

The Untimely Image:
On Feminist Inactivism and Postcolonial Ethics

By Lakshmi Padmanabhan

B.A., Stella Maris College, India, 2009

M.A., Georgetown University, 2011

M.A., Brown University, 2013

M.A., Brown University, 2018

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This dissertation by Lakshmi Padmanabhan is accepted in its present form
by the Department of Modern Culture and Media as satisfying the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date _____
Leela Gandhi, Advisor

Date _____
Ellen Rooney, Advisor

Recommended to the Graduate Council

Date _____
Ariella Azoulay, Reader

Date _____
Rebecca Schneider, Reader

Approved by the Graduate Council

Date _____
Andrew G. Campbell, Dean of the Graduate School

LAKSHMI PADMANABHAN
Curriculum Vitae

PhD Candidate, Brown University
Department of Modern Culture and
Media

lakshmipadmanabhan.com
Lakshmi_Padmanabhan@brown.edu
Ph: (202)4228396

EDUCATION

- 2018 Ph.D. Modern Culture and Media, Brown University (ABD from May 2015)
Dissertation: “The Untimely Image: Feminist Inactivism and Postcolonial Ethics”
Chairs: Dr. Leela Gandhi & Dr. Ellen Rooney
- This project argues for the aesthetic and political value of stillness through close readings of feminist experimental visual art in South Asia since the 1980s. The project engages with debates in film and media studies, postcolonial studies, and political theory.
- 2018 Certificate in Gender and Sexuality Studies, Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women
- 2018 M.A. History, Brown University
- 2014 M.A. Modern Culture and Media, Brown University
- 2011 M.A. Communication, Culture and Technology, Georgetown University
Thesis: “An Affective Nation: Tracing the Temporal Assemblage of Indian Media”
- 2009 B.A. Sociology, Stella Maris College, University of Madras

PUBLICATIONS

EDITED VOLUME

- 2019 “Performing Refusal/Refusing to Perform” Co-editor of special issue
Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory (Forthcoming, Spring 2019)

REFEREED JOURNALS

- 2018 “A Gasp of Air: Ecosensual intimacies in Tejal Shah’s *Between The Waves*”
New Review of Film and Television Studies, special issue, “Breath: Image and Sound”
(Spring 2018)

- 2017 “Acts of Rest: The Politics of Inactivism in Sonia Khurana’s *Logic of Birds*”
WSQ, Special Issue: Protest (under review)

BOOK CHAPTER

- 2013 “Watching Time: *Slumdog Millionaire* and National Ontology” *The Slumdog Phenomenon: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Ajay Gehlawat, (London: Anthem Press, 2013)

BOOK REVIEW

- 2016 Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference*, *Women and Performance, A Journal of Feminist Theory*, Vol. 26 (1) Summer 2016.

CATALOG ESSAYS

- 2017 “Public Access/Open Networks” *Public Access/Open Networks* catalogue, BRIC Contemporary
- 2017 “Dispatches from a war” in *The Community as Studio* Catalogue, South Asian Women’s Creative Collective (SAWCC) Symposium catalogue, Spring 2017
- 2016 “The Affective Body” and “The Lived City” in *BRIC Biennial Vol. 2* catalogue, BRIC Contemporary.

ACADEMIC FELLOWSHIPS & HONORS:

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| 2018 – 2021 | Junior Fellow, Dartmouth Society of Fellows, Dartmouth College |
| 2017 – 2018 | Cogut Humanities Institute Graduate Fellowship, Brown University |
| 2017 – 2018 | Brown in the World Research Grant, Brown University |
| 2017 – 2018 | Cogut Humanities Institute School of Criticism and Theory Fellowship, Brown University |
| 2013 – 2017
University | Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Open Graduate Fellowship, Brown University |
| 2015 – 2016
University | Pembroke Steinhaus/Zisson Graduate Research Fellowship, Brown University |
| 2015 – 2016 | Brown-India Initiative Graduate Fellowship, Brown University |
| 2012 – 2015 | Chancellor Tisch Graduate Fellowship, Brown University |

CONFERENCE AND SEMINAR PRESENTATIONS

PRESENTATIONS AT PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION MEETINGS

- 2018 “On Postcolonial Untimeliness”
Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference, Toronto, Canada
- 2017 “Still Moving: On Sheba Chacchi’s *Seven Lives and a Dream*”
World Picture, Toronto, Canada
- 2017 “Intimacy at the end of the (Third) World: Ecosexual ethics in Tejal Shah’s *Between The Waves*”
American Society for Theatre Research Annual Conference, Atlanta, GA
- 2017 “Afterlives of the Afterburn: Reading Third World Feminism in Contemporary Body Art” National Women’s Studies Association Conference, Baltimore, MD
- 2016 “The Absent Witness: Feminist Testimony and Decolonial Ethics”
National Women’s Studies Association Conference, Montreal, Canada
- 2016 “Dopdi’s ethics”
American Society for Theatre Research Annual Conference, Minneapolis, MN
- 2016 “The Witness and the Archive: An Ethics of Spectatorship in Amar Kanwar’s *Lighting Testimonies*”
Annual Conference on South Asia, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI
- 2016 “The labor of ethnic critique in Divya Mehra’s “contemporary south asian art” ”
Association for Theatre in Higher Education Annual Conference, Chicago, IL
- 2015 “Representing Rape, or, Parrhesia and Politics”
American Society for Theatre Research Conference, Portland, OR
- 2015 “Archiving violence on the body: public protest in neoliberal India”
National Women’s Studies Association Conference, Milwaukee, WI
- 2015 “Effective recognition: Queer rights, ‘lesbian’ subjects, and Indian law”
Annual Conference on South Asia, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI
- 2015 “Performing Precarity: Sexual Violence and Sovereign Power in Neoliberal India”
National Women’s Studies Association Conference, San Juan, Puerto Rico
- 2014 “The Tamil Question: Toward a Cinema of the Global South in Mani Ratnam’s *Kannathil Muthamittal*”
Society for Cinema & Media Studies Conference, Seattle, WA
- 2013 “Making the common extraordinary!: Towards an aesthetics of the multitude”

Association for Theatre in Higher Education Conference, Orlando, FL

WORKSHOPS AND INVITED TALKS

- 2018 “Otherness Machines: Postcolonial Feminist Experiments With The Moving Image”
Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA
- 2017 “Draupadi’s Ethics, or, truth in two acts”
Modern South Asia workshop, Yale University, New Haven, CT
- 2016 “Untraced: Remembering rape through performances of protest in Kashmir”
University of Pennsylvania Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies Conference,
Philadelphia, PA
- 2016 “Bearing witness as decolonial practice, or, how to remember rape”
Harvard University Drama Colloquium, Cambridge, MA
- 2015 “Notes on Parrhesia”
Marxism, Performance and the Body, Northwestern Performance Studies Summer
Institute, Evanston, IL
- 2015 “Precarious Critique: Sexual Violence and the Law in India”
Decolonizing the racialized female subject: black and indigenous self-making under
empire, Brown University, Providence, RI
- 2014 “Rape: A National Problem”
In Bodies We Trust: Northwestern Performance Studies Graduate Conference,
Evanston, IL

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

COURSES TAUGHT

BROWN UNIVERSITY

Fall 2015 Governing Sex: Citizenship, Violence, Media

TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIPS

BROWN UNIVERSITY

Spring 2015 Digital Media

Fall 2014 Introduction to Modern Culture and Media

Spring 2014 Sex and Sexuality in American Film

Fall 2013 Introduction to Modern Culture and Media

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Spring 2011 Technology, Culture, and Development (graduate seminar)

Spring 2011 Cultural Economics and Policy (graduate seminar)

Spring 2011 Hacking Critical Theory (graduate seminar)

Fall 2010 Introduction to Communication, Culture, and Technology (graduate seminar)

CURATORIAL EXPERIENCE:

Spring 2018
Providence, RI Curator, Center for Contemporary South Asia, Brown University,
Perverse Pleasures – an evening of queer shorts with with by Somnath Bhatt, Tejal Shah, Aisha Mirza, Seema Mattu,

2017 – Ongoing Curator, Magic Lantern, Providence RI
Screenings on Emergency: *Prisoners of Conscience* (dir. Anand Patwardhan, 1978) & *The New Wave* (Chandrasekhar Nair, 1976)

Fall 2016 Co-organizer, *Captive Genders*, Brown University, Providence, RI
Co-curated a two-day conference including a film screening of *Criminal Queers* and artist talk with the directors, workshops on art and trans justice, and a panel discussion.

2016 – 2017 Curatorial Fellow, BRIC, Brooklyn, NY
Co-curated programming for BRIC Brooklyn Biennial, and “Public Access/Open Networks,” an exhibit on early video art on public access television.

Fall 2015 *Governing Sex*, Brown University, Providence, RI
Curated a series of film screenings in tandem with my seminar on *Governing Sex*, on themes of state violence, sexuality, and queer cinema.

Spring 2014 Co-curator, Feminist Media Festival, Brown University, Providence, RI
Curated film screenings around themes of sexuality, borders, and archives.

ACADEMIC SERVICE:

SERVICE TO PUBLICATIONS:

2017-2018 Peer Reviewer, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*

2016 – Ongoing Editorial Board member, *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*

2010 – 2011 Peer Review Editor, *Gnovis: a journal of communication, culture and technology*

BROWN UNIVERSITY

2015-2016 Graduate Representative, Department of Modern Culture and Media

2013 – 2014 Vice-President Graduate Student Council

2013—2015 Research Assistant, Dr. Wendy Chun

2013 – 2014 Graduate Student Representative, Committee on the Events of October 29
(addressing issues of diversity and inclusion on campus.)

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

2010 – 2011 Department Representative, Graduate Students Organization

2010 – 2011 Research Assistant, Dr. J.P. Singh

MEMBERSHIP OR ACTIVITIES IN PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

2018 – Ongoing Association for the Study of the Arts in the Present

2018 – Ongoing Member, College Art Association

2016 – 2017 Co-convener, Performance in/from the Global South, American Society for
Theatre Research Annual Conference

2016 – Ongoing Member, American Comparative Literature Association

2016 – Ongoing Member, American Studies Association

2013 – Ongoing Member, National Women's Studies Association

2013 – Ongoing Member, Society for Cinema and Media Studies

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The Untimely Image: Feminist Inactivism and Postcolonial Ethics

Introduction

I. Moving images and a history of inactivism:

“So people are shown not what they were, but what they must remember having been” (Michel Foucault 1975, 25)

“To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears” (Walter Benjamin 2007, 255)

“It is incumbent upon us to understand the historical affinity between Protestantism and capitalist entrepreneurship as such, an affinity whose rationale may be ultimately paraphrased as, “I protest, therefore I am”: the more one protests, the more work, business and profit one will generate, and the more this will become a sign that one is loved by God” (Chow 2002, 49)



Fig 1: Protester walking through water cannons near India Gate during Nirbhaya protests, New Delhi 2012. Photo credit: Associated Press, Kevin Freyer

What does photographic form have to teach us about the ethics and aesthetics of feminist protest? This research was spurred by the emergence of a national conversation in India following the brutal sexual assault of a young woman on a bus in New Delhi, India, in December 2012. In the months that followed, news stories from around the world carried a growing photographic archive of protests by women occupying the streets across the country demanding for harsher sentences for sexual assault, better public infrastructure for the growing population of women entering the workforce, and broader awareness of the issues facing women across caste, class, and regional divides. A dominant strand of rhetoric in this conversation was the emphasis on how new such forms of feminist action were in India (Udas 2013, Timmons and Gottipati 2012, Faleiro 2013) and articles mused about the urgency of the moment. Would India finally reckon with its ‘rape problem?’ While the events following this public outcry led to varied forms of legal and social change, this writing is not an attempt to chronicle all the effects of these photographed scenes of public outrage.

In the years since these events, I have been examining the temporal logic inscribed in these protests. A rhetoric of exceptionalism has dogged the Nirbhaya protests, emphasizing the unprecedented nature of these protests within the history of feminist activism in India. One corollary of this observation is the implicit suggestion that India’s embrace of neoliberal capitalism had allowed women greater freedom of speech and mobility than ever before. If the moral arc of history bends toward justice, it is aided, in this logic, by the advent of capitalist globalization. My inquiry begins from the desire to historicize these images of protests, and the feminist subject that is claimed to be represented in these images. This photograph (fig 1) of a

lone woman, walking through the water cannons of police forces, with the India Gate behind her circulated widely, capturing the urgency of this historical moment and takes us back to the violent encounter between feminist activists and the police as agents of the state.

For now, I will refer to these snapshots as ‘moving images.’ The term refers to the multiple registers of ‘movement’ that are captured in the photograph: the physical movement of the protagonists, implying their active participation in the public sphere; the association to the broader women’s movement that was being documented in these images; and the emotional pull of these images, denoted by the observation that these images move us, as viewers, to engage with them. Through each chapter of my writing, I address how an archive of moving images, while valuable as historical record, limit the representation of feminist politics to scenes of urgent protests. These images might allow us to recognize what happened in the past, but they do not always show us ‘what must be remembered,’ as Michel Foucault observed, in his discussion of the potential for revolutionary cinema.

The goal of this writing is to trace the undercurrent of anti-colonial practices of civil disobedience that, I argue, are the unexpected memories of the past that are often occluded in the political diagnoses of the present as an unprecedented moment of political mobilization. I argue through this writing, for forms of protest that operate on a different register than we expect of activist images. My goal is to collect an archive of still images in contrast to the moving images I have discussed so far. The reasons for this shift to stillness are twofold:

First, I explore an archive of inactivism in order to challenge the temporal exceptionalism that I

have just outlined. The political goal here is to challenge the link between capitalism and freedom that this logic takes for granted. The last epigraph that opens this section is from postcolonial theorist, Rey Chow (2002) who addresses the vexed political labor of protests today. In Chow's astute analysis, the co-optation of protests into forms of assimilation within existing structures of violence occur through the limits placed on what forms of protest are legible and which subjects are expected to protest to receive their rights. Chow points us to the forms of epistemic capture that operate in relation to racialized and gendered minorities whose claims to justice and restitution occur in and through the role of the 'protesting ethnic subject.' (2002) This criticism has also emerged in postcolonial feminist writings about the demands for legible self-representation, made of the woman of color, by institutions that aim to provide aid or recognition. This is the vexed task of being an "otherness machine" in Sara Suleri's terms (1991, 105). It is to address these concerns that I turn to 'still images,' or images of inaction, which refuse the demand for stereotypical representations of protest throughout the project.

Second, and following closely from the first claim, is to develop a method of postcolonial reading that connects the aesthetics and ethics of contemporary protest to a longer genealogy of anti-colonial civil disobedience. Postcolonial studies' commitment to problematizing history is central to the approach I follow here. Founding texts in postcolonial studies¹ have continuously problematized history by asking who is the subject of historiography, which archives are we to examine, and who gets left out of such narrations? These questions invite a method of historical

¹ I am referring here to the canon of postcolonial studies including Edward Said (1979), Homi Bhabha (1990) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), as well interventions from within the discipline of history by the subaltern studies collective including Partha Chatterjee (1993), Ranajit Guha (1998), Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) to name a few.

reading that pays attention to the minor relations or moments that may not be fully realized within the archive, and therefore must be made visible through readings of their absence. This method is one that Leela Gandhi (2014) has referred to as ‘ahimsaic historiography,’ or an attention to everyday scenes of strife, and local encounters of difference that appear in the margins of official histories.

II. The untimely archive

“The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption” (Benjamin 2007, 254)

“The technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future.” (Derrida 1996, 11)

The stakes of historical reading in the minor key are not only a question of archival recovery, or historical accuracy. The archive is not only a relationship to events in the past, but the potential for understanding the future as well. This insight develops Walter Benjamin’s claim that the archive contains a temporal index of redemption. Given that I have been arguing that we must understand contemporary activism within an anti-colonial genealogy, the goal is to make visible encounters with anti-colonial pasts that allow us to imagine post-colonial futures.

Through this writing, I argue that close readings of images of feminist inactivism as historical record and aesthetic intervention allows us new insights into the potential for visualizing alterity, in the double sense of imagining other relations to community and the potential for alternative postcolonial feminist politics. Visualizing alternative feminist futures are as much a concern of photographic form, I argue, as they are of political imagination.

Theorists of film and photography have long highlighted the trust that we place in images to

work as a window into a world (Barthes 1982, Bazin 2004, Tagg 1993) This trust, what Roland Barthes would refer to as the ‘reality effect,’ (1977) originates in the mechanism of photographic capture: the photograph is viewed as an ontological trace of the object before the camera, the light passing from object to the lens is captured on film stock. While technology has changed, this conceptual link between photographs and historical fact continue in various ways. We view photographs as documents of past events. This is one definition of ‘indexicality:’ the physical trace that links a representation or sign to the object it represents (Krauss 1977, Doane 2007) What do these photographs of feminist activism index? The answer to this question is more complicated than it would first appear, and I will repeatedly return to debates on indexicality within film and photography through my chapters to illuminate the multiple registers of events that images of feminist action index through this writing.

One reason for photography’s intimate relationship to history, as I’ve already mentioned, is the perceived link between the image and the profilmic event: photographs have been and continue to be perceived as historical documents. Another reason is that the camera as an apparatus has been central to producing and managing linear temporality. Film theorists (Rosen 2002, Doane 2003, Lim 2009) have argued for the way in which film has been implicated within a thoroughly modern form of historical progress. The film strip, as Mary Ann Doane argues, spatializes time, producing a linear progression of instants that collectively create the appearance of movement. Narrative cinema has evolved with a commitment to linear temporality, where the duration of the film, each shot, the duration of the take and the rhythms of the cut, determine the viewer’s experience. Yet recent scholarship in film and media studies (Deleuze 1989, Rodowick 1997, Lim 2009, McGowan 2011, Thain 2017) has also addressed the ways in which certain cinematic

interventions (such as the genres of horror and fantasy, or formal techniques in experimental film) have put into crisis the linear temporality of modernity. I move between photography and film here, as in the rest of the dissertation, to address the multiple temporal critiques that are made possible within the frame of the photograph (see especially chapter 1) and the duration of film (see especially chapter 4). What ties all these investigations together is the form of ‘postcolonial untimeliness’ that I follow through each chapter, where images allow us to visualize temporal cohabitations between past and present.

‘Postcolonial untimeliness’ names what I have been developing here as the critique of linear temporality. The ‘untimely interval²’ articulates a moment that is besides linear temporality, and one that operates within its own temporal registers, thereby allowing us to imagine futures that may have been foreclosed in the linear progression from the past to the present. By untimely images, I am referring to images that prolong or extend their own time, thereby rupturing the appearance of historical and temporal progress, allowing moments of contemplation in which past and present, self and other, cannot be held apart so easily.

III. Indexing stillness

“Motion is the most apparent characteristic of life: it manifests itself in all the functions; it is even the essence of several of them.” (Etienne-Jules Marey 1879, 27)

“The instant — embodied in the film frame — must disappear in order for movement to emerge” (Doane 2006, 23)

So far, I have emphasized the stakes of postcolonial untimeliness as a method of reading. What I

² The ‘untimely’ draws on Friedrich Nietzsche’s theorization of critique as always untimely, that is, emerging as a break from its own time, and also occurring outside of the flow of linear time. See especially Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Use and Abuse of History for Life” in *Untimely Meditations* (1999)

have been arguing for is a form of historiography that disrupts narratives of historical exceptionalism and linear temporality, by focusing on scenes of inaction. Reading images for stillness rather than movement is a counter-intuitive practice since photography and film has evolved from the desire to capture movement. The epigraph from French scientist and inventor Etienne-Jules Marey's (1830- 1904), explicitly links motion-capture to the representation of life. Early film theorists continued in Marey's spirit, seeing in film the evolution of photographic technology toward the capture of motion and hence, toward the representation of reality (Bazin 2004, Metz 1986).

The desire for movement, and its fundamental link with life and freedom recurs in political theory, where movement (as physical motion and historical development) was a marker of civilization and its absence was reason enough for colonial intervention³. These two fields, developing largely independently of each other, converge today in the writings of theorists who valorize the democratic political potential inherent to the free movement of images; for example, through the development of new cinematic technologies that document political events as they unfold through mobile devices, and the ease of circulation of "poor images:" low quality copies circulated through online networks.

Yet, in my writing, the desires for motion as physical act and political metaphor are too often co-opted into the temporal narratives of historical progress and capitalist exceptionalism that I have just outlined above. In each chapter, I take up one form or desire for movement, and illustrate its

³ In chapter three, I address the resonances between colonial desires for individual mobility with contemporary debates on the democratic potential of media mobility more explicitly. For the purposes of this introduction, I am only signposting these recent critiques of colonial mobility by theorists including Uday Singh Mehta (1999) and Hagar Kotef (2015a, 2015b), and for discussions of the democratic potential of moving image media, particularly the 'poor image' see Hito Steyerl (2005).

limits for understanding feminist histories (Chapter one and chapter two) or feminist futures (chapter three and four).

The goal here is to index moments of stillness, ones that are at the heart of visualizing motion. Hence, the aim of my writing is not to dismiss the possibility or value of movement, but rather to highlight the scenes of passivity, stillness, and rest as a counter-archive of feminist inactivism. The paradox at the heart of film, as Mary Ann Doane argues, is that the instant – a stillness – is at the heart of the art of motion (film). The moving image is constantly in the process of denying and overcoming its dependence on still images, and it is this desire that drives technological development and the claims to immediacy that inhere to photographic representation. In a related logic, there are scenes of rest and inaction even at the heart of protests, ones that are not always visible as such, and it is to uncover these scenes of rest that I develop a mode of postcolonial untimely reading.



Figure 2: Protests against Bhopal gas disaster, December 3 2011. Photo: Associated Press/Rafiq Maqbool

In figure 2, taken at the twenty-seventh anniversary protests against the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, a woman lies across the train tracks, surrounded by fellow survivors. Yet, the image, without the reference to its particular frame as a scene of protest, could also be read as a scene of collective leisure, or ambivalent rest. A woman in the far left has her arms raised in a clap, while another holds an indistinct sheet of paper. Men stand around them, barely visible in the frame, while the women in front face the camera directly, inviting the gaze of the spectator. The aim of this argument is to illustrate how performances of leisure can also be forms of refusal: refusing both the appropriate bodily comportment of political action and the call for legibility as a protesting subject. Such a mode of reading takes advantage of the semantic indeterminacy that is contained within the definition of the photograph as an index⁴.

The indexical quality of a photograph, its claim to representing reality, takes advantage of the semantic indeterminacy made possible by an index: a sign that bears a physical trace of the profilmic event, and also has a deictic function: the ability to ‘point us’ to something within a specific context, the same way that linguistic shifters such as “I” and “you” indicate the subjects of speech through the speech act (Doane 2007). Through this writing, I argue for a mode of

⁴ The concept of an indexical sign emerges from the writings on semiotics by the pragmatist philosopher, C.S. Peirce (1991), whose early work on the classification of signs was eventually adapted to the reading of images by media scholars. I will not enter into Peirce’s theorization here, other than to note that in his work, the “index” referred to a type of sign that was connected to the object it represented through a physical or causal trace, for example, a footprint. It is helpful to understand the index here in contrast to the two other types of signs: icons, which resemble their objects (such as a painted portrait) and symbols, which are linked to their objects not by any natural link, but rather by social or logical agreement (for example, words or the letters of the alphabet.)

reading images that emphasizes their deictic function over and against their claim to physical verisimilitude. Indeed every photographic image contains both functions. The difference here is that reading the image as a physical trace focuses on what was there before the camera, while, as I illustrate in each chapter, reading the image for its deictic function, makes visible resonances with revolutionary pasts and futures that may not have existed in the profilmic event.

