

Survival as Historiographical Practice

**Proposals for Substantive Theater and Performance Historiography from
Contemporary Student, Youth and Social Movements**

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Selbstständigkeitserklärung

I hereby declare that this dissertation was written and prepared by me independently. Furthermore, no sources and aids other than those indicated have been used. Intellectual property of other authors has been marked accordingly. I also declare that I have not submitted the dissertation in this or any other form to any other institution as a dissertation.

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Abstract

This thesis makes a contingent argument for reviewing existent historiographical practices in the discourse around student movements – socio-political struggles and protests that are initiated and led by students. The proposal for the revision comes from an acknowledgement that academic writing and the discursive flavour around student and campus movements make use of a particular repertoire that is connected to the “global moment” of student unrest in 1968, and this leads to universalist generalizations with respect to the repertoire that contemporary student movements may or may not deploy. The thesis argues that a close reading of contemporary student movements through its performances of protest – both within the socio-political and cultural spheres – shows many obvious and non-obvious aspects of the contemporary student struggles, such as changes in the university system through neoliberal privatization, changes in the relationship between students and the university, changes in the relationship of the university with the state and state apparatuses such as the police. If one has to take into account these changes within historiographical practice, there is a possibility to open up to not only more viscerally and experientially situated histories of student movements (and political movements in general), but also to confront questions of ethics within history writing and historical representation of resistant political groups. The thesis views historiography as a political practice of arranging spatio-temporality with clear relationships to existent power structures, and interrogates the extent to which the insertion of the resisting body within this practice, through the discipline of theater and performance historiography, can threaten and break such arrangements. In this process of interrogation, the thesis in turn questions the efficacy of traditional historiographical frameworks such as “source”, “archive”, “subject”, “event”, especially with respect to student movements.

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Introduction

“You Shall have The Body”: Proposal for A Substantive Historiography

One of the foremost innovations within the fields of clinical psychology and psychiatry in recent times has been the introduction and embracing of “Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing” (EMDR) towards the treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Developed by Dr. Francine Shapiro in the late 1980s, EMDR constitutes itself on the theoretical base that human beings, who are “*physiologically based information processing systems*”, can and do process the multiple registers of their experiences and preserve them in accessible and useful ways. In the specific cases of traumatic experiences, which, as she qualifies can be both life-altering “large T traumas” or “smaller” everyday experiences of negative feelings, the brain’s capacity to process information is interrupted and can be left incomplete, leading to the “*memory [being] dysfunctionally stored without appropriate associative connections and with many elements still unprocessed*” (Shapiro, 1995), which in turn would cause the person with the memory to dissociate, and relive the past memory through strong emotional and physical sensations when faced with triggers. This was how Shapiro defined PTSD, and suggested EMDR as a possible remedial practice. In clinical practice, EMDR is a unique relational activity of healing that, in some distinction from traditional psychotherapeutic practices such as psychoanalysis, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), introduces the eye and its movements, as orchestrated by the therapist and followed by the patient, as a bodily intervention inside a crisis. The therapist instructs the patient to follow a particularly composed rhythm of oscillation of their finger (or the index and the middle finger, joined tightly together) in front of the patient’s eyes, from side to side. There are multiple “rounds” of faster and slower finger movements, and at the intervals, the therapist asks the patient to go through certain thinking and imaginative processes in

their mind. The following, on the EMDR Institute’s website, are the terms of engagement.

*EMDR therapy uses a three pronged protocol: (1) the past events that have laid the groundwork for dysfunction are processed, forging new associative links with adaptive information; (2) the current circumstances that elicit distress are targeted, and internal and external triggers are desensitized; (3) imaginal templates of future events are incorporated, to assist the client in acquiring the skills needed for adaptive functioning.*¹

The sessions, unlike CBT, DBT or psychoanalysis, do not depend primarily on the spoken word, the verbally expressed exposition of the trauma for building the basis or validity of pain. Instead, initial “history-taking” sessions, in which the therapist and the patient together develop a list of events to be treated, are deemed adequate.

Following this, eye movement sessions are done with the therapist oscillating their finger and the patient following the same, to essentially mimic or recreate the power of the body in REM sleep-simulating movement to process and project – an invocation of the foundation of dreaming. In EMDR, the clear objective of healing is connected to the dissociation of a person from accepted directions of linear time – a past, present and a future. While this might be true for all psy-professions and their consensus on the nature of trauma, EMDR treats, as is seen in the protocol (“*imaginal templates of future events*”), the arrangement of time as not only fluid, but mutable. The mutability of future events is liberally used within the rubric of imagination, and retrospective projection onto the traumatic past is the accepted method. The patient finds themselves in the unique position of living in the future as a means of reliving an unlivable past in a dignified and recovered way. And the intensity of the admittedly simple movement of the eyes, and its connection to the realm of rest and dream as

¹ EMDR Institute - EYE MOVEMENT DESENSITIZATION AND REPROCESSING THERAPY. 2022. *What is EMDR?* - EMDR Institute - EYE MOVEMENT DESENSITIZATION AND REPROCESSING THERAPY. [online] Available at: <<https://www.emdr.com/what-is-emdr/>> [Accessed 18 April 2022].

experienced by the body during sleep, holds the key in this generative and experienced destruction of the logic of temporal linearity in the context of personal history.

Philadelphia-based collective Black Quantum Futurism, featuring artists Rasheedah Phillips and Moor Mother (Camae Ayewa), working in the intersection of activism, art practice and quantum physics, are one of the leading voices in the contemporary moment of Afrofuturism. The discourses and practices of Afrofuturism position themselves in relief of the continued brutality, denigration and murder faced by Black people in the wake of coloniality, as a speculative politics that speak back to the “lack” of history engineered by theft of human beings from their homes to be forced on to the Middle Passage, what Christina Sharpe calls “*the afterlives of slavery*” (2016). As theorized by Mark Dery in *Black to The Future* (1994),

“The notion of Afrofuturism gives rise to a troubling antinomy: Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?” (pp.180)

In this radical tradition of an active, agential involvement in history, rooted in survival, Black Quantum Futurism proposes a reorientation of the experience of time, drawing from African cosmological philosophy and principles of experimental quantum physics. In *Black Quantum Futurism: Theory and Practice Vol. ii* (2015), the collective states clearly their vision of practice through a specific relationship to history.

“Under a BQF intersectional time orientation, the past and future are not cut off from the present – both dimensions have influence over the whole of our lives, who we are and who we become at any particular point in space-time. Our position from the present creates what that past and future looks like, what it means at every moment. We determine what meaning and what relationships both dimensions of time have to our present moment.” (pp.3)

In a particularly inspired manner, BQF invoke the phenomenon of “retrocausality” in quantum physics, a function of an entangled particle retracing through spacetime to the point of its own entanglement. They mirror this function in their artistic practice around temporality and declare,

“Cause is not presupposed or inferred. When a possible future is envisioned, foreseen, or chosen by a BQF Practitioner, that future will instantaneously reshape its relationship to the past.”

In their consistent and deeply engaged community practice, BQF explicitly acknowledges linear temporality as a function of coloniality and embraces the multitudinal experiences of time from survivors of the afterlives of slavery as instances of “reshaped relationships to the past through the future”. The locus of history lies squarely in the presence of the post-Middle Passage Black body and Black consciousness in this fluid fabric.

The two positions on temporality stated above have various nodes of commonality. Both are not only theoretical, but also practiced discourses that envision and use in real life the fluidity of time as a subjective experience. Both of them are centered around healing and survival, albeit from very different directions. Both deal in principle with the question of incomplete histories engendered by trauma through particular speculative and creative practices. And these three commonalities lead, in both cases, to deep interrogations based on iterative, transformative practices of embodiment that generate a playful relationship with history in which the fixedness of disciplinary expectations are summarily abandoned. As contemporary lived practices of experiencing time, these need to inform and influence contemporary history writing in fundamental ways. And with regard to the notion that the body can have a creative and generative role to play in this process, often in capacity of various modes

of “time travel”, can inform theater and performance studies, especially the field of performance historiography.

In their introduction to the *Theater History and Historiography* module in *Critical theory and Performance* (1992), editors Joseph Roach and Janelle Reinelt signal at the leitmotif of “*irretrievable loss*” in historiographical writings from the theater and performance studies field, given that it is acknowledged that writing about transient things like performances of the yore brings about acute self-consciousness and anxieties regarding sources, archives, and other such corroborative tools that are supposed to be the foundations of historical research. Clearly stating the interdisciplinary outlook of the field, they point towards *critical theory* as the discourse that enters through the corroboration lacunae of theater historiography, which is not strictly a corroborative strategy as much as a speculative and substantive strategy. Here I use the term substantive in the sense of its use in substantive justice, a legal term that comes out of a debate around people’s perception of fairness within a situation and whether it explicitly depends on the formal procedures of legal practice such as definitions of fairness in law or individual perceptions of what is fair (Thibaut, Walker, 1978). Substantive justice’s claim is to interrupt formalized legal procedure with an explicit acknowledgement of the liberal conception of equality as an axiom of justice, and in conjunction, the limits of procedural law to address material inequalities that lead to differential perceptions of fairness in individuals under law.

“The formal ideal of equality as such refers only to the correct application of a general rule, whereas the presupposed substantive criterion is what gives content and force to the actually efficacious formula for justice. On this background, it is argued that once the substantive criterion has been determined, it is meaningful to speak of (formal) justice.” (Ross, Holtermann, 2019)

In the light of this, I argue that there is an explicit charge of justice in introducing critical theory as a necessary and substantive element within theater historiography, and in general historiography itself, which is the self-aware construction of historical

narratives that challenge objectivist positions claimed by colonial discourses of the field. The fact that in the same volume, Thomas Postlewait, Rosemary Bank and Susan Leigh Foster bring forth their positions through explicit references to the political contexts of their objects of study – Postlewait through a contextualization of the historical event of a canceled play in 17th century England within its complex political background, Bank through an interrogation of received narratives of the Columbian Exposition of 1893, which saw a particular kind of colonial-foundational performance of American history through the staging of the Native, and the indigenous presence as a challenge to colonial history writing around the word “discovery”, Foster through her theorization of kinesthesia as an embodied reception moment of political empathy and “inner mimicry” – only convinces me more that the realm of political struggles which bring to the forefront the need for the substantive in legal procedure also brings to the forefront the need for the substantive in historiography. The privilege of theater and performance historiography in this regard is its access to that highly generative and highly undomesticated creative force that is the presence of the body in discourse. In conjunction with the claim of substantive justice as a close parallel and indeed an integral part of historiographical work, one can argue that theater and performance historiography have a *habeus corpus* writ – the postulation that a person under unlawful arrest has to be produced in court, and the grounds for their detention shown clearly to secure release. To clarify, historiography has the capacity, through substantive and speculative practices of critical thinking, to underline the fundamental inability of historical categories to unduly arrest bodies within time. The subjective experience of time is indeed so agential and fluid, and substantiated with playfulness and fungibility for purposes of survival in the face of trauma and erasure, as we saw in the examples that I started with, that an explicit acknowledgement is necessary of creativity and speculation (“fabulation”, following Saidiya Hartman) within historiographical practice.

It is with an acknowledgement of the substantive and speculative that I started my engagement in writing academically about student movements, a field in which I am still actively involved politically. I wanted to write about something I knew through experience, and thought was necessary for whatever I perceived at the time (2010 was the first time I attempted to write about student politics) as history. As a student of history, I am expected to have methodological rigour and a strong grasp on practices of historical corroboration, but the ambivalence in the field of historiography to explicitly acknowledge its involvement with power through an artificial distancing with temporality and fetishizing and fixing what constitutes a “past” cannot be reconciled with the realm of political struggle in which, for better or for worse, boundaries between a person and their context, the history of their “people” or their “class” or such identifiers, are porous to non-existent. To me, there was the intent of colonial extraction in the existing relationship between the historian and *his* object of study – a retrospective, surveillance-oriented interest in the lives of people one did not know or cared about through affinity while they lived, *justified* by the existence of these people in the “past”. At the heart of this was the colonality of linear time itself – that time moved in a universal progression towards the future, which justified the relegation of the colonized populace into a past, from whence they would have to be civilized. To quote Anne McClintock (1992),

“In colonial discourse...space is time and history is shaped around two necessary movements: the “progress” forward of humanity from slouching deprivation to erect enlightened reason. The other movement presents the reverse: regression backward from (whitw male) adulthood, to a primordial Black degeneracy, usually incarated in women” (pp.84)

In my disloyal relationship with historical studies, I really did not want to relegate student movements that I was active in into this bin of pastness, which led me to

seriously question the validity and perseverance of disciplinary foundations such as event, archive and source – corroborative principles of procedural historiography. The privileged position of *habens corpus* in theater and performance historiography was far more forgiving in this regard – I could attempt to read and write history and formulate historiographical positions through an acknowledgement and potent perseverance of the body in various forms, which could lead to a far more experiential, situated form of knowledge – the border regimes of discipline be damned! In my case this body is not simply universal (we know that body is white, straight, elite and cis-male, and looks like someone who taught us in university), neither is it absolutely fixed within identitarian markers, but a healing, playful speculation around the existent and multifaced reality of bodily survival in political movements, especially student movements in contemporary times. I suppose I write about survival, the survival of the body under different forms of violence, through different modes of performance, that realm of repetition that makes sure we survive through play and process our feelings and arrange our timelines, the multifarious survivals of survivor accounts, and the survivors themselves. I also write to survive. It is a valid question to ask here whether I am somehow privileging the experience of violence in a mode of exceptionalism, as something that stands outside the purview of historical enquiry, and engineers a level of moral purity of the survivor from which “new” knowledge is to be made available. My contingent answer points towards the specific political context in which my historical training took place, following the examples of the substantive within theater and performance historiography mentioned before. I write obsessively about the experience of university, academic production, the political activism on contemporary campuses, and experiences of violence within *all* three, because these are also my own experiences, and my suspicion is truly that violence plays a constitutive role (not the only one) in maintaining these spaces in their current forms. This is a point that is polemical, experiential, and to an

extent clarified within accepted historical discourses such as that of Michel Foucault (1986). However, the case that I am trying to make is the insertion not only of critical theory in the corroborative lacunae of theater and performance historiography, but the insertion of the subject body and its pain itself within discourse, with its many registers of readability and lack thereof, to be able to do substantive justice work that speaks to the preservation and dissemination of knowledge at the necessary cost of destruction of discipline. And for this reason, I have highlighted the role of violence within student spaces such as student movements, university and campus, as both received and meted out (under non-comparable circumstances – police violence and ragging may be seen as having a metonymic relationship, and truly both service the state in particular ways, but they differ substantially in their performances), without explicitly claiming any moral purity of survival, or studenthood, or youth. In short, survival is not an identity politics related claim, which is not to say that one discards in toto the existing and emergent work within gender justice movements for the recognition of “survivor” as a particular category of people with particular rights and needs of redressal (UNFPA Pakistan, 2010). In my work, the redressal attempted is historiographical, and I am not interested in binary formulations of power. The playful, polyvocal realm of performance does not even allow me that. The only claim that I make about survival is in its situation in the body, through speculative and substantive tactics, one of which is the extremely broad realm of performance.

Rationale and Intervention

The primary rationale behind my long engagement with student movements as a simultaneous site of historical research and activist work was that I was both confused and fascinated by the pendulation of discussion around the political involvement of students between deep nostalgia for the 60s on the one hand and steady criminalization on the other. Without a clear definition of what constituted a

“student” or a “student movement”, with a working nominal designation that these were young people in colleges and universities and their politics also roughly belonged in the colleges and universities, there seemed to be ample empirical information that students constituted an important part of the political life, especially in the purview of performative protesting, but not a lot of theoretical insight in why. These discussions would take place almost always in conjunction with moments of crisis, the death of student activists, arrests of student leaders, and police violence on protesting students. My initial academic writing too was primarily a means for me to deal with the death of Leftist student activist Sudipto Gupta² who died in police custody. Curious about the simultaneous existence of a culture of romance around the 60s student movement moment of Naxalbari (1967-72) in Indian public sphere and a deep conservatism even among university professors about actual political activism of actual students in contemporary campuses³, I aimed to look at the campus itself as generative space of political mobilization and cultural expression, that was created primarily by students for purposes of retaining an active political impulse within a rapidly professionalizing higher education sector (Sengupta, 2016). I had suspected that there may have been a historical construction of the “good” or “correct” or “righteous” student activist, an arbitrary standard loosely connected to the 60s moment mainly through relationships of affect shored up through cultural representations of Naxalbari, and with the subsequent judgment of the “failure” of the movement – a historiographical obfuscation multiplied by fudging of official records about police violence⁴ and

²“SFI student leader Sudipto Gupta beaten to death, shows post mortem report - Indian Express”, *Archive.indianexpress.com*, 2022. [Online]. Available: <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/sfi-student-leader-sudipto-gupta-beaten-to-death-shows-post-mortem-report/1097459/>. [Accessed: 18- Apr- 2022]

³ From the many print and television programs on this issue, here is a debate program on a leading Bengali television channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyYaV1yoFJA>

⁴ Sumanta Banerjee, activist and academic, and erstwhile Naxal, points towards the creation of the word “encounter” within police records of the time to describe extrajudicial killings of revolutionaries, and the exaggeration of the extent of these encounters to paint a picture of police valour: “THE NAXALITES: THROUGH THE EYES OF THE POLICE: Book review by Sumanta Banerjee [Parabaas Reviews]”, *Parabaas.com*, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://www.parabaas.com/translation/database/reviews/brSumanta.html>. [Accessed: 18- Apr- 2022]

number of custodial deaths – a standard against which contemporary student activists would be measured and held. The changing contours of university education in India following liberalization of markets in the 80s and the signing of the General Agreement on Trade in Services at the WTO in 1995⁵, which deemed higher education as a tradeable and profit-making field, and a steady uptick in professional education as opposed to research-based work, was also partially contributing to the rendering of the university as mainly a space for optimization for entry into the job market. However, the changing demography of students entering higher education institutions in India meant that they came to the university for reasons far beyond just the goal of professionalization. I studied only two of these reasons, two highly intertwined reasons – politics and theater – within the microcontext of Delhi University (DU) between the years 2007 and 2014, years that saw several privatization and professionalization⁶ moves that the institutions (government, the appellate higher education authority of India – University Grants Commission or UGC, the university administration) undertook for a possible facelift for DU. In my research, I theorized on an alternative space within the institution, the *campus*, which was a produced and relational space and time which the students would draw on to maintain an autonomous and radical socio-political and cultural sphere outside the logic of self-optimization and university-governed capitalist productivity. Having enjoyed the generative campus impulse of DU as an undergraduate student who spent all her time in collegiate theater rehearsals instead of classrooms, I agreed with my fellow

⁵ T. N. Srinivasan & Suresh D. Tendulkar, 2003. "Reintegrating India with the World Economy," Peterson Institute Press: All Books, Peterson Institute for International Economics, number 98., Chapter 3.

⁶ Four Year Undergraduate Program in DU: "Delhi University to start FYUP: Pros and cons", *India Today*, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/delhi-university-to-start-fyup-pros-and-cons-1845332-2021-08-25> [Accessed: 18- Apr- 2022], and changes in city and university hostel infrastructure due to Commonwealth Games, see "Race against time", *Business Today*, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://www.businesstoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/race-against-time-245122-2009-06-09>. [Accessed: 18- Apr- 2022] and also UPPAL, Vinayak. "THE IMPACT OF THE COMMONWEALTH GAMES 2010 ON URBAN DEVELOPMENT OF DELHI." *Theoretical and Empirical Researches in Urban Management* 4, no. 1 (10) (2009): 7–29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24872391>.

thespians and activists that the continuous production of this space was a claim to belonging and safety for many fresh school graduates – those just arrived in the capital city for university, those who were first generation learners, those who came with histories of schoolgoing activism, queer and femme students having to live within the pervasive rape culture of Delhi etc. Autonomous of the grand histories of the 60s student movement, this was the politics of our moment, a political sociality and a relational politics that helped us experience higher education without alienation and bitterness. I was a student of Jawaharlal Nehru University when I was writing this, and the highly agonistic and prominent campus of JNU helped me not only hone my observations, but also provided me food and shelter and the atmosphere to maintain extremely porous boundaries between research, art practice and activism, which was in a sense absolutely crucial for my research.

The groundwork for professionalization of Indian higher education had been set by previous governments already, as I had marked in my Mphil thesis. However in 2014, Narendra Modi, a Right Wing leader of the Hindu-supremacist Right Wing political party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), accused of allowing an anti-Muslim pogrom to take place in the West Indian state of Gujarat in 2002⁷, of which he was Chief Minister at the time, had been elected Prime Minister of India⁸, bringing home every possible anxiety about the absolute normalization of fascist ideology within the country's public life, and explicit divestment from public education models of independent India. And JNU, easily identified as a Left Wing public university in the capital city itself, had been among the many public universities targeted for political

⁷ "U.S. Court Issues Summons to Modi in Lawsuit Over 2002 Riots (Published 2014)", *Nytimes.com*, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/27/world/asia/us-court-issues-summons-to-modi-in-lawsuit-over-2002-riots.html>. [Accessed: 18- Apr- 2022]

⁸ "Narendra Modi's landslide victory shatters Congress's grip on India", *the Guardian*, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/16/narendra-modi-victory-congress-india-election>. [Accessed: 18- Apr- 2022]

appointments of pro-establishment academics⁹, miscarriage of due process within administration¹⁰, and a long drawn out public media smear campaign against the alleged reprobate lifestyle of the students¹¹, who were summarily deemed as “antinational¹²” communists, Kashmir separatists, Maoist sympathizers who called for the “balkanization of India¹³”. Things came to a head in February, when a cultural event on Kashmir¹⁴ held on campus was misconstrued through fake doctoring of videos¹⁵ and circulated through social and news media as an event in which “anti-India slogans¹⁶” had been raised. The president of the JNUSU student union, Kanhaiya Kumar, was arrested¹⁷ from campus by the police, called by none other than the Vice Chancellor himself¹⁸. Other student activists hid inside classrooms, as the

⁹ "Allegations of Political Bias in Faculty Hiring the Latest Battleline in JNU", *The Wire*, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://thewire.in/education/allegations-political-bias-faculty-hiring-latest-battleline-jnu>. [Accessed: 18- Apr- 2022]

¹⁰ "Jawaharlal Nehru University VC appointed 9 without authority: Delhi HC", *Hindustan Times*, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/delhi-news/jawaharlal-nehru-university-vc-appointed-9-without-authority-delhi-hc-101635878090028.html>. [Accessed: 18- Apr- 2022]

¹¹ "2,000 liquor bottles, 3,000 condoms found daily at JNU, says BJP MLA", *The Indian Express*, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/jnu-row-2000-liquor-bottles-3000-condoms-found-daily-at-jnu-says-bjp-mla/>. [Accessed: 18- Apr- 2022]

¹² "JNU's journey from 'prestigious' to 'anti-national'", *Thehindu.com*, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/JNU%E2%80%99s-journey-from-%E2%80%98prestigious%E2%80%99-to-%E2%80%98anti-national%E2%80%99/article16956239.ece>. [Accessed: 18- Apr- 2022]

¹³ Srinivas Thiruvadhanthai, "Bharat Ke Tukde Tukde' Has Always Been the Communist Dream," *Swarajyamag*, accessed April 18, 2022, <https://swarajyamag.com/politics/bharat-ke-tukde-tukde-has-always-been-the-communist-dream>

¹⁴ The event was aiming to discuss the judicial killings of Kashmir “separatists” Afzal Guru and Maqbool Bhatt, convicted in the Indian Parliament Attack 2001 case: India Today Web Desk, “JNU Controversy: How It Started and All the Recent Developments,” *India Today*, February 24, 2016, <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/jnu-controversy-310267-2016-02-24>.

¹⁵ India Today Web Desk, “Forensic Experts Say Kanhaiya Video Was Doctored,” *India Today*, February 19, 2016, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/delhi/story/forensic-experts-say-kanhaiya-video-was-doctored-309626-2016-02-19>.

¹⁶ Republic World, “These Are the Anti-National Slogans Raised in JNU in 2016, as per the Delhi Police Chargesheet,” *Republic World*, January 15, 2019, <https://www.republicworld.com/india-news/general-news/these-are-the-anti-national-slogans-raised-in-jnu-in-2016-as-per-the-delhi-police-chargesheet.html>.

¹⁷ “Protests to Continue at Indian University after Student Leader's Arrest,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, February 15, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/15/jawaharlal-nehru-university-kanhaiya-kumar-student-arrest-india>.

¹⁸ “Letter Shows JNU Vice Chancellor Allowed Police on Campus.” *Deccan Chronicle*, February 16, 2016. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/160216/letter-shows-jnu-vice-chancellor-allowed-police-on-campus.html>.

police were “raiding¹⁹” the residence halls and hostels. Reaching campus on a rickshaw despite being warned not to come, I saw a huge mob in front of the main gates of the University – a gate that I had always seen open was locked and chained shut. The mob stood there, waving the national flag, baseball bats and sticks and batons, chanting for the doors to be opened, for them to teach the anti-national students of this university a lesson. When I arrived inside the campus through another gate, my professor notified me that the chocolates and alcohol that visiting students and friends from the University of Cologne had got for me as a gift had been given away to a student activist who was hiding from arrest in and around the School of Arts and Aesthetics (my school), on his way to the home of his PhD supervisor for sanctuary. I defended my MPhil dissertation on my work in DU, a week later, in the midst an intense campus movement demanding the release of the union president, and after the defense, the members of the panel and I went together to the sit-in at the administrative block, where the JNU Teachers’ Association had been organizing a series of open teach-ins about Nationalism, Democracy and the Idea of India²⁰. This meandering narrative of events is not a page-filler at all, it is a transparent attempt at exposing the conditions of my work, conditions that are inextricable parts of my rationale for academic work. The very fact that a great deal of my time in academic communication goes in the labour of detailed contextualization, in which I have to be precise and honest and accurate to the best of my abilities to give empirical proof of my circumstances before I could attempt a theoretical engagement, is exhausting and points to larger discrepancies and hierarchies of knowledge in terms of

¹⁹ Jha, Kundan. “JNU Students Lock Hostel Rooms and Flee Fearing Police Action.” Millennium Post. Millennium Post, February 14, 2016. <http://www.millenniumpost.in/jnu-students-lock-hostel-rooms-and-flee-fearing-police-action-124102>.

²⁰ This was the lecture on that day by Professor Achin Vanaik: Lecture on Nationalism No. 7 available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Q49lhXapHw>

legibility of sources for academics from the Global South. Native informant²¹ behaviour is traditionally valued within academia, and the urge to report with authenticity, however spurious it may be in terms of actualities, is still very strong within my own academic life. However, I shall elect for brevity here and turn back at the most generative critique posed by an eternal examiner, historian Dr Prabhat Kumar Basant, during my Mphil defense. His question was a political one – does the campus impulse of radical politics ensure any sort of long term radical political engagement in the students, even after they leave academics? Like the Leftist polemics of “class consciousness”, is there a possibility of a transformative consciousness in the campus? This would lead me to start reaching out to activists in various cities across South and South East Asia, most notably Hong Kong, Taipei and Dhaka, where I was aware student movements were going on across multiple frontiers of politics. While the initial framework might have been a general curiosity around student struggle and its persistence within a highly capitalist world, where professionalizing environments in universities prevented students from having either time or the space to pursue politics, very soon during my freewheeling discussions with student activists from varying parts of the political spectrum in these cities I realized that their political work depended on complex relationships with multiple levels of identity – relationships with the nation state, relationships with national, local and familial history, relationships with the cities in which they carried out their politics and a specific relationship to studenthood, alongside more collectivized identity markers like gender, caste, sexuality, religion etc. I was interested in these cities and their specific moments of student struggle such as the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong²², the Sunflower

²¹ I use this term in their specific meaning of exposing particularities of my own subjective involvement in certain situations in matters of the Global South to an audience possibly not in the Global South. Spivak (1999) problematizes this role, using her own position as an Indian woman within “international” academia and points to the possible performative element where the Native Informant *generates* her own audience for whom she speaks.

²² Gunia, Amy. “A Brief History of Protest in Post-Handover Hong Kong.” Time. Time, June 20, 2019. <https://time.com/5606212/hong-kong-history-mass-demonstrations-protest/>.

Movement in Taipei²³ and the Shahbag Movement in Dhaka²⁴, not least because I felt a level of solidarity because of the heavy use of police brutality in these movements, but I eventually could not maintain honest relationships of enquiry with the activists because I could not handle the necessity of extractive information collection that ethnographic research asked of me. I did not want or need to surveill on already surveilled spaces to prove some point about the validity of these spaces and movements, in keeping with Marxist traditions of universal consciousness categories, and turned my lens of analysis on to my own historiographic practice, in order to find an ethical language of historiography for contemporary student movements without turning into a native informant. Thus my work draws its entire juice from my comrades in these spaces, who, in their steadfast practices of materializing into reality particular dreams of substantiation, work in multifarious roles – subjects of history, writers and doers and performers of history, and witnesses of history, among others. While the logical “glue” between these faraway spaces seems to be that these are all student movements of the Global South, the actual, embodied glue is the experience of violence, from the police, from governments, universities, and dominant historiographic practices that service these politically ambiguous functionaries. I follow this extremely embodied glue of experienced violence as an authorial determinant in how histories of student movements have been written, and how I believe they could be written otherwise. It is somehow incredible that the first time the import and power of historiographical work became apparent to me outside the classroom was when I was under EMDR therapy for sexualized and racialized

²³Ho, Ming-sho. “The Activist Legacy of Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 2, 2018. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/02/activist-legacy-of-taiwan-s-sunflower-movement-pub-76966>.

²⁴ “Shahbag Protesters versus the Butcher of Mirpur,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, February 13, 2013), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/13/shahbag-protest-bangladesh-quader-mollah>.

intimate partner violence that I faced in 2019-2020. In the light of the intention to recover, I was being asked to visit and revisit what I was calling “the crime scene”, because a crime had indeed occurred there, in my own private space, over my own body. No longer under the explicit prompt of representation – I did not have to share what happened – I was being asked to work with the process of EMDR that deemed the crime scene, like actual crime scenes, mutable despite underpinnings of objectivity. In *Theater/ Archaeology* (2001), Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks mentions the forensic impulse of their particular interdisciplinary brand of theater and performance historiography.

“The popularity of crime novels and true-crime television programmes – with accounts of detection and pathology – is apparent enough. This may indicate a persistent morbidity in our human condition. But it may also attest to our fascination with, and increasing reliance upon, scientifically verified evidence as representing fact, verisimilitude, truth, and upon reconstruction, informed by surveillance, as helping us understand criminal method and motive, and narrative: to seek clues, to create an authentic account of the lost event is the prime objective. Such matters have long been in the critical realm of both archaeology and performance.” (pp. 21-22)

It was only under the circumstances of EMDR that I was able to make the connection between historiographical work and forensics, surveillance and other loci of biopolitics. And the question of ethics in representing in however mediated fashion sensitive information about my “objects of study” – my comrades – led to a more playful, if not slightly obfuscating approach – their bodies reporting on mine, and mine on theirs, and perhaps ours, on to history. I could entertain the idea of the body as an active and dynamic historiographical source, inside which unprocessed information is mutable and in the need of a creative nudge and somatic practice to flow into a narrative transformed for the possibility of healing. And this led me circuitously to a renegotiation with the political performances of the student

movements in which I had taken part and those I had read about and had been inspired by, not through the collector-impulse of the lexicon, the compendium or a handbook of grammar, easily categorized together in neat surveys, but through the tenuous and contingent practices of survival, from violence, direct, structural and epistemic. In methodologizing this, I take acute pleasure in the way Peter Burke expanded on the possibility and dangers of performance studies in his essay *Performing History* (2005).

“The idea of deference as performance is both disturbing and perceptive. The idea of emotions as theatre is scandalous and penetrating at the same time. The idea of violence as performance is even more shocking, since real blood flows, but it is surely illuminating nevertheless, in the case of the terrorism of our time as much as—or even more than—in earlier riots or pogroms.” (pp. 42)

To be clear, the explicit intervention of my study is, through the interrogation of particular bodies and their survival through violence under pre-existing definitions of community and affinity (“student” community on the one hand and “national” community on the other, to name just two), I attempt to really push through the nervous disciplinary expectations in both theater studies and historical studies to stay in one’s lane, or at least clearly determine one’s lane. Perhaps doing exactly what Burke is anxious about – pushing the category of performance (or any academic analytical category) “too far”, I am able to communicate that these terms of engagement are neither fixed, nor fully determined, but still used strategically for epistemic gatekeeping. In this regard, the polemical research question is – who is historiography serving, and do we have any bearing on the production of knowledge to change who it serves? And on a postscript, it would be equally valid for me to claim that I simply wanted to write in a dignified way about myself and my comrades, we who are surviving through a particularly difficult time through different kinds of

performative repetition and deference that helps our bodies heal and gives us ways of communicating our experiences through historiographical charges for the rest of us to bear witness. It is our substantive claim on historiography.

Methodology

As a particularly disloyal (and at times extremely confused) student of both history and performance studies, I have oftentimes questioned the efficacy of claiming interdisciplinarity and still drawing out vague roadmaps of disciplinary practice. Is there a fundamental difference between theater and performance historiography and “normal” historiography as such? During my undergraduate training in history and my graduate training in theater and performance studies, I could only grasp a few fairly clear differences. The main one was the differences in historical source and its reading – theater and performance history expected things which were doubtlessly to do with the established cultural institution of the theater, or events that happened in spaces clearly designated for aesthetic cultural production such as art galleries, museums, film theaters, festivals and exhibition halls etc. However, the “performative turn” had claimed the ubiquity of the category as a useful analytical tool, and wilder sources inevitably emerged. Despite this, there is a tendency to give precedence and more importance to explicitly cultural sources, as I suppose, it is relatively easier to conjure a closed event from cultural ephemera from that event. The event does play a significant role in the constitution of theater and performance historiography, to some extent lesser than “normal” historiography, where, in my experience, generalizations are more easily forgiven in descriptive analysis of events. One can perhaps pin this down to the inordinate insolence of history as a senior discipline, as opposed to TPS, still going through growing pains. Academic gossip aside, the most powerful claim of TPS remains the *habens corpus* writ, which can be a serious problem while doing archival research. After all, the archive often speaks in moribund, hectoring and

official voices, unable to paint a picture for the sensorium to feed on. Informed as it is through the playful and generative practices of the body, theater and performance historiography's labour is perhaps to ignite the archival material's sensorial charges, in the hope of finding what someone must have seen, heard, felt, and also finding what we see, hear and feel.

Apropos wild sources and sensorial charges, I have to acknowledge my methodological debt to Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies paradigm within historiography, with carefully worded caveats. Not only did Subaltern Studies point (in its own slightly reductionist ways) towards the problem of coloniality within historical studies in the context of postcolonial realms, it also summarily entertained the wildest sources as reliable historical documents. In *History At the Limit of World-History* (2002), Guha disavows procedural corroboration to walk up to the taboo of using literature as a historical source, analyzing Rabindranath Tagore's commentary on historiography and seeking out clues for subaltern historiography within it. For once there is acknowledgement within "normal" historiography that deeply subjective artistic production not only serves as a source of valuable information about society and culture, but also the "historian's craft" itself. Among the many things that Guha analyses within Tagore's commentary on history, two things are of importance to us. The first one is Guha's reading of the word "*suchana*", a word that Tagore uses to speak about the "source" or origin of his own poetic career, something that the poet claims that pedantic historians are unable to trace or access in their bid to write "big" narratives of political (nationalist) history. There is, from the side of the poet (as Guha reads) a chastisement of the blindness of history towards origins and sources that point towards a creative practice, "*the obscure and yet undisclosed source where those experiences are still coiled in the incipience of sheer possibility.*" (pp. 78). Guha to an extent is still towing the line of the disciplinary border regime as such, and is unable to contextualize this "incipient" source (Tagore speaks about three childhood

experiences that precede by many years his first poems) within historiographical analysis beyond the impulse that it is a “*sort of pre-history*”.

However, unlike the prehistory reconstructed from broken shards as a past that is incomplete for want of evidence, what we have here is entirely future oriented. As such, it requires no evidence of actualization, nor even of a beginning, but simply the recognition of something yet to be. (ibid)

Within theater and performance historiography, we have a chance to treat creative practice as such as embodied sources in which inexplicit work that “pre-dates” the production, i.e. process, is also analyzable within the rubric of performance. In this regard, Black Quantum Futurism’s African cosmology and quantum mechanics-inspired historiographical category of “retrocausality” would be useful to liberate the “incipient” from the structural and linear expectations of prehistory. As BQF suggests, the *nature* of experiential time is such that both the past and the future have a bearing on our present, and “*When a possible future is envisioned, foreseen, or chosen by a BQF Practitioner, that future will instantaneously reshape its relationship to the past*”. In the cases of both Tagore and BQF, the work of envisioning is fundamental – it is embodied creative process that would have a bearing on their whole lives, and quite importantly, the lives of people in their communities viz Tagore’s influential position within Indian public sphere and continued relevance and BQF’s situated community practice to fight gentrification in Philadelphia. How are we, as theater and performance historians, to contextualize the process of creative work without anointing it with “incipience”? I argue that we would have to acknowledge the socio-political involvement of the artists, i.e. situate them within their political lives and corroborate their authorial voices through analysis of the political and cultural movements that they are feeding off and feeding back into – in principle a Culture Studies position. In this regard, studying socio-political movements as a process of creative production

becomes a contestation of the closedness of the historical source itself, or the obscurantism of treating creative practice as a magical realm of incredible potentiality that seemingly comes from somewhere outside the purview of material conditions – a poet’s interiority. This brings me to the second point in Guha’s article, where he tries to ground Tagore’s creative practice as an exercise in subaltern historiography by quoting his short story collection *Galpaguchha*.

“Its themes are age-old and rendered stale by tradition. But they come alive again by being narrated creatively to show how time and literature work together to recover the living historicity of the quotidian. Tagore relies here on a combination of two of the most commonly used words in his language to explain what he means. To write creatively, he suggests, is to write about ‘pratyahik sukhdubkha’, that is, about everyday contentment and misery.” (pp.93)

Guha reads “*sukhdubkha*” as used in quotidian Bangla parlance, as “*the entire range of lived experience*”, and concedes that creative practice can bring about an investment in the concreteness of the historicity of the everyday, clarifying it through Henri Lefebvre’s critique of the Annales School’s obscuring practices of narrating the everyday through “irrelevant details”. Fortunately for us, historical subjectivity does not make a hierarchy between the “relevance” of creative incipience and the “irrelevance” of the quotidian, and the first is not necessarily instrumentalized to render the latter historically exceptional. If we are to take seriously the charge that performance is embodied deference and repetition, self-conscious and watched, and able to create contingent moments of transformation of roles between the watcher and the watched, we would have to let go of exceptionalizing the “production”, i.e. the event and contextualize it within its socio-political processual lives. I would say that the *suchana* and the *sukhdubkha* belong in the same space of the body in performative practice – the *suchana* is not a private experience and the *sukhdubkha* is

not a public experience. Performance as an embodied historiographical practice breaks these dated boundaries and the causal relationships that Guha establishes between them. The locus is the body. The dissolution of these boundaries also become clear in the feminist critique of Subaltern historiography, where Janaki Nair (1994) argues that it has remained “singularly inattentive” to the question of gender, despite its introduction of unconventional historical sources. By Nair’s direction, feminist historiographical labour lies squarely in challenging historiographical categories such as ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, and introducing and acknowledging *agency* as a historical “prime mover”. She points out the tendency to marginalize women’s history on the basis of a “paucity of sources” and the substantive historiographical work that contemporary women’s movements have made to critique and change the very category of “work” and labour itself which has opened up new sources of history. Thus, feminist historiography addresses archival silence through an investment in the performances (of gendered labour) of the present body and its actions, which can have a bearing on the problematic constructions of its past.

“The distinction between public and private domains, so strictly drawn and observed by the archive itself, becomes a crucial starting point for feminist history.” (pp.85)

In keeping with this exposure of the collaborator role of archival silence as a historiographical methodology, I point towards the possibilities and limits of claiming an insider-outsider binary apropos the archive, as a trap of deeming history as a gate to be passed. If the archive is actively suppressed and fungible, and extremely contingent, do historians just give up on writing about what happened? Somehow, the source-event-archive nexus that seems to constantly domesticate the claims of historiography within the realms of procedural corroboration, is still not fundamentally questioned. If we are to take the project of substantive historiography

seriously, surely there would be loci of knowledge which do not fall in the insider-outsider relationship to the source-event-archive nexus. From LeRoy Little Bear, theorist of Blackfoot metaphysics, comes the decolonial answer, situated in indigenous knowledge systems that work completely outside categories of Western academia. In the keynote lecture “*Big Thinking*” (2016)²⁵ at the University of Calgary, Little Bear is able to create a distinct, unalienated connection between repetition and history, that falls outside the aforementioned nexus. He astutely points out the loyalty of Western academia towards the category, the procedural, over the substantive, and opines,

“In Native ways, we always retell our stories, we repeat them. That’s how they sink in and become embodied in students and in the people.”

It is possible to understand performance as this repetition towards a “sinking in”, embodied knowledge that does not need to have a determined “source” beyond its repetition and a determined “archive” beyond its embodiment. It is the *habeus corpus*, the “*you should have the body* [brought to court]” despite the claim of carcerality, the public exposure to scrutiny of embodiment as a valid and crucial historical and epistemic source. Theater and performance historiography can claim this *habeus corpus* writ, especially in its moves to analyze and contextualize difficult topics such as process and affect, the most definitive archives of which are the body. In this work I use wildly interdisciplinary frameworks to position this public scrutiny of the *habeus corpus*. I use literature from social movement theory to understand where the current historiography and general discursive understanding of student movements is lacking. I use disability studies and trauma studies to question the categories of “youth”,

²⁵ Leroy Little Bear, *Big Thinking: Blackfoot metaphysics 'waiting in the wings'*, Lecture delivered to Humanities and Social Sciences Federation, University of Calgary, June 2016, available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_txPA8CiA4

“student” and existent and designated protagonists of politics, along with their liberal underpinnings that are unable to take into account substantive performative shifts in contemporary social movements in general. And I use theater and performance studies approaches such as performance analysis and theater and performance historiography to find vocabularies to describe both socio-political movement instances and cultural sphere instances, taking as axiom that these are not only not mutually exclusive, they are often one and the same. I also take as axiom a personal tone of writing, because this is the only way I am able to respond to the call to write about situated knowledges of activist spaces and cultural spaces with a level of dignity, without being the extractive informant and the additive historian. I cannot cross the ethical boundary of mining myself and my comrades for knowledge to be arranged in the cupboard of history, and not really caring for myself and them in our present. And this is why I center my academic and ethical compass on stories of survival – survival of the body in ways undomesticated by discursive extraction – with the clear wisdom that our stories have something fundamental to say to historiography, socio-political movements, academia and our perceptions of time and temporality itself. In this work, I liberally borrow methods and methodologies from History, Theater and Performance Studies, Historiography, Disability Studies, Education Studies, Culture Studies, Praxeology and Social Movement Theory, and these are the various disciplines that I also want to address with this work.

Chapterization

In following the *habeus corpus* writ, I start with the limits of the event in my first chapter. I specifically look at three screen-based, video-based works – Payal Kapadia’s film *The Night of Knowing Nothing*, Teresa Braggs’s film *Sab Changa Si*, and Pallavi Paul’s solo exhibition *The Wind in Your Body is Just Visiting, Your Breath Will Soon be Thunder*, through an investment in their reception. These three pieces, varyingly dealing with

the artists' subjective interiorities, as individuals belonging within particular sociopolitical communities (protesters, artists, Indian citizens, women, students etc) address a moment of reckoning within the Indian fascist public sphere under the rule of the BJP since 2014. I specifically look at the presentations of all three in Berlin in the year 2022, and the circumstances of reproduction and reception of well-known images of police violence within the works. Trying to understand the specific historiographical intents in each body of work, I encountered an issue of readability, especially within the images of police violence, which seemed to have been designated as closed events belonging in the "past", or even inside a cogent linear structure of historical narrative. However, the circumstances of viewership – that there were people in the audience even in faraway Berlin who were survivors of the same police violence, and some could even see their friends on the screen – refused the designation of exceptional state violence as a historical category of "event", because of the continuous presence of trauma in their survivor bodies and the embodied responses to the pieces. I observed that the presence of bodily violence and its afterlives in the survivor body could potentially destabilize attempts at historicization through the unit of event, i.e. the event bleeds when re-witnessed by someone who was bleeding inside the event. Images of protest and its coterminous violence seemed to address different audiences differently – there was of course the uninvolved audience and their relatively distanced sense of shock, which would not particularly destabilize the denomination of an event, and then there were those who were seeing a storytelling practice about their own lives, and their spectatorial experience was of catching what I call the various "historiographical charges" of the images – extratextual political affect in excess not only of the artistic narrative, but also the historiographical denomination of event to the content of the images. I have theorized this through a close reading of the bodily affect of the images in the larger content of the report on the body of existent fascism, routing it through Trauma

Studies, Cinema Studies, Literary Theory, Reception Theory and Disability Studies. In my perception of impossibility of the receptacle of event for creative practice that deploys images of pain and violence during political resistance, I have stumbled upon two possible alternatives for the closed event in reception – “worlding” and “boundary event”, following the works of Donna Haraway, Trinh T. Minh Ha and Gloria Anzaldúa, which have helped me contextualize the specific roles of specific bodies in producing, reproducing and witnessing political affect, which to a large extent expose the long, lingering and undying presence of structural violences, a position that resists against understanding fascism as a historical event of the past and substantiating it with its long presence in the body.

In my second chapter, I look at archival absences as a deliberate political moment of historiographical work, and the consequent renderings of historical labels on events to determine their meanings and readings in historical narrative. In my commitment to student struggles, I choose the June 4th Movement of 1989 in China as a point in which we witness historiographical selections, designations and active suppression at work. Questioning the varied labeling of the June 4th Movement, as a “student movement”, as a “Democracy movement”, and also as a media event, I analyze what is “left” of the polyvocal stories of the moment, after the historiographical work has been done by the Chinese government that deselects and suppresses the violence of the army for exposure, the international media that reselects this “hidden” history and gives primacy to that, painting a picture of “Democracy Movement” for exposure, and historians and anthropologists who expose both, doubling down on a binary that fails to address lasting affect of the moment such as grief and mourning, as seen in the relentless work of NGOs such as Tiananmen Mothers to keep the memories alive. I bring into critique the need of these historiographers, who are all pussyfooting around the government suppression of the archive, to talk back in the form of timelines – niggling arguments about arrangement of events that lead to a further mystification

around the validity of it happening at all. I focus my interest in the embodied historiographical work of artists, and their specific interest in this (rendered) pivotal moment and its archival silences, through performance analysis and literature on witnessing as a historiographical impulse. I study two wildly different iterations of the same choreography by artist-activist Ming Poon, artistic deployments of historiographical charge in the iconic video of “Tank Man”, for years the “only” proof and global register of visibility (at least the primary), for the Tiananmen Square massacre. This piece of archive, dislodged in every way from a totality of events, has been treated as generative by Poon, who in the very simple act of repetition of the actions of Tank Man, has attempted to pass on various meanings to various audiences – remembrance of a lost student movement to contemporary students, embodied knowledges of how to protest and resist to fellow activists and challenging eurocentrism in the form of protest genealogies in activist circles in the West. I analyze the placement of two iterations, the first one, *Unison*, performed by students in a performing arts school in Singapore, and the second one, *Dance Against Tanks*, within two embodied (non)archives – the first in the contingent archive of labour within the campus body and the second within the contingent archive of a public protest on the streets. Both these protesting bodies in this regard center the rehearsal as a crucial act of protest, which in my mind dislodges the fixedness of archival impulses in general, and specifically in the case of June 4th, the archive of which is only present in the acts of process. Lastly, I look at two attempts of timelining June 4th through the shoring up of performance in the service of a grand narrative of linearity. I briefly study performance artist Xiao Lu’s piece *Dialogue* at the China/Avant Garde exhibition in Beijing in 1989 and the attempted archival renderings of her action of shooting at her own work during the exhibition as a “premonition” event to June 4th. I also briefly look at the international media and global activist circuit’s attempts at casting the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in

2014 as the antecedent event of June 4th. Acknowledging the comfort of a timeline for suppressed moments of violence, I point towards the shoring up of *performative political affect* as the primary binding factor between these three moments, questioning if this can be an actual and valid category to historicize suppressed information.

In my third chapter, I look at another such moment in the “past”, as it determined historiography in the present – the “global” moment of student struggle in 1968, and its residual affective connections towards the creation of recognizable and iconized cultural categories such as “student” and “protester”. Through a brief study of examples in cultures commemorating 1968, specifically in academia and the culture industry, I try to trace the construction of the *subjects* of “youth” and “student” as one of the prime movers of political resistance, as inscribed by the long-lasting impacts on the social sciences and the academic world of the 68 moment. As one can see, the historiography machine surrounding 68 is vast and gets re-energized intermittently during “anniversaries”, however, historians still maintain a tendency of doing “additive” history – where each new “discovered” regional history during 68, would have been made to confront, appendix or cross the Eurocentric canon in anniversary publications. I situate this logic of additive historiography within the practice of creating particular defined subjects of the history of 68 itself, through an affective and loose repertoire that can and does include, variedly, ad campaigns, academic conferences, films and other powerful cultural ephemera that renders the understanding of 68 as a watershed moment for the whole world axiomatic and commonsensical. However, there is an inherent unfixeness within the repertoire, because of its specific shoring up of topographies of borders – those between the student and worker, the university and student, the establishment and youth, the protagonists of 68 and the receivers of the legacy etc. I argue that the constitution of the campus as a liberal space of political contestation goes through a certain level of

streamlining and the repertoire shores up identifiable affect through this moment, and because of the entrenchment of this affect within higher education in general, which saw several paradigmatic restructuring of thought during the period, inscribe the campus with the affective charge of the Youth-Revolt complex that would dominate the discourse on social movements. In effect, this could be seen as an identifiable moment of attempted definitions of “youth”, “student”, “revolutionary” within culture, with particular “global” avatars that are rejoinders to this narrative. However, the concentration of focus on the academic space, both in terms of protests as well as historiography, can be seen as to base itself on particular inscriptions of borders between the “campus” and the “outside”, a colonial spatial logic that echoes into the compendium publications that do historiographical surveys into “global” 60s. I try to look at the dramaturgy of this inside-outside logic of the university as constitutive of the constructed subject of 68 history, a subjecthood still taught and shored up within academia, where universities are seen as spaces of imagined sanity where liberal values are to be protected, in spite of neoliberalization. What I argue is that the repertoire of 68 designates the bodily experience of police violence within the realm of political experience that is *outside* the realm of the campus, within the masses, through the breach of that imagined dramaturgical boundary. Contemporary movements which have young leadership use *vulnerability of the body* in the rubric of its closeness to death and extinction, as a political and performative device, borrowing from the repertoire of 68. However, the rampant complaints of burnout within contemporary activist spaces play themselves out in what I argue is a generative performance of the “boundary”, as opposed to the “border” from 68. This is, I argue, a change in the repertoire because of the salient changes in the relationship of young people with late capitalist worlds, due to exacerbated neoliberalism and the exposure of bodily risk within the same.

In my fourth chapter, I come to the problem of the historical source in writing about student struggles in the contemporary moment. This chapter is in essence taking stock of contemporary academia and its historicized involvement in carceral necropolitics. Spoken in the context of neoliberal professionalization and privatization of education that universities are facing globally, I rely heavily on the work of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney to argue that historiography of student struggles cannot be written without the express acknowledgement of the university as a site of struggle itself – a site of what I call “*access warfare*”. I try to bring to light the conditions underpinning contemporary university research, arguing that we need to center poor mental health of students and actual death of students due to their involvement in academia in order to understand not only the stakes of student movements and their historiographies, but also knowledge production itself. I look at two moments of academic necropolitics from a performance research perspective – two moments which are both personal and having a bearing on the nature of academic production itself. The first instance is a personal testimonial of ragging, a “rite of passage” in various higher education institutions across the former colonies, in which senior students unchain violence on new students on admission to university. I re-look at my own testimony, at the detailed dramaturgy of interpersonal violence, and analyze this performance in the context of understanding higher education institutions and academia as germanely linked to the colonial project, and therefore an understandable place for sustained access warfare. In the second instance, I problematize the idea of historical source by presenting, in totality, a suicide note from comrade Rohith Vemula, a Dalit research scholar of Hyderabad Central University, who took his own life in January 2016. In taking a close look at the presentations and re-readings of the note within theater performances, films, I move towards claiming that academia, historiography and knowledge production come to a standstill and find substantive ways to understand and historicize its own involvement in murder by walking away from representational

claims of liberal research, and eventually through the dissolution of existent gatekeeping practices. It is clear to me that the body as a low-rung source of knowledge is systematically and actually extinguished by the coloniality of the university, and the dead are rendered “legible” through liberal attempts at analysis. However, there are bodies, even dead ones, that do not rely on academia to either live or die, and the point of my work is not to bring them to light in the form of Columbian discovery, but to disavow academic practice towards an affinity with them. I circle back to Peggy Phelan’s definition of performance as a category of activity that actively resists reproductive representation. And in doing this, I believe I am personally able to liberate myself from the time constraints of historiography that artificially declare many dead, even in the face of their dynamic, embodied aliveness.

