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**Policing the “sensible” in the era of YouTube: Urban villages and racialized subjects in  
Delhi**

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**Abstract**

*This article attends to the ways in which user-generated video content presumed destined for online social media circulation polices the sensible and, in turn, is policed because of its capacity to reveal the messy, turbulent politics of the everyday. I focus on one incident I had in an urban village in Delhi, India where I was questioned by a group of young men after I filmed a spontaneous mob on the street who were vociferously debating the fate of African nationals who resided in the village. The young men assumed I was going to upload the footage onto YouTube and argued that I was going to cause harm if I did so. Their interest in policing my audio-visual content of the unfolding events, I suggest, reveals a politics of the sensible that imagines digital circulation beyond national borders as a key site of contestation.*

Keywords: Digital politics, YouTube, race, migration, ethnography, ethics

In 2013, after a series of violent attacks on African nationals living in a South Delhi urban village called Khirki, I used my DSLR camera to film a group of residents on the main street of the village arguing about whether and how to forcibly expel African residents.<sup>1</sup> As I walked away from the scene several young men from the village approached me demanding the data card from my digital camera. They argued that footage was too sensitive and that if I put it on YouTube, the video would circulate across borders on social media and that, as a result, the Indian diaspora in Africa would be attacked and that I would be responsible. Moreover, they explained that by circulating the video footage I had captured, I would be giving their village and India a bad name across the globe. They appealed to my Indian-ness to convince me that I shouldn't circulate the video on YouTube, presuming, of course, that I had intended to do so in the first place.

In this article I discuss how my encounter with these young men in that moment and the months that followed offered me the grounds to productively think through how the potential for online circulation of digital video generates anxieties about the *sensible* and its representations of it. If we consider, drawing from Jacques Ranciere (2004), that the sensible – the way we see, hear, smell, and feel the world – is governed by a deep sense of what we imagine is acceptable, then anything beyond the normative order is a break in the order we have come to expect. Ranciere describes the ordering of the sensible as policing and any breaks that arise in this ordering as dissensus. Policing, For Ranciere, is not so much about the “disciplining of bodies as a rule of governing their appearing” (13). The encounter that I had with these young men pushes for another, more careful reading of Ranciere's (2004) theorization regarding the relationship between the sensible, efforts to maintain its order through policing strategies of various sorts, and subsequent ruptures of this normative order through digitally enabled representational tactics.

As Trinh Minh Ha (2016) argues, smartphone-enabled videography opens up new questions and tensions regarding what can be made visible (and audible) and for whom, precisely because it ‘democratizes’ reportage through the circulation of verité capture. Which is to say, user-generated YouTube videos and, for that matter, social media circulated audio-visual content more generally, disrupts (and polices) the sensible in a way that mainstream journalistic, artistic, or social scientific accounts cannot precisely because the user-generated footage it is comprised of– in its shaky, grainy, amateurish presentation – appeals to the idea one can experience an unmediated real. Put simply, YouTube hosted user-generated content seemingly offers a spectacle that feeds the need for a representational realism that that Ernst Bloch once called “the cult of the instantly ascertainable fact.”<sup>2</sup>

In the Indian context, recent discussions regarding the affective user-generated media content hosted by social media platforms such as YouTube have drawn attention to the ways in which “state policy/corporate initiatives” generate infrastructural imaginaries that shape “the lived experiences/affective encounters of ordinary citizens (Mukherjee, 2019:177). These infrastructurally enabled imaginaries facilitate the emergence of right wing political subjectivities congealed in online performances of affective publicness (Udupa, 2019). They are also generative of a regional politics that purports itself as new even though it is undergirded by existing mass mediated populisms from a previous era (Cody, this issue). In what follows I veer away from discussions that focus on the ways in which (new) media infrastructures shape national and regional political subjects, temporalities, and events. Rather, I foreground the ways in which YouTube, as it was (affectively) evoked as the platform of choice by the young men I met that day in Khirki, reveals a digital media imaginary that links the viscerally local to geographies and temporalities elsewhere.

Consider that the young men I met that day immediately imagined the video I shot as having repercussions elsewhere that, ultimately, would have an impact on their village.