IV. Arts of dissent

The key interventions in documentary film and photography from anti-colonial South Asia have focused on illustrating the complicity of photo technology with colonialism⁵ while feminist historians have focused on documenting fights for legislative change as the history of women's activism in South Asia (See for example, Kumar 1999, John and Nair 2000, Menon 2004).

The archives of experimental photography and video, which document minor and everyday forms of collective refusal (such as moments of public rest in the margins of protests, or images of collective sleep as a mode of occupying public space) have remained outside their frame of analysis.

Each chapter of the dissertation addresses a scene of protest that occurs through forms of inaction, such as collective sleep, holding still, or sitting down. The artists whose work appear in these chapters are often enmeshed in the struggles for women's rights that they document and represent as texts that circulate within art institutions. Such interplay between political action and political art practice is not uncommon in post-Independence India.

⁵ Zahid Chaudhary's (2012) study of colonial photography as a tool of empire is particularly illustrative here, though his argument builds on a longer vein of photography theory that views the camera as a technology of capture. See especially Allan Sekula (1986) and John Tagg (1993).

While independent cinema, particularly political documentary had its moment in the 1970s and serve as a touch-stone for the aesthetic debates here, in the 1980s, political street theatre rose in prominence as a way to mobilize public sentiment against the excesses of government control. It is important to note here that the emergence of radical art, paralleled and emerged in conversation with related radical movements in theatre, literature and independent cinema. A thorough history of radical aesthetic movements since Independence is beyond the scope of this project, but some crucial intersections of these genealogies include the emergence of the Indian People's Theatre Association, in West Bengal in 1943, associated with the Communist Party and engaging in political street theatre and performances that challenged the failures of the British and state government of Bengal.

IPTA also spurred off-shoots across the country, most notably the Jana Natya Manch, (People's Theatre Forum or Janam) in Delhi that began in 1973 and is still active today. Janam's early years involved several successful plays on political themes performed around the city of Delhi including *Machine* a satirical take on the dehumanization of labor, and *Aurat*, on gender violence, primarily in working class neighborhoods and factories.

On January 1st, 1989, while performing Halla Bol! (Raise your voice!), a play addressing local elections in the outskirts of Delhi, the group was attacked by supporters of the ruling Congress government, who was the target of the play. Safdar Hashmi, one of the founders of Janam and an influential communist artist was killed in that encounter, and his death sparked a national call to action of artists, performers, and writers to address the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism and increase in communal violence around the country. The Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust

(SAHMAT Collective) would be at the center of these activities, counting amongst its most active members prominent Leftist artists and intellectuals. including the artists addressed in the following section: Sheba Chacchi, Sonia Khurana, and Rummana Hussain. Hashmi's death marked the beginning of the 1990s as a decade marked by widespread violence and communal conflict in urban centers around the country as the rise of Hindu nationalism and the end of an era of state secularism. The following section addresses these themes in more detail. It is also to be noted here that the parallel cinema of documentary film makers such as Amar Kanwar and Anand Patwardhan and even earlier, Ritwik Ghatak (a member of the IPTA) would eventually intersect with the aesthetic and political aims of the street theatre of Janam and the visual artists associated with Sahmat. These intersections emerge politically and intellectually, for example, Anand Patwardhan's earliest films address labor struggles and poverty in Bombay (*Bombay: Our City/Hamara Shahar*) and the communal riots of the 1990s (*In The Name of God/Ram ke Naam*), events that were also addressed by various Sahmat members and as a collective.

By the late 1990s, the emerging cohort of politically motivated artists turn to installation, photography and video, and performance to produce a discourse of contemporary visual art that is committed to radical avant-garde critique in both form and political aims. For example, Amar Kanwar turns from documentary film's conventional film format to multi-channel installations that push the boundaries of the indexical function of the image – by incorporating text, sound, and the production of the whole scene of viewing rather than a single channel video installation, Kanwar's documentaries now become meditations on the limits and potentials of documentary as a form that is tied to depicting “real” events and making truth claims even as it continuously fails to do so.

It is perhaps counter-intuitive for the reader to see in this sketch of political art the desire for inaction that I have stressed in the opening sections of this writing. Indeed, these artists were hardly disengaged or passive in their challenge to the state. They were passionately opposed to the violent excesses of the government, and vocal against the rise of the Hindu religious fundamentalism that was gaining legitimacy across the country, particularly in the aftermath of the destruction enacted by religious groups at the Babri Masjid in 1991. What I aim to develop over the course of this research is an attention to form; an analysis of the image as a site of critique. In doing so, I note the formal qualities of some of these images were in productive tension with the express desire for political action. It is this undercurrent of contradictory impulses— finding stillness at the heart of movement, or finding the past in the images of future politics — that I take up as a reading method.

To this end, the dissertation is divided into two parts.

Part I, “Then,” pays close attention to the representations of watershed moments when women became the subject of sovereign violence, and how we remember and protest the aftermath of such trauma. In chapter one, “A non-violent ethics of photography” I undertake a reading of Amar Kanwar’s work (2007), “The Lightning Testimonies,” alongside a photograph of a protest from 2004 against the sexual violence of occupation by the Indian army. “The Lightning Testimonies” is an eight channel video installation that documents the histories of sexual violence in the borders of the Indian nation-state, particularly the violence of Partition, the Bangladesh war (1971) and the ongoing military occupation of Kashmir and the north eastern states in India. In this chapter, I explore how Kanwar’s installation takes up the problems of

documentary cinema and formally challenges the desire to represent historical facts, alongside the photograph of the protests against rape. Here, I take up Ariella Azoulay's (2008) intellectual history of the concept of 'rape' as a problem for photography, arguing that rape photography must register the withdrawal of consent that defines rape at the level of the image as well, that is, a rape photograph must be a photograph that protests violation.

In Chapter two, the "Inactivist Image," I address the documentary photographs of Sheba Chhacchi, an artist and activist whose early photographs of the women's rights movement were central to developing a feminist documentary aesthetic. Yet, as I track in the chapter, Chhachhi develops a mode of portraiture that challenges the desire to represent the history of feminist activism. She articulates, through her documents of stillness and rest, moments of temporal disjuncture where feminist activists in the 1980s inherit a tactic of anti-colonial civil disobedience that appears only at the surface of the image, setting up formal resonances with a history that was not necessarily theirs to begin with.

In Part II, "Now," the two chapters address recent works by artists who challenge the desire for mobility, expressed at the heart of a globalizing discourse of free markets and free media. In Chapter 3, "Visualizing Obstructions" I read the work of Sonia Khurana, a multi-media artist, whose evolving exhibition, "Logic of Birds," captures scenes of rest and leisure in the middle of a life of speed and circulation. I argue that Khurana's scenes of collective rest imagine the potential for relation that do not depend on rhetorics of mobility, and media convergence, functioning as generative obstructions to scenes of leisure as mobility.

In Chapter 4, “A queer conspiracy,” I address the most contemporary work of the dissertation, Tejal Shah’s “Between The Waves.” The five-channel video installation imagines a future shaped by environmental disaster. In the aftermath, figures wander the ruin, performing scenes of care for each other and their surroundings. In Shah’s slow camera work and fantastical scenes of care, I find an attention to queer ethics of pleasure through shared respiration that provides us with a critique of futurity either as ruin or as utopia.

Taken together, the chapters develop an argument for temporal cohabitation between anti-colonial pasts (“then”) and postcolonial futures (“now”) that find in the moments of stillness the potential for collective inaction as a different politics and ethics of postcolonial feminism. I return to the figure of the sleeping figure/woman at rest at various points in the chapters that follow, along with figures of women seated or holding very still. In each of these moments of stillness, I hope to draw out the limits of movement, and the value of stillness as a mode of relation to selves and others.

CHAPTER ONE

A non-violent ethics of photography, or, how do you remember rape?

Prelude: The violence of reading

“To learn to read is to learn to dis-figure the undecidable figure into a responsible literacy, again and again.” (Spivak, 2003, 72)

This chapter began as an investigation into the long history of missing and violated women from the 1947 Partition whose deaths haunt the writing of feminist histories of South Asia since. The fundamental conceptual problem that these absences ask of the historian appear to be the task of reading the silence around violation. Yet, as I did so, the ethical call of the task of remembering became a much messier desire to not reproduce the violence of absence by presuming that silence must have been the aftermath of violence. The violated woman has repeatedly been produced as an undecidable figure, one who is unable to speak in her own name. That absence of speech has been read as the absence of subjectivity or the ability to consent. This chapter examines scenes of silence as instances of withdrawn consent, and hence, of protest. In order to do so, I begin with addressing the ‘undecidable figure’ at the heart of this investigation: the abducted woman, a figure of violation located at the heart of the origin story of the Indian nation-state.

There have been many ‘undecidable’ figures in the archives of postcolonial thought: the subaltern, the peasant, actors that remain illegible to the elite discourses of textuality. Yet, for my purposes, I would like to approach this problem of the ‘undecidable figure’ who must nevertheless responsibly entered into literacy through a scene of sexual assault and textual

reading.

The short story is “Khol Do”⁶ by the Urdu writer, Saadat Hasan Manto (1948/1999). Manto was a prolific writer of the short story, and a refugee of the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan. After moving to Lahore, Manto’s stories reflected on the violence of displacement and nationalism that characterized his experience and those of over fifteen million people who were displaced and over a million reported dead in the immediate aftermath. The story follows Sirajuddin, an aging father whose wife is killed by a rampaging mob, after he is separated from his daughter while they escape Amritsar to Mughalpura by train. The details of Manto’s story are sparse, though the details that are left out (why was a train journey of only thirty five miles eight hours long? What violence must they have faced along the way?) only invoke the violence of the moment.

Sirajuddin spends several days in Lahore searching for Sakina in the midst of the chaos while trying to piece together the events in Amritsar. His memory slowly returns as he recalls the death of his wife and his escape with Sakina but cannot remember where he lost her or how to find her again. Eventually, he comes across a group of armed young men who have formed rescue teams to bring back the women and children who had been abducted. Sirajuddin describes Sakina and asks them to look for her.

As the story unfolds, Sakina is rescued by these young men, but the ellipses in narration imply that they sexually assault her as well. She is eventually found on the side of railway tracks near

⁶ I am using the version of the story anthologized in Alok Bhalla’s anthology, *Stories About The Partition of India*. 1999. New Delhi: Harper Collins, though numerous translations are available online and anthologized in different volumes, making consistency of language hard to achieve across editions.

her father's refugee camp. When her still form is carried into the doctor's office to confirm whether she is alive or dead, the doctor orders an assistant to open a window to allow in some air by saying, "Khol Do!" (open it). Sakina responds by slowly undressing, while her father, who had been waiting for a sign of life is overjoyed because her gesture suggests that she is still alive. The chilling scene reflects on the ubiquity of sexual assault as part of the violence of Partition. Rosemary George (2011) has pointed out how this story, as well as other narratives that fall into the category of 'Partition fiction,' reproduce gendered relations that remained intact despite the violent restructuring of the nation-state during Partition. In her reading, the tripartite division of characters: the rapacious mob, the raped/assaulted woman, and the helpless masculine spectator of this violence, reproduce through the mobilization of national/masculine shame (that Sirajuddin was unable to save his daughter from the violence) the precarity of women as subjects of both colonial and postcolonial states.

Feminist historians of South Asia have highlighted the way in which sexual violence was central to the formation of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan as independent nation-states (Butalia, 2000; Bhasin and Menon, 1998; Menon, 2004; Mookherjee, 2015). Kamala Bhasin and Ritu Menon (1998) explicitly argue that the border that marked the line between the two states was realized on the bodies of women during the raids and riots that occurred just prior to and leading up to the official partition of these two countries. George's (2011) reading of this story highlights the education of masculinity through that occurs in this narrative: the shame of the presumably male reader who identifies either with the father's helplessness or with the doctor, a figure of order and the newly-formed nation-state who breaks into a sweat when faced with proof of Sakina's sexual assault. Veena Das (2006) reads in this final scene the quality of forgiveness and paternal

care that Sirajuddin exhibits through his lack of moral judgment of Sakina as a rape victim.

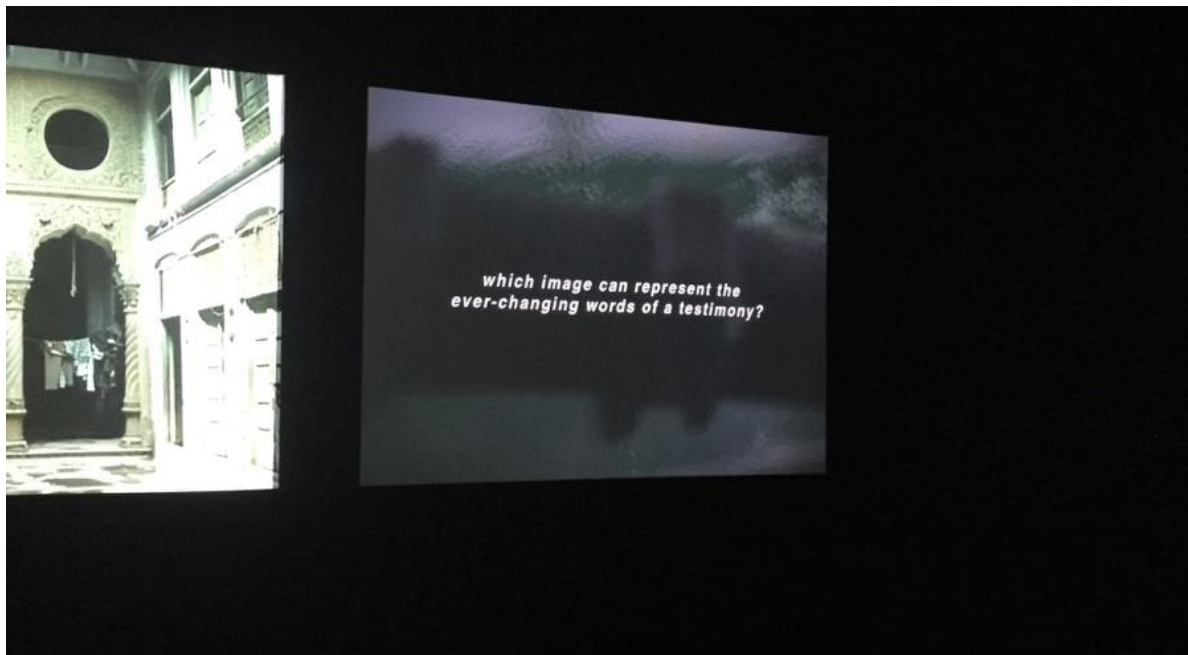
However, for the purposes of my dissertation, this moment in Sakina's narrative links the bodily gesture, the movement of her hands, to Sirajuddin's proclamation of life.

Sirajuddin's reading of this gesture as an indicator of life centers a form of witnessing (his own witnessing of her gesture, and our reading about his spectatorship) of the aftermath of atrocity (Sakina's assault and its metonymic association with the assault of the land/nation/region at the hands of the religious mobs) as the only way to recognize her life. The link between her gesture, and iterations of movement (the refugees boarding the train, the armed young men bringing Sakina across the border) locate in mobility the ability to be free, to escape the horror. Sakina's main problem is that she is still, she is passive, or, to reframe the claim, Sakina is the one that hardly moves in this story. Sakina is an 'undecidable figure,' uncertainly poised between life and death, whose movement gives Sirajuddin a definitive answer about her condition. In Sirajuddin's reading, it is her movement (as well as his own exclamation) that grants her life.

The matter of reading in this case is the difference between life and death. Can we extend Sirajuddin's reading to answer a broader question? How does the historian's practice of reading attend to the archives of violence against women? Is our only option to find in the archives such minor movements of compliance as signs of life? What would a reading practice look like that re-evaluates the links between motion and life, stillness and death? Landmark feminist histories from South Asia have begun from the scenes of violence that have founded the nation-states in the subcontinent (Butalia, 2000; Bhasin and Menon, 1998; Mookherjee, 2015). Women appeared to be making history by being sexually assaulted and/or dying. This is neither untrue,

unfortunately, nor unimportant historically. But the broader question of the method of reading only gains urgency in the face of this history. In my research, one continuing concern was the desire to not reproduce the erasure of women at the very site of their claim to being historical actors, that is, in finding in their assault the birth of a movement for justice. It is in beginning from this bloody scene of birth at the cost of feminist life that I have been trying to think modes of attunement that might not move the argument too easily from the necropower of sovereign state violence to the biopolitics of the nation-state. In fact, the ‘state’ as a concept became secondary to the mode of reading that I ultimately follow in this writing.

I. Image and testimony



(figure 1: Installation view, *The Lightning Testimonies*, Amar Kanwar (2007) Assam State Museum, Guwahati. May 2015. Image credit: author)

“Which image can represent the ever-changing words of testimony?” reads the slide on the screen. The slide is part of a documentary video installation by Delhi-based artist Amar Kanwar,

titled *The Lightning Testimonies* (TLT). The installation is set up in a darkened room, with eight simultaneous projections on the walls of the room, two or three videos on each side. Kanwar had first created the piece to be exhibited as part of Documenta 12, in 2007. It has since travelled to galleries in New York, Sao Paolo, Lyon, London, and Beijing. My first encounter with this piece was in the quiet hall of the Assam State Museum in Guwahati. Kanwar had set up the installation with support from donors in Delhi, and the North East Network, a small women's rights non-governmental organization that works across several states in north eastern India. In Guwahati, surrounded by objects such as the 'textiles of ancient tribes of India from the second century CE, and metal implements from the Bronze Age, *The Lightning Testimonies* received a different audience than the one that presumably attended Documenta 12 in Kassel. On my visit, the exhibit was staffed by several volunteers from the North East Network, all women who were engaging visitors in conversation about the history that *TLT* addressed. The sprawling narrative across eight channels addresses the history of sexual violence during scenes of armed conflict across South Asia, beginning from the Partition of 1947 and leading up to the first decade of the twenty-first century. Some of these events, such as the mass sexual assault and violence during Partition or the sectarian violence in the state of Gujarat in 2002 have been addressed quite widely through historical accounts from survivors of the violence. Others, such as the story of a young woman from the state of Manipur, Luigamla who was killed by an Indian army officer in 1986, or the story of Manyangkokla, a young woman from Nagaland who was killed in 1957, are stories that Kanwar has collected from relatives and friends. However, these narratives are not presented to us as a cabinet of horrors, where each screen recounts a violent rape or scene of mass sexual assault.

Each screen channels one location of violence but the line between spectator, artist, and witness are hard to conceive of as discrete, since the soundtrack shifts from first person ruminations on the ethics of remembering, “How can an image represent the ever-changing words of testimony?” to documentary footage of interviews with feminist activists, and then sequences of sites of old violence, such as a long take of a pile of broken pots in a dusty field, or rain falling on a rooftop. These scenes do not immediately provide proof of the assaults that occurred there. Each channel tells a layered, complex history that refuses to make a spectacle out of women’s suffering. Instead, *TLT* works as a meditation on its own archives. In telling the story of the sexual violence during the 1971 war in Bangladesh, the camera peers over the shoulder of a woman in a saree as she lingers over images of the war in the Dacca Liberation War Museum. The camera waits with her as she hovers over photographs whose captions tell us that these are images of sexual violence, but as the camera pans over the images that this figure pauses over, all we can see are pixelated images of bodies barely differentiated from background in shades of grey.

“shall I tell you how I felt when I heard this?” is a question that Kanwar repeats through out. In doing so, he insists on his own presence as a witness, but one who can only tell you how he feels. Witnessing atrocity, in *TLT*, becomes an exercise in accepting the limitations of one’s own subjectivity. Through its loops and refrains, *TLT* sets up the impossible but necessary task of bearing witness to all the stories that it begins, without ever allowing the spectator to fully comprehend the truth of any single one. The first video exhibit that the Assam State Museum had ever installed, *TLT*, was visited by school children from the city who were on day trips to view their ancient heritage, and instead, confronted by reality of armed occupation in their state. Exhibition staff narrated their confrontations with the army officers who had visited and had

either left in tears or in a rage at the screening.

The piece is thirty one minutes long, but after about twenty minutes, seven screens go dark, while a recording of a play begins on the eighth screen, intercut with footage from a protest. The play is a theatrical adaptation of a short story by Mahasweta Devi, *Draupadi*, which was first published in Bengali in 1978 and translated into English by Gayatri Spivak in 1981. The story is set in the aftermath of the Naxalbari peasant and uprisings against the Indian state in a region that stretches across the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Bihar. In Devi's narrative, the eponymous protagonist, a young woman, rebels against the violence of wealthy landowners in the village, who let the poor laborers of Draupadi's village starve during the drought, refusing them access to water. Eventually the peasants stage an uprising and The Indian army is called in to discipline them. Draupadi escapes the encounter; thereafter traveling the country-side and supporting the peasant uprisings that are spreading through the surrounding villages. She is eventually caught and tortured by the army officers, who demand that she give them information on the other rebels, which she refuses. The story ends with Draupadi, naked and bleeding from the torture, confronting her attackers. In the recording of the play that we are watching, *Draupadi* has been adapted by the Manipuri theatre group, Kalakshetra Manipur. The director, Heisnam Kanhailal and his partner, Sabitri Devi, adapted the story to speak to the occupation of Manipur by the Indian army. In the final scene of the play, Sabitri challenges the army officer by revealing her naked form, inviting him to assault her.

The footage of the protest that plays before this video documents another scene of confrontation, this time from the protests outside Kangla gate that occurred on July 15 2004, following the

sexual assault and killing of Thangjam Manorama, a young woman living in Bamon Kampu village, near the state capital of Imphal. Manorama was arrested on July 11, 2004 and dragged from her house by members of the 17th Assam Rifles. Her bullet-ridden body was found the next morning, with marks of torture and sexual assault. No charges were brought against the army officers because of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (1958) which grants legal protection for the Indian army to use extensive force in regions of political unrest. Manipur, along with districts in the surrounding states of Assam (where I viewed the installation in 2015,) Nagaland, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh remain under the rule of AFSPA, rendering citizens in these areas without legal protections against the violence of the army officers.

I have narrated at length the final scenes of *TLT* to illustrate the complex histories of sexual assault that the installation attempts to document by blurring the boundaries between journalism, history, and fiction, in its search for an image that can represent testimony. The question that *TLT* wrestles with is the relationship between documentary form and histories of violence. It is the guiding question for the rest of this chapter, where I follow Kanwar's aesthetic intervention to ask: what images can serve as testimony to sexual assault? I develop a mode of reading, a nonviolent photographic ethics by distinguishing between testimony and proof, as two opposing readings of scenes of photographic encounter. In the following section, I outline the history of AFSPA and the histories of sexual assault that founded the Indian nation-state, rendering women's bodies the site of sovereign boundary-making. In subsequent sections, I take up the aesthetics of remembering this violence, contrasting two approaches to remembering sexual assault: the first, from the short story *Choli Ke Picche*, by Mahasweta Devi and the film

adaptation, *Gangor* (Spinelli, 2010). I read *Gangor*'s critique of the use and abuse of photographs of sexual assault with Ariella Azoulay's theorization of rape photography, to illustrate the violence of representing and circulating images of assault. In the final section, I contrast this approach to the photograph of protests against sexual assault from July 2004, footage of which was also included in the final scenes of *TLT*. In doing so, I argue for a form of photographic testimony that provides a non-violent alternative to the violence of representation that *Gangor* addressed.

