

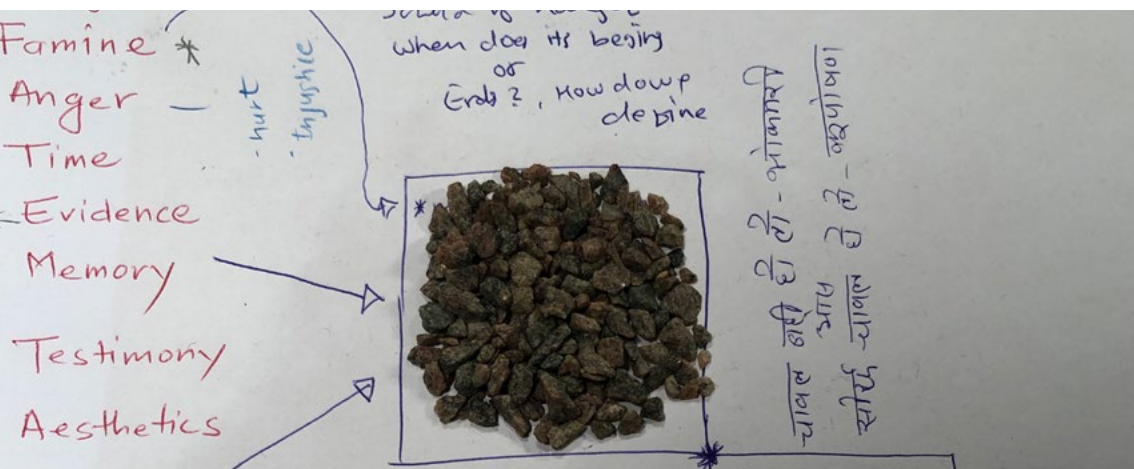
# Elephant Trumpet. In/out of the black box

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## Abstract

This text weaves reflections on the (im)possibility of foregrounding caste-subalterns', specifically Dalits' experiences and imaginations of the Bengal Famine of 1943. This text is in conjunction with, next to, between, and in/out of the film *You deny my living and I defy my death*. The film has emerged as a result of a collaborative-performative workshop between two caste-subalterns, initiated and organised in the context of a PhD in Artistic Practice. Just like the workshop, the film is also animated by the desire to complicate the dominant representational realm ascribed to Dalits, which is often either essentialising or reductive. The film explores methodological and aesthetical approaches to go beyond the default imaginaries.

Constructed across multiple modes, genres, fragments, and layers, this text aims to expand, extend, inflect, and build on the key themes explored in the workshop and the film. Some text precedes the workshop and film, some emerged during the process, and some came afterwards. Mobilising iterative and assemblage-style writing, this text anchors itself in the Bengal Famine of 1943 to critically engage with ideas around 'critical presence' and the 'representation' of Dalits. The text also aims to explore notions around malnutrition, hunger, starvation, and famine as categories, 'recovery and representation' of caste-subaltern histories in the context of famine, opacity and affect as aesthetic choices, and collaborative practice as a method.

**Keywords:** the Bengal famine of 1943, caste, dalit, subaltern, film practice

## Trompeta de elefante: dentro/fuera de la caja negra

### Resumen

Este texto entreteje reflexiones sobre la (im)posibilidad de poner en primer plano las experiencias e imaginarios de los subalternos de casta, específicamente las experiencias e imaginarios de los Dalits sobre la hambruna de Bengala de 1943. Este texto está en conjunción con, junto a, entre y dentro/fuera de la película *You deny my living and I defy my death*. La película surge como resultado de un taller colaborativo-performativo entre dos subalternos de casta, iniciado y organizado en el contexto de un doctorado en Práctica Artística. Al igual que el taller, la película también está motivada por el deseo de complicar el ámbito de representación dominante atribuido a los dalits, que a menudo es esencializador o reductivo. La película explora enfoques metodológicos y estéticos para ir más allá de los imaginarios predeterminados.

Construido a través de múltiples modos, géneros, fragmentos y capas, este texto tiene como objetivo expandir, extender, modificar y desarrollar los temas clave explorados en el taller y la película. Algunos textos preceden al taller y la película, otros surgieron durante el proceso y otros vinieron después. Movilizando una escritura iterativa y de ensamblaje, este texto se ancla en la hambruna de Bengala de 1943 para abordar de manera crítica las ideas sobre la “presencia crítica” y la “representación” de los dalit. El texto también tiene como objetivo explorar las nociones sobre la desnutrición, el hambre, la inanición y la hambruna como categorías, la “recuperación y representación” de las historias de casta-subalternas en el contexto de la hambruna, la opacidad y el afecto como elecciones estéticas y la práctica colaborativa como método.

