This summer, I conducted pre-dissertation research in India from June 5th through August 21st with the generous support of the Scott-Kloeck Jenson International Pre-Dissertation Travel Fellowship. In December of 2012, the international media exploded with the story of a brutal gang rape in Delhi, India. Over the next few months, the topic of violence against women in India, its history, the laws surrounding it, and the culture that might be encouraging it were discussed endlessly in newspapers and social media. At the same time, a massive protest was staged in Delhi with men and women alike demanding not only reforms to India’s almost colonial-era laws surrounding rape but also policies to help encourage better enforcement of those laws. Change was in the air. The SKJ Fellowship allowed me to spend the summer in Delhi and Kolkata, India (with brief excursions to Mumbai and Chandigarh) investigating performative reactions to this moment. I intend for my dissertation to examine representations of violence—be it physical, emotional, epistemological, or semiotic—against women in India, focusing most closely on theater in India’s urban centers but also referencing popular culture and practices of the everyday.

I arrived in Delhi on the hottest day the city had seen in 52 years. Unfortunately, this kind of heat results in a less active theater scene, as many groups take a break for part or all of the summer. I had decided to begin my research in Kolkata, as I was lucky enough to have a friend who had worked with many different theater groups there as a young artist, and who still had many contacts based on that work. Within the first two weeks, I had met the most well-known Indian playwright writing in English (Mahesh Dattani) and received an invitation from him to visit his home in Mumbai and see what his theater company might be able to contribute to my research. I had also seen four different plays in Bangla (a language I have intermediate proficiency in) that addressed to various degrees issues of women, family, modernity, and violence. In Kolkata, I only encountered one play the entire summer that directly addressed rape and rape culture in India. The director and playwright, Sohag Sen, wove together the ancient Indian story of Draupadi with more modern stories of rape in an attempt to trace the historical patterns that make violence against women possible today. While the play, *Hay Haya*, never directly referenced “Nirbhaya”, Sohag felt that the violence of that incident, as well as other rapes that the media had report since “Nirbhaya”, deserved artistic reflection. She wrote her play to begin thinking through how and why this kind of violence could happen.

With Mahesh’s encouragement, I traveled to Mumbai, the city that many Indians refer to as the most modern and cosmopolitan. While there, I got the chance to speak more extensively with Mahesh and with the actors in his company about the issue of violence against women and whether they saw it as a topic that needed to be processed through theater. An actress in the company thought I might be interested in a group of young women she was a part of who chose a place to meet once a week and loiter in public space. This may sound completely unconnected to the topic of violence against women, but a closer look at the “Nirbhaya” incident shows the importance of women occupying public space. The victim in this case dared to be out at night with her boyfriend seeing a movie. Many called into question the foolishness of such an action when Delhi is known as a place that is unsafe for single women after dark (her boyfriend, in this discourse, was ignored). The women I met in Mumbai engaged in performing their own right to loiter in public space in order to fight the idea that women who take unnecessary risks deserve
what they get, to fight the idea that women’s place is in the home and not the street, and finally, to normalize the sight of women hanging out with one another in public spaces. The project is now entering its sixth month, and I am so thrilled to have been a part of it and to have the opportunity to write about it. The woman who had started the exercise was also an actress in a play that she had devised with director Rasika Agashe and others that was meant to directly respond to the “Nirbhaya” incident, The Museum of Species in Danger.

I also saw some inspiring proscenium theater while in Mumbai. In the short week I was in Mumbai, I saw both an English and a Hindi version of The Vagina Monologues directed by Mahabanoo Mody-Kotwal, in which she had inserted a brief monologue about the “Nirbhaya” incident; Baawre Mann ke Sapne, a play devised by Kolkata Creative Arts and directed by Ramanjit Kaur, which analyzed the daily life of upper-class housewives of the Marwari community in Kolkata and focused on the small, daily events that create a culture of oppression for women; and a host of other plays by various Mumbai-based artists. Ramanjit and I spoke extensively on the importance of plays like hers in addressing not just the larger incidents of violence against women (e.g. rape) but also the ways in which daily life makes incidents like that possible by creating a culture of misogyny. Because she was actually based in Kolkata, I got to continue attending the rehearsals of her company when I returned from Mumbai and even teach a session on feminist theater to her actresses.

The final exciting contact I made in Mumbai was Ravinder Randawa, whose organization, Swaang, uses music, theater, dance, and social media to address issues of pressing concern to its members. Since December 2012, Swaang has been almost entirely focused on talking about rape and rape culture. Ravinder offered me the amazing opportunity to direct a play for Swaang when I return. In Delhi, the city in which the “Nirbhaya” incident had taken place, I got to speak with Kavita Krishnan, one of the leaders of the protest that erupted directly afterwards. She was a wealth of information on performances that had taken place around the protests and connected me with a theater group, a stand up comic, and a performance artist. Each performer and each performance had a different idea of why they were doing what they were doing, whether it was a politically or an aesthetically motivated project (or both), and how they thought it might contribute to social or political change in India.

With the support of the SKJ, I was able to visit three radically different urban centers in India: Delhi, the political capital and the place where the “Nirbhaya” incident happened, Mumbai, often referred to as the cultural capital, and Kolkata, which is known as a place of fierce Marxism and passionate intellectuals. I made some wonderful contacts with artists with whom I will be able to continue working when I return to India for my longer-term dissertation research. I had the opportunity to see plays that both directly and indirectly engage issues of rape and rape culture in modern India and to speak extensively with the artists who created the pieces about what they were doing and why. I also attended rehearsals for two of these plays, observing the process of putting together these pieces as well as the final product. I feel well positioned to write my dissertation proposal with a clear idea of the kinds of performances and artists with whom I will be engaging. The SKJ allowed me to prepare myself perfectly for further research on what I consider to be an urgent question: how can Indian performance artists use their craft to address the problem of rape and rape culture in their society?