I. Silence and sexual assault

Kanwar's visual archive of sexual assault in South Asia attempts to represent this history in the register of 'testimony.' I will address the potential for images to function as testimony in the final section of this writing. First, I wish to discuss the relationship between sexual violence and the Indian nation-state, and the need for images of testimony. There has been a continuing tension between the need for representing sexual assault and, simultaneously, the difficulty of materializing such representation. Thus far, feminist historians have attempted to address this problem through collecting oral histories of sexual assault (Butalia 2000; Bhasin and Menon 1998). Yet, repeatedly, the trope of 'silence' or the loss of speech is the way in which sexual assault has been described, both by survivors and critics who write these histories. For example, Veena Das recounts this silence that enveloped her interviews with women survivors of Partition

"When asking women to narrate their experiences of the Partition, I found a zone of silence around the event. This silence was achieved either by the use of language that was general and

metaphoric but that evaded description of any events with specificity so as to capture the particularity of their experience, or by surrounding events but leaving the actual experience of abduction and rape unstated. It was common to describe the violence of the Partition in such terms as rivers of blood flowing and the earth covered with white shrouds right unto the horizon. Sometimes a woman would remember images of fleeing, but as one woman warned me, it was dangerous to remember.” (Das 2006, 54)

The very act of remembering seems to pose a challenge strong enough to invite the threat of violence, enough that a language of metaphors, euphemisms, and innuendos surround the event, memorializing it as literally an unspeakable horror. In *Other Side of Silence*, Urvashi Butalia begins her project to document the oral histories of refugees from the Partition by narrating the reluctance to speak explicitly about the violence that occurred, and concludes that she learned to “listen differently” with the women, “often of listening to the hidden nuance, the half-said thing, the silences which are sometimes more eloquent than speech” (2000, 12)

These methods of ‘listening to silence’ attempt to meet the juridical demand for proof with a particular instance of individual speech. The impossibility of listening to silence as a method of representing sexual injury raises the problem of form: what forms of representation are adequate to the task of remembering sexual assault beyond the individual memory of a survivor (especially given that survivors themselves sometimes refused to speak of their assault?) Oral histories set up a discourse of confession around sexual assault, limiting the possibility of representing sexual assault to the speech act, “I was raped.” Such a discourse continues the discursive structure of demanding recognition from the state apparatus, leaving the victim in

the position of either refusing to confess or confessing and thereby entering into the subject of victim. Ariella Azoulay's investigation into the discourse of rape is helpful here in distinguishing the problem with the confessional mode. As Azoulay argues, what has constituted 'rape' has changed over the years, and sexual assault has not been constant as a conception of injury. (2008, 250-257) 'Rape' in the aftermath of Partition was framed in the law as a problem of property.

Feminist historians of South Asia have highlighted the way in which sexual violence was central to the establishment of sovereign nation-states during Partition. Kamala Bhasin and Ritu Menon (1998), describe the ways in which the border that marked the line between the two states was realized on the bodies of women during the raids and riots that occurred just prior to and leading up to the official partition of these two countries. Their work documents the stories of survivors from the region who recount tales of Muslim women being branded with the words "Hindustan, Zindabad!" ("long live Hindustan!") and vice-versa, as well as women being dragged out of their houses, stripped, and paraded in front of their villages. As Bhasin and Menon argue,

"Each one of the violent acts mentioned above has specific symbolic meaning and physical consequences, and all of them treat women's bodies as territory to be conquered... In the context of Partition, it engraved the division of India into India and Pakistan on the women of both religious communities in a way that they *became* the respective countries, indelibly imprinted by the Other" (1998, 43)

Soon after the summer of violence and Partition in August 1947, India and Pakistan met to

discuss legal measures to repatriate citizens in the aftermath of the riots. In 1949, the Indian Parliament passed the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Bill from 1947 till 1951. According to the Bill, an abducted person referred to “a male child under the age of sixteen years or a female of whatever age.” Veena Das (2006) argues in her discussion of the legal instruments set up to return women and children who were “abducted” during Partition as a process that created the “abducted woman” as a category in order to reiterate the gendered nature of sovereign power and the realm of the political as the space for men where women’s bodies were objects to be exchanged, protected, and rescued. Here, the law condones the repatriation of women as the property of the state who were to be returned to their owners. In the interviews that Bhasin, Menon (1998) and Butalia (2000) conduct with the survivors, they repeatedly discuss the necessity of preserving the honor of the community by saving the women from abduction in order to prevent dishonoring their community. In the discourse of the law as well as the communities who survived the violence women’s bodies are produced as communal property, and their violation is discussed as an injury against the community or the State, rather than as individual harm.

II. Ganadarshan, or, has anyone seen a photograph of rape?

“Choli ke picche, ganadarshan” (Spivak 1997, xv)

In *Civil Contract of Photography*, Azoulay (2008) raises the question of representing rape by investigating the absence of photographs of rape in scenes of sovereign violence, despite the histories of rape that are narrated as part of these events. Azoulay argues that this is partly because of the changing conception of what constitutes ‘rape.’ In her analysis, the 1970s mark a

break from the conception of rape as a crime against property, to a problem of individual consent. This shift occurs through the changing public discourses around sexual assault, particularly the feminist calls for understanding sexual assault as injuring women as citizens and individuals, rather than women as communal property. (2008, 250) While feminist activism in India has not always correlated with the emergence of feminism in the United States, my argument is not concerned with the history of the term ‘rape,’ so much as the questions raised by its visual representation that Azoulay discusses. Following Azoulay, and the oral histories of assault that I addressed in the previous section, the shift to the language of individual consent nevertheless institutes a ‘confessional’ mode, where assault is verifiable through the demand for proof.

In India, several high profile cases of gender violence in the 1970s-1980s led to the re-evaluation of legal measures of proof. The first of these cases was *Tukaram Vs. State of Maharashtra* (1979), popularly known as the Mathura case, where a young girl was sexually assaulted by police officers at Desai Gunj, a village located a few hours outside Bombay, Maharashtra. In 1979, her case was heard at the Supreme Court, which acquitted the policemen on grounds that Mathura was “habituated to sexual intercourse.” Days after the verdict, several lawyers published a letter condemning the judgment while protests occurred through the city of Delhi. The passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1983) was one of the outcomes of the years of activism following the Mathura verdict. The amendment passed the burden of proof in cases of sexual assault to the alleged perpetrator and created the category of “custodial rape,” or assault by government officers on duty as a distinct crime. (Khullar, 2005) The case remains central to history of the women’s movement not only through the partial victory of the 1983 amendment

but also because of the institutions that emerged from the milieu of activists who participated, merging with other cases of women's autonomy and consent that were being debated in the national stage at the time (Basu 2013). I raise these legal changes in sexual assault cases to highlight the ways in which such debates nevertheless hinged on the question of 'proof,' where rape was defined through clear limits on which acts constituted penetration, and which forms of penetration were conceived as violating. The measurement of injury in cases of sexual assault have been a question of 'truth:' what really happened at the scene? However, even in situations such as Partition, or in later instances (for example, the villages of Kunan and Poshpora in Kashmir, which were attacked by Indian army forces in 1991, and several women were sexually assaulted and bore marks of their struggle) the burden of proof manifested as a desire for making visible, a desire that ultimately would never be sufficiently fulfilled, thereby denying victims any legal recognition of their harm⁷.

Azoulay argues that the lack of images of sexual assault are generally explained through a moralistic claim, either the protection of the victim, or the fear that these images of assault would

⁷ The violence in Kunan and Poshpora are a classic example of the way in which the demand for proof has been used to render justice impossible. On the night of February 23rd, 1991, the fourth Rajputana rifles division of the Indian army entered the twin villages of Kunan and Poshpora with orders to conduct a cordon and search operation for militants. The village lies in a remote section of Indian-occupied Kashmir, on the border with Pakistan. Once the army officers arrived, they separated the men from the women and proceeded to sexually assault the women in the villages. Through the night, children watched as their mothers and siblings were raped by military officers. The next morning, the men were allowed to return to their homes where they learnt about the horrors of the night. Over the course of the next few months, officials from the Indian government and the Press Council of India engaged in investigations of the atrocity in response to the public outrage that followed. Medical examinations of the women were conducted over a month later. While some government officials reported the severity of the crime and the need for a large-scale investigation, the independent Press Council of India report that was filed months later acquitted the Indian army of any wrong-doing based on the claim that there were contradictory reports on the number of victims, and that the medical examiners did report evidence of harm – scratches, cuts, and so on – but these were not conclusive of rape.

be viewed as pornographic rather than violent. Here, Azoulay points to the way in which the visual field of rape appears to still be linked to fears about sexuality, a link that feminist discourses for recognizing rape as violence have been at great pains to break. The fear that photographs of rape would be sexualized, and the taboo around photographs of rape, Azoulay argues produces rape as a visual problem.

Here, Azoulay's logic follows a Foucauldian understanding of the work of confession (Foucault, 1990) wherein the subject is produced through their confessing. In this case, the confessing of the victim of sexual assault produces her as such, while rendering the representation of this act, obscene, thereby producing the desire for proof. Photographs which may show a whole series of events that could or could not be construed as rape are taken to be images of rape when they are banned from public consumption. Azoulay argues that images of rape are left out of the public archive not because of their exceptional status as images of sexual assault (and not even because of a moralistic fear of pornography) but rather because they would reveal the banality of sexual assault, and its ubiquity: images of rape are produced as 'obscene' by remaining, literally, 'off-screen.' Still following Azoulay's assessment, we can suggest that these absent photographs of sexual assault become a productive way to police the social milieu within which they are produced, marking certain bodies as unseeable, and thereby unable to participate in the civil community that is established through the circulation of other photographs of violence such as murder. In re-stating Azoulay's discussion of rape photographs, I want to highlight how, in Azoulay's theorization, photographs come to carry the potential for a civil encounter — if we had images that were associated with the concept of 'rape,' this would allow the victims of such assault to enter into civil engagement with other members of the governed such as citizens with

rights, who could potentially answer the call to justice that such photographs would place upon the viewer. In this approach to photographs, their circulation set up scenes of encounter that increase the likelihood of ethical response.

While I generally agree with Azoulay's argument, which could be roughly summarized in the following way: we must be able to see all images in order for us to enter into civil relation with the subjects of these images, I want to qualify this claim by paying attention to the aesthetic relations that photographs engender. That is, I want to insist that the 'civil encounter' that Azoulay hopes for in the photograph cannot be separated from their aesthetics. In the following chapters, I will pay close attention to the form of images and the potential for ethical encounter that they make possible. However, here, I want to approach this question by discussing one image of sexual assault that from the short story "Choli Ke Picche" (Devi 1997), which was translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1997) and eventually adapted into a film (Spinelli 2010). In doing so, I hope to distinguish between scenes of visual encounter that are violent, and the later example of a protest photograph from 2004 that sets up a non-violent ethical encounter.

The violent visual encounter that I am addressing here is raised by Gayatri Spivak's introduction to the collection of Mahasweta Devi's writing in which "Choli Ke Picche" appears (Spivak 1997). "Choli ke picche," takes its title from a popular Bollywood song of the same name, a hyper-sexualized 'item number' or song sequence that is shot with the explicit aim of titillating a presumably straight male audience, and a convention that has emerged in the last thirty years in Bollywood cinema. True to the genre, "Choli ke picche kya hai?" the song, begins with the slow tilt of the camera along the silhouette of a woman dancing in front of a trumpet as the music

begins, and then cuts to a medium shot of two women facing each other as they dance to the music, and then cuts to the entry of another dancer whose form comes slowly into focus as the flutes come in on the soundtrack. The choreography is built on a rhythm set by the heaving bosoms of the women dancers, while their faces are veiled. The song begins to the question, and finally answered by the lyric, "*choli ke picche dil hai mera*" (my heart is behind the bodice). The lingering gaze of the camera, and the choreography emphasizing the choli (bodice), and the choreography framed the sequence bordering on soft pornography, which led to public protests against the film before its release in 1993. Devi's story, written in 1996, three years after the movie's release drastically re-contextualizes the question, 'what is behind the bodice?' I will not enter into a formal analysis of Devi's short story, focusing instead on the narrative of the film, which adapted Devi's story to the screen, and stays mostly true to the narrative, besides some minor changes including the location of the village, and the final scene, which I will address presently. In any case, the plot is as follows: Upin, (Adil Hussain) a photojournalist from Calcutta who is quite well-known, arrives with his assistant and friend, Ujan, (Samrat Chakrabarti) to the remote village of Purulia in West Bengal, where there have been accounts of mass sexual assault by army officers. Upin is the character who represents the urban, progressive protagonist, who is intent on helping the women of this village to get justice for the crime. While collecting images for his expose on sexual assault, he comes across Gangor (Priyanka Bose), a poor wage laborer, who is breast-feeding her child near a construction site. Upin comes up to her and takes a photograph of her without her consent. The framing of this scene in the film emphasizes Upin's exploitative gaze, particularly focusing on the long moments in which his camera lingers over Gangor's breasts. At the sound of the shutter closing, Gangor holds her arm out, asking for compensation. Upin is shocked by her forthrightness, but gives her some money,

telling Ujan that he is happy to compensate Gangor for the photograph, congratulating himself for granting Gangor subjectivity by paying for her services.

The photograph that he captures, which is never shown in the film or described in the story, (hence, 'obscene' in the strict sense that it is always 'off-screen') circulates along with Upin's story of mass sexual assault in Purulia in the local newspapers. This is where I depart from Azoulay's reading of sexual assault. While, in Azoulay's estimation, it is the repression of the photograph of assault that produces the photograph as one of assault, Spivak's use of 'ganadarshan' translated as 'the rape of the people' is instructive here. 'Ganadarshan,' in its Hindi (shared also in Sanskrit and Bangla usage) translates to 'gan' as in community, unity, or group, and 'darshan' or viewing practice (especially in relation to divinity (See Pinney 2004, for discussion of 'darshan' as a practice of spectatorship in India). In translating 'darshan' or "viewing" as a form of violation ("rape") Spivak alludes to the violence that this photograph engenders. But what is this violence? It is not only that Upin's photograph is exploitative in its use of Gangor's image to tell a story of sexual assault, or even that it is a photograph of her nude breasts. Rather, it is the violation of Gangor's interiority, by placing the intimate scene of Gangor's act of breast-feeding in the context of a story of sexual assault, Upin's photograph is obscene in showing and thereby eliminating Gangor's right to privacy, the photograph becomes an object that stages an encounter of shame. This shame is not produced because of a desire for modesty (such as those insinuated by narratives of 'traditional' gender roles in South Asia, or some inherent national obsession with women's bodies in India) but rather, as Joan Copjec has written in a related context, is the constitution of the subject through a claim to an inner life, one that is petrified in the photograph and made into an object of consumption. What I am pointing to

is the way in which a secularized form of the sacred is carried forth, under conditions of modernity, as a right to an inner life, or privacy. The desire to ‘reveal,’ which drives Upin’s actions from the beginning of the film, when he arrives in the village to reveal the violence of sexual assault, to the final scene when he begs Gangor to reveal her breasts one last time to him, that desire for revelation is the ‘obscene’ desire that the photograph fuels. This desire manifests through the film each time the photograph is viewed, from Gangor’s own husband, who attacks her and demands that she reveal herself once he sees the image in the newspaper, to the policemen who sexually assault Gangor for having revealed herself to the journalist.

It is the desire for revelation that the absent photograph traffics within, and furthers the violation of Gangor. Hence, my qualification of Azoulay’s theorization of photography is to illustrate that the circulation of photographs are not inherently capable of eliciting an ethical response, indeed, it is the photograph here that repeatedly leads to Gangor’s violation, and is itself, the first scene of violation. In one of the final scenes of the narrative, Upin has returned to Gangor’s village, after hearing about the effects of his photograph. He has come back to save her, again. Yet, his desire to ‘reveal’ the truth seems to express itself as a desire to save her, which is also a desire to look. In the final scene, he demands and begs for her to take her *choli* off, and reveal her breasts. Gangor does so, only to reveal the marks of assault that are the result of his first *darshan*. Spivak uses the term ‘*ganadarshan*’ to read Gangor’s rape metonymically, where the violation of her body by the gaze of the journalist stands in for the violence of a uniquely modern form of looking for the truth as a violation of privacy.

So, in answering Azoulay’s question: has anyone seen a photograph of rape? We must address

not only the historical absence of rape photographs from the archive, as Azoulay does, but also the potential for violation that inheres to the secular form of revelation (Copjec 2007) that photographs can instigate. It is this modern desire for revelation that expresses itself in the legal discourse of proof as an empirically verifiable quantity, emerging from the interrelation of facts. Fact-finding missions, particularly in cases of sexual assault, become an inquiry into a secular desire for revelation, despite the fact that such revelation is both a product of discursive rendering of certain bodies and acts outside of visibility, and the effect that such revelation, which is that it continues to function as violation.

III. Image and temporality

“The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up in the instant when it can be recognized.” (Benjamin 2007, 255)

“what is specific to the image, soon as it is creative, is to make perceptible, to make visible, relationships of time which cannot be seen in the represented object” (Deleuze 1989/2010, xii)

I began this writing with Amar Kanwar’s question: which image can represent testimony? In the previous sections, I have outlined a logic by which photography has circulated within existing discourses of governance, furthering a desire for revelation that is uniquely modern in its reliance on juridical discourses of proof. Photographs have, since their earliest invention, been conceived of as having a privileged relationship to history, and theorists have documented the historical correlation between the emergence of photographic technology and the desire for modern record-keeping, often in the service of establishing and furthering structures of governance (Tagg, 1993; Chaudhary, 2012; Barthes, 1989; Poignant, 2002; Sekula, 1981). The reading of the photograph, when we put our faith in its connection to reality, is to find within the frame, proof of the events that happened outside of it. Such an approach feeds into what Alan Trachtenberg refers to as

“popular historicism,” (1990, 1) where events are conferred their reality by their photographic record. Such truth value emerges through the function of the image as an index: that is, as a physical trace of events that leave their mark on the surface of the image through the camera as a technology. This physical link between image and represented event is no longer always the condition of producing photographs, given the developments in digital camera technology.

However, photographs still circulate as images of reality untouched by human intervention. In light of my earlier discussion of the desire for revelation that drives the reading of the photograph as proof, I want to develop the claim that what makes photographs function as testimony is precisely not their representation of an event beyond the frame, but rather the potential within the frame to imagine forms of relation that are not possible beyond them. I develop this argument based on an understanding of images as making perceptible relations that may not be visible in the represented object. The value of the photographic image, emerges precisely in its alienation from either the photographer, the viewer, and the represented object. The photograph makes perceptible both more and less than the photographer intended, or the subject meant to depict. It is here that I take Benjamin’s discussion of the historical materialist conception of history as seizing up an image of the past (2007) at his word: the past appears in photographic images, serving as a medium to bring together past and present, facilitating the blurring of boundaries between “then” and “now.” In paying attention to the temporal disjunctures that images facilitate allows us to understand, as Deleuze (1989/2010) argues, relationships that are neither wholly present in the represented object/event, nor available in their entirety to us in our scene of viewing.

In order to illustrate this temporal disjuncture, I turn to the image that haunted the writing of this dissertation from its earliest days. It is a photograph from a protest staged on July 15th 2004, at the gate of Kangla Palace, in Imphal, the capital city of Manipur. I alluded to this protest in the Prelude to this chapter because Kanwar uses news footage of this protest in the final scenes of TLT. The protest followed the sexual assault and murder of Thangjam Manorama, a young woman who lived in Bamon Kampu, a village on the outskirts of Imphal by officers of the 17th Assam Rifles of the Indian Army. After Manorama was killed, early in the hours of July 12th 2004, women from her village had staged protests across the city, and their protest outside Kangla palace on July 15th is one that received press coverage internationally. In this scene, the photograph captures the women soon after they have stripped and stepped in front of the gate, holding a flag that reads, “Indian Army Rape Us.” In viewing this image today, the verb in the sentence, “rape,” remains in the present tense. Viewing the photograph today, fourteen years after the protest, while the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act is still valid in the region (as it was when I visited the installation in Assam in 2015), the photograph collides the image of the past with the present and making perceptible a relation of time — the continuing present of sovereign violence — within the frame that may not be accessible to human perception outside of it.

IV. Image and Testimony

“Testimony is a potentiality that becomes actual through an impotentiality of speech; it is, moreover, an impossibility that gives itself existence through a possibility of speaking. These two movements cannot be identified either with a subject or with a consciousness; yet they cannot be divided into two incommunicable substances. Their inseparable intimacy is testimony.” (Agamben 2000, 146)



Figure 2: “Indian Army Rape Us” Photo Credit: AFP/Getty Images

“What image can represent the ever-changing words of testimony?” Testimony, in Giorgio Agamben’s development of the term emerges through the impotentiality of speech.

Impotentiality, in Agamben’s writing (2000) develops in relation to potentiality, it describes the power not to do something, as a form of withholding. This concept re-emerges through each of my chapters in scenes of refusal where images interrupt the normal progression of signification, creating barriers to representation through gestures of stillness such as sitting, sleeping, or performing forms of rest. The photograph as testimony functions precisely through its instantiation as non-speech. For example, if the phrase, “Indian Army Rape Us” were an utterance, an instance of parole, it would, by its performance, be rendered irrelevant to challenging the structure (langue) within which rape continues to be an invisible and normal state

under armed occupation. Precisely because this photograph is neither a single speech act, nor a mere record of an event in the past, it sets up an intimate relation between past and present, between spectators of the image and the subjects of representation.

This image also answers Azoulay's (2008) conditions for viewing an image of rape. Rape, in Azoulay's discussion, changes from a crime against property to the discourse of consent. The entry into discourse of 'consent' as the marker of sexual assault also changes the acts that are recognized as violent, locating the recognition of sexual assault in the withdrawal of consent, even if such withdrawal occurs much after the act of violent penetration. The change from acts of harm to property, to the scene of encounter without consent, also changes what can be represented in an image of protest. Following this logic, images of rape cannot be understood as images that capture scenes of violence against a body (such as violent penetration). Instead, an image of rape would be one that withdraws consent. It is precisely why this photograph is one of sexual assault: rape becomes visible at the moment when consent is withdrawn, and the women protesting outside Kangla gate are certainly withdrawing their consent.

CHAPTER TWO

An Inactivist Image

Prelude: The desire for history:

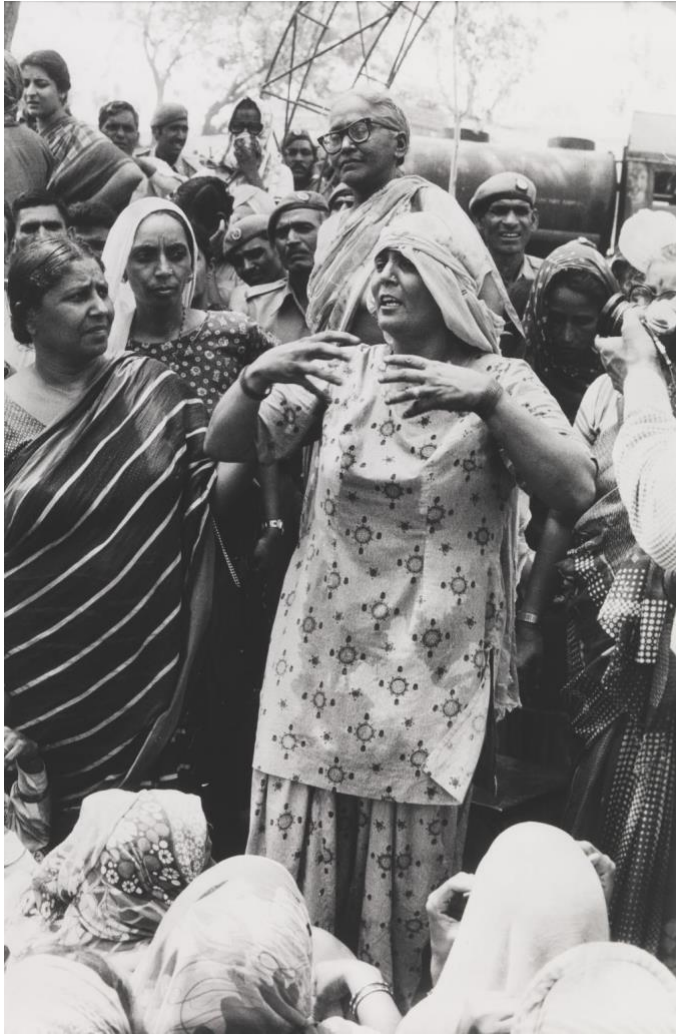
There are two images of a woman captured in shades of grey, taken a decade apart. In the first image, she is captured with her arms raised and mouth open in a shout, in the midst of a sea of protesters. In the second, she is seated on a staircase, a pile of files arranged at her feet. Behind her looms the Supreme Court of India, in New Delhi. Both images contain a framed portrait of a young woman in graduation robes. Both the images are of Satyarani, a community organizer in Delhi, who was a leading figure in the legal fights against domestic violence and dowry related abuse in the 1980s. Both images were captured by feminist artist and activist, Sheba Chhachhi (1958 —), a Delhi-based artist and activist, who began her career as a documentary photographer of the women's rights movement in the 1980s. The images are part of her series, *Seven Lives and a Dream*, first exhibited at the India Habitat Center in New Delhi, in 1998. The images were shot over a period of 10 years, from 1980 to 1991. During this time, Chhachhi used her camera to tell the history of the women's movement.