These young urban villagers in Delhi recognized the potential international effects that my representations of violence being perpetrated against African nationals at the local level would have if they were circulated on YouTube – and sought to police them. They did so, ostensibly, to protect the Indian diaspora in Africa but also protect themselves, their village, and ‘India’ from scrutiny. I take this incident as the grounds on which to theorize what policing the sensible means in the era of YouTube – particularly in what Nimmi Rangaswamy and Payal Arora (2016) refer to as the ‘wild and everyday’ context of urban India’s marginalized spaces and places of habitation.

My argument is simple: social media enabled video circulation complicates Ranciere’s ideas of dissensus and policing as distinct tenses by which appearance is governed and contested. User-generated content hosted on sites like YouTube compel us, rather, to reassess the ways in which we theorize how the maintenance of social norms and their ruptures are entangled in our current moment and the anxiety this generates for (some) people on the ground (like the young men who accosted me that day). User-generated media also demands a productive engagement with the confusion that those of us who are in the business of representing social worlds (like myself) experience when we conduct ethnographic fieldwork that seemingly doubles with this content. Policing the sensible, in this interweave of affect and imminent circulation, pushes us to reconsider simplistic ideas that valorize the democratization of representation as a necessary break or interruption of the social order or to think of policing as a re-inscription of it in one socio-temporal scale. Rather, policing the sensible in the era of YouTube opens up a way to engage with the politics of circulation in and of multiple scales.

### **The sensible at the threshold of experience**

To theorize a policing of the sensible in relation to everyday digitality requires an understanding of what constitutes a normalized sensorium within a particular socio-historic context, in this case Delhi, India. As historians of postcolonial urban India have pointed out, the Indian city has been the constant object of scrutiny, reform, and development from the colonial period onwards.<sup>3</sup> The upper caste and economic, social and political elite of urban India have long sought to contain certain sensoria, to clean up the so-called filth of the urban public domain. To do so they, at least in part, attempted to impose a sensory order by inculcating a feeling of constant surveillance amongst the denizens of the city, a sense that they were being watched. Sudipta Kaviraj (1997), for instance, discusses the role of hand painted signs in the public spaces of Calcutta that admonished its readers to follow particular rules concerning hygiene (don't spit on the road), traffic regulations (don't honk the horn), or, even more insidiously, his example of a sign that read in English, "don't cause mischief." These signs were meant to not only regulate behaviour but control what was perceivable as sensory input.

In contemporary Delhi, as in many cities in urban India and, indeed, across the globe, efforts to create a normative sensorial order in the city increasingly hinge on a totalizing strategy of containment (See Ong and Lin, 2017 for a discussion of how citizen-subjects are recruited, with their smart phones as surveillance tools, into a project of containment and policing of racialized Others in contemporary Hong Kong). Planners, developers, and so on, demarcate space to delineate order and sensibility. Gated housing colonies with *chowkidars* (security guards) that sit at the entrance gates and CCTV cameras sporadically placed throughout the village, shopping malls with several zones of security, the metro with its clear rules of conduct; all of these developed spaces reinforce a particular class, caste, and ethnic order in the city. This spatial demarcation can be seen as an effort to limit what can be seen,

heard, or otherwise apprehended through the senses. The bordering of the city from within is, in and of itself, a strategy to police the sensible. It is a strategy that is enacted at the level of experience and is meant to contain and order urban life.

Mainstream media is also harnessed towards these ends. Ravi Sundaram (2014) has written about the ways in which televised depictions of risk related to traffic, pollution, crime and so on in urban India, circulate to generate a kind of low-grade, perpetual panic about particular places in the city as well as to re-inscribe borders already demarcated spatially by planners, developers, and politicians. And yet, in order to function, the city requires a certain level of porousness. The perforations in the social order that this permeability creates opens the door to the possibilities of sensible displacement. Service labour, after all, needs access to the middle-class households nestled in the gated communities to clean their houses, drive their cars, to raise their children, or to cook their food. Similarly, the shopping mall requires the very same labour to staff the shops, serve as security, and so on. The governance of flow, affect, and sensoria in urban India is, thus is, always incomplete.

Proliferations of pirated media in 1980s (Liang, 2005) and the advent of internet connectivity in the 2000s (Arora & Rangaswamy, 2013) produce a different kind of porousness and rupture in the city. In each case, mediatized dislocations of the sensible emerge through citizen-subjects' unpredictable and illegible media consumption. More recently, the advent of smart phones and tower and satellite enabled 2G, 3G, and now 4G networks that enable them, when coupled with media sharing platforms, offer the opportunity for urban denizens to not only to consume a heterogenous assemblage of media but to produce and upload videos that offer up sights and sounds of the city previously out of sight, beyond the threshold of listening.