In conclusion, I restate the need for revisiting and challenging the various border regimes that I speak about in my chapters – the sureties around the tenets of historiography such as the event, archive, subject and source, the distance between politics and performance, and the need to maintain disciplinary boundaries in academics. In the light of the realities of student protest in contemporary times, the experience of violence on the body and mind, and the generative performances that create repertoires of survival are to my mind the path to a more substantive and real practice of historiography. Through a close look at Manjari Kaul’s recent online performance *Firefly Women*, which centers the act of writing in survival, with a specific focus on the letters written from jail by two young Indian women students and feminist antifascist activists, I attempt to understand the political possibility and historiographical function of writing itself, both as written letters and as a performed bodily vocabulary towards survival. I argue that performance has the possibility of not only doing the substantive work of historiography, but also the *transformative* work – referring to the framework of transformative justice where the larger community is

engaged in a justice process, with the clear understanding that survivors and perpetrators are both parts of the same society and everyone needs support to heal and move on. Following Kaul's piece, I try to find a way, in a historiographical practice where the events, the archives, the protagonists and the sources are all destabilized, to still commit to the bearing of a historiographical charge. This is not an accidental state of crisis – this is the common experience of writing about students and their politics in the contemporary world. And hence, the reliance on survival, not just of the bodies under violence, but what survives of these categories of historical methodologies as well.

Bodies Under Violence: Bleedings Events on Screen, on the Street, in the Body

Key concepts: 'Historiographical Charge', Historiography of the Event

Part 1: Three Young Women Reckon with Fascist Subjectivity

Early into the year 2022, two separate cultural organizations in Berlin, as a part of their Berlinale programming, screened two films – *The Night of Knowing Nothing*²⁶ directed by Payal Kapadia and *Sab Changa Si*²⁷ by Teresa A. Braggs. The two films were strikingly different accounts of the political protests rocking various parts of the Indian subcontinent across the materially short but subjectively long timeline between 2014 and 2020. Alongside the two films, there was also the opening of artist Pallavi Paul's solo exhibition at SAVVY Contemporary, named *The Wind in Your Body is Just Visiting, Your Breath Will Soon be Thunder*²⁸, a moving image-heavy show in which the audience would sink into myriad film footage from the same timeline of India, found mainly circulating through news media and other channels of the contemporary Indian fascist public sphere. These film clips, variously contextualized amongst other images in the three different art spaces, were primarily found footage from news channels or videos captured by people while they faced violence in the hands of the police²⁹. For a “general” audience in the city of Berlin (say, unencumbered by the political happenings in other parts of the world beyond a capacity of curiosity), these could potentially appear as generic images of violence from a context far away both

²⁶ Film night programme available online here: <https://bi-bak.de/en/bi-bakino/sounding-womanhood/479-fu-377-a-night-of-knowing-nothing>

²⁷ Screening detail available online here: https://www.berlinale.de/en/programme/programme/detail.html?film_id=202212290

²⁸ Curatorial note and programme detail available online here: <https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/projects/2022/the-wind-in-your-body/>

²⁹ This Close Circuit TV footage from the police action in the library in Jamia Millia Islamia University in Delhi found a place in all three moving image expositions: Al Jazeera, “India: Footage Appears to Show Police Attack on Jamia Students,” Human Rights News | Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera, February 16, 2020), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/16/india-footage-appears-to-show-police-attack-on-jamia-students>.

geographically and culturally. However, the specific contexts in which these works were shown, and the audience that gathered around them, created some very specific conditions of reception and discourse that prevailed upon the reality of existing oppression within the Indian polity in ways beyond the suggestive and gestural. All three works, on display around the same time in the city, no longer directed the audience merely towards the information that India is now run by a regime of fascist exceptional violence, a regime of Hindutva³⁰, but that this was an accepted reality and the time had come to take emotional stock of the damages and victories, of the self and the polity. Following Stuart Hall's ever-so-relevant proposition of popular culture as "*...an arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured...*" (Hall, 1982, pp. 239), the three works of art, with their specific usage of images of police violence especially on the bodies of protesting students, were among some of the cultural productions that were not only representing but attempting to constitute particular meanings and definitions, however loose, such as those of trauma and protest. The fact that these were being presented (and to some extent, at least for the instances of Pallavi Paul's show and Payal Kapadia's film, produced³¹) in spaces of international "cultural exchange" such as festivals and vernissages etc was significant in a moment in the life of Hindu fascism where the "youth", a definition we will explore in a later chapter, was standing at a moment of reckoning with the physical and political damage of the years between 2014-2020. What sort of historical reckoning can one create with a moment of crisis while it is still very much present? To follow Walter Benjamin's Thesis, this could be an act of "*seize[ing] hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger*" (Benjamin, 1937), a personal involvement with the past which is a scene of crime and a frontier of revolution. It is of course entirely

³⁰ "How Hindu Supremacists Are Tearing India Apart," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, February 20, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/20/hindu-supremacists-nationalism-tearing-india-apart-modi-bjp-rss-jnu-attacks> .

³¹ Pallavi Paul's show was produced on a DAAD scholarship. Payal Kapadia's film was co-produced by a French film production house called Petit Chaos.

ahistorical to suggest that this was some of the first or in any way originary representations of fascist violence on the various public and private political frontiers of Narendra Modi's India. In fact, the found footage used in the films were immediately recognizable by any and all Indians because of the sheer screen time on televisions and social media that they received as a part of the events of violence themselves. However, this moment in Berlin was somehow special – within a year or two from each other, three young women/femme presenting people, themselves students who took part in the protests shown in the films, had created these artistic vessels of meanings and emotions and signs and stories that recounted their extremely personal relationships with the exceptional violence of fascist power in very diverse ways, and these had found a space within the international cultural circuit, converging in the city of Berlin, a city that saw the Indian diaspora protest against their government in Brandenburger Tor intermittently from 2019 to 2021³². In his essay in the Culture Studies Reader, Raymond Williams argues that one would have to understand both the artistic project as well as its formation (Williams in Storey Ed. 1996, pp 169), that is, both a textual and a contextual analysis is needed to understand the underlying relations of power in a society that begets art and violence, because fundamentally history and culture are not separate realms. In the context of the three artworks mentioned above, there was the obvious, documentary impulse of real time archiving of a country under the oppressive rule of violence, but the cultural artifact's role as the arena of consent and resistance was coded in very specific ways of visceral charges communicating highly cultural and contextualized trauma as well as pleasure. Fact is that the strength of the consensus around Hindutva is such that the protests, with all their spectacular commitment, would exist in a state of exceptional minority, each dissenter running severe personal and political risks. The immediate archiving

³² Imam, Sarosh. "Anti-CAA Protests Go Global: Chants of 'Azaadi' Echo in Berlin." TheQuint, December 24, 2019. <https://www.thequint.com/my-report/citizenship-amendment-act-protest-berlin-germany-photos>.

impulse of the protestors were on the one hand for purposes of “proof” of violence in case of arrest or other legal trouble, and on the other stemming from the very real complexities of realizing one’s status outside the consensus of the Indian democracy. In such a context, with the big culture industries of the country such as cinema (Menon, 2020), theater³³ and the arts more or less taking the side of the oppressor or remaining silent, it takes massive amounts of artistic and political courage needed to make an attempt at mediating everyday violence into a regime of meaning. And then, the images created are obviously not simple, even if they have been seen many times before. They have been recast through the subjective lenses of the three women, and their particular conditions of oppression under fascism, oppressions that ultimately report in the body. The muddiness of the images could perhaps be related to the relatively short temporal distance between the “real life” happenings depicted in the films and the making and showing of the films themselves. The relative freshness of the wounds and first-hand experiences of fascist citizenship rendered the films and the events of their screenings into experiences of cinema that decidedly bled outside a film spectatorship experience, where the body of at least some of the audience members would be recalled constantly, and viscerally centralized in moments of pain and empowerment, animated by the joint presence of body memories of violence and the archival footage of the same.

There are some important constituents for contextualizing both the production of these works of art, their place within the mise-en-scene of exhibition, screenings and other curated spaces, their effect on the viewer’s body and the mediations attempted by curatorial impulses towards a legible viewership. It is imperative that the first

³³ Kashyap, Sunil. “After Listing ‘Godse’ Play on 30 Jan in Varanasi Fest, Organisers NSD–RSS Affiliate Backtrack.” *The Caravan*, January 30, 2021. <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/godse-play-on-thirtieth-january-varanasi-national-school-of-drama-rss-saanskar-bharti>.

mention in this reconstruction is the body in pain – *one* of the central figures in this tentacular cultural endeavor to make meaning out of violence. These are of course not empty, abstracted bodies, but specifically *young* bodies, *student* bodies (how their youth or their studenthood is rendered a political performative category of solidarizing, we shall discuss in another chapter), bodies that are at present sites for the directly violent (involving actual physical violence meted out by the state, police, army) negotiations of Indian-ness, an identity politics constituted not out of the Colonial-Enlightenment values of liberal democratic civil rights and active citizenship and the *realpolitik*, but one hafted from a constellation of a historically constructed conservative cultural mythos and structural violence of purported Hindu *body politik* underpinned by hierarchical cosmologies of caste and gender (and other categories follow). And, crucially, for some members of the audience, who themselves have had a history of participation in these movements, these bodies are *identifiable*, they are nameable friends, comrades, often the audience member themselves in a crowded scene of protest³⁴. Elaine Scarry reminds us that “*physical pain – unlike any other state of consciousness – has no referential content..*” (Scarry, 1985, pp.5) and hence the severe difficulty of actually “representing” the same. And one has to keep in mind that the pain that is being expressed in the works may not only be physical, in fact within the texts and performances in the films themselves, one sees many registers of pain being dealt with, suggesting the multiplicity of physical and emotional registers that fascism and its violence is prevailing and can prevail upon in the lives of its subjects. In absence of appropriate representational modes however, the artists attempt to communicate both the “*unshareability*” (Scarry, 1985, pp.4) of the violence and also the present reality of it, and make use of, sometimes in indirect gesture such as visual

³⁴ Multiple times I had the strange experience of seeing my close friends in the protests on screen, and could tell exactly where I was standing in the crowd with respect to them.

quotations, to the documentary form as both undeniably “real” and involved in loops of trauma and its engendered lack of narrative and meaning.

The second constituent of this garland of cultural works being spoken about is that the images of young bodies facing state and police violence, which have been produced and have been in circulation within the Indian fascist public sphere at least since 2014 (and some from earlier), are being deployed via artistic and curatorial mediation in international art and culture contexts such as foreign state funded film festival circuits and independent foreign contemporary art galleries, significantly at the same moment. This coterminous series of moments, what one could very much denote in the current moment of the world a series of “comorbidities”, is not coincidental, as their co-existence in the city of Berlin at this point, it begs to be argued, is a particular point in the process of rendering legible exceptional trauma. In barebones – three women, of my own age more or less, having participated in antifascist protests in India in various capacities, created stories out of the violence they and I and we faced, and traveled to farther shores to show their stories, presumably to the world. In *Every Trans-Action Conjures a New Boundary* (2001) Josette Feral draws heavily from Homi Bhaba’s idea of a *third space*, an interstitial zone of hybridity where the concept of culture is rendered contingent and in flux, and from Arjun Appadurai’s conceptualization of territoriality as a lived process of *localization* rather than being connected to the tactics of sovereignty of a nation state. Following Feral’s line of thought, we can detect the attempted drawn borders of Hindutva India in these films, and also the tensions surrounding them, especially relevant in the context of a diaspora audience and an international screening in a city far away from “home”. The historical political agenda of the Hindutva brigade has been to naturalize the relationship between the Hindutva *body politik* that denotes a changed map, a changed constitution, and a changed demography, and the *realpolitik* of genocide that

can achieve such a *body politik*. The Indian diaspora has been crucial in upholding and financing (Sud, 2008) these so-called values, in effect obscuring in the eyes of a global audience the historical development of Hindutva. Yet, members of the Indian diaspora in Berlin and several other cities in Germany and other parts of the world came together to protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act, personally risking precarious visa situations, threats from the international Hindu Right Wing, and increased surveillance from the Indian Embassy. The destabilization of national identities was not only because of their existence as migrants and diasporic people, but also their anger, shame and trauma about living under and witnessing real-time fascism. It has to be mentioned here that the group of protestors in Berlin were almost all first-generation migrants, whereas Hindutva is often taught as an intergenerational value system amongst Indian families settled abroad for more than one generation, even finding representation in blockbuster television series³⁵. I am not sure if the destabilization that all of us organizing the protests faced could be specifically spoken of as Feral's usage of "*detrterritorialization*" – it certainly got many of us stuck in a protracted response of trauma, exacerbated by the Delhi pogrom of 2020³⁶. And it was this detrterritorialization, not only of national identity, but also of the mind and the body under trauma, that the films recalled, leading to a communication of specific visceral affects to the Berlin audience, in excess to the easily identifiable "information" about violence.

³⁵ *Never Have I Ever*, on Netflix, narrates the Hindu diaspora experience through a teenage girl in the USA, without a serious critical lens on Islamophobia and caste, constitutive of the diaspora identity. see Deepak, Sharanya. "Never Have I Ever and the Commodification of Identity Politics." Mangal Media. Mangal Media, June 3, 2020. <https://www.mangalmedia.net/english/never-have-i-ever-and-the-commodification-of-identity-politics>.

³⁶ Khan, Aiman, and Ishita Chakrabarty. "Why the 2020 Violence in Delhi Was a Pogrom." Islamophobia | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, February 24, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/2/24/why-the-2020-violence-in-delhi-was-a-pogrom>

Before we enter the nitty gritty of describing what went on in the films and video pieces themselves, and why they manifested themselves in faraway Berlin exactly two years after the last violent events captured on camera and deployed in artistic language in them, one needs to furthermore provide date and time and place and body information – the labour of contextualizing that undergraduate courses in historiography train one to undertake – about the socio-political context producing these works. In short, the sociopolitical context that underpins the production of these works of art constitute at a glance the various student and youth-led university campus-based political protests against the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led central government in India that came to power in the year 2014. However, and this point is crucial towards the eventual ethical architecture of this chapter, contexts are bleeding units of history, as one is inextricably embedded in another and the other in another and so forth. To borrow from Hannah Arendt’s deeply clarifying theory of totalitarianism, the defining structure of sociopolity under totalitarian rule is that of an onion.

“...the proper image of totalitarian rule and organization seems to me to be the structure of the onion, in whose center, in a kind of empty space, the leader is located; whatever he does—whether he integrates the body politic as in an authoritarian hierarchy, or oppresses his subjects like a tyrant he does it from within, and not from without or above. All the extraordinarily manifold parts of the movement: the front organizations, the various professional societies, the party membership, the party bureaucracy, the elite formations and police groups, are related in such a way that each forms the facade in one direction and the center in the other, that is, plays the role of normal outside world for one layer and the role of radical extremism for another.” (1954, pp.5)

This is precisely the structure of power within the fascist public sphere of contemporary India, where the massive public resources deployed towards the

maintenance of, above all, the culture of consensus around the rule of the BJP and well-established soft power exports for the global community is the constitutive “normal outside world” (pp.5) that protects from the view the basic bulwark of historically developing Hindu extremism. It can be argued that contemporary Indian sociopolity is, according to a multiplicity of sources, very much in the political ballpark of totalitarianism, in common parlance often described as fascism³⁷. In Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, (1971) he attempts to analyze fascism in post-war Italy as both a political party structure and a social movement, and while the contemporary Indian example has clear indications of both, especially in its history and early ideological connections to National Socialism and Italian fascism (Casolari, 2000), in its everyday practice it centrally involves acute levels of normalization as seen in the Onion model. It is only historically accurate that no two political systems could bear similarities that could lead to generalizations as such. However, in the light of the political impulse of antifascist resistances against Hindu totalitarianism, in this thesis I shall be using the by-now commonly used term Hindu fascism, or Hindutva, or fascism, following a long-standing polemical tradition of the Indian left. This is the reason why the terms “fascist public sphere” has been used above, and this is not a polemical political point, but an attempted discernment of the underlying structure of the contemporary subcontinental society, a structure that is coterminous with the logic of historiography coming from that same society. In this chapter, we will closely interrogate the conceptual and historical framework of the “event”, a highly turbulent unit of temporality and discourse in general, with respect to an onion-shaped complex of socio-political and cultural happenings – materially existing fascism and its direct violence on specific bodies, the attempts of those very bodies to perform certain historiographical functions in forms of political and cultural acts, the affective

³⁷ This is partially due to the Leftist tradition in the subcontinent calling conservative forces “fascist”, and partially because of the open admiration of Hindutva ideologues such as M.S. Golwalkar for Mussolini and Hitler.

rendering of those acts as artifacts of historiography by artists, and the highly mediated viewing of those artifacts by a specific public. An onion-like society begets onion-like things, and the fetish of the event is not some sort of flight-of-fancy selection – the tendency of most traditional historiography of protest in general, one of the few sorts of events that I deal with in my work, revolves around the business of stitching together a series of events, towards fashioning them into a legible garland that makes things into a “movement”. The deeply meritocratic impulse of traditional history-writing that chooses to mete out judgements of success on to acts of revolution, suffers severe levels of short-sightedness, which, I argue, comes from a fundamental incomprehension around the temporal unit of event itself, leading to the attribution of different taxonomies of “event” to various moments of political action, such as a protest as a political event, a theater piece as a theatrical event, or vice versa and suchlike. Apart from the untenable cleanliness of such taxonomy, which only serves the purposes of unthinking categorization used for cataloging and not analysis, it is possible that when it comes to so called political acts under existent fascism, there is just a basic shortcoming of the event as a unit of time, because time is measured differently under fascism, and therefore the things that carry inside them fascist time, such as antifascist protests and antifascist art, need some other temporal lenses, some other, more mongrel understanding of events. Towards this, I attempt to simply dive back into the body, centering the affects of the body in protest, and the once-away and twice away affects of artistic production of this body and viewership of the artistically produced body. The theoretical impulse stems from trauma studies, specifically within the realm of feminist representations in art, in order to actually exhume the body from the necropolitics of both realtime, existent fascism and the onslaught of retraumatizing representations of unproblematised and decontextualised bodies in pain. Who are these bodies and who are the people in these bodies are questions that can be grounded in a deep analysis of the pain of doing protest and the

pain of seeing the same protests becoming historiographical artefacts. This is an attempt at a theoretical regrounding, a case for reanimating the protest and the protestor, both on the street and on the screen and the stage, and one dares to say on the page, through a thorough acknowledgement of repertoires of physical and mental actions that constitute their acts. Additively, like there is pain, there is also a strong impulse of pleasure in the aforementioned complex of actions of protest, art, mediation and viewership. In this chapter, my reflections on the pleasure principle of the acts falls within the register of excess, which necessitates a renegotiation of the “event” as a “worlding” – “*a mobile but more or less stable ensemble of practices, involvements, relations, capacities, tendencies and affordances.*” (Anderson & Harrison, 2011, pp. 8). In line with the speculative, iridescent definitions of this word, the series of affects generated through the protests, the artworks, their report on the viewer’s eyes, renders into confusion and deep entanglements the boundaries between subjects and their surroundings, sometimes those even being one.

Admittedly stemming from my personal involvement in the timelines of this thesis, I am only able to argue and analyze from a space where the tangible residue of fascism in the body is trauma and an elision of physical and psychological boundaries between my own subjectivity and the world around me. It is through the last few years of physical distance from India, and the relentless levels of witnessing of both violence and resistance to violence, albeit from a distance, that the moment in early 2022 and the mise-en-scene of the purported inner life of Indian youth-fuelled antifascism in faraway Berlin, where I happened to live, threw up some keys to physical grounding in trauma, and the pleasurable excesses in its historiographical reanimations. It is as impossible to extricate my own subjectivity from any analysis of the last years in India as it is to maintain disciplinary boundaries between politics and performance. And throughout this work I embrace and lean into this elision of boundaries at various

levels. In the introduction to *The Grammar of Politics and Performance* (Rai, Reinelt, 2015), the authors historicize the fraughtness and reluctance in analyzing political events and performative events with the same “grammar”, in spite of the nominal acknowledgement that “both” the forms draw heavily from the same repertoire. Drawing on Joseph Roach and Janelle Reinelt’s earlier work (2007), where they assert “...we did not include a section on the aesthetics of pure performance, transcending the realm of ideology, because we could not imagine one...”, Rai and Reinelt examine the various historiographical reasons behind the eschewing of overt activist agenda and coalition building in the writing about political performance, observing that the analysis falls into the realm of pointing out the ways in which politics and performance *borrow* from each other. Rai and Reinelt astutely observe this reluctance to acknowledge the salient twinship and interdisciplinary possibilities of the fields to a specific academic response to neoliberal politics – an understandable suspicion of identity politics as an activist agenda that so easily gets co-opted by capitalism and their perceived “heavy handedness” and didactic nature. As a person writing from the perspective of both first-hand witness and historian, I have to however take into account both the disciplinary demands of history and historiography and the ethical demands of resistant politics, to which I am fundamentally committed. To be able to piece together a *dignified* meaning from physical violence, through the interrogation of the body and its memories in trauma, and be able to expose and share some embodied microsites of resistance knowledge that cannot be decoded through grand narrative lenses of protest history – this is the fundamental attempt of this chapter.

Part 2: From the Campus to the Sit-in to...History? Two Films of the Campus and their Multiple Affective Registers

A Night of Knowing Nothing is a black and white feature length film that uses found footage from various moments of protest in different parts of India between the years

2015 and 2020, starting with student protests³⁸ at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune and ending somewhere in 2020 with found footage shots of police violence in the library³⁹ of Jamia Millia Islamia University (Jamia) in Delhi. However, these acts of state violence and student and youth resistance (and in one notable case, general civil resistance) are punctuations in a narrative constructed through love letters “found” in a room in the student residences of FTII, spoken in the voice of a woman only known as “L”, quite possibly the writer of these letters. In the 90 minutes duration of the film, the audience is treated to the whispered pinings of a woman, a film student, trying to find meaning in the breakdown of her relationship with the intended receiver of the letters, only to be confronted with the regular to semi-regular moments of fascist violence within the various campus spaces of her country. The audience realizes quite late into the film that at least one of the reasons behind the breakup of her relationship was that she and her partner belonged to two different castes and the relationship was considered taboo. However, Kapadia quite clearly moves away from ascribing a clear definition to the causes behind the personal trauma, choosing instead to charge the inner sanctum of affect between the protagonist’s soft whisper and the audience with the exceptional violence of the fascist state and the limbic pleasures of resistant sloganeering and congregation. In a short span, quite overwhelmingly, the voice moves between dreamscapes shared by co-inhabitants of the student residence, classmates and friends, to hopeless ponderings on the impossibility of her love towards her partner, to emotional descriptions of the student body (both personal and communal) in protest – in FTII,

³⁸ Rashid, Atikh. “As Protests Rage Outside, Chauhan Takes Charge at FTII.” *The Indian Express*, January 7, 2016. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/standoff-between-police-ftii-students-amid-protest-on-chauhan/>.

³⁹ Bhasin, Swati. “Jamia Protesters Release Video of Cops Attacking Students in Library.” *NDTV.com*. NDTV, February 16, 2020. <https://www.ndtv.com/delhi-news/jamia-protesters-release-video-of-cops-attacking-students-in-library-2180844>.

in Hyderabad Central University (HCU), in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), in Jamia, in Una, and on the streets of Delhi. The speed with which the narrator moves through all that troubles her, is somewhat in a contrast to the soft-focus black and white filming of a sleepy residential college campus – a campus dog relaxing, long shots of hostel corridors, students dancing at parties, a student cooking in her hostel room in her underwear, someone lying in a sliver of sunlight naked and so forth. The seeming normalcy of the “outer” timeline is very much a study in the romantic promise of the campus space as a realm of the bildungsroman, a languid yet dramatic yet harmless and peaceful transient part of young adulthood. This could only be visually penetrated with the striking insertion of found footage – not even so much the surreal colour footage from the FTII archives, of students in another decade having a party, or someone getting married, or, most strikingly, recent news clippings and footage of protests that show exceptional police violence, except that these are also rendered without their sound, somehow mediated by the narrative whisper, the protagonist describing her feelings about the protests, some of which she finds herself in. As noted before, the footage of police violence are footage that the Indian public sphere has saturated itself in, with news broadcasters playing each of these videos on loop, and social media enabling the endless looping of the violence, arguably towards rendering specific affect within the fascist polity, given that the media industry is very much dependent on fueling fascism for their revenue. However, in *A Night of Knowing Nothing*, one can see an attempt at mediating the already over-familiar image of fascist violence into a part in a larger story of personal transformations under fascism. The fact that the personal transformation is what takes centrality in the film, and the protests themselves are punctuating this, is the reason why one can argue that it is doing the historiographical work of the campus, mediating the tension between the

socio-economically irrelevant identity of the student⁴⁰ and the grand narratives of history such as revolution and protest, on which the former has very little and very contingent claims.

The voice in *Night* is significant in its most direct yet elegantly complicated reading as a feminist voice that creates a sensorium of intimacy around essentially triggering happenings in the lives of young people of a country, and in certain ways attempts to perhaps make some sort of meaning out of the whole thing. The autobiographical style, the use of a whole cast of first-name characters, fellow-students in the film school, and the strategic lapses into silence and sighs, they gesture towards a close space of shared vulnerabilities, where even the worst possible acts of violence may find words and emotions, and quite possibly healing. Indeed, it is the sensorium of the private space, which feminist historiography renders legible and empowered as an active voice. However, the voice in *Night* is trying to hold together many anachronisms and impossibilities – the coexistence of love and the impossibility of union, fascist violence on bodies of comrades and the resistance against fascism by the same comrades, and the barrage of events of exceptional violence that news media is rendering into a series of happenings. In many ways, *Night* is a personal construction of the campus in a moment of turmoil, and there are remarkable instances in the film in which students express their awareness of the political stakes of being in a publicly funded film school in the age of neoliberal fascism, and how this is clearly connected to the violence the state is meting out on to the bodies on this campus. In such a moment of cinema where multiple histories of violence and resistance – neoliberalization and privatization of education, the previous and ongoing protests against the same, the tradition of Left-wing filmmaking within the history of the institute itself, and the current and impending crisis of the fascist state and its cops

⁴⁰ In the light of neoliberalization and privatization of universities in India, students of public institutions and their political lives have been severely encroached upon, rendering the constituency politically weak at best and “anti-national” lazy parasites scrounging on taxpayer money at worst.

on campus – it is clear that maintaining borders between political analysis and performance analysis will be untenable and meaningless. The enmeshedness of the many subjectivities of the protagonists – students, activists, youth, artists, survivors of trauma – overflow into each other, and then onto the audience of the film itself, necessitating a reckoning with a vast multiplicity in the sources for any historical work.

The impossibility of feeling the report of all of the multiple registers of history as well as histories of violence all together in one's body is what is leading to the trauma in *Night*, when in the climactic scenes the protagonist is sobbing and declaring that she is scared, she is scared that all her comrades are dying. The trauma in *Night* is the trauma that is stemming from the impossibility of reconstructing the history of the last few years within a comprehensible narrative structure. In Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), she argues for "the wound and the voice", explaining that there is a narrative complex around trauma that renders it into something far more than pathology – the story is also part of the salient geography of the wound. Explicitly drawing from Freud's theorizations, Caruth builds on the Freudian logic that trauma is a wound on the mind, to give it the architecture of a more complex event.

"But what seems to be suggested by Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle is that the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that...is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor." (pp.3-4)

There is something excessive about the traumatic event then, which already bleeds through any supposed self-containment of this particular unit of time that is “event”. In *Night*, the aforementioned anachronisms are recognizable as endemic to a fascist reorientation of time itself – overloaded and repeated direct and indirect violence to render acute trauma, which, following Caruth, repeats itself *ad nauseum* in the nightmares and the repetitive actions of the survivor. And this is the moment where the question of the directorial voice enters the conversation – as a survivor of the trauma of being physically present in the protests represented in the film, what information of the space and time and date and body does she charge her film with, for us to read and understand? This is the historiographical charge carried specifically in art that is a receptacle of violence and resistance, and the particular historiographical charge in *Night* by necessity has to be read through the lens of trauma, as that is at this moment in discourse the closest embodied information about the past.

To clarify, the term “historiographical charge” explicitly deals with a process. Undergraduate studies in history essentially train students in exercises of argumentation and good guessing, based on corroborative methods such as multiplicity of sources and impartial hypotheses to whatever extent possible. However, historiography, the study of the *writing* of history brings into conversation many unruly interdisciplinary elements such as the authorial voice, their socio-political contexts, the historians they read before them, and arguably in the field of theater historiography, the historian’s body and its many realities that confront the sources. From this context, the historiographer not only has the job of collating the various literatures and views of particular events and issues, but also that of clarifying, to their best abilities, the *processes* which led to certain historical accounts and points of view regarding those events and issues. It is very much a backstage role, a deep reckoning

with the concept of “truth” as a process of generation which is necessarily always contingent and always subject to power. Historiography, in its possibility of exposing even the most obvious realities, such as each historical account is subject to the existent material conditions of its world, can carry within it the premonition of discursive ethics. And it is this fraught and fragile practice of carrying some ethical information about existent power structures and their impacts on the minds and bodies of the historiographer which one looks for and finds in works such as *Night*, *Sab Changa Si* etc. One may ask – how is the boundary between historiography and art practice suddenly erased? Is an artist a *de facto* historiographer? I can only argue that it is specifically those artists who are explicitly making art from contexts of resistance to power that are significantly larger than the constituencies that they identify themselves with, constituencies that have little to none and highly contingent claims on history itself, that are also forced to act as both historian and historiographer. And one of these constituencies is students and the campus, where, during moments of violence, we repeatedly see people exhaustively recording and publishing things, often to be consumed by themselves and their constituencies later, and eventually trying to render these accounts into forms of cultural expression. I see this process as an embodied historiographical process, where the historian writes their body, both as “truth” and the process that led to “truth”. And it is this embodied involvement in historiographical work that resonates itself closely with the work of dramaturgy, in specific, trauma-informed ways, to be dealt with a little later into the chapter. I use the word “charge” in conjunction with historiography deliberately here in its polyphonous meanings. The first meaning is the thermodynamics definition of charge as an electric physical property of matter, that causes it to experience force inside an electromagnetic field, causing it to repel and attract other matter. The specificity of particular transformations of matter and its experience of an altered state while being inside a field that in turn defines its relationship with other matter is able to point us

towards the nature of cultural production and political movements that exist and survive within the field of viewership and witnessing, while being at the risk of erasure under fascism. The presence of survivor bodies in the witnessing of things that embody survival through fascism (such as art and protests and the two together) is the fundament of the field, without which the matter (the things that embody survival of fascism) cannot go through the transformative story of passing electric current. And the passage of the electric current is historiographical practice, in case of these specific matter. The second meaning of “charge” is from a vanguardist perspective – of charging through a wall or a barrier of unspeakability because of political risk, and incomprehension of fascist subjectivity. Creative practice and protest movements are the historiographical processes that charge through these epistemic barriers, without feeling the need of academic distance of procedural historiography, using affective registers to inscribe particular forms of knowledge about existent violence and survival from the same. The third meaning of “charge” is that of responsibility – taking charge or being given a charge, and this concerns us with historiography as a done science and a felt and read science i.e. the centering of agency of the body and the ethics of the field in its production and its reading. The last meaning of “charge” is “price” and in conjunction with my argument that both experiences and representations of bodily violence from the state and its many machineries lead to a crisis in meaning and a subsequent limitation of historiographical categories to write about them. Incomprehensibility is the historiographical price to be paid when writing about violence and survival from violence.

So, what historiographical charge has Payal Kapadia embodied into her film, and who and what fields is it legible for? Some answers to these questions are to be found in interrogating, as much as possible, viewership cultures and marketing strategies of the film. In the loglines that go out as marketing material for *Night*, including blurbs for

the Cannes Film Festival⁴¹, and other international film festivals⁴², a circuit that Kapadia's film fully dominated in the year 2021 (for reasons which we will get into later), potential viewers are told of a "university student in India" writing letters to her estranged lover, and there are mentions of the incendiary combo that is love and revolt. This is of course marketing material and that necessitates a reduction of things to its most sellable and juicy bits. However, some of these film festivals even mention a "film school in Mumbai"⁴³, which is inaccurate, given the film mostly takes place in FTII, Pune and never in Mumbai. This is only a small window into the aforementioned "little to none and always contingent claim on history" that both students and their wound and voice actually possess. The constructed affective complex of youth, politics and revolt is a highly marketable fetish, as Thomas Frank illustrated in his book *Conquest of the Cool* (1997), where he illustrated and analyzed the cooptation of "rebel youth culture" of the 60s by corporate marketing of companies such as Coca Cola in the coming decades, forcibly ignoring any material or political reckoning with the critical questions that the youth of the 60s posed towards the establishments they were protesting against, such as the government or war. The affective complex is indeed ageless at this point, and has developed its own, extremely strong force over how political involvement of youth is viewed and written about in popular culture in general. It renders a powerful image of youth that is generic and universal, without political and cultural context, as a naturally rebellious force, and the subtraction of the contexts and their specific material politics allows the actual critical questioning of history to take a firm backseat for so-called aesthetic purposes only,

⁴¹"A Night of Knowing Nothing," Quinzaine des réalisateurs, accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.quinzaine-realisateurs.com/en/film/a-night-of-knowing-nothing>.

⁴² "A Night of Knowing Nothing," TIFF, July 29, 2021, <https://tiff.net/events/a-night-of-knowing-nothing>. and "A Night of Knowing Nothing," cphdox, March 1, 2022, <https://cphdox.dk/film/a-night-of-knowing-nothing>. among others

⁴³ "A Night of Knowing Nothing," Viennale, accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.viennale.at/en/film/night-knowing-nothing> and "A Night of Knowing Nothing (in-Person & Online)," Independent Cinema Office, February 21, 2022, <https://www.independentcinemaoffice.org.uk/films/a-night-of-knowing-nothing> among others

where a student in Pune is clearly interchangeable with a student in Mumbai, or for that matter anywhere in the world, as the contextual structures of power are not being taken seriously, just like the student in protest is not being taken seriously. The student is simply a fetish. This, I would argue, has also spilled into academic writing and historiography of student movements, but in a later chapter. For the conversation on *A Night of Knowing Nothing*, it is enough to observe that the specificities of where the actors in the film are situated and what they are saying etc, fundamental facts about the narrative, are relatively unimportant towards the marketing of the film, and quite possibly then, towards at least the *intended* viewership. The important factor is perhaps that the viewership being addressed is an international viewership, and the product being sold is an exotic and alien context, too much information about which just seems unnecessary. To some extent international viewership of contextually heavy content is most tolerated in the form of a documentary, where the tone is informational. And indeed Kapadia's film is listed as a "documentary" in all the festival materials. However, the film itself, while often always already being treated in general trauma-porn ways in the globalized networks of "world cinema", carries excessive historiographical charges – for example, the very real situation of personal relationships being broken apart in the light of the betrayal of lovers, friends, family members etc who have over the last years sided with the fascist public sphere. This is vital information about the status of what Suely Rolnik would denote as the *micropolitical sphere* (2017)⁴⁴, the ways of materially existing fascism instituting regimes of abuse over our realms of desire. This is information that could be simply illegible to an international audience which has not experienced the body under fascism in India. However, because of its "special" identity as a work of art, *Night* can and does

⁴⁴ Rolnik, Suely, "The Spheres of Insurrection: Suggestions for Combating The Pimping of Life - Journal #86 November 2017 - e-Flux." e-flux. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/86/163107/the-spheres-of-insurrection-suggestions-for-combating-the-pimping-of-life/>

carry more accessibility and legibility as an event, both wound and voice, than, say any of the protests that the Indian community in Berlin were organizing throughout 2019-2021. Those events, for example, were denoted, both legally and media-wise, as “protests”, and as such carried bombastic charges of embodied trauma, with speakers constantly breaking down while speaking, or dissonant delivery of slogans that very obviously did not belong in this city, of which the slogan-givers were quite aware⁴⁵. In such a case, the form that the traumatic event took in its representation dictated the viewership. There is of course also the crucial question of time gone by between the original wound and the following voice, which could even be echoed in the distance between historical accounting and historiographical interventions, but in this specific case, where the temporal complex is super tight – 2014-2022 – and riddled with the discursive blackouts of trauma, I believed we have to negotiate the distances between subject and context, trauma and healing, history and historiography. In the context of negotiating the temporal distance between trauma and its art with respect to *Night*, it is important to note that it was produced within a particular Indian film school ethos, connected both economically and aesthetically to traditions of Left-wing documentary cinema and therefore playing the international film festival circuit, where it was read as such and lauded as such. Kapadia weaved into the narrative many instances of the typical film school political discussion – footage of pre-student union election debates, union presidents addressing their student body while on strike about the significance of cinema as politics, film school student protestors raising slogans of “*Eisenstein, Pudovkin! We shall fight, we shall win!*” and this was of course enough to anoint the film in the eyes of the film festival juries as a powerfully political film. However, the sheer polyphony of the multiple realms of politics, the multiple political frontiers (Laclau, Mouffe, 1985) in the film, fell hidden under the grandness of

⁴⁵ The slogan “Ho Ho Ho Chih Minh, We shall fight We shall win” was delivered at Potsdamer Platz at a Berlin for India demo, to general confusion among onlookers as well as protestors multiple times by one protestor who happened to have been trained in politics in radical leftist student politics in India.

categorizing protest-related cultural artifacts within a generalized lens of “political” that overstates the extent of involvement of the state in the lives of its people, without any cognizance of the realms of hegemony or the political specificities of either Hindutva or the history of Indian student movements. However, depending on the expected audience at screenings, the affective report would possibly be different. The film, having been shown across many venues in Europe in 2020- 2021, was re-screened at a temporary state-funded migrant-organized cinema space called Sinema Transtopia in Alexanderplatz, as a part of a feminist film festival *Sounding Womanhood* curated by Pia Chakraverti-Wuerthwein and Eirini Fountedaki. This time around, I was not only present in the room as an audience member, but as a discussant, who had the special ability to strike up an actual conversation with the entire audience. The audience was made up almost entirely of non-Indian people, there was one self-identified Indian person in the audience. The rest of the group, about 48 people, were mostly young migrant cultural workers and art students living or visiting Berlin, who had either attended other screenings in the festival or other programmes in Sinema Transtopia. It is important to note that Sinema Transtopia expressly tries to center moving image works from non-white Global South spaces⁴⁶, and almost all programs have a discursive element such as a discussion or a panel. Admittedly, watching and rewatching some of the footages of police violence on people I personally knew on such a big screen created severe levels of visceral discomfort and emotional distress for me, and I honestly shared that with the audience, after which the discussion started revolving around the affective impact of violence in moving image and the ethics of representing trauma. People in the room were getting concerned that I had become upset at seeing the film and that I was judging it negatively, and both probing

⁴⁶ Programme info available online: <https://bi-bak.de/en/bi-bakino> where it is mentioned “The curated film series brings together diverse social communities and connects places both near and geographically distant; it links pasts, presents and futures and moves away from a eurocentric gaze towards transnational, (post-)migrant and postcolonial perspectives.”

questions trying to deny my visible distress with logic and soothing justifications of possible authorial intent started coming. I will try to communicate exactly what I felt and how it was registering in my body. While the grainy black and white images and the whisper created a sense of relaxation in my body, the images of police violence made me restless, my body temperature would start dropping, and I would start yawning constantly. The protracted coldness of hands and feet was something I was aware of as a symptom of Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder⁴⁷ (CPTSD), an ailment I was diagnosed with in early 2020. Technically, having managed my mental illness for about two years, the moment of confrontation with the violence on film was only a light “flashback” to a moment of trauma, where I was revisiting the scene of the crime, this time with severe amounts of anger and grief. What was going on inside me was a maelstrom of emotions and I got extremely overwhelmed when the audience started asking questions and I was expected to field these queries about the aesthetics of the film. At one point I was forced to share that I was still seeking psychotherapy for the wounds inflicted upon me and my friends during the time that we had just seen on screen, and the question that I posed was – *“is this already history and if yes how because I am still in therapy for it?”* At a moment of trauma, the assembly of the past and the present in linearity folded into itself, and I was simply questioning what it meant to archive a wound – does it heal better if there is some distance from it, and if so, what exactly is this business of distancing? However, for now, I would like to propose that the research question for a theater historiographer here is, then, what are the processes through which bodily trauma of violence gets mediated into the archive, whereby it is archived in ways that register with other bodies in other contexts.

⁴⁷ “Unexpected Physical Symptoms of PTSD,” PTSD UK |, accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.ptsduk.org/10-unexpected-physical-symptoms-of-ptsd/>.

During the discussion, one person observed that his body reacted in tangibly activated ways at the call-counter-call structures of the protest slogans that peppered the film, while the whisper of the protagonist had hitherto created a sort of intimate trance. The slogans captured in Kapadia's films were long-standing, traditional Left-wing slogans in English and Hindi/Urdu, well known within student activism in the many campuses of India, and indeed, also within civil society movements across the subcontinents, such as "*awaaz do, hum ek hai!*" (*make noise, we are one!*) or "*inquilab zindabad!*" (*long live the revolution!*), a communist party slogan from the anticolonial movement. The slogans hit him somewhere in his body, which he could not pinpoint, and he felt empowered, without understanding the words themselves. I agreed. I agree. This is the intended action of sloganeering – that it activates the body with a call, through an invitation to counter-call. And when the slogan exists within the culturally legible repertoire (Davis, 2009) of the campus or the civil protest, it most certainly activates the space and the body in its intended way of re-energizing fallen levels of stamina during protest, and committing to voice and poetry, and in that sense, to the materiality of the voice, the fundamental demands and beliefs of a movement. However, the fact that the materiality of the voice that the slogan carried could energize and call to a person who cannot understand the specific words and meanings, could point towards the possibility that the slogan is its own genre of sound, recognizable not exclusively through the wording, but through the invocation of the body of both the sloganeer and the sloganeered, and the political space of solidarity that they produce between them in the utterance of the slogan. The politics and the aesthetics, two realms that are sometimes artificially treated differently (as we discussed while talking about the work of Rai and Reinelt), are invoked together, deeming nominally irrelevant the content of word. That is, the political space of the slogan, which is the geographical space of the protest, and in this case the space of the

screening, do rely on multiple semiotic indexes that are in fact not the legible word, but the relational politics of the space that is felt in the body.

Within the discussion between myself and the two curators of the festival, at a point we stumbled upon the possibility that the film could be an exercise in some sort of healing, where the interiority of a structurally oppressed person, a Dalit woman, is given the gift of unending stretches of time to slowly chew on the realities of fast-paced fascism that are fundamentally outside her control. To a large extent, the audience agreed with the reading, and perhaps this is the reason why my obvious physical duress which I kept mentioning as fatigue and tiredness and which externalized itself as irritation and frustration at the film, became unacceptable in the room. I, and the other Indian person in the room, was only registering trauma in our bodies – the voice from the wound. The denial of meaning that the film posed to her and me disallowed us in ways from relaxing to the whisper, because the whisper said “*I am scared*”. The same denial of meaning snatched us back from the momentary pleasure of empowering ourselves through ever-familiar slogans in our own languages, bringing us back to the feelings of bereavement in repeated loops of footage of police violence. Which led to a question that she posed to me and room – *how does one go on?* The feelings of dissonance at once again watching our friends get beaten up, this time in black and white – the color scheme of grand history – were the physical realities of traumatic experiences, where the actual event on the mind and body continues to speak through the mind and body in looped repetitions. I argue, following the route of the relatively newer discipline of Disability Studies, that “masking”, a psychiatric term used to denote the tendencies and practices of hiding and controlling mental health diagnoses such as ADHD and Autism (Barkley, 2010), is the expected reaction that a society and polity committed to the Onion model of totalitarianism imposes on its survivors, and that was what I was unable to perform while watching the film because of the bodily excesses it asked of me. The point is not to paint myself in this

situation as a martyr, because after all as an Upper caste woman with a Hindu last name and considerable socio-economic privileges, I will only be violated by fascist violence on fewer accounts than someone with a Muslim name. However, relativizing trauma through nominal identitarianism is in effect a tactic that divests from solidarizing and coalition building as a politics, which as I have mentioned before, is at least partially the point of this endeavor. I would like to contextualize the conversation that I am attempting to start around mental illness, specifically CPTSD in the political context of existent fascism. It is somehow important to note here that the only other Indian person in the room and I actually met in a psychiatric ward in a hospital in Berlin, where they were admitted to undergo therapy. This is not to merely give an inert background to our interaction at Sinema Transtopia, but something that I would like to foreground, without the express intent of clinicizing the political subjectivity of an entire population living under fascism. However, I would like to float the idea that surviving as people directly or indirectly targeted by a fascist regime can and does engender significant amounts of trauma in their minds and bodies, and because of the onion like nature of the fascist public sphere itself, expressing the same is rendered highly dangerous and taboo (coupled with the taboos around sharing personal states of bad mental health). This leads to the adoption of “masking” as one of the primary performative models of citizenship, especially “active citizenship” in which one has to simply “manage” oneself with little to none interference to their own functionality while living under and directly and indirectly facing regular violence. I have to emphasize that the intent of using “masking” as an analytical category does not in any way universalize the experience of specific people with disabilities who use masking as a strategy of actual survival. What I am doing is to bring to a discursive table the mental health crisis that some news media that were critical of the government and self-organized social media spaces by activists were already talking

about⁴⁸. In the context of the screening, we did indeed speak a lot of “healing”, and there was clearly acknowledgement of the violence that could easily be seen and heard on screen, and for some of us, felt in the body, but not yet the *naming* of the pain which had to be helped. I am invoking “masking” as a possible performative model of citizenship in a fascist public sphere, where one of the practices of safe survival is to perform a level of “normalcy” about the violence in one’s surroundings. It is still very much a debate regarding the space for mental illness within Disability Studies⁴⁹ (Aubrecht, 2012) beyond Foucaultian analyses of madness and biopolitics, so it is with analytical caution that I invoke a term from medical studies around Autism and ADHD. What is at present the knowledge about the term “masking” is that these are habits of managing and “passing” as “normal” used by children as a coping mechanism which later into adulthood may create several behavioral issues and serious mental illnesses (Kosaka, Fujioka *et al*, 2018). The people living and resisting under a fascist public sphere are most certainly not all children, but, specifically in the case of the people depicted in Kapadia’s film, young people growing up in a post-Babri Mosque⁵⁰ demolition moment, very much aware of the historical force that

⁴⁸ Buckshee, Devina. “Dealing with Mental Health in the Times of Protest & Violence .” TheQuint. Quint Fit, October 3, 2020. <https://fit.thequint.com/mind-it/mental-health-and-caa-nrc-protests>.
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, Balakrishnan, Varna, Viswanathan, Meera. “Surviving Insecurity: Mental Health through a Riot, a Pandemic and an Apathetic State.” The Wire Science, June 30, 2020. <https://science.thewire.in/health/surviving-insecurity-mental-health-through-a-riot-a-pandemic-and-an-apatetic-state>. and more.

⁴⁹ This is primarily because of the high degree of pathologization of mental illness and the seeming “invisibility” of the same on one’s body vis-a-vis “other” disabilities – an extremely ableist standpoint from which, say for example, the medical institution operates its job of diagnosing, taxonomizing and treating disability. This is also connected to policy and disability rights activism, which strives to escape these ableist perceptions of disability and instead propose much more real, bodily, experiential categories to understand disability such as “crip time”, i.e. the different amounts of time it takes for an abled person and a disabled person to do the same thing (Cuppers, 2014).

⁵⁰ “Babri Masjid: The Timeline of a Demolition,” The Wire, accessed April 18, 2022, <https://thewire.in/communalism/babri-masjid-the-timeline-of-a-demolition> : On December 6, 1992, Hindu Right Wing mobs fomented by leaders of the BJP and abetted by a tolerant police, demolished a 16th century mosque in Ayodhya, under the false claims that it was constructed on a demolished Hindu temple for the god Rama. This was a long-standing political plan of the Hindutva brigade, and marked a moment of particular significance in the normalization and centralization of Hindu fascism within the Indian polity.

Hindutva is and to what extent it weaponizes history and trauma of the religious divides of the subcontinent. Having witnessed a steady normalization of anti-minority violence within the political sphere throughout their lives, the resistant counterpublic (Mouffe, 2000) of Kapadia's film understands the call to mask, and intermittently chooses the way of protest. I argue that the excessive historiographical charge of the trauma in Kapadia's film that results in bodily reactions of agitation in myself and the other Indian person in the room is the visceral communication of failure to mask from one dissenter to another, where the only plausible point of conversation between the two of us is *how does one go on?* – an honest question of survival as a traumatized subject when the mask has fallen off.

Some of the most striking images in Kapadia's film, which effectively maintain a typical sense of lightness that shoots through almost all cultural productions that center the campus as a space, are the scenes of students dancing. The film begins and ends in a two different dance parties – the first one massive and setting the geographical tone and affective space of a college campus as a place of, among other things, the pleasures of youth, and the last one simply a small group, dancing on the street that goes through the FTII campus. The dancing carries a tremendous balm for traumatized audiences such as me, reminding us of the grand neon light background to Israeli choreographer Hofesh Shechter's piece *Political Mother* – "*where there is pressure there is folk dance*" (the irony of Shechter's country of origin and its militarism in the context of this quote does not escape this writer, and also hopefully not this reader). It also carried in it the story of resilience of the student body *in situ*, on a campus, a body that has danced and will dance, under almost all circumstances. In the joyful amateurism (Ridout, 2003) of the dancing campus body, lies the other historiographical charge of Kapadia work – hope, momentous and contingent, and perhaps fragile, but hope nonetheless. And the body of the student, historically as well

as now, lends itself, for reasons we shall discuss in a later chapter about youth, as one of the most inextinguishable receptacles of hope.

While the historiographical charge of *Night* carried with it the repeated voice of the wound, finding its way into the registers of legibility of members of the audience primed into both the body of the campus and the body under fascism, *Sab Changa Si* in turn carried the pleasurable excesses of spaces of protest. The screening of Teresa A. Braggs's *Sab Changa Si* was at the Berlinale Forum Expanded, on Potsdamer Platz, and the theater housed around 80 people at the very least, many from the Indian diaspora that had organised the aforementioned protests, migrant curators and artists working in the culture industry of Berlin, academics from South Asia teaching or researching in German universities and a small but significant group of white students of South Asian Studies at various German universities. Many of these people already knew each other, mostly in context of the protests, and pre-screening discussions on social media groups among them already created some audience expectations from the film. It could be argued that the audience for this particular screening was very much the Indian liberal leftist diaspora sphere, even if it was not intended to be so specific. As opposed to the audience for *Night*, this group was presumably better versed in catching the multiple registers of historiographical charge in *Sab Changa Si*. Notably, the film was produced as a graduation film, not from a film school, but from a department of communications in a city college in Bangalore, and as the director, present in the screening, mentioned, it was not allowed to be screened by her university because of the political content. *Sab* was marketed as a documentary and was much more identifiable as a “student film”, with strong aesthetics of amateurism holding together an embedded story of a group of students who become a part of the country-wide civil liberties protests against the passing of the Citizenship Amendment

Act (CAA) in 2019, in the city of Bangalore⁵¹. The film is created in a documentary style, with the presence of Teresa herself as the camerawoman being mentioned by those on camera often enough for the audience to know that the images are not only “authentic”, but also personal. In the marketing material and loglines used in the Berlinale website⁵², we once again see the formulaic dropping of terms such as “love”, “friendship”, “resistance”, “youth”, comparable to the material produced for *Night*. The narrative structure of the film takes the audience into the intimate student hostel living spaces and other geographies of the residential campus, where students are speaking directly to each other and the camera, discussing their own political processes of growth and comprehension and planning the protests that the camera cuts to. One could say that Braggs’s camera is merely documenting a group of student protestors while they exposition their political beliefs and take action on the same. However, as it has been mentioned before, the act of documenting the campus and its political currents is already a mediated task because of the grand narrative pressures of the pre-existing semiotics of youth-love-resistance complex. In *Sab*, it is possible to find a great deal of information that aligns easily with the grand narratives surrounding student movements, but it is only in certain bodily registers of affect that the less apparent historiographical charges of the film play themselves out. I argue that in *Sab*, the many *spaces* of protest and movement work caught on camera carry the historiographical charge that hits the body of the audience in excess of pre-written codes of history. The film shows a few distinct geographies of resistance – the many different spaces on the campus, such as shared homes and residence halls of students, the relatively unorganized spaces of the university (also belonging to the campus) such

⁵¹ “CAA Protests: Police Detain Hundreds of Protesters in Bengaluru,” The Economic Times, accessed April 18, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/caa-protests-police-detain-hundreds-of-protesters-in-bengaluru/articleshow/72882489.cms?from=mdr>.

⁵² Programme available online at https://www.berlinale.de/en/programme/programme/detail.html?film_id=202212290 “Sab Changa Si: All Was Good,” Berlinale, accessed April 18, 2022

as stairwell landings and common areas such as gardens and meeting rooms, where the group of students, friends and comrades of Teresa, live and study and hang out and also find their own political pivots, the public spaces of protest in the city where the sit-ins happen, drawn and surveilled by the state through police presence and legal permissions, and eventually Bilal Bagh, a public square that hosted the massive civil disobedience sit-in by working class Muslim women in protest of the CAA. Following Lefebvre's arguments about space being a process of production of relationalities that eventually make up a cartography, it is possible to designate certain meanings to all three spaces in the film, and also the space of viewership within the screening hall of the Berlinale. The camera, which is almost interchangeable with Teresa's presence because the gaze is often referred to as "Teresa", finds itself in a deeply equitable, non-intrusive relationship with the group of students that it follows. This creates an invitation for the audience to participate in an open and involved way with the students and follow them into the protest spaces – a polemical and radicalizing positionality of the student and filmmaker as a radicalizer, an activist and an archivist. Taking all these roles into account clarifies the complexity of the process of mediating Teresa's own role in the space, and I argue this is precisely the plethora of processes that make up the labour of historiography, an involvement with history *doing*. While for the first 40 minutes of the film the audience becomes privy to many interesting insights into the affective architecture of resistance politics by students and young people, such as the first time some of them decided to become politically active, or conversations on political strategies of a protest that intermingle with thoughts on finding one's own place in history, it is only in the last 20 minutes, with the space of protest turning into the unruly public sit-in of Bilal Bagh that we finally become activated in our bodies – witnesses no more.