In her early snapshots, Chhachhi captured candid moments at protests, street performances, and sit-ins during the early 1980s, and illustrated the emergence of a thriving scene of women's political action in this period. Images such as the ones collected for the retrospective, "Record/Resist" (fig. 1) at the Kiran Nadar Museum in 2013, were documentary photographs that framed women as political actors. Close-ups of organizers in the middle of meetings (see fig 2. Shardabehn) or performing street plays addressing gender violence (see fig. 3 Moloysree Hashmi and the Jana Natya Manch) brought intense debates around women's

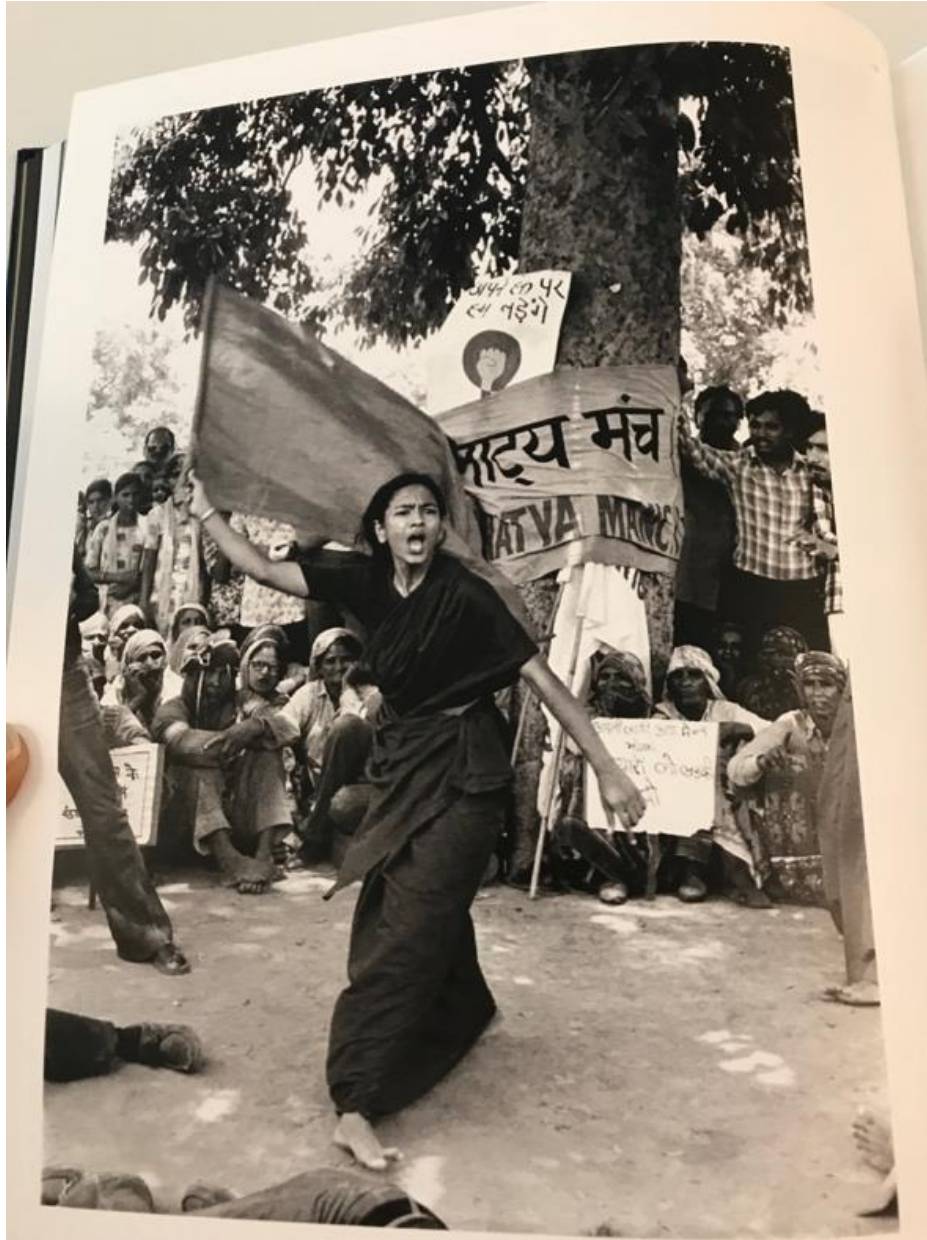
rights and feminist activism to the public. She embraced a feminist approach to documenting the history of this period, turning the camera to scenes of women's collectivity and public participation. In their subject matter, as well as the framing of the image, Chhachhi's work in *Seven Lives And A Dream* documented the photographer's involvement with the women's rights struggles as much as they document the images of women activists who led the movement.



(Fig. 1: Record/Resist 2012, exhibition view. Image courtesy: Volte Gallery Mumbai)



(Figure 2: “Shardabehn, Public Testimony, Police Station, Delhi,” 1988 printed in 2014. Gelatin silver print on paper, image courtesy: Tate Modern)



(Fig 3: Moloysree Hashmi and Jana Natya Manch performance, Image from *Arc. Silt Dive*)



(Fig. 4: Sathyarani – Anti Dowry Demonstration, Gelatin- Silver Print on Paper, 1980, Sheba Chhachhi, Image Courtesy: Tate Modern)

These images by Chhachhi circulated as a growing historical archive, documenting the movement that they emerged from, and in sympathy with. Such political sympathies were expressed in the desire for archiving these protests, framing these activists front and center in the fights for legislative change. They called upon the viewer to recognize the urgency of the scene, as these women look either directly into the camera, or just to the side of the viewer, their arms raised in a gesture of protest, capturing their shouts of anger. The affective call of these images repeatedly conveyed the sense that something important had happened when the photographer

closed the shutter. These images, tell us little about the events they captured in terms of location or context, but they draw us closer, demanding that we recognize the urgency of their moment. A viewer, particularly one with sympathies to feminist struggle, is left with the desire to be there, to be a part of their history, even as one is painfully aware that this moment has passed.

Understanding this paradoxical desire that photographs capture: both the desire to have been there, and the sorrow at the fact that the moment has already passed, has been central to critical debates in the field of visual culture and history for several theorists. I will enter into these debates presently to illustrate the complex uses of photography in relation to feminist politics. However, the purpose of this writing is to highlight the potential of photographs to trouble our understanding of the desire for historical representation. The goal for this chapter, is to wrest the use of photographs from this desire that I am provisionally naming “historicist,” toward imagining more autonomous aesthetic ends. I am indebted in this approach to the strand of debates in postcolonial studies about the value and limits of historical representation. At the same time, I argue that close readings of the form of these photographs as historical record and aesthetic intervention allows us new insights into the potential for visualizing alterity, in the double sense of imagining other relations to community and the potential for alternative postcolonial feminist politics.

In the following writing, I begin by outlining the shared desires and problems of postcolonial historicism, and the debates surrounding filmic indexicality, which, I argue, participates in and extends historicist arguments to the field of the visual. The stakes of this argument are to illustrate the ways in which photographs are complicit in limiting the potential for political action

to the realm of the empirical, i.e. what is already existing in the world. Yet, the potential for change, the possibility for radically new forms of relation need images of what may not exist yet, or may not be legible as such. Such relations are problems of photographic form, as much as political imagination. It is to these ends that I provide close readings of the two images of Sathyarani taken by Sheba Chhachhi. I argue that these two images of the same individual, taken by the same photographer, can evince very different political affects, one historicist in its approach, and another that provides a form of asylum from the historicist drive for representation, one that I will name “aestheticist” in its attention to the form and potential of images.

I. The Uses and Disadvantages of Historicism

“We want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life: for it is possible to value the study of history to such a degree that life becomes stunted or degenerate” (Nietzsche 1999, 59)

In this second essay of his *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche criticizes the approach to studying history that consigns its object of study to the past, a process of embalming the past in the knowledge one produces of it. The only value that Nietzsche finds in the study of history is inasmuch as it directly demands action in the present. I will return to this line of argument in the final section of this paper, following the need to forget as the basis of life, but for now, I will locate the “stunting” or degeneracy that Nietzsche finds in a certain strand of historical thinking, what I have been calling “historicism,” i.e. the approach to delimiting or embalming the event as having past, as the work of photography as well.

First, however, we can begin with the postcolonial debates on historicism. Postcolonial studies, particularly its theorists of South Asia, have approached the discipline of History with the loving

suspicion of those trained by it. They have repeatedly illustrated the limits of official archives and historiography, theorizing instead a “subaltern” history⁸, that pays attention to the minor stories in the archive, the moments of fracture and disunity that provide their actors autonomy from broader political agendas. Yet, historical knowledge has nevertheless remained the field of that disagreement, and shaped the debates in literature as well. As Leela Gandhi (2011) notes in her chapter, “Art,” in *Affective Communities*, postcolonial theory has often been mired in an “anti-aesthetic fallacy,” where analysis of the real conditions of domination (as in the subaltern studies project), underpinned by a secular humanism (as in Edward Said’s commitments), occur through the “revealing” of the sociological forces that shape aesthetic texts. Hence, the mode of postcolonial reading modelled by scholars in the early stages of these debates, was to reveal the imperial bias and basis of aesthetic interventions. Such an analysis hinges on debates about historical facts and their effects on the literary text, reading the literary text as a trace that indexes forces outside it. This postcolonial approach links to a broader challenge being mounted against the appearance of disinterested knowledges, most clearly argued in Edward Said’s (1979) *Orientalism*, but also tackled in writers such as Pierre Bourdieu (1984), who argued that class politics underpinned aesthetic judgment. While I will not re-tell Gandhi’s intellectual history of this postcolonial approach here, it is enough to note that the challenge posed by postcolonial theory was to question the realm of aesthetic autonomy (most explicitly argued through Enlightenment thought of Immanuel Kant) through historical analysis, i.e. to oppose aesthetic

⁸ I am thinking here especially of the Subaltern Studies Collective and their radical approach to historiography influenced by structuralism and semiotics. See especially the essays collected by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in *Selected Subaltern Studies* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988. Ranajit Guha’s writing in *Domination Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998 and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

autonomy as a historical construct produced by social inequality. Hence, in this strand of postcolonial argument, the realm of aesthetic autonomy is read for its reflection of historical relations. The task of postcolonial reading, as Gandhi observes in this historicist approach, is to challenge not only the individual literary text for its complicity with colonial domination, but to question the autonomy of the text itself, emptying it of any meaning besides its historical significance.

This postcolonial approach to reading the text as an indexical sign, empty of all meaning save its service to historical narration, is oddly shared by a very different group of theorists, those who were studying the uses and forms of the photographic image and its relationship to reality. The concept of an indexical sign emerges from the writings on semiotics by the pragmatist philosopher, C.S. Peirce, whose early work on the classification of signs was eventually adapted to the reading of images by film theorists. For Peirce, the “index” referred to a type of sign that was connected to the object it represented through a physical or causal trace, for example, a footprint. It is helpful to understand the index here in contrast to the two other types of signs: icons, which resemble their objects (such as a painted portrait) and symbols, which are linked to their objects not by any natural link, but rather by social or logical agreement (for example, words or the letters of the alphabet.)

Theorists of film and photography located the indexical function of the photograph as the basis of the challenge that photography posed to earlier visual arts⁹. Andre Bazin began his book on

⁹ For a cogent discussion of indexicality and its centrality to film studies, see “Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction” by Mary Ann Doane, in *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* Vol. 18:1 2007. For the first discussions of film and semiotics, see Peter Wollen, *Signs*

cinema by discussing the desire to embalm objects, to preserve them, that drove the development of the plastic arts. The photograph, for Bazin, is the clearest evolution of this desire since it embalms the object for contemplation without human intervention, freeing the image from the ravages of time and space.¹⁰ In Peirce's terms, the index "asserts nothing; it only says, "There!" which is the same effect as a photograph of an object or event¹¹. Bazin also observed the psychological effect of this automatic process of creation of the image: the viewer of a photograph grants the image a claim to reality because of its process of creation¹².

Writing several years after Bazin, Roland Barthes furthered Bazin's approach to the indexical quality of the photograph. For Barthes (1977), there is a psychological effect of the myth of reality or the "reality effect" of the image. It denotes not just something that is there, but, "having-been-there:" a spatio-temporality particular to the photograph. Unlike painting and sculpture, which came before and still denote the fact of their presence; or of film, which came after, and again denotes the "being-there," for the duration of the film, the photograph creates its own reality: spatial continuity and temporal anteriority.

I am tracing the evolution here, of the peculiar temporality of the index as a sign, since the historicist approach that I highlighted earlier also participates in this rhetorical construction: whether in the approach of subaltern historiography in the writing of the postcolonial theorists

and Meaning In The Cinema, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973.

¹⁰ Andre Bazin, "Ontology of the Photographic Image" in *What Is Cinema?*

¹¹ See Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America" for a detailed discussion of photography's deictic function in *October* 3 (1977): 68-81

¹² For a theoretical engagement of Bazin's approach to indexicality and cinema, see Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

discussed above, or in the narration of the photograph as an index, the reading strategy is to understand the text as it points to something beyond it: the text achieves its meaning through its relationship to reality beyond the image. At the same time, the text embalms or captures an object, emptying it of meaning other than its function as an index.

When we read Chhachhi's early images of the women's movement in conversation with these debates, the stakes become more apparent. While Chhachhi's relationship to her subjects emerged not only through the photographic encounter, but through several decades of activist work alongside them, the photograph itself, and the genre of the documentary image that these early photographs circulated within, focused on depicting the political movement as it was happening. The emphasis on urgency, and realism are central to the image of Moloyashree, for example. The subject is framed in the center of the image, arm raised and flag in hand, as spectators watch her performance. The image captures a staged scene of political theatre, which utilized the fictional frame of the play's narrative to stage debates about political issues such as gender violence and domestic abuse, communal violence, and critiques of the political establishment. The medium of street plays, which gained political prominence during the Emergency (1975-1977) were an important vehicle for public engagement and democratic dissent in the midst of authoritarian rule. The form, taken up by feminist actors and activists in the 1980s, travelled across the country staging plays such as "Aurat" (by Jana Natya Manch, led by actors including Moloyashree¹³) and "Om Swaha" (written and performed by Stree

¹³ For a history of the emergence of Jana Natya Manch, See Sudhanva Deshpande, "Remembering Safdar Hashmi and the Play That Changed Indian Street Theatre Forever." *Scroll.in* published: January 3, 2017

Sangarsh¹⁴), addressed topics including domestic violence, and the role of women in society.

The very existence of these photographs suggests that Chhachhi chose to capture these moments of protest and saw her work as an intervention and continuation of the fight for women's rights through the medium of photography. That is certainly the reading provided by scholars of her work including Kumkum Sangari (2016) and Gayatri Sinha (2016).

Chhachhi's images of protests and street plays captured the blurring of boundaries between staged and unscripted performances of protest, as the images of Sathyarani and Moloyashree suggest. In both images, the subject has her arm raised and her mouth open in the middle of a scream. The banner behind Moloyashree reads "Jana Natya Manch," (People's Theatre Front, Janam for short¹⁵), marking the scene in front of it as a staged performance, reiterated by the audience watching the actor on stage. The image on the right, of Sathyarani with her arm raised and her mouth open in the middle of a shout, also conveys a sense of urgency. The close framing of her face, and the photograph in her hand, in the middle of a sea of protesters, give the viewer the sense of being crowded in, as part of Sathyarani's struggle and a sense of having been there.

My point here, in line with the argument I developed in the introduction about the concept of the 'moving image,' is that, when the photograph traffics in its claim to being a historical record, it simultaneously distances the spectator from the scene of this action. We cannot share her

¹⁴ On the emergence of feminist street theatre and the story of Om Swaha, see: Malini Nair, "How a dowry death in Delhi gave birth to feminist street theatre in India" Scroll.in, published July 13, 2017; Radha Kumar, *A History of Doing*; Deepti Mehrotra, "Feminist Street Theatre: Plays as Contemporary History" <http://indianculturalforum.in/2016/07/09/feminist-street-theatre-plays-as-contemporary-history/>

¹⁵ The radical history of this theatre troupe's emergence is more explicitly addressed in the introductory chapter of the project.

temporal location even as we share the physical space of the image in the moment of our viewing, which is Roland Barthes' insight into the odd temporality of the image. The close framing of Sathyarani's face, and the photograph in her hand, in the middle of a sea of protesters, give the viewer the sense of being crowded in, witnessing Sathyarani's struggle from within the protest. The lack of consent or intervention in the process of its production, and the apparent candour of Chhachhi's images, feed into the historicist reading of the photograph: where it gains its value as an index of historical events that occurred outside the frame of the image. By operating in the temporality of "here/formerly," the image of Sathyarani caught in mid-shout signals an event that ended soon after the shutter had closed, ending both the gesture of the protesting figure and the political action it captured as well. Yet in doing so, they render Sathyarani and the women around her, as minoritarian subjects defined by their protest; contributing to a historical archive where feminist actors appear as screaming protestors, marching for their rights.

In the introduction to this writing, I have already alluded to the arguments of postcolonial critic Rey Chow, who has addressed the ethic of protest that defines minoritarian subjectivity under late capitalism. Chow points us to the forms of epistemic capture that operate in relation to racialized and gendered minorities whose claims to justice and restitution occur in and through the role of the 'protesting ethnic subject.' (2002) This criticism has also emerged in postcolonial feminist writings about the demands for legible self-representation, made of the woman of color, by institutions that aim to provide aid or recognition. This is the task of being an "otherness machine" in Sara Suleri's terms (1989, 105). Chhachhi's explicit desire to record the history of the women's movement in this period, also reveals the double-bind of feminist representation: the subject of the photographic gaze, even when captured by a feminist photographer who is

documenting a feminist protest, can formally contribute to the archiving of feminist protest as having occurred in the past, and therefore not relevant to our contemporary moment, and limited in scope and performance to spectacular scenes of action.

II. Here/Then: A Snapshot



(Fig. 4: Sathyarani – Anti Dowry Demonstration, Gelatin- Silver Print on Paper, 1980, Sheba Chhachhi, Image Courtesy: Tate Modern)

In this image of Sathyarani (fig. 4), we encounter a crowded frame, packed with bodies half visible in a tangle of limbs. Front and center is the determined face of an older woman, her right arm is raised out of the frame and her mouth open in a shout. In her left hand, she holds a portrait of a woman in graduation robes, perhaps holding her diploma in her hand. The framed photograph bears the creases of multiple unfoldings, white lines running across the black robes of the young woman as the frame glints in the daylight. A banner is held aloft behind her by an

unknown hand, perhaps the words on it read, "Indian." Other faces are visible within the image, also with their arms raised in protest behind her, but the woman in the center, Sathyarani Chadha had become "the face" (Bhandare 2014, Jain 2014) of women's rights in India in this period, as multiple sources repeatedly recall. The photograph of the woman holding the photograph circulates within an emerging visual grammar of feminist activism that reached public prominence in the 1980s in Delhi.

Sathyarani Chadha was an activist and community organizer who began her engagement with public life in 1979. Her daughter, Shashi Bala, recently married and newly pregnant had told Sathyarani that her husband wanted a scooter and that Sathyarani would have to give him one. The request of the gift, read under the sign of dowry, meant that it was a contractual demand that Sathyarani would have to fulfill. She asked for a few days to get him one. Shashi Bala died of burns in her marital home, a "kitchen accident," in which a stove spontaneously burst into flames, while waiting for a scooter. Chadha too began her period of waiting in the aftermath of the fire. She filed legal complaints against her son-in-law in Delhi high court, and it took over 34 years for the state to recognize that dowry-related murder did, in fact, constitute a crime. In the meantime, Chaddha began a non-profit that worked to help local women fight domestic violence, organized marches, education drives, and taught herself how to wait for justice by changing the structure of the law.

The photograph that Chadha holds in her left hand, raised defiantly at the spectator demands that we pay attention to the history of loss signified by the image of her daughter with a diploma in her hand. Shashi Bala's photograph, mobilized here as an icon of loss, portrays the deceased who

haunts the present, drawing the viewer into a relation of mourning and witnessing, the response that Chadha was demanding from the courts in recognition of her loss.

Within the frame of the snapshot, Barthes (1977, 158) argues that the photograph's magical power stems from its claim to reality through the invention of a new space-time category: "spatial immediacy, and temporal anteriority." A photograph does not "transform" what it signifies (as in other conventional signs including painting) but merely flattens and frames what was already there, serving as a record of a moment that has passed. It is the peculiar spacetime of the photograph (here/formerly) capturing an event that has passed that grants the image its claim to truth. In this image of Chaddha, the frame of the snapshot dismembers those around her, leaving Chaddha's upraised arm and face in the center of the frame, while a government building looms in the background. This photograph of Chadha, which circulated widely in the news, accompanied stories about anti-dowry protests, and functioned as a record of the protests that occurred. In its function as historiographic record, the image also illustrates that the event it captured is now in the past.

In "Discourse of History," while addressing the forms and methods of historiography, Barthes locates the emergence of the genre of history as the codification of a structure of historical discourse based on the concept of a historical fact, which appears to be related to the "real" event that occurs outside of language yet is only produced within and functions through signs themselves. The emergence of objective history occurs through its reality effect – the elision of the signified and the appearance of a direct link between the signifier and the referent, where the signifier repeats over and over again, *this happened*. Barthes also notes that the reality effect is

made possible most explicitly in the development of photography, a medium that makes objective history as a genre possible precisely because of its claims to historical fact.

The snapshot of Sathyarani conveys the urgency of her moment, but simultaneously shelters us from her political present, since we do not share her temporal location even as we share the physical space of the image in the moment of our viewing. Ultimately, the embalming effect of the photograph, what I had previously alluded to in the historicist approach to texts, occurs through its indexical function. By operating in the temporality of “here/formerly,” the image of Sathyarani caught in mid-shout signals an event that ended soon after the shutter had closed, ending both the gesture of the protesting figure and the political action it captured as well.

This reading appears to leave us at a dead-end with the photograph. Given that it traps the object of the camera and renders them a historical event, photographs appear fundamentally complicit in the historicist approach to the text, a fact that Barthes also noted in his discussion of the evolution of photography with the emergence of history as a discipline. Yet in the following section, I wish to contrast this approach with another of Chhachhi’s images, taken a decade later and involving Sathyarani again. The goal here is to address the aesthetic potential for images to exceed their function as indexical sign, and to further an “aestheticist” approach to both postcolonial feminist politics and the potential of the photograph.