YouTube, with its user-generated, licensed mainstream media, and independent media content, emerges as a key site of media proliferation in cities like Delhi. As Burgess

and Green (2009) argue, YouTube functions as a cultural system – a means to consume, self-make, and be seen within the city, the nation, and across borders. In Khirki, where I have conducted fieldwork since 2011, small *dukans* (shops) selling Chinese-made smartphones and cheap downloads of media content enable young people – the children of regional migrants who have come to the city to find work - to deepen the relationships they developed with the internet in the early 2000s in the villages' cyber cafes. YouTube, with its iterative platform that has been adjusted, it seems, to work with the emerging digital worlds of the global south (think flexible data rates, offline viewing, etc.) – opens up opportunities for young people in places like Khirki to explore worlds and share their own.

Contemporary migrations of African students, entrepreneurs, and refugees to places like Khirki pose a unique entry point into understanding urban India's sensory order and its ruptures and contestations brought about by digital media circulations. In the last decade there has been a growing number of nationals from all over Africa choosing to head east rather than west, particularly to China and India, to fulfil their aspirations as students, entrepreneurs, or simply to find respite as refugees while they wait for asylum claims to be processed in the global north (Dattatreyan, 2015). In part, of course, this has to do with an increasingly virulent policing of European and North American borders. It also has to do with India and China's (growing) economic influence in Africa (Dattatreyan, 2018).

As a result, African nationals have become a visible minority in Delhi as well as in India's other first and second tier cities. The visibility of the Nigerians, Ivorians, and Ugandans, to name a few of the nationalities represented in India, is marked by perceived difference based on skin, hair, and facial features. Difference attributed to the epidermal, what is on the surface as it were, is amplified as African nationals tend to live in the same neighborhoods of Delhi where they can find housing. Khirki, where the incident with the group of young men I described above took place, for a time was a place that housed a large



number of African nationals. The concentrated number of Africans living in one particular locale of the city, of course, increased their visibility in that locale and produced a disruption of the sensible on multiple levels. Simply put, African nationals' mere presence on the street, in the public spaces of the urban village, posed a disturbance to the otherwise predictable chaos of the urban village of Khirki. What Franz Fanon (1967) termed their "corporeal schema" marked their bodies as a site of spectacle, disturbance and, eventually, regulation.

Their visible difference was amplified when Khirki residents perceived them to conduct themselves differently than the diverse South Asian population residing in the village. I would hear from the Indian nationals I knew in Khirki about how Africans produced various sorts of sensory displacements— their cooking smells strange, they don't wear enough clothes when they walk on the street (*nanga gumthe*, one imam from a local mosque exclaimed to me), they walk through the village aggressively, they have no regard for our women, they play their music loudly, they get into fights with each other in the street, and so on. The (visible) presence of Africans produced and provoked deep anxieties. Their sensory output, the scent of their cooking, the loudness of their music, their different comportment and sense of propriety and fashion, heightened these anxieties.

Folk stories circulated about the Africans residing in the village, stories that stressed their radical and incommensurate alterity. One story suggested that all Africans were cannibals. The evocation of the cannibal suggests a kind of sensory policing, a signalling of difference that hinges on what can be imagined as the most repugnant of eating practices. Another story suggested that the African nationals had come to India to engage in illegal activities of various sorts, from drug peddling to organ snatching to prostitution. All of these stories, of course, had an underlying message that the African nationals who now resided in India were somehow morally suspect and unequivocally posed a threat to the sensible order of the village. The question of the moral turpitude and inherent danger of African men and

women were always underpinned by mistrust that emerged and emanated from a sensorial experience – they looked, smelled, and sounded different. They embodied something outside of the experience of life in Delhi. This experienced sensoria of difference reinforced the discursive fiction of a racial hierarchy produced in the colonial era that positions “Brown over Black” (Burton, 2012).