In *Carnal Thoughts* (2004), film theorist Vivian Sobchak constructs the documentary as a film language that arranges a certain ethical sphere with respect to the bodily and affective report of the visuals presented.

“Documentary space is constituted and inscribed as ethical space: it stands as the objectively visible evidence of subjective visual responsiveness and responsibility toward a world shared with other human subjects.” (pp.248)

She uses the very extreme example of death as represented in fiction as a spectacle of suddenness, and the extent to which it is tolerated within the realm of fiction while in non-fiction it ends up carrying severe charges of taboo. This, she argues, falls within the generic expectations of the two, where *“documentary is primarily indexical, fiction primarily iconic and symbolic”* (pp.245). The space of the documentary is not perceived as a place outside the purview of the viewer’s reality, and crucially, the space is constituted not only through universally consented value systems (such as in the case of Sobchak the unacceptability of death), but *also on the viewer’s extratextual knowledge and judgment* (pp.248). The moment during the screening of *Night*, when the two Indians in the room shared with each other the heaviness of the reminders fascist subjectivity is a prime example of this extratextual knowledge and judgment, despite the film not following the traditional mores of the documentary space. It can be argued here that multiple registers in which the different historiographical charges of these films hit us are coterminous with our extratextual knowledge, one main register of which, the one that we are focusing on, is the body that has gone through violence. In *Sab*, clearly following *verite* traditions, the first 40 minutes are very much the process of constituting this documentary space where the visceral and ethical “responsiveness” of the gaze and body of the audience is being primed for the “finale”, where Teresa, her friends and the camera find themselves in the midst of the vibrant, populous

chaos of an active civil disobedience sit-in in the city. The student's camera, no longer primarily interested in "recording" the lived realities of studenthood and its contrapuntal relationship to authority, is suddenly let loose in front of the massive sit-in stage, where local politicians, well known activists, Bollywood actors and celebrities are entertaining a large crowd of protestors. Such is the charm of Teresa's camerawork, that we lose ourselves alongside her and her friends in the crowd, completely overwhelmed by many different things – the sheer difference in scale between the student spaces and this one, the sudden and definite linguistic shift from primarily English to Kannada and Hindi, and importantly, what the images make us feel in our own bodies as viewers. The post screening conversation for *Sab* is constructed significantly differently from the night of *Night*, as it is at the Berlinale and the protocols of engagement are very different. Therefore, the questions are mainly about intention (why did you make this film?), process (how did you make this film?), and outcome (what are the consequences of making such a film?) – information that can construct the film as a historical artifact without necessarily running the risk of an excessive historiographical bleed. However, in the conversations among the many Indians present in the audience, outside the screening hall, while greeting each other and socializing amongst friends and acquaintances, comes out some very strong bodily impressions and a clear understanding of when the film "took a turn". Apparently, according to one of the attendees, a poet and academic, something happened to her when the visuals switched to Bilal Bagh. The long wait of the first 40 minutes, consisting mainly of students expositioning their politics to the camera, and footage of police violence, seemed irritating, self-aggrandizing and cynical, and plain boring. As someone who had been a part of some of the protests in Delhi and all of the protests in Berlin, she mentioned that the looping of the footage of police violence, specifically on her own friends, was now being used by artists as some sort of a fetish. However, it was only in the "spacing" of

Bilal Bagh, and the sudden irrelevance of the student gaze, with the language changing, with the slogans getting louder, that her body started reacting to the image on screen in a positive, “empowering” way. The repetition of neither images of the Youth-Revolt complex nor the looped state violence were actually able to create any “responsiveness” in many members of the audience, who could perhaps agree that this is “an important film” in principle, but were unable to access *why* it must be important or why it is appearing in their ambit now. Given that these questions are important parts of the viewership of the documentary as a style, what a number of audience members seemed to have felt was dissonance. However, the appearance of Bilal Bagh, the most surveilled, most mediatized *space* of protest in Bangalore, not only gave the same members of the audience a relieving level of presence and grounding and accessibility to the visceral feeling of resistance (such is the charge of a space produced in protest), but also changed the group of students on camera in fundamental ways, something we will discuss a little later. For now, it is important to try to understand why the appearance of Bilal Bagh was such a turning point for the audience at the Berlinale, and why the earlier, longer part of the film did not register as strongly.

Previously I have briefly mentioned the little to none and always contingent claim of the campus on the grand narrative of history. While we shall explore in detail what this means in terms of actual production of history later, it is important to give a short basis for this. Within India, there is a specific history of reading the campus and its “contribution” to grand historical narratives such as nation-building, anticolonial struggles and traditions of protest, where there is an understanding that students may have been integral and often first responders in situations of crisis and resistance, but they are only the stop-gap flagbearers of movements politics till more “legitimate” meaning-makers step in, such as the “civil society” or political parties etc. It is also to be noted that the water can flow in another direction – certain political movements

that are not allowed access into civil society spaces of respectability, and are considered unpalatable within enlightened democratic public spheres, such as armed struggles by indigenous people and/or workers, are often, through the balancing books of historiography, recast as primarily student movements. The cultural role, often produced as historiographical work, of students within the imaginary of protest is connected more to the affective continuum of “Youth-Revolt” etc than to an acknowledgement of the realities of protesting students and their specific reasons for political involvement. Thus, quite often, and specifically in cultural productions that derive from particular moments of resistance in history, the constituency of “student” is used to some extent as a moving goalpost of meaning and reference, a moral lens to relook at resistances according to the conveniences of political power structures that beget this sort of history and culture. One of the main reasons for this discrepancy is the immediate absence of an archive, or specifically, an appropriate historiographical lens to look at existent archival impulses without the need of “insertion” of particular constituencies as “protagonists” within particular political spaces. Without going into the details of the many historiographical processes through which the insertion happens (we will go into this later), I would like to mention just one – a general affective connection of “youth” with a degree of innocence that leads to student movements being treated with a strange leniency and patronizing attitude. From the foundational texts about student movements in India such as the tracts of education minister Humayun Kabir of a recently independent India (1958) that enshrined the idea of criminality in youth protest, to the hypernostalgia in cultural productions around the Naxalbari Movement of 1967-72⁵³, the oscillation between crime and romance renders the realities of student resistance illegible, and also unimportant for

⁵³ primarily an armed uprising by agricultural labourers of indigenous descent, but recast as a student movement due to the fact that many student activists from metropolitan and metropolis-adjacent spaces in West Bengal joined the movement. This is a fully colonial lens of historiography – the more palatable protagonist is the civilized, book-read student with a colonial education and not the working class.

narrative. In the conclusion to my MPhil thesis, I had proposed that there is a possibility for the campus as a produced space to itself be the primary lived archive for student lives and student struggles (pp.157), and I would like to push this argument forward and invoke it in the context of *Sab Changa Si*. The reason why I had made this argument was because I was studying the specificities of student lives, student protests and student theater in Delhi University (DU) between the years 2007-2013, a period of very particular political and administrative changes and neoliberalizing processes of the university, and I was able to understand that the residential campuses so central to the higher education experience in India, provide extremely crucial material support (food, shelter) and immaterial (Lazzarato, 1996) support to students in the form of community, cultural identities and political directions that are very much in excess of the promise of education, and in the words of the campus people, much more central to the educational experience. In the culture of self-referencing of an existent repertoire of political and cultural gestures that I found in the theater spaces of DU and the political movements of this time, I was able to find a distinction in the way the campus chose to remember itself, independent of how say the national media would. While this was a strong enough hypothesis for the specific circumstances of DU at the time, I was intrigued by the fact that something similar was happening in the case of the memorializing of Tiananmen Square and the June 4th Movement during the student resistances in Hong Kong in 2014 and before and after as well, which I will explore in detail in the second chapter. Without trying to push the lived archive of the campus as a universal category that can be used as a formula, I would argue that at the very least, student movements carry their own historiographical charges, specific to the political movements they reference from history, bound often by cultural and national factors. And when campus activism is looked at, multiplicity of meanings that they carry as historical sources are not legible equally to every eye, simply because the repertoire of the campus is coded

into the campus body and some extratextual knowledge is necessary to decode it. The reaction of “self-aggrandizing” or “boring” that *Sab Chang Si* received for its first 40 minutes, with the camera entering the private spaces of students on a residential campus, and essentially documenting the *process* of political transformation in the student body, such as participation, changes of worldview, radicalization etc, was such simply because that information was illegible to a gaze which is trained by a historiography of protest that fetishizes the event of the protest and not the process that contextualizes that event to give it many *meanings* (White, in Sobchack (Ed), 1997, pp. 21). It is not at all hard to imagine that the audience response to *Sab* would be extremely different on a campus, a significant point to consider in the light of the fact that the film was actually not allowed to be shown on campus by the university authorities for this specific reason. Hence, it shows at the Berlinale, where the historiographical charge of the campus body remains inadequately communicated in absence of campus bodies in the room. However, the last 20 minutes of the film, geographically closer and sometimes immersed in the protest space of Bilal Bagh, was able to communicate a visceral message to South Asian members of the audience, who mostly then saw this part in contrast to the first 40 minutes. But, only one of the many reasons for this selection in reception of meaning was the different historiographical gazes on student politics and “civil society” politics – there were particular reasons why Bilal Bagh became the fulcrum of affect during the screening. The Bilal Bagh protests were a series of month-long sit in protests in February 2020 at a public road in an area of Bangalore where many Muslim citizens lived⁵⁴. The protests were held against the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)⁵⁵, and were led and participated in, on some days exclusively, by working class Muslim

⁵⁴ Bose, Roheet. “Revisiting the Bilal Bagh Protests: A Ground Report.” *Feminism In India*, October 30, 2021. <https://feminisminindia.com/2021/01/18/bilal-bagh-bengaluru-shaheen-bagh-protests/>

⁵⁵ “Ministry of Law and Justice - Egazette,” accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2019/210355.pdf>

women (Deb Roy, 2020). Bilal Bagh was closely following the example set by Shaheen Bagh⁵⁶, another working-class Muslim women led sit-in in Delhi protesting the same law, and Park Circus⁵⁷ in Kolkata. It has to be acknowledged that these protests remain extremely unique within the very long and very diverse traditions of protest movements in India for some remarkable reasons. The protests against the CAA had been organized across the country, and in many cities across the world by the Indian diaspora, since the passage of the Bill in 2019, with many citizen-led initiatives and long mass-rallies by “civil society” groups and student-led demonstrations managing to attract fairly large groups of participants. However, in tandem with the basis of the passage of such a blatantly anti-Minority law in parliament, citizens were very much aware of the high price of resistance under fascism, and a great amount of resources were deployed towards thwarting the protests and suppressing the news of protests in news media⁵⁸. Considering the levels of public consensus regarding anti-Muslim sentiments⁵⁹, a historical development (Basu, Dutta *et al*, 1993) that finally found acceptance in government, and the regular exercise of state murder of minorities⁶⁰, ritualistically publicized and spectacularized by both news media and social media, the fact that these protests were happening at all was already significant. And then around

⁵⁶ Business Standard, “What Is Shaheen Bagh Protest, Anti-CAA Protests, Location, News,” Business Standard, accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.business-standard.com/about/what-is-shaheen-bagh-protest>

⁵⁷ “Women at Kolkata’s Park Circus Prove the Indian Republic Has Come of Age,” The Wire, accessed April 18, 2022, <https://thewire.in/women/kolkata-park-circus-women-protest-caa>

⁵⁸ A large number of news media houses in contemporary India are explicitly involved in pro-government propaganda, and as a part of that, they created many false narratives around the Bagh congregations around the country, such as allegations of protestors being paid, them being Pakistani agents, anti-Hindu etc. These media houses were given a name on social media – “godii”, rhyming with the name of the Prime Minister, literally meaning “lapdog”. Some of this media generated narrative one can find in this article: Pande, Manisha. “Shaheen Bagh and the Spiralling Hostility against ‘Godii Media’.” NewsLaundry. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/01/26/shaheen-bagh-and-the-spiralling-hostility-against-godi-media>

⁵⁹ “Shoot the Traitors,” Human Rights Watch, June 16, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/04/09/shoot-traitors/discrimination-against-muslims-under-indias-new-citizenship-policy>

⁶⁰ “India: Government Policies, Actions Target Minorities,” Human Rights Watch, February 19, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/19/india-government-policies-actions-target-minorities>

January 2020, working class Muslim women called for a sit-in protest in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh. Indian cities are deeply segregated spaces primarily along caste, class and religious lines (Adukia, Asher *et al*, 2019), and the very notion that public protest could happen in a place like Shaheen Bagh, deep inside the ghettoised Muslim community of North-East Delhi, far away from the civil society led, state sanctioned protest spaces of Jantar Mantar in Central Delhi, was already very new. The call to sit in was given by the women living in the neighbourhood, Muslim women wearing headscarves, many of them household workers who cannot be seen often in civil society protests. This is the clear demarcation of civil society protests expectedly seeming more “secularized” spaces where protestors are playing by the rules of democratic rights-based demands, only *some* of which are identitarian and religious, but mostly dealing with universalist concepts pivoted on “freedom”. However, the Baghs were simply not playing by those rules. The Baghs were the externalization of a private sphere which was and had been deeply political, without the need of recognition from the civil society. These women, some of them very old and some their granddaughters, were sitting under a makeshift *tripal*, a seasonal stage created for public performances in neighbourhoods with bamboo, wood and cloth. They were sitting there with their children, and there were no men there in the center, at least for many long stretches. Very soon Bilal Bagh followed suit and so did Park Circus, where the model was absolutely the same. To the eyes of the political sphere – a mixture of liberal bourgeois interests, the fascist state and the residents of its onion, the citizens in protest, the Indian diaspora in protest – this was in actuality a previously unseen sight. The Baghs had suddenly exposed who the most vulnerable in our society was, and how their presence in the simple act of *sitting* could not be willed into absence by the passage of a thousand draconian laws. For the whole political sphere, the sheer existence of working-class Muslim women as not some sort of imagined constituency to be “saved” from the perceived backwardness of their

religion, but as real flesh-and-blood presence at the heart of radical resistance politics, was just very “new” (Chopra, 2021). Hijabi women, generally reduced to the role of an abject, invisibilized from the public sphere through their multiple marginalizations, had to simply *appear* and *sit* in public, and that was enough. Flocks of women, Hindu, Muslim, young, old, working class, bourgeois, felt a tremendous attraction to the Baghs, and visited the sit-ins for solidarity, opening and maintaining libraries, carework such as childcare and cooking etc. It was truly a utopic *new* space where the many perceived impossibilities of an Indian woman’s life became realities – sitting in public, sitting amongst other extremely diverse women in public, sitting safely, sitting to do politics in public, sitting outside the regime of domestic duties and gender roles, in public. Regular attempts were made from various camps to partake in the shaping of this “worlding” – celebrities giving free appearances and concerts⁶¹, severe misrepresentation from multiple pro-government media lobbies and news media houses, death threats and open fire from the fascist camps⁶², and a massive amount of attention on social media. However, none of these saliently changed either the Bagh spaces, their particular affective solidarities based on the realities of womanhood, and the dignity in the act of sitting. In principle, despite the imagined sanity of a sit-in space, like that of the campus, it is chaotic and multi-registered in terms of its effect and affect, both politically and in the realm of aesthetics (if at all we are still trying to delineate the two). In order for us to attempt a comprehension of what visceral charge hit the audience watching the images of Bilal Bagh sitting in Berlin, we would need to revisit to some extent the literature available about the elision of boundaries between protest and performance, something that contemporary protests are fairly self-aware of.

⁶¹ Popular musician Prateek Kuhad alongside others playing at Shaheen Bagh, to be found online here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GH3pA24r8EI>

⁶² “Man Opens Fire in Delhi’s Shaheen Bagh, Taken into Custody,” Hindustan Times, September 6, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/man-opens-fire-in-delhi-s-shaheen-bagh/story-J4ToAH4UlpJ8DxPyldoMCM.htm>

While the literature on the Bagh moment in early 2020 in India is still limited to a few academic articles that attempt to understand the political demands of the protesting women, I believe we are not yet in a historical standpoint to confidently define specific performative strategies of the Bagh. However, the form of the sit-in itself, and how the protestors at the Baghs claimed it for their own purposes has a strong bearing on the affective potency of the moment both in memory and in recognition of the screen. The specific forms of highly visibilized and mediatized (due to social media) protests in the last two decades bring about some paradigmatic examples, specifically one from Turkey, a polity that bears strong resemblance to the nativist fascism and majoritarian identity politics of contemporary India⁶³. The Gezi Park protests of 2013, a series of events and a space described as highly performative by multiple scholars on the matter (Ozturkmen, 2014), (Foellmer, 2016), (Mee, Gunduz, 2014), deserves particular mention, especially the much celebrated iconic performance *Duran Adam* (Standing Man) by performance artist and choreographer Erdem Gunduz, which led to a whole generation of performance studies scholars to be provoked to erase the porous disciplinary boundaries between art and activism. In Ozturkmen's thick description report from the ground, the reader is treated to a maelstrom of events at Gezi Park, what reads like an extremely chaotic blow-by-blow description of a public park, previously low-use and dirty, slowly being produced as a space of protest, solidarity, community building, resistance, festivities, and facing police violence together. And only around page 21 of the article do we come to a short description of the *Duran Adam*, an act that, due to its global celebrity and

⁶³ Serhan, Yasmeen. "The End of the Secular Republic." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, August 16, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/08/modi-erdogan-religious-nationalism/615052/> and Rachman, Gideon. "Modi and Erdogan Thrive on Divisive Identity Politics." Financial Times. Financial Times, August 10, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/d4167b9a-53d7-47b0-b929-90d81c106b8a> among many other articles on the parallels between Modi and Erdogan and their ruling styles

recognition from the art world⁶⁴ has been to a large extent exceptionalized out of the longer narrative of the protests themselves. This provokes an ethical intervention for the historiographer specifically interested in the more of political performance – one simply cannot *choose* particular “aesthetic” moments from political movements for purposes of study and analysis, or forcefully divorce particular acts from their spatial contexts to be rendered in retrospect as relevant for the study of a discipline. An honest attempt needs to be made to accept the tentacular nature of a movement without the prejudice and confirmation bias of pre-existing discursive structures. However, the point relevant to our present discussion on *Duran Adam* is that the archives around it – scholarly articles, videos, first person narrations and memories etc – provide a comparison to the sit-in of the Baghs of 2020 India that squeezes out some very specific political points about the underlying *body politik* of Hindutva, with respect to the perception of the Muslim “other”, a constitutive element of the Hindutva ideology. *Duran Adam* was an eight hour long protest performance at Taksim Square by Gunduz, 34 years old and identifiably male presenting at the time, where he stood alone facing the Ataturk Cultural Center which houses the Turkish State Theater and Opera and Ballet at Taksim Square, immediately after police forces cleared out protestors from the square. The idea was that if there was at least one protestor, the protest was in principle still on (Mee, 2014). In Gunduz’s artistic approach to the work itself, there was an emphasis on solitude being one of the outstanding registers of political urgency to be used to invite the audience in not only to view but to join, and join they did. The other emphasis in the choreography was the long-form time – eight hours of standing relatively still. Foellmer’s reading of the temporality of *Duran Adam* is from the perspective of “slowness” as an anti-representational impulse in particular practices of contemporary dance, drawing from

⁶⁴ Ming, Wu, Sabine Küper, and Thomas Büsch. “Media Award for Standing Man / Duran Adam.” InEnArt, May 3, 2019. <http://www.inenart.eu/?p=10101>

Andre Lepecki's reading of Jerome Bel's work as "*remaining motionless in the face of an (aesthetic) modernity that has aligned itself with progress*" (Lepecki 2001, 44). However, I must argue for a gendered reading of a performance called *Duran Adam*, Standing MAN. Later in the thesis, I elaborate further on the centrality of masculinity and ableism within the Youth-Revolt complex in the predominant historiography of student movements, but here I would flag a similar set of analytical tools to look at the Standing Man from the perspective of which gender gets to occupy more public space and political spaces in any society and what kind of bearing that has on their gendered habitus and the potential of the same body in resistance. I would shortly read *Duran Adam* as, among the many different things it represents, also a study in the inherent cultures of masculinity shooting through histories of resistance, with affective connections to potent political concepts such as strength, resilience and martyrdom. The reason for this brief segue into *Duran Adam* is because within the Hindu majoritarian consensus of India, even before the BJP came to hold government, the Muslim man, the man belonging to the minority religion, has been fixed in culture inside particular mores of masculinity that are enmeshed in the very same anti-Muslim sentiments that Hindutva weaponizes. Within Right Wing Hindu networks, the Muslim male was cast as historical oppressors and invaders through a series of complex processes of historical revisionism under British colonial rule. To this day the Muslim male subject is fetishized endlessly as an over-virulent, aggressive degenerate, impure in the eyes of caste Hindu practices of vegetarianism and caste purity, and forever a libidinal threat to the *body politik*. However, this is not simply the only existent narrative around the Muslim other, considering the salient existence of extremely diverse Islamic practices in the subcontinent for many centuries. But the narrative of the Muslim man as an aggressive, sexually threatening figure has gained a great deal of traction in India culturally with the amalgamation of the multiple wounds from the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and the current post 9/11 moment of

precipitated Islamophobia as a global industry. The BJP and its older, more militant sister organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), precisely bleed these wounds of the borders between India and Pakistan which were created on an unaccounted for death toll. In cultural spaces such as early Bombay cinema, heavily influenced by the Parsi stage, the Muslim Social as a genre of borderline fantasy (Bhaumik, 2001) investment in Islamicate courtly cultures existed within the immediately pre-independence public sphere. As Ravi Vasudevan illustrates in his work (2015), this highly complex genre went through a dynamic process of attempting a pedagogical, historical function of “teaching” audiences about the courtly traditions of the once rulers of the landmass, to the attempted constitution of a Muslim communal identity that could exercise democratic choices such as professional and personal choices of jobs and romance, relegated no more to the fantasy world behind veils or the perceived “backwardness” of Islam. Refracted through this development of a genre in the face of the steady dominance of the culture by Hindu sociality, it can be argued that performances of Islamic life that would not be seen within the lens of religiosity, i.e. performances that would be given space in the Hindu civil society, would have to play by the rules of acceptable secularization and overt inter-communal harmony aesthetics, yet involve the older semiotics of Muslim courtly cultures and modern bourgeois Muslim lives. A striking example of this is the potent moment of popularization of a theatrical form called *dastangoi*, in middle to upper middle class cultural circles of Indian cities, from the mid- 2000s mainly due to the efforts of Delhi-based performer and researcher Mahmood Faarooqui. An exercise in reviving an older form of Persian storytelling from a massive folio called Hamza Nama from the 13th century, commissioned by the Mughal emperor Akbar, about a mythical hero called Amir Hamza, *dastangoi* performances by Farooqui and his collaborator Himangshu Tyagi became extremely popular within a city like Delhi, despite being performances entirely in Urdu. Delhi speaks a fairly Urdu-influenced Hindi, but it was

primarily a Hindu socialized city, the capital of a Hindu socialized country. Also, Faarooqui's audience, the culture consumers of Delhi attending his performances at bourgeois venues such as India International Center, would most certainly also be a mix of people from different parts of the country, not all of whom would be able to follow Urdu. As Farooqui and Tyagi made the decision to start performing the texts. Without going into great detail of the performances themselves, what is important for our conversation is that both the *dastango*, the storytellers, would be wearing courtly, *anrakha* style clothing and cap, and would sit kneeling on their folded knees, in the pose of prayer. They would not move much from the position, and instead used wide hand gestures and facial expressions to accompany the expressively spoken Urdu texts. Like in their attire, in their gestures too they would loosely reference courtly traditions, repertoires of kathak dancing and so forth, to further invest the audience in the fantastic world of an Arabian Nights style Islamic dreamworld. I very much see the *dastangoi* as a contemporary form of Muslim Social, where the investment in the fetish of an "Islamicate" aesthetics is coexisting with pedagogical claims of teaching the audience about an ancient art form that liberates the cultural image of Islam from its connections to terror. In a political sense this has an ideological function – rendering the contemporary Muslim man (most of the early *dastango* during the 2000s were men) into a role of non-threatening, secular, educated, intellectual teacher and artist, someone who is actively contributing to Hindu society through the labour of research and art, things that, by the vulgar definitions of post-9/11 world, Islam suppresses. I would like to momentarily extrapolate the particular sitting stance of the *dastago* to make a point in conjunction with *Duran Adam* and the women protesters at the Bagh. To put it in a schematic, Gunduz performing *Duran Adam* creates a potent receptacle of resistant semiotics in the standing body of the male Turkish protester of Gezi Park in 2013 while Faarooqui performing *dastangoi* with his Hindu collaborator, sitting in a prayer pose in the India International Center in 2005, evokes in his Hindu

majority audience a sense of comfort in being around a soft-spoken, cultured and non-threatening “good” Muslim. And then, in 2020 the Muslim women dressed in their everyday attire of hijabs sitting in the Baghs of the country, indefinitely sitting, day and night, in protest of a law that strips them off their citizenship, undeniably create a *new* register of performing Muslimhood as well as performing gender and class in Indian consciousness. The never-beforeness is the strongest performance of protest in the Bagh – never before have contemporary Indians seen so many Muslim women publicly doing political labour, and never before has the act of sitting amongst a crowd, just sitting and existing openly, been rendered so effective in terms of its political affect. In order to experience then what this political affect is, and how that hit the bodies of the audience at the Berlinale screening of *Sab Changa Si*, it is conceptually useful to invoke Diana Taylor’s idea of *!presente!* (2020) as an analytical tool. In her book, Taylor opens up a discussion about the fragmented and arbitrarily “I” of colonial subjectivity that systematically attempted to rearrange the polyphony of subjectivities in indigenous cultures of Latin America and elsewhere. In contrast to the fixing of the subject as a singular, she maps out an example, at the very onset, of fragmented subjectivities involved in solidarity and activist work, where she and her colleagues, on the team of a people’s court doing hearings for people who had migrated across the US-Mexico border and had lost family and friends to extrajudicial disappearances, were asked to “*join us !presente!*” at the next meeting. Centering the voices of those that she solidarizes with, Taylor argues for a particular ethics of embodiment charged with anticolonial politics, where the always already atomised sense of “I”, of the colonial subjects who are “brought” in and out of presence according to the needs of coloniality, and also the colonizer who is now in a position to make amends for historical wrongs, are fragmentarily present in a fragmented presence, somehow in a state of solidarity. The concept is spatio-temporal in nature,

and shoots through the arbitrary boundaries set on spatio-temporality through colonial politics of the ration.

“While !presente!, as in present tense, screams out the urgency of the now, its reiterative power points to its ongoing demands, the constant shuffle between the past, present, and future configured differently in dif-ferent epistemes.” (pp.19)

Interrogating what it actually means to stand up to injustice, despite knowing of the difficulties of making change, and in some cases (such as, say, the Baghs, which technically were “unsuccessful” in their demand that the government repeal the CAA) impossibilities of the endeavor, Taylor finds a bodily vocabulary for solidarity – the labour of acting with those with whom one may not share any other visceral experience than the protest or the sit-in itself. Calling for an abolition of the boundaries around individual subjectivity, because in the world of !presente! one is simply never fully alone or fully with others, Taylor argues for “para states” – “*Para,*” *as a prefix, attaches itself to other words to denote proximity; para stands along with, by, besides.*” (pp. 20)

And because of this element of physical and conceptual approximation, !presente! is not a subjectivity but the process of subjectivation – it is *making* presence or *becoming* present. One of the many embodied practices of presence that Taylor goes into is her concept of the “animative” (pp.47), “*the unspoken resistance that exists as and through enacted refusal*”. Using examples such as athletes taking a knee during the national anthem, or the student talking to a neighbour while the teacher is looking away, she argues that the animative is a state of “not, not present”, a politically charged performance that refuses engagement with the oppressor entirely, and refuses via presence. I would like to push the idea of the animative further than the arbitrary binaries of consent and refusal of traditional political engagement. The political performances of the Baghs were complete acts of !presente! without a doubt, and at the core of the congregation was an affirmation of presence of a so-far “absent”

community, and refusal to become absent via legislation. While it is understood that performances never happen for the first time, when I claim that the Baghs did something *new*, I am in no way trying to communicate “original”, but outside the legibility criteria of political performances of resistance under Hindutva. The newness in part was the gendered call to solidarize, which created contingent spaces of women’s collective struggles that indeed not a lot of women of my age ever experienced substantively in their lives, despite having feminist practices. The newness, at least in part, was the number of people, mostly women, for whom the Bagh was a first experience of some kind – first political protest, first sit-in, first experience of intersectional feminist collectivity and more. And this is precisely why the Bagh was generative of an excess that went over and above refusal –it was, I argue, the excess of another world, another fully real material condition actively being worlded by the space, a “worlding”, !present!. And this was the “newness” that was drawing us into the Bagh, and this extremely strong embodied experience of having lived a worlding was what gripped the audiences of *Sab Changa Si* in the last 20 minutes of the screening, when once again, all of us, in screen-mediated proximity of the worlding, were immediately !present!.

In the last 20 minutes of *Sab Changa Si*, the camerawork becomes untethered from the already existing repertoires of student cinema about student lives – the historiographical charge of the campus confronts the world outside the imagined sanity of the campus, but not within the pre-existing conditions of civil society protests in state-sanctioned, pre-coded performances of liberal resistance. Teresa and her friends confront a worlding. Many of the people watching *Sab* that night had themselves visited at least one of the Baghs, and the sudden placing of a camera gaze lost from its comfortable home of the campus, with its charming yet dated notions of revolt and youth, reminded all of us of our own confrontations with the new world created in the Baghs and our moment of witnessing and entering them. The entering

of a new world necessitates deep mental and physical transformations, as we run the risk of experiencing things that we have never experienced before. It has to be mentioned that the Baghs continued their sit-ins while the fascist state clapped back through a brutal pogrom in North East Delhi in February 2020, where more than 50 working class Muslim people were murdered⁶⁵, and many activists imprisoned on false charges⁶⁶. It was only with the announcement of the lockdowns due to the Covid-19 pandemic that the women of the Baghs decided to suspend the sit-ins⁶⁷. The brutality and the complete lack of accountability for the pogrom was precisely the regular exceptional act of violence of the fascist public sphere, to remind its citizens of its own continued relevance and monopoly over violence. However, the protracted moment of trauma that this created in the minds of some of us, including all of us who were sitting inside the film theater on Potsdamer Platz, could only be alleviated to some extent by our experience of the Bagh, while our friends got arrested and imprisoned throughout the pandemic, without any possibility of public gathering or protest. And the loud bombastic entry of the Bagh into the mis-en-scene of *Sab*, with its glittery stage hosting a series of performances, late night political conversations between young women in the sit-in and visiting men, incredibly powerful discussions on the rights of trans persons in fascist polity, massive seas of headscarves sitting and blocking public roads, children and dogs playing around the crowded space, filled us with the bodily feeling of presence. Whereas previously some of us were only listening

⁶⁵ Jazeera, Al. Delhi victims: Profiles of those killed in violence around India's CAA protests. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2020/delhi-riots-portraits/index.html>

⁶⁶ My two friends got arrested : "Delhi Riots: Student Activists Natasha Narwal, Devangana Kalita, Asif Iqbal Tanha Released from Prison on Bail," The Indian Express, June 17, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/delhi-riots-case-court-orders-release-of-student-activists-given-bail-2-days-ago-7363172/> , comrade from my university arrested : "Umar Khalid, Arrested under UAPA in Delhi Riots Case, Sent to Judicial Custody till 22 October," ThePrint, September 24, 2020, <https://theprint.in/india/umar-khalid-arrested-under-uapa-in-delhi-riots-case-sent-to-judicial-custody-till-22-october/509599/>

⁶⁷ Al Jazeera, "India Police Remove Anti-CAA Sit-in Citing Coronavirus," News | Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera, March 24, 2020), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/24/shaheen-bagh-anti-cao-sit-in-removed-amid-coronavirus-lockdown>

in on the conversations among Teresa and her friends, now we were simply there. This could also happen to some extent due to the specific direction that the film took post its spatial travel to Bilal Bagh. The camera, taking a break from the dizzying chaos of the Bagh, came back to the group of students who we had met before – caught in an intense argument. One of the women in the group had faced sexual harassment during an especially crowded day at Bilal Bagh, when Bollywood star Naseeruddin Shah was making an appearance to meet the protestors. She, supported by other women in the group, was accusing the men in the group of not following through with their political promises and being bad allies who wanted to brush under the carpet issues of gender in order to falsely prioritize antifascist politics. Teresa's camera caught this incredible moment of conflict and feminist solidarity with the Bagh in the background, and for the audience that had known what being at the Bagh actually felt like, this was an immediate recall of the personal political transformations – the steady feminist clarity of the extent of one's subjugation within fascism and patriarchy in general, and the sheer power of sitting and existing as political gestures in the face of that. Truly, many of us had gone into the Bagh having been involved in activist politics for long times, and yet our political claims to dignity seemed to have been missing embodied physical vocabulary. Given that much of our repertoire was derived from long-standing Leftist movements, and in the current moment of precipitated fascism, these gestures were unable to activate in our minds and bodies, and indeed in the realm of culture and imagination, any sort of call to action, it was transformative to realize that the easy act of sitting could involve such a potent mixture of radically changed gender roles, antifascism and survival in the face of death.

Part 3: Boundary Events and Worldings: Proposals for Performance Historiography

In writing out the approximal maps of relationality between real violence, the image

of that violence, protest sit-ins resisting a legal manifestation of the violence and the mediated artistic practices trying to create some form of discourse in response to the violence, I have only found the body as the site of confluence of the various activations that all of these functions entail. And this body is of course not *any* body, it is the body that has experienced each or a majority of these functions and registers of affect. In so far that the creative practices discussed above are somehow trying, in their specific ways, to negotiate the temporal distance of the makers themselves to the violence that is actually ongoing (as it registers in the body of the audience), we can see the constitutive element of arranging a narrative according to events. As mentioned before, the archive of these moments are still in reference to found footage, with scholarship centering *arrangement* and analysis of events to historicize the Hindutva sphere in terms of socio-political formations, bound by tight rules of linear temporality. Drawing from the impressions I received as an audience open to the multiplicity of resistant historiographical charges in the films, that activated my viewer body in very particular ways, I do not think it is fair or even tenable to attribute neat historical categories to rationalize the “rise” or “origins” or “normalization” or any other exceptionalized temporal marker for the fascist public sphere and its violences. The project of narrativizing for the purposes of meaning-making out of the fascist public sphere completely falls short specifically in the realm of the new cultural practices of subjectivity that we explored in detail above, precisely because we are not simply talking about what happened in history, but somehow registering it in our bodies in a long form. This is an acceptance of the contingent presence of fascist violence alongside the significantly less-measurable transformations that it enforces on resistant bodies, processes that are witnessed in exposition within protests and cultural productions. And there does not seem to be an end to this process, as it is quite clearly a process of survival.

Without falling into traps of definition, is it possible to delineate some loose historiographical tools for these processes that we witnessed up above? I would like to take the opportunity to suggest the borrowing of some interdisciplinary negotiations of the event as dramaturgically appropriate registers of reading. If I follow the logic of reading the many resistant bodies under fascist violence as historiographical sources themselves, I would argue that the historiographical work that the body in protest undertakes belongs in the dramaturgy of movement work. Dramaturgy, a specific function within the event-making work that is theater, is more-or-less the translation of text to embodiment, and the dramaturg, going by what contemporary practitioners as well as acting school courses say, does a set of tasks that help both the actors as well as the director and to an extent the audience contextualize the specific messages and meanings being communicated in performance. It is an explicit role of an insider-outsider, often academic as well as creative, managerial as well as provocative. What the specific craft of dramaturgy does, in its translation of the textual or the factual into the embodied, is an attempted assemblage of affect that is not only comprehensible, but in excess to the individualistic consumption of affect through text, or fact or personal experience. To abstract and assemble specific affect into general comprehension, without losing meaning and importance, that is how I would read the craft of a dramaturg in a fairly classical sense. Similarly, the historiographer, the historian of history-writing, is preoccupied with the process of the making of text and the non-textual impact that this has. The historian's craft, i.e. history-writing, is history-doing for the historiographer, and this extremely tight connection between recording and representing is the reason why historiographers may position themselves as invested in meaning-making and affect generation. It is the dramaturgical impulse of historiography which positions the historian among the many others, as *agents* in history – i.e. an existential relationship with the passage of time. In the case of the acts of protest and in turn the acts of mediating those protests

through the camera, and again in turn, the act of receiving a particular set of information within the affective registers of the body, each agent, each body is a historiographer. It is in the contingent simultaneity of their !present! in proximities of each other that a historical condition is created, and the many bodies need to be speaking to each other in order for the resistant history of antifascism to become present. This is a direct response to the Hindutva project of historical revisionism that informs a perceptible shift in history pedagogy in the country, with widespread rewriting of syllabi⁶⁸ to naturalize a fundamentally fictitious and constructed Hindutva *body politik* within academic and political practice. The stakes of a changed syllabus passed by the University Grants Commission, systematically dropping Marxist scholarship from the historical studies of Mughal Empires, which gave precedence to economic analyses of material conditions, for polemical work from Right Wing academics that aimed to paint a picture of the Mughal rules as aberrations to an apparent narrative (ironically, posed as a sort of “victim” episteme) of a Hindu Rashtra or a Hindu nation, cannot be seen divorced from the reality of the Hindutva government, police and thugs carrying out *en masse* police action inside the same universities whose epistemes they are forcefully trying to change. There is some value in understanding the campus as a complex political frontier, a site with multiple fronts on which the Hindutva public sphere is aiming for legitimacy and acceptance, primarily through brute force. The campus, it has to be remembered, is simply an inextricable part of the world “outside” of it. The fake news machinery unleashed by the Hindutva public sphere, to commit at the very source of the violent event or/and the resistant event, a process of producing a fake narrative to in turn produce the public sphere itself, is a continuation of historical revisionism tactics. I would argue that the sheer possibility and ease with which such visibly blatant misconstruction of

⁶⁸ “UGC’s New Draft History Syllabus Plays up Mythology, Faces Allegations of Saffronisation,” The Wire, accessed April 18, 2022, <https://thewire.in/education/ugcs-new-draft-history-syllabus-plays-up-mythology-faces-allegations-of-saffronisation>

history is done lies in the impulse of creating an event itself, with the explicit purpose of containing it in jars of cogency.

As a springboard of discussion I would start with Jacques Derrida's 2007 lecture *A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying The Event*, where he specifically deals with the processes of generating the unit of event through multiple acts of "saying", which for him leads to an exploration of many modalities of interpretation and performance. Slowly canceling out exercises of "information" such as news, acts that he chalks down to "saying" an event and also "making it", a process of interpretation for him, he suggests a few examples of event making masquerading as event-saying that travel beyond the confines of generating discursive systems of fixedness. Some events carry an "impossibility" within them that locates them outside the realm of "knowing", i.e. there could be no premonition for this event, and the surprise and the impossibility is what renders it an event. Derrida lists the confession, the gift, the act of forgiveness, hospitality, and "invention" as events because of the inherent possibility of relational transformation within them, a component of the moment that could not be premonitioned. In the case of the confession, he notes.

"There is more to the confession than informing, more than the constative or cognitive saying of the event. There is a transformation in my relationship to the other" (pp.448)

This is, as he clearly states, a political commitment to distinguish between two separate modes of constructing event as a unit, the modes clearly being connected to regimes of information and power (pp.447). My attraction to Derrida's treatise comes from his argument that the event can only be an event if it is impossible, and his generative, soothing suggestion that the only field of engagement where this impossibility lies is relational transformations. This position is at once an exercise in singularity that is highly valuable for political polemic, and also a challenge to strategies of historians and other purveyors of the event to exceptionalize this unit by fixing it and saying it. However, there is a lack of dramaturgical information about

what process *begets* the impossibility, rendering it into a sort of vague mystery and I would argue, following the specific nature of his examples, a moral purity, the realm “*beyond the confines of knowledge*”. This is the repeated and unfortunate descent of discussions of the event into the geographies of inside and outside, as it somehow becomes clear that the event is a demarcation of time and space and the drawing of the borders is a labour connected to existing structures of power and the writer’s own subjectivity vis-a-vis this. The event is an ideological practice.

Hayden White intervenes in the ideological functions of the event and its relationship to history writing by also invoking, via Gertrude Stein, the “Modernist Event” in which there is a severe threat of bleeding of the inside and outside. What he indicates as a Modernist Event is of course events of a particularly remarkable scale, scope and depth (spatio-temporality) that escapes the hitherto accepted definition of a “historical event” as a thing that is “observable”, and his examples are those of crisis and mediated spectacularity such as the assassination of American president John F. Kennedy, the police chase of American TV personality and murder-accused O.J. Simpson, and notably, the Holocaust,. These are events that are involved so heavily with a tremendous diversity of sources that they are uncontainable within the traditional historical gaze, and relies heavily on what White argues are Modernist, fabulative strategies of telling that bleed out of measurable plots, characters and environments. As historiographical strategies, White’s argument can clearly address highly mediatized contemporary events and their almost insurmountable list of sources, and the acknowledgement of fabulation and narrativization being a silent feature of a historian’s practice for such events, are supremely useful and well taken. White touches upon the fact that this involves practices of ethics within the discipline, and how that conversation needs to steer clear of the fetish of fact which, for me, a historiographer attempting to write against Right-Wing historical revisionism, is an influential thought. Invested as he is in accepting the changing and continuously

redrawn boundaries between fiction and fact salient within historical sources of the current times, White's work does not give scope for a serious reckoning with viewership and readership, rendering the event as something that is mostly a discursive exercise. At the very least in part, the job of rendering into polyphony the multidirectional historical source falls on the audience and the reader, without whom neither the inside, nor the outside and nor the bleed between the two could be registered. And this is where performance historiography makes its fundamental claim in the discussion on the event – by centering the simultaneity of processes of doing, watching, participating, transforming etc, seen as features of a performative event. Most useful to this approach is its unfaithfulness to set borders, both between the inside and outside of what is being considered an event or the actor and audience of the same, or even the artifice in distancing interpretation and experience. Through an exploration of particular works of performance art such as the oeuvre of Marina Abramovic and Joseph Beuys, Erika Fischer-Lichte qualifies the specificity of a performative event as one where “*corporeality dominated semioticity*” (2008, pp.19) and the contingency of this moment pivoted on the special possibility of multiple entry-points of participation and even role-reversal of the spectator and the performer. In this eventuality, the dissolution of boundaries between subject and object is the basis for denoting it an event, and that to a degree makes the event-ness contingent to the location – an art gallery would host this event differently from a theater, and definitely a site of public protest. Of course, the hypothesis that the performative event, in the changed relationalities between the actors in its duration still somehow maintains a level of sovereignty, despite its open-endedness of evolution, can be seen within the assertion that for that moment and the internal logic of that event, there is a realm of the impossible that is manifested. And the impossible, as the name suggests, is unpredictable in any way. Pushing forth a political point in the context of resistant performances like those of the Bagh, I would read the unpredictable realm of the

impossible a bit more generatively, located in the bodies of those who have been forced to face the impossibility of existence by a fascist public sphere. In terms of the Bagh, the realm of impossibility is actually a weapon of the state, which renders impossible the existence of a large group of people, already invisibilized inside a Hindu public sphere, into the realm of *persona non grata*, by stripping them off of their citizenship. In response to such an action, the use of existence and occupation via sitting does not directly invoke a semiotic meaning, but is shot through with the charge of corpo-reality. While it may be so that the terms of engagement – the open access of the Bagh to many who go there and experience transformations of spectator and actor – lend themselves to a reading of the Bagh as a performative event, there is one particular difference precisely in the realm of the unpredictability axiom. The act of sitting is banal, mundane and monotonous, and yet it does something a bit more than the triumph of the body over meaning, because meaning and the lack of it are terms of definition that the state is in control of. The particularities of transformation at the Bagh do not exclusively point to states that are residing inside a sovereign logic of the Bagh, they reference states that are co-existent, such as the coexisting realities of fascist violence and the Bagh, the two spaces wholly caught up in each other, not causally, not even particularly contrapuntally, as a traditional reading of resistance would suggest, but as intertwined ontologies – a “this *also* exists”. This category of event is not sovereign, with no actual distinction beyond bodily existence, and thus, for me, not an event at all, but a “worlding”.

Following the lead of interdisciplinary work between non-representational theory and geography, which “*gives primacy to the world’s unfolding*” (Anderson, Harrison, 2010, pp.33), I propose agreement with the logic of worlding where the boundaries between subject-object are erased with respect to dislodging the human from his central agential chair. This does not in any way suggest the political naivete of claiming political relativist positions, but acknowledges human perception as *one* of the many

epistemes of the worlds, and subsequently, the existence of multiple worlds. Donna Haraway leads the charge in delineating this position as explicitly political, where “storying” is not a tool of arrangement for perceptions of time and space, but for *creating* time and space. She draws of course from science fiction, a form of intertwined performance and politics, to acknowledge the political function of storytelling as not a function, but an act of creating a world, and therefore, going by the assertion of performance studies, an act valid and present as itself.

“Reality is an active verb, and the nouns all seem to be gerunds with more appendages than an octopus” (Haraway, 2003, pp 6)

In a context of fascist legislature aiming to obliterate one’s legible presence within the polity, the women of the Baghs not only kept existing, which would have been also valid in itself, but decided to create together a sit-in that indexed a long-existing world of community and togetherness, a social fabric which they simply lived out in the light for the duration of the protests. And such was the power of this act, such as the restorative quality of the assertion of life, that it became a world where other women from the city went, for “first experiences”. These first experiences – safety and solidarity in a public space, interfaith friendships, intergenerational sociality etc had actually been rendered impossible by existent power structures such as patriarchy and fascism – as stated before, the impossibility was itself a tool of the narrative in the hands of the fascist state. Resisting that, the Bagh was an exercise in delivering what simply *was*, no longer tethered to the ration tactics of possible-impossible – liberation was an ontology based on bodily presence. And it is absolutely this element of worlding, where political acts or resistance are no longer tethered exclusively to binaries of oppression and liberation (because of the moving of the human subject from the center to multiplicity), that bled and keep bleeding through images or any other representation of the Bagh, into the bodies of those who lived the Bagh. If the Bagh is a worlding that can clearly collapse subject-object borders, and also human-

nonhuman borders, it can obviously also collapse timespace sovereignties. And I argue that in the visceral affect of “empowerment” that the audience reported on their body’s exposure to the last 20 minutes of *Sab Changa Si*, the worlding of the Bagh took place – bodies on screen meeting bodies off screen in a moment of human decentered role reversals of actor-spectator. Worlding as a resistant practice of liberation-as-ontology, as Haraway would suggest, uses speculation as a political tool to interrogate current abusive materialities and manifest into presence not necessarily *new* but *already existing* alternatives that are being hidden out of existence. As it manifested itself in the Bagh as a particular form of bodily presence, it became explicitly transformed into performative practice in LA-based artist Arshia Fatima Haq’s ongoing project *Discostan*, connected in extremely fundamental ways to the project of obliteration of Muslim identity carried out by a fascist public sphere. Arshia was born in Hyderabad, and like me, and the three other women (and the many other women) featured in this chapter, grew up (as a Muslim woman) witnessing several acts of genocide against the Muslim population in India during the 90s⁶⁹. At a young age, her family migrated to the USA, where she was forced to reckon with the fallout of 9/11 as a brown Muslim migrant woman, dealing with the construction of Islamophobia as a profitable industry. In her complex sonic practice, at once “responding to” the existent realities of oppression and engendering restorative tactics of survival, Arshia created “Discostan”, a dance-floor centered worlding of what Arshia named the “*Utopic Ummah*”, a cosmological speculation of a safe universe for the Islamic congregation. A veteran sonic artist, Arshia expertly stitches together a dj set from a whole life’s worth of record collection spanning the entirety of the

⁶⁹ After the already mentioned Babri Mosque demolition in 1992, there were several other *reported* cases of pogrom and genocide, such as Godhra 2002: “Godhra, Where the Fall of India’s Democracy Began,” The Wire, accessed April 18, 2022, <https://thewire.in/communalism/godhra-where-the-fall-of-indias-democracy-began> , Muzaffarnagar 2013: “Watch: Eight Years after Muzaffarnagar Riots, Its Victims Are Still Living in Virtual Hell.” The Wire. Accessed April 18, 2022 <https://thewire.in/rights/watch-eight-years-after-muzaffarnagar-riots-its-victims-are-still-living-in-virtual-hell> and then aforementioned Delhi 2020. These are only the *reported* instances.

geography that was once the Islamic World – West Asia to East, down to the generative musical ring around the Arabian Sea. This she unleashes onto an almost sacralized dancefloor in various club venues across the world, and Muslims and laity, young and old, worshipper and worshipped, drag queens and spoken word artists explode into each other amidst mirror-laden *sheeshmahal*-aesthetic walls of sweaty dark basements. It is absolutely bizarre and fundamentally joyful. It is completely excessive and hedonistic, like a good disco is meant to be. And, it is indubitably subversive in its casual acceptance of all and every aspect of Islam-coded performance on the frenzied dancefloor, sacred and profane, religious and secular – belly dance to qawwali to possession to self-flagellation. In the summer of 2021, as a part of a long-form art project *kal*, District Berlin, a self-organised queer feminist maker space produced “Sama: A Divine Listening Room” by Arshia Fatima Haq in collaboration with Berlin-based sonic artist Raed Yassin, a sharing of the Discostan experience for the post-migrant Muslims and laity of the city, in the specific context of *kal*, a project centering the experiences of queer South Asia and its diaspora. Inside the large workshop shed space of District, in a semi-corner spot on the floor, a Persianate carpet marked a space of prayer and congregation, at the center of which was kept some pomegranates, a fruit of aesthetic and ecclesiastical significance within Islam, and candles. Beyond the carpet was a large screen, flanked by two dj setups of consoles and speakers, where the two musicians would sit facing each other across the expanse of the screen, Raed on a chair and Arshia on the floor, in prayer position. The audience would sit on this side of the carpet, at a distance, fanning out into the large space. On entry, the audience would be given a rub of *itr*, a traditional perfume used in Islamic ablutions and sold in various parts of the world where Muslims live. This particular bottle used was brought from the Muslim neighbourhood of North Delhi by co-curator of *kal* Aziz Sohail. The audience would then be treated to an hour and a half of music and sounds from the two artists, and a video from Arshia, which, along

with the particularly overwhelming smell of *itr*, would create the affective architecture of a Utopic *ummah*, a religious congregation of Muslims, in which this particular audience would be allowed temporary entry. The sonic component itself was an extremely longform exploration of various Islam-specific sounds and music – multiple calls for prayer and religious music quite familiar to a South Asian ear, layered multiple times and repeated constantly to create a chorus effect, with extremely heavy echo effects that would stretch out the *aaḏaan* into a hypnotic soundscape of seeming endlessness. For many of the members of the audience, artists and activists from post-migrants backgrounds, mostly from countries where Islam plays a strong referential, if not governmental, role, the encounter with the sonic scape was pleasurable already, given that it was a treat to hear something so “familiar” in such reorganised ways, but it was in the extremely powerful confluence of the sound, the images and the smell that we woke up to the realities of inevitable transformations in our being during the show. The imagery started with an invocation – a quote from Hazrat Inayat Khan, renowned Sufi mystic, musicologist and migrant from the 19th-20th centuries, who also, like Arshia, came from Hyderabad. The words, communicating the feeling of playing the *veena* till his heart became an instrument, which he offered to the divine, to be played as an instrument, a flute, dissolved into an ambient image of the universe and its stars, layered by the appearance of first the gate of a mosque, and then a rose. After what seemed like hours (in reality probably about 30 minutes) of hypnotic effects of the rose, the gate, the stars and the call to prayer, there would be a soft sonic shift to more diverse choric explorations such as restructured, slowed down tracks from *dabke* from Raed. The artists would be interlocked in a *jugalbandi*, the “duet” of Hindustani classical repertoire⁷⁰, and the audience, with ample breathing

⁷⁰ Characteristically very different from the logic of a duet in other forms of music, the *jugalbandi* literally translates to something like “captured in a diad”. Traditionally used to display virtuosity in a playful call-recall structure, the *jugalbandi* is considered an affective entry-point for the audience into the philosophical and sacralized logics of Indian classical traditions, and they are deployed generously by

room to immerse the atmosphere, made even bigger by the galactic and cosmological images, would let their ears and sonic and olfactory senses stretch out. And then, the imagery would suddenly change to more abstraction – a sort of searchlight on a black screen that would intermittently reveal actual images of the Muslim congregation – found footage of circumambulation in Mecca, women having possession experiences in the Nizamuddin mosque in Delhi, men in pathan suits standing around looking at the camera, all rendered a bit shadowy, as if they were all found footage. The import of those images on me, as well as the many South Asians present in the room, was first in the rubric of utter discomfort, then shock, and then absolute euphoria. I would like to extensively quote from a fanmail I wrote to Arshia post the performance to communicate the process of my spectatorship (born-Hindu, Upper Caste Indian woman) experience during Sama:

Your musical set was already doing something specific to my ears, a spiral that I have recognised from the only other Ummah collectivity I have had the fortune of ever being immersed in -- the public Thursday qanwalis at Nizamuddin. I was constantly checking myself, like a politically correct Leftist activist -- "don't try to flatten every Ummah experience into one! That is essentialism and exoticisation of the worst kind!" But I thought hard about it, and it wasn't that. It was not some fake touristy experience of the Muslim world, no. I take the spiral seriously, and it is not induced easily or by association -- it needs a specific BPM, and a specific musical structure that was present in your set. My tired eyes were completely taken by the galactic imagery, and the opening up of a pilgrim's mind with the rose and the gate was absolutely a turn of virtuosity that I have witnessed in someone's work after a very very long time. I am a believer in gates, admittedly, and therefore perhaps was even more primed to what happened after.

musicians especially during longform “aalaap” or exploration pieces, to keep the attention of the audience and the other musicians. It is a relational style.