III. There/now: Time-exposures

It is here that I wish to return to second image by Sheba Chhachhi. By the 1990s, Chhachhi’s frustration with the scene of the documentary encounter, where the photographer instructed his

subject, the protesting women's rights activist, to have her fist raised and her mouth open, thereby fulfilling the generic expectations of documentary photograph of the protest led to her experiments with collaborative portraiture.

Chhachhi has been critical of the claims to reality that documentary images made, particularly criticizing the formulaic staging of the protest photograph:

"The cameramen position and direct the women. The angry eyes, raised fist, shouting mouth are enacted. I photograph the photographers. And then, turn my attention away from the public mode and explore the subjective, the inner life through a series of collaborative staged portraits." (Chhachhi 2016, 152)

This explanation of her process in her own words, addressed Chhachhi's own frustrations with what she sensed as the epistemic capture of her feminist subjects in the protest photographs. In her desire to challenge the indexical function of photographs, Chhachhi borrowed from the vernacular visual grammar of bazaar studio photography, that she termed "theatres of the self." Over the course of several months in 1990, Chhachhi invited several of the activists to collaborate with her on staged portraits that they developed together. The images emerged from long conversations with each of the photograph's subjects. She narrates her later photographs, which were part of the "Seven Lives And A Dream" project as a turn to "the inner life," of her subjects, staged in collaborative portraits. Eight subjects from the first series of images including well-known community organizers such as Sathyarani were invited to participate in the production of their portraits, though only seven agreed. They were invited to bring objects that represented their history and labor, and to choose locations that they felt most at home in. Yet Chhachhi describes her intent here to "work with the photograph as fiction." (2016, 165) The contradiction between revealing the truth of oneself in the portrait and the task of staging the

photograph as fiction illustrate some of the tensions inherent to photography itself, and Chhachhi's images of Sathyarani make visible differing approaches to feminist history, representation, and action.

In her collaboration with Sathyarani on her staged portrait, the subject is seated on the steps of the Supreme Court of India, surrounded by the objects including files, and an image of her daughter. The camera captures her from enough of a distance so that her whole body is in the frame, and shot at a low angle as one would a statue or a building, so Sathyarani towers over the viewer, directly facing the camera with an impassive gaze. At first glance, this image already occupies works in a different register than the first image of Sathyarani (fig. 4): the first appears to the immediate, realistic representation of a scene of protest, yet do not tell us anything about the subject on display, while the second image represents a serene, impassive engagement with the law. In both images, a government building looms in the background, but in the first, it is off in the distance, Sathyarani does not appear close enough to be seen from it, and lost in the crowd of protesters. In the second image, Sathyarani is all alone, front and center, with the Supreme Court of India behind her. The files, read in the context of the building, indicate Sathyarani's decades-long political fight against dowry-related harassment, and her successes with legal change, even as the image of her daughter in graduation robes indexes her loss.

All these observations already list the oppositions in feminist representation: a screaming protester, captured without her explicit consent, against an impassive individual, surrounded by the successes of her political organizing, who collaborated with the photographer to create the image. These two images reveal the reformulations of feminist documentary practice that

Chhachhi was undertaking, even as she continued to work with and through images over the decades. In what follows, I argue that the spatio-temporality of this image opens it up to a postcolonial feminist ethics of inhabitation.

Here, I argue for the recursive temporality of waiting as a refusal to move; an inhabitation¹⁶ of the impossible yet necessary¹⁷ work of waiting for justice¹⁸.

In order to address this odd temporal formation of this image, I would like to contrast the reading from Barthes, of the “here/then” temporality of the photograph, with critic Thierry de Duve, who responds to Barthes’ claims. In “The Photograph as Paradox,” Thierry de Duve (1978) the critic distinguishes between two effects or modes of reading a photograph, both of which can occur simultaneously, and emerge from different approaches to the process and function of images. The snapshot, is de Duve’s term for the photograph that appears to capture an event, conveying that it has happened and is now in the past. This type of image builds on Barthes’ discussion of the odd temporality of the image as “having been there.” Yet, the image itself cannot convey the reality of what has passed. De Duve discusses the early experiments of

¹⁶ Robyn Wiegman’s (2012) lesson of feminist inhabitation in *Object Lessons* as a mode of engaging with the contradictions in feminist politics resonates with the conception of ‘waiting’ I am developing here. In Chapter four, I will explore multiple forms of waiting that are made possible within the image.

¹⁷ I draw here on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s discussion of the value of translation – the impossible but necessary task of doing justice to a text. Political organizing, petitions to the state for protections, demands that the law tend toward justice are, arguably, also forms of translation, though I will not venture into that argument here.

¹⁸ What counts as “justice” in this instance, is part of a longer discussion within postcolonial feminist debates, and indeed broader philosophical debates as well. I will not enter into the complex history of that debate here, other than to note, following Ranjana Khanna, that the risk and potential of feminist politics hinges on the fact that both the terms “justice” and “women” are unknowable in advance. See Ranjana Khanna, 2003.

Eadward Muybridge's images of galloping horses, where the snapshot allows us to understand that that horses gallop, but the surface of the image (what de Duve refers to as the "superficial series," or what the image shows) only captures the static image of a horse in mid-gallop, having petrified the event after its demise. It is here that de Duve argues that, "the snapshot steals the life outside and returns it as death" (1978, 116)

While the snapshot's ruse of immediacy nevertheless only captures the demise of the events it purports to represent, the time exposure instead functions with a funerary motivation, that of memorial. The time exposure depicts the awkward bodily pose of a subject performing stillness, or objects that are at rest. Such images place the objects of the photograph outside of the flow of lived time, producing an image that is carefully constructed to memorialize the subject of the portrait. While de Duve describes the time exposure as a funerary portrait, I am invested in his theorization of the recursive temporality that is made possible in this photographic memorial. Such images are marked by the temporality of the "there/now" (in the present, but elsewhere) in direct contrast to the "here/then" of the snapshot. Since there is no physical movement captured in the image; no gesture to indicate where an event begins and ends within the frame of the photograph, Sathyarani's seated form appears to be able to sit there forever.

IV. Toward Postcolonial Aestheticism

To address the differing social functions of the bazaar photograph that Chhachhi cites as her inspiration for her portraits, I would like to take a minor digression here to an incident narrated

by the anthropologist, Christopher Pinney in the preface to his book, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (1997). Pinney's writings on photography in the South Asian subcontinent continue to be one of the most exhaustive studies of the social and political functions of images, and it is particularly striking the intuitive differences that Chhachhi evoked in her practice open Pinney's discussions on the topic as well, albeit in a very different context. In *Camera Indica* (1997) as in his later writing, *Photos of the Gods*, the author carefully narrates the production and circulation of vernacular imagery, from film posters to individual photo albums, and the way they circulate with the broader social field of popular culture and politics. In the preface, the author narrates an experience that he had while conducting fieldwork in Bhatissuda, a village near Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh. He describes his desire to take photographs of the villagers he encountered as part of his research. His photograph of his neighbor, Bherulal, was a candid image he took while they walked in the fields one evening. The desire that drove him, as Pinney narrated it, was to capture "candid, revealing, expressive" imagery of the people he was living with. The image he captured was one centered primarily on Bherulal's face, a study in shadow and light that granted its subject both gravity and humour in the twilight. Yet Pinney narrates that he was "shaken" by the fact that Bherulal responded with irritation, complaining that the image was of no use to him. (1997, 8-9)

The contrast between Pinney's historicist desire to capture a candid image of his subjects, and Bherulal's disdainful response addresses the different values and relations to representation that, arguably, reflect in Chhachhi's aesthetic shift as well. Later in his writing, Pinney discusses the monetary value assigned to portraits. Professional photographers that Pinney interviewed for his project half-jokingly noted that their clients demanded full-length portraits, and refused to pay

full price for anything less than an image that captured the entire selves. The question that Pinney finds himself asking is about the “use” of the photograph; while his use of the image was to capture something “candid and revealing” about the villager he lived with for his research, the studio photograph that a client requested had uses other than candid representation, perhaps the marking of a major life event, or for circulation in the unofficial market of marriage brokerage, or even as “aestheticist” approach to the pleasure of the image. By “aestheticist,” I am provisionally naming the pleasures of reading the disjunctures between signifier and signified, an interstitial pleasure in the potential for semantic play afforded by the camera.



107 Studio photograph of Orissan tribal woman wearing wristwatches, c. 1990.

(Fig 5: “Studio photograph of Orissan tribal woman wearing wristwatches, c. 1990.” Image from Christopher Pinney’s *Camera Indica*)

Pinney contrasted the social practice of the studio photograph in his fieldwork with the readings of French popular photography that Pierre Bourdieu discussed in *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (1990) observing that the photographic studio became a space “for the individual exploration of that which does not yet exist in the social world.” (1997, 178) The goal was to “come out better” in a photograph than in their daily lives. In fig. 5, for example, the image identifies the subject as a “tribal woman,” wearing multiple watches, a marker of modernization, in Pinney’s terms, utilizing the space of the studio as a site of exploration. The resulting photographs mobilize the technological capacity of the photography studio to fashion selves that did not necessarily index the world beyond the image. Rather, these aesthetic practices and their attendant pleasures, which left the anthropologist “shaken” in his first encounter, index the political potential of imagining otherwise. In the context of Chhachhi’s images, “coming out better” imagined not only an individual desire for fantastical representations of modernization or masquerade, but a postcolonial feminist aestheticism, that imagined other social relations by refusing a historicist reading, and its attendant anti-aestheticist politics.

V. An Untimely Dharna



(fig. 6: “Sathyarani – Staged Portrait, Supreme Court,” 1990 gelatin silver print on paper, Sheba Chhachhi, Courtesy: Tate Modern)

With this conception of an aestheticist use for photographs in mind, we can return to this image of Sathyarani. In this staged portrait¹⁹, she is seated on the steps of the Supreme Court of India, located in New Delhi. The objects that Sathyarani chose to surround herself with include case documents and a garlanded photo of her daughter. A saree is draped down the stairs, holding these files. Her seated figure is located between the central columns of the Supreme Court building and an Indian flag flies directly above. The building was designed to represent the scales of justice, with the central building (behind Sathyarani) symbolizing the central beam of the scales²⁰ and two wings on either side representing the scales themselves.

Chadha’s seat, her claim to the space at the center of the frame, and directly in front of the central building, makes her presence unavoidable to anyone entering or leaving the court. Yet in occupying the stairs as her place of rest, she faces away from the building; her seat is both centered in front of, and simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the looming presence of the law behind her.²¹ Sathyarani stares directly into the camera, arms crossed in front of her, at rest

¹⁹ The genre of portrait photography, as historian John Tagg argues, emerged in the earliest moments of photography itself. When the technology was still new and very expensive, one marker of elite consumption was the ability to have one’s portrait taken. The portrait was both “a description of an individual and the inscription of social identity. But at the same time, it is also a commodity, a luxury, an adornment ownership of which itself confers status.” (Tagg, 1993, 37)

²⁰ For a history of the architecture of the Supreme Court, see <http://supremecourtofindia.nic.in/history>

²¹ Thanks are due to Anna Thomas for talking through the reading of this image with me, and for stressing the importance of understanding rest as an intentional “facing away” from the demands that surround us.

on her lap. The piles of files at Sathyarani's feet extend beyond the frame of the image, her labor unable to be contained within one frame. The garland around the image of her daughter teaches us about the social and material relations one can have to a photograph, given the practice of garlanding images of the deceased by loved ones during annual rituals of mourning, or on special occasions.

The "time exposure," as de Duve remarked functions to remove the image from the linear temporality of life passing. Within the image, the stillness of the subjects and their careful arrangement imply the space-time of "there/now," seemingly capturing an ongoing event that is occurring elsewhere. While this portrait of Sathyarani was captured with technology that did not require the stillness of the subject in front of the camera for an extended duration, the portrait still operates within the space-time of the time exposure: capturing a moment that seemingly never ends. The spectator watches Sathyarani's on the steps of the court, seated in her "untimely" dharna, simultaneously functioning as an event out of time (in the time of the "time exposure," where the image appears to remove the object out of the linear progress of temporality) and as a continuous event without end.

Writing in 1885, Orientalist scholar, H.H. Wilson compiled a list of terms to assist with the management of the British colony in India, where the 'dharna' was discussed a vernacular practice of civil disobedience. The "dhurna," defined by Wilson as "Sitting usually at the door of a house as a protest against some wrong doing by the particular householder." (cited in Dharampal, 2000, 1975). Reading Sathyarani's portrait as an event of dharna also conceives of her dispute with the law as a dispute with another "householder," a challenge not to the

institution of the law that does not recognize her claim to political representation, but a fight among equals, members of one community. The portrait perhaps captures a dharna that was never intended as such, but it is in the potential for play in the interstice between signifier and signified that we find Sathyarani inhabiting a domain of stasis opened up by the recognition of contingency in the indexical sign.

An image of a woman seated on the steps of the Supreme Court, which is also a portrait of a never-ending dharna, takes advantage of the aestheticist possibilities of the image to imagine forms of living in the present. Within the image, an autonomous aesthetic realm is made possible, indexing a political present that does not exist outside of it, yet perhaps captures the potential for a future politics. It is in this Nietzschean sense that I use the term “untimely” to refer to this image: given its rupture not only of the linear progression of the past, but calling into being a future that has not yet come to pass. I name such political potential “postcolonial” not only because these images are captured in a postcolony, and picture a “postcolonial” subject, but because of the odd temporal moves that the term “postcolonial” encapsulates: no longer a temporal marker of linear progression as in “post-colonial” but rather a way to capture the continuing relevance of the violent history of colonialism and the recurrence of forms of anti-colonial civil disobedience (as in the dharna, or sit-in) today. When read as an image of (im)potentiality rather than history, this image indexes the continued struggle for autonomy, where the dharna draws on a longer genealogy of anti-colonial politics to index such democratic potential in the present.

My desire to wrest the aesthetic from the domination of the historical, is driven not only by Chhachhi’s desire (which I am sympathetic to) of reading photographs beyond their function as historical record. In the introduction to this writing, I addressed the “anti-aesthetic fallacy” of

postcolonial reading, committed as it was to a historicist approach to the text as an index of the past. Hence, the stakes of conceiving a realm of aesthetic autonomy is nothing less than the possibility for expanding what constitutes the definitions of the “political,” and of questioning the colonial roots of the logic of realism itself.

In concluding this piece, I would like to return to Leela Gandhi’s reading of Immanuel Kant in *Affective Communities*. In Gandhi’s reading of Kant, the realm of aesthetic autonomy opened up in the moment of aesthetic judgment, is a liminal “domicilium,” inhabited by contingent, particular, and sensuous experience. In that moment art becomes associated with an experience of alterity, a form of radical difference that will eventually be subsumed into the familiarity of judgment, but is nevertheless otherwise in that moment. As Gandhi observes, “it is in the capacity to offer asylum that art lays claim to radical autonomy from the leveling and conservative actions of history and thought.” (2011a, 161) It is in this vein that I read the portrait of Sathyarani, as providing an asylum: a space of rest, which is also an image of stasis, and hence of nothing less than radical disagreement, between members of the community.

PART II: NOW

CHAPTER THREE

Visual Obstructions

I. On napping as feminist praxis:

“Take a nap in the park, ladies” reads the cheeky headline to an article in *The Hindu*, a national newspaper in India (Bagashree, 2015), discussing a recent spate of actions organized by the Blank Noise Collective, a group of artists and activists who stage events that address sexual harassment in urban spaces across the subcontinent. The “Meet to sleep” campaign, which is an ongoing project of Blank Noise invited participants, dubbed Action Heroes, to meet at various public parks across several South Asian cities including Delhi, Hyderabad, Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and Vadodara, and fall asleep together. The name “action hero” for participants in an act of collective sleeping encompasses quite neatly and perhaps unintentionally, the main thrust of the argument contained in this chapter. To attribute “action” to the inactivity of the “Meet to Sleep” campaign links the supposedly unbridgeable oppositions between these two positions. This will be the claim of the rest of this writing, to theorize the relationship between sleep and public rest as forms of action in public.²²

²² The term “hero,” that the OED today defines as “A man (or occasionally a woman) of superhuman strength, courage or ability, favored by the gods” was used, as Hannah Arendt reminds us, simply to name all free men who participated in the Trojan enterprise, or at least used in that way in Homer. Their courage was not granted by the Gods but simply the courage of those who chose to act and speak at all, or, in this case, choose to not act or speak at all. (Arendt, 1998, 186)

The humor of the campaign's title indicates the mildly condescending amusement with which such tactics were covered in the news media, even as more "Meet to Sleep" events are organized each year along with other public art campaigns by Blank Noise. What would it mean to take these naps seriously as an engagement with political life? This is the question that I address through the chapter, locating the Blank Noise collective action within a broader theoretical debate on the aesthetics and politics of rest.



(Fig 1: Blank Noise Collective, "Meet to sleep" Mumbai, Hiranandani Park, Jan 16th, 2016)

In the images from these actions shared on the Collective's blog, people lounge on the ground in parks, resting on backpacks or sheets, sharing water and watching over each other's belongings in the daylight. Some of them lie down together, limbs tangled in indistinct shapes under blankets, while other images are of lone sleepers, faces covered by sheets or hidden under arms, and still others are of women in various forms of relaxation, resting on each others' legs, engaged in the common intimacy of friends. These images of women's bodies in repose out in public, without the visual markers of familial relation or apparent indicators of productivity or purpose, capture moments of nondescript sociality, yet, marked as "actions" they carry rhetorical force. What problem do these images act against? Why is such action necessary? Because there's something in the air, and on the air, where national news headlines and talk show specials address sexual violence in urban India, especially since a series of high profile cases of brutal sexual assault have made international news, giving the country the dubious honor of having a national rape problem. But the problem isn't always as apparent as the immediacy and violence of the event of rape.²³

We might say that the Meet To Sleep campaign is addressing a structure of feeling, rather than a single event of assault. A structure of feeling, or "practical consciousness" in Raymond Williams' writing, refer to the lived relations that cannot be reduced to individual psyche nor generalized to legible social identity. Instead, they demarcate the inarticulate, yet nevertheless shared, and hence social, feelings that emerge in everyday relations. A structure of feeling,

²³ What "counts" as rape is its own problem, though not specifically an Indian one. Yet it is worth noting that feminist historians of contemporary South Asia have documented the ongoing sexual violence of sovereign occupation from Kashmir to Manipur. Chapter 1 of the dissertation addresses this history in more detail.

Williams explains, is “a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies.”²⁴ (Williams, 1978, 132)

Returning to the image above, Fig. 1, the inarticulate structure that I aim to describe is left out of this frame: the stares of passersby, the guards who told them they were not allowed to sleep there, their own discomfort at engaging in a shared public activity, all of which was documented on their blog after their event. The structure of feeling: of unease at occupying public space, and feeling unwelcome in it, is documented repeatedly in Blank Noise’s growing archive of anecdotal evidence of sexual harassment. Other projects of theirs have included invited women to send them the clothes they were wearing when they were harassed, or sharing images of walking alone around their cities at night. The shared sense of being unwelcome in public space that these incidents narrate articulate both a truism – the streets are unsafe for women, especially late at night – and shared dis-ease: that the threat of violence is always around the corner. A structure of feeling does not necessarily demarcate something that is shared equally: while everyone seems to agree that women are unwelcome in public space, the histories of sexual violence on the subcontinent have played out very differently across class, caste, and religious, urban and rural communities, and those tensions run through the atmosphere of threat that Blank Noise’s archive documents.

²⁴ I linger here with Williams rather than more recent discussions of affects and atmospheres (Ahmed, 2004, Berlant, 2011, Stewart, 2007) because the term affect has come to denote a variety of emotional and unemotional relations. Williams’ more clunky term appears more precise in the wake of the affective turn. It allows me to do the theoretical work of “women’s studies” without necessarily having to believe that only “women” participate in the structure of feeling.

Yet, their solution was to invite individuals to participate in public actions such as the Meet to Sleep campaign, and to take their “Safe City” pledge, where individuals (mostly women) took it upon themselves to narrate how they would stand up for their rights. Pledges included going to bars, walking alone, and not letting society dictate their behavior. In short, they made sexism their own burden to bear, something to be fixed through fights for more mobility. While there is more to say about these contradictions, in diagnosing a structural problem and offering individual solutions, for the purposes of this writing, I narrate this anecdote to highlight two things: first, the possibility for leisure, and especially the feminist body in repose, as a political inclination. The second, is the fight for freedom of mobility and its contradictory/coterminous relationship with inactivity.

In this chapter, I extend the argument to explore the strategies of inactivity or immobility especially through the figure in repose. The argument essentially, is quite simple: that the value placed on mobility and movement has been quite high in activism and contemporary Marxist politics in general, and in postcolonial media studies particularly.²⁵ Indeed the very title of the “movement” for women’s rights evokes images of women marching in the streets, or delivering moving addresses on the freedom of movement of women; to leave home, go to school, seek work, and so on. Here, I propose that we reconsider this valorization of movement.

²⁵ This argument is addressed not only to feminist activism but to the broader field of post-Marxist and neo-Marxist trajectories of political thought including some contemporary postcolonial theorists of globalization. Tracing the relationship between freedom and mobility in contemporary Marxist articulations of network culture (Terranova, 2004) and the figure of the multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2005, 2009) is addressed in the conclusion.

The movement for women's rights in India especially since the 1970s and 1980s has focused on addressing and making visible structural and legalized violence: dowry harassment, practices of sati, rape, and domestic violence, environmental threats. (Agnes, 1998; Menon, 1999; Nair and John, 2000, Ghosh, 2008) Engaging with structures of governance, even when they are conceived in opposition to the state, and articulated both through legal channels and direct action, particularly marches and occupations of public space and working with NGOs, such approaches have addressed the erasure of women's action from histories of resistance to colonial rule and patriarchal norms. For example, the volume *Behind The Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia*, begins with the failures of earlier studies (including those by the Subaltern Studies collective) to address the active resistance of women in historical research, arguing that "we see woman as a silent shadow, veiled and mute before her oppressors, and unquestioningly accepting a discourse that endorses her subordination." (Ghosh 2008, 1) The problem of women's representation is addressed by the argument that women are indeed active agents on their own terms, illustrating feminist fights for legal recognition (Kumar, 1993).

Yet feminist criticism even from within such movements has often struggled with the limits of legislative frameworks for feminist politics. As Nivedita Menon most forcefully argued in *Recovering Subversion*, "at this historical moment law has limited capacity to pursue justice. That is, social movements may have exhausted the emancipatory potential of law" (Menon 2004, 204). While Menon's study posits slightly different relations of freedom to feminism, particularly the limits of freedom of choice and its link to consumerism, freedom of mobility as the horizon of radical politics is dogged by similarly compromised rhetoric, as we shall see

shortly. If, as Menon argues, the law's potential for feminism is exhausted, perhaps then what we need is a rest, a respite, a *rest publica*, as states of rest as the foundation (which is to say, rest) for other states including the State. More playfully, perhaps we should say that we could give the State a rest, turning instead to states of arrest and being at rest as a mode of (un)productive relationality. The goal of this writing is to articulate an aesthetics and ethics of inactivity: for the refusals to move or be moved have not always recognized as tactics of action. This oppositional relationship between the recognition of movement (and its associations with freedom) and the conception of inaction (and its associated senses of arrest as unfreedom) functions on several registers that I will attend to presently, and constitute the site of my intervention.