These instances of everyday difference marked in the empirically perceivable or sensible, narrated in the inconceivable and the exceptional, for the most part, went unnoticed and unremarked upon save for the indelible marks they leave on those who have been marked as Other. The Nigerians, Somalis, Congolese, and Ivorian nationals I met in Khirki would narrate to me the little instances, the everyday micro-aggressions where their embodied difference was marked by those who they came into contact with in the village and in wider expanses of the city. They would describe to me the ways these everyday aggressions made them feel and the costs they incurred (financially, socially) as a result of them. One Congolese man told me how mothers with their young children walking down the road would simply point to him to scare their children into submission. A Nigerian man told me how he was picked up and beaten by the police and taken into the station, only to be released soon after on the grounds of mistaken identity. A Congolese woman who ran a small restaurant in Khirki told me she had to hire an “Indian man” to do her shopping for provisions as it was cheaper to hire him to do this than it was for her to pay what she called the Black tax for her to shop in the market.

While these everyday reminders of difference created an uncomfortable and sometimes untenable life for African nationals living in Delhi, I also observed how these daily assaults pertaining to the sensible created an African community, bridging linguistic, cultural, and political differences with others from the continent of Africa who they had contact with for the first time (Dattatreyan, 2015). South Africans, Nigerians, Somalis, and Kenyans had

opportunities to discuss their shared experiences of India and other destinations in the global south and compare and contrast them to each other. Lively debates regarding Africa and its futures unfolded as nationals from several different countries congregated in cramped apartments in Khirki and ate food prepared by Congolese women.

For the most part, however, the everyday experiences of African nationals in Khirki were invisible to Indian publics, save for those who lived in the immediate cordoned off space of Khirki. This changed dramatically after the 2013 attacks that I began this essay with and even more so after the state sponsored attacks on African students, soon after the Aam Aadmi Party won local (Delhi) elections in 2014. This attack was sponsored by Somnath Barthi, the then law minister of Delhi, a member of the AAP party and a resident of the gated colony of Malviya Nagar just on the outskirts of Khirki. The violence was a result of the simmering unrest produced by the kinds of ruptures in the sensible that African nationals unwittingly produced when they made their homes in Khirki. Barthi had, prior to the election, been in contact with local leaders in Khirki. These leaders who represented the different religious and class communities of the urban village, were able to, despite their other differences, agree on one thing – that African nationals were a problem for the community and needed to be rooted out.

One night in the winter months of 2014 Barthi hired a few men and went into the village. He raided a flat he had heard from his contacts in the village was the nexus of illegal activities and picked up a couple of Congolese women whom he accused of prostitution and drug dealing. He held them in his car for a long period and purportedly forced them to take urine tests while inside the vehicle.<sup>4</sup> The next day the story of Barthi's raid hit the local, then national news. Barthi was put under scrutiny for his vigilante actions and defended himself by saying that the local police were corrupt and were being bribed by those he called Nigerians who he argued were at the heart of a prostitution ring and drug cartel based in Khirki.

The major news media turned up immediately and began to interview people on the ground. People were very willing to talk with the press about the issues in Khirki. The everyday racism that Africans experienced became national headlines as a result of the Somnath Barathi intervention. In the coming months and years racism became the catchall term used to describe the experiences of Africans in Delhi and stories from across the cities of India began to appear in major news publications citing instances of violent racist attacks against African nationals. What was quite striking was how comfortable the residents of Khirki, whether African student, Bihari worker, or zamindari (landowner), were in their interactions with the mainstream press. It didn't seem to worry anyone when reporters with their crews and large cameras began to descend on the village to interview anyone on the street that they could find to write a story of, on the one hand, a class inflected story of intolerance and illiberalism, and on the other, a story suggesting that Africans were, indeed, bringing drugs and prostitution into the heart of the city. One local imam said, in reference to what he called the "African problem," "If the media can get candidates elected, they can do anything. We put our trust in the media."

However, similar to the response I had in 2013 when the first violent outburst against Africans took place in Khirki, there was a discomfort when I and the young Somali men who by then I was working with to make a film about the racialization of Africans in Khirki, pulled out smartphones or DSLR cameras (as opposed to professional video equipment) to document what was happening on the ground. There was something about the amateurishly produced moving image that made people uneasy. We were clearly imagined – perhaps because we didn't look like journalists, academics, or even artists – as vigilantes of some sort.

This brings me back to what I argue at the outset of this short essay – that amateur produced footage, precisely because of its lack of 'quality' and as a result of its non-expert point of view, holds a different weight than audio-visual evidence produced and circulated by

journalists, filmmakers, artists and even academics (when they aren't misrecognized as something else). These 'poor' images, as Hito Steyerl (2009) argues, stand in critical tension to the rich image – the sanitized and overly aestheticized high-resolution products that the corporate media and elite academic and artistic makers generate. It is the sort of audio-visual content that Helen Grace (2007) suggests offers a counterpoint to the high definition footage that dominates mainstream circulation. These 'poor' images are at once perceived to capture something more of the sensible and its disruptions. They also hold the possibility to travel in uncomfortably unanticipated and immediate ways.