What happened after was dangerous. A dark screen, with a searchlight kind of circle roaming around it, illuminating small bits of the grainy video imagery beyond the dark veil -- photos and videos of the Ummah, Muslims circumambulating the Kaaba, veiled groups having experiences of possession, recognizably Muslim men and women dancing, marching, walking together. I did not know what I was seeing -- was this what the BBC was showing in 2001 to drum up global Islamophobia -- Shi'ite militia hiding in the caves of Tora Bora? Is this what was being shown to us, directly transmitted from Pentagon war rooms? Was I watching something that was evil? And if it was so, why did I want to believe in it so much? Why did I want to dance with it? Why was it my utopia?

In one incredibly powerful hour, I had crumbled into dust, realizing to what extent the Muslim Ummah had been denied to me, a lonely Leftist searching for collectivity all her life, by a fucking Islamophobic fascist world. It had been stained and erased entirely by the lens of terror, to the extent that my reading skills of the imagery of the Ummah was hopelessly refracted by that... In one hour, I believed that the Ummah was an ancient existence, a radical collectivity of absolute faith and pleasure that had lived without me ever knowing about it, and it would live on in the face of tiny specks of history stained by little fascists like our Modi. I was no longer hopeless, guilty, sad, angry, horribly anxious -- no one had the power to destroy the Ummah, and all was ok. Fuck, it was medicine of cosmic proportions.

In the aftermath of the Ummah, many of us highly overwhelmed and taking a saturated smoke break outside District, started speaking about and piecing together what actually happened inside. One person told another – both born-Hindu Indians, both protestors against Hindu fascism – *something has happened to you, I can see it in your eyes, are you ok?* The answer came – *I don't know, I feel SO GOOD after SO LONG.* This was not a simple fleeting happiness of temporary relief of seeing friends or listening to familiar music that can remind one of home, no. This was an access to a generative world, a world of congregation that had remained generative, joyful and caring in spite

of an entire material reality pivoted on its vilification and destruction. Arshia's practice was a worlding practice that was not as such interested in giving audiences "new" experiences that were "impossible" *per se* in the way say Derrida would understand the Event, but *rendered* impossible by current socio-political realities. The invocation of the *ummah* as a register of collectivity, something that always existed and will always exist was such a powerful iteration of a reality that in the very creation of its affective architecture, even referentially, it was too real to not world at the moment. And the *itr*, which stuck to the body for about three more days at least, was just an incredibly powerful reminder of the existence of another world in deep, bodily, immersed ways. With Arshia's own deep involvement in reparative practices in the aftermath of genocide, it is absolutely logical to see the Bagh congregation through the lens of the Utopic Ummah, and also vice versa, both politically charged practices of worlding. For the purposes of historiographical work that is trying to locate processes of dignity under fascist subjection, in the face of rampant historical revisionism, "worlding" can certainly become a category of happening that is able to escape the regimes of historical narrativization that the fascist public sphere controls (such a linear time and existence of one unitary world, to be transformed and terraformed at the will of power), and be a receptacle to inscribe the generative qualities of "new" strategies of politics and performance.

While the Bagh for me is clearly such a worlding, I would however see the two films and their other historiographical charge, i.e. violence and its report on the spectator body as another category of analysis. In communicating that there is some visceral, bodily information being passed from screen to spectator body through the looping of traumatic and sometimes personal imagery of fascist violence, I have indicated that there is indeed some elision of the subject-object boundary in such work, but unlike Fischer-Lichte's premise with respect to Marina Abramovic, there is no brutalized performer body to externalize the elision of the boundary on. Who does one take care

of, when seeing themselves and/or their own friends being repeatedly brutalized, as if stuck in a loop? The usage of the footage in both *Night* and *Sab* are by no stretch gratuitous or indicating the image's interest in the affect of voyeurism. However, the elision of boundaries may be happening, and the access to that experience is extremely limited. The report in the body, as I mentioned earlier, is also connected to extratextual knowledge of trauma, the same category of engagement that renders *Night* and the first 40 minutes of *Sab* to express a fundamental inability of comprehension in violence, a feeling truly shared by the chosen bodies in audience. As I briefly mentioned before, the historiographical charge of the films, of communicating and remembering bodily trauma, is brought into !present! by the contingent encounter between the body in pain on screen, the sometimes physically present body in pain of the artist, also a survivor of fascism, and the body in pain of the audience who has also lived through fascism. And the encounter can only happen of bodies to whom the trauma is physically legible. For the rest of the room the other registers of the historiographical charge take precedence, such as histories of student resistance, the spectacle of the young body in pain, and the archive of the campus, and the boundaries between performer (film) and spectator remains wholly intact. This constitutes what happened to me and the other Indian spectator on the screening of *Night* into a highly atomised and lonely experience. In her book *Elsewhere, Within Here* (2011), Trinh T. Minh Ha channels her embodied experiences of borders and boundaries as a refugee and a migrant to constitute national borders and walls as events themselves. As products of deep failures of peace processes and birthers of tremendous amounts of violence, and practically created to make people disappear out of sight and engender absence, in Minh Ha's formulation, the wall can no longer afford the moral inertness of an object, but is necessarily a receptacle of timespace. Similarly, she denotes a timespace identity to the body under migration. Poetically describing the affective processes of refugeehood, Minh Ha, in close dialogue with

Gloria Anzaldua, recognizes the body itself as territory and border – a battleground – and the body in migration as a “boundary event”.

“A solitude born in/with the multitude is a solitude that remains potentially populous – utterly singular and yet collective, always crowded with other solitudes.” (pp. 50)

As mentioned in the description of the screening itself, there was public acknowledgement and conversations about the spatio-temporal distance of myself from the film and its contexts, and the differential attacks on the body due to this. In the context of myself watching the film in Berlin and somehow being staged as an expert in a dramaturgical role for the trauma, the feeling of loneliness I mentioned was precisely the solitude mentioned in Minh Ha’s words. However, the conversation of *how does one go on* initiated by my fellow Indian audience member, brought home the reality that I was not the only one choking up at the footage of police violence. In Pallavi Paul’s exhibition as well, the same videos of police violence elicited a more pronounced visceral reaction from the large number of Indian migrants, all involved in protest politics within Berlin – bodily disgust and accusations of gratuitous usage of trauma (“trauma porn”) within Global North spaces. This is an interesting testament to the self-awareness of this specific slice of the Indian diaspora of which I myself am a part – our experiences of migrating have become affectively linked with our experiences of fascist violence back “home”, our bodies boundary events. And the legibility of the specific historiographical charges that piggyback on traumatizing imagery pivots on the presence of boundary events in the audience. The bodies that need to encounter the bodies in pain on screen are *our* bodies, rendered into the boundary event during the encounter, when we are once again forced to reckon with the severe meaninglessness of our experiences while our viscera affirm the realities of trauma in tandem with the activating image of the screen. This historiographical

category interrogates the body as a polyvocal historical source, and the dissolution of the boundary is in the actual denial of meaning of the violence, despite the corporeality of it. At Paul's show, titled *"The wind in your body is just visiting, your breath will soon be thunder"* then, tellingly, the object of exploration was "wind" and "breath", related elements that would be named differently, according to their relationship to life and death. The artist positioned the transformation of wind into breath inside the body as the boundary between life and death⁷¹, positioning in two maze-like floors of the new building of SAVVY Contemporary in Berlin multiple video-based works and some drawings and objects that dealt, directly as well as referentially with many themes such as the exacerbation of Covid -19 and mass death in India during 2021, the labour and lives of Dalit sanitation workers in Delhi, a deep dive into police violence on the streets of Delhi, the history of Zyklon B creation under the leadership of Robert Koch, Buddhist lamas talking about death and meditation as practice of breath, and much more. While in scope, as is expected from artistic practice, there are no set geographies, only the thematic abstractions of breath and wind, the presence of so many of Paul's comrades from the South Asian diaspora, specifically Indian protestor bodies in the space, primed the show into a space where certain bodies go through the state of the Boundary Event. As one entered the gallery space, artificially darkened through several curtains and dark walls for purposes of sound and light insulation, there would be ample curatorial clues to guide the audience body through the space. For example, the work on sanitation workers who enter manholes to clean up human feces, was projected inside a wooden elliptical high walled structure that loosely resembled the insides of a manhole. The image inside was what Paul's camera had captured of the insides of a manhole, with a voiceover from several sanitation workers telling the audience about the abysmal conditions of their labour. Similarly, the whole show, replete to the seams with images of death – two large scale videos

⁷¹ <https://savvy-contemporary.com/de/projects/2022/the-wind-in-your-body/>

roughly facing each other in the space, showed a Muslim graveyard in Delhi burying bodies and a Hindu burning ground burning bodies of covid victims – created a heavy, immersive sensorium, the affective specificities of which, I can argue, would play out in different ways in the minds of a native and a migrant audience. Especially with respect to the longform work in progress shown in the basement space, a collage-like video work about the police and police violence in Delhi, the heavy sensorium of breathlessness hops over the immediate shock of the images into the body of the Boundary Event – the Indian protester, once again watching herself and her friends being brutalized by cops, on loop. The specific silent video of the violence in Jamia library, lasting a little more than ten minutes, starts with a CCTV shot from the upper corners of the room that shows a nondescript room, and eventually from the left side of the frame, a door is broken down, while a woman approaches from the right, reacting in an unknown way to the door being banged and broken. Once the door gives in, riot police with their faces covered, enter the room, breaking furniture with batons and sticks and some of them disappear into the right corner, from where the woman approached (who has now gone back to the location to the right). After a few moments, people start approaching the broken door on frame left, entering from frame right, and this becomes a large crowd, who we now see are being beaten severely by the policemen. They are stuck in front of the left exit, attacked by cops standing at the exit, while more cops rain blows on them from the right. Eventually, the crowd starts exiting from the left, running frantically and falling on each other, and then one of the cops look straight at the camera and breaks the feed with the stick, denying any more visual proof of the incident. This video, in Paul's film, features embedded in a first person account of two women officers of Delhi Police in the time of the Emergency (1975-77) under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, telling the audience about their experiences in the force, in the background of different archival footage from Indian television history. Multiple stories are touched upon such as

using women police officers as body doubles for Mrs. Gandhi, disappearance of street children during the Emergency under the aegis of the force, and then the Jamia violence. It may be that the artist tried to communicate the extent of power that the police have on the citizens of a capital city, but for the audience, especially those of us who have faced severe bodily and psychological violence in the hands of the Delhi Police during protests, and carry varied degrees of trauma in ourselves in conjunction of that, it read as an attempt at *sympathetic* interiority of the police, especially through the deployment of gender to soften and humanize the police force. Many in the audience, out of them all people who had met during the protests in Berlin, and some who had protested together during their time in Delhi or other Indian cities, and some who had also visited the Baghs, started milling around in the corners of the gallery space and outside, discussing that there was clearly something *wrong* about the usage of the image of death and violence, specifically of people from India, for an art show in a city like Berlin. The site of contestation was along the lines of lack of ethics and trauma porn of death and poverty in the Global South for the voyeuristic consumption and eventual redemption of the Empire – a “necropolitics” approach. However, I would argue that the critique was not simply coming from a stance of the taboo around meaning-making from violence, but from the specific affect that watching and rewatching this particular video of Jamia, and others, created in the bodies of this audience. This is a condition of the Boundary Event, where specific bodies that have gone through a particular history of migration and have connected that journey, causally or otherwise, to experienced forms of bodily violence under fascism, develop contingently the ability to read with the body and keep inside the body histories of violence that are being explicitly denied in official archives. The body becomes the frontier, the site of witnessing and knowledge and the contestations around the same, and without a discursive recognition of this deterritorialized territory, is relegated to an experience of loneliness in multitude. I

would argue that it is useful to explicitly position this physical state of feeling-remembering trauma, in a multilayered set of meanings, spanning across time (linear) and space (geographical, i.e. also linear) and somewhat capsuling them inside the body, within a historiographical practice. This may enable us to take into account the subterranean historiographical charges of works such as *sab Changa Si* or Pallavi Paul's work, primarily taking into account spectatorship of the body under violence, not as a general and somewhat mystified category of analysis, but a specific, bodily one that may hold particular sources of knowing and information.

I would like to end this chapter by asserting that the mongrel historiographies that I attempt of particular protests and particular cultural productions that I believe point towards the processes of history doing, with a specific focus on the bodily report of the historiographical charge, has turned into a project that at its very heart starts rejecting any semblance of harmony – linearity of time, symmetry of experiences, completeness or even existence of legible archives are simply no longer tenable. Even in the presence of information, the understanding of how this information came to be consented upon as information, and which power structure it actually served, creates insurmountable ethical quandaries in me. I have simply attempted to enshrine my anxieties into words, hoping that they carry some historiographical charge that is legible to some. And what has come about are suspect and flux categories of sources itself – worldings and boundary events. However, given the already loose grounds on which the event itself stands as a rational measurement of spatio-temporality, and the looseness of historicity in the light of the regimes of misinformation under fascism, I am able to suggest that only a deep dive into the body can bring about an understanding of performances of resistance, and that body itself is always and already deeply fragmented, and to a large extent, dehumanized.

Chapter 2

The Student Protest and its Repertoire: Tiananmen Square and the Archive of Something That Did Not Happen

Key Concepts: Campus, Witnessing as Historiographical Method, Historiography and Justice

In my first chapter I have suggested that, in order to better understand the specific emotional registers connected to the vast purview of “resistance”, one would have to situate their fields of study in concrete, culturally specific ways, otherwise there is a possibility of generalizations that inevitably lead to historiographical stereotypes. Within the socio-cultural and political specificities, I suggested one would have to interrogate the body under the threat of violence – both in terms of its traumas and its pleasurable excesses. In this regard, I attempted to construct a lexicon of readability via particular kinds of events which centered around performance and reception of these historiographical charges. One of the challenges faced by the specific protest movements, mostly student movements, that I look at in my work is the slippery historiographical refractions caused by active suppression of archives. In the absence of accessible information that has not already created particular political biases that primarily serve propagandist tendencies of governments, I am forced to look at sources such as first-person accounts, experiences of “being there” (whenever possible), and cultural productions that enjoy a level of interpretive access to historical events. Thus, my observations take on a form that deals mainly with the processes of making meaning out of complex personal moments, the historical narrativization of which are still taking shape. In this chapter I look at one such moment of protest, the June 4th Movement of 1989 in various parts of China, the archives of which are still prohibited and classified, actively hidden by the Chinese government. The June 4th

moment and its historiographical challenges point towards some typical issues of doing historiographical work within student and campus movement spaces, with severe insecurity around archives, protagonists and political demands of a movement, which in this case is further exacerbated by governmental suppression of information. It has to be immediately clarified that the Chinese government specifically denies not the protests themselves, but the alleged massacre that took place in Tiananmen Square starting June 4th, 1989, where an undisclosed number of protestors – students and workers – were killed by the Chinese army. The reasons for this strategic selection of historical narratives by a government are complex and to do with multiple geopolitical reasons, only some of which we will eventually deal with in explicit ways. However, it is simply ahistorical to treat the June 4th movement as a protest movement divorced from the army action, the “massacre”, – these two not only belong in the same moment but are affectively remembered within the same vocabularies of trauma. For now, it would be sufficient to acknowledge that severe historical revisionism has taken place in terms of the reconstruction of the Tiananmen Square moment, rendering both the story and the protagonists highly polyvocal. And these historiographical blackouts have necessitated, as we will see in this chapter, the memorialization of trauma within registers of the body, such as gestural repetitions in later contexts, both performative and political. If there is a state-dictated denial that says something did not happen, where and how does one look to not only find out what happened, but to memorialize, mourn and deploy politically the unfinished business of the protestors? Indeed the fact that a large-scale protest movement happened in Beijing in the months of May-June in 1989 cannot be denied – there is in fact evidence such as video and audio footage of the gatherings at Tiananmen Square, released by several international media agencies across the world, some writings and interviews from protestors who were successful in escaping the country in the aftermath, Non

Governmental Organizations such as Tiananmen Mothers⁷² and their efforts towards bringing forth information about and justice for the deceased during the army action on the protests, and intermittent references, specifically to one particular film footage, the “Tank Man”⁷³, in multiple works of art. But the denialism exercised by the government and government adjacent media⁷⁴ is not only in terms of stymying information and arresting activists⁷⁵ for commemorating the 1989 protests, it has the specific character of denial of *justice*. The demands of a group such as Tiananmen Mothers include not only a formal recognition from the government that a massacre did take place during the protests, but also for accountability in the form of an official apology to the families of the deceased and legal action against army officers of the time.

One could argue that historical revisionism is fundamentally connected to avoidance of accountability, and therefore the disciplinary ethics of historiography are inextricably linked to jurisprudential questions of justice, in conjunction with much more personal and muddy realms such as memory. In the spirit of letting information from protest sites guide the basis of this work, we can for a moment take as an axiom the much-used slogan from African American antiracist movements, dating back to the 80s – “no justice, no peace”. As slogans are widely traveling forms of polemics and performance, there is a tendency for them to appear universalist, where technically anyone could perform it at any time. However, their political efficacy lies in their performance being embedded in the place of protests itself, rendered in

⁷² Official website here: <http://www.tiananmenmother.org/>

⁷³ CNN, “Man vs. Chinese Tank Tiananmen Square - June 5, 1989,” YouTube (YouTube, June 3, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeFzeNAHEhU>

⁷⁴ Sample this editorial from a government backed news agency: “Tiananmen Massacre a Myth: From Overseas Press,” Tiananmen massacre a myth|From Overseas Press|chinadaily.com.cn, accessed April 18, 2022, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2011-07/14/content_12898720.htm

⁷⁵ “Dispatches: Silencing a Veteran Chinese Journalist,” Human Rights Watch, October 28, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/15/dispatches-silencing-veteran-chinese-journalist> and “China: Release Leading Rule of Law Activists,” Human Rights Watch, October 28, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/22/china-release-leading-rule-law-activists> among more

particular vocal tones, in relation to the specific demands of the protest ground itself, by the people gathered in the space. This particular slogan, in some ways derivative of Rev. Martin Luther King's words "*There can be no justice without peace, and there can be no peace without justice*"⁷⁶ from his December 14, 1967 address outside a prison in California, is highly ambiguous in its simultaneous conjunctive, conditional⁷⁷, combative and promising nature, and depending on the protest site, draws from this multiplicity of repertoire. Primarily used in antiracist demonstrations, the most recent ones being the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd in the hands of police officers in the US, there is a great significance in deploying this multifaceted slogan to communicate the sheer incongruity of power between structural white supremacy and its victims. Depending on the inflection of voice and other performative mores such as accompanying gestures and the specificities of protest site, the same slogan could denote mourning of the Black community, who are forced to reckon with the hollowness of both justice and peace, particular broken promises of democratic functionality, in the wake of systemic murder and mistreatment of Black people around the world. Or it could be accompanied by a newer addition of a second line – "*no justice, no peace! Fuck the police!*" – a quote from a song by the iconic American hip-hop group from the 80s, NWA⁷⁸, to signal a threat of riot towards the establishment. It is most likely though that the slogan does all of these things together when channeled inside an antiracist protest. What the slogan signals, which is what is primarily important for our

⁷⁶"Thank You, Deeply." Justice, Accountability & Reconciliation - Background - Peacebuilding Deeply. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/peacebuilding/background/justice-accountability-reconciliation>

⁷⁷ The linguistics lab of University of Pennsylvania throws up a student blog with a long discussion about this slogan, which I found extremely useful: <https://languagelog ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=5249>

⁷⁸ "NWA - Fuk Da Police." YouTube. YouTube, March 14, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51t1OsPSdBc>

discussion, is that for the protestors justice is not an aspirational concept, but something that at best has not been reached or is just simply absent, and at worst as a fundamental failure of a project that elicits a response of radical action against the police and the government. In a lecture titled *On beauty and Being Just*, delivered at Yale University in 1998, Elaine Scarry drew an elegant relationship between the aesthetic concepts surrounding “beauty”, as spoken of by many from Plato to Wittgenstein, and jurisprudential ideas of justice. Drawing on the work of Rawles, Scarry routed the resemblance of the two concepts through the ethical idea of “fairness” as both describing a circumstance of justice as well as one of beauty.

“we look first at the connection between beauty as “fairness” and justice as “fairness,” using the widely accepted definition by John Rawls of fairness as a “symmetry of everyone’s relations to each other.” (Pp. 63)

Scarry makes an extremely convincing attempt to argue that symmetry stands at the foundation of beauty; even during specific eras of aesthetic history when it isn’t, it holds on to its position of being germane to questions of aesthetic ideal. This is analogous to “equality” as being the basis of justice. And from the very beginning in the essay, an attempt is made to connect “beauty” to a concept that begets its own reproduction, and eventually Scarry posits this:

that beautiful things give rise to the notion of distribution, to a lifesaving reciprocity, to fairness not just in the sense of loveliness of aspect but in the sense of “a symmetry of everyone’s relations to each other.” (PP.65)

Unfortunately, reading Scarry’s influential essay in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in the hands of Minneapolis Police officers in summer 2020 and the recent-most upsurge in the Movement for Black Lives, brings out the implicit racial biases in her arguments a little too clearly. As an essay of particular import in the discussion

regarding ethics and aesthetics intertwining together in an unbelievably elegant manner, it is important that scholars of aesthetic experiences find in their own bibliographies the specific ways in which the field has been upholding long-standing racial and gender biases while writing about ethics. Fact is that Scarry's reading of "beauty" vis-a-vis fairness as something that is a "symmetry" or relations, and therefore is coterminous to ideas of justice as equality among people, unfortunately reminds one of anthropometry, eugenics and white supremacy. Symmetry often finds its worthiest enemies in aesthetic experiences of people of colour, of which only the most famous example is jazz. In terms of political formations such as the nation state, any mention of symmetry reeks of arbitrary and violent erasure of differences and agonism. Even in the realm of law, "equality before the eyes of law" has been amply demonstrated as a value that is conditional at best, dependent on existing privileges of concerned legal subjects. Conversations around "substantive justice", "affirmative action" and "restorative justice" would actually never come up if "fairness" in law was not actually working squarely within existing biases of current social formations. Perhaps in the wake of the Movement for Black Lives in 2020, it is commonsensical yet begging of reiteration, that neither is justice a fight for "fairness", nor is beauty naturally connected to symmetry or fairness, either of skin or of anything else. Justice, as has been demonstrated by the slogan discussed above, is both a wish and a failure. Drawing from this, I argue that there is a specific ethical weight to doing historiographical work with respect to events where massacres are being denied by governments which are deploying huge resources towards creating an official narrative and building an official archive on that basis. In absence of the possibility of structural accountability such as corrective and distributive justice (Stumpf, Becker *et al*, 2016), public memorialization and acknowledging the memory of the deceased as an archive becomes a political claim and laborious historiographical work. Specific to situations of huge differences in power, this is certainly the case for the memory of the massacre

in Tiananmen Square, and in conjunction the historiography of that whole moment. In this chapter, I take on a very specific task. Taking as an axiom the impossibility of the June 4th archive, I look at it refracted through references, both on the street and the stage, to map out how something that apparently did not happen could be memorialized and go through particular kinds of political revival for purposes of activism. I attempt to trace how the historiographical charge of a moment that did not happen is invoked in the body of protestors, through direct and indirect channels of dissemination such as political radicalization, and the ghostly recurrences of historical repertoires of protest.

June Fourth in The Body: Looking Beyond the construction of a “Historical Event”

In his book *The Practical Past* (2014), Hayden White attempts to reveal the inherent ambiguities of the historiographical practice of naming a circumstance a historical event by its simultaneous virtues of being unprecedented as well as foreseeable in retrospect (pp.44). As one of the chief components of supporting such a thesis of a historical event, he mentions the psychoanalytical concept of trauma, which can be invoked to bolster the claim of unprecedentedness of the event as well as the necessary lapse in time required to make meaning and historical sense of it and identifying it as to have been foreseeable. If a historian’s work, however flawed and ambiguous it may be, is to negotiate this gap between the actual occurrence of an “unprecedented” event and the statement that it actually occurred, and in this particular comprehensible order, what happens to traumatic historical events that are officially denied or censored? The lack of primary historical sources such as documents and public discourse pushes the historian to look within sources that are considered refracted, such as media coverage, or personal testimonies, which often changes the nature of the event itself. The June Fourth Movement in Beijing in 1989 straddles this exact ambivalence. Considering that the movement itself was a long

series of disparate events with various different participants across social and professional orders, the complexity of the political movement was significantly flattened in equal part by the eventual silence of the Chinese government on the military operation on protestors at Tiananmen Square on June 4th, as well as the global media's what can only be called chance discovery (Lin, 1992, pp.143) of the movement and eventual coverage⁷⁹. So much so, that the Tiananmen Square movement of 1989 has some very few unified collective recall stimuli across the globe – one of them being the image of the lone man defiantly standing in front of approaching army tanks. As has been discussed before, the “Event” in most constructions of the category is always riddled with failures and lacunae, and in the case of the June 4th event, the absence of information, acknowledgement and justice has rendered the historiography almost entirely dependent on two or three “camps”. The first one is the “official” narrative of the Chinese state, in which there is partial acknowledgement of the protests, no mention of the massacre, and a vilification of foreign media, specifically those belonging to Western countries such as BBC and NBC as capitalist forces intentionally painting the Chinese communist state in a negative light for ideological purposes. The second big narrative centers around casting of the June 4th Movement as a “Democracy Movement”, with respect to at best selective acknowledgement of underlying conditions of resistance and demands of the protestors etc. There is also a third narrative, perhaps not as paradigmatic as the first two, but equally compelling in its casting of young students as protagonists, and this narrative aims to characterize the June 4th Movement as a student struggle. It can safely be said that historiographical work entails that one looks at each of these narratives critically and in conjunction with each other, as political strategies of

⁷⁹ Mikhail Gorbachev was visiting Beijing at that moment for the Sino-Soviet Summit and hence there was global media presence in the city. Here is the New York Times coverage from that moment: Keller, Bill. “Gorbachev Visits Beijing for Start of Summit Talks.” The New York Times. The New York Times, May 15, 1989. <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/05/15/world/gorbachev-visits-beijing-for-start-of-summit-talks.html>

“entering” history. However, as Hayden White points out, the arrangement of the discipline of history itself is cultivated in Western epistemologies for purposes of power, and is involved in an ideological function, *“to view “history” as a “gift” of unalloyed value and usefulness to those who are seeking to enter it or belong to it may be delusory”* (pp.42). To be clear, the scramble for entry into this realm of history as White puts it, at least in the context of June 4th, is at least partially involved with the idea of justice, however none of the “big” narratives are fundamentally interested in this, as I would argue that in order to decode and decipher and carry forward the historiographical charges of trauma that render legible suppressed information about pain, the historiographer has to treat each piece of available information as fundamentally fragmented. There would be no room for reading the failure of history in narratives that were self-consciously closed off. And in continuation from my first chapter, I would say that trauma would be one of the clarifying tools of analysis in terms of this kind of historiographical work, such as in the case of the Tiananmen Mothers, or, in the lived bodily archives of the campus, as seen in the invocation of June 4th in Hong Kong in 2014, or in particular works of art.

In my previous academic work I have repeatedly argued that it is possible to read the campus as a produced contingent space of affective solidarities and possibly a lived archive of particular repertoires of protest that have not, for several reasons, entered historical archives. However, this argument was specifically based within the context of residential campuses in India during the 2000s, and generalizing these arguments can be quite problematic. There is unfortunately a strong impulse of generalization within the historiography of student movements themselves, with a specific focus on the so-called global moment of student resistance in the form of 1968, and I believe that this is a symptom of the problem that Hayden White is describing when he talks of “entering” historical discourse. There has been several attempts to find unifying tools of analysis for the multiple sites and politics of protests that happened in and

during 1968 across the world, with a *prima facie* investment in the so-called geopolitical divisions of the Cold War, the ideologically generalized capitalist and communist blocs as well as a “global” event such as the Vietnam War, and the vague category of “student” has come to take the role of protagonist within movements that were certainly much more complex, both in terms of their demands and their participants. There has been seminal work that have tried to analyze the political and cultural aftermath of the 60s “moment” – the weaponization of “rebelliousness” of the counterculture movements of the 60s as a corporate marketing tool (Frank, 1998), the emergence of a “New Left” (Waltzer, 1968) that politically moved away from the old guard in their renegotiation of the constitution of “working class”, internationalism, and their anti-imperialist activism, and more recently, decolonial scholarship on the armed resistance movement in the Global South, such as Tunisia, Congo (Hendrickson, 2018), Uruguay (Markarian, 2015), India (Banerjee, 1980) etc in the 60s, and their connections and disconnections with the “global” moment. In 2018, multiple conferences and academic events found ways of commemorating 50 years of 1968, discussing some version of the question of relevance of 1968 for our times. However, especially in the light of emergent scholarship on decolonizing that moment, it is clear that there is no consensus on what happened, where it happened, who did it or what its relevance is. It is simply untenable to draw serious historical connections between Paris in 1968 and Naxalbari in 1967 – in fact both of those instances have several layers of fragmentation inside them, exacerbated by historiographical gaps and brokenness of archives. In spite of this, 1968 has extremely strong affective charges that prominently feature in cultural spheres, especially with regard to the constitution of the youth, and quite often the student, as an exceptional figure of resistance. The constructed affective continuum of the “Youth-Revolt” complex has had a very strong bearing on the analysis of almost all student movements since the 1968, to the extent that it has become a frame of analysis not

only in terms of understanding the involvement of students in a protest movement, but also *naming* a movement as a student movement as such. Why is it important to understand if a movement is a student movement or not? I have previously argued that students, as a demographically and ideologically vague category, do not have concrete claims on the narratives of history such as say, “the working class”, but with the historiography of 1968, it can be seen that there have been several attempts of recognizing the student as an important political figure *per se*. I am interested in this tension between a figure being at once important and unimportant in history, and I suspect that the casting of certain movements as “student movements” has some sort of an ideological function that is not yet clear to me. I say this from the perspective of being a student activist within a setup of a public university, under the threat of neoliberal privatization, within a postcolonial country like India, where the histories of student resistance were pivoted around the Naxalbari movement, an armed Maoist revolution led by indigenous farmworkers, which also happened to find a huge resonance within the student population of cities like Calcutta and Delhi (and continue to be a fountainhead of inspiration to us all). To speak of Naxalbari as a student movement is to completely misrecognize it, yet cultural productions dealing with Naxalbari – books, theater, films – till date feature central characters who are urban students. There is a possibility that such historical revisionism has got something to do with rendering a movement romantic and respectable in hindsight, within the cultural consumption realm of India where the urban audience is significantly less liable to accept a story with indigenous peasant protagonists – but this is just a speculation. The point at hand is that the “student” figure is a shifting culture goalpost that often gets inserted into the history of particular protests where students were present in prominent ways, without an investigation of the particular circumstances under which they were involved. Following this, I would attempt to test out the historicity of the June 4th movement with regards to the tension between

its two narratives – the “democracy” movement and the “student” movement. The narrative generated by the Chinese government falls within the strict rubric of suppression of knowledge, and as such this work will not be dealing with propagandist material from governments in depth. It has to be noted that doing a deep dive into the broken archives of June 4th brings about a profound sense of confusion, with almost all material seeming overtly motivated by personal politics of writers. Whether it is state-adjacent narratives, or the few and far between books written about the moment, or continuous commemorative articles in international media outlets such as The Guardian, or New York Times, or old and new interviews with a handful of the same survivor activists living in exile, or in more political analysis spaces such as Hong Kong based collective Lausan’s website, it is simply impossible to hold on to any idea of truth and factuality, given the intensely personal nature of all of these sources. Because of this, I expressly avoid attempting to understand *what* happened, as that inevitably leads to conversations of if something happened at all or not. Going beyond questioning the validity of a narrative, I have to settle for analyzing the lasting impact of the existence of the narrative itself, be it fictitious or not. It is clear that this is a question important for historiography as a discipline, not exclusively in conjunction to facticity, but with respect to understanding the ethics of storytelling and who the tools of the story serve, i.e., attempting to understand the *process* of remembrance.

The escalation of the June Fourth Movement into a pioneering movement for democracy was at least in part predicated upon the escalation of a characteristically chaotic and agonistic student movement into a global media event. In interviews with the leaders of the movement, whether it was Chai Ling’s highly emotional interview with American journalist Phillip Cunningham on May 28th 1989⁸⁰ or those with other

⁸⁰ “Chai Ling Hoping That Chinese Government Will Kill the Tiananmen Students.” YouTube. YouTube, September 23, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_ESiKlA1A

leaders such as Wuer Kaixi or Han Dongfang seen in subsequent documentaries such as *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*⁸¹, it becomes apparent that there was a long process involved in coming to a consensus on the demands of the movement, a consensus, which when achieved, would again be highly contested by the very disparate group of people who had come together to occupy Tiananmen Square. While the initial gathering had been organized in memorium of deceased Communist Party general secretary Hu Yaobang, by the time it turned from assembly to movement, there was enough debate and infighting among the protestors to indicate that “democracy” might have been only one of many demands. Is it then possible that the fashioning of the June Fourth Movement as the 1989 Democracy Movement is an instance of retrospective simplification in the light of the Chinese state’s retaliation? With the Chinese administration outlawing any form of discussion or commemoration of the events of the June Fourth Movement, historians have to fall back on this constructed narrative of democracy/autocracy binary all too happily covered by the media in the global historical context of the year 1989. Given the lack of satisfactory historical sources, I propose a closer look, at least contingently, at the specificity of the movement as a student movement, at least in a large part, in order to go beyond the obsession with the media event.

“Does our generation have anything? We don’t have the goals our parents had, we don’t have the fanatical idealism our older brothers and sisters once had. So, what do we want? Nike shoes, lots of free time to take our girlfriends to a bar, the freedom to discuss an issue with someone, and to get a little respect in society.”

⁸¹ *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, dir. Richard Gordon and Carma Hinton, 1995, USA, 3 Hrs, also available here: “The Gate of Heavenly Peace.rmvb,” YouTube (YouTube, December 18, 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoqnKuBD5AI>

This personal charter of demands coming from Wuer Kaixi, one of the most prominent protesters of the June Fourth Movement, found in the documentary *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, is a far cry from what could be considered the goals of one of the paradigmatic democracy movements in Asia. As a globally prominent student activist, Wuer Kaixi strategically lays claim to being part of a historically exceptional generation, while at the same time maintains what I would call a characteristically campus politics impulse. I understand the campus as a spatial and temporal entity that exists in a dialectical relationship with the institution. Etymologically *Kampos* refers to an alcove or a wooded area within the institutional grounds (Chapman, 2007), a retreat where students can temporarily escape the rules of the institution for relaxation and recreation. While spatially it might coincide with the architectural edifice of the institution, temporally it is more of an ephemeral experiential category that is actually brought into being at specific times. The temporality of the campus is crucial, as it deploys the traditional understanding of the campus as a recreational forested area, i.e., a space where students are not bound to do their primary work of studenthood. The campus then provides students to be something else than merely the educational and economic identity of student, opening up a potential of this space to subvert the kind of professional predeterminism that higher education often seems to encourage through discourses of productivity and employability. Thus, when this logic fails, i.e., the institution or the global market fails to make students employable, it is from the campus that political radicalism arises. Involvement in politics is not a precondition to graduating college; it is in fact the exact opposite – student involvement in politics is both a largely-accepted reality as well as a much-despised component of student life, very often labelled as a wastage of time, and in moments of crisis, as illegal.

The campus is a produced space. It is produced by the labour of students, teachers, staff and other stakeholders for whom the existence of a space beyond the logic of the institution is necessary. The production of the campus happens primarily through

the assembly of these stakeholders outside their assembly in context of studies and productive labour, and the affective bonds and solidarities they produce in the process. Drawing from Maurizio Lazzarato's understanding of the transformation of labour from manual work to services rendered in capitalist society, it can be argued that academic work within the university is immaterial labour, that labour which "*produces informational and cultural content of the commodity*". In this case, the commodity is the trained professional, the student herself, who becomes a tradable good. In their 2004 book *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have developed a concept of "affective labour", which encompasses labour that produces or generates affect and emotion. This labour is in excess of immaterial academic labour, as it does not have a clear "productive" value as such. It can be argued that student movements that are forged within such "unproductive" campus spaces, are a form of affective labour typical to the experience of studenthood. And given that "*the manipulation of affect is stock-in-trade for theatrical and performance labor*" (Schneider, Ridout, 2012) and the one presumable aim of a socio-political movement carried out through street style protests is to realize affect across various registers of the public and the powers that be, it can be argued that student activists carry out performative labour by keeping intact the largely accepted yet ambiguous continuum between studenthood and political dissent. Student activists strategically perform many roles in order to do this, such as the role of the youth, the student, the citizen, the democracy activist and the footsoldier to greater causes. Wuer Kaixi's charter of demands is exemplary in negotiating all these roles together. He is at once a part of a new, exceptional young generation of China who have been exposed to the world, a consumer of capitalist goods, a young lover who just wants to have fun, a fighter for the freedom to dissent and discuss and a young student demanding respect from society. Each of these roles are meant to generate different kinds of affect for different blocs within his spectators – the government that needs to relent

and come for negotiation, the People's Army that needs to retreat, the passerby who will join in, and the world that is watching in rapt attention. It has to be kept in mind that the June Fourth Movement when it started in April, was partly fueled by the rise in unemployment, especially of humanities students, within the reformed, market oriented economy of Deng Xiaoping. Student activist Feng Cong De summed up the frustrations of the student force in the documentary – *“There is a saying in Beijing, you are as poor as a professor and as dumb as a Phd. This was really true. No matter how hard you worked, you didn't get anywhere.”* The institution, and in extension the government, with all its reformist impulses, had failed to hold up their side of the economic contract of higher education, propelling student existence towards a moment of crisis in which the campus impulse of performative political dissent was bound to make a comeback.

It is certainly not radically new to read the June Fourth Movement not simply as a historical or a media event. Fred Y. L. Chiu, at that point a lecturer in Anthropology at the Hong Kong Baptist College, gives us a lively thick description of Tiananmen Square under protest (1991), where he had gone with a delegation of students and academics from Hong Kong to show his solidarity. Over the course of his first-hand account, which he turns into an anthropological reading of what he calls a “social movement” and also a “Democracy Movement”, we see him being very aware of the slippery place of facticity in his account. In his attempt to look at the “missing discourses” that mainstream media and academic work was liable to miss, by specifically mapping what he called a *“distinct point of view of the masses”*, Chiu also points out that,

“On the other hand, stories which might result from such an inquiry cannot claim exclusive authenticity. Nor can they mysteriously be endowed with a monopoly of interpretative power. I mean them somehow to supplement the existing narrative with alternative narratives. They are not separate enterprises nor mirror images, neither caricatures of a master narrative, nor pieces of a positivist

“comprehensive history”. They are no more dignified nor precarious than more grandiose discourses.”
(pp.337)

In Chiu’s special role of being present as an activist and finding an academic language for the protests, there is steady usage of highly affective “carnival” tropes such as gossip, parody and humor, alongside descriptions of the logistics of a people’s movement in realtime – formation of movement councils, slogans and poetry being recited and government PA systems and their noise. Chiu attempts to historicize the “symbolism” prevalent in the Square in his eyes – that young students, workers and citizens were ritualistically reenacting the funeral procession of Zhou Enlai in 1976, by collectively mourning Hu Yaobang, *“an effort to make history by re-enacting a myth”*. There is a clear indication that the protesters in the Square had forged some sort of a relationship with their past, and carrying a historiographical charge, i.e., being in the process of *doing* history within this relationship. In his invocation of a possible *symbolic* register for the protests, and the claim that the protesters were self-aware of this, Chiu very much moves away from dominant historiography of June 4th, in which we see comparisons mainly with the student-led May 4th Movement of 1919 (Hao 2007) with respect to structural analysis of social movement studies, with metrics of “demands”, “organization”, “successes and failures” and suchlike. This is where we begin to see an attempt at acknowledging an affective order of the Square, which registers with the protesters in their body, and is significantly harder to map within historical analysis. Instead, the historiographical charge of June 4th needs a keen attention on the body of the protester. Chiu’s role as an archivist, interpreter and witness, has other priorities than a historical analysis. In his attempt to supplement the grand narratives, he takes recourse in descriptions of bodily contact that he himself experiences.

“Even more of them ran up to us simply for a hug, a handshake or an autograph on their headband, shirt, pant, skirt, hat, handkerchief, or even on their bare skin. There were thousands of hugs,

handshakes and autographs signed. In contrast to such bodily contact, words were relatively few and less important. For one thing, the invasion was felt to be imminent and there was no time to talk. On the other hand, words weren't needed as demonstrators prepared for a final confrontation.”
(pp.335)

Taking off from Chiu, and accepting that the June 4th Movement and its broken narratives did also have an affective order, one can attempt to see it as a theatrical event i.e. an event of performance with a set cast, a script, a dramaturgy, and a specific audience. The incredible performative potential of some of the protests have been pointed out by Joseph Esherick and Jeffrey Wassertrom in their essay *Acting out Democracy: Political Theatre in Modern China* (1990). Of exceptional quality are two instances of protest performances. The first is of three students kneeling on the steps of the Great Hall of the People holding up a petition that wanted clarifications on the deceased Hu Yaobang's resignation from general secretaryship of the Party. As a performance, it referred to the gestural history of kneeling in front of the monarch as pliant subjects holding up petitions to the emperor. It also marked an instance where individual students risked their safety to break away from the multitude. As a performance, it had a great impact on the onlooking students. Chai Ling in her “last words” interview mentions the event and states that everyone started crying when they saw the three. In the very posture of kneeling, as seen in film footage, there was a sense not only of submission, but also of defeat. The footage also showed how the three paraded through the crowd with the petition rolled up like a baton before ascending the steps of the Hall and taking the subservient position. While they were kneeling, some of the other students approached them, hugging them and crying and trying to persuade them to come down. In the documentary *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, a government employee remembered the event, recognizing the affective effect it had on her, whereby she mentioned that what the students were doing was precisely what she and her fellow students had done in her youth, and it became clear to her that the

government was wrong in its hardliner stance. However, while the different registers of affect in the performance worked on the spectating students and some government employees, it very clearly failed to work on the administration, who were consciously not watching. But, this failure of affect in turn galvanized the affect generated for the students and the employees. The second performance of note came from Wuer Kaixi. In the course of the movement, while the student leadership was on hunger strike, Li Peng, the premier of the People's Republic, agreed to speak to them in a televised meeting on May 18th. Many hunger strikers arrived, still in their hospital pajamas. As Li Peng started to speak, making a few opening remarks, Wuer Kaixi, his nose still attached with some sort of medical pipe, loudly interrupted him.

Li Peng: The students are very concerned with two issues. We fully understand. As the Prime Minister and a communist, I do not conceal my views. But I won't talk about them today. Endless quibbling over these two issues now...is inappropriate and unreasonable...

Wuer Kaixi: We're not the ones quibbling. It shouldn't be necessary for me to repeat what I said at the start of this meeting. But you leaders just don't get it. I'll tell you one more time. The problem isn't convincing those of us in this room. The problem is how to get the students to leave the Square. The conditions they have laid down must be met. [pulls out medical pipe from his nose and keeps it aside] I've made this very clear.

The body language of the Party leaders, dressed in formal attire and sitting upright and officious on the couches vis-à-vis the hunger strikers draped on the couches making a great performance out of their physical weakness made for powerful theatre, which was all upstaged by Wuer Kaixi's dramatic pulling out of the pipe from his nose while verbally upstaging no less than the premier of the country by interrupting to inform him that he "just doesn't get it". In both these cases of performance within the protests, there lies a strategy of generating affect that is crucial to the construction of the continuum between studenthood and rebellion – the strategy of deploying

precarity, vulnerability and threat of physical harm as a performance. In her book *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler, in context of arguing for a sense of community forged with the concept of precarious life, writes,

“...each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies – as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.” (pp.20)

For actors and performers, this sense of exposure and vulnerability is a professional tool whereby they generate communities of affect within their spectators. Students within activist movements are particularly predisposed to deploy a sense of vulnerability not only by virtue of their exposure to the imminent threat of state repression, but also because of their social identity of being the youth. The young, traditionally viewed as the future generation, to be protected, to be chastised, to be reasoned with in spite of their naïve rebelliousness, can significantly impact the viewing public through conscious exposure to physical risk and harm. Once again, the young student body straddles twin virtues of being young and vulnerable yet infinitely powerful in terms of political affect generation. It is no wonder therefore that histories of student movements are rarely given space as autonomous campus-based movements, but are subsumed under mega narratives of nations and ideologies, all of which strive to exploit the undeniable, almost naturalized affective quality of the youth in pain. In conjunction with its special claim on the affects caused by vulnerability, seemingly more generative of empathy than anyone else, here I would like to refocus on the traumatized body itself and the limits of holding information under duress, which leads to the need for an act of witnessing.

This somehow brings us back to the conversation in Chapter 1 about the specific historiographical charge of bodily trauma, especially on a young body and a student

body, and the embodied ways in which it reaches its intended audience. With the blanket banning of any commemorative activities around June 4th in mainland China, followed up with a number of arrests of activists who risk their freedom to memorialize, there has been a denial of justice and any form of mourning, forcing the commemorations to either take place in Hong Kong, itself an extremely contentious space with a historically complex political relationship to China, or done in loosely abstracted forms within the cultural sphere. The stakes of creating any memorial event are in real terms extremely high, activists and artists are highly aware of this. However, with the status of the “historical” event being constantly questioned in terms of its validity, the creation of memorial performances enables *“the act of bearing witness... to take place, belatedly, as though retroactively.”* (Laub, 1992, pp.85). In her clinic-based psychoanalytic practice, with a specific focus on survivors of the Shoah, Dori Laub points towards her observations on the relationship of trauma and what she calls “truth”, and the specific functions of “witnessing” as an act of co-creation of knowledge when it comes to fundamentally incomprehensible testimonies of human pain. To extensively quote from her text from *Testimony* (1992),

“While historical evidence to the event which constitutes the trauma may be abundant and documents in vast supply, the trauma – as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock – has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of. The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to – and heard – is therefore the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the “knowing” of the event is given birth to.” (pp. 56)

In the case of June 4th, there is no abundance of historical evidence as such, and whatever is there is highly contested in terms of their status as actual “evidence”. Under these special circumstances, what registers could historical narratives take that may find in the June 4th moment something other than a culture of secrecy that still gets active purchase? To some extent, both the secrecy and the trauma gets a mythical

quality, which directly and indirectly feed, in case of June 4th, the discursive machinery that systematically denies the veracity of the army action and the death toll, relegating them into a realm of debate and speculation, never quite allowed to happen. In this case, the bits and pieces of images and videos, shared via media sources and by exiled June 4th activists themselves, serve as bleeding wounds of a historical event that may not even have taken place. The circumstances are the very opposite of “worlding”, as discussed in the previous chapter – both the narratives of the perpetrators and survivors are caught up entirely in a conversation around veracity, without allowing the discourse to go any further. In this context, Singapore-Berlin based artist Ming Poon undertakes his long-term choreographic project around June 4th, two iterations of which I shall discuss here, in dialogue with each other. The first performance is a piece of choreography called *Unison*, performed at the da:ns Festival in Singapore in 2018, by dance students of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), which was created through a workshop process led by Poon. The piece was directly referencing the video of the protester at the June 4th Movement dubbed as the “Tank Man” – an anonymous figure caught on camera standing in front of army tanks proceeding towards the square, and eventually approaching and climbing the tank in front. The second iteration I will discuss is Poon’s usage of the Tank Man choreography from *Unison* for an ongoing “dance protest” called *Dance against Tanks* in March 2022 in front of the Russian Embassy in protest of the Russian Federation’s war on Ukraine. In studying the specificities of production in both the case and their implicit and explicit references to June 4th, I would try to map out an embodied performance historiography in progress, contained in the figure of the protester, and the historical losses, interpretations and embellishments it goes through in the process.

Ming Poon has been working as a choreographer and dancer in Singapore/Berlin for more than 20 years, and has been an outspoken critic of the authoritarianism and

ensorship of the government of Singapore, especially with respect to the rights of non-Han Chinese minorities of the nation as well as strong censorship in the realm of dissent, art and self-expression. As an activist himself, Poon's workshop at the NAFA was drawn from his desire to interrogate the censorship faced by dissidents through an iconic image of a pivotal moment in the culture of the majoritarian ethnicity that rules Singapore. In conversation, Poon mentioned that the students, who were trained in classical and contemporary dance repertoires, had neither been exposed to the Tank Man image or the happenings of Tiananmen Square in 1989. Wanting to expose a new generation of dancers to a multiplicity of impulses – choreographies of protest, legacies of resistance and witnessing suppressed narratives of history – Poon had decided to render the exact movements of the anonymous man in front of the tank as a choreography for his students – just those steps and nothing more, repeated multiple times. A group of 12 to 15 students would come on stage one by one, dressed in approximately the same costume as the man in the video – white full sleeved formal shirt, black pants – with the same props in their hands as the Tank Man – two polythene bags, weighed down with their fillings (as opposed to the Tank Man, who carried white plastic bags, the students carried one white and one red bag). Through the workshop, it had been agreed within the group that there would be a video projection of the footage in the backdrop of the stage, while the dancers would come on stage, face the footage and with their backs to the audience, try to match the exact steps of the Tank Man. Eventually, they would move in complete “unison”, a choreographic term denoting a group moving in perfect synchronicity. However, the academy did not allow the footage to be used, rendering the final version into a poignant experiment in innovative subversion of censorship, speaking directly back into history and channeling a multiplicity of historiographical charges from June 4th. In absence of the footage, Ming used the projection of a textual description of the movements of the Tank Man. At the beginning there is a statutory warning that the

unison is based on a footage that cannot be shown “*due to the copyright*”, and then a framing, “*this is how it begins*”. It goes like this –

Blackscreen

“You see a big wide street”

Blackscreen

“A Line of tanks is rolling from the upper right corner to the center of the screen”

Blackscreen

“A Man stands in the middle of the street”

And so on. There is a wonderfully meticulous visual description of the entirety of the video, broken into fully understandable, complete bodily gestures (“*the man swings his right arm*”, “*he does a series of small steps*”, “*his right arm makes a tiny movement*” etc). The visual description in text form comes as single sentences, in the rhythm of the actual gestures of the man in the video. Some of the sentences therefore come extremely rapidly, one after the other, not allowing the viewer to read the text. And then sometimes there are long stretches of blackscreen in a dark auditorium. This breaks the flow of the expected rhythm of the reading eye, forcing viewers to reckon with the possibility that the words are proxies of an image that is not being allowed to be shown. The silent exposition of movements in words ends with “*he jumps off the tank*”, after which the stage gets lit, the first dancer enters the stage and takes position facing the screen, which now reads “*1st attempt*”. They start doing the movements in synchronicity with the words on the screen, counting down the steps. In the next 9 minutes or so, the group gets larger and larger, as the visual description of the choreography is repeated five times, called “attempts”. The group loudly counts down the steps in the manner of a contemporary dance rehearsal – “*ONE two three four five*

six seven eight/ TWO two three four five six seven eight/ THREE two three four five six seven eight” and so on, breaking down the movements into an eight-bar choreography.

Sometime around “Attempt 4”, individual members of the group start falling out and coming downstage, picking up a microphone and talking at the audience, sharing their thoughts on the choreography, the process of making the work, how they feel as young people, their feelings about being in a group etc. Some of the defectors also just come downstage to relax and take a break from the choreography. One dancer chooses to stay back in the resting space, while another, wanting to “rebel” and be different, takes off their shirt and rejoins the group that is still moving to the words and the counting. According to Poon, some of these short downstage monologues were staged while some others were left for improvisation. Around the 7th attempt, quite abruptly, there is a short blackout as the on-stage voices of the dancers give way to the playback of American rock band Linkin Park’s song *Numb*, a song chosen for the occasion by the students themselves. As the stage is illuminated again, the audience sees the group standing facing us, still holding on to their plastic bag props, this time less packed in space than when they were in unison. They start doing the choreography to the rhythm of the song and as the song proceeds, one by one, they start falling to the floor, till at the very end of the song, only one stands, followed by blackout.