I argue for an aesthetics of rest, rather than the absence of movement as such. I begin by addressing what rest refuses, or is in contrast to, i.e. the political discourse of mobility as a common thread linking postcolonial studies and contemporary feminist activisms with liberal and colonial logics of freedom and mobility. In the second half of the chapter, I explore the aesthetics of rest in the ongoing video/performance/photography project, "Logic of Birds" and "Lying Down on The Ground" by the visual artist Sonia Khurana, whose peripatetic practice provides the material for her oddly still, unmoved images of rest and inaction.

Let me be clear at the outset that my avocation for stillness and non-movement is not a rejection of the rights of women and minoritized populations to education, work, or mobility as freedom, but rather an attempt to challenge the limiting horizon of such activist goals and to supplement such advocacy for movement by paying attention to the interrupting and interruptive interval that insistent rest can provide.

I. Movement and/as freedom

“Movement is the order of things.” (Kotef 2015a, 10)

The question of movement, both bodily and political, is a vexed one in the canon of postcolonial studies. The central figure in much debate, the subaltern, is in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s definition, one who has no access to lines of social mobility. This lack of mobility renders such a subject illegible to discourses of power. The foundational works in the field, called into existence by the historical interventions of the subaltern studies group, aimed to find agency and mobilization in the margins and silences of official history (Spivak and Guha, 1998; Guha, 1999; see also Bhadra, 1998; Pandey, 1995; Spivak, 1988). In postcolonial studies, undertaking an analysis of the West and the rest often resulted in an argument in which the rest were never actually at rest. As Edward Said notes, “Never was it the case that the imperial encounter pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native; there was always some form of active resistance, and in the overwhelming majority of cases, the resistance finally won out” (Said 1993, xii). One aim of postcolonial studies was to chronicle the uprisings and movements of minoritized populations. The second, and related aim of postcolonial studies, drawing from its anti-colonial antecedents, draws out the ways in which colonial control is exercised through the limitations on mobility of those under its rule. Whether, in colonial Africa (Mbembe, 2001), or contemporary Palestine (Kotef, 2015a), colonial control is exercised through strict political hierarchies of access to space, i.e. the management of movement.

The colonial refusal of the rights of movement to the colonized and the postcolonial critics

recuperation of the histories of resistance movements despite colonial control extend the arguments mapped in liberal political theory that links the concept of freedom to mobility. Even as colonial control was exerted through the curtailing of physical and political movements in the colonies, the idea of movement, particularly forward linear movement, or progress, was central to the conception of liberalism in the 19th and 20th century. And it is precisely the lack of intellectual movement and philosophical stasis that is given as the liberal justification for colonization of South Asia. For example, as Uday Mehta (1999) notes, “progress for Mill is like having a stalled car towed by one that is more powerful and can therefore carry the burden of an ascendent gradient.... Hindu civilization, for Mill, epitomizes this condition of being stalled in the past.” (94) The metaphors of physical, even mechanical movement and their links to civilizational progress and political advancement served both to shape the colonizer as a vigorous and healthy body on the move, leading the charge on the future while the colonized were dragging their feet. As political theorist Hagar Kotef (2015b) argues in her reading of John Locke’s foot fetish, his fixation with the idea of Chinese women with bound feet expressed the theoretical link between hindered movement as physical disability and mental incapacity for sovereignty, (340) echoing other thinkers including Hobbes, Mills and Plato as part of the “liberal” tradition of understanding the subject as a subject continuously in motion.

Contemporary political thinkers who do not subscribe to such eugenic arguments about bodily capacity and political acumen nevertheless continue to understand freedom in mobility. Hannah Arendt, most notably develops her definition of the human condition premised on an understanding of the *vita activa*, the active life, organized around the realms of labor, work, and action. In a later work, she explicitly argued that freedom of movement was the indispensable

condition for action, though her own thinking on the concept of action and its physical manifestation in bodily movement were not easily linked.²⁶ The essential relationship between movements for freedom and freedom of movement underpins theorizations of liberal governance and nation-state formation across the political spectrum in Western political theory, as Hagar Kotef's, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom* thoroughly illustrates. In my brief notes above, I am indicating the extent of that liberal inheritance to colonial logics of governance, postcolonial studies and feminist activist politics through their valorization of mobility as the marker of freedom.

II. Post-Postcolonial Politics:

Recent debates in postcolonial media studies²⁷ have taken up the problem of movement through their discussions of the emergence of transnational media networks, highlighting the political potential of the illegal and semi-legal networks of media exchange that convene contingent and mobile communities built on the sharing of pirated media, thereby subverting capitalist legal networks by denying profit to transnational corporations while avoiding the reach of the state.

²⁶ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* and *Men in Dark Times*. In her argument, the reduction of movement to only bodily movement would be problematic given the sense in which man is alienated from his world when he is reduced merely to his bodily movement. Her understanding of movement, action, and freedom (especially her later writings on the *vita contemplativa*) are beyond the scope of this discussion but productively diverge from the arguments made here.

²⁷ The intellectual antecedents to the post-postcolonial theorists here include especially the autonomist Marxist theorists who see in the rise of the “network society” the possibility for global class struggle. While I will not address their work in detail here, some of these debates are addressed in the conclusion. I am including here related works that are collectively conceived of as Italian autonomism, though each’s position on the potential and limits of networks and the emergence of a transnational class produced by the biopolitical production of post-Fordist capital.

Echoing the older dream of technological reproducibility articulated in Walter Benjamin's writing on film, these theorists argue for the semi-autonomous realm of informal networks established through sharing media but extend that metaphor of piracy to the entire realm of informal postcolonial negotiations with the failure of state infrastructure. Ravi Sundaram's argument for piracy as a model of analysis, first addressed in his essay "Recycling Modernity" (1999) and is most eloquently outlined in, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism* (2010), making the case for these emerging informal networks of media circulation through a study of Delhi as an epicenter of piracy. Essays by colleagues associated with the Sarai program and CSDS in Delhi had taken up his call to study piracy, including Lawrence Liang's (2005) illuminating study of the cassette tape as a cheap, semi-legal format for sharing music, which developed a whole new market for music sharing in India (Philip 2005) and new avenues for participation of those often excluded from circuits of capital.

Ravi Sundaram finds in these new media urbanisms, the need to surpass postcoloniality. As the title of his essay, "Post-postcolonial Sensory Infrastructure" makes apparent, the "post-postcolonial" seems to be a less antagonistic but no less dismissive position than the "anti-postcolonialist" theorists of the new global commons²⁸. Sundaram (2015) associates postcoloniality with the separation between the realm of the social, marked for him by the government's nurturing of a healthy population through social welfare schemes, and the medial as the realm of leisure (including film, television, radio) where welfare was "the state and

²⁸ The "anti-postcolonial" thinkers here refer to some of the debates in on network society addressed in the footnote above. Also see the conclusion to this writing.

politics” media were managed by “regulators and censors” (who are notably still the state, at least in India) but then, Sundaram argues that the increased circulating of media puts the social into question. He states, “Via a Kittlerian lens, we could say that if media “determines” our urban situation by becoming its infrastructural mesh, it simultaneously undermines and implodes the representational models of postcolonial power.” (2015, 5) Sundaram seems to suggest that the postcolonial is obsolete and “imploded” because of its understanding of power as representational. The term “postcolonial” here refers not quite to the postcolonial studies and its naïve particularisms that the new democratic theorists are criticizing but does seem linked insomuch as they share a model of power: the imbrication of the social and the medial, in Sundaram’s terms, against older postcolonial studies’ focus on representational governance. Hence, the implosion of postcolonial power seems to also invoke the end of postcolonial theory, or at least the kind that does not include acknowledgement of the mobility of media. Sundaram is not explicit about what pirate subjectivity is, as he is more intent on explaining the culture of piracy that emerges in the 1990s. He explains that “pirate culture has utilized the technological infrastructures of the post-colonial city – electricity, squatter settlements, roads, media networks and factories. These are siphoned off, or accessed through informal arrangements outside the existing legal structures of the city. By disrupting existing technologies of control and expansion, piracy provides a key interface between media technologies and larger urban infrastructures.” (2015, 12)

Yet he does not want to venture as far as Hardt and Negri, who find the in the disorganized global multitudes the possibility of the emergence of a class for itself in the Marxist sense, piracy is “not an alterity, or a form of resistance, though it clearly offers creative solutions outside the property regime for subaltern populations.” (2015, 13) Yet in an early text of postcolonial

studies, “Can The Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak had already warned us of the dangers of non-representational theory. Analysing Foucault and Deleuze’s exchanges, the same theorists of power that Sundaram draws heavily on to understand pirate modernity as an instantiation of Deleuzian societies of control, Spivak argued that the lack of a subject in the theoretical discourse is precisely the rhetorical strategy by which the Subject (of the privileged theorist) re-enters the discussion.

While Sundaram is more circumspect about the figure of the pirate, Bhaskar Sarkar is more forthcoming in his provocative new essay, “Media Piracy and the Terrorist Boogeyman” where he argues for a conception of piracy as it is rhetorically linked to the idea of terrorism, both produced in the racialized rhetoric of contemporary Euro-U.S. theorists of intellectual property and security as an ever-evolving threat from Asia. Sarkar’s critique of racialized figure of the pirate-terrorist produced in liberal media, instead views these informal networks as the inheritor of the politics of Third Cinema, which lives on today in the form of shared entertainment, and locates in pirated media consumption nothing less than the potential decolonization of the mind, stating:

“The Asian pirate-terrorist’s revolutionary potential lies in the challenges it poses for a Euro-American modernity’s normative impositions – whether technological or aesthetic, institutionally codified or habitually internalized –that constantly seek to discipline, modulate and shape behavior to reproduce the very differences that it purports to erase in the name of a universal globality.” (Sarkar, 2016, 332)

Sarkar hails the pirate as the new actor of decolonization, and he does so precisely because of the pirate’s productivity, taking issue with those “liberals” who are interested in policing intellectual property rights who dismiss piracy as unproductive, Sarkar states that piracy “potentiates” by explaining that it “builds on current productivities, proliferates spontaneous energies, and opens

up unanticipated vistas of ingenuity.” (359) Even the most optimistic of Marxist autonomists find the value constantly extracted from us through our media consumption when we are not actively producing goods a troubling fact,²⁹ but for Sarkar, this productivity is to be celebrated. Sarkar also argues that given the high rates of unemployment in the Global South (he goes to India as his example) media piracy might be providing the livelihood of several million people, though why we wouldn’t just agitate for better employment or better yet, more social welfare so employment is not the only route to survival, is not clear here.

My only aim here to highlight the chain of substitutions by which “pirate modernity” is theorized. Following Sundaram, the postcolonial state is linked to the forms of modernist urban planning that developed through the aim for discipline and order, which is to say, in Foucauldian terms, it was exercised as disciplinary power. This model of power in the postcolonial state, under the regime of ‘liberal governance,’ characterized by the provision of state welfare and a robust public sphere. In contrast, “pirate culture” is linked to the post-postcolonial infrastructures of increased media mobility, and characterized by the illegal and semi-legal networks of commodity exchange that connect transnational actors and emerging through the copy.

The subjects in this system are entrepreneurs whose “jugaad” (the colloquial term for improvisatory and temporary solutions to structural problems) function through illegal and extra-legal networks of circulation, both of media and capital. It appears that the diagnosis of the problem (neoliberal capitalism, which disenfranchises large populations and continues the

²⁹ For a detailed discussion of the limits and potential of network culture, particularly the surplus value generated through new forms of mediated consumption including social media, gaming, and online communities, please see Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2004)

exploitation of labor today by increasingly commodifying all aspects of everyday life) is also the solution (anti-authoritarian, de-territorialized networks of pirates).³⁰

Postcolonial theorist Rey Chow observes that a demand to political action and movement inheres in the very conception of minoritized being, “To be ethnic is to protest” (Chow, 2002, 48), either by working through legal channels to fight for structural change, (the limits of which I have already alluded to in the introduction to this chapter,) or to take to the streets. For Chow, the paradox at the heart of fights for social recognition hinge on the logic of capitalist productivity that underpins the ethical impulse to protest. The ethnicized or minoritarian subject is held captive by the logic of racialization in which one is both rendered an object, i.e. dehumanized because of histories of colonial violence, and retains one’s humanity by protesting for those rights. Yet such protests for rights only occur through the very capitalist racialized logics that again objectify minoritarian subjects, now as subjects who demand visibility, currency, and freedom of movement (Chow 2002, 47-48). Chow’s argument echoes Spivak’s articulation of the “double-bind” of representation that haunts the figure of the “third world woman,” produced even as she disappears in the violent shuttling between opposing positions – subject and object, patriarchy and fights for freedom. Faced with the option of either representation (political and aesthetic), which requires entry into structures of governance or the absence of representation,

³⁰ This approach to the network form, to the diagnosis of mobility and decentralization that veers toward its celebration takes up what Mark Fisher calls, “capitalist realism,” a belief in capitalism as “the only political-economic system that ‘works,’ and that it is impossible even to imagine any alternative to it.” Fisher goes on to argue that “rather than challenging capitalist realism, horizontalism has – at least in some respects – further embedded it.”³⁰ While Fisher’s argument is directed at the hopeful abandonment of the state by Leftist intellectuals who are invested in the network’s mobility and flexibility, primarily in West, his provocation to postcolonial intellectuals stands in its invitation to strategize alternatives to simply advocating for the status quo.

which comes with attendant threats of violence and lack of protections, rights become what we “cannot not want.” (Spivak 1996, 28)³¹

Postcolonial theory teaches us about the particular impasse of representation and the limits of the fight for rights for minoritarian or “third world” populations. Such double-binds have emerged in recent cultural critique of the contemporary moment, theorized as a general condition of life: as the impasse or the “crisis ordinary” under late capitalism, where the future-oriented promises of the good life are rapidly fraying and disappearing under general conditions of economic precarity, the disappearing resources of state-sponsored welfare and the horizon of environmental crisis. Lauren Berlant’s productive formulation of “cruel optimism” marks the form of affective attachment to something that is “at the same time an obstacle to one’s flourishing” (Berlant, 2011: 5). It appears that the double-bind, initially conceptualized as the relation of the “third-world” woman as subject in the post-colony now extends to the general condition under neoliberalism. As Chow argues, there remains an affinity with the labor of protest and labor in general under capitalism, as exploited and exhausting work: “the more one protests, the more work, business and profit one will generate, and the more this will become a sign that one is loved...ethnic captivity thus transubstantiates, its lines of flight readily morphing – and merging – into global capital’s phantasmagoric flows” (Chow 2002, 49). Chow’s critique of the labor of activism as capitalist exploitation alongside Berlant’s invocation of the promises of the good life that fuel continued engagements with capitalism highlights the double-bind of

³¹ For a nuanced critique of postcolonial valorizations of mobility, see Pheng Cheah’s essay, “Given Culture” where the author reads Clifford and Bhabha’s writing in line with a broader turn to cosmopolitanism in postcolonial theory.

labor and political recognition: to protest in the hopes of a potential future of a better life for minoritized populations might, paradoxically fuel the very machine it opposes.

III. Obstructions

Sonia Khurana's on-going projects, *Logic of Birds* and *Lying Down On The Ground* address some of the aesthetic tensions of mobility and stasis that I have been discussing so far. Khurana is a Delhi-based multimedia artist working across performance, video and photography and since 2006, she has trained her camera on the act of lying down in public to explore the boundaries and potential of sharing public space. In her own words, the project is "a proposal to perform the abject; a state of dereliction inherent within us, and the underlying desire to recuperate the lost or residual 'body matters' which remain unattended on the sidelines of the social." (Khurana, private communications, March 2017).

Logic of Birds, which precedes *Lying down on the ground*, began as a working through of personal and public trauma through the act of lying down on the ground. In a recent interview, the artist narrates this early experiment in public sleeping as, at the time, her bodily state and affective response to losses in her family and in the political situation around her, while she was living and working in different cities across Europe (Adajania, 2009). First at the Place de la Bastille in Paris, during protests against attacks on Lebanon, and then in cities around the world, Barcelona, Nagoya, Delhi, London, Nottingham, wherever she travelled, Khurana followed her impulse to participate in public horizontally. In her recent retrospective at Gallery Chemould, the final section of the show, titled "If I can't dance...", begins with the video of an early iteration of

Logic of Birds. The title borrows from anarchist feminist Emma Goldman's famous misquotation, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be a part of your revolution," which is commonly read as an indictment of the possibilities for revolutionary action to also acknowledge those forms of sociality that engage in joy and freedom of movement. In Khurana's repetition of the quotation, the artist reframes Goldman's indictment as a question; an inquiry into what forms of bodily action are legible as revolutionary or politically motivated. Here, dancing as a metonym for movement is framed in opposition to Khurana's lying down and horizontal stillness as a politically motivated act. Is it possible, she asks, to read lying down as a revolutionary gesture?

In what follows, I read several of Khurana's images through contemporary theorizations of surviving the impasse. First, I draw on Nick Salvato's concept of obstruction to think of Khurana's work as an obstruction to my own thinking on representations of feminist activism on screen. Salvato complicates the idea of an obstruction by drawing on the flipside of Berlant's formulation of the obstacle: rather than something that appears to be good for us, or that we desire, while preventing us from achieving our survival, Salvato finds the obstruction to be that which appears unnecessary, detrimental, or a blockage to thought that nevertheless is productive intellectually. Salvato's writing explores phenomena including laziness, embarrassment, slowness, cynicism, and digressiveness as frequent complaints of academics in relation to the need to produce valuable work at regular intervals. Instead, Salvato argues that sitting with these bad affects, or wastes of time, can open up objects and periods of contemplation that are intrinsic to the work of thinking. An obstruction is hence, valuable, even if it is not always productive, which is to say, it may do something by not doing anything. (Salvato, 2016)³²

³² Jack Halberstam was already thinking along these lines in their work, *The Queer Art of*



(figure 2: Sonia Khurana, *Logic of Birds*, film still. Image courtesy: Gallery Chemould)

Khurana's project consists of an evolving archive of the "third world" woman figured as a passive body, often in urban landscapes, many familiar as capitals of major global cities, yet not

Failure (2011) in which Halberstam outlines a commitment to "intellectual worlds conjured by losers, failures, dropouts, and refuseniks, often serv(ing) as the launching pad for alternatives [to the violence of war and capitalism]" (Halberstam, 2011: 7) where there appear to be none. In a chapter on radical passivity, Halberstam articulates a feminism premised not on the ideals of individual agency and the passing on of the lineage of activism from one generation to the next through the heterosexual imagination of familial lineage, but on the radical refusal of feminist subjectivity or to "refuse what was refused to us" in Fred Moten's terms (2013, 756). As Halberstam observes, "failure is the map of political paths not taken, though it does not chart a completely separate land; failure's by-ways are all the spaces in between the superhighways of capital" (Halberstam, 2011, 19)

necessarily localizable from within the image through spatial markers. Often, the images frame Khurana's prone body slight off-center, either filling the whole screen or prominently present; her face rarely betrays any emotion, and her eyes are closed, giving us no insight into the emotional state of the photographed subject. In the short video "Logic of Birds" as part of the installation, the still camera appears to share the ground with Khurana's prone form, placed a few feet away as birds move in and out of the frame, as do the legs of passers by, their shadows falling on the form on the ground.

Khurana's archive functions as a productive, inscrutable obstruction, not necessarily evoking the pity or empathy³³ that are ostensibly the affective call of images of homelessness and dereliction. Khurana's images, even as they archive her stasis, also archive the life of mobility: taken in global cities around the world from Aichi to Hyderabad and Paris, Khurana is by no means the "postcolonial subaltern" who is defined by lack of access to lines of social mobility. Instead, it is Khurana's living within that mobility, and unlearning that privilege of mobility as a loss³⁴ of rootedness and a place of one's own that is on display.

The faces of passersby, and occasionally the names of restaurants or monuments behind her provide some geographic markers. Often, the camera is too close to the body on the ground to see much except feet. Her images document spaces neither private as in the domestic spaces of sleep, nor public spaces of performance display (museum, gallery, theatre) but rather in the "by-

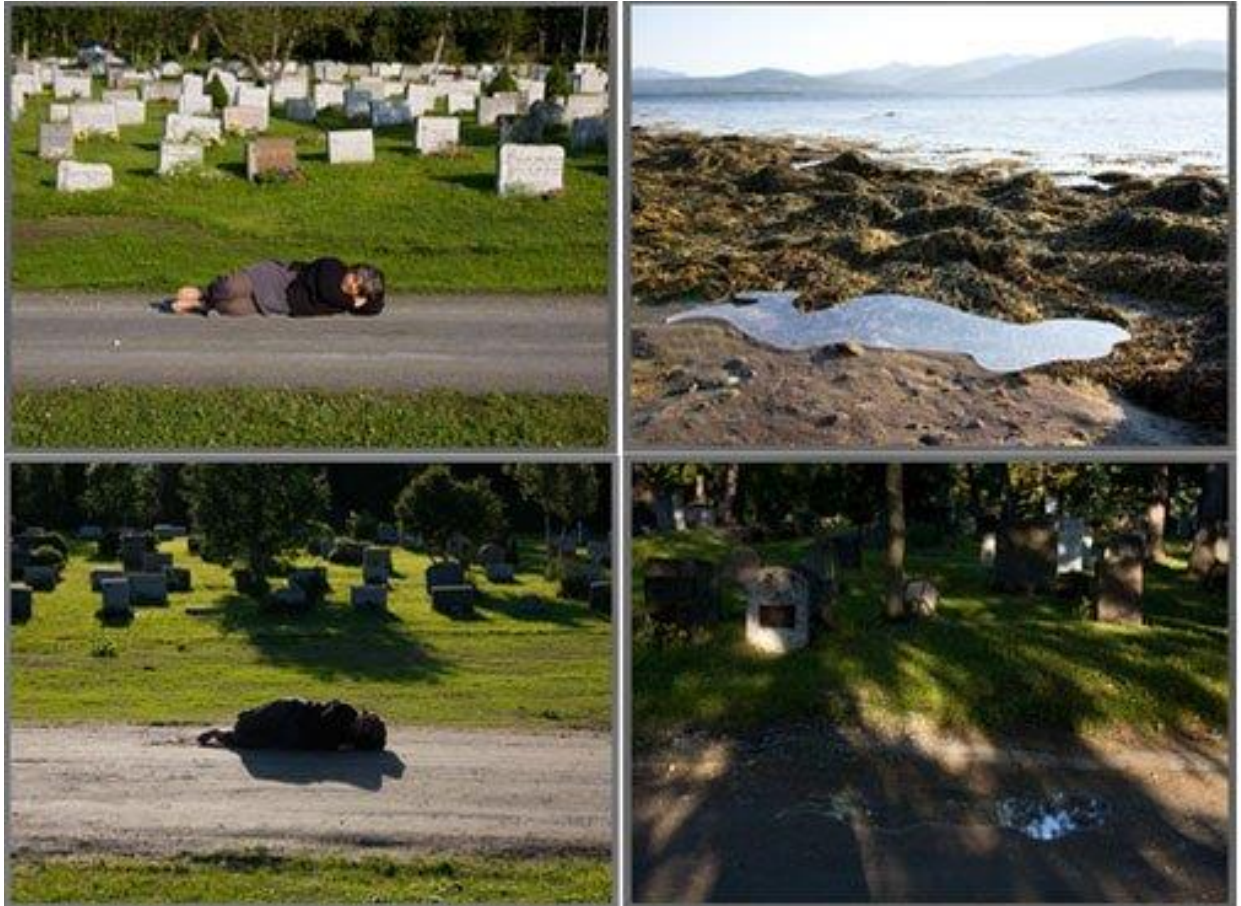
³³ Deborah Nelson's discussion of "toughness" and unsentimentality as a style of thought is related to this argument, but didn't make it into this version of the chapter. See *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil* (University of Chicago Press: 2017)

³⁴ This is the lesson that Gayatri Spivak demarcates for "postcolonial intellectuals," who need to learn the privileges of mobility and assimilation in institutions as the loss of other kinds of access, including claims to representing the gendered subaltern. (Spivak, 1988: 271-316).

ways” and places of waiting – graveyards, city squares, bus stops – places of anonymous transience within which she creates scenes of rest. Passivity is not always a radical feminist act, indeed earlier feminist critiques of women’s representation were frustrated precisely by the passivity assigned to women, as only “to be looked at” (Mulvey, 1999) while men did the looking. However, these images put passivity itself on display as an object of artistic labor. As an index of emotional neutrality, the image refuses to instruct the viewer on the appropriate response to the still body on the ground: are we witnessing a crime scene, or a moment of public leisure? The answer seems to be both, by rendering them inseparable from each other. The impassive image of the prone figure on the ground, invites the viewer to contemplate an image of contemplation, to think about repose. Such thinking about thinking, a meditation on rest, is also a meditation on the place of rest. Leisure, as a feminist issue has been understood in contrast to the drive to work, or the ethos of productivity as defining of human life. (Weeks 2011) While I agree with the Marxist feminist critique of work and the work ethic of productivity, I want to suggest here that the figure in repose in these images asks us to think of leisure not only in terms of its anti-work politics, that is, not only a pause or break to capitalist temporality, but also in the rendering inoperative³⁵ the norms of public space, and the representational logic that drives desires for mobility. By making apparent the structure of feeling that I discussed in the opening section of this chapter as the desire to move in public space, these images repurpose stasis as critique not only of the ethos of productivity, but also as a critique of the desire for movement, and especially for representations of movement.