### **Shooting the sensible**

I arrived to Khirki as the sun slowly dropped below the horizon. I had come because Ola, a Nigerian man who I had met in the village months prior, had phoned me, imploring me to get to the village as fast as I could. "There is a big meeting going on about what to do with the Africans," he said on the phone. "Bring your camera and come." I arrived to Khirki too late to catch the scheduled meeting between local leaders in the community to address the so-called African problem. I, however, wasn't too late to witness the after-effects of the meeting. Ola met me at the edge of the village, and we walked briskly to where a group of people, some of who had attended the meeting, many of who hadn't, were gathered.

There was a mob of men and women surrounding one woman. I trained my camera, a DSLR with a shotgun mic mounted on top, at the scene unfolding. The woman, who I recognized as a Khirki-based real estate agent, was speaking in elegant Hindi about supporting the Africans in the community who were deserving and not involved in criminal activities while male voices in the mob shouted for the expulsion of all Africans. The political economy of the village, in this instance, was laid bare. The woman, by expressing her support for the 'good' African nationals, revealed her stake as a real estate broker who had been profiting,

along with several property owners in the village on the presence of African nationals by charging them considerably more rent. I knew this because I had been listening to and following the stories I had heard about landlords, real estate agents, and African tenants for months and knew something of her role in the village.

A member of the mob confirmed as much in the interaction that ensued, arguing that the woman was profiting from Africans and therefore supported them for that reason. I caught this on video. As the action unfolded, several people in the crowd noticed me and the camera quietly witnessing what was said, how it was said, and who said it. A couple of older men asked the mob to part, to make way so that I could move to the front of the audience and ‘interview’ the woman (someone in the crowd referred to me as the journalist). This was the first instance, on that day, in which I was misrecognized. However, it didn’t really cause me any concern at the time. For practical purposes, it can sometimes be advantageous for an anthropologist to be thought of as a journalist, as was the case in this particular instance. Those older men, by calling me a journalist in this instance, gave me credence and legitimacy and, in so doing, gave the unfolding event the status of being newsworthy. In contrast, the anthropologist roaming the streets of Delhi is either an unknown, illegible entity or one associated with the study of remote tribals and, therefore, a puzzling actor indeed.

As I walked toward the centre of the crowd with Ola, he turned to me (the camera) and said, “this woman is so nice [referring to the real estate agent]. She is in charge of the Africans here.” Ola had clearly not understood all that had been said in Hindi as we approached the centre of the circle. “Just ask her a few questions,” he said. Before I could say anything to the woman, she began a monologue, directing her speech to the camera. As she gazed into the lens, she gesticulated animatedly speaking about how her heart was with the good Africans of Khirki but not with those who had done wrong. The police had arrived soon after she began speaking and the crowd began to disperse. As people began to walk away, Ola

asked me to follow him to a meeting where a group of Congolese women who ran African restaurants in Khirki were gathering to discuss what to do as the Khirki Resident Welfare Association (RWA) had decided to implement a curfew for Africans residing in the village of 11pm and to shut down, until further notice, all the restaurants. As I walked away from the scene the young men accosted me, sharing their discomfort regarding my video capture of the scene.

Their discomfort, as I suggested at the start, hinged on the idea they had that, for some reason, this footage could only be destined for social media circulation. They, unlike the older men who recognized me through their analogue sensibilities as a journalist, saw me through digital eyes. They made their digital sensibilities evident to me by citing one previous incident when a Congolese student was attacked by a mob in Punjab in 2013 and the attack was caught on video and uploaded on YouTube. This video, they argued, was picked up and circulated through the Congolese diaspora until it reached Kinshasa and, according to these young men, precipitated violence against the Indian diaspora who resided in the city.

