance about caste also benefits Brahminical supremacy.

Among these erasures of horizontal relations of power (Byrd, 2011), the brutality and banality of caste violence remains perfectly invisible and illegible to all but the caste-oppressed in every institution. The labour of caste-oppressed academics is rendered invisible in university departments understood to be divided along the ternary lines of white, Indigenous, and racialized faculty, staff, and students. By labour here, we do not simply mean the apparent process of creating economic value, but also life, intimacies, alternative world orders, and futurities for variously marginalized people, and also trauma and death for these same people.

Drawing upon Rita Kaur Dhamoon’s (2020) conceptualization of “racism as a workload and bargaining issue” in academia, we argue that caste work in universities also needs to be

framed as a matter of workload. Dhamoon notes that racism and workload are “inseparable” for racialized and Indigenous faculty (n.p) because “i) it changes the distribution of labor from that undertaken by white faculty; and ii) it is work that is not accounted for in initial appointment discussions/letters of offer, revised individual agreements, faculty-university agreements, and departmental standards and responsibilities, pay scales, the distribution of labour, and unwritten practices” (n.p.). In an academy where we are fighting to make visible the fact that labor is also gendered, racialized, and sexualized bodies, what the labor of caste-oppressed faculty, staff, and students does will take more work and time to be fleshed out, and western academia is certainly not at the point of putting caste on the table as a bargaining issue. No matter how attuned to power relations some university departments are, and there are some better ones that seek to confront the constant cis-heteropatriarchal white workings of the university, there still remains an assumption that at least all the brown faculty will be in solidarity with each other.

Often, if there are two or more South Asian faculty members in the department, everybody from one’s colleagues to the chair and the dean assume that solidarity, and even friendship binds us. Requests are made for us to co-design and co-teach courses, we are encouraged to apply together for grants, collaborate on projects, and are often treated as a homogenous entity. Even worse, savarna academics are assigned as faculty mentors of us Muslim, Dalit, and other caste oppressed faculty (Patel). Nobody understands that whereas the savarna colleague might still be obsessed with teaching reverential courses on the casteist and anti-Black Mohandas Gandhi, the Dalit academic is doing the tedious work of introducing new courses on Dalit feminisms, educating the department (including colleagues and not just the students) and allies in other departments on how to understand casteism, and mobilizing these large universities to include caste in our universities’ anti-discrimination policies.

Overshadowed by Brahminical Indian and often very Islamophobic South Asian studies departments, centers and initiatives, we (Patel in this case) do the unseen, unacknowledged, and sometimes-treated-with-hostility soul-crushing and bone-crunching work because Dalits and caste-oppressed Muslim scholars are only at the threshold of academia whether in South Asia or in North America. This purposeful stance, and a position at the threshold, allows one the perspective of both the view behind, based on centuries of histories of anti-caste consciousness and survival, and the view in front of the open/ing door. Dalits stand at the door as people whose epistemologies will crumble the very buildings they are refused entry into, and people on the other side know that the Dalit feminist epistemologies can never be commensurable with how they live, learn, teach, write and uphold their networks of power. But often times, anti-caste resistance becomes a workload issue for Dalit and caste-oppressed academics, as they work to conceal their caste backgrounds. For those of us who have the privilege to do so, we have sometimes done it in order to avoid the deathly stigmatization that comes with our castes and our actual last names.

## **Our Process of How We Came to Collaborate**

### ***Dia's Reflections***

Shaista and I met at a conference in 2016. I was beginning to write on my responsibility as a dominant caste Indian for colonialism in Canada and in Kashmir. Ironically, I approached the former by thinking with the example of the Dene delegation to Japan to offer their apology to Hiroshima survivors, bypassing the Canadian state. I was also reflecting on stories from my memories and family's relationship to Kashmir, a place and people colonized by India. In large part due to my conversations with Shaista and her ethical orientations, I learned why my approach to the Dene story was, what Unangax scholar Eve Tuck calls "extractive" (Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2018), and why it was worth continuing the work on Kashmir. I will always be grateful beyond words for the gift of her work, honesty, and eventually friendship in my life.