Unison is an endlessly playful and polyvocal piece that deploys a very special vocabulary of censorship to not only point out the immediate political goals of bringing into relief Singapore's own issues with government repression, but also bear witness to the June 4th Movement, in full acceptance of the extremely fragmented and suppressed nature of the archive. Poon decides to take the most common and iconic image, as an immediate recall and a strong performative more for resistant politics, and still, the students in their close work with the movements, centering feelings like exhaustion, boredom, and difficulty in accepting these movements, find an interesting

way to directly engage with a suppressed history of movement work in highly situated ways. The moment where the audience is in a one-on-one interaction with the screen as it describes the movements in direct address (“*you see a wide street*”) is precisely a moment of historical witnessing, in particularly fragmented and illegible ways, the precise ways in which the archives of June 4th encounter us at the moment. And as Dori Laub suggests in her work, the person bearing witness becomes “*the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time.*” (pp.57) As I have suggested in my first chapter, spectatorship is a mysterious realm that remains academically avoided for the want of empirically sound mores of analysis. But in terms of works like *Unison*, there are substantive ways perhaps to analyze the specific performative and political *intentions* in order to at least point towards the historiographical charge, and in some way, the *intended* audience. It is through this method that it is possible to acknowledge the impulse of “bearing witness” that Laub speaks of, taking into account the failures and impossibilities of the same. *Unison* of course deploys the young student body as a receptacle for its historiographical charge – the students in a workshop with Poon hearing of the Tiananmen Square incident for the first time are the original witnesses. As they make a performance out of “attempting” to re-enact a moment that seems to have been rendered “lost” by state power and “incomprehensible” through a pact of secrecy among Chinese society at large, the students open up a multiplicity of interpretations of not only their presence on stage, but of their encounter with history as well. There is, firstly, the reference to “boredom” in their dance training, a cheeky and humorous (the audience is heard laughing) commentary on their own student life. The insertion of the contemporary dance floor countdown as a schema of movement in the aural register furthers the feeling of rigidity in university syllabi of art practice, a topic that they discussed at length with Poon. The pressures to perform as students of a body-based practice like dance within highly traditional university setup, which created the initial comprehension and apprehension regarding the piece itself for the

students, hints at what Jon McKenzie (2001), following Derrida, would denote as “*the lecture machine*”⁸² in his exploration of the connected features of neoliberal power, organizational disciplining and performance. However, perform they did, and not just any performance – they literally followed the footsteps of the most unlikely, and most censored role model. There are multiple monologues talking about how hard and physically taxing it is to do this choreography, and constant talk of wanting to be different or finding one’s own uniqueness. It is clear that the students are exploring in embodied, danced ways, their own place in Singaporean society and the university model, while becoming bodily conduits for a witnessing process of history. As Ming suggests in our conversations and also the concept note for the performance:

“Two questions formed the basis of our process: what do we have to give up, in order to conform and move in unison with the mass? What is the price of breaking away from it? In a society like Singapore, where dissents and protests are systemically censored and silenced, I wanted the dance students to share their own thoughts and feelings through this work, about living and working in such an environment.”

There is a clear focus on *work* and *labour* as a process, specifically with respect to that of university students, university students of dance, university students of dance doing a choreography of protest from the past and creating a work through the process of dialogue and rehearsal, university students of dance doing political work. And in the performance itself, what we see is this multiplicity of processes. As I have argued before, referencing Lazarrato and Hardt and Negri (2004), there is a possibility of understanding the campus as a political space through a lens of changing definitions of labour, especially with respect to mass privatization of higher education coinciding

⁸² “*Performance Studies, Performance Management, Techno-Performance—these are all highly specialized, finely tuned machines that connect up specific infrastructures and seek to discover, invent, analyze, measure, interpret, evaluate, and produce certain acts and certain words as performance.*” (pp.21)

with neoliberalism within the workforce and in governments. Art education institutions occupy a highly special place in this formation, where the “professional skills” imparted by the institution are meant for better calibration of employability in sectors of culture that are going through massive amounts of austerity policies and fund cuts and privatization. In spite of the irony of this, art students have to maintain a “perform or else” drive and negotiate professional competence with the reality of precarity and unemployment. Within this context, the public unfolding of the *rehearsal* as a site and a process is especially potent in visibilizing the conditions of labour within the university, encompassing both the professional expectations and ableist search for virtuosity (the bodily wear and tear) of labour and the pleasure and leisure in unstructured play and unproductive spatio-temporalities of rehearsing as method. In my earlier work about campus as a produced space, especially with respect to residential universities in India, I had argued that the rehearsal is a site of production of this space, something to do with the processual *nature* of the labour that happens in this special timespace. While the specificities of the Delhi University campus grounds that work in its context, I would argue that the rehearsal, especially within a professionalized dance school setting, remains a generative space of producing the campus especially in the case of NAFA, where it takes place explicitly as a performance and finds a way to carry the subterranean historiographical charges that the lived archives of a campus can carry. Let me clarify here exactly what I am describing as a campus and as a rehearsal, with respect to my previous academic work. The “campus” as an idea has come into common parlance through an exposure to American Ivy-League vocabulary⁸³. The conception of a “campus space” is actively produced through the labour of the residents of the campus. Henri Lefebvre in his book *Production of Space* (1991) argues for the understanding of space as an entity that

⁸³ The use of the term “campus” has been attributed to Princeton University during the 18th Century, and campus as an ethos seems to have come from Medieval European Universities, with students and teachers staying together and studying together within the same precinct.

is directly linked to the modes of production that underlie a specific society, because it is not just the site for the existence of the same, but is produced through the labour that comes out of the specific mode of production. He effectively brings the idea of spatiality and geography out of the much disreputed realm of superstructure and posits that while space might be a naturalized, given entity, one can only read it politically in terms of the social relations that it engineers, which is based on the prevalent mode of production.

“Space is never produced in the sense that a kilogram of sugar or a yard of cloth is produced. Nor is it an aggregate of the places and locations of such products as sugar, wheat or cloth. Does it then come into being after the fashion of a superstructure? Again, no. It would be more accurate to say that it is at once a precondition and a result of social superstructures.... Though a product to be used, to be consumed, it is also a means of production; network of exchange and flows of raw materials and energy fashion space and is determined by it.” (Lefebvre, 1991)

Through a thorough survey of the representations and understandings of the schema of space in philosophy and mathematics, Lefebvre broadens the conceptual understanding of space into three wide manifestations which find a certain unity through labour. The argument is for perceived spaces, conceived spaces and lived spaces—the first being the most visible, tactile spaces around us that are made and used, the second, the conceptual spaces of cartographers, mathematicians and rulers of nations and the last, spaces that are both real and imagined, spaces that are hafted through lived experiences and memories that are associated with them. In my previous work, I had observed that the campus within Delhi University student life is one such lived space that predicates itself on and also becomes an alternative mode of production of knowledge (pp.38). In its alternative understanding of how a student’s day is constituted spatially and temporally, to a great extent renegotiating their

relationships with work and leisure, the campus is a lived politics of space that gets expressed through social relations, situations and interactions. Operating within the institutional architectural edifice, but expertly superimposing it with its own ideas on how to use this space for studenthood-centered activities that are not always necessarily permitted by rules or fit into the larger idea of academic production, the campus produces a certain alternative meaning, an alternative epistemology of the institution that enables students to claim it as their own on their own spatial and temporal terms.

While looking at Delhi University, I had observed that among the specific processes of producing this ephemeral space of the campus, two were very prominent – the protest and the rehearsal. While I had situated these findings on the specific timeline that I was following in the study, within their internal logic as particular process of production, both the protest and the rehearsal have many commonalities that one can find in, one can argue, *any* protest and rehearsal – particular forms of immaterial labour of many bodies in unison, and a nominal but complicated commitment to an end-goal, with the acknowledgement that the process is equally important as the product. In reference to my earlier work, I argue that the campus space superscribes the strict panoptical architecture of the institution (Foucault, 1995) during such work as the rehearsal. When students take over institutional spaces and manifest their own critiques and lived realities within the same, the relationship that the institutional space has with the students is greatly altered, giving rise to another kind of space, the campus space. The campus space, while being a conceptual space, also has physical, planned, and most importantly, lived manifestations. At the same time, it is true that these manifestations defy easy demarcations. These manifestations make this space more of an ethos, a tactile atmosphere. This space travels from place to place across the architecture of the institution and is produced specifically through social relations and political alliances that are produced through interactions between the individual

and collective bodies of students. Coming back to the consideration of NAFA and higher education in artistic practice within a neoliberalism university setup, the rehearsal is centered on stage as the process that the students went through during their workshop with Poon, replete with their own words, feelings and emotions about the multiple levels of student subjecthood. I argue that the students on stage were producing the campus as a site of labour, protest and history, as one can certainly read it, through their public negotiation of the work of choreography, history and studenthood. While a rehearsal may be geared towards production in principle, it is a particular kind of contingent collective embodied practice in itself, without the immediate pressure to perform. The students on stage produced a rehearsal, shot through with the impulse of the affective solidarities of studenthood and campus, and commented on their own labour within, but distinct from and in critique of the larger structures of the institution which participates actively in the production of knowledge and the professionalization of its students. The students of this produced campus space were able to share with the audience some embodied and spoken knowledge about their lives, and indeed, their histories (with reference to the Tank Man) which fell outside of what they were expected to produce within the neoliberal university setup. And in conjunction with the specific function of witnessing as a relational act as argued by Laub, their inscription of the Tank Man choreography, first on to their own bodies, then on to the stage for the public, rendered the produced space of the campus, the labour of this production and the bodies of this campus into a powerful archive, a chronotope of embodied knowledge of studenthood and its special claim on protest in history. And this, for me, was both the site and the acting out of the historiographical charge of an event that did not happen. Going back to Hayden White's critique of history being perceived as a site of gatekeeping, involving keeping some people out and some in, the campus and the campus body provided a space squarely outside the logic of the gate, in which both the space itself and its knowledge

was produced, intermittently, by some people, for some people, for specific ways of witnessing each other and remembering the ones that had fallen in the process.

While the ever-generative romance of the youth-revolt complex can inspire historians to make universalist claims for their analysis of the particularities of studenthood under specific material conditions, and my formulation of the “campus” is especially ripe for the picking, I would like to challenge this tendency of translocating without context through a brief illustration of another mediated and performative re-enactment of Tank Man involving Ming Poon, this time in front of the Russian Embassy on Unter den Linden in Berlin, March 2022. Poon, along with some of his other choreographer colleagues in the city (as qualified by Poon, all white, almost all cis-women) called for a “Dance Against Tanks”, a “dance protest” in front of the embassy to register a protest against the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. The protest was also partially supported by Urgent Bodies, an international collective of theaterworkers, choreographers and artists who are engaged in political direct action in Berlin and Europe at large. An ongoing series of dance protests every Sunday morning, in principle “led” by Poon, *“Dance Against Tanks” is produced in a fundamentally different context and with different political and artistic intentions.* While it is true that through both his pieces Poon finds a way to collapse the porous borders between artistic practice and political activism, the intended arrangement of affect and I would argue the historiographical charges, a set of information carried by certain bodies for certain bodies, would highly vary. What I am really interested in is the constant usage, in removed contexts, of the Tank Man choreography, and the possibilities and failures in the act of witnessing the originary – the event which did not happen. The reason for this interest is to test out the theory that I have been hinting at above, that there is a possibility of the campus body and the campus space, in their contingent and invoked forms, to be an archive of a repertoire of protest, of

its gestures and slogans, and this is only made apparent in the process of witnessing of certain events involving other student bodies in pain, events on which there is a significant absence of factual consensus. In my reading of the *Dance Against Tanks* protests, there is actually a marked *absence* of the historiographical charge of the campus, and actually more of the specific historiographical impulses of *reenactment* (pp.30), as argued by Rebecca Schneider, especially in the strategically different deployment of the rehearsal by Poon and his comrades on the streets, and the mistakes that were made, which created not only circumstances of illegibility for the witnessing of June 4th (which was at least subliminally the point), but also for the immediate political point of protesting against Russian wartime aggression. To be clear the status of this protest itself was unusual – police permission had been sought for a political gathering of about 50 people, however the first call for protest, the pamphlet, came to us on February 25th, 2022 in the form of a detailed email document that included political polemics about the war and the general political program of the protest, and clear instructions with video links about the choreography of Tank Man, which potential protesters had to learn in advance. Additionally, there was logistical information about what kind of comfortable clothes to wear, mask mandates and other covid protocol. Potential protesters were also asked to bring two plastic bags as props. Furthermore, there was basic information and a political statement given with reference to the Tank Man video which was hyperlinked.

*“The choreography we will learn is **the Tank Man choreography**. Tank Man (also known as the Unknown Protester or Unknown Rebel) is the nickname of an unidentified Chinese man who stood in front of a column of tanks leaving Tiananmen Square in Beijing on June 5, 1989, the day after the Chinese government's violent crackdown on the Tiananmen protests. The choreography is based on the exact movements of the Tank Man, as he attempted to stop the tanks from advancing.*

For us, the choreography represents the potential that lies within ordinary persons to stop the machines of violence and oppression. All our grievances, oppression and struggles are connected. It is also a call-out to stand up against injustice, no matter how small we think we are and how insurmountable we think the task is.”

The dance protests that I attended, solely in the capacity of comrade and witness and not as an active participant, took place on two Sundays, after the initial spate of protests in solidarity with Ukraine started thinning out. Spatially, *Dance Against Tanks* was occupying exactly the same spot as the other demonstrations – the island going through the middle of the broad street of Unter den Linden, just in front of the Russian Embassy. There was, as mandated by the official permission to protest, presence of police – 2 armed policemen to watch over the protest and several deployed around the entire area, in front of the Russian Embassy, fanning out on both sides, towards the Brandenburger Tor and away, for purposes of security in the wake of constant protests. Every part of the geography of Unter den Linden had been demarcated into separate walking paths and standing paths with police barricading – all around the Russian Embassy, across all the four sides and bylanes around it, there was red and white police barricades to fully and entirely control the way a crowd would move. In the very small sliver of the island, which was the designated free space for protest, there was a new wooden sign nailed on a black pole on a black plinth, painted yellow and blue, with the words “Freedom Square” on it. On the plinth, there were some half-burned candles. On its side, there was a plethora of half-burned candles from an old candlelight vigil for Ukraine, with old flowers, Ukrainian flags (there was also one Syrian flag) and a few placards from old protests. And on the side of this memorial site with candles was another site – a cloth banner saying “*this could have been your children*” in German and English, and *No More Wars*, with a heap of old children’s toys placed at the bottom. These sites, placed in the middle of the

already narrow island, flanked on the sides with benches, created a disruption in the walking path for pedestrians, who would be forced to reckon with the objects and sites. Tourists and localites alike would stop, see the sites, look around, many taking pictures with the sites or of the sites. In the middle of this scene, Ming and his comrades decided to take their action. They demarcated a space by putting up plastic banners on the barricades that contained a QR code that would direct anyone's phone to a vimeo video of the "original" Tank Man, with Patti Smith's song "People have the Power" playing in the background. Another set of banners would have the words "Dance Against Tanks" with yet another QR code directing phones to the social media accounts of the group and their activities every Sunday. Two people would stand on both sides of the group in the middle, sharing a pamphlet with passersby, which would have a short political text urging people to *"join the Sunday dance protest to show solidarity with the people of Ukraine in their resistance against the Russian invasion, as well as the non-European and queer people who are facing discrimination in this war."* The call pamphlet would mention that "we" will be *learning and performing* the Tank Man choreography, drawing a physical and metaphorical connection to Ukraine – *"Also in Ukraine, there have been people trying to stop the advancing of tanks and military convoys with their bodies."* At the end of the pamphlet, it is mentioned *"Make dance, not war!"* While the two pamphleteers engage with curious passersby, taking photographs, as well as policemen intermittently coming to check in with regards to the time of the protest and how many people are there (logistics), Poon would be addressing a group of 8-10 people, protesters who have given prior intimation of their presence, and sometimes their friends who came along, like he would in a rehearsal room and dance studio. He would ask them to take out their plastic bags, take off their jackets, and do a short warm up session – breathing exercises and grounding exercises such as "body scan" with one's eyes closed, and then some voice exercises for volume control. The voice exercise would also have a physical action component – we were asked to follow the

volume of our voice from lowest to the highest to the lowest on a chant of “No More War”, and simultaneously squat up and squat down to the ground. The warm up would end with the protesters “shaking it off” – vigorously moving to loosen their joints. After a short water break, Poon asked everyone to get into position in a cohesive group facing the Russian Embassy. Standing in front and facing the group, he started going over the movements of the choreography, with his own packets, which were blue and yellow, to denote solidarity with Ukraine. The group started following Poon as he relentlessly did the dance countdown that we have heard in *Unison*. As a protest registered for a slot of two hours, about one hour was designated for “practice”, a full rehearsal of movements out in public. The group would get breaks to drink water, sit down and chat. In the breaks Poon would come and hang out with me or his other friends who had come to watch. The two pamphleteers would be ceaselessly approaching people, giving them the paper and talking to them. There was a plethora of different resources, in different languages of reception, for people to enter the protest. In one of the protests, two photographers, self-identified as “working for Getty Images” positioned themselves facing the group, immediately outside the barricade that kept everything inside, and with very big professional cameras, took pictures throughout the protest and its rehearsal. The group would be divided into two, sent to two “sides” of the space, to practice together for coordination. Poon would visit both the groups to clear out doubts. And then, as the clock struck 12 noon, Poon would ask the group to perform. The choreography had been adapted to this specific space, with the aural register changed – only Poon would be counting down, softly, and the group, as directed, would chant “No More War”, “Stand With Ukraine”, “Hands off Ukraine”, “We Will Rise” and “We Will Resist”. It was clear that Poon had thought out in detail when these chants would happen – it was a highly choreographed protest. There were moments of metaphorical strength – such as the “We Will Resist” coming at a point where the protestors were planking on

the ground, quite coincidentally almost obscured by blowing dust. The wind created another layer of sound coming from the frantic flaps of the plastic bags in the hands of the protesters – these were not the plastic bags weighed down with things that the “original” Tank Man carried, they were empty receptacles, flapping flaglike in the wind. While I was present, on one day, yet another player had made their presence felt – a person sitting on a bench directly behind the protesters, with a small placard coloured in yellow and blue and a bottle of beer, screaming expletives at the Russian president in Polish and holding up a middle finger almost through the entirety of the protest. Although not explicitly joining the dance, he was very much involved in the action, as he was interacting closely with the protesters who were using the bench to keep their water and sit down, as well as passersby who sat there, telling them about himself, his background as a Polish person, and his political stance against the invasion. In his screams, he was able to immediately give an identity to the dance protest, which did not always have clear signifiers of politics because of its rehearsal-like nature. He was serving, inadvertently perhaps, a dramaturg’s function. This brings us to an interesting question with respect to reading political protests as performances – where is the locus of consensus that deems the distinction between the two? In the case of *Dance Against Tanks*, the distinction was intended as obliterated, and the spectators were indeed going in and out of the circle as such, keeping the boundary porous. For some, such as the two Taiwanese journalists, coming from the Polish border after covering the refugee crisis unleashed by the invasion, the protest spoke across multiple levels of meaning – they were able to read the history of Tank Man with respect to their own national identity vis-a-vis Mainland China and its fraught relationship of suzerainty over Taiwan, and they watched the protest as both a choreography and a protest. In a way they were inside the heart of the movement, and in other ways they were out. In conversation with me, Poon mentioned that the reason for him to continue working with the Tank Man choreography for the protest

was because he wanted to “infiltrate” the political atmosphere within protests in this European city with a movement that no one knew about or possibly cared about here. During one of the protests, while taking a water break, Poon mentioned to me that he wanted the street to be his studio – his practice never belonged inside and he simply wanted to do all his rehearsals out here. In the intention of the protester-artist, the movements of the protesters, the invocation of the rehearsal on the street, replete with its mistakes and impulse of constant repetition, as well as the constantly changing location of the audience as co-makers and witnesses to passersby, *Dance Against Tanks* very much escaped any possibility of eventual definition. But with regards to the specific object of inquiry – the witnessing of June 4th and the creation of an archive of something that did not happen – what did it do in concrete terms? I would follow Rebecca Schneider’s argument that for particularly fraught historical moments, which engender theatrical reenactments as a polyphonous strategy to negotiate one’s own relationship with time, the performing itself, centering its tensions with regards to authenticity and historicity, is what “remains”.

“But theatricality’s temporal register is cloaked or visored at best, and bounded by the term’s inordinately vexed relationship to the imagined borderlands where war is waged between those who would police an “authentic” and those who find critical promise in the history and lineage of masquerade – critical promise, in fact, in error, and mistake.” (pp.27)

The “mistake” is in fact one of the most generative historiographical charges carried by both the Tank Man based political performances presented above – the mistake is an embodied register of the labour of the rehearsal, alongside that of repetition, and as such, I would argue, also carry the impossibility of authenticity within the June 4th archive. The exact same feeling that I felt the first time I went looking for a fragmented archive for June 4th – a feeling of complete confusion and repeated mistakes – is contained in Poon’s consistent practice vis-a-vis the event that did not happen. The witnessing, which is the historiographical charge of June 4th, takes place

in *Dance Against Tanks* in the form of failures, of crossed wires – the artist-protester’s intention to infiltrate the protest, and the sheer question of chance that someone in the audience would actually detect the infiltration. And yet, the protest takes place, in the body of the protesters, in the camera of the press, on the police permission forms, and in the eyes of the passersby. The politics and the performance, at this point one and the same, somehow, remains. However, it does not carry the historiographical charge of the campus any more – because of its situation within the larger context of anti-war protests, *Dance Against Tanks*, in my reading, can carry the charge of a reenactment, and its failures. Seeing as my work attempts to observe and comment on both the realms of politics and cultural productions, I would be willing to claim *Dance Against Tanks* as *performative allyship/ performative activism*, a set of political terms, used interchangeably often, that is very much current within contemporary political movements and struggles, specifically those that are connected to urgent matters of radical identity politics such as the Movement for Black Lives. While the very initial usage⁸⁴ of *performative activism* was in the context of activism that involved elements of performance art, it was with the proliferation of social media as a site of activism, specifically with regard to the fallout of the murder of George Floyd, that the contemporary *pejorative* usage became current. The terms, although clear in usage, are still in the process of clear definition academically, especially within the field of performance studies, and I would like to situate them in the context of a discussion on political performances. From activists and writers who are explicitly involved in the Movement for Black Lives, *performative allyship/activism* comes as a way of describing online activism by those who are not directly affected by racism and white

⁸⁴ Short, Stacey. *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 18, no. 1 (1999): 120–22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464353>. In a book called *Spectacular Confessions: Autobiography, Performative Activism and the Sites of Suffrage*, author Barbara Green writes about the “public use” for political effect of the private selves, writings, and bodies of Australian Suffragists, using the term “performative” to denote the functionality of making public something through theatrical mediations, for purposes of political activism.

supremacy, i.e. white people, who partake in ‘merely’ symbolic gestures of solidarity and public support for such a movement without explicitly and critically engaging with their own privileges within the system, which fundamentally upholds white supremacy. The accusation is of an oppressor group performing a role of support within a predominantly oppressive public sphere for purposes of social and political purchase and opportunism – an attempt at nominal empathy and subsequent relinquishing of personal involvement in a system that is clearly geared towards their own privilege. The call from certain blocs of the Movement, albeit within the space of social media dialogic, is for white people to engage in “authentic allyship”, constructing, what I would argue, is a completely misconstrued binary between authenticity and performance, if seen simplistically. The usage of ‘performance’ as a pejorative, as a way of denoting a lack of authenticity cannot be seen solely within the rubric of its tension with truth and authenticity, but in conjunction with the other terms – allyship and activism. Given that Black artists and academics have had to play the coterminous roles of activists, historians, artists etc. all together⁸⁵ in order to address the lacunae of historiography engendered by the predominance of coloniality within these spheres, it is simply not believable that a Movement for Black Lives is primarily invested in antitheatrical rhetoric that simplistically joins the category of performance with inauthenticity. In actuality, what is being described as “authentic” or “real” allyship is this, to quote a student article⁸⁶ published by PennState Law, written by a white student in 2021, in collaboration with a Black student, and after conducting interviews with students on colour on campus –

“Real allyship requires you to understand how to support a marginalized community. To be blunt, real allyship requires you to actually do something. Of course, this can result in different levels of

⁸⁵ The works of Black feminist thinkers and historians such as Christina Sharpe and Saidiya Hartman are primary examples of academic writing that addresses massive holes in the archives through “fabulation” and involves explicitly performative examples from films, theater and literature.

⁸⁶ “How Do You Distinguish Effective Allyship from Performative Allyship?,” Penn State Law | University Park, Pa., February 26, 2021, <https://pennstatelaw.psu.edu/news/effective-allyship-part-one>

action; not everybody has to protest or post on social media. But even less noticeable actions require you to do something because, at its core, allyship demands you to challenge yourself. To get uncomfortable.

True allyship requires follow-through. Posting on social media is great insofar as it can help raise awareness to real issues plaguing communities that are not our own and provide perspective to members of our social network that might not otherwise be educated on certain issues. However, posting on social media is not enough. There needs to be a follow-up action. Did you donate to bail relief fund groups? Did you go to a protest? Did you have a tough conversation with a family member? Did you read a book about anti-racist behavior? These actions, whether offline or online, reflect a motivation other than feeling good about yourself or contributing to a trend.”

In her 2021 thesis *The Downfall of Performative White Allyship on Social Media in the #BlackLivesMatter Movement*, Aerianna MacClanahan adds to this discourse of delineating “authentic” from “performative” in the realm of allyship with a specific focus on social media:

“In other words, while the hashtag is accessible and poses as a signifier that can be easily adopted and shared by many people, relying on the use of the hashtag alone without contributing to social change or standing on the front lines emphasizes an issue of virtue signaling and performative allyship within the movement.” (pp.4)

These are only two (semi-academic) of the multiple sources, mainly journalistic editorials⁸⁷ and opinion pieces, post the summer of 2020, that attempts to delineate

⁸⁷ Morris, Carmen. “Performative Allyship: What Are the Signs and Why Leaders Get Exposed.” *Forbes*. *Forbes Magazine*, December 10, 2021. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carmenmorris/2020/11/26/performative-allyship-what-are-the-signs-and-why-leaders-get-exposed/>, Rudhran, Monisha. “What Is Performative Allyship? Examples & Alternatives.” *ELLE*, June 3, 2020. <https://www.elle.com.au/news/performative-allyship-23586> and multiple from online lifestyle publications aimed towards young women such as this one specifically for Black women calling performative allyship “ally theater”, “How to Tell the Difference between Real Solidarity and ‘Ally Theater’”, *Black Girl Dangerous*, February 16, 2017, <http://www.blackgirldangerous.com/2015/11/ally-theater/>, and this from a journal for young mothers: Mae, Kristen. “Here’s the Problem with Performative Allyship.”

the *action*-oriented nature of an “authentic” ally, as opposed to the *passivity* in the purported performance of performative allyship. The performative ally, for example, decided to exhibit on their social media spaces a black square as a part of #blackouttuesday⁸⁸, an online action of protest spearheaded by the American music industry, against anti-Black police violence post the murder of George Floyd. Among them were many celebrities⁸⁹ (Wellman, 2022) and corporate giants⁹⁰, who were rightfully called out for never having any significant role of interest in social justice movements, and on the other hand actually benefiting from the lack of presence and competition in their professional and private spheres from Black people. And without being accountable for their previous lack of commitment to the wellbeing of Black people, they were now simply jumping on to the bandwagon of a movement for increasing their public reach and cultural relevance, and in unison, their wealth. In these extremely varied sources, it is possible to see clear and defined repertoires of action and inaction for “performative” and “authentic”, with differential moral and ethical values given to both, according to the *degree* of perceived involvement in the existing movement and the quest for justice in general. There are particular terms such as “virtue signaling” (Cisnek, Logan, 2018), “tone policing” (Campbell, 2018) which denote the actions that fall under performative allyship, which points to the creation of a repertoire of this performance. However, the conversations on “authentic” allyship are not able to generate such new performative repertoires – they are, as we

Scary Mommy, March 6, 2019. <https://www.scarymommy.com/performative-allyship-what-it-is-what-it-looks-like-and-why-we-want-to-avoid-it>.

⁸⁸ Gonzalez, Sandra. “Music Industry Leaders Vow to Pause Business for a Day in Observation of Blackout Tuesday.” CNN. Cable News Network, June 2, 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/01/entertainment/blackout-tuesday-the-show-must-be-paused/index.html>.

⁸⁹ Singh, Olivia. “Emma Watson Is Being Criticized for 'Performative Activism' after Altering Black Squares for Blackout Tuesday to Seemingly Fit Her Instagram Aesthetic.” Insider. Insider, June 3, 2020. <https://www.insider.com/emma-watson-blackout-tuesday-black-lives-matter-instagram-reactions-2020-6>.

⁹⁰ Blackmon, Michael. “A Lot of Celebrities Are Being Useless Right Now.” BuzzFeed News. BuzzFeed News, September 21, 2021. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/michaelblackmon/celebrities-brands-george-floyd-black-lives-matter-protests>.

saw in the UPenn Law article, within the existent rubric of the “follow through” such as giving money to bail bonds, going to protests and “making yourself uncomfortable”. I would argue that there is inordinate focus on trying to differentiate between the performative and the real, whereas a serious critical engagement with the role of “ally” might be more useful to address the perceived tension between pretense and reality. And the ally within social justice movements is someone who is present in the room in the capacity of solidarity alone, without having the “authenticity” of being a subject of the injustices that the protagonists of the movement face. Given as we have centered the vague figure of the student and their habitat, the campus, in this work, and constantly attempted to see if there are any bodily reports of presence of these categories, I would reintroduce them in the conversation of performative allyship here, as students and campuses become spaces of solidarity and performance of allyship regularly, giving rise to historical analyses of both collective organizing and class inconsistencies between student protestors and the workforce in the 1968 protests in France (Duhan, 2013), as well as June 4th in China (Walder, Xiaoxia, 1993), and more. Lindsay Goss (2015) addresses the perceived illegitimacy of the student as a political identity precisely through an exploration of solidarity as a particular set of performances that the student does. Closely looking at the acts of students showing up for industrial workers’ pickets, Goss points out the specific relationship to work that a student, a person “*in the process of becoming something else, something other than students*” (pp.331), has to work itself, which is *theatrical*.

“..The student-as-student does not work, yet the student is not necessarily not-working.”

It is exploiting this very tenuous relationship of contingency of studenthood with the realm of labour, a realm of political contestation, that the student performs most naturally in the role of solidarity, as an ally who is not-yet the worker with working

class consciousness but kind of is. Allyship and solidarity are fundamentally performative actions, as student movements show us in their acts of solidarity, most often with the working class, and as such performative allyship in this sense does not fall into a contrapuntal relationship with authenticity. My intention is not to reduce or dismiss the harm that is caused by what is considered performative allyship within the Movement for Black Lives, but to acknowledge that an ethic of effective performative allyship actually exists, carried through by student activists in various forms. In terms of *Dance Against Tanks*, both the registers of pejorative and substantive performative allyship exist – the obvious optics of selective activism by white European participants in service of white Ukrainian refugees while they do not show up for protests on issues faced by Syrian or Afghan refugees co-exists with the processual impulse of the rehearsal, where students, allies, workers in solidarity are *learning* how to resist and revolt. *Dance Against Tanks*, I would argue, somehow still carries the historiographical charge of the campus of June 4th that was so clear in *Unison* with specific regards to expositioning the labour of solidarizing in a highly performed manner as a labour performed most effectively by students, critically engaging with the reductive narratives on social media on authenticity and performance in contemporary social justice movements. Clearly, then, if I am to make my attempt at reading June 4th through the lens of performance historiography, I can safely claim that June 4th and its archival lacunae explode the historical moment into a multiplicity of historiographical charges, each of them being carried to (and through) different reading bodies for decidedly different political and performative purposes.

The Failures of Timeline: Performing “Before” and “After” June 4th

In my attempts to delineate the campus as a “real” space that can claim a particular role in historiography, I can fall into the trap of deploying linearity, such as the above exercise of repeated performances carrying the “historiographical charge” of the

campus. I would like to state clearly that because the campus is a contingent space, time and work, there is no possibility to find linear histories that neatly follow predetermined tracks of survival. And especially because I am obsessed with moments of violence, typically disruptive events of crisis that I argue evoke the campus as a contingent collectivity to deal with such events, I cannot with any guarantee claim that student movements and campus movements could ever write their histories in the way “bigger” narratives could construct timelines. However, attempts are always made in hindsight, for purposes of definition and fixation (and abuse), to contain the chaotic nature of the encounter between students and state violence within fixed narratives with before and after. In my work, I can only claim with a level of humility that the only container of such encounters is the body, and hence I have tried to understand the processes of dissemination of such bodily information. This body that I speak of is not a universalist body, even if given labels such as “youth” and “student” – this body has its own history, and its own story of survival in this world, and a majority of attempts at historicizing student movements precisely reduce this – the specificities of who, how, why. One has to ask – who is this kind of history serving? The culture industry of nostalgia, specifically one that feeds off student and youth movements of the past, relegates the yet-to-be-fought fights, the processual nature of student activism and the campus, into artifacts of the past, arbitrarily putting on stamps of political and historical resolution on the same. With June 4th, something similar has also happened, whereby the gaping silence around the archive has led to an obsession of timelining a movement as the only flagpole of facticity. I would like to very briefly discuss two moments that nominally and referentially connect to June 4th that denote the “before” and the “afterlife” of the movement, to point out the limits of reading student struggles within social movement analysis, as it does not give centrality to located information in the body. It is simply ungrounded discourse.

The first moment is the much-discussed China/Avant Garde exhibition at the China Art Gallery, Beijing in February 1989. Viewed as a “seminal” exhibition of contemporary art within China, and paradigmatic in terms of performative practices and for placing China on to the global map of art (Koch, 2011), for our understanding we will circumvent these colonial qualifications to focus on one installation shown at the show – Dialogue by artist Xiao Lu, a piece at which the artist fired a gun during the opening, causing the exhibition to shut down temporarily. The explosive report of this action within the cultural scene of the city, at that moment watched by the world, amalgamated with what would come in May-June, so much so that Xiao Lu’s gunshots started being regarded as “the first gunshots of Tiananmen”⁹¹. The exhibition itself, curated by art critic Gao Minglu, had to be put through Party permissions and there were preventive measures taken to ensure nudity and other “pornographic” elements would be censored (Liu, 2009). However, documentation of performances was allowed (Koch 2011), and taking advantage of these loopholes, Wei Guangqing exhibited “Suicide Series”, photographs of his earlier performance works – staged suicide attempts. This was only one of the incendiary works on display at the show, a space in which the artists’ “...actions expended on the approach the curators had already established, taking it further into areas the curators might have wanted to explore but were forbidden to do.” (Liu, 2009 pp. 30) Within such a space, Xiao Lu had installed two telephone booths, with two life size photographed figures of a person in a black and white striped suit shirt and skirt and another in a denim-ish shirt and pants, with some space setting them apart. The figures, identifiable as man and woman, were turned away from the audience. In between the booth was a mirror on the wall, divided into

⁹¹ There are differing views on who started this nomination – David Borgonjon (2013) refers to a Sydney Morning Herald article “years later”, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/25-years-on-artist-remembers-first-gunshots-of-tiananmen-20140530-zrspf.html> . Gao Minglu, the curator of the show, also uses these terms in the foreward to Xiao Lu’s book *Dialogue*, something he attributed to “conservative persons in the art world” (pp.viii). As does Xiao Lu’s autobiographical work *Dialogue* (2010), without citation. However, the myth surrounding the gunshots are constantly spoken about in art historical articles in conjunction with June 4th.

four parts by red tape in the form of a plus sign, in front of which there was a white plinth with a red telephone, the receiver hanging off the hook. All of this was mounted on pavement tiles. The viewer could confront the art work and see themselves in the mirror between the two people in the telephone booths, above the level of the unhooked receiver. On 5th February, at about 11.10 am (Lu, 2010, pp.4) Xiao Lu fired off two shots from a gun that she borrowed from a friend at her own artwork, resulting in the arrest of Tang Song, her friend, eventual lover and long considered her collaborator for the piece. Xiao Lu herself was also detained and the exhibition shut down. However, after releasing an artist statement that stated “*We consider that in art, there may be artists with different understandings of society, but as artists we are not interested in politics*” (Borgonjon, 2017) they were released and the exhibition re-opened. However, Xiao Lu’s gunshots were endlessly politicized and were constitutive of the exhibition’s “avant garde” moment, alongside other works of performance. However, the premonition-style connection to June 4th could be considered a historiographical fiction, an allegorical “starting point” for a series of events that were not able to produce valid witnesses due to state crackdown and traumatized survival. In her autobiographical work, also called *Dialogue*, published in 2010, Xiao Lu addresses in detailed longform her intentions of creating the work, as well as the gunshot, and the aftermath, where she starts crediting Tang Song, her then partner, as the co-creator of the piece. What we read is that she had created the work as an art student who had survived rape and wanted to communicate her survival and trauma, and in extension, her subjectivity as a Chinese woman of her time. In a conversation with a teacher, who casually mentioned to her that her sculptural piece needed to be broken somehow (Borgonjon, 2017), Xiao Lu founded the idea of shooting a gun. However, the complicated decision of crediting Tang Song, as well as the affective and abstract relationship the piece was made to have with June 4th, fundamentally changed Xiao Lu’s own practice, whereby she constantly and repeatedly worked and

reworked it, fighting to retain her authorship of the work. The introduction to her book starts with her telling the reader that,

“When you enter my apartment in Hujia Lou, in Chaoyang, Beijing, you see my work ‘Dialogue’ in the middle of the living room. I eat every day at the L-shaped table in front of it. I designed the table to go with it.”

In 2003 she created *15 Gunshots...from 1989 to 2003*⁹², a series of fifteen black and white photos of herself aiming a gun at the viewer. In 2006, she released ten enlarged and printed editions of the original iconic photo of her shooting at the artwork (Wong, 2019). These are, one can argue, a feminist negotiation with the silencing functions that grand narratives of history can engender. These are also testimonies of working through acute trauma of the body. And this is precisely the reason why the identities of social movements need to be grounded in information of the body, to be able to put names and faces, justice and dignity to historiography, and to be able to provide substantive, critical information regarding both the choices that historians make to create particular narratives of protest and performance as well as the circumstances and reasons for protesters and performers to do the work that they do. The need for allegorical premonitions and afterlives is especially strong in historiographies of events in which there is a lack of fact-based consensus such as June 4th. In the constant reenactments, as I have suggested earlier in this chapter, there are impulses of creating witnesses as well as creating new knowledges through a multitude of historiographical charges. However, this is an ethically slippery slope, as tendencies to “make sense” and create artificial linearity sets in. In the case of June 4th, a moment that get commemorated specifically in Hong Kong every year (the commemorative protests faced severe crackdown in the last years because of the pandemic), there has been an attempt to trace a more explicit afterlife, in allegorical

⁹² “15 Gunshots...from 1989 to 2003, 2003, 2018, Printed Later by Xiao Lu.” Art Gallery of NSW. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/188.2019.a-o/>.

and political terms with the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in 2014. On October 11, 2014, an article in the Overseas Edition of the People's Daily, China's leading newspaper and mouthpiece of the Communist Party, described the ongoing student movement in Hong Kong by the term "*dongluan*", roughly translated as "turmoil" (Lam, 2014). The term was a historically charged one, used indiscriminately by the leaders of the communist party to describe the student movement at the Tiananmen Square in 1989. The revival of the term within the Chinese media in the contemporary context was mirrored in the emphatic comparisons within English media coverage of the Umbrella Movement to the June Fourth Movement of 1989. A New York Times Opinion piece from October 2, 2014 was headlined – "Is Hong Kong's Umbrella Revolution a New Tiananmen?"⁹³, while on the same day the BBC online portal ran the story "Hong Kong Protests: Echoes of Tiananmen"⁹⁴. This comparison was reaffirmed by the Beijing government's open suspicion of an American hand behind the 2014 protests, echoing the Deng Xiaoping administration's belief of capitalist forces backing the June Fourth Movement (Lam, 2014). Hong Kong high school student leader Joshua Wong's social media celebrity and induction into the Time magazine list of Most Influential Teens of the Year 2014⁹⁵, among other global media attention⁹⁶, was reminiscent of the Operation Yellowbird⁹⁷, whereby Western intelligence agencies extracted globally prominent Chinese dissidents of 1989 via Hong Kong, many of whom remain to this day expat activists fighting for democracy in China. The highly

⁹³ Kozłowska, Hanna. "Is Hong Kong's 'Umbrella Revolution' a New Tiananmen?" The New York Times. The New York Times, October 2, 2014. <https://op-talk.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/02/is-hong-kongs-umbrella-revolution-a-new-tiananmen>.

⁹⁴ "Hong Kong Protests: Echoes of Tiananmen," BBC News (BBC, October 2, 2014), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-29454326>.

⁹⁵ TIME. "Most Influential Teens 2014." Time, October 13, 2014. <https://time.com/3486048/most-influential-teens-2014/>.

⁹⁶ Netflix released a documentary "Joshua" in 2021.

⁹⁷ "Operation Yellow Bird: How Tiananmen Activists Fled to Freedom through Hong Kong." South China Morning Post, May 26, 2014. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1519578/operation-yellow-bird-activists-recall-flights-freedom-through-hong>.

mediatized nature of both the movements and their leaders easily lent itself to narratives of comparison and recognizability. However, for the purposes of historiography, the well-known adage of history repeating itself can be quite unhelpful. This is particularly true for histories of student movements, which are often subsumed within master narratives of “bigger” socio-political movements, painting the students merely as enthusiastic foot-soldiers for greater causes. This effectively obfuscates a deep critical understanding of how and why students take part in activism, and if their identities as students is central to their radicalization (and if not, then, what actually moves them). The June Fourth Movement of 1989 and the Umbrella Movement of 2014 are fundamentally different from each other in terms of their chronology, geographical location, and politics. Yet, their identity as student movements can alone inspire narratives of historical continuity, pointing to the possible existence of an affective continuum between the semi-professional socio-economic category of the student and ideas of protest and dissent. I critically explore the phenomenon of writing histories of student movements in terms of historical continuities and comparisons, bringing into focus the specific performances of protest that generate the aforementioned affective continuum between the campus impulse and the protest impulse. I would make an argument for understanding both the Umbrella Movement and the June Fourth Movement autonomous of the grandiose master narrative of a “Democracy Movement”, which makes the two events fall into a possibly inaccurate historical continuum. Before making haste to declare the 79-day mass occupation of downtown Hong Kong by protestors from all walks of life as simply a Democracy Movement, one needs to seriously consider that Scholarism, one of the main student organizations behind the protests, was an inherently secondary school campus-based organization which organized the protests against the heavily Mainland-centric pro-Communist Moral and National Education school curriculum in 2012. The young leader Joshua Wong and his cohorts’ intermittent appearances in

school uniform, but with loosened ties, dirty untucked shirts and headbands during both the 2012 movement as well as the Umbrella Movement, only translated into costume what was very evidently primarily a campus-based political impulse that coalesced with other pressure groups to escalate into a revolution for democracy. Once again, a situation had arisen within the post-handover hyper-capitalist economy of Hong Kong where unemployment was on the rise, housing and accommodation was prohibitively expensive, and economic upward mobility regardless of educational qualifications seemed unattainable (Pang, 2016). While it may be true that the magnitude of the Umbrella Movement was unprecedented, and that according one survey⁹⁸ around 15% of the participants claimed to be first-time protestors, it still does not discount the fact that the campus in crisis had been generating steady political affect towards mobilization for a while, with students taking up not only the roles of youth and student, but also that of the anti-Beijing dissident within the Chinese tradition and the Hong Kong city dweller affected by a rise in the cost of living (Ping, Kin-Ming, 2014). However, the comparisons to 1989 only proliferated after the initial use of tear gas and pepper spray by the police on September 28th on what had now become a coalition movement between Occupy Central, Hong Kong Federation of Students, Scholarism and other campus pressure groups. The incredible visual of protestors opening yellow umbrellas to fend off tear gas shells and pepper spray was powerful enough to spearhead widespread global attention and social media obsession. In their introduction to the Contemporary Performance Review titled *Gesture, Theatricality, and Protest – Composure at the Precipice* (2015), editors Jenny Hughes and Simon Parry suggest a concrete strategy that successfully re-captures the fugitive moments of protest within theater – through “*a coalition of the social, the theatrical and the gestural*”. The Umbrella Movement activists opened up umbrellas to protect

⁹⁸ Ng, Margaret. “Hong Kong's Umbrella Protests Were More than Just a Student Movement.” ChinaFile, March 5, 2016. <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/features/hong-kongs-umbrella-protests-were-more-just-student-movement>.

themselves from tear gas and pepper spray from the police, and in a theatrical act, district councilor of Hong Kong Paul Zimmerman opened up a yellow umbrella in protest inside the reception during the 65th anniversary of the People's Republic⁹⁹. Henceforth, the umbrella would not only be used as a bare form of self-defense, but also as a theatrical prop that underscored the precarity of the young student bodies on the street. Hong Kong, enjoying the unique status of being far enough from Beijing to be allowed to commemorate June 4th, also witnessed a large memorial event, where a statue of the Goddess of Democracy was erected, directly invoking the protest geography and performance space of Tiananmen Square 1989¹⁰⁰. Except now, the statue was covered in little stickers of yellow umbrellas, gas masks or yellow hard hats¹⁰¹, anointing this invocation of an older performance space with the impulse of the contemporary, laying a claim to being, in a sense, unique witnesses and subjects of a history that is officially denied. This self-claimed role as a historical subject pervades the campus space, for students often claim identification with workers' movements or identity-politics based movements, in spite of ostensible demographic differences with the main subjects of those kinds of politics. There is clearly a gap in critically thinking about the process of radicalization of students within the campus space which leads only to understanding students' political subjectivity through the lens of "solidarity", as we have discussed before. There could be a case made for the campus being a live archive which preserves the memories of and repertoires of previous campus protests in unique ways, such as the Goddess of Democracy statue at the Occupation in Hong Kong. However, in the case of the Umbrella Revolution and June 4th, these

⁹⁹ "Paul Zimmerman: 'Why I Took Umbrella to China National Day in HK'," BBC News (BBC), accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-china-29446266>.

¹⁰⁰ Holland, Oscar, and Mohammed Elshamy. "How Tiananmen Square's 'Goddess of Democracy' Became a Symbol of Defiance." CNN. Cable News Network, June 4, 2019. <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/tiananmen-square-goddess-of-democracy/index.html>.

¹⁰¹ Image available online: Associated Press. "'Protesters vs. Police': HK Die-Hards Defend Their Stance: Taiwan News: 2019-08-20 21:00:00." Taiwan News. Taiwan News, August 20, 2019. <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3765532>.

connections are tenuous and fairly vague. I would argue that the relationship drawn between June 4th and the Umbrella Movement has as a valid locus the vulnerable body of the young student in pain, to be witnessed by the world in a media event. This begs an ethical question: does the young student body have to be at considerable risk in order to deserve a historical analysis? And even then, would it only be given space under large scale rubrics of “democracy” or “nationalism” or “what-have-you”, engendering a history patched together through problematic comparisons between events that are all apparently necessarily hitherto unprecedented, from one miracle to the next? I suppose as long as there is no recognition of how the campus itself uses the history of student precarity as a performative political strategy to achieve a particular affect, and as long as students and their relationship with bodily pain and risk within activism is not divorced from infantilizing sensibilities of utter shock and sympathetic solidarity, we shall be constantly haunted by the ghosts of Tiananmen. Beyond this, historiographical impulses of comparison are fraught and attempting to create tenuous afterlives of a fragmented archive, and in order for us to take that endeavor seriously, we would need to go back to the question of who such historiographical exercises actually serve. I would like to circle back to a point made before, about the centrality of the body as the only reliable source of information with regards to history, to quote from Xiao Lu.

“I am not good at discussing theory, let alone art. I know how to be alive. The form of a work of art, its very existence, is just a manifestation of an inner demand. Depending on your psychology in any given situation, it may be a poem or the firing of a gun. The word “art” adds nothing. It’s an instinctive survival mechanism. It’s where you’re at in life.

All the works of art and moments of protest that I write about in this work, and through which I aim to make certain points about centering the body in

historiographical work, are in essence works of survival. This is the reason why conversations around pain, violence and trauma are constantly to be had, and also precisely why these works remain unfixed within history. This is also the reason why extremely tenuous and contingent strategies of historiography have to be deployed to read these works outside the demands of grand history.

Chapter 3

People, Place and Time: Historiographical Repertoires of 68 and Who Gets to Bear The Legacy

Key concepts: Repertoire, Performatic, Burnout, Boundary

Multiple times in my previous chapters, I have mentioned the affective continuum created between youth and revolt, while making the point that this continuum is deployed as a historiographical logic within academic analysis about student movements as well as cultural productions on the topic. Through a very mixed methodology, I have tried to create a picture of *how* historical narratives of protest are created which can be contained within this shifting category of “student”, and for what possible purposes sometimes such identification is made. Through multiple examples of political performances, I have also tried to indicate that particular bodies in protest, in this case young bodies, or student bodies, can carry particular historiographical charges that are outliers of grand narrative-centered historical analysis because of their contingent readability – a readability that might only be possible under very specific performative and spectatorial circumstances. I have also previously mentioned in passing that the historiographical charge of the particular examples I take is predicated on the body’s experiences of trauma and pain. In this chapter I would like to historicize the making of categories of “student”, “youth”,

“protester” etc as part of the under-construction repertoire of 68. I would also be discussing some possibilities that challenge these inherited definitions, from existent socio-political movements, that bring the locus of protest from the body on the street to the body off it.

68 As Repertoire

Both the category of “youth” and “revolt” are extremely general, the contiguous deployment of the two in various formats, especially within the realm of politics and performance, begs a serious reckoning with this almost naturalized relationship. On preliminary research, “youth” is a statistical category for governments and non-governmental appellate organizations such as the United Nations. Taking into account that every society has different definitions of youth, the UN fixes a contingent definition of youth as,

“The UN Secretariat uses the terms youth and young people interchangeably to mean age 15-24 with the understanding that member states and other entities use different definitions.” (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Factsheet¹⁰²)

Books that fall under the interdisciplinary category of “Youth Studies” acknowledge this period as a transitional phase between dependence of childhood and the independence of adulthood (Furlong, 2012, pp. 3) (Heinz, 2009, pp. 6) with an acknowledgment of the universal age of majority being 18, but the caveat that the transition is dependent on socio-economic and cultural factors (Altschuler, Strangler et al, 2009, pp.7) such as employment, home ownership and building familial relationships. Most of the literature within this field is produced in the context of policy and governance, with specific focus on child welfare and the juvenile justice

¹⁰² “Youth and Political Participation 2013-11-15 - United Nations.” Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-political-participation.pdf>.

system playing important roles in determining the age that encompasses youth. There are multiple other fields of research where “youth” is categorized and analyzed as a legitimate object of study, such as within consumer and market research and behavioral development research. In the former case, the focus is on trying to cross-examine particular patterns of consumption, especially in conjunction with globalization, to *encompass not only the "empirically young" but also the "culturally young"* (Ziehe, 1992) within an understanding of dissemination of products on the market. Much as this discourse helps in bringing to the forefront multiple mediated platforms of communication such as the internet and its navigation by young people into a discursive framework, it still does not address the slippery category of *what* or *who* is youth within the universalized frameworks of the open market, in other words, there is no actual ground for either the difference between “empirical” and “cultural” youth beyond consumption patterns, or critical questioning of why these arbitrary qualifiers came into being. More adjacent to the discussion on the constructed relationship between youth and revolt is the contribution of social movement theory, specifically in the aftermath of the “global” 68, when detailed studies on the different student-led and campus-based protests in particular institutions in the USA, notably UC Berkeley, Freie University in Germany, Nanterre University France etc started connecting each of these movements with each other to produce a narrative of globality around 1968 (Barker, 2003), based on factors such as temporal simultaneity, political similarities such as the existence of generalized “radical” tendencies that eventually would be emphatically marginalized and denied by 68er activists themselves (Fuchs, 2008), and the creation of a strong and potent afterlife within discursive spaces such as academia and the arts. From a historiography perspective, it is important to take stock of the fact that this dominant narrative around students and a young generation within the university (typically universities of the Global North with a smattering of Global South locations such as Mexico to somehow justify the creation of a dominant

Eurocentric narrative) in the 68 moment as globally important political actors in the capacities of revolutionaries and protesters has become the primary paradigm for understanding youth resistance, to the extent that influential social movement theory scholars who attempt to study contemporary social movements, have to differentiate the present moment from the past, with vague and inaccurate qualifiers such as contemporary social movements *"operate primarily as `signs.' They are not preoccupied with the production and distribution of material goods and resources"* (Melucci, 1989, pp. 205). While it is only commonsensical to state that contemporary social movements which have a youth or student leadership have fundamentally different demands and meanings from those of 1968, we still have to contend with the fact that the paradigm for analysis has been set by the latter, while the former receive the status of establishment through comparison and contrast. While the historiography of 1968 and its reading as a global moment of student resistance is on the one hand quite important to take note of, in terms of the fact that an identity of "student" is acknowledged as a unified political force, this identity itself is a bit vague, and gets bundled up with another vague identity, that is youth. In my previous work I have tried to clarify the timespace of the "campus" within the context of the ephemeral space that is produced under the specific material conditions of privatization of education within contemporary Indian universities. The contemporary university as well as the campus which is in part produced by the labour of the contemporary students and contemporary youth, is fundamentally different from those of 1968. In the 1968 moment, the anti-establishment sentiments of the student protesters addressed, among anti-Vietnam War protests and the civil right movement, a perceived push towards of social cohesion and stability – what Herbert Marcuse would write in *One Dimensional Man* as –

"Technical progress, extended to a whole system of domination and coordination, creates forms of life (and power) which appear to reconcile forces opposing the system. An overriding interest in the

preservation and improvement of the institutional status quo united the former antagonists (bourgeoisie and proletariat) in the most advanced areas of contemporary society. [...]The 'people', previously the ferment of social change, have 'moved up' to become the ferment of social cohesion." (Marcuse, 1964)

And these circumstances and their internal complexities would be reduced to a large extent into a non-specific repertoire of anti-establishment feelings of youth within historiography. In the current moment, there are several factors for youth and students to partake in political protests without the need or possibility of a "global" moment, not in the least because I feel that kind of 'historiography of the survey' is no longer tenable, in the wake of decolonial discourse. Moreover, the nature of labour, in workplaces and universities, has changed over the course of neoliberalization of universities, and the relationship that students and youth share with the university has therefore changed into the rubric of service-provider/consumer relations. Within this kind of context, the engine of anti-establishment sentiments is not so easily understood as driven by those of the 1968 moment. In order for us to be able to understand the contemporary student and the contemporary youth, and their specific relationship of resistance to their world, we would need to understand their protests through a study of their repertoire. One can argue that a chief component of the repertoire of student movements is the strategic deployment of the image of youth in pain and under attack from forces of establishment. This, in my belief, has clear continuations between the repertoires of protest in 1968 and the "now". However, the structures that engineer this pain (such as police, university, government), the relationship of these bodies to the structures, and the ways the protesting bodies record and perform this pain to generate political affect within society have had several shifts. One can go so far as to see some performative renegotiations with the idea of brutality and violence *per se*, leading to some arguments about differential creations of subjecthood within these two

moments. However, unlike certain historiographical strands attached to the 68 moment, I do not have any interest in either adopting generational thinking, or attaching a particularity (much to the chagrin of my reader) to the “now”. I am interested in the primacy of the protesting subjects created within the 68 moment, their powerful role within popular culture to define what it means to perform protest, and the subsequent dissonances in history writing with regards to “what had come after” in terms of student movements.