What becomes interesting, in this instance, is the global imaginary they were working with to deduce my future actions, an imaginary that included the Indian diaspora as part of their argument against a (digital) representation of the events of that day. These young men who resided in the village stand for an urban underclass who are often depicted in the Indian mainstream press as hopelessly disconnected from the global. Yet, they evinced an acute understanding that there is an Indian diaspora in the Congo and that YouTube footage taken in Delhi could impact them. What is ironic, of course, is that it took quite some time for the Indian national media (the journalists who I was initially imagined to be) to begin to report on the struggle African nationals face in India and, even then, they weren't able to link these struggles to the Indian diaspora at all. It took even longer for government officials to

appreciate the international implications of the attacks on African nationals in India and the potential harm it could do to national interests abroad.

The video footage I had shot – unlike the attack on the Congolese student in the Punjab or even a later video I saw make its rounds depicting an attack in the Delhi metro on two students I knew, one from the DRC, the other from the Ivory Coast – didn't depict a violent scene. In fact, it captured a scene that, in my estimation, required too much contextualization to do much of anything on its own, except mystify. It occurred to me later that the scene I had captured felt as violent as capturing a graphic attack to the young men on the street because it revealed the kind of structures of power arrayed against the African nationals in the village. To these young men the footage felt too close to home, and was tantamount to an airing of dirty laundry that should not be made public. Their fear that it would be made public had in large part to do with the fact that the particular video clip implicated the real estate agent as someone who benefitted from the presence of African nationals in the village. I say this because when they reluctantly let me go, they insisted that I meet them at the real estate office and give them a copy of the footage I had shot (it turned out they were related to the woman who ran the real estate company).

Their worry that this video would go viral was also grounded in their stated belief that it would incite violence. By linking the mob scene I shot to the violent attack on the student in Punjab a few years prior that made its way onto YouTube, they evinced an understanding that the semiotic and the enacted was grounded in the sensible that couldn't be easily separable or objectified. In other words, they couldn't see how this particular video clip on its own could possibly be interpreted by others who didn't live in Khirki, or even in Delhi, in any way *other* than how they had read it and felt its dangerous possibility.

Months passed before I stopped by the real estate office with a copy of the video file. The real estate agent who had made the speech to the mob immediately recognized me.



*Videose de sakthe he bhai ji, Chai chaiye, beto!* ("Are you able to give the video brother have some tea, sit down!" were all uttered in one breathless sentence). I sat down and gave her the file on a data stick which she threw into a drawer. She served me tea and talked to me about the weather and the Aam Aadmi party and the new road in the village. I left after tea and didn't hear about the video again from them. Months later I used the clip I had shot of her in the film I collaboratively produced with a group of young Somali men who resided in Khirki about the racialization of Africans in Khirki. When we scheduled a screening of the film at a local art gallery (not too long after Somnath Barthi's vigilante attacks in the village) I dropped by her office to invite her to the screening. She and the young men who had accosted me on the street months prior and were all in the office on that day. They all politely said they would come but never showed up to the screening. Clearly, once they understood who I was (an anthropologist and filmmaker) and what the footage was going to be used for, all of their worries about the circulation of the captured scene in question, dissipated.

### **Conclusion – Anthropology (and the social sciences) in the digital age**

For months and, indeed, for years afterward -- the series of interactions I had with the young men and the real estate agent rankled. The story of being misrecognized by these young men as a YouTube citizen journalist or vigilante of sorts, and the concern that they expressed when I was seen as such in juxtaposition to the nonchalant dismissal of my work because I claimed a different status – that of the anthropologist/filmmaker – perturbed me and raised several questions concerning (1) the power that YouTube has been accorded in its capacity to disrupt the sensible, (2) the policing of the sensible that emerges as a result and, finally, (3) the circulation of anthropological work and its inefficacy to incite conversation and, dare I say, action in comparison to online circulations of everyday life. I'd like to conclude this essay by thinking through anthropology's remit as the social science that claims to represent the

everyday, the quotidian, in all of its sensuousness. How is my anthropological work positioned in relation to the depictions of everyday life that circulate online? How do I and others who base their theorizations on long-term fieldwork respond to digital representations and the ways in which they shape how our work is imagined in the world?

I, in my training, was told to, first and foremost, avoid causing harm during fieldwork and in the representations I produced after fieldwork was over. One way of doing this, I was taught, was to make those I met and even, at times, places I encountered in the world, anonymous in my write-ups. The art of ethical practice during fieldwork, however, gets tricky when locating who or where you are in ones' representational project seems an unavoidable and necessary political manoeuvre. I say unavoidable because, in some cases, to abrogate ones' responsibility to locate and to name is potentially unethical.