A few years into a growing academic relationship and friendship, Shaista brought up the question of writing something together. An unspoken but deep discomfort punctuated my genuine excitement about the prospect. I was keenly aware of the patronage offered by caste-dominant Brahmin scholars to caste-oppressed Dalit-Bahujan and Muslim scholars, and I noticed the reproductive and even aggrandizing work such patronage practices yielded for the individual Brahmin academic and for Brahminical supremacy, regardless of the benefits that also accrued to the Dalit-Bahujan and Muslim students and faculty persons concerned. In harboring such concerns, I naively chased an idea of an imaginary relationship between Shaista and I, as if the one we had was not already deeply marked by the violence of patronage politics and its reproduction.

We started concretely talking about writing together in 2020, during a pandemic. I was nursing accumulating burnout and heartbreak in academia during a sabbatical. Because of her vastly different experience in academia compared to mine, Shaista already juggles burnout in the crucial early years of being an assistant professor. From there, we wrote an abstract for a paper tentatively entitled "Complicity and challenges of addressing whiteness in higher education" for a conference panel in June 2021. We wanted to locate our uneven complicity in settler colonial institutions of higher education. Caste was unavoidable, and in the conference abstract which we submitted, we committed to emphasizing "structures of 'our' particular and uneven complicity with racist, colonial power, while considering their practical implications."

But then, in the face of collaborative writing, for various reasons, we both struggled and found ourselves hesitating. We made reading lists, read and discussed our favourite quotes, annotated texts, and discussed its relevance to writing about complicity. We talked about the ethics of writing collaboratively across caste lines, and our search for an adequate vocabulary for these challenges. Doubts about overcoming my usual practice of individualized writing seized me and overlaid doubts about being able to write ethically and together across caste lines. Avoiding the truth behind these doubts, I feverishly summarized Shaista's previous writing for the parts of this piece that we knew we would need. I compulsively cut and pasted from my own previously drafted prose, trying desperately to quell my anxiety of presuming to write collaboratively with Shaista. Without knowing for sure, I got the sense that we both felt the deep chasm between us, notwithstanding our friendship. Such chasms are wide and deep.

Proponents of Brahminical supremacy would rather they remain unnoticed, unremarkable, like a natural landscape. How do we honour the places where our relationship doesn't want to go, when we have committed to writing together for an event?

I could not write with Shaista without reproducing Brahminical patronage—it was not a matter of will and conviction. I knew that. I also knew that I didn't have much to offer as far as ethical, historical, theoretical knowledge of caste and colonialism. What then could I write with Shaista that could escape the agony of using, extracting from, and hurting a friend that Brahminical socialization instilled in me, even as I tried to consciously think about not doing so? My search for escape and caste-innocence was constant. My political commitment to foreground and cite Dalit-Bahujan writers doesn't prescribe an ethics of when *not* to use their words for my own purposes. My political commitment to do more work than I ask of Dalit-Bahujan does not prevent me from doing that work unethically by taking up too much space. These ordinary moments when I had nothing ethical to offer made it difficult to believe in this collaboration. I have no verbal balm to offer here, no template for doing better. The challenge of confronting an animated manifestation of caste violence in our relationship generated a whole lot of silence within me—my silence exemplifying Brahminical ignorance, violence, and lack of basic education in ethics—impossible to overcome simply through collaborative writing.

Soon enough, Shaista noted that we cannot write about complicity together. She reframed it as an honest reckoning with the structural failure of cross-caste collaborative writing and the kind of friendship that is unafraid to countenance the limits of friendship. In the end, we didn't want to allow the white and Brahminical academy to consume the story of the limits of our friendship either. Instead, we decided to focus on foregrounding caste in conversations about collaborations.

### ***Shaista's Reflections***

Can that which is felt be theorized in words? One can try to write about caste terror and anti-Muslimness one lives with, but sometimes there are no words. In graduate school, I never had any good relationships with any of the (one or two) Brahmins I worked with, even as I deceived myself into thinking that there was actual care and friendship. I now know that one cannot be friends with one's murderers, and that there can be only bloodied transactions with one's "assassins" as the narrator of *Theory* cited at the outset of this article calls these academic colleagues. And yet, in order to survive in spaces where we appear as pus-filled wounds only, not even the kind of wound where light enters according to Rumi, we often rely on finding Brahmin and white patronage. This is not about caste-oppressed people being deceiving, cunning, or traitors to our multiple histories of marginality. Brahmin networks are just so transnationally powerful and so engulfing that there is no outside to them in academia. There are no Dalit or caste-oppressed Muslim academics I know whose lives have not been punctuated by patronage of one or two "kind" Brahmin academics. This is our caste debt, accumulated over generations, and needing to be expressed as an obligation, every step of the way from acknowledgements in our books to a lifetime commitment, to subservience and an expectation of silence and data. The historical, contemporary, and allegorical dimensions of this caste debt are a multitude to which there are no alternative economies unless caste is annihilated (Ambedkar, 1936).

