

ARUN SALDANHA. *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. Pp. 239. ISBN10: 0-8166-4993-6.

Every year, hordes of youngsters from the wealthy West grab their backpacks and head for Goa. Since its hippy beginnings in the 1970s when the flower children claimed those pristine white beaches and tranquil fishing villages of Southwest India as *the* destination, Goa has come a long way. Today, it has a booming tourist industry. Furthermore, the hippie subculture has experienced a metamorphosis, which has produced a completely new breed of tourist. With their dollars, pounds or euros, they purchase for themselves a life of comfort as well as a seemingly infinite supply of the drugs they crave.

For several years, Arun Saldanha witnessed the party-filled lifestyle of Western youths on Anjuna beach, Goa's best-known hippie destination. The idealistic discourse of Goa freaks, as they are called, emphasizes the ethos of Peace, Love, Unity and Respect (or PLUR) between all humans. Yet, these tourists are a vastly privileged group, who cannot, even if they wish to, ignore the gaping cultural and economic differences between themselves and the locals. In *Psychedelic White*, Saldanha relies on ethnography to capture the tensions and paradoxes of race and class that this juxtaposition inevitably produces. He describes how Goa 'freaks' push the limits of "whiteness, class, gender, sexuality, home, health, and reason" (p. 55).

Psychedelic White is more a collection of fragments than a classic ethnographic text: the chapters are short and touch on a wide variety of issues and practices. Saldanha arranges these fragments according to several different conceptual lenses: viscosity, embodiment and face, and location.

The term *viscosity* refers to a set of conscious acts and decisions, which makes the young white freaks' culture impenetrable for Indians. Saldanha uses this slightly vague term to explain the malleability of race and, in Goa's case, mechanisms of racial segregation. He explains whiteness as viscous, which means that it is neither "solid" nor "fluid"; it is frequently transgressed and sufficiently porous for all white newcomers to join, while solid enough to make it incredibly hard for Indians to penetrate.

This viscosity can be detected in the bodily behaviour of the Goa freaks, and the ways they delineate themselves from the locals. The coolest elite of these tourists are those living semi-permanently in Goa. These insiders nurture an extremely exclusivist subculture. Only those with the right behaviour and right attitude can fit—the most inappropriate behaviour of all is fraternizing with the locals. In Goa, freaks abandon their middle-class backgrounds in search of a more emancipated self and countercultural experimentation only to rediscover themselves as whites. In fact, their whiteness becomes more important than ever, as it is the most important aspect of their social value and belonging.

Indians are considered a nuisance by Goa freaks and are generally unwanted. However, beaches, restaurants and bars are open to all. In addition, the presence of Israelis, who are often quite dark although counted as white, means that even the phenotype—while helpful—cannot always distinguish who belongs and who does not. Saldanha finds himself in an excellent position to discuss this, as he is half-Belgian, half-Indian, and during the field research was occasionally mistaken for a local. However, this mistake was soon corrected, as he carried all the right signs of white *embodiment*: he dressed, talked and behaved like a European. The writer was thus able to participate and blend into the party scene—the psychedelic culture—with ease.

In order to participate in this psychedelic culture, one need not only exhibit the right embodiment but also work towards the presentation of a proper white *face*. Ideally, embodiment and face-work will lead to a self-transformation, which is aided through the right techniques of self. These techniques consist of a correct way of dressing, dancing, drinking tea, moving about—even smoking the *chillum* (the traditional Indian hash pipe) becomes a form of art. The self-transformation is further enforced by drugs and trance dance, which are supposed to have a mind-opening effect. The ensuing psychedelic experience is meant to free the dancer to understand the existence of a universal harmony.

An important aspect of these techniques is sociochemical monitoring: regardless of the quantity of ecstasy, LSD and hash consumed, intoxication must not be visible—again, face must be maintained.

Learning all this is complicated enough for someone who already has an idea of what is being pursued, and what it means to be white, and virtually impossible for someone who has not been born and bred in the West.

In his ethnography Saldanha describes how the youngsters arrive at the psychedelic paradise of Goa to shake off the shackles of white modernity with drugs, music and a free lifestyle, but end up reinforcing their own the whiteness and that of their subculture. The longer they stay, the more immersed they become in the viscosity of whiteness. Saldanha ends up employing Deleuze and Guattari's term microfascism to describe this prescriptive subculture.

So far so good, but when the author broaches the issue of *location*, one cannot help but conclude that he is overextending his argument. For Saldanha, location is a centrally important fact of whiteness in Goa, and it is its particular circumstances and historical significance as the end point of the "hippie trail" that bring the viscosity of psychedelic whiteness into being.