³⁵ I am thinking here of Giorgio Agamben’s definition, “Inoperativity does not mean inertia, but names an operation that deactivates and renders works (of economy, of religion, of language, etc.) inoperative.” (2014, 69)

In “Can The Subaltern Speak?” Spivak addresses that the figuration of the “third world” woman, who disappears in the violent shuttling between multiple demands of representation, in such a frenzy of movement that the figure presumably blurs, torn between tradition and modernity, patriarchy and imperialism. (Spivak, 1988) The violence of that conceptual disappearance of the figure of woman is also a historical disappearance, given the histories of sexual violence enacted on women particularly during the Partition of 1947 but continued today in zones of military occupation and caste violence where the boundaries of sovereignty and domination are established through the violent disappearance of women, whose bodies become the site of drawing the line between two nation-states or between caste communities (Butalia, 2000; Menon and Bhasin, 2000, Rao 2009). In light of these disappearances, conceptual and historical, the act of lying down marks a place; it figures the body on the ground as an obstinate archive of continued existence.



(Figure 3: Sonia Khurana, *Insomnia Monologues*, diptychs, photographic translate, light box. 2011. Image courtesy: Gallery Chemould)

In the images above, the headstones mark the bodies of the dead, while the body of Khurana lying down in front insists on its living materiality. The images on the right document an extension of the project where Khurana placed plexiglass outlines of her prone form to mark places of rest. The figure on the ground, even in its transparency, nonetheless remains *there*, which is to say, the localized instant that is here materialized as a place of rest. Against an understanding of wakefulness as the condition of the laboring and exhausted subject, such as the “third world woman” (a meaningless yet necessary designation of a standpoint), the act of lying down is the event of staking a localized relation to one’s surroundings, of taking a place, demarcated by the outline of the body on the ground.

Through this chapter, I have aimed to illustrate the limits of the discourses of mobility, linked as they are across different registers to understandings of freedom, sovereignty, and capital. In concluding with Khurana, I want to suggest that radical passivity can be a refusal of the injunction to movements both political and physical. The representations of rest and lying down allow us to imagine conceptualizations of selves beyond or outside of our relation to logics of labor and productivity, even while living lives that nevertheless are productive – as in the art objects we are contemplating in this section. In contemplating Khurana’s object of contemplation, which is also herself, the images capture a dialogue with oneself. Such a dialogue was Hannah Arendt’s definition of thinking as a dialogue with oneself, in contrast to the political actor. Throughout the *Human Condition*, Arendt’s treatise on the *vita activa*, she either ignores or warns against passivity. Yet, quite surprisingly, Arendt concludes this writing by noting that “For if no other test but the experience of being active, no other measure but the extent of sheer activity were to be applied to the various activities within the *vita activa*, it might well be that thinking as such would surpass them all. Whoever has any experience in this matter will know how right Cato was when he said...Never is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself.” (Arendt, 1998: 325)

While a sustained engagement with Arendt’s argument is beyond the current version of this writing, it is this surprising argument about the necessity of thinking *as* stasis and thinking *of* stasis in relation to action that this chapter has been motivated to understand. Khurana’s project engages with what Gayatri Spivak has argued is the work of aesthetic pedagogy, as the “non-coercive re-arrangement of desire” (Spivak, 2012). This writing and Khurana’s work participate in this re-arrangement of desires, nudging us slowly away from the rhetoric of activity to perhaps contemplate the value of rest, of passivity as a form of thinking, and also as a feminist form of life.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Queer Conspiracy³⁶

Prelude: Waiting for a life

‘I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me.’ (Fanon 1968,107)

‘In the temporality of the interval, waiting happens without protection, exposed to the examination and expectations of others. The challenge the experience of the interval provides entails opening through to the unforeseeable, the unanticipatable, the non-masterable, non-identifiable. Perhaps a whole other reality – one that we do not yet have a memory of as such – opens up.’ (Keeling 2007, 40)

‘The indefinite article is the indetermination of the person only because it is determination of the singular... One is always the index of a multiplicity: an event, a singularity, a life...’ (Deleuze 2012, 30)

The epigraphs that open this essay conceive of waiting as central to spectatorship. For Frantz Fanon (1968), waiting is the pause: a black screen, following which a film will play, perhaps providing him with an image of himself. But such a waiting might result in unforeseen consequences. Waiting is the activity of being suspended in a state of potential, where an event is unfolding but we are unsure what form it will take. For Kara Keeling (2007) who follows Fanon’s logic to theorize the interval, waiting is a mode of engagement without the protection of guarantees, and a potential opening to a reality that does not exist yet. In this essay, I submit waiting as a mode of inhabiting a moment that is full of uncertainty. Such a temporal inhabitation, I argue, makes possible the experience of ‘a life.’

‘A Life’ is the subtitle to the final short essay written by Gilles Deleuze. In it, Deleuze (2012) characterizes ‘a life’ as that which is the very fact and process of existence: life as the impersonal event of living, in contrast to the specificity of someone’s life. The indefinite article, ‘a’ indexes

³⁶ A version of this chapter first appeared in a special issue of *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, “Breath: Image and Sound.” (See Padmanabhan, 2018)

an indeterminate form of living in common. A life is never fully defined, or fully actualized, it is always in the process of emergence. 'A life' describes a 'we,' that is not defined by subjective differences or commonalities such as one's identity. Rather than individuals, 'a life' describes multiple singularities. Such singularity is central to the desire described by Fanon, of experiencing oneself without the violent interpellation of racialization. 'I wait for me,' he remarks, but in this impersonal sense of living, the terms 'I' and 'me' are separated by 'waiting.' Waiting keeps 'I' and 'me' from coinciding in one body: waiting is the process of moving between these states.

Postcolonial Untimeliness

This final chapter closes a series of investigations into the queer and postcolonial archives of untimeliness. Here, I focus on the work of Tejal Shah whose art practice investigates the boundaries between queer sexuality, embodiment, and new forms of life made possible by video technology. In early works such as *Chingari Chumma* (Stinging Kiss), Shah has explored the queer pleasures of cinema through drag re-performance of heteronormative Bollywood scenes. In other pieces, including, *I Am* and *What Are You*, the encounter of the body with the camera becomes an occasion to challenge and renegotiate gender norms, where queer bodies refuse binary gender identifications and provoke critical reflection on the complexity of sexuality and gender as bodily performances.

Between the Waves marks a break with these earlier pieces inasmuch as it begins to create its own language of embodiment and visual pleasure, rather than parodying existing markers of

gendered difference. In this piece, the artist invited collaborators and friends to participate in scenes of collective care that extend beyond forms of identifiably human interaction. In such scenes, a gently held cup exhibits as much erotic potential as the close up of an eye, or the sound of a pomegranate as it falls on the ground.

The piece, in its first iteration, was installed at Documenta 13 in 2012. It consists of five channels, each occupying its own timespace, though the sounds of the videos overlap to produce a shared soundscape. In Channel I, 'A Circular Fable,' the camera travels across wastelands, from mangroves choked in plastic, to trash that washes up on the shores of an empty beach. Channel II, 'Landfill Dance,' is a shorter video (five minutes in length), in which femme bodies dressed in plastic and paper perform slow choreographed dances amid piles of industrial trash. Channel III, 'Animation,' consists of a short video of hand-drawn stop-motion imagery. IV, 'Moon Burning,' consists of a long take of a paper moon on fire that crumbles and reforms over the course of the video. Channel V, 'Morse Code,' slowly beeps out a mysterious text one letter at a time.

In *Translating Time*, Bliss Cua Lim (2009) outlines the political value of temporal critique of cinema. Bringing together Gilles Deleuze (1986; 1989) and Henri Bergson's (1911; 2005) theorizations of temporality and ontology together with postcolonial critiques of linear temporality (Chakrabarty 1997; 2000), Lim approaches the genre of horror and 'fantastic' cinema as a site for envisioning the radical heterogeneity of time. I follow Lim's claim that we must pay attention to the ghosts of colonization and racial violence that shape our present. Such hauntings are made visible through the temporal disjunctures within film.

While narrative cinema has evolved with a commitment to linear temporality, enacted through its ability to spatialize time, and to determine our experience for the duration of our viewing, it has also been vehicle for forms of temporal critique that challenge the linear progression of instants, as noted (1986; 1989/2010) in Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*. Following a postcolonial critique of linear temporality, Lim (2009) argues that temporal cohabitation, such as a moment of shared racial identification with a 'savage' on screen, illustrates the ways in which the past is never quite done with us. Haunting continues to be an important metaphor for the relationship of the colonial past to the postcolonial present. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (1997) explains in his essay, 'The Time of History and the Time of the Gods,' the linear progression of time that has underwritten the discipline of History is not a natural given, but rather a modern construct that has brought with it the conception of subjectivity and History as an accretion of instants. Phil Rosen (2001) has traced the conceptual emergence of film as a technology linked to modern temporality and historicity, while Mary Ann Doane (2003) has provided us with a media-archaeological approach to the emergence of cinematic time. These two disparate fields—postcolonial studies and film studies—are brought together in Lim's project to illustrate the ways in which the modern temporality cannot account for the forms of survival made possible in the aftermath of violence.

I follow Lim's approach to temporal critique, drawing on postcolonialism and Deleuzian film theory. However, in this writing, I am invested in understanding the untimely emergence of potential futures, rather than the haunting of colonial pasts. 'Postcolonial untimeliness' names what I have been developing here as the critique of linear temporality. The 'untimely interval'

articulates a moment that is besides linear temporality, and one that operates within its own temporal registers, thereby allowing us to imagine futures that may have been foreclosed in the linear progression from the past to the present. In its occupation of the untimely interval, I argue that *Between the Waves* is instructive as a mode of attuning us to shared potential futures, where the boundaries between self and other, human and non-human continuously escape easy identification. Such indeterminacy is made possible through Shah's exploitation of the technological shifts entailed by digital video.

While classical film theory has taken up the problem of indexicality³⁷, conceived as the physical trace of the object on film, the embrace of digital technologies of video recording have been accompanied by the fear that the loss of the physical trace indexes the de-materialization of the social world more broadly. Against this imminent loss, scholars have insisted on the materiality of experience (Sobchack 2004; Hansen 2004) and the continued expansion of cinema into other spaces (Balsom, 2013; Casetti, 2015) as forms of cinematic survival.

It is in this context that the intervention of temporal critique is most apparent. By paying attention to the way temporality is experienced in moving images, we cannot take a technologically deterministic view of the shift from film stock to pixels. Rather in Shah's work, the temporal disjunctures and loss of the physical trace make visible what postcolonial theorists

³⁷ I will not re-visit the complicated debates within film studies on indexicality in this chapter, since they have repeatedly been address in Part I. I will note that Shah's work takes for granted not the disappearance of the physical trace, but rather that these two functions need not be in tandem. Often in this work, the physical trace of the referent (object before the camera) contradicts or breaks with what it points us to.

of temporality and feminist critics of embodiment have already illustrated to us: that the links between the physical world and its representations (between referent and index, physical bodies and social subjects) are not so easily mapped on to each other. Rather than conceiving this interval as a period of mourning loss, I argue that we can find an incipient potential for imagining other futures. In the interval between the image of breath and the sound of breathing lies the potential for a mode of digital disembodiment as a form of queer feminist poetics³⁸.

Queer Dystopias, or, digital care for self and others

‘Queerness’s form is utopian’ (José Muñoz, 2009, 30)

In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz’s (2009) critical intervention into debates on futurity, sexuality, and collectivity, the author takes up the challenge posed by queer theory for temporality. Beginning from the observation that the present is toxic for queer sexuality, Muñoz argues that nevertheless, we must imagine queerness as our horizon of potentiality. His challenge to minoritarian critique is to imagine futures that are *impossible* with the present: forms of living that are foreclosed by the restrictions of what is possible in the present moment but nevertheless emerge. Against *possibility*, those events which emerge from the ordered nature of the present, *potentiality* marks the unknown and unknowable emergence of futures. For Muñoz, queerness’ form is utopian; it is characterized by waiting for a future that might never come. Later in his writing, Muñoz (2009: 182) argues that waiting itself is a queer form. Waiting, he argues, marks a way of being out of time on two fronts: queerness has been cast out of straight time’s rhythm, and queerness is the

³⁸ My use of poetics, and particularly the invocation of touch as a mode of care, is informed by Hypatia Vourloumis’ writing on queer forms of touch (Vourloumis, 2015)

remaking of the world through queer temporal and spatial reconfigurations.

‘Utopia’ plays with the etymological indeterminacy between ‘eu’ (good/well) and ‘ou’ (non) place: utopia implies that what is missing (nonplace) is also what is desirable. While Muñoz’s queer utopias imagines the future as a desirable place, I focus on how spaces of queer sexuality have been and continue to be dystopian, especially in Tejal Shah’s installation. Yet this does not negate the necessity of a future-oriented temporal critique since it is precisely the attunement to colonial pasts (from postcolonial studies) and unliveable presents (from queer theory) that allow us to imagine queer postcolonial inhabitations of the future that exceed the possibilities of the present moment.

In Tejal Shah’s queer project, the future is quite dystopian. The title, *Between the Waves*, describes the timespace of the work: somewhere in between. We do not know where or why figures wander expanses of environmental ruin, or who is recording their exploration. While the locations of these images are occasionally familiar—the outskirts of a city, a skyline visible far away—the entire piece appears set in ‘between’: a break that opens up to reveal a world of postpornographic, postapocalyptic, postcolonial mess. Large piles of refuse occupy most of the frame, where characters wander slowly through the mess, trying to clean each other and the world around them.



(Figure 1. Dancer on top of the landfill. Still from Channel II, “Landfill Dance,” in *Between The Waves*, Tejal Shah, 2012)

The narrative, such as it is, which unfolds in Channel I follows two figures as they walk, swim, and have sex in scenes largely devoid of human inhabitation. Though there is always the waste. The waste of the landfill, the plastic that washes up on the shore, and the assorted metallic pieces of electronic waste that are used to make the costumes for many of the figures on screen. Every frame is full of objects, all of which seem to index a civilization that laid waste to its surroundings, or perhaps one buried under its own refuse. In figure 1, for example, we see the city in the background, visually overwhelmed by the trash it has produced. The dancer balances in the foreground, moving through the trash in sudden scuttling motions. Urban life is both far away and ominously present in its remains.

The sound that opens Channel I, ‘A Circular Fable,’ is the dull roar of wind and waves. Another

sound track kicks in beneath it, an electronic hum. About a minute and a half in, there is a sigh, or maybe a gasp of air from Channel II, 'Landfill Dance.' It repeats again a few seconds later.

The first channel, 'A Circular Fable' consists of five chapters, each approximately five minutes in length. Each chapter begins with a black screen, and a small seal at the center. The seals, images from the archaeological site of the ancient Harappan civilization in the Indus valley, remain one of the last untranslated writing systems. Throughout the first chapter of the fable, two moving figures occupy the diegetic space. They are clothed only in long white plastic horns attached to their heads by bands of white fabric that cut their bodies into neat sections. The costumes are iterations of the work, *Einhorn* (1970-72), by performance artist, Rebecca Horn. They also draw on the imagery of Frida Kahlo's self-portrait, *Broken Column* (1944). Both *Einhorn* and *Broken Column* raised questions about the ambivalent relationships between pain, performance, and sexuality. In citing these works, *Between The Waves* evokes the longer archive of feminist visual art, even as, in this iteration these questions are newly mediated through the digital image.

Between the Waves is a queer text, but not because of the occasional scenes of homosexual relations. Rather, it is the moments of care for the self and for nonhuman life that carry the erotic charge of this work. The gentle caresses of the camera across the skin, and the long takes³⁹ that capture repeated moments of care for bodies human and nonhuman, equate visual pleasure with

³⁹ Of course what constitutes a 'long take' is subjective, as film theorists have already pointed out. See, for example, discussions of long takes in the emergence of 'slow cinema' (de Luca and Jorge 2016). I am using the 'long take' here to mark the still camera and extended scenes of repeated action that are predominant in this work, though no single take is longer than about a minute through the whole piece

the pleasures of care.



(Figure 2. Hand caressing the sand. Still from Channel I, “A Circular Fable,” in *Between The Waves*, Tejal Shah, 2012.)



(Figure 3. Sunlight shining on water. Still from Channel I, 'A Circular Fable,' in *Between The Waves*, Tejal Shah, 2012)

In figure 2, for example, a close-up of hands caressing the sand, clenching and opening in the earth, suggests that the body they belong to is in the throes of sexual pleasure. This image is immediately followed by a brief, upside-down shot of sunlight shining on water. The sequence does not confirm or deny the potential of sexual pleasure, leaving the viewer to find, in the absence of such narrative progression, the ambivalent pleasures of touch. Similarly, later in the work, two hands gently stroke branches (see figures 4 and 5). The mangroves in which the sequence is filmed appear to be choking under plastic. Human figures move between the trees picking up plastic, playing with it and each other. These caresses occur between other moments of care through touch such as the gentle cleaning by one figure of their prosthetic horn, or another scene where one of these figures slowly cleans the plastic off tree branches. Here, care

for our surroundings, exhibited through the deliberate work of picking up the refuse around them, intersperses with the creative re-making of trash into toys through moments of play. Trash is both what is left behind and the raw material for different forms of careful pleasure. Such depictions of care bring us into the realm of haptic vision (Marks 2000), where touch and vision blur together such that the close-up, skimming the surfaces of bodies, mirrors the acts of touch that these hands employ in relating to their dystopian surroundings.



(Figure 4. Cleaning the mangroves, Still from Channel I, 'A Circular Fable,' in *Between The Waves*, Tejal Shah, 2012)



(Figure 5. Caressing a branch. Still from Channel I, 'A Circular Fable,' in *Between The Waves*, Tejal Shah, 2012)

Such moments of care represent forms of engagement with the environmental ruin that surrounds them. However such care is also digitally produced. Images traffic in sensorial practices of digital care, even as the objects of touch in these videos vary from human bodies to plant life and industrial waste. By digital care, I'm referring to the potential for forms of care made possible within digital images. For example, the long takes of gentle caresses share aesthetic resonances with the emergence of a digital community of care that makes and shares videos of autonomous sensory meridian responses (ASMR). In online ASMR communities, videos depicting forms of bodily care (such as long takes of someone combing hair another person's hair, gentle whispers, or fingers clacking on a keyboard) trigger synesthetic pleasure for viewers, who experience the act of viewing as a form of multisensory pleasure. While not everyone finds all ASMR triggers pleasurable, there are certainly ones that are common, including gentle stroking (Bjelic, 2016). In online ASMR communities, videos depicting forms of bodily care (such as long takes of

someone combing another person's hair, gentle whispers, or fingers clacking on a keyboard) trigger synesthetic pleasure for viewers, who experience the act of viewing as a form of multisensory pleasure.

I raise the resonance with ASMR not necessarily to presume that *Between the Waves* traffics in such forms of pleasure, but to illustrate that under the digital regime of the image (Keeling 2011), the technologically mediated break between physical trace and visual representation (the loss of indexicality) leads to new sensorial relations, allowing us to understand pleasures decoupled from expected circuits of touch, and embodiment. I raise the resonance with ASMR not necessarily to presume that *Between the Waves* traffics in such forms of pleasure, but to illustrate that under the digital regime of the image (Keeling 2011), the technologically mediated break between physical trace and visual representation (what has been described as the loss of indexicality) leads to new sensorial relations, allowing us to understand pleasures decoupled from expected circuits of touch, and embodiment.

In following Muñoz's invocation of queerness' link to futurity, *Between the Waves* makes visible an unknown future of environmental ruin in which queer pleasures are perceptible despite the break between referent and representation, perhaps even because of it. Each instant of the video does not narratively follow from the last, but in the disorienting break between one image and the next, waiting for narrative closure gives way to a form of waiting linked to the fractured and mobile pleasures of watching a hand glide down a branch, or listening to the sound of the waves, or the chitter of insects.

Between the Waves employs digital technology, taking advantage of the dematerialization of the image at the level of physical link. However, it is still invested in materiality in the focus on touch, and the accretion of material on screen as the refuse of civilization. New media have been linked to the 'ephemeral' and the 'desubstantial' (Rodowick 2000, 212); however, *Between the Waves* insists on making visible the physical and environmental costs of dematerialization. In several sequences, costumes of the figures on screen consist of repurposed technological waste such as CD-roms and a computer mouse.

Though the entire piece is shot on digital HD video, there is little manipulation of the images beyond jump cuts and a few composite shots. The jump cuts recur as a formal technique through the video that marks changes in space, thereby indexing a form of movement from one image to the next. Linear progression of a film narrative occurs through the technological imposition of uniform diegetic time through cuts and edits. Yet, throughout *Between the Waves*, jump cuts are used to make visible breaks in continuity. In the opening sequence of Channel I, for example, the camera travels across an empty stretch of sand, with no temporal or spatial markers to indicate how close we are to the ground. The scene is immediately disorienting, as are the quick cuts that follow. First, a jump cut takes us to an extreme close-up of the ground, accompanied by the sound of feet walking across sand, though we do not know whose feet. Immediately after that, there is another jump cut to a medium shot of a woman's body in repose, lying in a rocky nook. Only the gentle rise and fall of her chest in quiet breathing indicates life. Another cut, and we see the same body. The camera is now positioned slightly above the body and angled downward.



(Figure 6. and Figure 7. Jump cuts mark the transitions from one long take to another, 'A Circular Fable' in *Between The Waves*, Tejal Shah, 2012)

Her sleeping form is a bit farther away, lying on cracked brown earth as the wind continues to

howl. Her chest still rises and falls. Another cut marks a moment where another body lies down behind her (see figure 6). By now, the wind has also settled into the rhythm of breath, rising and falling at regular intervals. Another cut, and these two bodies are even further away, still in repose, seemingly unmoved by the change in scenery. Another cut, and the sound of the wind dies down, while the still bodies are visible in the distance, lying in the middle of a deserted beach. The breaks addressed above, where images do not produce narrative cohesion (see figures 2 and 3), here take the form of breaks within the temporal progression of each take, such that the same action—lying down on the ground—appears discontinuous, making visible the moments where time disappears from the screen. Yet, such cuts also contain their own rhythm, made apparent by the sounds of static that frequently accompany them. This is most evident in Channel II, ‘Landfill Dance,’ a five-minute video consisting of footage of dancers moving slowly within the trash of a landfill, while a skyline is barely visible in the horizon.





