Language Materialities of Caste and Race in Global South Asia
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What is the lexicon of caste, and what is its relationship to that of race? This paper examines the role of language in determining why caste, a centuries old system of social differentiation, has only recently become a publicly visible topic among South Asian Americans. Employing the framework of language materiality and considering the racial ontologies of caste, the paper investigates the emergence of caste in the South Asian diaspora and grapples with its relationship to race. Tracing continuities between the colonial and postcolonial eras in South Asia to focus on settler colonial South Asian Americans, the paper analyzes shifts in linguistic and rhetorical discourses of caste in examples drawn from ethnographic research, media, and literature. While the violence of caste supremacy in South Asia and white supremacy in the United States share many similarities, to treat them as interchangeable would obscure intraethnic processes of differentiation evident in linguistic register as well as the variable ways in which South Asian Americans are racialized. How caste violence in the U.S. emerges in overt as well as hidden ways will be examined, as will how diversity discourse further complicates South Asian American racial classification along caste lines. Through these linguistic analyses, the paper will aim to redefine the relationship between caste and race by considering legacies of privilege and the erasure of settler colonialism in the face of white supremacy.