Challenging the moral and economic grammar of this terrifying caste debt is an important praxis of anti-casteism, and this is the labour which Dalit Bahujan people do all the time. Brahmin patronage, or more aptly parsimonious casteist/predatory lending of that which is actually accumulated from our bodily, spiritual, intellectual, and economic dispossession over generations in the first place, becomes a site of further dehumanization of caste-oppressed people as even “well meaning” Brahmins structurally thrive on devouring our bones, skin, flesh, intellect, soul, and futurities. Caste debt is always meant to keep us alienated from ourselves, and always in our place—that is, outside the sketch of modernity’s figure of the human. The humanization of the small minority of Brahmins rests on caste-oppressed peoples’ constant dehumanization.

It is in this context of generational debt and dehumanization that my friendship with Dia was cultivated. To her credit, I have never had more open and honest conversations about caste complicity of Brahmins with another caste-privileged scholar. In the beginning, she very graciously came onto my dissertation committee and her unconditional support for me has meant a lot to me in an interpersonal way, even as we both recognize the broader and historical context of Brahmin patronage and Dalit’s caste debt. We understand that ours is an imperfect and difficult friendship at structural, and sometimes interpersonal, levels, but still one in which we are both invested for reasons of love and working toward an anti-caste future for both our people yet to come.

I suggested to Dia that we write about our complicity in white settler colonialism while considering our differential caste positions within the context of white supremacy. I am exhausted by the move of homogenizing all South Asians as settlers of the same kind, a move often made by Brahmins and savarna as they bring Dalit and caste-oppressed Muslims into the fold of complicity, while erasing their local and transnational Brahminical supremacist power and its historical and ongoing role in consolidating white supremacy. However, many conversations later, I was firm in my belief that my injury and anger were so deep that even writing a short article on complicity was not possible for me. We cannot write about complicity together, even while centering caste power. This collaboration has been very difficult for me, despite a great level of comfort and friendship between us.

Initially, I could not articulate the difficulty to her, and expressed my discomfort through going very quiet, something unusual for me, or I expressed it unwittingly through my failure to meet up to talk through things which needed to be done for writing this paper. I now know that going quiet in meetings with her was not a lack of feelings, but a re-routing of feelings that one fears will not be understood by the other person. I had been reading Kevin Quashie’s (2012) book, *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, and reflecting on the work of quiet. This thinking happens for me alongside my “emotional outbursts,” my “breakdowns,” and my “meltdowns.” These are the words I have used to characterize my (lack of useful or utilitarian, for this article) contributions in conversations with Dia. Quashie theorizes going quiet as part of Black aesthetics. Refusing to be over-expressive, one of the ways in which Blackness makes an appearance in the American cultural and political landscape, quiet instead is “about expressiveness that is shaped by the vagaries of the inner life. Such expressiveness is not *necessarily articulate*—it isn’t always publicly



legible, and can be random and multiple in ways that makes it hard to codify singularly” (p. 103, emphasis added). Quiet is not a passive or disengaged state of being. It is not about the lack of feelings. Quiet is not the expected-to-be-silent in front of our various masters either. The inner life, of which quiet is an active state of *engaging with*, allows one to be expressive without wanting to be public, without showing everything that lives within one, and without allowing one’s body and mind to be theorized and written about by one’s masters, those who have for centuries drawn on your lives and labour for extraction. Here I am reminded of the deep and powerful words of the late Indigenous/Adivasi rights activist and intellectual, Abhay Flavian Xaxa (2011) who wrote:

“I am not your data, nor am I your vote bank,  
I am not your project, or any exotic museum object,  
I am not the soul waiting to be harvested...”<sup>9</sup>

I draw on Xaxa’s words to note that going quiet was both a turn inward to wait, to search for or dream up different wor(l)ds, not to live up to their expectations of polemical and emotional “us,” and sensible, objective, and theoretical “them” making sense of “our” lives and living. A collective but heterogeneous “we” has been the Brahmin site of theorizing for their publications and grants long enough. Suspicion and vigilance were ever-present despite trust and comfort on an interpersonal level.