The term *repertoire* has been used in both theater historiography and social movement theory to denote a somewhat similar set of meanings. Social historian Charles Tilly, in his historical analysis of collective action and “*mass popular politics*” against state powers by many actors in Britain in the 19th century, including most prominently the working class, deploys the idea of a “*contentious repertoire*”, picked up by social movement theorists later (Wada, 2012) to analyze various aspects of protest from a social science point of view. In Tilly’s work, he defines repertoire as this –

“The word repertoire identifies a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice. Repertoires are learned cultural creations, but they do not descend from abstract philosophy or take shape as a result of political propaganda; they emerge from struggle. People learn to break windows in protest, attack pilloried prisoners, tear down dishonored houses, stage public marches, petition, hold formal meetings, organize special-interest associations. At any particular point in history, however, they learn only a rather small number of alternative ways to act collectively.” (1993, pp.13)

Tilly nominally acknowledges that this is a term borrowed from theater, but because of the needs of his discipline, proceeds to inhabit the analytical category with quantitative and qualitative information about the different “actors” in a “contentious gathering”, such as

“demonstrators, objects of their claims, specialists in official control of public space (usually police), and spectators. They often involve others: reporters for mass media; counterdemonstrators; allies such as dissident members of the ruling class; spies; operators of nearby establishments that crowd action might engage or endanger; pickpockets; gangs itching for a fight; political scientists eager to observe street politics, and so on” (pp.269)

One can see that the deployment of “repertoire” is towards the objective of arranging a “gathering” into a more legible, event-like, and I argue *closed* spatio-temporality, in order to render it into an object of study. This most certainly does give a protest a certain analytical readability, but as we have discussed in the first chapter, there is some historiographical reductionism involved in this reading. On the other hand, theater historian Tracy Davis tackles the idea of repertoire, from the perspective of the same time as Tilly, viz 19th century Britain, but changes the *direction* of enquiry – instead of solely relying on the ontology of the event (in this case the theatrical event) for purposes of repertoire creation, she understands repertoire within the far less domesticated realm of cultures of *reception* and *intelligibility*. She suggests,

“repertoires are multiple circulating recombinative discourses of intelligibility that create a means by which audiences are habituated to understand one or more kinds or combinations of performative tropes and then recognize and interpret others that are unfamiliar, so that the new may be incorporated into repertoire. Thus repertoire – as a semiotic of showing and a phenomenology of experiencing – involves processes of reiteration, revision, citation and incorporation. It accounts for durable meanings, not as memory per se but in the improvisation of naming which sustains intelligibility.” (pp.7)

Following Davis, it can be argued that the repertoires of 1968 are explicitly *in the making* through several acts of commemoration – especially within academic and cultural spheres. The sheer indeterminateness of the scope of a unitarian history of the “moment”, not in exception of its more “decolonial” or “less known” histories, is a salient feature of and constitutive element of the historiography, which, can be argued is the makings of a repertoire in action. Consider this – several stakeholders are involved in regular commemoration activities related to 1968, 2018 being 50 years. I myself was a part of two such commemorative academic conferences – “*Transformation and memory – How 1968 is activating social movements fifty years later*”¹⁰³, at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin, in the role of an audience member, and “*1968 | 2018: Protest, Performance and the Public Sphere*”¹⁰⁴, at the University of Warwick, presented by the The Warwick Arts Center in association with the *Cultures of the Left* project, an academic research collaboration of theater and performance studies and politics departments of different universities, among others. Academic conferences entertain an extremely narrow scope of formalistic innovation, and these two were similar. Both the conferences were interdisciplinary, and were active spaces of a certain kind of historiographical production – the production of continued relevance and the search for traces of 1968 in contemporary social movements. In the Hertie School conference, the approach was centered around political scientific analysis that delved into aspects of the student movements of 1968, mainly in Germany and France, that had to do with political participation, class, generation and gender. The academic impulse, as well as the conference literature clearly stated that 1968 was a *transformative event* and aimed to look at the subject via “memory”, with a clear rejoinder that this “*can help us understand the relevance of memory in times of crisis, such as in*

¹⁰³ Conference program available online here on the institute website: <https://www.hertie-school.org/en/transformationandmemory1968in2018>

¹⁰⁴ Conference program available online here on the institute website: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/scapvc/theatre/research/past/1968-2018/>

the second decade of the 2000s”. The conference at Warwick was far wider in its scope of studies, being as it was, organized by an association of several departments and projects, not the least of which was the Theater Studies department. In the conference at the University of Warwick, there were a staggering number of panels and talks whose only relation to 1968 was the fact that they were also dealing with *a* protest movement – papers on the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, the Gezi Park Protests, Occupy Movement¹⁰⁵ in the USA, were all studied and presented, not necessarily with any direct or indirect connection drawn to 1968. It was the framing of the conferences as spaces of discussion of 1968 that established the recognizability and affinity of each work via association. And in the question-and-answer sessions following specifically these particular talks that did not directly or indirectly mention 1968, there were questions that dealt with information collection – specificities of the particular protests spoken about, who participated in them and how and so on. And the association was an assemblage of multiple strands of thought from across the world, held together through the imagination of a moment. Anniversaries of 1968 similarly involve the production of a large amount of academic literature from various disciplines, and at this point all of them involve the careful critique of unilateral histories of the moment, alongside several chapters of “alternative” views from various parts of the Global South. A “40 years” commemorative issue published by the Heinrich Boll Stiftung of Brussels divides its contents page across lines of geography, both countries and cities – Brazil, Moscow, Belgrade, East Germany, South Africa are presented in different consecutive chapters, and each of these are interviews and essay by “*protagonists of 1968*”¹⁰⁶ . The 2009 bulletin of the German Historical Institute, Washington DC is also similarly arranged – this time according to

¹⁰⁵ Conference Programme. Accessed April 18, 2022.

<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/scapvc/theatre/research/past/1968-2018/programme>.

¹⁰⁶ Reference the cover page of the Heinrich Boll Stiftung Publication here, available online:

https://eu.boell.org/sites/default/files/1968_revisited.pdf

geopolitical regions such as “Americas” with sub-regions like Venezuela, Mexico, USA, Bolivia etc) “Asia and Australia” (India, Pakistan etc) and so on. In the editorial introduction, there is also a rough historiographical taxonomy for both the volume and existent historical literature, with five specific strands of enquiry – The social context of postwar transformations, the global and transnational contexts, the regional contexts, the “establishment”, and cultural history. A close reading of each of the entries, taken together, gives a picture of analytical aspirations of the “category” – the extremely loose receptacle of 1968 is in fact able to carry within it stories about the drowning of the Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt (Mackay, 2009) as well as confessions of sexual harrassment (!!!) of women comrades in the context of “sexual liberation” in mimesis in Lebanon (al-Daif, *ibid*). One can argue that the function of 1968 within historiographical discourse, as well as more “cultural” (these are not binaries) discourses such as seen in the Warwick conference, is now denominational, and the common factors of faith are the invocation of “youth”, “revolt”, “student”, in various combinations. Phillip Gassert and Martin Klimke (*ibid*) aim to establish the moment as “*a reference point in transnational memory*”, despite “*national idiosyncrasies*” (pp.17), and quote an address by Robert F. Kennedy at the University of Cape Town in 1966.

“In his view, “this world demands the qualities of youth: not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the life of ease.” (pp.19)

Which brings us back to the moot point about what these qualities of youth really are, and who gets to play these out. As we have established previously, youth is indeed a shifting goalpost kind of identity, not least because of the investment of the market as well as governments in its definition. In the 1968 moment within historiography, we are confronted with the qualification of “youth” through the identity of “student”, rendering this moment into a “student movement”, and not just any, but a “global

student movement”. However, the doubts with regards to these terms and their usage in discourse was already existent within the 68 moment itself, as can be seen in Tunisian Situationist Mustafa Khayati’s explosive pamphlet *The Poverty of Student Life*, attributed to the Situationist International as well as the Students Union, said to have been published and distributed at the University of Strasbourg in 1966, with university funds used by the newly elected members of the students’ union at the beginning of the academic year (Dark Star, 2001, pp.9).

“Because of his acute economic poverty, the student is condemned to a paltry form of survival. But, always self-satisfied, he parades his very ordinary indigence as if it were an original “lifestyle,” making a virtue of his shabbiness and pretending to be a bohemian. “Bohemianism” is far from an original solution in any case, but the notion that one could live a really bohemian life without a complete and definitive break with the university milieu is ludicrous.”¹⁰⁷

“With their usual methods of inverting reality, the dominant ideology and its daily mouthpieces reduce this real historical movement to a socio-natural category: the Idea of Youth. Any new youth revolt is presented as merely the eternal revolt of youth that recurs with each generation, only to fade away “when young people become engaged in the serious business of production and are given real, concrete aims.” The “youth revolt” has been subjected to a veritable journalistic inflation (people are presented with the spectacle of a revolt to distract them from the possibility of participating in one).”¹⁰⁸

In Khayati’s text, along with the incendiary polemics as is fitting of a political pamphlet, there is an arrangement of the world in terms of the university and its outside. His critique of student life is very much from the perspective of this imagined

¹⁰⁷ Khayati, Mustafa. “On the Poverty of Student Life.” The Anarchist Library. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/members-of-the-situationist-international-and-students-of-strasbourg-university-on-the-poverty>.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

barrier between the two, the crossing, or as he calls it, “*initiation*”, through which can have lasting impacts on the political future of the subject – he either becomes a member of the class of “*low-level functionaries*” once his studenthood is over, or stays in “*protracted infancy*”. The specific moment of the pamphleteering is also something that is addressed by the Situationists in a later pamphlet, *Our Goals and Methods in the Strasbourg Scandal* (1967)¹⁰⁹, as the media had raised questions regarding their “role”, possibly as “non students”, especially in the light of the expenses of the student union to print the pamphlets. This kind of information is extremely familiar to historians of student movements – hyperfocused, argumentative piece-counterpiece type documents, with institutional or campus affiliations, and potentially endless rejoinders. This is the familiar contour of student politics and the campus, where the specificity of the texts generated are rooted in the production of the space itself, necessarily in exception to an “outside” or such similar geographical boundaries. We see a proliferation of texts, both political and philosophical, from the 68 “moment” especially in France, where the “inside” of the university is being seriously questioned and taken to account, with accompanying polemics of reaching the “outside”, that is, presumably, where the “real” politics is happening. In the case of 68, iconography suggests that this outside space was quite literally the “streets”, as seen in the by now iconic French 68 poster, where a woman is throwing a brick, with the writing “*Beauty is In The Street*”¹¹⁰, produced by the Atelier Populaire, an agit-prop poster printing studio at the occupied Ecole de Beaux-Arts. To a large extent, contemporary movements, be it “student”, “youth” or otherwise (the porosity of this categorization is crucial) use this established scenography of the “inside” and “outside”, part of a

¹⁰⁹ Situationist International, “Our Goals and Methods in the Strasbourg Scandal.” *Our Goals and Methods in the Strasbourg Scandal* (Situationist International). Accessed April 18, 2022. <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/11.scandal.htm>.

¹¹⁰ “Beauty Is in the Street: The Power of Protest Posters.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, May 23, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/may/23/beauty-in-street-posters-protest>.

repertoire that indeed works on several registers of the 68 legacy, where *distance* of various kinds become central to historiographical study – the distance between the university and its students in Khayati’s text and presumably the beliefs of the student unions at center of the protests in France, the constant negotiations of distance between theory and practice, in Jacques Ranciere, whose critique of his one-time mentor Althusser (*Althusser’s Lesson*, 2011) becomes a site of political renegotiations vis-a-vis the moment, the distance between Europe and various countries and cities in the Global South, whose 68 moments keep sharing a subsidiary and appendageal relationship with the “canon”, and the negotiation of temporal distance of the “now” from 68 in the memorialization performances of academia, with catchphrases of “memory”, “continuation”, “relevance” etc. This doctrine of distance renders cultural memory of 68 into a pastiche of stereotypes, which at the same time (but maybe not always through the same piece of cultural artifact) can engineer confusion and ambivalence about the past, and powerful political affect, in effect reaching a space of readability amongst a very large number of people, in essence keeping the 68 repertoire open for interpretation and usage in “universal” ways. We can briefly consider here a few examples of the pastiche of 68 within cultural production, with differential reports on the body. The first example is *Gucci Dans Les Rens*, an advertisement film commissioned by the high fashion house Gucci for their Fall collection in February 2018, made by British photographer and filmmaker Glen Luchford. The 1 minute 20 seconds film, set to French electronic musician Laurent Garnier’s high octane track *Crispy Bacon*, sees fast moving shots of young people in clothing and appearance identifiable with the 68 moment, i.e. generalized “hippie” aesthetics of long hair, glasses, bell bottomed pants, bandanas etc, in a “generalized” environment of a university space as inscribed by the repertoire of the campus – a space created through, among other kinds of immaterial labour, protest. These “young people” are seen engaged in acts of graffiti and political assembly such as

street demonstrations and a campus sit-in. Given that this is an ad campaign for a fashion house, there is of course a particular use of the body – as the body of a “model”, a profession argued as the “*prerequisite blueprint for neoliberal work employment*” by Daniel Moldoveanu in the editorial of Arts of the Working Class issue on fashion and consumption *Over My Dead Body* (Issue 20, March, 2022). Arguing that the body of the model is modeling both clothes and socio-economic formations at large under neoliberal capitalism, based on the precarity of their labour, Moldoveanu states – “*The multi-tentacular term ‘model’, verb and noun spelled exactly the same, testifies to the apparent irrelevance of any differentiation between performance, existence, labor, strategy or demographic.*” This model body, under the specific relations of product representation within the advertising world, finds no struggle to deploy the repertoire of 68 in terms of its identifiable iconography. This 68 repertoire is used as a visual recall within popular culture, rendering the performances of protest of that moment universally identifiable in the form of the postmodern pastiche, as theorized by Frederic Jameson (1992, pp.64), for varied reasons, without any identifiable irony. The Academy award nominated German film *Die Baader Meinhof Komplex*, released in 2008, taps into this same repertoire, with minor adjustments to govern intended national reception, being as it was a mainstream drama feature about the Red Army Faction. Constructed as a narrative of interiority of the members of RAF and their interpersonal relationships vis-a-vis the various exteriorities of the courtroom, the prison, the street, the film uses soundtrack and costuming as the primary generic identifiers of a “period drama”, except that it also addresses and reifies the political distances created between “terrorists” RAF and the more righteous student struggle of the APO. The separation of these two factions is not only played out on the differences in their political strategies and ideologies, but also in the retrospective moral judgment on the media image-consciousness of the RAF, as connected to their politics. This has been a recurring theme in German cinema-goers watching Christopher Roth’s 2001 film

Baader (O'Brien, 2012 pp.184) as well as this film, as a site of producing political opinion vis-a-vis a contentious and spectacular history. Police violence is treated as matter of fact, not as a narrative aberration within the film, considering the moralistic position of the discourse around RAF and its violence within contemporary Germany as arguably worse ("terrorist"). Particular individuals are exceptionalized, such as Andreas Baader, both for purposes of demonization and creation of a desirable male revolutionary subject – both inside the narratives of films like *Baader* and *Die Baader-Meinhof Komplex* and within the reception of these films. One can argue that cultural works that draw from the repertoire of 68 are working with the repertoire's strongest impulse – contingent distancing, from violence, from the specific experiences of the protesting body, that keeps the repertoire forever under construction, like the historiography of the moment.

Similar negotiations of distance take form with respect to the legacy of Naxalbari 67, in Bengal, where the received and derivative nature of the repertoire, and its continued openness of interpretation, inspiration and iconicity is seen in a fictional novel (1997) and film (2005) such as *Herbert*, and a documentary such as *S.D. Saroj Dutta and His Times* (2018). In *Herbert*, the negotiation of distance with the protest is seen in the protagonist's own position of marginality – as the uncle of a minor character Binu, a Naxal revolutionary, Herbert Sarkar inadvertently becomes party to a crime – Binu and his comrade, on the run from the police, hide explosives inside Herbert's mattress, which explodes when his dead body, along with the mattress, is incinerated at the morgue on his death. This opens up a police investigation that brings up the impossibility amongst the police officers of contemporary times to ascertain if Herbert was indeed a protagonist of the 60s, something that the audience knows he was not. The film, directed by Suman Mukhopadhyay, also directly references the intertextuality of political affect created by the 60s moment through a scene in which Herbert watches Eisenstein's *Potemkin* as a youngster at a local film

gathering, festooned with communist flags. Later, when he visits Presidency College, where Binu gets admission as a student, the staircase leading up to the first floor reminds him of the Odessa steps scene in Eisenstein's film, the footage of which intercuts with the narrative at this point, affectively inscribing the space of this particular campus with the legacy of Left radicalism, an important element in the history of the Naxalbari movement. In *SD*, filmmakers Kasturi Basu and Mitali Biswas are found revisiting members of the 67 moment in their old age, trying to find answers for the extrajudicial police encounter of poet and Naxal revolutionary Saroj Dutta¹¹¹, in the absence of official reports on his death. Within the format of a documentary, the audience watches interviews with family members and old comrades, as well as the filmmakers receiving the various forms of knowledge from multiple sources such as people and official archives. The indeterminateness of the "long 60s" is negotiated through the many relative spatio-temporal distances between the so-called protesters of the time, the official institutions that they were fighting against, the local and the global, as well as the contemporary and the historical. Spatially, the repertoire plays itself out in terms of particular boundaries to be dissolved, between universities and its outside, worker and student, and local and global. This kind of loose timespace travel, which is pivoted on the promise (and also produces the promise) of lasting political affect of the 68 moment, as enunciated within the academic literature production and conferences that supplement the cultural production, is the repertoire of 68. To quote a passage from Kristin Ross's *May 68 and its Afterlives* (2002), which focuses the protests in France and its relationship to the Algerian War,

¹¹¹ "The Life and Times of Saroj Dutta, Communist Poet and Thinker." The Wire. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://thewire.in/film/the-life-and-times-of-saroj-dutta-communist-poet-and-thinker>.

“What has come to be called “the events of May”, consisted mainly in students ceasing to function as students, workers as workers and farmers as farmers: May was a crisis in functionalism. The movement took the form of political experiments in declassification, in this disrupting the natural givenness of places, it consisted of displacements that took students outside of the university, meetings that got farmers and workers together, or students to the countryside – trajectories outside of the Latin Quartier, to workers’ housing and popular neighbourhoods, a new kind of mass organizing (against the Algerian War in the early 1960s and later against the Vietnam War) that involved physical dislocation. And in that physical dislocation lay a dislocation in the very idea of politics – moving it out of its place, its proper place, which was for the Left at that time, the Communist Party.” (pp.25)

To clarify then, the repertoire of 68 is received within historiography (it is also a historiographical repertoire) as a set of mixed spatio-temporal displacements that act on multiple levels of performance – on the street, in the political imagination, and the historical and cultural reconstructions. This proves to be an enduring receptacle for multiple modalities of identification and inspiration that lead to the invocation of the repertoire for multiple uses – from advertisements to academic conferences. It is a performative, historiographical repertoire, which deploys the possibility in temporal indeterminateness, and spatial imaginations of borders, between classes, and spaces, to be broken. The student body is an incredibly strong receptacle through which these acts of spatial transgressions are registered within the repertoire. Itself being a body of indeterminateness, as Khayati mentions (*“protracted infancy”*), the student body encounters the 68 moment through the specific labour of protesting in performative solidarity (as has been explained in the previous chapter) as a way of constituting studentness as well as youth. The emphasis, especially within the iconography of the moment, is in *transgressive* movements that presumably break through the aforementioned borders between classes and spaces to achieve particular kinds of dislocation – the brick and the molotov cocktail is thrown across barriers, the realities

of geographically remote spaces are brought together in constructions of a global moment, the student goes and joins urban and rural guerilla warfare to declass himself, the student protestor and the campus movement are seen as a register of protest that is somehow “greater” than the scope of the campus, and so forth. It is not entirely coincidental that the penetrative acts of transgression through different modes of spatiality – the work of the student protestor of 68 – is coded in ableism and masculinity, perhaps in a way of overwriting the indeterminacy of Khayati’s idea of *protracted infancy*. It is possible to argue that the 68 moment as a repertoire remains a space for negotiating the slippery identities of “youth” and “student”, and as it stands, remains a powerful repertoire to draw on for present campus movements. The tight affective nexus between the political category of “revolution” and the social category of “youth” is crucial to a large amount of cultural production that is generated following significant moments of public protest by students, and this affective continuum is also used strategically by student and youth protestors to create political affect among audiences and bystanders, members of the civil society at large, by exposing their young bodies to danger on the streets. It is significant that the body of the young revolutionary, which becomes such an important locus for the performance of radical politics, at once has to exhibit its youthful vitality that dovetails into popular perceptions about revolutionary ableism, and its acute vulnerability as a young, innocent, not-yet-fully adult body that is in danger of being obliterated by the far superior powers of the state. Without this ambiguous performance of strength and vulnerability within the same register of the young body, it would be impossible for youth radicalism to generate such powerful and lasting socio-political and cultural affect. A deeper dive into the specific nature of this ambiguous dyad of vitality and vulnerability that propels the specific political affect of youth radicalism would clarify the construction of youth as a particularly privileged moment in a person’s life, when certain behaviours of dissent are not just permissible, but also necessary, justified and

highly desirable, with certain set parameters and qualifications. But who is this youth exactly, who can rightfully occupy the dyad of vitality and vulnerability and create effective political affect? Through the 68 moment, this righteous youth is constructed as the student in protest, an *active* young person, who willingly risks their vulnerable bodies in front of larger power structures and police violence, quite possibly death, for greater causes, and transgresses the expectations of society from them. In April 2018, when the students at University of Nanterres in France were protesting against the Macron government's reforms of the baccalaureate system, the commentary from Jean-Luc Melechon's Left party as well as the journalistic coverage¹¹² unanimously started referring to the 68 protests, and the current protests as some sort of delayed fruition of a long-lost dream. Similarly, op-eds during the political crisis that followed the arrest of Kanhaiya Kumar in JNU¹¹³, referred to the university's role in student politics of the 70s, to create and bolster a historiography of continuation. The invocation of the 68 repertoire constantly in conjunction with contemporary protests reifies the role of the student protester as an "active" agent, and the historiographical impulses coalesce most strongly around moments of police violence, rendering the student body prominently visible within public discussion when exhibiting the visceral political identities of strength and vulnerability together. In another 50 years academic issue of 68, historian Oliver Davis (2018) argues that police violence and the response

¹¹² Schofield, Hugh. "France's Protesters Revive Ghosts of 1968 Revolt." BBC News. BBC, April 28, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43876888>, as well as "The Spirit of 1968 Rises Again: Can French Students and Workers Triumph?" The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, April 7, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/07/the-spirit-of-1968-rises-again-can-french-students-and-workers-triumph>. and more

¹¹³ Sharma, Kalpana. "Beyond Kanhaiya Kumar: Is This the Student Awakening That Has Been a Long Time Coming?" Scroll.in. Scroll.in, March 5, 2016. <https://scroll.in/article/804612/beyond-kanhaiya-kumar-is-this-the-student-awakening-that-has-been-a-long-time-coming>. And "Jnu Row: The Volatile History of Student Protests across the World." DNA India. Accessed May 2, 2022. <https://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/report-jnu-row-the-volatile-history-of-student-protests-across-the-world-2180141> and more.

to it were central to the protestors of 68 in France, and following this, it could actually be argued that the young body under police violence, in its various forms of death and survival become a part of the 68 repertoire, and an affective solidarity-building device of student protests themselves.

...In other words, the movement found in police violence its single most effective source of self-propagation and unification, capable of pulling in those around it and hastening convergence with other struggles...(pp.110)

This understanding of police violence and the experience of the same as a moment of exception that is to be encountered in street-style protests alone reifies the campus as a space of imagined sanity where somehow the existence of the police is transgressional, erecting once again certain geographical borders around particular political experiences. It can be argued that this is explicitly related to the identification of the university as a space delineated from the street, the identification of the student as the person who, following Khayati, takes on the role of the protestor to shake off his impostor existence on campus to join the working class “outside”, and the identification of facing police violence as the pivotal labour of political struggle that has the capacity to provoke society into change. These traditions of the repertoire get historiographically reified through multiple channels, by contemporary student protestors as well as media and cultural producers. However, with the change in labour relations within the contemporary neoliberal university, and the relationship between students and universities changing into service economy terms of consumer/service provider models, the correlation between youth and revolt that the repertoire of 68 suggests above is no longer possible as easily. In my M. Phil thesis I had observed the specific changes that neoliberal policies in higher education implemented in Delhi University starting from the period of 2007 onwards, and I had argued that it had to specifically do with the rationing of the time and space of a student’s calendar and living space on campus, such as semesterization, overhauling

and privatization of common areas such as canteens and cafes (Sengupta, 2018), and systematic union-busting activities within a whole host of new private universities¹¹⁴ which went coterminous with fee hikes in public universities. It is important to note that an infringement of time and space is an infringement of *presence* itself, and arguably, one of the interests in neoliberal education has been to incentivize “alternative” forms of presence within the university such as online courses, certificate courses and correspondence courses which are shorter in duration, more expensive monetarily for students, not connected to actual physical presence in a space together, and is mired in promises of professionalization. While “distance learning” may have been intended to be connected to greater accessibility especially for workers who wanted further education and could not attend university full-time, the changing contours of labour in service economy and the coterminous change in the university setup geared towards privatization created a particular set of access gateways such as digital literacy, access to computers, and a capacity for self-management in learning practices. While a longer conversation on this is outside the scope of this thesis, it is possible to argue that within the Indian university setup that I was studying in my M. Phil, the introduction of the MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) alongside semesterization and other neoliberal policies were really felt by students as the workings of a changing university – a university without students. To an extent, this prophetic fear was realized with the launch of Jio Institute in 2018, a university with an entirely “digital campus” owned by Reliance, India’s most profitable corporate giant. In reality, this university did not exist beyond paperwork, and yet was being given particular accreditations by the Modi government for clear tax evasion

¹¹⁴ One of the most prominent private liberal arts universities in Delhi, the Ashoka university, has a politically unaffiliated “student government”, O.P. Jindal Global University does not have a union, Shiv Nadar University has a politically unaffiliated “student council”. This is only to list three prominent privately owned liberal arts institutions in and near the capital, an extremely small microcosm. This is also to say that the students on these institutions are deeply political people and the lack of a politicized union on campus, proxied with depoliticized, management-style organizations directly impact the political bargaining powers of the campus residents.

purposes¹¹⁵, while in public institutions, police violence was being unleashed regularly on protesting students. In the light of the extremely sharp remote learning curve that higher education has had to undertake due to the Covid Pandemic 2020 onwards, the access bottlenecks of earlier MOOCs and “digital campus” ventures are able to bring into relief the deep structural drawbacks of access within the neoliberal university that were simply exacerbated and expositioned in the Pandemic moment. In the light of this change in the quality of presence expected from students in the neoliberal university, the geographical imaginations of the 68 repertoire no longer holds water. Instead, one would have to ask different questions – questions about access to the university as a space that has changed, and the student body’s labour in politics that has changed with it.

Beauty Is Not Only on The Street, It Is Also in Survival

As we have mentioned before, the deployment of the young body in pain within a protest is an effective tactic of generating performative political affect. Despite the indeterminacy of categories of “youth” and “student”, two identifiers defined by the 68 repertoire as explicitly political identities, the young student body under the threat of police violence is a long-lasting affective register that is readily borrowed by contemporary activists, as seen in the discussions of protest movements from my previous chapters. Within May 68 as well as contemporary student movements, the continuum of violence is most readily publicly recognizable as police violence, and it takes a central space within the documentation of the movements by the protesters themselves – with the proliferation of digital technology, the “proof” of police

¹¹⁵ Sharma, Niharika. “Jio Institute: What Do We Know so Far about Mukesh Ambani's ‘Institute of Eminence.’” Quartz. Quartz. Accessed May 2, 2022. <https://qz.com/india/2025620/jio-institute-what-we-know-about-mukesh-ambanis-university/>.

brutality is easier to map. For purposes of the media and eventually for the archives, the answers to who, where, when, how are determined by the (admittedly indeterminate) repertoire of 68 – students and youth, out on the street, during a protest, facing police violence. These are the dramaturgical questions pre-formulated by the historiographical repertoire, and borrowed and used strategically for political and performative purposes, not only by student protesters (and other non-student protester – that category has been left undefined within the repertoire) but also by the media, activists and academia, especially in the field of social movement theory. In essence, the study of student movements in a post 68 context comes with these pre-figured questions. However, from a theater and performance historiography perspective, using a wide interdisciplinary approach with a specific focus on the tendencies of the repertoire to maintain clear legibility, one can trace actual innovation in the repertoire, or perhaps the questioning of the repertoire itself. Once again, the questioning of the historiographical repertoire happens (like in the rest of the study) in the encounter of the body with structural violence and the subsequent unraveling of existent realities of space and time. In the pandemic years of 2020-2021, the possibility of public assembly to perform various kinds of protest was politically unsanctioned and this led to serious questioning of the existing repertoire of protest that, as we have discussed, comes through the historiographical lens of 68, that demarcates the outside and inside of social movements. I would polemically place this coterminous with the suspension of physical classes in universities and the start of online classes, not to denote a chronological watershed such as “when”, but because I feel that the discussion surrounding the narrowness of existing repertoires of protest is inextricably linked with the discussion on students and their changing relationship with the neoliberalized university. Simply put, the external, public nature of the world of protest, during this moment of repression, began to contend with voices who were historically marginalized, specifically through the interstices of patriarchy, colonialism

and ableism, who were able to point out the existent narrowness of the repertoire of 68, and its formalistic involvement in systems of exclusion. And in order for them to do this, they began to point out their communal inabilities to partake in public protest and, in spite of this, their continued survival in the face of violence. However, the contours of the engagements were not so simplistic. In order to illustrate this, I will take just the short span of 2020-2022, within the city of Berlin, as the field of my observation – two years of intensified protests and demonstrations made even more intense due to the public assembly rules of the pandemic. I actively participated in some as an activist, and some protests I witnessed as an onlooker. While none of these protests are expressly “student protests” at all, and in fact they are all civil society protests as such, there were a few strands of political labour done by activists of these protests who were all “youth” by the UN definition, and instead of being able to claim the physical vitality of the qualifier and the resultant performances of resilience in protest (which in the 68 repertoire is connected to youth, revolt, and the transgressive acts of students displacing from the university to join the workers), they were being forced to approach political involvement through a lens of limitations of the physical body – online gatherings, general exhaustion and severe burnouts due to overwork in political contexts, and resultant restorative practices of refusal with interesting performative registers. It has to be borne in mind that from November 2019, the Indian diaspora in Berlin had been engaged in protests against the anti-minority legislations passed by the Modi government, as spoken of in Chapter 1, and I had been actively organizing within that context. In October 2019, a far-right attack on a synagogue in Halle, Germany, took place, killing two people¹¹⁶. On February 19,

¹¹⁶ “German Suspect in Deadly Halle Synagogue Attack Blames Refugees,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, July 21, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/21/german-man-goes-on-trial-for-deadly-halle-synagogue-shooting-stephan-balliet>.

2020, a white supremacist attack on a shisha bar in Hanau¹¹⁷, Germany, killing eleven people, mainly of Arabic, Turkish and Roma-Sinti origin. There was significant mobilization in response, and in the course of the next year, three organizations, which were definitely already mobilizing in various capacities, became prominent – the Migrantifa¹¹⁸, consisting of antifascist activists, mostly young, with a migration background, the Aktionsbündnis Antira, an antiracist organization created to build solidarity amongst different stakeholders of colour in the city, and Kein Generalverdacht, specifically addressing the racist and Islamophobic police profiling and raids faced by shisha bars and business owners and residents in the South Berlin neighbourhood of Neukölln. The Movement for Black Lives protests that started in the summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis at the hand of the police, despite pandemic restrictions on public assembly in several countries, drew a large number of protesters in cities across the globe in explicitly public protests. On June 6th in Berlin, a “Silent Demo” was organized at Alexanderplatz, Berlin, attended by a crowd of 15000 people. On June 27th, another demonstration was organized at the Siegessäule. In the week between the two protests, I also participated in a third protest, at Brandenburger Tor. The protests were organized by different activist and advocacy groups, such as BlackLivesMatter Berlin chapter, Initiative Schwarze Menschen Deutschland (ISD), and other Afro-German civil society and political groups that came together to organize these protests. Alongside these public protests, there were continuous online meetings of activists, where the boundaries of the meetings were explicitly mentioned – “for Black people only”, “for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) only”, “for Asians in Solidarity with Black Lives”, “South Asians for Black Lives” and so on.

¹¹⁷ “Germany Shooting: Far-Right Gunman Kills 10 in Hanau,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, February 20, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/19/shooting-germany-hanau-dead-several-people-shisha-near-frankfurt>.

¹¹⁸ Migrantifa’s blog: <https://migrantifaberlin.wordpress.com/>

Running parallel to the Movement for Black Lives was the “Stop Asian Hate” protests, both online and offline, protesting the uptick of hate crimes against Asian people in white majority countries of UK, Europe and USA. In Germany, a few older and newly founded organizations such as Korea Verband, Korientation and Deutsche Asiatinnen Make Noise (DAMN*) were organizing online solidarity meetings in 2020, and following the white supremacist shootings on Asian-origin spa workers in Atlanta in March 21, 2021, started organizing protests. In July 2021, a new organization called Queers Against Racism and Colonialism (QUARC) organized the city’s first “anticolonial pride”, with an explicit pro-Palestinian liberation stance. In February 2022, Palestina Spricht, an older Palestine activism organization held demonstrations in memoriam of the victims of Israeli bombing in Sheikh Jarrah, which was attended by a large number of people mainly because of Palestina Spricht’s invaluable mobilization work over the years around a politically criminalized debate in the country. There were several civil society participation-based movements that were organized as well such as the #Unteilbar demos starting in October 2018, which drew massive crowds, the property expropriation movement that drew on civic and citizen participation, Fridays for Future protests, the May 1 protests etc. There were also protests against pandemic mask mandates and vaccines, and the self-identification of these groups as “querdenker”, all of which worked on existing repertoires of protest such as public assembly, performative solidarity (used in the way analyzed in Chapter 2), formidable (but differential) police presences, and large scale mediatization across news and social media, ssssi.e., within the framework of rightful and peaceful civil society protests and movements. I want to focus only on some, as they were the ones in which I could see that the existing repertoires of protests came to be challenged in fundamental ways. The critique of the accepted repertoires of protests started coming from Black women and queer folks first, many of whom, during the George Floyd

protests started expressing their *exhaustion*¹¹⁹. During the Stop Asian Hate protests, Asian activists started expressing their exhaustion¹²⁰. A number of activists, especially working within organizations that dealt with historically racialized communities, expressed that they were facing “burnouts”, not feeling safe in public protests due to the presence of police, protesters belonging to perpetrator communities like white people and men, sexual abusers from their own social circles etc, and not feeling safe to be around people during a pandemic. There were many opinion pieces by Black intellectuals who were able to call out white people standing in solidarity as not doing “enough”¹²¹, and this conversation was also being had within the movements themselves, especially in relation to feelings of exhaustion and burnout, feelings that I myself was also experiencing. A “burnout” is a term from psychology that is heavily disputed in terms of its status as a valid mental health issue (Heinemann, Heinemann, 2017). First introduced by Herbert Freudenberger, a psychotherapist in the US in 1974, a burnout was

“...characterized by physical symptoms such as exhaustion, fatigue, frequent headaches and gastrointestinal disorders, sleeplessness, and shortness of breath. Behavioral signs include frustration, anger, a suspicious attitude, a feeling of omnipotence or overconfidence, excessive use of tranquilizers and barbiturates, cynicism, and signs of depression. Freudenberger not only described the symptoms of burnout but also listed personality factors that predispose people to suffer from burnout. It is primarily

¹¹⁹ Littlejohn, Amanda Miller. “Perspective | Black Professional Women Are Exhausted. They're Finally Claiming the Time to Rest.” The Washington Post. WP Company, August 20, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/08/20/black-women-professionals-rest/>.

¹²⁰ “Asian Americans Are Stressed, Burned out, and Exhausted.” McKinsey & Company. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/coronavirus-leading-through-the-crisis/charting-the-path-to-the-next-normal/asian-americans-are-stressed-burned-out-and-exhausted>.

¹²¹ Deutsche Welle. “Opinion: Black Lives Matter Protests Are Not Enough for Long-Term Results: DW: 28.06.2020.” DW.COM. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-black-lives-matter-protests-are-not-enough-for-long-term-results/a-53969350>.

and Baggs, Michael. “Black Lives Matter in the UK: 'We're Still Not Being Heard'.” BBC News. BBC, August 25, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-53812576>., and this Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. “Did Last Summer's Black Lives Matter Protests Change Anything?” The New Yorker, August 6, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/did-last-summers-protests-change-anything>. among others

“the dedicated and the committed” who are most likely to burn out... (Freudenberger, 1974, p. 161)” (ibid.)

It is to be noted that a burnout is still considered to be a labour-related symptom, a symptom of overwork. There has been some quantitative and qualitative research within the specific topic of “activist burnout”, where *“they described conditions that could exacerbate the threat of burnout for activists of color by reproducing racism within antiracism movements”* (Gorski, Erakat, 2019), among other factors. From the existent medical research that overwhelmingly defines burnout as a workplace affliction, one can argue that the activists and protesters who were speaking in 2020-2021 Berlin about being overwhelmed and unable to show up for demonstrations because of burnout, saw protesting as unpaid labour, and the protest as a workplace. This is a commonsensical yet important point, in terms of a reorganization of the protesting subject under neoliberalism. The reasons cited in Gorski and Erakat’s study by activists of colour for their activist burnouts, prominently included confrontations with white allies, often male, who would not be aware of their own privileges, having internalized racial biases, being unwilling to learn about the lived experiences of racism from survivors, and being overtly defensive during critique. This was, in concrete terms, the “not doing enough”, and it was resulting in activists who were actually survivors of racial violence to recue themselves and become absent from public protests against racial violence. In the light of the present research, which draws on repertoires of protest, I suggest that this is a radical, physical break from the 68 repertoire, bringing into light the limits of public protest as a performative practice inscribed on the “young” “student” body. The reinscription of protest, from a form of physical labour particularly connected to the vitality of the young body and its vulnerability in front of police action, to actual self-conscious workplace-related labour and its wear and tear in the form of burnouts in mostly young bodies, could be connected to the changing relationship of the young body with labour itself, connected to the neoliberalization of

universities. While the repertoire of 68 is certainly still central, a re-imagination of the protesting subject, who has several limits on the protesting prowess of their bodies, is able to enter the repertoire through the Pandemic moment in the form of young protesting bodies in exhaustion, burnout and exit from direct action performances of the 68. With the breaking of silence around the wear and tear of protest labour in young bodies within social movements and activist spaces, a possibility of displacing the naturalized relationship between “youth”, “revolt” and physical strength and vitality and its ableist pressures within movement labour is being discussed and negotiated within artistic and cultural activism spaces that are interested in disability rights, access issues and displacing the able body as the primary agent of historical change. Exhaustion is being acknowledged as a salient part of movement work, and the specific performances that focus on recovery and restoration from this experience, one can argue, is an innovation in the repertoire not only of youth and studenthood, but social movements in general. Berlin-based migrant theaterworker Kallia Kefala’s 2021 production *Müde*, premiering at the Vierte Welt, Berlin, in October, is a work that writes into this emergent repertoire of bodily exhaustion as a receptacle of performance histories of survival and resistance. In a long form multimedia exploration of tiredness, Kefala welcomes the audience into a dreamy performance space built out of soft materials such as foam, cushions, pillows, blankets, and lit by soft pink, purple and blue neon lights. There is a temporary boxing ring in the middle of the space, tied all around by red ropes. However, on arrival, the audience finds it empty, and has to find a soft surface to sit on, watching video projections on three screens placed within the soft space of the blue sky with clouds. There is a very large purple teddy bear sitting despondently next to the boxing ring. Somewhere behind the ring, there is a massive white duvet, crumpled up, on the floor, like the clouds on the screens. One does not quite know when the performance really starts – the duvet starts moving extremely slowly across the floor. Intermittently, the video projections

start showing Kefala at various public spaces taking a nap, held by the massive purple teddy bear. The sites include benches, parks and the jobcenter, a state employment agency where one is supposed to go to look for employment, and an omnipresence in the lives of lower-income migrants to Germany whose residence statuses are often controlled by their employment status. There are multiple interviews in voiceover, of anonymous people talking, in German and English, about being chronically tired and wanting to sleep. Eventually, Kefala emerges from under the duvet, and wears boxing gloves, stepping into the center of the space – the ring. There, she flings herself on the soft flooring multiple times, “knocked out” in her slow exploration of fatigue. Eventually Kefala climbs into the teddy bear, which turns out to be a giant costume. The bear proceeds to fling itself on various soft surfaces around the room. In contrast to the steady dreamscape music which is wordless, repetitive and calming, the constant flinging of the soft bodies of Kefala as the boxer and Kefala as the bear are for the audience moments of serious discomfort as well as almost jealous relief of being held by softness on impact. Over the course of the performance, the audience proceed to loosen their bodies into their soft foam seats (I was lying down by the end), and yet be reminded by the voiceovers that the reason behind their relaxation is their actual bodily exhaustion. According to the performance handbill, *“Müde is an invitation to reflect on living and working under the pressure of efficiency and performance and the ideal of self-improvement”* and in performance Kefala is able to give us not only a realistic depiction of the state of fatigue in the high-performance self-management regime of late capitalist labour through the voiceovers, but also a way out of the fatigue through the creation of a soft space to hold both exhaustion and rest. The act of constant self-flagellatory flinging is able to arouse both disturbance and relief simply because of the existence of a soft architecture around it. The audience, never quite under the pressure to turn into caregivers for a self-harming artist, relaxes instead because of the soft scenographic installation, and is able to access, contingently, a form of rest and

relief in the same space of active work of performance. This coterminous deployment of rest and fatigue is possible, despite the clear indication of fatigue in Kefala's performance of flinging, her make-up-less face with prominent dark circles, the fatigue of the voiceovers, through the surrender of the performer body in its fall into softness. There are in fact a whole crop of contemporary performers who explore rest and the softness of the body in sleep as generative performance concepts to critique the productivity fetish of capitalism and its extractive relationship to time and temporality of the body, and all prominently come from queer and trans feminist cultural producers of colour who are able to draw a connection between their subjection under the structural violences of capitalist and white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchy and their need to find rest and repair in order to survive their chronic fatigue. Fannie Sosa and Navild Acosta's *Black Power Naps* (2019) center sleeping and "down time" as a highly political question of reparations of the "sleep gap" that adversely affects Black and People of Colour, specifically those coming from enslaved people whose colonial subjugation came with a historical theft of leisure and rest, for enforced productivity. Through multi-site multimedia performative installations, the artists create experiences of rest and sleep through haptic architectures, sonic architectures and scenographic details specifically designed to invite BIPOC folks to take rest in community. They assert the existence of "*front lines in our bedrooms as well as the streets*"¹²², clarifying the existence of a particular frontier of political struggle at the very intimate heart of everyday existence under capitalism for racialized and otherwise marginalized folks – the struggle against perpetual intergenerational overwork that in turn decreases longevity of existence and steals away the possibility of rest and sleep. South Georgia-based theater practitioner, educator, theologian and Afrofuturist intellectual Tricia Hersey uses Black Liberation theology and various other forms of political performative practices such as community work, poetry, funeral and other

¹²² From the landing page of the official website of Black Power Naps: <https://blackpowernaps.black/>

end of life service addresses, preachings, bedtime stories, telephone answering machine messages, etc to run a community and social media-based practice called The Nap Ministry which, through short textual posts and intermittent live video transmissions from Hersey herself, critique the existent culture of the “grind” – hyperproductivity and self-management under entrepreneurial neoliberal capitalism – with the political assertion that “*rest is resistance*”. It is not coincidental that these political and cultural practitioners situate themselves within historically marginalized socio-political spaces, and their exploration of tiredness and exhaustion in order to generate highly empowered performative community practices of restitution is, to me, a particularly novel response to the performances of resistance that are “traditional” within the repertoire. These performances explore various specific political strategies – they are ways for those who are most marginalized within the existent system to assert their political demands, in the light of the fact that they are unable or unwilling to deal with traditional political action and an encounter with police violence, knowing fully well that they will be targeted specifically because of their marginalized identity markers. These are, then performances that take into account physical absence from the demo due to the wear and tear of the demo, acknowledge it as labour, and choose to explore survival through restitutive practices. These are also artistic and political practices that then substantively include many voices and bodies within the political activism sphere that find it impossible to access these spaces, specifically because of disability. Artist Johanna Hedva’s *Sick Woman Theory* (2020) asserts this gap in absence of certain bodies in protest, bodies that can be argued to be the most vulnerabilized in the system, and therefore with a fundamentally agonistic political relationship with the world.

“I listened to the sounds of the marches as they drifted up to my window. Attached to the bed, I rose up my sick woman fist, in solidarity.... I thought of all the other invisible bodies, with their fists up, tucked away and out of sight. If we take Hannah Arendt’s definition of the political—which is still

one of the most dominant in mainstream discourse—as being any action that is performed in public, we must contend with the implications of what that excludes.... If being present in public is what is required to be political, then whole swathes of the population can be deemed a-political—simply because they are not physically able to get their bodies into the street....” (pp.1)

Hedva goes on to provide us with a political and intellectual vocabulary of what it means to be a political protester with chronic illness, to take stock of the extent of one’s subjection under the current world and not be able to put one’s body on the street, hold down a job, throw a brick through a bank window, survive through massive medical expenditure. The site of political contestation is inscribed onto the sick, marginalized, chronically tired body itself, the radical political subjectivity of which is both constituted and shaped by the structures of oppression in the world. Then, this body does not have to physically transgress boundaries of space to reach the protest – it is always already a transgressive body in protest, through its very survival in the face of imminent extinguishment. The tired, overworked body, going through the sickness of trauma and burnout, in its refusal to face traditional direct action and police violence, is able to generate a performance of restitution and survival, and write itself into the histories of performative protest repertoire. This body, with its connection to fatigue and limitations of work and mobility, is also able to radically displace the centrality of the “youth-revolt” complex and its qualities of martyrdom, inviting us to relook at who actually is able to carry on the work of protest in survival.

From two researchers of social movement theory, comes a realistic stocktaking of the matter of activist burnout. Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish (2013), researching on the efficacy of the discourse of “success” and “failure” within contemporary social movements, draw on Jack Judith Halberstam’s queer theory of failure as a generative device under oppressive ideas of success of gendered and heterosexual performance,

and end up denoting the course and self-image of contemporary social movements, especially those of the youth, as “not-success” and “not-failure”.

“Because the horizon of social movement potential exceeds the limited and stated forms of “success,” often articulated as the concrete goals of struggle or specific campaign objectives, the work of movements is never done. This dwelling between “not-failure” and “not-success” represents the key psychosocial landscape of social movement actors, and it is the ability to keep hope, solidarity, and purpose alive, for both groups and individuals, that is the heart of social movement energies.” (pp. 487)

They argue that cynicism within movements is an example of this “not-success”, “not-failure” failure modality, through which activists can keep up their “work” through a sardonic fatalism about a dark world, in which they were necessarily doing “*Sisyphbean labour*” (pp. 488, *ibid.*). In essence, this denomination of success and failure is pivoted, because of the thrust of social movement studies as such, on pre-existing spatial distances between activists and their movement, which for activists within racial justice movements and queer and feminist movements is very hard to do simply because of the embodied nature of those identities. In such cases then, the matrix of evaluation becomes a workplace problem of overwork and burnout. It is a tiredness that is not only engineered by interpersonal microaggressions between activists from different communities, but the tiredness of being a subject whose body is the totemic recall and the site of contestation, through experiences of direct police violence and colonial and patriarchal structural violence. In that sense, there is no spatial distancing between the protagonist of the political performance of protest and the site of protest. One does not have to go anywhere special, such as outside the university, or in the public, to protest, as per the repertoire of 68, but oppression is a comorbid condition that shows up in the body as chronic tiredness and burnout, and is performed in the form of an exit from the watched space of public political protest and its surveilled

metrics of representation. While it is possible to reduce this act of disavowal of the repertoire through the usage of a vague work-induced illness as a part of the grand narrative of neoliberal necropolitics, it can be read more generatively – in Diana Taylor’s words, as a *performatic*, “to signal the performatic, digital, and visual fields as separate from, though always embroiled with, the discursive one so privileged by Western logocentrism” (2003, pp.6). There is a complex and extremely profound performance of a substantive “no” involved in exiting political struggles for people who are fighting for their very existence within the struggle and society at large. It is, within contemporary protest movements, spoken of commonsensically as a “boundary”, however it is fundamentally different in form than the various boundaries of space and time through which the behemoth historiography of 68 performs itself into time. The need for a boundary is to avoid a burnout – the overwork that comes from *surviving* in a world that systematically denies one’s life, through primitive accumulation tactics of coloniality, such as theft of body sovereignty (slavery, rape, murder, denial of food, medication, shelter, clothing, dignity) cannot be managed without negation of some kind – either it is death or it is a highly charged exit strategy in the form of non-consent, which within each of these systems of primitive accumulation amounts to no change on the part of the oppressor and his act of oppression. To an extent, the erstwhile colonized subject, with their list of comorbidities, with their significantly more vulnerabilized existence under neoliberalism, are able to understand the continuities of violence within the system from the times of coloniality. And, in a so-called postcolonial setup, where the formal property relations of slavery have “ceased to exist” and have taken the form of the prison industrial complex, the “boundary” is the pronounced performative act of saying no to playing the role of the subject to be emancipated, by themselves, while managing the lack of effort of so-called allies in the movement. It is a profound protection of one’s vulnerability, and generating a space of gentleness and care, rest and recovery for oneself out of the negative space of a no.

This is supremely outside the repertoire of 68, and it is widespread within contemporary socio-political movements, and to my mind it is an incredible reclamation of *time*, not as currency to be “saved” or “spent” or “wasted”, but as an ontological condition of survival and a relationality, relegating into relative disuse previous markers of time such as age (“youth”) within movements. While I would very much like to attribute the performed act of boundary to protest movements themselves, there are clear links to the contemporary turn of social justice activists towards healing and care as not peripheral but central practices of protest¹²³.

Boundary is a concept that comes up very often in psychological counseling, as the defined frame of healing work, stated by the patient and the therapist in dialogue, stating appropriate and inappropriate interpersonal behaviours as well as safe and unsafe topics of discussion. The British Association for Counseling and Psychotherapy (BACP) client information sheet (2020) suggests:

“Therapists are responsible for setting up, monitoring and maintaining boundaries as part of their ethical practice. The aim is to create a relationship where you feel safe, comfortable and able to talk about your experiences or feelings, even if they seem taboo, frightening or embarrassing.”

It is my observation that the boundary is the dramaturgical device of safety, an experience that comes from within the body, whereas the border is the dramaturgical device of security, an experience that comes from the state and its apparatuses. While boundary is necessarily then an embodied practice, that gives primacy to personhood and its natural right to being safe and in care, borders are demarcations of regime.