What goes on is hardly unique, or different from, for example, thousands of noisy young Britons consuming beer in a sports bar regardless of whether they are in Las Palmas, Ibiza or Paris. While their poison of choice might be alcohol, their behaviour is essentially the same. Nevertheless, Saldanha pins the youthful behaviour in Goa down to their whiteness, racial difference and the particular geographical circumstances. As all Estonians know from years of experiencing an influx of Finns out for a good time, a mere difference in ethnicity and wealth can cause travellers to behave abysmally—it does not always require ideas of race.

In a more convincing line of argument Saldanha shows how the location is also bringing on an ongoing contestation over space. Money opens all doors in Goa, but the freaks also want to claim the place as their own. To this end, they use several techniques that can be spatial, visual, audible or temporal. Certain spaces, for example bars, are territories of white insiders, and Indians are ignored and left feeling marginal should they be bold enough to enter.

The proper embodiment becomes important in these spatial contestations, as freak bodies tend to create a certain visual impression. They are lean, tanned and wear certain clothing, often too little for Indian standards. They are being heard as well: the psychedelic trance music or the noisy Enfield motorbikes that the insiders drive effectively announce their prevailing presence, whether it is day or night, and whether the locals are asleep or not. Most importantly, the life of a Goa freak acquires a rhythm: things happen at certain times, and these times tend to exclude the locals, even the wealthiest Indian tourists.

The absolute climax of a freaks' night and the pinnacle of viscosity in Goa emerges with the sunrise. Beach parties gain new momentum at dawn when all the Indians have left,

either too tired or too uncomfortable amongst all the hallucinating white bodies. The chemically boosted, tireless dancers salute the new day, experiencing Peace, Love, Respect and Unity with one another, creating a pale little bubble on a Third World beach.

Those in favour of studying whiteness have pointed out how important it is to not only examine people of colour but also whiteness as it tends to be an invisible, normative measure of humanity. Those opposing whiteness studies have retorted that the study of whiteness could easily become a self-centred academic practice merely draining the resources of critical race studies. The fear of an obsession with whiteness at the expense of Others has led to some central authors of whiteness studies, such as Noel Ignatiev, to publicly turn their backs on the study of whiteness.

However, Saldanha's research should alleviate concerns that the study of whiteness could become a narcissistic obsession with the Self. True, he tends to over-emphasize his own value in his claims to formulate a "materialistic theory of race" where much has already been said, for example, in the fields of urban studies and anthropology. He also ignores a valuable body of texts in whiteness studies, such as those of David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev and Ruth Frankenberg. Nevertheless, he manages to take a fresh and invigorating perspective in a challenging manner that he conveys with dignity and grace. Consequently, he not only proves his own point, but also the immense inspirational value and importance of whiteness studies for racial studies.

The ethnography is convincing and well executed, and the writer's acute sense of detail is admirable. His work is worth reading for the sake of the accurate ethnographic description alone. Saldanha describes the young, supposedly alternative, whites' arrogance, paranoia and callousness towards the Indians in an exemplary manner that makes the reader's ears redden out of embarrassment.

Regrettably, when trying to elevate his idea to the next level and start developing theory, the author's reasoning often falls flat and remains immature. Although Saldanha's clever machinations with Deleuze and Guattari's theories are alluring, they remain shapeless. The inventive way in which he uses concepts such as "face" also leaves something to be desired. Perhaps a geographer is slightly out of his depth trying to create larger-than-life theoretical innovations from ethnographic accounts.

There are even some classic exploratory avenues that Saldanha might have explored instead of leaning heavily on fragmented and fashionably open-ended, although obscure, poststructuralist French theory. For example, an anthropologically minded reader soon gets a strong feel or an impression of a massive rite *initiatique* occurring in Goa—here Catherine Bell's recent work on modern adventure model of rites of passage could have offered a fascinating perspective.

A far more serious deficiency is that Saldanha chose to largely exclude gender issues. Perhaps inadvertently, the book depicts a very male-oriented subculture, and the reader begins to wonder if the practices of embodiment and face-work have the same meaning for the male and female Goa freak. What tensions and stereotypes influence the gender relations there? These issues could and would have helped the reader to achieve a deeper understand the dynamics and experience of whiteness in the psychedelic culture of Goa. Since these issues are only touched upon, the member of the Goa counterculture and tourist stereotype is, once again, reproduced as a young male.

BOOK REVIEWS

Having said all that, apart from the few moments when the author gets too carried away or entangled with his murky theoretical machinations, *Psychedelic White* makes a pleasant and immersing read. I can whole-heartedly recommend it to anyone interested in travel, Goa, embodiment, or whiteness and race studies.

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