If we add video and photography as part of the toolkit of the 21<sup>st</sup> century anthropologist, the grounds between an ethical and political engagement become even more complex and tricky. Images, moving or still, have the tendency to locate and name in a far more visceral and unsettling way than text. This, of course, is in large part because images provide an excess of interpretative meaning even as they are, in David McDougall's (2005) words, frustratingly mute when it comes to providing the necessary context to read the image. It is precisely for these interrelated reasons that the discipline of anthropology has long had a tenuous and ambivalent relationship with audio-visuality as a suitable medium for representing anthropological work.

Yet, with the proliferation of digital technology in the world and the need to, as a result, rethink scholarly outputs, teaching, and the very objects of our study, digitally enabled audio-visuality has become a viable and important alternative to text. To some degree, anthropologists (and those in related disciplines that use ethnography as method) have begun to turn to non-textual representation because they want their work to be more public, to

circulate more readily in the digital circuits of the inter-world we co-inhabit. There is also, I would contend, another important and obvious reason for the turn to audio-visual representation. For the majority of us who do fieldwork, with some specific exceptions, we find ourselves in nascent or fully developed digital ecologies where our participants are producing audio-visual material for social media circulation all the time (Collins, Durnington, and Gill, 2017). This material complicates the anthropological conceit we bring with us into the field – that we are present to document the sensible and its disruptions on the ground in a way others can't.

There is an ongoing conversation in anthropology and related disciplines with regards to how we work with the digital material of our interlocutors and what, in fact, is our added value. Do we leave description, thick or otherwise, to amateur enthusiasts who make audio-visual work and take up the task of analysis and theory building around this circulating material and the infrastructures that enable its movement? Do we avoid this material altogether and trust, rather, our own senses and what they produce as description on the ground? If we do go about collecting our own audio-visual material, how does this sit with and against what circulates in the digital ether?

I grappled with all of these questions in the shooting, the edit, and the screening of the final cut of a film on the racialization of Africans I made with a group of young Somali men who I met in Khirki (Dattatreyan, 2018). The film uses the DIY aesthetic of YouTube user-generated content and the passion that the young Somali men had for American popular culture. Together we created something that collectively works with the sensible as a digitally mediated space where anthropology can enact its collaborative possibility. By constructing a narrative through the audio-visual material my participants and I collected and the material we borrowed from YouTube – we engaged with the sensible and its disruptions, creating a displacement of our own.

It is in this sort of displacement of representation, where the grainy, shaky footage that the digital offers is harnessed to push against racialized policing at the local level that I found a satisfying ground on which to work. Yet, the very people that I hoped would watch the film – for instance the young men and real estate agent who were uncomfortable when they saw me shooting because they imagined the footage’s global audience – didn’t come. What my failure to engage them as an audience shows, I believe, are the ways in which traditional methods of knowledge production, reportage, and circulation are increasingly becoming the domain of ever smaller publics while YouTube (and more recent social media platforms) are now imagined as the site where knowledge is generated and politics are staged.<sup>5</sup> The millennials I met that day on the street certainly believed that to be the case.

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## **End notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Urban village is a term used to describe villages that have been subsumed as a result of Delhi's expansion since the 1990s. The term also indexes their colonial era legacy status that prevents city level planning within the area designated as the village.

<sup>2</sup> Quote from Arvind Rajagopal's (2006) chapter titled The Gujarat Experiment and Hindu National Realism in Anuradha Dingwaney Needham, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (eds.) *The Crisis of Secularism in India*. Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Nair, Janaki. 2005. *The Promise of the Metropolis: Bangalore's 20<sup>th</sup> century*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> See news accounts of the incident, for instance Somnath Bharti's Midnight raid: African Women forced to urinate in public. Retrieved on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014

[http://zeenews.india.com/news/delhi/somnath-bhartis-midnight-raid-african-woman-forced-to-urinate-in-public\\_905018.html](http://zeenews.india.com/news/delhi/somnath-bhartis-midnight-raid-african-woman-forced-to-urinate-in-public_905018.html)

<sup>5</sup> Of course, the YouTube imaginary that these young men evoked and I have thought through in this article doesn't take into account the ways algorithmic curation and its politics shape what does and doesn't circulate broadly. The actual workings of a platform like YouTube and its capacity to disseminate and monetize media is not what is at stake in this article. Rather, it is the global imaginary and diasporic and racialized politics of difference that the platform and its content evokes that I highlight and make central.