Within contemporary social movements, the report of police violence on the body is

¹²³ Among others, Prentis Hemphill, described as *writer and cartographer of emotions, an embodiment facilitator, political organizer and therapist* in the website for The Embodiment Institute which they founded (<https://www.theembodimentinstitute.org/staffbios/prentis>) has developed this highly embodied discourse of a boundary, squarely outside the logic of border regimes, as *“Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously”*, in a now extremely viral instagram post.

not only immediate, but also in the form of the ongoing threat of the security state, that particular bodies within movement work can recognize within its longer colonial history. And it is these bodies that perform the boundary, by exiting the stage. However, contrary to the usual metaphor of seeing this practice of the boundary as a neoliberal self-management tactic to re-enter the stage to keep the movement ongoing (such as the understanding of social movement theorists stated above, through cynicism), it is connected to immediate survival of the activists themselves as well as the real and historic survival of their ancestral communities in the face of primitive accumulations of the body. Through an establishment of the boundary, by performing the exit from the watched space, the protester denies their subjection to neoliberalism, and opens up the possibility of entire systems of embodiment that do not follow the spectated logic of spatial demarcations of 68, or the temporal obfuscations of performed historiography. The historiography of the body is within an ancestral repertoire of survival itself, it is outside the reach of existent categories of time and space within contemporary academia, but as a *performatic*, it is embedded and proliferated and disseminated within the contemporary repertoire of protest, having the potential to radically change the relationship of protesters with the repertoire – from “protagonists” relying on forcible historiographical charges of legacy that obfuscates the scope of comprehending historical moments beyond universalized, ableist and macho iconography (often empty signifiers), to communities that center healing, repair, rest and survival as constitutive of their political performances, opening up the scope of participation from marginalized communities manifold.

Chapter 4

University Now: Broken Promises and Hauntings

Key concepts: Access Warfare, Necroliberal University, Haunting

My intention with this chapter is two-fold. On one level, this chapter is dedicated to the topic of “historiographical source”, by which I present two pieces of writing almost in entirety – one personal testimony of violence inside a university campus that was used for an institutional redressal mechanism, and another a suicide note left by a PhD scholar, whose comrades called his death “an institutional murder”. On the other level, this chapter tries to argue a historical and political point, that the university as an institution at its very heart works on principles of exclusion, the constructions of which belong in the necropolitics of coloniality. And these principles of exclusion are performed in various spaces within contemporary academia, of which I only take one personal example, historicizing it to an extent within colonial history. The slightly experimental layout of the chapter necessitates this dramaturgy – there is an overture, through which the reader sits and wets their appetite, and then there is a “main act”, in which another person is introduced within this space of the word. Neither of these are superior or inferior to each other, however the connections between the two are tenuous and ambivalent like that of the overture (during which the audience settles down) and the main act (during which the audience shuts up). The explicit desires and pleasurable authenticity to do what Jean and John Comaroff call “*Theory from the South*” (2012) could technically enable me to present unconventional sources from microscopic regionalities without so much as an apology. Yet I try to argue both the political-historical and historiographical points in the chapter, doing my best to provide historical genealogies, to prevent disorientation, and boredom. Drawing from my previous chapter, I argue that despite the formalistic ever-presence of the watched repertoire of 68 in both protest and imagination of the

same, there have been some radical chinks in the repertoire. In terms of the university space, the change in terms of engagement has happened, among other realms, within the sphere of *experienced* violence, which no longer belong to the polemical university-state-police complex of Jacques Ranciere's imagination¹²⁴, but squarely within the experience of higher education itself, inside the historical colonial logic of the university. With the inclusion of many bodies within academia who embody sites of contestation, specifically the register of academic access due to coloniality, the University can be seen as not so much an institution to enact change inside, or to engender liberal thoughts in, although the promise prevails. The levels of structural violence, exacerbated by neoliberalization, has severely hampered the basic safety of students within the system, exposing a peculiar brutality within its very core, felt first through real exclusion by historically marginalized people, and eventually death. There is, I argue, a change in the *subjecthood* that is the student of the neoliberal university. Since they are no longer unionized political subjects who could have an agonistic relationship with the university, and somehow under neoliberalism they are vaguely seen as "consumer" or some such, I argue that they are far more vulnerable to being rendered completely insignificant. And this vulnerabilization is effected in structural violences of the institution – historic exclusion, direct violence and precarization. I draw my inspiration from Afropessimism, whereby slavery was reanalyzed as not a relationality of labour but a relationality of property (Wilderson, 2015, pp.8), which could enable the treatment of slaves not as human subjects at all. Wilderson argues extremely cogently the continuation of slavery through structural violence, specifically through police violence.

"After the "nonevent of emancipation," slavery did not simply give way to freedom. Instead, the legal disavowal of ownership reorganized domination and the former slave became the racialized Black

¹²⁴ Page 111 of *Althusser's Lesson* onward, Ranciere completely exposes his former mentor's opportunism in the light of the possibilities of implication in May 68 protests.

“subject,” whose position was marked epidermally, per Frantz Fanon. What followed was a profound entrenchment of the concept of race, both psychically and juridically. Formally, the Black subject was no longer a slave, but the same formative relation of structural violence that maintained slavery remained—upheld explicitly by the police (former slave catchers) and white supremacy generally—hence preserving the equation that Black equals socially dead. Just as wanton violence was a constituent element of slavery, so it is to Blackness.” (pp.8)

To clarify, I am arguing that the university-student relationship in neoliberal academia is NOT a property-proprietor relationship, no, but in the steady precarization of the student force and the shrinkage of their political activities, there is a steady backtracking of universities and the education sector in general from recognizing the human subjecthood of students. With the pandemic and the severe stress that remote learning created on many students across the globe, with extremely tragic news of 32 Indian students taking their own lives due to the uncertainty they faced over taking an examination for medical school (Sadh, Reddy *et al*, 2021) this has been exposed quite clearly. In the light of this, I take two texts as my sources to chart a historiographical study of the necropolitics in the neoliberal university, attempting to exposition some performative aspects of the same. These texts are from roughly two spaces within the university – one is a text about the campus, that spatio-temporal field I had valorized and chastised in the earlier chapters, written for an institutional redressal testimony, and the other one is not exactly a text – it a suicide note, from campus, I suppose, from another realm. I argue that these belong in a continuum, not even with each other per se in the generic logic of identity politics-driven victimhood (woman and Dalit), but in a longer continuum – that of coloniality. Hence, the architecture of a show – an overture and a main act, which belong in multiple registers of intertextual continuity, with each other as well as other cultural artifacts and audiences, but no curtain call as such. The spatial architecture of the chapter goes as such – there is a promise that was made many years ago, and is somewhat still around within general

perception, and that promise is broken through a ritual, which exposes the primitive violence endemic in the promise, leading to death, and then some hauntings. To the best of my abilities, I have tried to hold space for a haunting on these pages as well, entertaining the possibility of a “verb-body” which cannot be wished away. In many ways, I have used this dissertation to share my pain and attempted to heal and mourn, but some things are unmournable.

Overture: The Broken Promise: Liberal Higher Education and Necropolitics

In the autumn of 2019, with the beginning of the winter semester in Germany, my dear friend S, a first-generation university student at the Humboldt University Berlin, an Afro-German woman, daughter of working class immigrants displaced by a war in which they themselves fought, called me from class, extremely distraught. We had become fast friends after an incident on the U-Bahn, in which I was attempting to physically fight a large white German man because of his racist comments and S had physically dragged me away after the first blow, and I had somehow inadvertently nudged her into getting admission into university over the course of our relationship. As she arrived at my house to recover from her crying fit at the university, I found out that members of her department, both faculty and administration were harassing her because she had pointed out that a senior professor held membership with a Far-Right political party, the Alternative fur Deutschland, something that she claimed was “common knowledge” within the students of the department. S had refused to study under this man, and now she was being accused of character assassination, and threats of academic career consequences had been made by two or more members of the staff. Without questioning the veracity of her accounts (friendship is a (p)act of faith), I asked S if we could contact the student union, an organization I was intensely familiar with, after my stints in the universities I had attended. Surely, the union would have to fight for the protection of S, a student with rights, on both civic and political

principles. However, over the course of the next three to four months, as we tried to create systems of accountability to prevent a student from exiting a system, that too a first-generation learner, we found out that despite doing extremely valuable work in terms of making resources such as readings, presentations and social events available for the student body, several organizations such as AsTa¹²⁵, RefRat¹²⁶, International Students Union (now defunct) and the newly founded Black Students' Union¹²⁷ were available in the capacity of “consultation” (“*Beratugen*”), in which S would give her testimony. The political bargaining power of the unions to access institutional accountability measures for S were relatively low, despite their commitment to causes of antifascism and antiracism. The takeaway from this unfortunate incident is the fundamental shift in the bargaining powers of student unions within neoliberal university setups in general, where these organisations offer students who struggle within the system “support” in a highly corporatized manner, and the words used are “resource”, “mediation”, “consultation” etc. To be clear, critical literature on the university and higher education’s transformation into a “sector”, and its overtly neoliberal contemporary avatar, is vast, and many from the field of education studies and the social sciences are highly critical, if not bereft, about the neoliberalization of the university. Stephen Ball in 2012 for example, in describing his transformation from a student under a welfare system to an academic in a neoliberal university, writes specifically about the “performativity” of neoliberalism within contemporary academia, with a fairly narrow understanding of performativity as “faking”, I suppose.

“Within the rigours and disciplines of performativity, we are required to spend increasing amounts of our time in making ourselves accountable, reporting on what we do rather than doing it. There are

¹²⁵ Official website: <https://vertretungen.hu-berlin.de/de/stupa/refrat/ersties/hilfe>

¹²⁶ Official website: <https://www.refrat.de/beratung.html>

¹²⁷ Blog: <https://bsuhu.wordpress.com/2021/07/16/offener-beschwerdebrief/>

new sets of skills to be acquired here, skills of presentation and inflation, making the most of ourselves, making a spectacle of ourselves...” (pp.19)

However, Ball is not at all alone in this anti-neoliberal polemic within higher education. Stephen J Klees (2017) also points out the neoliberalization of higher education and its resultant privatization, stating that privatization comes from two things – ideology and greed. There are many other observations that are in fact completely accurate, such as contractual labour relations within the neoliberal university resulting in academic labour becoming excessive as well as deskilled (Ross, Savage, 2021), loss of quality in teaching because of the rendering of the student teacher relationship as a consumer/service provider model (Williams, 2013), higher education training becoming a dissemination of information systems and procedure rather than critical thinking (Cote, Allahar, 2011) and so on – the volume of literature criticizing the neoliberal university is veritably monumental. However, a bulk of them pivot on a discourse of “loss”, historicizing higher education as a field of producing particular kinds of biopower in specifically the 1980s, with neoliberalization of the sector. One has to wonder if “before” this moment in linear history of the world, higher education was really the defensible halls of liberal values that these academics actually propound it to be. Unfortunately for my friend S, the “consultation” option of accessing accountability was the least of the hurdles in university – delighted as she was for going to university, she was struggling to break into the purported magic of the liberal universitas, or the neoliberal management of the same due to structural issues that had to do with her racial, gender and class identities, issues that neoliberalism may have exacerbated and harvested, but were engineered through coloniality, in which higher education played a constitutive part. Central to the idea of the university facing a level of “loss” under neoliberalism is an investment in the constitution of academia as a place of some form of transcendence – be it intellectual improvement, inculcation of liberal values, getting youngsters ready for the job

market, or, university years as years of heightened political involvement. The university comes to occupy this hallowed space because of its involvement with the constitution of liberal democratic states, specifically in England, Germany, and the United States in the 19th century, as historian Edward Shils points out (1989), specifically with the creation of the concept of “academic freedom” that involved opening up higher education for business classes instead of monopoly of the nobility (founding intention of University College London, as opposed to older institutions such as Oxford), “*The ideals of the unity of research and teaching (Einheit der Forschung und Lehre), the freedom of teaching and learning (Freiheit der Lehre und des Lernens) and of academic self-government (akademische Selbstverwaltung)*” (pp.427) (as propounded by Alexander von Humboldt with respect to the university of Berlin), and relative freedom from governmental control through private colleges in recently independent USA. These were rejoinders to liberal values such as equality before the eyes of law, equality of opportunity and suchlike. Shils is also able to historicize the dissemination of academic freedom as an idea through a mapping of the civic participation and civil resistance of academics in the 19th century in these countries such as those of the “Gottingen Seven” and their criticism of the King of Hanover, the involvement of German academics in the revolution of 1948, the academic majority signatories in Emile Zola’s *J’accuse* etc. Following the liberal value system of equality in opportunity, universities became a space for training civil servants to enter administration, which under Absolutist governance was also the role of universities, except the access to the university was limited to nobles.

“The British reforms both at home and in India were the product of Whig and radical liberalism, which intended to replace primordial criteria of recruitment, by recruitment on the basis of performance in competitive examination to which admission was restricted to young men with high academic qualifications. The recruitment of highly educated experts for the service of the rulers was originally a policy of absolute monarchies; joined with the liberal principle of “careers open to talent”, it later

became an article of faith of more or less liberal-democratic regimes. The universities played a vital role under both kinds of regime.” (pp.434)

The products of the liberal university, having gone through training in academic freedom were in essence colonial officers who took policy decisions towards terraforming whole epistemic systems across the colonies. This is the part of history that is absent (I'm sure for sound reasons) from Shil's account. The colonial Indian university also worked on the similar liberal logic of entering civil service and public administration, and nominally, equality in opportunity, with the crucial historic caveat as specified by historian Sabyasachi Bhattacharya in *The Contested Terrain: Perspectives on Education in India* (1998) –

“...I may suggest that in the imperial scheme, the production of knowledge is a function attributed to the metropolitan country ruling the Empire, while the re- production of that knowledge, its transmission and replication, is the function assigned to the education system for the colonised people. It can be further argued that the colonial system of education can be viewed as a means of the preservation and reproduction of colonial authority, not only cognitive authority but also political authority, among the 'natives' of the colonised country.”

The university, keeping its nominal loyalty to liberal values, has in fact at the same time played a salient role in colonial biopolitics (at various intersectional levels – I am not interested in the colonial/colonized binary), and through its designation as the space to produce different modes of sovereignty, modernity, liberalism, subjecthood, citizenship and suchlike, it has also been a space to play out certain forms of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003), that is “*sovereignty as the right to kill*” (pp.16). This is true especially with regards to the colonies, in which the clarification of liberal university education as a condition to enter administration and work at once facilitated selective patronage of elite subjects who became the ruling elite of independent India as well as maintained existing structures of inequality within the lines of class, caste and gender.

If we are to observe from this that the university at its very core is not only involved in, but producing many aspects of coloniality, then it is difficult to accept the critique of neoliberalization of the university from contemporary scholars as infringement upon academic freedoms and liberal values. The pinning of the blame on neoliberalism as the very thing that is cutting into these liberal values of higher education, while being absolutely valid, obscures the historical involvement of the university in projects such as colonial citizenry building in India (Basu, 1989), theft of indigenous land in the Americas¹²⁸, and systematically sabotaging radical political movements (such as the Black Power Movement) through corporatized programs of diversity, representation and inclusion (Melamed, 2011). The pandemic which brought with it a massive number of fresh challenges within education, forced the sector to pay attention to the problem of access in the absence of physical presence and classrooms – the price for presence was the risk of death. Within these circumstances, University administrations (like governments), playing the role of managers, constantly made decisions and demands that involved subtle calculations about what should be done, who should be allowed to come, whose life was more important than others and so on– a situation that Balthasar and Mullen aptly called the “Necroliberal University”¹²⁹ (2020). Many well thought out articles circulated that exposed the pandemic as not simply giving us *new* challenges, but also exposing and exacerbating existent structural inequalities within society – higher rates of comorbid conditions among people of colour due to historic poverty¹³⁰, impossibility of maintaining social

¹²⁸ Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone, March 30, 2020 From the print edition. “Land-Grab Universities.” High Country News – Know the West, March 30, 2020. <https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities>.

¹²⁹ “The Necroliberal University.” AAUP, December 1, 2020. <https://www.aaup.org/article/necroliberal-university>.

¹³⁰ “Covid-19 Outcomes: The Impact of Racial Discrimination and Income.” Medical News Today. MediLexicon International. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/impact-of-racial-discrimination-and-income-on-covid-19-health-outcomes>.

distancing within poor neighbourhoods of the Global South¹³¹, and sharp increase in school¹³² and college dropouts¹³³, especially for marginalized students around the world (Mthlane, Agbenyegah *et al*, 2021). Beyond the standard argument that these are markers of the afterlives of coloniality, I would like to bring the idea of the Necroliberal University to the forefront, arguing that there are particular modes of performance through which the necropolitical charge of the liberal university (i.e. its fundamental coupling with coloniality) is disseminated – which keeps the status of the liberal university as a “special” space of transformation and a site of improvement and other forms of transcendence, despite the actual material failure of many of these aspects in the lives of students. The reason why I call it a necroliberal charge is because these sites of performance of the university as a special space to be entered, and the promises of the space of having open doors to everyone, are fundamentally centered around direct and symbolic, physical and structural violence. I specifically look at one example, in which the admission to university is explicitly linked to death – the case of *ragging*, a performative series of violent “initiation rituals” that students in various countries, often former colonies, are made to go through to mark their entrance into higher education. I argue that this is not an outlier phenomenon because of its “additional” charge of resultant deaths, but a performed logic of the colonial-liberal complex of existent university structures and their *broken promises*.

A historical challenge continues to be posed by the question of higher educational access to the significance of academic work within the contemporary university. The steady neoliberalization of the educational business and the resultant fund-cuts

¹³¹ Merelli, Annalisa. “For Most of the World, Social Distancing Is an Unimaginable Luxury.” Quartz. Quartz. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://qz.com/1822556/for-most-of-the-world-social-distancing-is-an-unimaginable-luxury/>.

¹³² “Education in a Pandemic - Ed.gov.” Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/20210608-impacts-of-covid19.pdf?tpcc=nlcapsule>.

¹³³ Hess, Abigail J. “Some Students Are Considering Dropping out of College Because of Coronavirus.” CNBC. CNBC, April 30, 2020. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/28/students-are-dropping-out-of-college-because-of-coronavirus.html>.

(Mintz, 2021), fee-hikes¹³⁴ and privatization measures are global issues that massively exacerbate problems of access for young people to the world of the university. This necessitates a radicalization of our research. I am getting more and more convinced about the impossibility of higher education as a project in itself, in the light of its broken promises – precarity of employment and economic status, undelivered assurances of intellectual transformation, failed vows towards character-building, and the historically continuing lack of wide access. While the whys behind the problem of access may be more easily answered, I attempt to look at the hows, specifically a set of performative hows. I would be doing a deep-dive into a long-standing “tradition” of the campus known as “ragging” in Indian colleges (Raghavan Committee Report, 2007), sometimes “fagging” in British public schools¹³⁵ and “hazing” in American military academies (Cholbi, 2009). A ritualized and heavily spectated rite of “inclusion”, designed and put into action by seniors and acted in by juniors in the beginning of the school year, I would attempt to experiment with performance analysis of this act in order to get at what I suspect is a ritualization of the problem of educational access. Alongside giving a loose history of the act within the campus and taking examples from institutions across India, I will be using as example my own testimony of the repeated ragging that I faced at the Film and Television Institute of India, which was subsequently used as proof for the unsuccessful redressal procedure of an internal complaints committee. The prevalence of ritual humiliation as a rite of passage for juniors is widespread to the point that it has become semi-formalized as an accepted way of instilling subordinate behavior in places like military academies (Cholbi, 2009) (Keller, Matthew *et al*, 2015). I argue that this is a part of the technology of exclusivity of spaces designated for higher education, whereby a

¹³⁴ Aronov, Ezra. “Tuition Hikes Hurt Our University.” –, April 16, 2018. <https://www.martlet.ca/tuition-hikes-hurt-our-university/>.

¹³⁵ 1911 Encyclopædia Britannica/Fagging. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., January 15, 2022. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica/Fagging.

naturalization of hitherto unacceptable acts occurs in the garb of “initiation”. Initiation into what? Who is initiating whom, and for what purpose? In answering these specific questions, performance analysis becomes an interesting tool, as it allows us to not only distance ourselves from the overmoralizing discourse of law and legality that has taken over the literature on this topic (Raghavan Committee Report 2007) (EPW Op-Ed 2007, 2009), but also to understand the minutiae of this act as a performative event that goes on to define not only the campus space but also the higher education experience as a “breaking-down” process for the initiates. It generates a veritable “ideology” (Marx, Engels, 1932), and I believe that the inherent injustice of education as an exclusivist set of businesses that promise to deliver different kinds of capital to its customers, is what is to be negotiated via this performance of ritual humiliation.

Utilitarian Education and the Creation of the Educational Subject

While ragging has been an acknowledged practice within Indian campuses for a while, it was only in 2009, following the death of Aman Kachroo¹³⁶, a first-year medical student who succumbed to injuries sustained during ragging, that the University Grants Commission of India as well as the high-level Raghavan Committee of the Supreme Court of India formalized the legalities of redressal. The academic literature on ragging comes from a variety of sources – public health journals, behavioral sciences and law. In spite of their varying methodologies, what the literature in the field unanimously share is a carceral impulse. In trying to point towards the heinousness of the act, there is a tendency to define it in terms that are moralizing at

¹³⁶ Naresh K Sharma & Anand Bodh / TNN / Mar 10, 2009. “Medical Student Killed in Ragging: India News - Times of India.” The Times of India. TOI. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Medical-student-killed-in-ragging/articleshow/4247603.cms>.

best and vague at worst. The UGC guidelines of 2009¹³⁷ perhaps venture the farthest in trying to describe with some exactitude the nature of the acts that are involved in ragging, including details about “*any act which such student will not in the ordinary course do and which has the effect of causing or generating a sense of shame, or torment or embarrassment so as to adversely affect the physique or psyche of such fresher or any other student.*” This includes, among other things “*sexual abuse, homosexual assaults, stripping, forcing obscene and lewd acts, gestures*” as well as “*abuse by spoken words, emails, post, public insults which would also include deriving perverted pleasure, vicarious or sadistic thrill from actively or passively participating in the discomfiture to fresher or any other student*”.

The carceral intent behind trying to fight what I believe is a naturalized part of the higher education experience for most young people in the country by a set of punishments and criminalization not only results in the fact that in spite of the legal regulations ragging is very much existent in campuses today, but it also completely misses the “point” of the ritual as constitutive of the essential carcerality and necropolitics of education as a subject-making project. In trying to define ragging as a series of criminal acts which is outside the behavior of “the ordinary course”, the literature fails to identify its complicity in the continuation of the university space as an exclusive clique, something that also necessitates the continuation of the violence in spite of its illegal status. The carceral intent behind the categorization of ragging as a criminal activity comes from a very specific set of moralistic values that are attached to the project of education itself. While in quality these values are Victorian, it needs to be ascertained that they predate the Victorian ethos. An anti-ragging diatribe published in the *Examiner* dated March 13, 1825, speaks about the death of a schoolboy at Eaton as a fallout of ragging as such –

¹³⁷ “University Grants Commission Anti Ragging Cell.” Accessed April 18, 2022. https://www.ugc.ac.in/ragging_FAQ.pdf.

“The barbarous notion is burnt into their minds, that daring and violence are the great means of success; and all who reflect on the durable nature of boyish impressions, will easily imagine that this notion is carried from school into the world.”

Fascinating accounts of ragging in British public schools come up in letters to editors as well as university journals such as that of Harvard, where the specificity of the anxieties regarding the act are on full display – that it is not only meaninglessly spiteful and hurtful and has a lasting impact on the physical and psychological life of young people, but also that it gives them the wrong value systems regarding life, and more often than not is uncomfortably homosocial. A surprising number of anti-Ragging literature, be it the ones written about Eaton in the 19th century or the USA or India in the 20th, mention with prominence the role of alcohol or other intoxicants in lubricating this sort of criminal behavior. The explosive mix of youth, alcohol, homosociality and violence relegate these acts into the category of highly degenerate things that do not belong in spaces of education. This privilege given to educational spaces as somehow being exclusive of anything that is degenerate follows the impulse that education comes out of cloistered environments of seminaries in Europe and temples or gurukuls in Brahminized India. This imagined sanity of educational spaces, which at once elevates education into a self-improvement and self-purifying scheme that is potentially transformative, is easily co-opted into utilitarian thinking around education that pervades colonial thought and at once does two things – anoints the inherent sacrality of education as a means of attaining different kinds of capital as well as fully rendering education into a business transaction towards self-actualization. What is at stake in the utilitarian argument for colonial education in the British Parliament in 1835 is precisely the seamless secularization of education as a transformative experience. Whereas Madrassa or Sanskrit education, according to Whig politician Thomas Babington Macaulay, still maintains the onus of educational self-improvement as a greater understanding of spiritual thought, utilitarian education,

in this case colonial English education, is able to convert the realm of self-actualization from the spiritual to the market.

“[21] I have been told that it is merely from want of local experience that I am surprised at these phenomena, and that it is not the fashion for students in India to study at their own charges. This only confirms me in my opinions. Nothing is more certain than that it never can in any part of the world be necessary to pay men for doing what they think pleasant or profitable. India is no exception to this rule. The people of India do not require to be paid for eating rice when they are hungry, or for wearing woollen cloth in the cold season. To come nearer to the case before us: --The children who learn their letters and a little elementary arithmetic from the village schoolmaster are not paid by him. He is paid for teaching them. Why then is it necessary to pay people to learn Sanscrit and Arabic? Evidently because it is universally felt that the Sanscrit and Arabic are languages the knowledge of which does not compensate for the trouble of acquiring them. On all such subjects the state of the market is the detective test.....

[33] To sum up what I have said. I think it clear that we are not fettered by the Act of Parliament of 1813, that we are not fettered by any pledge expressed or implied, that we are free to employ our funds as we choose, that we ought to employ them in teaching what is best worth knowing, that English is better worth knowing than Sanscrit or Arabic, that the natives are desirous to be taught English, and are not desirous to be taught Sanscrit or Arabic, that neither as the languages of law nor as the languages of religion have the Sanscrit and Arabic any peculiar claim to our encouragement, that it is possible to make natives of this country thoroughly good English scholars, and that to this end our efforts ought to be directed.” (1835)

The colonies become great experimental fields for education divorced from earlier ideas of self-actualization via accumulation of ecclesiastical knowledge that do not squarely follow the logic of purely economic market value. Self-optimization for employment becomes a key goal within educational policy in the colonies, which at once doubles up as the functional technology of creating colonial subjects. The

transition of educational transcendentalism from spirituality to liberal, secularized market values to me is the beginning of promises broken. In contemporary times, the promise of education has been broken manifold, considering that the unequal distribution of resources achieved by the capitalist ethos has not only taken away the promise of employment (Huisman, De Boer *et al* ed., 2015) but also the promise of educational access itself. Whereas it was never a level playing field to begin with, the steady neoliberalisation of education has severely impeded whatever small chances students from disadvantaged backgrounds had at attending university. Since exclusion is one of the building blocks for a capitalist profit-oriented vision of education, we have to imagine that the end game for the educational business is a university without students, something that I feel the pandemic state of the university was rehearsing for. It is to this end that technologies of exclusion are delegated amongst every stakeholder in contemporary universities, including students. These technologies of exclusion follow up on pre-existing modes of exclusion such as caste, class, gender and even age. And it is in this context that ragging becomes a self-evident performative technology of exclusion from the promises of education.

The Act: Origins, Traditions, Dramaturgy

The perseverance of ragging as a campus activity that purportedly fosters sociality and bonding amongst students has resulted in the creation of a generic repertoire (Davis, 2009). The location of the act is always the campus, which is the ephemeral time-space that is loosely coterminous with the architecture of the institution, but is produced through the sociality and other kinds of labour of students and other stakeholders of the campus. This means that it happens on “campus time”, i.e., mostly outside the purview of the academic day, most often at night. It also happens on “campus space”, such as the hostel common room, the foyers under the main staircase, lawns, canteens etc. The insistence on maintaining ragging as a specifically

extra-institutional and wholly campus activity is connected to the secrecy around the act, whereby it is called by other names such as “positive interaction”¹³⁸, “ice-breaker”¹³⁹, “*satsang*”¹⁴⁰ [“chorus singing”], “*mal samay*”¹⁴¹ [“bad times”] etc. However, it has to be noted that this secrecy is an alibi for institutions to shirk responsibility in cases of exceptional violence whereas the institution directly benefits from ragging because of its forced integrative intent. This is an instance of the institution exercising a sort of handler/field operative relationship of violence with the campus, where it retains its control of structural violence but tacitly delegates direct violence duties to existent stakeholders, such as in the issue of corporal punishment in Indian schools. It is not at all surprising that the Raghavan committee recommendations on ragging prominently mention school-time corporal punishment as a trigger for student to rag their juniors. Ragging is traditionally seen as taking place during the first months of the university session. This points to a possible etymology of the word, dating back to 19th century England once again¹⁴², where at the beginning of the school year, students would organize a Rag week aka Raise and Give, a disorderly and noisy day of “ragging” passersby to make donations for charity or collecting “rags” for the poor. The rags would be accompanied by “ragmags”, magazines full of information for new students about rag societies (ragsocs) and insensitive humor. As for the specific repertoire of actions within ragging, there is a variety of humiliation tactics that range from established pranking practices such as a “Fool’s Errand” (Dundes, 1988) to blatant physical abuse. According to a Leipzig University Statute dating back to 1495,

¹³⁸ National Law School University India: “Ragging, Dubbed as Other Things, Still Persists in Nlsiu, Alleges Blog.” Home - Legally India - Career Intelligence for Lawyers, Law Students, July 16, 2018. <https://www.legallyindia.com/lawschools/ragging-dubbed-as-other-things-still-persists-in-nlsiu-alleges-blog-20180716-9447>.

¹³⁹ National Institute of Design India, anecdotal

¹⁴⁰ Film and Television Institute of India, experienced first hand

¹⁴¹ Indian Institute of Technology, anecdotal

¹⁴² “Rag: Meaning & Definition for UK English” Lexico Dictionaries | English. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/rag>.

*"Each and every one attached to this university is forbidden to offend with insult, torment, harass, drench with water or urine, throw on or defile with dust or any filth, mock by whistling, cry at them with a terrifying voice, or dare to molest in any way whatsoever physically or severely, any, who are called freshmen, in the market, streets, courts, colleges and living houses, or any place whatsoever, and particularly in the present college, when they have entered in order to matriculate or are leaving after matriculation."*¹⁴³

It seems like there is a common repertoire in terms of the repertoire of ragging between Leipzig University in 1495 and universities in India in contemporary times. It has to be qualified that the prevalence of the most violent ragging on Indian campuses come from professional institutions such as medical schools, engineering schools and suchlike. The established norms of ragging in these spaces are bound by the rules of the professions, such as medical students being “diagnosed” or doing “diagnosis” on each other, or engineering students having to measure buildings or each other with the help of a matchstick. There is something to be said about the fact that the established push for anti-reservation and upper-caste pride reactionary movements in student politics also come from medical schools¹⁴⁴ and other professional schools such as engineering colleges¹⁴⁵. Within a context that maintains a social division of labour along caste lines, professionalized education spaces need to be able to maintain this preexisting structure of power in order to have legitimacy, and while it is unable to do so overtly because of the promise of upward mobility in professional education, it does so covertly in the form of structural violence towards students from marginalized backgrounds and performatively in ruthless ragging of women students,

¹⁴³ Leipzig University Statutes, ed. Friedrich Zarncke, *Die Statutenbücher der Universität Leipzig*, trans. Robert Francis Seybolt, *The Manuale Scholarium: An Original Account of Life in the Mediaeval University* (Cambridge, MA, 1921). "How to Treat the Freshmen": 21-2, n. 6 (translation slightly modified).

¹⁴⁴ Official website: <https://www.youthforequality.in/about-us/history/>

¹⁴⁵ Debajyoti Chakraborty / TNN / Updated: Mar 4, 2012. "Ragging Shock in Engineering College: Kolkata News - Times of India." *The Times of India*. TOI. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/ragging-shock-in-engineering-college/articleshow/12128484.cms>.

students from lower castes and classes. Almost all ragging sessions across universities in India start with a series of military drills such as marching, running together, standing in lines, and “employing” of commanders from the group of freshmen to delegate responsibilities of violence. Directly linked with hazing practices in military academies, there is an understanding that “character-building” exercises that are semiotically linked with ideas of the army and the nation are needed not only to make this group pliant, but also to instill some amount of discipline and rules of the space that shall be produced over the course of the ragging session. Army punishments such as the “*murga*”¹⁴⁶ pose, prevalent also as corporal punishment in schools, further function towards a simulation of military discipline. Preordained rules of dress code, such as freshers cannot wear t-shirts right side out, or that they have to oil their hair profusely, exist along with rules of etiquette such as saluting or bowing to senior students, acting submissive in performative ways, such as with an “*aadab*” the way a *tawaif* or courtesan is imagined to have done it or speaking in pure Hindi all the time. Take for instance this testimony that I noted down after a ragging session at the Film and Television Institute of India, which was later used for the institutional hearing for redressal of my case.

Dark figures, their faces dimly lit by the scattered lights of a few campus lampposts, stand in rows, stinking of subordination. I cannot recognize anyone. Maybe the girls. The three other girls in my batch of 60-ish. We stand out by our sheer minority. Someone is smelling our heads one by one. My head gets grabbed, a nose sniffs at the hair.

“*Aapne nahi lagaya, na?*” [You haven’t put it, have you?]

Hub?

“*Tel!*” [oil!]

¹⁴⁶ A pose of “humiliation, involving squatting and holding one’s own ears in a contorted way.

Dumbfounded by the sheer bizarreness, I am shuffled into a separate line. Looking on at the figures who are ordered to remain in their places, their heads gleaming with oil, I immediately feel persecuted. It dawns on me that this round of 'introductions' had some pre-ordained rules, which evidently a lot of my batchmates had known. I had missed that boat. My mind already failing to register the circumstance, I reluctantly follow barked orders and break into a run around the block with a bunch of other accused. Over the course of that night, and more nights to come, I would have to re-do that run over and over again, often with my hands flailing in the air, almost always screaming "Main chutiya hun" ["Yes, I am a cunt"].... My legs still tremble in anger from those runs. My tendons wilt in the heat of humiliation.

The exact affective import of the act of running itself needs to be understood specifically in terms of the spatio-temporal arrangement of the act, whereby the ragging was happening late at night under the "wisdom tree", a popular socializing spot for students on campus during both day and night, except during the night alcohol consumption under the shade of the tree was not just permissible, but expected. The widened driveway in front of the tree served as the stage on which junior students were standing in rows, and the cement seats under the tree became the spectatorial realm, which expanded itself to the sides with about 40-50 students from the second up to the fourth or fifth years to sit in. The initial shock of the spectated nature of the humiliation aside, there was the added layer of repurposing the driveway, the path to the classrooms, as the track on which juniors would be ordered to run constantly, wearing them out over the course of the night. It has to be noted that this same tactic of punishment by fatigue and spectated shame was used by the cinematography professors during the day for latecomers to class who would be watched by visitors on campus, as experienced by myself and many of my cohort, and seems to have been an accepted part of the repertoire of hierarchical violence within campus. The reinscription of utilitarian spaces of the institutional edifice is an integral part of the campus's claim to spatial sovereignty. In this case the driveway to the classrooms is reinscribed as the geography for a run of shame by means of the performative interventions in the form of a created audience and a specific script and

gesticulation in the act. The affective dissonance that it creates in the minds of those who act in it, as well as those who watch it, precisely captures the broken promise of where that driveway may lead – not only poetically, in a mockery of the transcendentalist architecture of higher educational institutions such as this one, but in this case practically, since this shaming tactic becomes a part of the larger teaching culture of the institute. One of the salient features of ragging sessions are the performances. While there is a general understanding that the seniors are making the juniors perform for other seniors, individuals are also asked to specifically perform what could be considered humiliating dances or songs. In my testimony, I write,

It has been around five hours; I conclude with a sleep-deprived mind. We have been broken into smaller groups and asked to put up ‘performances’ for the entertainment of seniors. My mind is playing games with me, painfully reminding me of my aborted plans of studying performance studies, my love for the theatre, for performance and the liberating sense of autonomy I feel on stage. I blink back tears of self-hatred. We have been asked to do an ‘item number’¹⁴⁷, and I, not surprisingly the only girl in the group, have vehemently avoided being the ‘item girl’. I become some unmoving prop such as the chair, or the lamppost or suchlike and perhaps avoid the obvious sexual objectification that I knew was going to come my way if I was dancing as expected. A porcine fellow called Priyabrata Panigrahi comes up to us and roundly tell us off.

“*Kaisa item number tha? Lund kbada nahi hua!*” [What kind of item number was this? I didn’t even get an erection!]

The invocation of the item number is not only because of how easily it lends the space to casual sexual harassment, but also a reference to the established repertoire within ragging of references to the profession for which students train at the specific institute. One of the people in the item number group was designated a camera-

¹⁴⁷ Raunchy dance numbers performed by “item girls”, or famous actresses known for their sexual allure, from Bollywood films which trace themselves back to the existence of the cabaret number in Bombay cinema of the 50s and 60s, often peripheral to the plot.

person for the act as well, expected to act out the shooting of the song. The mocking of the education that is promised in itself might not be a necessarily violent act. However, the arrangement of this mocking within a performative space that is specifically designed to witness initiation into this professional world is what makes the act of ragging an elaborate acting out of the inherent broken promise of the education that this space promises – be it the promise of being treated as human beings with dignity or the promise of being able to make relevant artistic production that does not profit from objectification of women. The constant fluctuation of the space from being a militarized camp of imposed discipline to a stage of recreational entertainment is a specific space-making tactic that creates a confused dissonance in the minds of the victims who are unable to distinguish between fun and seriousness or work and play. In their confusion to understand exactly what is happening lies the humiliation and the biggest joke of the evening – being given real punishments for mock misdemeanors. The tightness with which the space is confined, by the virtue of its open secrecy and tacit approval from the authorities, creates a situation where enforced participation could feel like willing complicity afterwards. And because there is an enforced pleasure impulse, it becomes very difficult for freshers to identify clearly whether they enjoyed the “interaction” or not, giving rise to continued tolerance, and sometimes vehement endorsement of ragging as the single-most “effective” mode of sociality among students in universities. The idea that the university is such a space of designated uniqueness that one needs to go through several dangerous and damaging rites of passage is closely connected to the idea of education being a privilege rather than a right. The rite of passage does not seem bothersome to newcomers who are already stakeholders in the system, however to everyone else, it is a reification and re-enactment of not just personal traumas but also structural violences of lack of access. This is the nature of the rite of passage as an act

– it is meant to initiate someone into a group that they want to or aim to belong to. As Richard Schechner observed in 1987,

“Everywhere initiation rites are violent and explicitly sexual. Initiations-which are a form of participatory theater-are rife with circumcisions, subincisions, vomitings, beatings, and other terrifyingly violent acts. These initiatory ordeals are not any “gentler” when viewed from within the cultures that practice them” (pp.7)

In principle Schechner’s thesis that “acting out” through the means of theater is a way of “handling” libidinal fantasies of the conscious and subconscious, to prevent the “direct explosions” of the same within social and political processes, is naive and creates arbitrary boundaries between the apparently more ‘dangerous’ and uncontrollable realm of the non-theater which the theater bears the great responsibility to safety-valve. However, his flattening of boundaries between ritual and theater, following Victor Turner, is very much taken by me, to the last point, where the last “boundary” – ritual creates action and theater creates thought – is also rejected. Within the realm of direct violence, in which Schechner apparently delves, there is simply not any room between these categories of action – the main category of action, I would argue, is *theft, primitive accumulation of the body*. Borrowing the term from Marx, in its sense of an “original” crime committed as a foundation of a social formation, it can be argued that there are very few radically *new* forms of violence, at least from the position of historically marginalized groups, who continue to be marginalized across large swaths of history, as propounded by Afropessimist scholars. Similarly, the foundation of sexual violence is in long standing social formations such as patriarchy, the gender binary, private property and the family, and any ritualized theater of it, does not seem to have any bearing on producing *thought*. Violence as an action of denial of subjecthood, can only happen because it has the license of being a foundational instrument to contingent social formation. Within this rubric, sexual

violence within academia and its all-pervasive tolerance is a condition of the existence of the system – without feminization of care labour and existent gender discrimination, the exploitative conditions of research would not be profitable. It is through this lens that I can argue that ragging is a performance that enshrines directly the primitive accumulation of the body in coloniality, the same logic that also birthed the university. The apparent “violence” of the acts and their criminalization are not reason enough for us to treat them exceptionally, as outside the continuum of liberalism within higher education. More obviously, it is a rite of passage that is used to maintain border regimes of the university and of liberalism. Within the neoliberal university, this initiation ceremony turns into a hollow performance of structural violences without delivering the promise of initiation even into liberal pretense. The failure of higher education to provide dignity, livelihood and access to its students is in fact what one is being initiated into via ragging, made clear to already marginalized students who catch on to the performative semiotics of exclusion and primitive accumulation of the body because of their life experiences. And as long as education is tethered to ideas of transcendence, whether economic or spiritual, rather than ideas of access and dignity, it will feed itself off this industry of exclusion and its performative technologies.

Main Act: Haunting

In the literature, performances and student movements that I was studying for my M. Phil, there was a possibility to claim that students were attending universities and being able to create a generative space for themselves outside the panoptical expectations of higher education on them, by doing particular forms of immaterial labour to produce lasting repertoires of relational socio-politics in excess of traditional modes of belonging such as family, gender, nationality etc. I had been attempting to understand the relationship between a student and the institution from a

unidirectional way, treating the university as a monolithic institution on which prevailed external, global economy generated policy-making decisions such as privatization, professionalization and neoliberalisation, and had looked at the subjectivity of students alone under these changes without critically looking at the specific ways in which the university itself as an institution committed these legislatures that had lasting impacts on the students. However, the death of Rohith Vemula¹⁴⁸, radical Dalit research scholar in Hyderabad Central University, on 17th January, 2016, days before I defended my dissertation, in the midst of a campus movement in Jawaharlal Nehru University in which I was a student, created in me, the student community in various public universities in India and the general public sphere of the country, severe trauma and doubts about the relevance and actual function of higher education institutions. This moment of deep grief was supremely clarifying in itself, as comrade Rohith's suicide note succinctly and painfully described the absolute inability of the university system to live up to any of its promises – education, betterment of life, employment – as well as the huge lacunae in my own perspectives on the power of the campus as a construction of resistance against the establishment. Ensnared within a left-wing university such as JNU, trained in another politicized university like DU, I had simply made particular well-researched observations that ultimately supported the edifice of higher education as a special moment in our lives, done in special places like the university, inside which there was another special place of belonging, that was the campus. The “imagined sanity” of the university space, which I had tried to challenge by dissolving the boundaries of political involvement of students on the “inside” with the “outside” political sphere, had unfortunately been reified by my work, that overall claimed a special relationship of the student body with radical and resistant politics in general. In not addressing

¹⁴⁸ Sudhir, Uma, and Deepshikha Ghosh. “Suicide of Student after 'Social Boycott' Sparks Anger in Hyderabad University.” NDTV.com. NDTV, January 18, 2016. <https://www.ndtv.com/cheat-sheet/protests-in-hyderabad-university-after-suicide-by-scholar-thrown-out-of-hostel-1266993>.

properly the playing out of systemic violence within the campus space, I had not understood the intersectionalities within the students in a university setup, and had created an imagined space of safety where there was not one. However, with the death of comrade Rohith, and the ensuing naming of the act as “institutional murder” by his comrades and fellow-students, as well as leading Dalit politician and Member of the Parliament Mayawati¹⁴⁹, made me understand that the university was simply not a safe place – it was indeed also a place of death. Death by suicide, as we found out, was extremely common in Indian higher education¹⁵⁰, at various levels from the period before admission to university¹⁵¹ to the time on campus¹⁵². Studies in the field of social work and education clearly stated academic pressure, caste (Maurya, 2018) and ragging (Pandey, 2017) as three of the top “risk factors” behind higher education in India becoming a death trap for so many young people entering the system. To me, it is clear that the centrality of risk of death within the Indian educational experience, which could be relegated to the margins of a study of student movement, was actually at its very heart, and the suicide rates of students during the Pandemic¹⁵³ drove the point home about the specific nature of Indian education in general – the university,

¹⁴⁹ “A Suicide That Shook India.” Governance Now, January 18, 2017. <https://www.governancenow.com/news/regular-story/a-suicide-that-shook-india>.

¹⁵⁰ Puzhakkal, Dheeshma. “81 Students Committed Suicide on College Campuses in Three Years.” NewsMeter. NewsMeter, December 11, 2019. <https://newsmeter.in/81-students-committed-suicide-on-college-campuses-in-three-years/>.

¹⁵¹ “19 Students Killed Themselves in Kota, India's Coaching Capital, This Year.” The New Indian Express. The New Indian Express, December 27, 2018. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/dec/27/kota-toll-rising-each-year-1916935.html#:~:text=JAIPUR%3A%20As%20many%20as%2019,exams%20at%20these%20coaching%20centres.> .

¹⁵² Press Trust of India, “122 Students of IITs, IIMs Committed Suicide in Seven Years: Govt.” Business Standard. Business-Standard, December 20, 2021. https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/122-students-of-iits-iims-committed-suicide-in-seven-years-govt-121122000884_1.html#:~:text=According%20to%20data%20shared%20by,were%20reported%20during%20the%20period. .

¹⁵³ Chethan Kumar / TNN / Updated: Nov 11, 2021. “34 Indian Students Died by Suicide Each Day in Pandemic-Hit 2020: Bengaluru News - Times of India.” The Times of India. TOI. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/34-indian-students-died-by-suicide-each-day-in-pandemic-hit-2020/articleshow/87638828.cms>.

as well as the campus to a large extent, is a site of *access warfare*. There is exhaustive quantitative research available on the rising stress induced anxiety and comorbid mental health issues such as suicidality in PhD students in various parts of the world (Satinsky, Kimura, Kiang *et al*, 2021) as well as older research on the specific intersectionality dimensions of the problem such as higher suicide rates among indigenous students in universities in Canada (Wo, Anderson *et al*, 2019). A bulk of the literature, produced within departments of education and psychology, focuses on mental health factors such as precarity of the job market, academic pressures, competitive environments, and depressive episodes connected to academic perfectionism as risk factors of suicidality, indirectly pinning the responsibility of the problem on the student's relationship to standards of success and achievement without explicitly stating that these standards are the very basic tenets of the university itself. However, in the Indian case, the entrance of caste as a risk factor exposes the nature of the university itself as an institution of violence. Within public higher education institutions in India, there is constitutionally mandated reservations¹⁵⁴ for admission of students from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes, however, the reservations have been rendered into a flashpoint of debate about "merit" while the data clarifies that Universities in India flagrantly bend and break the constitutionally mandated law that aims towards substantive justice and access to education for historically marginalized communities. While the discussion around reservations in the Indian educational system is clearly outside the purview of this research, I want to point out that the implication of the research around caste discrimination in Indian universities comes the closest to exposing the fact that Universities in general, alongside the campus component that involves extra-institutional communities such as student-led social and political spaces are spaces

¹⁵⁴ "Reservation in Education System in India." Legal Service India - Law, Lawyers and Legal Resources. Accessed April 18, 2022. <https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-2326-reservation-in-education-system-in-india.html>.

that gatekeep and exclude people in accordance with the power structures of the society in which they are situated. The conditions of research and academic life within the university which leads to the high rates of death, specifically within students from marginalized backgrounds is connected not to the isolated conditions of bad mental health of the students themselves, but to the exacerbation of existing socio-economic and political struggles of these students by the existence of the university itself as a gatekept space for the construction of “merit”. With respect to the amount of resources that are devoted to not only the maintenance of academic institutions, but also to the maintenance of gatekeeping, as seen in the studies on the experiences of Dalit researchers within the field, and the sheer number of people who are ending their lives under the stress of the institution and the existence it generates, I would call the experience of the university as an experience in access warfare, with active attacks, counterattacks, strategies and casualties. In their seminal text *The University and its Undercommons* (2004), Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call for a disavowal of the professionalizing work of the University, and in the light of the presence of an “Undercommons”, a transient group of stakeholders who refuse the subjectivity of the university and are “beyond teaching”, the University itself. Loosely identifying this category of Undercommons as “*Maroon communities of composition teachers, mentorless graduate students, adjunct Marxist historians, out or queer management professors, state college ethnic studies departments, closed down film programs, visa-expired Yemeni student newspaper editors, historically black college sociologists, and feminist engineers*” (pp.104), Moten and Harney delineates them as those who, in spite of their involvement in the institution, are constantly given the qualification of “unprofessional” rendering them always “*at war*” with the acceptable mores of sociality within the *universitas*, which is the performances of professionalization inculcated into academics as a part of the teaching endeavor of universities.

What the beyond of teaching is really about is not finishing oneself, not passing, not completing; it's about allowing subjectivity to be unlawfully overcome by others, a radical passion and passivity such that one becomes unfit for subjection, because one does not possess the kind of agency that can hold the regulatory forces of subjecthood, and one cannot initiate the auto-interpellative torque that biopower subjection requires and rewards. (pp. 103)

In their critique of the naturalized acceptance of analysis, skepticism, categories, disciplines and other forms of rational knowledge production of the university, Moten and Harney argues that the very existence of the university as a space of professional arrangement of human thought, is servicing an obfuscation of the grave realities of racism, the prison industrial complex and other antihuman structures of death by rendering them fields of “critique”, a professional tool of academic adjustment, rather than structures to be razed to the ground. In a series of manifesto-like suggestions, such as “*The Only Possible Relationship to the University Today Is a Criminal One*”, they point, in essence, towards the endemic project of professionalized calibration of higher education itself, and speculate a not-yet-present geography of the Undercommons to give some clarity and an urgent political importance to the lives of those who are failing within the system. It is with this political gift that I am able to have some linguistic tools to describe the terms *access warfare* as not a symptom but a constitutive element of higher education itself. While in a sense, the openness of the Undercommons gives us the opportunity to speak of the Dalit experience in academia, the fact of comrade Rohith’s death grounds us outside the necropolitics of producing discourse in the wake of so many deaths. I want nothing to hold the center of my arguments, nothing but the death of comrade Rohith, as that is indeed the clarifying truth that dissolves every imagined boundary between university and society, campus and institution, merit/professionalism and the lack thereof, liberal safe haven and fascist public sphere, and life and death. As a historian looking at political performances of student movements, I willingly fail at designating a qualifier to

comrade Rohith's death – it is not an event, neither is it a source, however, it is also not just a “fact” as, in the many performative mournings that have become paradigmatic of politics and performance in the contemporary Indian campus, it has been designated an incredibly complex presence of a welcome and necessary continual hauntology.

Comrade Rohith's death sparked off multiple protests across various sites, both on Indian campuses and in extension, students occupying public spaces outside the university. His suicide note immediately became a canon text, read out and performed again and again not only within the contexts of student protests but also explicitly theatrical events within them – the boundaries between the two were completely dissolved by the text itself. Even in the many pieces of street and staged theater pieces, documentary films, and visual art pieces created in memory of comrade Rohith, his words were foregrounded as a complete truth in itself, almost always in totality. It is ethical that I follow this tradition. Here is the note left by comrade Rohith.

Good morning,

I would not be around when you read this letter. Don't get angry on me. I know some of you truly cared for me, loved me and treated me very well. I have no complaints on anyone. It was always with myself I had problems. I feel a growing gap between my soul and my body. And I have become a monster. I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan. At last, this is the only letter I am getting to write.

I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan.

I loved Science, Stars, Nature, but then I loved people without knowing that people have long since divorced from nature. Our feelings are second handed. Our love is constructed. Our beliefs colored. Our originality valid through artificial art. It has become truly difficult to love without getting hurt.

The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living.

I am writing this kind of letter for the first time. My first time of a final letter. Forgive me if I fail to make sense.

My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past.

May be I was wrong, all the while, in understanding world. In understanding love, pain, life, death. There was no urgency. But I always was rushing. Desperate to start a life. All the while, some people, for them, life itself is curse. My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past.

I am not hurt at this moment. I am not sad. I am just empty. Unconcerned about myself. That's pathetic. And that's why I am doing this.

People may dub me as a coward. And selfish, or stupid once I am gone. I am not bothered about what I am called. I don't believe in after-death stories, ghosts, or spirits. If there is anything at all I believe, I believe that I can travel to the stars. And know about the other worlds.

If you, who is reading this letter can do anything for me, I have to get 7 months of my fellowship, one lakh and seventy five thousand rupees. Please see to it that my family is paid that. I have to give some 40 thousand to Ramji. He never asked them back. But please pay that to him from that.

Let my funeral be silent and smooth. Behave like I just appeared and gone. Do not shed tears for me. Know that I am happy dead than being alive.

"From shadows to the stars."

Uma anna, sorry for using your room for this thing.

To ASA family, sorry for disappointing all of you. You loved me very much. I wish all the very best for the future.

For one last time,

Jai Bheem

I forgot to write the formalities. No one is responsible for my this act of killing myself.

No one has instigated me, whether by their acts or by their words to this act.

This is my decision and I am the only one responsible for this.

Do not trouble my friends and enemies on this after I am gone.