I am not being contradictory here. The heart knows what it knows, but then there are thousands of years of being exploited by Brahmins and that historical and ongoing violence does mediate all relationships across caste lines, whether personal or professional. There were too many overlooked or difficult to articulate feelings, of which going quiet was but one manifestation. It was an active refusal to become data, to become something Brahmins get inspired to find/write words from. This going quiet is not being apolitical, uncaring, unfeeling; rather, it is about *not* letting the full range of one’s inner life be “determined entirely by publicness” (Quashie, p.6), while dreaming up a bloody revolution.

### **Collaborating with One’s Data**

Having discussed our investments in wanting to collaborate ethically and not being able to join hands over the ongoing caste apartheid, we invite readers to question the place of caste in canonical texts on collaborative work by dominant caste transnational feminists (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997; Grewal & Caplan, 1994; Mohanty, 2003; Swarr & Nagar, 2010). We are refraining from citing particular South Asian feminist scholarship on friendship that mines the depths of history and academic life to find, construct, or curate rare formations of friendship across power lines. Even though these texts are held up as exemplary gems, given our own experience with collaboration described above, we are citing the kind of work on collaboration and friendship that most enables us to take seriously the feminism of making legible the deep

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9 Abhay Xaxa (Sept 19, 2011), “I am not your data,” <https://roundtableindia.co.in/lit-blogs/?tag=abhay-xaxa> (accessed July 11, 2018).

challenges and limits of friendship across power lines, alongside prompting readers to see feminism in searching the possibility of friendship across borders. We briefly turn to Richa Nagar's (2006) much-celebrated book on feminist commitment to friendship, reciprocity, and solidarity, *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India* which she co-wrote with eight other grassroots activists from mostly rural, and belonging to different caste and class locations in Uttar Pradesh, India. This book has a wide reach in South Asia and transnationally. We both have either been taught this book in graduate school or have taught it to our students before.

While appreciating the book, we would also like to remind the reader that staging critical inquiries into much-beloved texts is not to reject the work of its authors or the ways in which important theoretical work is done at multiple sites. Indeed, it made sense for us to gravitate toward this text to think through our collaboration. This text has made us ask several questions in relation to our own struggle for collaborating with each other. We are interested in thinking through what allows the use of a "blended 'we,'" to become grounded as a methodology across vertical and horizontal power lines. In the introduction to the book, solely authored by Richa Nagar (2006), she writes:

The use of a blended "we" is a deliberate strategy on the collective's part, as is our decision to share quotes from the diaries in a minimal way. Rather than encouraging our readers to follow the trajectories of the lives of seven women, we braid the stories to highlight our analysis of specific moments in those lives. ... We want to interrupt the popular practice of representation in the media, NGO reports, and academic analyses, in which the writing voice of the one who is analyzing or reporting as the "expert" is separated from the voice of the persons who are recounting their lives and opinions. One way we have chosen to eliminate this separation is by ensuring that our nine voices emerge as a chorus, even if the diaries of only seven of us are the focus of our discussions. At no time is this unity meant to achieve resolution on issues of casteism, communalism, and hierarchy within the collective, however. ... In other words, the blended "we" hinged on the trust and honesty with which each author could articulate her disagreements and tensions. (pp. xxxiv-xxxv).

These words and the intentions embodied in them sound good. Collaborative writing across uneven locations in, for, and beyond the academy has in this way been championed for its capacity to generate dialogue across disagreements, a praxis grounded in social change, and a challenge to the academy's notions of individual knowledge-production and merit (Sangtin Writers & Nagar, 2006 Nagar and Swarr, 2010). However, if we two Indian Hindu and Pakistani Muslim university professors, respectively, albeit at different stages of our careers, could not find ethical ways to form a "we," across fractured lines of caste apartheid, then we cannot help but wonder about the ways in which a "blended 'we'" relies on obscuring one's own caste power and generational and ongoing complicities in the violence.