(Figure 8 and Figure 9: Jump cuts capturing shifts in posture. Stills from Channel II, 'Landfill Dance,' in *Between The Waves*, Tejal Shah, 2012)

The first minute and a half involves the slow choreography of a group of silent dancers, whose deliberate movements are barely perceptible. Yet their bodies are held in tension: a slight quiver of the arm or leg as it moves slowly through the air indicates the labor of such slowness. The most drastic movements occur through the jump cuts, which are accompanied by the sound of static. The affective contrast between the jump cuts and the slow deliberation of the dancers makes visible the technological production of speed and bodily durations of slowness, juxtaposing stillness and motion. As the static draws out attention to the presence of the cut, the rhythm starts to appear so that every time we hear static, we try to see which figure moved. Here again, we become attuned to a mode of attentive waiting, trying to find movement in the stillness of the images.

In each take, the dancing figures barely move, though the occasional tremble of a suspended leg, or the quiver of an arm, index the passing of time and the endurance of the body. Bodily exhaustion becomes the way to tell time; and the jump cuts mark the technological reordering of temporality. Waiting becomes the mode of attentive spectatorship, since even the slightest movement triggers changes in the affective structure of the image. For example, the fraction of a second when a body loses balance, causing a dancer to rest her foot, takes on the poignancy of a humorous and painful display of emotion. It is in this moment that the phrase, ‘I wait for me,’ gains a new force. The body of a dancer does not coincide with itself, and the jump cut makes visible this pause, the ‘waiting’ for oneself from one image to the next.

‘And’ A Conspiracy

The etymological origins of the term ‘conspiracy’ describe a form of acting in harmony: a form of breathing together. In this section, I take up the form of waiting that I have been tracing as a mode of spectatorship in *Between the Waves* to pay attention to the sounds of indeterminate aspiration that repeatedly rupture the soundscape of the installation. In doing so, I argue that the epistemic break between images of breath and the sounds of aspiration produces forms of ‘posthuman’ relation that imagine queer dystopian futures of shared breathing.

We must pay attention to sound, Christophe Cox (2011) argues, in order to move past the questions of representation, and enter into a study of events. *Between the Waves* allows the experience of ‘events’ in so much as viewers walking through the space of the installation encounter different soundscapes depending on the location of their body in that space. The beeps

of Morse code are overlaid with the sound of waves, the chittering of insects, and mechanical wails, emitted both in surround sound and from each screen. Between the five channels of video, varied sounds and spatial arrangements (installations of the piece have differed in layout, adapting to the space) provide a numerical multiplicity of sensory experiences. I want to focus not on the instantiation of particular differences at the level of phenomenological experience, but the collective sound of difference. For this, we must listen to Channel II, 'Landfill Dance.'

Almost two minutes into the video of 'Landfill Dance,' there is an indrawn breath, a gasp of air. The breath that we hear is extradiegetic, as is the whole soundtrack to the video, none of which is recorded on location. This breath exists within the soundscape as an interruption, but one that is repeated, like the jump cuts, therefore educating us to listen to the other rhythms in aspiration. The rhythm of a technologically produced breath in turn teaches us to listen to the waves and the mechanical beeps as breaths that rise and fall over the course of the video.

The breath, therefore, captures the tendency that Kara Keeling has called the digital regime of the image: the indexing of radical difference represented by the formula, 'I=Another.' Drawing simultaneously from women-of-color feminism and digital media theory, the formula 'I=another' describes the experience of an image that occupies the very sense of difference as a radical openness: breath marks both the sound of a shared bodily activity and the irruption of the technological production of sound. Hence, the kind of disembodiment made possible by this digital image, that is, its break between the referent and representation, becomes the occasion for imagining and representing another moment of collectivity—a gasp of air—which melds into the sound of the wind and the crash of the waves.

We return here to the concept of ‘a life,’ with which I began this chapter. The indefinite article ‘a’ marks the opening onto radical difference perceptible in the acousmatic sounds of breathing, while the visualization of breath in the rising and falling of the chest marks the body as living, even in the midst of environmental ruin. Breath oscillates between image and sound, moving from living human bodies to nonhuman rhythms of aspiration, including the sound of wind and the rhythmic static of jump cuts. Breath becomes the indeterminate rhythm of living, one that is unveiled through the accretion of rhythms made perceptible through a technological layering of sounds that traverse the boundaries between human and nonhuman.

There is one instance of breath where image and sound seem to map onto each other in *Between the Waves*. This scene occurs in the fourth chapter of Channel I, in a sequence shot mostly in a pool. The two figures we have been following through this landscape go for a swim together with large moveable sculptures consisting of repurposed technological waste (see figures 10 and 11). In this scene, these two figures carry these sculptures in their slow swim across the bottom of the pool, trailing plastic jellyfish and computer cables. We hear melodic and resonant metallic echoes, beeps and clicks being transmitted underwater. Eventually, bubbles start to appear from the sculpture as we hear the rhythmic sounds of aspiration underwater. It appears that the sculpture is breathing.



(Figure 10. Sculpture of repurposed technological waste in the pool. Film still from Chapter 4 of Channel I, 'A Circular Fable')

The bubbles of air, rising from the sculpture blend with the air expelled by the two human figures, visualizing the impossibility of signifying breath as only an individual human act. In making the plastic appear to breathe, the boundaries between living and nonliving, human and nonhuman start to blur. We are faced by the impossibility of answering the question, 'What can breathe?' In *How We Became Posthuman*, Katherine Hayles (1999) poses a similar question from Alan Turing's writing: 'What can think?'

At least since the emergence of the discourse of cybernetics, we have been exploring the boundaries between human and nonhuman. In this piece, I have argued that the rhythms of breath sensible in *Between the Waves* raise the potential for nonhuman aspiration across multiple registers of life from the ocean to plants, and eventually plastic. As Hayles (1999: xiv) notes, the

boundaries between human and nonhuman hinge on the conceptual relation between embodiment and representation; yet, in our present moment, that relation is technologically mediated at multiple levels, whether through the digital manipulation of sound in digital cinema to convey speech, or in our everyday mediations of selfhood through digital technologies including mobile phones, personal websites, and email. However, the observation that the boundary between human and nonhuman is technologically mediated does not provide the conclusion so much as the beginning of the inquiry.

Postcolonial ethics, or, how we live as posthuman

The discussion of the ‘posthuman’ necessarily raises questions about what counts as, or is sensible as ‘human.’ As Sylvia Wynter (2003) has argued, the liberal Western bourgeois subject of Man has, through the colonization of the human sciences, overrepresented itself as Human. In Hayles’ theorization of the posthuman, which follows from the trajectory of liberal humanism, the problematic presumptions that have underpinned humanism, that is, the founding exclusions of racialized, gendered and queerly sexualized bodies from the category of ‘Human,’ have only been exacerbated by the forms of disembodiment made possible in the digital regime of the image. Yet the form of mediated breathing made sensible in *Between the Waves* raises very different pasts and futures of the posthuman. As I noted earlier, the installation refuses to traffic in the authenticity provided by claims to embodiment. This is especially evident in the soundtrack, which is completely technologically produced, collecting an archive of sounds from sources as diverse as NASA audio from outer-space to the sound of glaciers. The technologically produced (not just mediated) soundscape includes breath as one among many other technological

sounds, some of which are machine-like.

Alex Weheliye (2002) pursues a related line of inquiry when he argues that technologically produced sound has been central to the racialization (and social valuation) of music in genres such as R&B, hip hop, and jazz. He concludes that even as we move toward the figure of the posthuman, we must investigate ‘other humanities,’ or relations to humanity that do not need to proceed through the figure of the Western liberal subject as Human in order to arrive at the posthuman. In *Between the Waves*’ untimely narrative, such an approach is made visible by the accretions of history that occur all at once: such as the seals from the Indus Valley civilization that serve as intertitles, the footage of figures wandering amid archaeological ruins and postindustrial waste simultaneously—in short, a series of queer revisionings of past, present, and futures.

Yet, I would also argue that in the ongoing investigations of our posthuman condition, it is important to ask not just ‘how we became posthuman’ (Hayles’ question) or ‘who gets to be posthuman’ (Weheliye’s intervention), but ‘how we live as posthuman.’ It is this question that is addressed through the queer forms of self-care that *Between the Waves* makes sensible, where the conception of care for the self (what Michel Foucault [1997] would argue is a practice of freedom) becomes a form of caring for the world, even in its ruins. Care for a self (where the indefinite article also indexes the multiple, technologically produced selves) made legible through digital forms of care and the fractured and disembodied pleasures of *Between the Waves*, invites us to conceive of queer dystopian erotics of inhabiting the interval opened up by postcolonial temporal critique.

I return here to the forms of waiting that I have tracked through this writing. Keeling (2007, 36) conceives of Fanon's form of waiting as a state of suspended anticipation. It is a related form of suspended anticipation that Muñoz mobilizes as queer utopian horizons. These two interventions account for the ethical signposts of waiting as inhabiting the indrawn breath, ready to witness either the explosion of the self in racial signification (as Fanon waits for the film) or the potential for queer utopian relations (as in Muñoz's queer potential). In the meantime, Shah's queer dystopian figures occupy the indrawn breath through untimely moments of care; finding ambiguous pleasures through touch and sound that refuse the linear temporality of narrative recognition, thereby making possible forms of postcolonial temporal inhabitation that are untimely in their break with colonial pasts and ruined futures. I name such potential 'postcolonial' not only because these images are captured in a postcolony, and picture a 'postcolonial' subject, but because of the odd temporal moves that the term "postcolonial" encapsulates: not so much a temporal marker of linear progression as in 'post-colonial' but rather a way to capture the continuing relevance of the violent history of colonialisms that are made visible in the environmental ruins of the dystopian future.

CONCLUSION: Some lessons from postcolonial studies on the occasion of its demise

I. Politics: Postcolonialism, Marxism today

“Globalization returns us to a condition where once again it is capitalism, rather than colonialism, that appears as the major problem.” (Dirlik 2002, 440)

“Postmodernist and post colonialist strategies that appear to be liberatory...unwittingly reinforce the new strategies of rule” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 138)

“This empire is a post-poststructuralist, post postcolonial empire that is able to name the effects of its own naming.” (Agnani, Wenzel, et al, 2007 634)

There has been, for some time now, an on-going debate about the vitality of postcolonial studies. Is it alive or dead? This seems to be the indeterminacy gestured to by the “?” at the end of the PMLA editor’s note “The End of Postcolonial Theory?” (2007) It seems appropriate to raise the ghost of this new (old?) debate at the end of this project, if only in order to put it to rest again. The epigraphs that open this writing take us to several scenes of postcolonial theory’s definitive demise. In their editors note, Agnani, Wenzel, et al, stake out the various failures of postcolonial theory, including its limited methods of reading, the blindness to the particularities of African and Latin American colonizations, and most of all, its inability to speak to the condition of the ‘post-poststructuralist, postpostcolonial empire’ that we find ourselves in today. Yet their discussion is avowedly a charitable reading of postcolonial studies, even if all the authors generally agree on its demise. This demise, as Wenzel notes, is because the empire is so reflexive that it can name itself. What then is the postcolonial critic to do when empire does the work itself?

Aijaz Ahmad’s (1992/2008) critique of postcolonialism appears to follow a similar logic. In Ahmad’s estimation, postcolonial theory is produced by Third World elite intellectuals who live

in the First World, take advantage of the mobility granted by their class status as First World intellectuals while failing to be sufficiently critical of the class hierarchies that make their critique possible. Hence, postcolonial theory is compromised precisely at its point of origin. Ahmad's opposition to postcolonial studies is most trenchant when he addresses the method of postcolonial studies, that is, its emergence within the field of English literature and its commitment to reading and discourse, which obscure the political economic (i.e. classed) conditions that make its critique possible. Mere reading, for Ahmad, is postcolonial theory's ultimate sin. I will address reading presently. My own writing is shaped by the concepts of postcolonial studies and develop in conversation with earlier theorists of postcolonialism. Hence, it will come as no surprise that these critiques of postcolonialism strike a nerve. However, Ahmad's thought is very productive for my writing in one particular way. And it is his observation that in the present moment (and in the absence of a rigorous Marxist analysis) the only terms we have left to diagnose our condition are only in the terms of capitalism. The force of this observation is especially evident when we ask whether the theorists who claim postcolonial theory's demise in the face of empire are not, in fact, complicit in reproducing empire as the epistemic horizon of our thought?

II. Ethics: giving us pause

To put this disagreement more schematically, in categories whose boundaries are themselves under question in the rest of my writing, I want to suggest this frame:

Contemporary political theorizations of neoliberalism that require the narration of the demise of colonialism and, along with it, postcolonial studies, appear to do so in the name of a more

rigorous call for class analysis (hence, Marxism) and find in such analysis the opportunity to challenge or overthrow capitalism from within, particularly in the political potential of the transnational ‘multitude.’ Such arguments do not only originate in the academic circles of the Euro-American west, though certainly Hardt and Negri’s (2000, 2005, 2009) trilogy continues to be a touchstone for these debates. Theorists concerned with geopolitics outside the Euro-US also occasionally follow in this Marxist argument, while suggesting that Marxism is on the decline and needs to be resurrected (Dirlik, Chibber, etc) Yet, if we acquiesce to the argument that capitalism remains the political horizon of the present, this diagnosis does not explicitly address the potential for ethical encounter that challenge capitalist ethics, even if capitalism (and its deterrents) often disavow the ethical as a field to be explicitly engaged. Nevertheless, recent theoretical interventions explicitly criticize the form of subjectivity that is produced under late capitalism. Michel Foucault’s (2005) late lectures as the ‘entrepreneurship of the self,’ is the enduring paradigm for this debate (see, for example, Lazzarato, 1996, Virno, 2004, Terranova, 2004)

Indeed, it is based on these ethics, of being perceived as entrepreneurs of the self that they wield against their opponents as a moral failure, particularly criticizing postcolonial theory for being an elite undertaking occurring in the privileged halls of academic institutions in the ‘West’ (we will not belabor the observation they are also sharing the halls with these postcolonial theorists, no matter what their class analysis). Yet, in ceding the ethical to a realm unworthy of theorization or critique, they cede the very grounds of possibility for living otherwise. Ethics is left to the naive postcolonialists (Gandhi 2011) while the real task of political analysis is undertaken by Marxist theorists. Yet, even when ethics is disavowed, there are some resonances between the ethical

stance of the ‘new democratic theorists’ who often claim the intellectual legacies of Marxism and the ‘neoliberal’ capitalism that they criticize, if only by omission. And it is this: they share a tendency toward a moral perfectionism. Their own ethical claims are manifest in their criticism of postmodern and postcolonial theory. For example, in *Empire*, Hardt and Negri argue that postcolonial theory (and postmodern theory) emphasize difference and hybridity, while missing the ways in which collectivity emerges under empire. They go on to observe that,

“the postcolonial theory that shares certain postmodernist tendencies has been developed primarily among a cosmopolitan set that moves among the metropolises and major universities of Europe and the United States. This specificity does not invalidate the theoretical perspectives, but it should make us pause for a moment” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 154)

Why the pause? It appears that the judgmental pause that these authors direct toward postcolonial theory is not on its theoretical perspective, but on the lives of those professing it. Within their questioning silence is an ethical claim for how those who make theory should live. A similar claim is echoed, more vociferously, in Aijaz Ahmed’s criticisms of Salman Rushdie’s writing, where Ahmad faults Rushdie’s characters and narratives for giving voice to Rushdie’s own migrant condition as a desirable one (1992/2008, 130-32), or in Arif Dirlik’s dismissal of postcolonial theorists as the “intelligentsia of global capitalism” (1997,77). What I am pointing to here is the way that such an observation is a judgment based on the question, “how should we [theorists/critics] live?” We can read in these moments of pause, a shared ethic of moral perfectionism, a desire to live better (and therefore criticize better) than postcolonial theorists that they target. We are now on the terrain of the ethical. And that is one that postcolonial theorists have occasionally had something to say about (Spivak, 1996, 2002, 2012; Gandhi, 1998, 2011, 2014). However, through the various scenes of pause that I have tracked in this dissertation, the pause – a moment of contemplative questioning – is also a moment in which the

ethical encounter is possible. Each chapter has tracked the moments of pause (waiting, stillness, rest) as a time within which to encounter alternative histories and to explore the potential for inaction as an alternate future.

In this writing, I begin from the idea that it is not only forms of colonial violence that haunt our present, but also anti-colonial ethics of civil disobedience, made manifest transnationally in encounters where tactics such as sit-ins, occupations, and refusals to work become forms of challenging normalized violence. To recognize in this transnational history of civil disobedience the legacy of anti-colonial struggle is to continue the task of ‘provincialization’ of Europe (and the ‘West,’ more broadly) that Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) so clearly articulated as a problem for postcolonial thought. While more intellectual historical connections need to be developed here between the forms of civil disobedience articulated in anti-colonial struggle in South Asia, and other movements for civil rights transnationally, I am only schematizing the relations here between political diagnoses of neoliberal capitalism and the ethical work of moral perfectionism. Against this trajectory, I have argued that postcolonial fixation on the past can point us to the ethical work of anti-colonial civil disobedience as a form of ‘moral imperfection,’ an ethic of abnegation, that is repeatedly enacted through the visual encounters that I have addressed in this writing. The terms of this distinction: moral perfectionism, and anti-colonial imperfection draw on Leela Gandhi’s (2014) intellectual history of democratic ethics that emerge in scenes of colonial encounter in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

I began my research from the recognition that, while diagnoses of late capitalism continue to proliferate, along with the proliferation of capitalist forms of exploitation, the arts of critique that

challenge this proliferation are indebted to anti-colonial ethics of civil disobedience, even when this gift is not always recognized. The legacy of anti-colonial ethics, made apparent in forms of self-ruin or danger to the self, that perform a critique of violence, is a thriving and transnational one. Postcolonial theory's research into the archives of colonial encounter and its methods of historical reading grant us insight not only into the histories of the past, but the ethics of the present.

III. Aesthetics: media and mobility

The aesthetics of neoliberal capitalism, as addressed by recent theorists of film and media, tie into the political framework laid out by the new democratic theorists. To speak of a unitary 'aesthetics' of 'neoliberalism' is certainly impossible in any conclusive way. There are as many contradictory approaches within contemporary art to the problems of late capitalism as there are artists and critics, and that does not even address the aesthetics of mass media outside the institutionalized discourse of art. In any case, I am not making a case for a particular group of aesthetic strategies such as the turn to archival and found-footage in recent documentary work (Foster, 2017), or rise of social practice art (Bishop, 2012; Jackson, 2011), though such approaches might fit into the frame I am interested in analyzing. Instead, what I would like to emphasize here is the tendency to anchor the diagnosis of contemporary media to the desire for mobility. By this, I mean that critics who vary widely by discipline but share in the new democratic diagnoses of late capitalism, find in figures such as the hacker (Wark, 2004) a class who will challenge global capital; or the pirate whose illegal networked media sharing challenge the structures of capital and state (Sarkar, 2016, Sundaram, 2010, Liang, 2005). While the tenor

of claims about networked aesthetics (Terranova, 2004) ranges from cautiously optimistic to very pessimistic (Crary, 2013, Virilio, 2006, 2009) the terrain of discussion is a shared recognition of the ways in which media are inherently mobile today and that this quantitative increase in media mobilization by the networked underclass of hackers and pirates has led to qualitative changes in the form of images. Ravi Sundaram (2015), goes so far as to state that what has led to the ‘postpostcolonial’ condition today is media circulation itself, which has led to entangled relations between traditionally separated actors that challenge traditional ‘postcolonial’ relations.

"The management of public affect through authorized circulation has broken down all over the postcolonial world, if not elsewhere, disrupting older transactions between sovereign power and a population seen as susceptible to sensorial powers. Media has become the infrastructural condition of *living*, rather than existing as distinct, regulated sites like the cinema theater, or as celluloid." (Sundaram, 2015:5)

Such a diagnosis finds in media circulation the very foundation of life today, unmooring us from ‘older’ forms of state power, which was enacted through forms of spatial containment and population management. Sundaram cites Gilles Deleuze’s (1995) influential observations on the societies of control as the basis for the kind of media circulation he sees as taking over the present, but in his work, this shift appears in a more positive light, having shed the limitations of the older postcolonial state.

My attempt here is to point to a constellation of assumptions about the contemporary moment that share in the valorization of mobility, even by those who are critical of the transnational infrastructures of mobility, and it is this conceptual slippage — the equation of mobility with freedom — that limits the Marxist critiques of capitalism that I have been discussing here. These theorists are not the first to make this conceptual link, and in chapter two, I have addressed the

way in which film studies has specifically focused on motion as an instantiation of life, while chapter three addresses how political theorists of liberalism (Mill, Locke) have also shared in these assumptions. This is not to suggest that we must abandon mobility altogether, I do not think that is always revolutionary, or even possible in the contemporary moment. The point is to question the givenness of mobility as a political end.

In each chapter, I have traced moments of stillness that I develop in conversation with the anti-colonial ethics of civil disobedience that I outlined above. I read such moments of stillness as productive ruptures in the ethical desire for moral perfectionism, expressed in a variety of political debates as the delimiting of what constitutes political action. In focusing on the aesthetics and ethics of civil disobedience, the momentary challenges to expected political ends, I highlight the quotidian labor of non-coercively re-arranging our desires, what Gayatri Spivak (2012) argues is the task of an aesthetic education today.

IV. Impotentiality and history: a feminist still.

“History, then, is a record of an interruption of the course of nature.” (Gandhi 2009, 88)

“To be potential means: to be one’s own lack, to be in relation to one’s own incapacity. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality, and only in this way do they become potential” (Agamben 2000, 182)

Through this writing, I have collected an archive of scenes of rest and stillness, where nothing happens. I have repeatedly argued that these moments have ruptured the normal flow of historical time, and political action. However, such an enterprise has been undertaken with one minor error, and it is the conception that history consists of events and its ruptures consist of inaction. Instead, I have been trying to find the language to articulate what M.K. Gandhi (2009)

has referred to as ‘passive resistance.’ For Gandhi, history is the inverse of how we have understood it in these preceding pages: it is often mistaken for the chronicle of events, wars, and political action. Instead, Gandhi argues that it is these spectacular events such as a declaration of war, or a recourse to the law, that constitutes the interruption to the flow of human life. For Gandhi, it is the minor scene of daily encounter that constitutes the history of our lives, a history that is ruptured by the use of political force⁴⁰.

I have aimed to trace therefore, the scenes of incapacity, or impotentiality: the moments at which inaction is chosen over action as an ethic, thereby to attempt a history of daily encounters of passive resistance. The valences of passivity -- waiting, inoperativity, inhabitation, rest, silence -- have been explicated at scenes where passivity is re-cast as a moment of potentiality, an image of the past that contains the potential for future redemption. Such a task is postcolonial in its historical approach, and it is feminist in its method of critique. Stillness is reconceived here from its associations with absence and violation (Chapter one) into a form of inhabitation, of living in the ‘meanwhile,’ (Chapter four): a form of survival and self-care within structures that were not meant for us, and that, as Audre Lorde (1988) instructed us, is an act of political warfare.

⁴⁰ There is a longer discussion to be had between MK Gandhi’s use of force, and Walter Benjamin’s discussion of ‘force’ as interchangeable with ‘violence’ in “Critique of Violence” (1928). However, this discussion is beyond the scope of this current writing.

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