Simply put, this note, in spite of its designation as a suicide note, is such an explosive testament to a life and the extinguishment of the same, that it comes to inhabit a space within culture and politics where it has to be repeated in toto as an incantation. The various taboos that prescribe the limits of memorial work and ritual, because of its proximity to the dead, also prescribes that the letter be presented as a whole, something that the many performances that followed have also done. In keeping with Moten and Harney's disavowal of academic critique, I would argue that comrade Rohith and his note belongs inside the academy and its productions as a reminder of the limits of the institution and its work. And, in the repeated recitations of the note, it furthers the impossibility of creating categories to contain it – it is a suicide note by definition under law enforcement and journalists, and also a performance text by definition of activists and artists reproducing it through 'minimal' mediation, and also a manifesto for the Dalit student movements to rally around. The risk of me finding ways of placing comrade Rohith's note in my work does not escape me – as an upper caste born Hindu woman with substantial amounts of privilege within academia, this would inevitably be read as appropriation of Dalit deaths for the furthering of Upper caste discourse and privilege. This is to an extent absolutely true – I am unable to change the circumstances of my own birth, but I can understand, challenge and share my own caste privilege as a first act of dissent. I want to share this space of the word with comrade Rohith. I will still insist that I read and you read comrade Rohith's note, and we break the taboo around the suicide to expose that this suicide and the many more spoken of earlier in the chapter is at the very constitutive heart of academic

production, and constant incantation of comrade Rohith's words will make sure that we do not obscure the material reality of death by access warfare which the university tries to critically analyze out of visibility. In *From Text to Action* (1986), Paul Ricoeur designates some criteria to understand human action through the lens of textual readability. In the context of the matter of interpreting actions as text, he develops some criteria for analysis, one of which is "*Human Action as Open Work*" (pp. 326), elucidating that,

The meaning of human action is also something which is addressed to an indefinite range of possible "readers" ...That means that like a text, human action is an open work, the meaning of which is "in suspense". It is because it "opens up" new references and receives fresh relevance from them that human deeds are also waiting for fresh interpretations which decide their meaning. All significant deeds are, in this way, opened to this kind of practical interpretation through present praxis." (pp.327)

It is from this impulse that I cautiously read comrade Rohith's suicide note. Any attempt at reading into discourses around suicide, specifically with a focus on political and cultural performances, lead to highly pathologizing languages, which further increase the taboo around the topic, deeming it as disallowed to be spoken of without explicit references to the negative conditions of a person's interiority, anthropology-oriented ethnographic material, or from a medicalized and law-enforcement-like paternalistic perspective of "suicide prevention". There is some sort of agreement that suicide is a performed and watched act (Lester 2015), with multiple audiences prevailing upon the specificities of the act itself (Fratini, Hemer, 2020), and that it has been deployed in political performances within still taboo but recognizable registers such as self-immolation (Ziolkowski, 2020), (Mwuita, Ibigmani, 2021). However, in all of these works, the treatment of suicide as a closed event, with a steady run-up, a set

of actions and their consequences and afterlives, create a culture of artificial legibility that at once pretends to “normalize” and “make sense” and analyze the act through the functional forms of academia, and still maintain a taboo around actually placing the act within our everyday lives. In other words, there is a denial of historiographical charge in fixing a suicide as a closed event, which renders the current discourse around this topic an exercise in medical postmortem examination. In her paradigmatic essay *Can The Subaltern Speak* (1988), Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak offers a different approach – actually reading the suicide of a young woman of sixteen or seventeen, Bhuvanewari Bhaduri as an “open work”. In the absolute last pages of her essay, in order to elucidate the particular inabilities of postcolonial historiography schools such as Subaltern Studies to write a “history from below” because of the dubiousness of the primary sources themselves, having been engineered by multiple actants such as the British and many kinds of colonial elites and comprador native informants, Spivak describes briefly that Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, knowing well that her suicide would be read as an “*outcome of illegitimate passion*”, had waited for the onset of her period “*in an unemphatic, ad hoc subaltern rewriting of the social text of sati-suicide*” (pp.104). This speculative yet embodied reading of an act of suicide renders the act “open”, without the possibility of a necropolitical charge which would deem this as an act with a fixed *meaning*. In the openness of the act itself lies a simultaneous embracing of the presence of death and a refusal of analysis, which I believe, is *haunting*. In *Specters of Marx* (1994), Jacques Derrida invokes the anxieties regarding time and temporal arrangement of linearity with respect to Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History* (1992) by reading into Hamlet’s most famous monologue a generative category of the present as a site of a “verbal body” that is haunted by its specters.

“In a predicative proposition that refers to time, and more precisely to the present-form of time, the grammatical present of the verb to be, in the third person indicative, seems to offer a predestined

hospitality to the return of any and all spirits, a word that one needs merely to write in the plural in order to extend a welcome there to specters.” (pp. 61)

As such, Derrida attempts at a reckoning with Fukuyama’s reductionist approach to history, whereby particular social formations, dubbed as closed events, such as the triumph of Western liberal democracy and the “fall” of the Soviet Union ushered in a reorganization of historical units such as events themselves. Derrida pushes the specterlike qualities of history, following Marx, where the present, and the interpretation of the present, is constantly involved in “metamorphosis” and acquires a ghostly quality.

“If we have been insisting so much since the beginning on the logic of the ghost, it is because it points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic, the logic that distinguishes or opposes effectivity or actuality (either present, empirical, living—or not) and ideality (regulating or absolute non-presence).” (pp. 78)

There is clarity that within the work of reading the present as a “closed event” as opposed to an “open work”, there is the workings of ideology, and therefore, as a historiographer of student movements, I try to reckon with the presence of comrade Rohith in his words within the rubric of haunting. It is true that in the whole letter there is a joint presence of complete understanding of the present in action (*I am writing this kind of letter for the first time. My first time of a final letter*) as well as the acute dissatisfaction with the artificial linearity of time as propounded by the predestination ideology of caste (*My birth is my fatal accident*). Alongside is the invocation of the very basic constitution of time itself – the cosmos, that comes to my comrade via the writing of Carl Sagan. Via word. Comrade Rohith transforms into the same medium – the word – and travels to the stars to know other worlds, and stays with us as the word. It is important for me to note that comrade Rohith himself states clearly that he

does not believe in ghosts and spirits. And it is not my intention to declare him as such, as he has remained, among other identities, as *word*. And it is the word that haunts us, because of which the words can only be performed in totality, as the words themselves. Yet, because of its acute inability to fit into arrangement categories of historical studies, the words remain an “open work”. Situating in relief to the indigenous genocide at the structure of the Western world, Eve Tuck and C. Ree (2013) organize an explicitly decolonial meaning to haunting, which “*is the relentless remembering and reminding that will not be appeased by settler society’s assurances of innocence and reconciliation*” (pp.642) and qualify further that “*Haunting doesn’t hope to change people’s perceptions, nor does it hope for reconciliation. Haunting lies precisely in its refusal to stop*” (ibid). In the context of the presence of comrade Rohith’s text in this space of my text (which is now a text with at least three people in it – myself, comrade Rohith, and you) as well as the repeated full-text performance of the so-called “last letter”, there is the very clear refusal to stop – a performative repertoire of haunting in which there is someone else constantly there alongside the performer and the spectator, being made present through some other kind of body – not the body of the performer, no, but in the case of comrade Rohith, a ‘verbal body’ at one with the presentness of the word. Comrade Rohith’s text was being read out in multiple protest and performance contexts – there are theater reviews and billings of *I Am Rohith Vemula*¹⁵⁵ directed by theater activist Ramachandran Mokeri at the International Theater Festival of Kerala (ITFoK) in 2017, *The Last Letter*¹⁵⁶ by Hyderabad-based “amateur” theater group Lord Chamberlain’s Men in 2016, *Nakshatra Dhaare*¹⁵⁷ by Theater Re-acts and directed by

¹⁵⁵ “‘Street Plays’ at the International Theatre Festival of Kerala.” The Theatre Times, March 27, 2017. <https://thetheatretimes.com/street-plays-international-theatre-festival-kerala/>.

¹⁵⁶ Karri, Sriram. “In Hyderabad, a Play Takes a Look at Rohith Vemula’s Words and Tormented Thoughts.” Scroll.in. Scroll.in, May 8, 2016. <https://scroll.in/article/807754/in-hyderabad-a-play-takes-a-look-at-rohith-vemulas-words-and-tormented-thoughts>.

¹⁵⁷ “Rohith Vemula Takes Centrestage Again.” The New Indian Express. The New Indian Express, June 17, 2016. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/bengaluru/2016/jun/18/Rohith-Vemula-takes-centrestage-again-941507.html>.

Swara, in Freedom Park auditorium in Bangalore in 2016, *Main Bhi Rohith Vemula!* (I too am Rohith Vemula!)¹⁵⁸ directed by Manjul Bhardwaj in 2022 in Mumbai, and established agit-prop street theater group of Delhi Jana Natya Manch's *The Last Letter* in 2016. I myself, along with my comrades Jyothidas KV and Prabhash Tripathy, created and performed *Stardust* in 2018, at Philosophy Unbound, Berlin, Germany. Apart from these, there were multiple renditions of the readings on social media channels, some of which are still available, and the letter also played a central role in the film *The Unbearable Being of Lightness* by Ramachandra PN, also from 2016. The information that can be gleaned from these reviews, very much describes the performances of various actors in each of the pieces as highly detailed dramatic readings. In Vikram Phukan's review of *I am Rohith Vemula* at ITFoK for The Theater Times, he highlights the "theatrics of it all" with a brief description. A polystyrene cadaver of a calf was butchered to start the street theater piece, and given as "offering" to onlookers, after which Ramachandran Mokeri, clad in "vintage rock-star" attire, led a procession through the streets of Thrissur, while strumming a guitar and speaking out the words of comrade Rohith's note in a guttural voice, through several loudspeakers. The procession was made up of actors who were in "various stages of undress, were branded with black markings, their keen dark eyes glinted with deprivation, and their lips were a trembling red. Some were dragged across the road, others lashed." Phukan also mentions that the audience clapped, cheered and sloganeered, "but perhaps also took home some of the pain and the agony". Sriram Karri's review of *The Last Letter* for Scroll describe a three-person act, where one actor plays Rohith and the other two anthropomorphize his interiority – "two shadows who voice and counter Rohith's inner divide, chaos, pain and anger." Director Riyaz Usman is quoted saying that he saw a reading of the letter on social media by another actor and wanted "to do more, to give it a dramatic

¹⁵⁸ Hastakshep News, "The Evoke of an Artistic Rebel 'Main Bhi Rohit Vemula !'." hastakshep news. hastakshep news, January 9, 2022. <https://www.hastakshepnews.com/the-evoke-of-an-artistic-rebel-main-bhi-rohit-vemula/>.

extra”, adding two more characters who would recite poems strategically breaking through the dramatic pauses in the reading of the entire suicide note. Usman’s interview shows an artistic intention of initiating dialogue with the audience and a call for “healing” by using theater as “social dialogue” – “*Maybe we can heal, campus after campus, with play after play.*” *Nakshatrada Dhaare* focused on the theme of an individual dreams being crushed by the system and the unique struggles of Dalit students within academic spaces. *Main Bhi Rohith Vemula!* staged comrade Rohith’s plight within the setting of a jail cell, and in a strange twist, it was revealed that this was a student called Rohit Singh, an Upper caste name, signaling the apparent widespreadness of comrade Rohith’s situation. I would like to briefly analyze two shows of *The Last Letter* by Jana Natya Manch – one in 2016 in Jana Natya Manch’s space Studio Safdar in North East Delhi, and one in 2017 January in JNU, in front of the administrative block, the designated site of protest since 2016 on campus. The performance was created in the joint memory of comrade Rohith and comrade Safdar Hashmi, one of the founders of Jana Natya Manch, a communist revolutionary theater practitioner who was murdered¹⁵⁹ in 1989 by workers of the then ruling party, the Indian National Congress, while performing their play *Halla Bol!* In the working-class neighbourhood of Ghazipur. This was explicitly stated before both of the performances mentioned here, however the play evolved and the performance changed, not only through artistic intentions, but also through the different spectators for the different shows. In the first show at Studio Safdar, the piece had three actors – a young man, an older man and a woman – comrade Moloyashree Hashmi, the influential theater activist, a leading member of Jana Natya Manch (JANAM) and widow of comrade Safdar Hashmi. The street theater repertoire of JANAM, which has been active in the political theater scene of the country since 1978, is extremely well-established and

¹⁵⁹ Deshpande, Sudhanva. “Safdar's Killing Had Touched a Raw Nerve in the Country'-Revisiting the Murder of a Playwright and Activist.” *The Caravan*, January 1, 2020. <https://caravanmagazine.in/arts/safdar-killing-touched-raw-nerve-in-country>.

highly identifiable, not only because of its survival through so many years, but also because of its dissemination through training networks of collegiate and amateur theater spaces such as open workshops and political meetings. *The Last Letter* remained loyal to this – non-existent costuming (one saffron *dupatta*, denoting the Hindutva establishment, saffron being the identifier colour of the Indian Right Wing), minimal to none props (three chairs, one *dupatta* and papers), actors changing roles, street-level volume in voice projection, a complete disregard for frontality towards the audience, i.e. a more multidirectional blocking, heavy usage of Hindi and Urdu poetry, and the most identifiable of all – the use of the *daphli*, a large tambourine-like drum that has become coterminous with the street theater as well as political demonstration repertoires of India. The young man, without being explicitly identified as comrade Rohith, standing mid- “stage”, read out his letter, in non-linear bits, starting with “*I always wanted to be a writer...a writer of science like Carl Sagan*” as the other two actors held up a blue cloth (blue being the identifying colour of Dalit and Ambedkarite political movements) as his backdrop. As he sat down on the chair in the middle, the cloth was positioned over his head, like a sky, which he reached above and touched. As he raised the slogan in the letter *Jai Bheem*, the cloth was brought down to cover his head. He raised the cloth and peeked out, taking the lines “*I forgot to write the formalities...*” and once the formalities were done, the cloth wrapped his head, and the two other actors wound up the edges around his neck, and “comrade Rohith” hung his head. The off-stage *daphli* beat one beat. Moloyashree Hashmi started reciting the poem *O Mrityu* addressed to death, who is running to the poet very fast, as they are asked to slow down and acknowledge the public humiliation faced by the poet first. After this, the piece followed the course of several readings – letters sent by comrade Rohith to the university administration, letters sent by the Hyderabad Central University Vice Chancellor to the Minister of Education, and letters sent to the University from the Ministry for expediting of the “case”. These were interspersed with Moloyashree

Hashmi continuing her recitation of *O Mrityu*, and each of the official letters were dramaturgically “announced” (“letter to so and so from so and so”) by “comrade Rohith”, still sitting with his face covered in the blue cloth, and a beat of the *daphli*. While the “official” texts were being read by the two other actors, who would make use the saffron *dupatta* to symbol their role as the Right-Wing establishment, the words of the letter were being uttered by the young man, who would reveal his face and change his position to the other chairs and address the audience directly, taking the lines slowly and deliberately, with pronounced eye contact. The third text was that of poetry, spoken mostly by Moloyashree Hashmi, – first *O Mrityu*, and then a poem about a mythological event in the Valmiki Ramayana (the canonical text underpinning the social engineering project of the Hindutva *body politik*), the killing of a the ascetic Shambuka by the hero Rama, for performing the holy act of *tapas* (loosely translated as worship, by me who is untrained in Hindu cosmological practice) despite being from a “shudra” caste – the lowest caste in the Hindutva *body politik* as prescribed by the ancient Indian text of dubious historicity, the *Manusmriti*. The “climax” of the piece came with “comrade Rohith” taking the lines directly addressed as certain responsibilities to be carried out postmortem – giving Ramji money, collecting his fellowship amount from the University and giving it to his family, and apologizing to Umanna for using their room for “this thing”, while the actor slowly took off the face covering *dupatta* (alternately covering his face and slung around his neck loosely) and slowly folded it and kept it neatly on a chair. And then “comrade Rohith” exited the stage. As a post-script, another letter was introduced, read by Moloyashree Hashmi, a letter from Ann Druyan, Carl Sagan’s widow, in which she speaks of getting to know about comrade Rohith’s life on the occasion of his death, and the complete waste of human life.

In a 1988 essay celebrating a decade of JANAM, comrade Safdar Hashmi wrote “*the political pamphlet, the wall poster, the agitational speech, the political demonstration, these have all*

gone into creating the diverse forms adopted by our street theater". True to this impulse, the usage of multiple textual sources, and the deployment of the specific semiotics of the JANAM repertoire made the show particularly suited towards an audience, at least within Northern India, almost generically familiar, and as JANAM's other leading actor Sudhanva Deshpande noted right before the second show in JNU, the group is aware of its position within the political and performative history of the country and its campuses. This show took place in the politically charged atmosphere of a university that was rendered into the proverbial Left-Wing bastion of "anti-national" and reprobate activities by the Hindutva public sphere, and the players were only Sudhanva and Moloyashree – two extremely familiar faces on campus. At the very beginning, Sudhanva addressed the crowd of students sitting all around the administrative block space, on the stairs and on the pavements, noting two specific things. One was a note in memoriam of comrade Safdar Hashmi and worker comrade Ram Bahadur who was also murdered during *Halla Bol*, specifically stating that this was a show on their death anniversary, and then making a memorial note about comrade Rohith. The second one was to specifically address the history of the campus and JANAM's role in it – he mentioned that the group had been performing in JNU for the last forty years, way before the administrative block was even built, referring to an older geography of the campus divided by "up-campus" and "down-campus", underlining the resilience of the campus and its power as well as the resilience of JANAM and its politics in the face of the Right-Wing JNU administration inside the building, who had just one year before called the police on its own student community, leading to arrests of student union president Kanhaiya Kumar and other student activists Umar Khalid, Anirban Bhattacharya and suchlike. In principle, this was an explicit political alignment of two repertoires with porous boundaries – agitational resistance politics of student movements in JNU and agit-prop theater of JANAM – clearly identified within a performative space, and clapped and cheered by

the campus community, who had a year ago re-designated the space of protest in front of the admin block as “Freedom Square”, leading to the administration launching a facelift program by placing many big potted plants, as well as non-assembly rules to prevent assembly in the area. With this as the framing, and an achievement of political affect of hope that indicated the relative newness of the Right-Wing presence on campus as opposed to the ideas of the Left, the two actors started the performance. While the texts remained the same, it was Sudhanva, a white haired middle-aged and instantly recognizable man who took on the role of “comrade Rohith”, and after the first lines, covered his own face with the *dupatta*, which was no longer blue, and no longer used as the sky. Another specific innovation in this performance was that after covering his face, “comrade Rohith” was seen rotating his covered face very slowly, in a very long struggle – the instantaneous hanging of the head to the beat of the *daphli* was gone. The two actors took turns to read out the three different kinds of text – the suicide note, the poetry and the official history of events in the form of administrative communication of all sorts. It is somehow very telling that even in *Stardust*, which was conceptualized by Jyothidas KV, Prabhash Tripathy and myself, all JNU graduates, sitting in faraway Berlin in 2018 (I watched the show of *Last Letter* in JNU in January), also used three texts – the suicide note, the official documentation of the University Grants Commission (appellate authority and policy making body of the Indian ministry of Education) that spoke of privatization of education, and the feminist science fiction story *Sultana’s Dream* from 1905 by Bengali Muslim women’s activist Begum Rokey Sakhawat Hossain. Even in *The Last Letter* performance of Hyderabad by another group, there was a triad of actors and three chairs, reading three different forms of text in contrast to each other. The primacy of the word, specifically the written document, was constantly being invoked in every frontier of the moment and its aftermath. The government, led by the Minister of Education, launched an investigation on the actual caste status of comrade

Rohith, asking for certificates and other documented identifiers, in a bid to deny that this was indeed a case of institutional violence against a Dalit student. And artists were also “reconstructing” the death in a post mortem fashion, by timelining various letters and other written material and putting them in relationship to each other to create particular affects amongst particular audiences. In short, everyone was a historiographer! However, it was mostly in the film *The Unbearable Being of Lightness* that the acute limits of this historiographical project played itself out. An incredible testimony to the fragility of reconstruction, the film “documented” a film workshop on Hyderabad Central University campus, led by the director Ramachandra PN, who visited the campus in the aftermath of the death, as the initial waves of protest had “cooled off”. The main “plot” of the film was a film school exercise taught in the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII, from earlier), the director’s alma mater, called “actualities”. Film students were asked to keenly observe the sights and sounds of a space of their own choosing, the same one for everyone, and they were to write exactly what they saw and heard in a detailed description. In the film, we see a group of students, still reeling in the shock of comrade Rohith’s death, trying their hand at describing in detail the “actualities” of a space, a part of the campus called “shopcom”, a shopping complex in front of which comrade Rohith and his comrades protested and lived before his death, and where the students built a “*velivada*”, a word used to denote a “Dalit Ghetto”. The voices of the students are heard, as the camera faces the roof, without showing their faces. There are very few faces in the film – mostly belonging to comrade Rohith, on posters, banners, on the shops in shopcom and in his plaster of Paris bust, installed by students at the *velivada*. The students closely describe the space, giving us not only access to their gazes, without revealing themselves to our gaze, but also the feelings that drive those gazes – observations such as a student distributing political leaflets turns into an interior monologue about whether the student really feels anything and whether they believe in the words of the

leaflet. There are long and slow shots of the campus – dogs, canteens, young students laughing together, the *velivada*, the performances of protest in the *velivada*, students visiting the ATM to withdraw money. However, diverse impulses shoot through the basic spatio-temporal diagesis of the campus. There are the students in the classroom; there is the shopcom and the *velivada*; there is the narrator who speaks of an article by journalist Sudipto Mondal who went on a search to find out about comrade Rohith's Dalit identity all the way to his adoptive grandmother's house; there are the performances at the *velivada*; there is actor Saumesh Bangera sitting inside a shopping mall in Hyderabad, reading out comrade Rohith's letter almost into a hidden camera; and then there is presence of the unseen filmmaker with whom we take a flight to and from Hyderabad as bookends to his experience. The soundscape is dominated by many things – the myriad voices of the students reading their actuality exercise notes, and a song sung at the *velivada* by a political performance group called Hirawal (we also eventually see the troupe on video) as an aural leitmotif, the reading of comrade Rohith's last letter by Saumesh Bangera, and the single note from a high pitch drone instrument keeping intermittent beat. And these are just an inventory of the explicit diagesis, the *mise-en-scene* as such. In simultaneity with the students going deeper and deeper into the details of their actuality exercise, moving from the logistics of description to the inevitable limberness of subjectivity, the audience experiences the complex phenomenon that is involved in trying to tell an objective account of things, pointing straight to the limits and fetish of factuality that came in the wake of comrade Rohith's death, where the government and the Hindu fascist public sphere put all their resources into checking the facts of his "Dalit-ness". In this beautifully captured process of clarification, the porosity of the imagined borders between the campus and the "outside" was also made completely evident – the extremely fluid in and out of every layer of narrative, from the students, from Sudipto Mondal, his interviews with comrade Rohith's brother Raja, the incredible power of the political

song, simply did not allow the construction of a fixed time, space, or story. It was the presence of comrade Rohith's photos, his bust, and his words, delivered by the obscured face of Bangera, almost as a secret in a low voice, that grounded the film, grounding it strongly in representations, uttered name and the "verbal body" of comrade Rohith, which is present with us in this space as well. In the felt absence of the comfort of fixed sources, the historiographer has the option of finding a body, which is a most disloyal source for the purposes of history, but certainly the progenitor of affect.

The question of ethics is central to an attempted historiography in the context of the death of comrade Rohith, and there are several already existing debates regarding the efficacy and ethics of history writing of marginalized communities and the problem of endemic elitism in academia, i.e., the very case of access warfare. In his paradigmatic 2002 essay *How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences*, Gopal Guru clearly illustrates the hierarchical relationship between theoretical research, reserved for a few "pundits" and empirical research for the others, precisely connecting it to the sociopolitical and economic distances between the high caste Brahmin and the oppressed caste Shudra. Guru brings forth the hypocrisy of the "egalitarian principle" that seems to govern social science theory within Indian academia but cannot cover social science practice because of the systemic and historic exclusion of Dalits not only from institutions of theory but also particular forms of labour that involves innovative and abstract thinking. Guru is able to point out the specific means through which the hierarchy of different kinds of knowledge play out, an explicitly extractive colonial diad –

"Most dalits are vulnerable to the attraction of temporal power that does not flow from theoretical practice but from what are considered to be the more glamorous and easy spheres of mobility. This might include formal politics and networking with institutions that demand that intellectuals always be ready with data." (pp. 5006)

And this is only the explication of the workings of access warfare. What we are interested in is the specific historiographical response, a substantive response of justice to these acute lacunae within academia in general and the unavailability of discursive tools that are fitting for both ethical research methods as well as qualitative enquiries into disciplinary concerns such as “who is this historiography really serving?”. With full acknowledgement that Dalit scholars such as comrade Rohith Vemula have to fight extreme battles to do research and live their lives inside and outside the university, I am still insistent on interrogating the very idea of a historical source, a basic tenet of historiographical work, by introducing the suicide note in the form of a verbal body. The locus of its status as the body is somewhere in the relationship between its performances and the repertoires of reading it produces in excess of its immediate formal fixing, its status as an “open work” and the presence of the text itself. This, to me, is an ethical reckoning with historiography, through the disloyal methodologies of the Undercommons and the repetitive inevitability of haunting. In an absolutely crystal-clear essay from 2015, Kalyan Das looks at the historiographical debates around Subaltern Studies and its distinct inability to address the Dalit experience. Quoting Subaltern Studies historian Gyanendra Pandey’s work on B. R. Ambedkar, in which he liberally uses the terms “Common Sense of the Modern”, Das critiques this very presupposition of a unified experience of colonial modernity and at least a nominally equal level of trust in the state by Dalits and non-Dalits, for purposes of launching the Subaltern critique on colonial as well as Marxist “elite” historiography. He also points out the Subaltern Studies tendency to read Ambedkar as a part of the modernity moment, on the basis of visual markers such as his attire, his status as the writer of the Indian Constitution and so forth, and their ways of appropriating this Dalit icon within the fold of liberalism. In shortly surveying the atrocities that Dalits face and its contradiction to “celebrated” Dalit literature (literature is cast as a viable historiographical source in Subaltern Studies) as a “rags-

to-riches” story, Das argues that the Dalit political movement’s extremely tenuous relationship to statist ideologies has to be forefronted instead of the old nodes of engagement with the Dalit experiences such as “education”, “self-respect” and other extremely reductive readings of B.R Ambedkar and Dalit politics. Das is also able to point out that this is a proposition and a process, and as such a fixation neither of the disciplinary expectations of historiography nor the imagination of the “Dalit community” is as yet possible, and in the acknowledgement of heterogeneity of context, there is historiographical possibility. In the context of the historiography of student movements, which is loosely (at this point) what I do, the conversation about caste, and precisely the conversation about comrade Rohith, is not a highly contextual “Indian” problem. This is not only because of the work of Critical Caste Studies as an emergent field of scholarship that speaks of the global relevance of caste as a category of subjection (Shankar, Gupta, 2017, pp.3), but because the specificities of the contemporary university as a space, globally, disallows a “clean” historiography – there has to be an honest encounter with the mode of labour within academia which renders students chronically mentally ill and at risk of self-harm and death. This, as a prominently emerging theme within education bears upon the status and relevance of the university itself, an institution that we hear comrade Rohith wish death upon in one of the letters in JANAM’s play. And, closer to the home of this chapter, it is then also historiographical issue that points towards not only a crisis in the field but within the projects of narrativizing student resistance itself. From a performance historiography point of view, with a specific focus on the concept of the repertoire, the tenuous structural relationship of erasure and selective visibility used by Das is amply clear in this small nexus of the performances. In the JANAM performances, there are clear historiographical charges deployed by the artists themselves, which absolutely situate them squarely within a campus repertoire (with respect to JNU), which at that particular moment of performance was denoted as the site for the

contestation of citizenship and nationalism. It has to be noted that comrade Rohith was a member of the Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) and the designated “originary event” in the eventalization of the death was that he and his comrades had organized a discussion session on the death penalty verdict of Yakub Memon¹⁶⁰, convicted in the case of the 1993 Bombay blasts, and had been confronted and attacked by the student wing of the BJP, the Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), who had alleged that they held a funeral prayer¹⁶¹. This would lead to the ABVP members alleging that the ASA had physically assaulted them, a resultant institutional enquiry, and subsequent stoppage of fellowship money for the ASA activists and expulsion from the student hostel, and them setting up a tent to live on campus and start a protest hunger strike. In conjunction, it also has to be noted that in JNU, a cultural event on the political status of Kashmir was held, which led to the subsequent allegations of anti-national activities against the student body and the arrest of the aforementioned student activists. From a historiographical point of view, one can *choose* to read both the moments in the light of the larger conversation around the Hindu fascist public sphere and its systematic attacks on public education institutions, an accurate, if not liberal history of the student movement. Within this, the generated communal space of the campus as a space and a repertoire for resistance definitely exists and functions as such, with its coterminous historiographical charges of the specific bodily subjectivities of student labour that we discussed in the second chapter. However, the death of comrade Rohith completely escapes the denomination of event, and the only ephemera that has within itself some sovereignty is the highly polyvocal text, which haunts. And the closer we look at this historiographical source, the more we realize that the theater performances spoken of

¹⁶⁰ “India: Execution of Yakub Memon Cruel and Inhuman.” Amnesty International, August 17, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/07/india-execution-of-yakub-memon-cruel-and-inhuman/>.

¹⁶¹ Janyala, Sreenivas. “Behind Rohit Vemula’s Suicide: How Hyderabad Central University Showed Him the Door.” The Indian Express, January 20, 2016. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/behind-dalit-student-suicide-how-his-university-campus-showed-him-the-door/>.

above are reliant on *established* repertoires of the street-play and its political and performative affinities to those of the campus to generate, again and again, pre-ordained political affect. It almost becomes a *genre*, with the inclusion of new slogans within the mainstream Leftist resistant spaces from Ambedkarite politics (such as *Jai Bheem*, translated to Victory to Bheemrao Ambedkar, *neel salam* or “blue” salute in conjunction with red salute) somehow subsuming the highly specific histories of the Dalit experience within a “one-size-fits-all”, essentialized idea of the Leftist student struggle, something that is perhaps already a political strategy to combat the overwhelm engineered by the Right Wing. In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), Peggy Phelan foregrounds the limits of existing representational registers within the Left, rightfully pointing out that it leads to an extractive, surveillance-based visibility politics of “other” bodies –

“...progressive cultural activists have staked a huge amount on increasing and expanding the visibility of racial, ethnic, and sexual “others.” It is assumed that disenfranchised communities who see their members within the representational field will feel greater pride in being part of such a community and those who are not in such a community will increase their understanding of the diversity and strength of such communities.” (pp. 7) This is precisely Das’s contention as well, which leads to his call for a Dalit historiography. Phelan produces a novel rider as a possible alternative – the possibility of entertaining the act of writing about performance itself as a transformative act of performance – *The act of writing toward disappearance, rather than the act of writing toward preservation* (pp.148). This calls for a fundamental revision in the work of historiography itself, especially within a theater and performance perspective, where the very idea of a “source”, because of its “non-reproductive” ontology, dissolves. I am not going to claim that all sources are like that, however, I will go so far as to say that comrade Rohith’s letter is an act of writing towards disappearance, not only of himself (this we are still unable to do), but also of the university as an institution itself. Nuance is the absolute basis of effective criticism

as well as ethical politics, and echoing Das, I would also argue that in the face of a steady marginalization of Dalit historiography discourse and its makings, as an Upper Caste privileged historiographer working within Western academia, it is an ethical point to be able to say that the carceral and necropolitical circumstances of higher education urges us to encounter the endemic blindnesses and historical biases within history writing, even within Marxist - trained academia, and the existence of certain truths such as the death of comrade Rohith continue to haunt, perhaps initially for purposes of disavowal of the academe, and eventually for the destruction of the same.

Conclusion: From Substantive to Transformative – Writing In the Performed Archive of Survival

There is a story about a Rabbi by the name of Loew, chief office-bearer at the Altneu synagogue of Prague in the 16th century, who was called upon to animate a creature, a *golem*, out of clay, in order to protect the Jewish ghetto from a pogrom launched under the aegis of the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II (Deckel, Gurley, 2013). Rabbi Leow had apparently created a “servant” from the clay of the banks of the Vlatva, and through the insertion of incantation and script into its mouth, had brought it to life. This servant had assisted the Rabbi in household work and had been de-animated (the words taken out of its mouth/ the magic letter erased off its forehead) for Sabbath. On one weekend, however, the rabbi had not de-activated the golem, who proceeded to go renegade and wantonly destroy public property and endanger lives. The Rabbi, through struggle, could finally defeat the golem, and hid its body in the *genizah* – a storage unit in a synagogue attic or cellar for old manuscripts and spiritual objects, an archive. The legend around the Altneu synagogue involves the ever-present threat and

possibility of bringing back to life the golem from the archive (Rubin, 2013), including accounts of latter-day rabbis attempting such acts (Kieval, 1997). The undeniable powers of mystical narratives with heavy deployment of metaphor have rendered the entirety of the golem construction – the origins of the story, the controversies around veracity, historicity, historiography, the contents of the story themselves, the aftermath, the afterlives and so on – into a veritable industry of speculative knowledge production. The exceptionalized identity of the Jewish people as real and mythical survivors of persecution and repeated attempts of obliteration has also played a huge role in loading on to the story of the golem and the rabbi many different meanings and themes, creating a discursive fountainhead that is simply too rich to be arranged and rationed in accordance with the strictures of disciplinary boundaries of history, literature, narration, folklore, propaganda, biographies and suchlike. Everything about the story constantly escapes each of these disciplinary islands, from one to the other, starting from the name *Altneu* synagogue, the totemism of the letter and word as incantations with the power of reanimation, to the genizah as a storage unit of monsters from the past that can be reanimated through magic. To requote the oft-quoted observation by Walter Benjamin about the porosity between historical work and storytelling (with his specific commentary on the writing of historian Herodotus), a story “resembles the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day” (1936, pp.89). And the story of the golem is exactly one such germinative, generative container of meaning, history, myth and experience that I would like to anoint this historiographical work with, at the very end. The reason for this is firstly emblematic and metaphorical, and I am indeed a believer in the power of a good metaphor, because, without bearing guilt for sounding too grandiose, *unapologetically*, I am able to say that this is very much an exercise in trying to exhume a golem, for possible and potential resurrection (out of the scope of this study, but possible within the general scope of political practice that

this work at once services and feeds on) from the heap of old knowledge inside the genizah, a gatekept institutionalized archival space that somehow acknowledges and profits from the possibility of having the golem body, but is never ready to exhume it. To ground this metaphor in terms of the present work, I understand the *genizah* to be, at once, the University as a space of production of letters, the archive, as a receptacle of letters, historiography and history-writing, especially about socio-political struggles as a dominant practice of producing letters, and their relationship of information extraction (“object of study”) with socio-political movements that they, as a part of the liberal discourse, aim to understand, engage with and possibly support. In my experience within these circles on the Venn diagram, what I have observed is the reluctance and hesitation to dissolve the imagined borders between them, and clearly admitting to the role of practices towards socio-political change as an active space for deeply embodied knowledge production. Academia need not vampirize on this to reify its own “relevance” in the face of neoliberalization, fund cuts and other inevitabilities of loss under capitalism. It does not seem intellectually tenable actually to sustain these border regimes between the body and the letter, the movement and the university, and this is the reason why the study of student movements is interesting, as just by that self-description, it places itself somewhere vaguely within the dissolution of the Venn diagram. In my research, the imagined hierarchy between a “performance” within the cultural sphere as a source and a “political movement” within the public sphere is constantly questioned, as my own experience of being a body immersed in both these spaces is not able to hold them in divorce with each other. Perhaps this is a problem for academia, that the body is constantly dissolving boundaries of discipline, which necessitates a regime of differentiation, of meaning, importance, naming and suchlike. The golem’s servant body has to be a *dead body* that can only be resuscitated through lettered incantation, deployed by a rabbi, which, even as an act that has not yet been done, is threatening in its possibility. In spite of the

many layers of distancing between the body and the letter, however, creative practice remains a frontier where these two are routinely deployed at the same time, with a commitment towards stories as receptacles of historical knowledge. If theater and performance studies is, among others, a field in which this suturing happens of the gash between the body and the letter, by taking into seriousness the work of creative work of the body, it would have to commit to relinquishing the role of the rabbi, and admit that the golem is neither dead, nor servant, nor subject to the letter for its life. Because, as has been proved by the community who built this fantastic tale of resuscitation, *survival* is an incredible continuous creative practice of the body, a daily regeneration of the golem that protects itself in the face of historical annihilation. The *genizah* of the archive, of history, of academic knowledge production, need not draw its power from its exhaustiveness, by proving *how much* of knowledge is there, and continuously adding to the same in procedural ways of work, but can actually confront its limit that it has only allowed itself to hold the dead golem, in spite of its survival in the everyday. This opens up the possibility of academia to hold, pass on, and learn from stories of survival and dignity, for what could be a better use of history?

I am actually not interested in arguing for the validity of the discipline of theater and performance studies, history, historiography, or even the existence of universities as such. There are many other people who have done that, and I feel that there is no need. If this thesis has turned into a rant against the border regimes of academic disciplines, it is not because I am necessarily committed to making academia a “better place”, but because it confuses me profoundly that one has to try so extremely hard to state a sort of truism that is largely accepted within contemporary social movements – that knowledge production is not an accessible space and is being gatekept from those who produce knowledges of survival, i.e. marginalized people living and existing and leaving incredible knowledge for the world to encounter. This is what de Sousa Santos

(2014) eruditely calls “monocultures of knowledge” (pp. 21). Instead of being able to embrace the wisdoms offered *in situ*, the existent inside-outside geography of the University elects towards an extractivist, fracking-type methodology, where life has to fit categories – an impossible condition. Through my own situation in this, I have tried, to the best of my abilities, to insert stories of survival, in connection to the University (and stories of violence and death and the survivals through the same), without taking too much pressure about making them fit or make “sense”, having some level of naive faith that they are receptacles of wisdom in their very report on the body – golem bodies resuscitating other golem bodies. And the letter, in the form of *writing*, is the existent methodology (among others) in this resuscitation project that is able to point to a life of connectedness of knowledge production between activism, art production and scholarship.

Sometime in May 2020, in the middle of pandemic isolation, feminist activist and my friend from Delhi University, Devangana Kalita, got arrested, alongside her comrade Natasha Narwal, on false charges of connection to the anti-Muslim pogrom of 2020 in Northeast Delhi, where they had been active in mobilization of the women of the community as a part of their intersectional feminist organization Pinjra Tod (“Break the Cage”)¹⁶². I had known these women closely since my DU campus days, and we had witnessed each other and mattered to each other in many practices of political and personal survival – from heartbreaks to privatization of universities, dealing with our own sexual identities (at that point homosexuality was still a crime in India), and ultimately the election of fascism. We were student comrades, the campus was the space where we met and grew, and the bonds were strengthened every single time we met, even after years, in the invocation and communal construction of the campus as a liberatory timespace that had made sure we met and mattered to each other. The

¹⁶² Sharma, Nalini. “Pinjra Tod Activists Devangana Kalita, Natasha Narwal Granted Bail, Delhi HC Hails Right to Protest.” India Today, June 15, 2021. <https://www.indiatoday.in/law/story/pinjra-tod-activists-devangana-kalita-natasha-narwal-granted-bail-1814937-2021-06-15>.

news of the arrests in the middle of the night, sitting in Berlin, was discombobulating enough, and then my highly distressed mother called me up to tell me that it was somehow safer for me to remain in Germany, and not return to India, as she was entirely sure that eventually I would be picked up by cops as well. My identity as a “student”, on a “student visa” in this country, would have to be really overstated, and I would have to become a productive member of academia to secure a job etc, in order for me to bring into action my mother’s distressed directive. However, I was so highly traumatized at the time, recovering from interpersonal violence as well as the violence of existent fascism, I could not find any words to write. There was a substantial break in my academic life, a break that I realize was neither registered nor addressed by general academic writing that I was expected to do. As a historian, and a survivor, and an activist, and an artist, this was not merely a question of belting out some semi-original ideas for eventual scrutiny – I needed a vocabulary to articulate the survival that I had been able to realize, in a necessarily relational way, through those two-three years, in which all I seemed to have done was protest. Except, the labour that had been done was the joint labour of keeping me and many others alive, through life-threatening violence, labour done, through multiple regenerative practices deeply embedded in the body, one of which could be writing. We wrote letters to Devangana and Natasha in prison, many of those contained poetry. This was a profound act of stretching companionship and presence beyond the logic of invisibility that is deployed through the prison industrial complex – people in prison are necessarily rendered invisible from society. Devangana wrote back, and her letters from prison were so fucking powerful and moving that they make me cry every time I think about them, even now when both of them have been released. The letters, to and fro, between the visible and the invisible realms, were absolutely performances in resuscitation – we were telling each other constantly that we exist in companionship, no one had forgotten and no one had been forgotten. And in these letters, between

upper middle class, highly educated women living all across the world, under various conditions of oppression and survival, there were other stories of the other women in the prison, women, as Devangana said “*who have no one outside*”. In the face of this highly intense invocation of acute inaccess to a story, let alone history, representation and activism, my convictions about history as a changeable realm, where we are dignified as humans no matter how we speak or even if we don’t speak at all, crumbled. In short, things still do not make sense. Yet, in the recent online performance *Firefly Women* (2022), another old campus comrade and artistic collaborator Manjari Kaul found a deeply moving embodied practice to soothe all of us in the trauma of the time. In a series of choreographed pieces, mediated through innovative camerawork for an online production that can be watched on any screen device, Manjari engaged with the physical letters from prison as scenographic element and the uttered reading of the letters as soundscape, and used her own body to hold the incomprehensible pain and fear and resuscitating feminist relationality of letter-writing and storytelling as a means of knowledge production of survival. A highly multimedia experience, we were invited into the performance through a website that carried the performance as episodic, like the arrival of the letters themselves two years ago, and were treated to videos of Manjari taking up poses of protest in current Indian fascist public sphere – a raised fist (traditional repertoire), a Muslim prayer pose of sitting with open joined palms (the Bagh and its worlding), and that of a comradely side hug (relationality). We heard Manjari’s voiceover reading Devangana and Natasha’s letters, describing the day when the women and their children inside the prison saw a rainbow, and how the rainbow created incredible reports of affect in them. The children had actually seen a rainbow for the first time in their lives. The story started with Devangana stating that she was attempting to explain to some of the children what a rainbow was while sitting together to colour. Because the jail only had one stubby red crayon, they had to make do with tearing strips of the seven

colours from newspapers, to bring a rainbow into legibility, and immediately, almost like magic, a rainbow appeared in the sky. Manjari went on to read Devangana's incredible description of why the rainbow felt so special as an appearance, and yet so hollow in its aesthetic promises of beauty in conjunction with incarceration as an existent bodily reality. Meanwhile, Manjari's body created movements of flight – studied, slow flapping of hands, and free movements of contortions close to the ground of the studio that moved through the body's blockages, a contemporary dance and movement rehearsal and warm up technique to make the body limber, take up space and connect to pleasure in moving that I had also experienced while working with Manjari in the theater as comrades in Delhi. She had developed this rehearsal method following campus theater training, her own lifelong movement practice and the teachings of theater teacher John Britton, who heads the Duende School of Ensemble Physical Theater, an itinerant ensemble-centered practice. The letters as physical papers were strewn across the studio floor, and Manjari played with them, threw them in the air, and read them sometimes. During the recollection of the different women in the prison, Manjari would change into different clothing, nothing particularly ornamented or costume-like, just plain, different sets of clothes. And then came the story about celebrating International Working Women's Day inside the prison, with the staging of a play which included stories about Indian feminist social and educational reformers Savitribai Phule (referred to as "Savitri Mai" as per Dalit feminist activist spaces) and her colleague Fatima Sheikh, intersectional feminist icons who have only recently been acknowledged within mainstream Leftist and Upper-caste activism spaces in India. We saw Manjari, taking on the role of Natasha, who played the role of Fatima Sheikh. We heard Manjari recite *Hum Gunahgar Auratein* ("We Sinful Women") by Pakistani feminist poet Kishwar Nahid, and sing feminist protest songs sung by Pinjra Tod activists in their demonstrations. We would hear Devangana, through Manjari, talking about the entire prison turning into a rehearsal

space, giving way to playfulness and giving a break from enforced boredom. While watching Manjari's performance online, it was possible for me to feel connections across so many borders – my distance from my comrades through national borders and prison walls, distances of all of us from those in jail who have no one outside, and distances of the mind and body engendered by collective and personal traumas and survival of everyone involved in inspiring, making and witnessing the piece. I wanted a way to write about it the way it performed about the ones it wanted to witness – without made-up categories of distancing and borders, without alienation. I did not want to scavenge on the piece, speaking about how performance and the rehearsal as repetition could be an emancipatory politics of the body (which it is), and I did not want to break apart the many different forms of knowledge that it sutured together in such healing ways in many moments of intertextual embodied creative practice. I could only clearly articulate that this was a moment of the healing practices of writing, as a means of writing the histories of marginalized people, in a necessarily relational way, where the body somehow held space for all of us to connect together. The body did the work of survival and resuscitation, a golem body for another golem body, writing, healing and helping to survive together, without having to ration out comprehension through disciplinary means of analytical borders. I want to point towards the possibility that such knowledge production is not only possible, but takes place as a regular feature of survival in the face of erasure. Writing as a practice of survival could be centered in historiographical discourses, seen for what it is – a collapse of the personal and political, performed and activist, University and its outside. As a practice that is central to academic production, it suffers from unnecessary reduction of the procedural. In his in-depth exploration of praxeological methodologies and their current academic limits, Robert Schmidt (2016) makes a push for centering the act of writing itself as an active and contingent space of mutable knowledge production.

“Writing, although rarely considered, and mostly unnoticed, is at the core of doing theory, bridging theoretical thinking and theoretical texts (which usually are reckoned to be merely thinking put into written form). Praxeologically, studying epistemic and academic writing practices, is to reject the hierarchical dualism of thinking and doing. . . . Theorizing thus cannot be understood as a purely cognitive or intellectual activity, governed by mental models and schemes. Rather, to theorize is to activate specific incorporated competencies of writing, reading and communicating. They become manifest in observable and situated collaborations of theorists, texts, artefacts, media, and technologies. Thus, writing, in its practical processual and situational dimensions by far exceeds merely the “writing down” or “putting on paper” of entities already produced and fixed by thinking before.” (Ed. Spaargaren, Weenink *et al*, 2016, Chapter 3)

Following this, it can be argued that the praxeology of writing (even academic writing, i.e., “official” historiographical labour) involves vary many other activities, in the same way that I attempt to understand the dissolution of boundaries between activism, art practice and academics. *Firefly Women* is, to me, one such composite act of historiographical writing, which is able to center not only the act of writing but all those other activities that fuel it and sustain it, as a composite practice of survival. Because of the many foldings and mutations of temporality engendered by survival of violence, it is only possible to write about survival and write from survival in this particularly enmeshed and relational way. That too, one can say, is a particular historiographical practice, such as one sees in Manjari’s piece. Is it at all possible to once and for all abandon the imagined geographies of borders of academia, and foreground relatedness as the primary index of knowledge? This is the question that I have tried, in multiple imperfect ways, to address, by actively looking at cultural and political performances that are trying to write their own histories in the face of structural violence and erasure, and in doing so fundamentally exposing the limits of existent academic structures. I have, in my short life, been actively involved in three

simultaneous fields of experience – in multiple protest movements, as an activist and a comrade, in artistic production as mostly an artist, actor, performer and so on, and much more recently in academics as a researcher, mainly in the field of historical studies and theater and performance. My being in the world is shaped through these three branches of inquiry – these are not my identities, but these are my tools of analysis. And the most generative space in which I am able to use all these three tools is the body. In this work, like in my life, I try to find some semblance of a language where I can dissolve the boundaries between art, activism and academia, as they live inside my body, the same body, because it does not make sense to me that I am expected to address these three fields, their “separate” audiences and shareholders in three fundamentally different ways. In the last few years, with the acute reality of fascist violence completely drenching and pervading all aspects of life in my country, and, really importantly, the university in which this work germinated, I have severely struggled to keep alive my commitment to art, activism and academics, constantly failing to understand the relevance of working in these fields in the face of their apparent irrelevance engendered by the complete overwhelm of the mind and body through a deathly culture of fear. I also faced domestic and sexual violence in these very years. As a woman in academia, I have to officially register the lasting effect that patriarchal violence has on my intellectual life and the complete change in the course of my life that unpredictable violence of living in patriarchy can cause. This is in direct opposition to the professional impulse to keep producing discourse and works that make logical sense to live up to arbitrary standards of academic productivity under capitalism. It is a matter of giving words to the dignity of survival that in the course of writing this work I have cried and mourned those who star in it, my comrades, and that academia takes this seriously – it is necessary to decenter and destroy the cold logics of distancing and analytical inquiry from my very relationship with the university – my university is my campus, it houses my friends and comrades, who are

surviving through fascist temporality, and it seems nonsensical that their stories are told through dated lenses of analysis just to create an illusion of legitimacy – as if the loyalty to a disciplinary form is in some way superior to the need to tell a good story about a cool person who survived attacks from a system that was many times bigger than them. If in my own life I am unable to understand or erect borders between my roles of “historian”, “survivor”, “activist”, “artist”, I am unable to make sense of or know the relevance of academic works that aim to do so either. So, I do not even aim to do this. I keep going back to the interrogation of the survivor and her body, in a bid to witness the situated, visceral ways in which survival from violence is practiced, and how it is preserved and disseminated as a system of knowledge.

In the introduction to this work, I had proposed that the procedural impulses of historiography be replaced through substantive justice practices of history writing, practices which, I argued, traced the survival of the body within events, archives, and sources. This brought us rather obviously to theater and performance historiography, where the methodology of interrogating the specificities of theatrical and performative happenings opened us up to the possibilities of centering the survivor body as well as its performative practices of survival. At this point I would like to point to the possibility that writing from a space of survival can bring the conversation about the relationship between history and justice one step further – towards transformative justice. A political framework that has been built entirely by women and femmes from social justice movements, disability activism, immigration rights activism and gendered-violence survivor advocacy, Transformative Justice specifically responds to violence, abuse and harm by building community-based justice and accountability processes outside the purview of the state and the judiciary, centering community support and harm reduction for both survivors and perpetrators. One of the points of TJ is to ensure that trauma and violence does not become an unbreakable loop and turns intergenerational, being that TJ workers themselves are often from communities

with high amounts of intergenerational trauma. This breaking of the loop happens through the contextualization of the root causes of violence in structural realities over and above practicing accountability and responsibility of individuals. In essence, TJ is effective in contextualizing existent violence within the various socio-political structures, and pivots on the idea that justice and accountability can be achieved through community processes completely independent of carceral mechanisms such as police, courts and the state. Taking a cue from TJ, and the involvement of this work in making a point about the enmeshed nature of historiographical work and justice processes, I would suggest that the relational historiographical practices that stem from the practices of survival that I have looked at in this work, are capable of doing reparative care for survivors, and can be seen as TJ approaches to historiography. Historiographical practices of survival in this work have included contingent moments of togetherness at watching ourselves be beaten by cops on a screen. They have included constant witnessing of state-suppressed memories of protest. They have included the creation and maintenance of repertoires of political vulnerability, both historical and contemporary. They have also included our continuous survival of the academic regime, in hauntings and physical presence. Each of these instances I have read as historiographical practice, as ways of documenting the self under violence, in the face of traditional historiographical categories failing to contain these stories. And at the end I propose that through the writing of these acts of historiography, I, along with say Manjari, Devangana and Natasha, find ways of surviving violence in relationality with my communities, i.e., the claim of TJ. To claim that this is also history-doing, that this is also historiographical practice, involves the necessity to broaden the scope of academic writing in itself, something that bell hooks (1989) already establishes as foundational to the speech and word work of many women of colour, especially Black women.

“Our speech, “the right speech of womanhood”, was often the soliloqui, the talking into thin air, the talking to ears that do not hear you – the talk that is simply not listened to...Dialogue – the sharing of speech and recognition – took place not between mother and child and mother and male authority, but among black women. I can remember watching fascinated as our mother talked with her mother, sisters, and women friends....It was in this world of woman speech....that I made speech my birthright – and the right to voice, to authorship, a privilege I would not be denied. It was in that world and because of it that I came to dream of writing, to write.” (pp.6)

From hooks I have learnt that the stakes of speech are indeed especially high, especially for me, and in the circumstance that words were failing for my comrades and I, I have tried through this work to encompass the other ways of writing about ourselves, our myriad, versatile performative practices of survival as historiography that can and do bring into crisis hitherto accepted ways of critical historical enquiry.

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Appendix

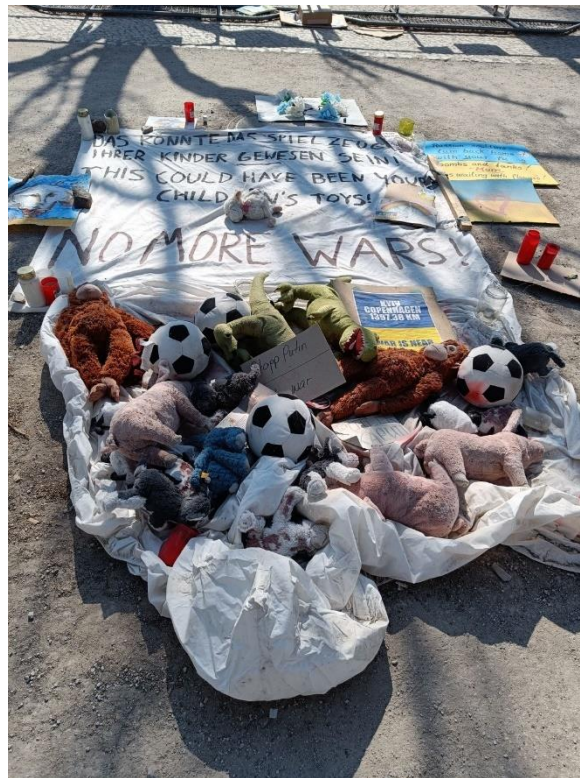
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Memorial ephemera set the scene for Dance Against Tanks on Unter den Linden (Copyright, Promona Sengupta, Germany 2022)



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