Guided by concerns brought forward by caste-oppressed feminists, we bring to fore the power that hides behind this “blended ‘we’” of collaboration, especially in a book where the caste locations of rural women mark the lives of others – and in quite totalizing ways, but caste does not seem to overdetermine the lives of the dominant caste academic. Consider this second quote also from the introduction in which Nagar (2006) explains the rationale for why material from seven rural activists’ diaries formed the core of this book, whilst the two urban educated dominant caste women’s diaries were not considered appropriate for the book.

Furthermore, although Richa Singh and I can by no means be described as coming from the same background, our Hindu and upper-caste affiliations and our socioeconomic and geographical locations and histories were radically different from the varying backgrounds of the autobiographers. Both Richas’ diaries on childhood, youth, and marriage also *sidetracked* the discussion toward contexts, issues, and power relationships that were not shaped by the politics of NGO work, rural women’s empowerment, and knowledge production about rural women’s lives in the same ways as the lives of other seven authors were. The collective decided that Richa Singh and I would write and share our personal stories, but these would become part of the collective’s discussions only when they seemed relevant to the issues that the autobiographers’ diaries inspired. (Nagar, 2006, xxxvi-xxxvii, emphasis added).

While it is certainly laudable that a collective’s politics determined whose lives constitute its data and central politics and whose doesn’t, we limit ourselves to asking what notion of relationality guides this collaboration, where the lives of dominant caste actors are taken to “sidetrack” the critique of this NGO’s politics, despite the fact that it is precisely caste Hindu supremacy which structures the politics of development in India. Moreover, it feels like where some lives are laid out for the reader to probe at, the two women with the same name keep their lives on the relative sidelines, affording them the mystifications of irrelevance, privacy, respectability, distance, and therefore, greater value than those whose lives were made public to the readers. Gopal Guru (2002), a Dalit scholar aptly said that in Indian social sciences, while Brahmins circulate as theoretical as people with power to write different worlds, give shape to ideas, caste-oppressed people, the Dalit-Bahujan remain as empirical. They remain as data and at the mercy of dominant caste scholars to give them whatever shape is needed to get their (caste) work done.

So, we ask: Was it a sidetracking or a clear recognition that their lives, especially the life of the upper-caste U.S.-based academic, were so different that braiding those lives together would make their positions across the barricades even more clear? Was it sidetracking, plain incommensurability, or such starkly demarcated lines of the kind that broke the words into nonsense? The incommensurability, after all, is not just about different lives, but precisely about the reality that one’s humanization has historically relied on the other’s dehumanization. After all, what Fanon (1963) has said about the colonial world being “divided into compartments,

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this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species” (pp. 39-40) also holds true for a world where caste apartheid is 2,500 years old.

### **Conclusion**

Our effort to collaborate prompted the realization that we cannot write about complicity together. Our argument is not intended as a blanket recommendation never to collaborate across differential power lines. Nor do we suggest that collaborations are essentially colonial, casteist, or otherwise transactional. We want to make caste legible where it runs for cover in academia. We are writing against the commonplace assumption that those racialized as brown, or South Asian are automatically suitable to form alliances or collaborations because we are in the same racial checkbox. We write to make apparent the structural relationship of Brahminical supremacy to a monopoly over education systems, to canonical racialized knowledge, and to white supremacy’s prospecting of collaborations among “people of colour” for new frontiers of value. We also write this because we believe that cross-caste collaborative work should be ethically predicated on making specific, relevant histories of Brahminical and dominant caste violence publicly legible, especially when spelling out those histories can crack the veneer of more tidy narratives—even those that seemingly project radical messiness. Against this paradigmatic and fantastical model of cross-caste racial solidarity and collaboration, we write about the collective exhaustion but also of caste-oppressed students and faculty invited as props to allow caste-dominant South Asian scholars to claim anti-caste politics, which always comes with the perks of funding and recognition as being “not casteist.” We also write to reflect on what it means for dominant caste scholars to refuse any place of innocence through such collaboration when caste violence has been a site of genocide. Ultimately, we write to encourage South Asian academics to think critically about what remains unsaid and becomes epistemological and material violence in this encounter of Brahmin patronage and Dalit debt, which continues the casteist project of humiliation and dehumanization of caste-oppressed people. For us, this difficult work of thinking through caste hierarchies and our investments in either upholding or working towards the Dalit feminist project of caste annihilation is both urgent, and the only way we can enter into conversations on decolonization and abolition in North America.

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