**Palabras clave:** la hambruna de Bengala de 1943, casta, dalit, subalterno, práctica cinematográfica

## Preface

*Akaler Sandhane* (*In Search of Famine, 1981*), directed by Mrinal Sen, is a film within a film that portrays an urban director's efforts to create a film about the Bengal Famine of 1943. The director and his crew stay in a village for a month to shoot the film, and by the end, the relations between the film crew and the villagers have worsened to the extent that the film within the film cannot be finished there and the only option for Sen's director is to recreate the famine in the confined studios of Calcutta. Highly reflexive in nature, the film is aimed at interrogating the capacities and incapacities of any attempt to 'authentically' represent the famine and the rural. In a way, Sen suggests that the only way to make a film on the famine is to show how it can't be made. Sen's musings on famine-related temporal, historical, ontological, and representational questions come together nicely in this sequence. One day sudden rain stalls the film shoot, and the cast decides to play a guessing game. The director shows them several photographs of famine sourced from newspapers, archives, personal collections etc., and asks them to guess the context of the photographs. Most of them make the mistake of thinking that all the photographs are of the 1943 famine, but they are not. Photographs from the 1943 famine, 1959 food riots in Calcutta, and 1971 Bangladesh refugee crisis become indiscernible from each other. In the last part of this famous sequence in the film, Smita Patil, an actress in Sen's film and the film being shot, holds a picture of black nothingness, and she declares – past, present, and future.

Any scholarly and artistic engagement with a famine of the 'past' raises several conundrums relating to definitional, spatial-temporal, ontological, and recovery-representational questions. According to de Waal (1989, p.6), how and when a famine is defined or declared "is a question of power relations within and between societies". Starvation-related mass deaths are often the prerequisite for a calamity to be called famine. In most cases, this narrow framework is adopted instead of a broader framework of hunger, starvation, poverty, and malnutrition. In the case of postcolonial states, they are always keen, and rightly so, to acknowledge how coloniality and famines are intrinsically and historically linked but always hesitate in declaring a famine themselves; why would they admit to their failures?

Concerning spatial-temporal questions, the most crucial consideration is whether a famine should be seen as an event frozen in time and space or as a continuum across time and space. Mike Davis (2007, p.21) argues that famine "is part of a continuum with the silent violence of malnutrition that precedes and conditions it, and with the mortality shadow of debilitation and disease that follows it". The danger in talking about a famine from the 'past' is that it relegates it to an occurrence from the past, with a specific location and starting and end dates. Moreover, in the popular imagination, a large-scale famine flattens out the differences in experiences; all sufferings become one. And this is so far from the

truth, as we know that famine is always a complex story of society's social, economic, and political fabric. Famines also pose ontological questions – hunger operates at the level of the gut (Ginwala, 2017); it is affective; it resists any definitional framework; it defies time, measurement, and visual perceptions. If we trust only our vision, by the time we notice it, it's already too late. Considering these definitional, ontological, spatial, and temporal complexities, framing a famine is quite daunting. Perhaps Sen is alluding to these challenges through the aforementioned sequence. What if we were to add another layer of complexity to it – exploring and framing a famine from a caste-subaltern perspective?

“My memory is again in the way of your history.”

“Your history gets in the way of my memory”. (Ali, 2012)



How does one draw a line?  
 Malnutrition, Hunger, Starvation, Famine?  
 Past, Present, Future?

The questions that shadow my attempt to study the Bengal Famine from caste-subaltern perspectives are – is it even possible to recover and represent those histories without relegating caste-subalterns and their histories as fully knowable subjects or risking ventriloquising them? Given the ethical-methodological complexities and (im)possibilities inherent in framing the famine, even more so from caste-subaltern perspectives, this text, just like the film that accompanies it, departs from an authoritative recuperative historical project and instead pays attention to, or is attuned to, processes of creatively imagining the heterogeneous subaltern histories, which can often be fragmentary, unresolved, and contradictory. In its framing, this writing is not pre-figured for a mere translation of already worked-out arguments. Writing, in this paper, is mobilised as a method and a creative process through which myriad imaginations of the Famine are being negotiated. Writing, in that sense, is conceived as a creative practice to construct and already imagine alternatives that attempt to go beyond reductive and essentialising representations. To that end, the following two questions capture its spirit and ethos:

Why do you  
 want our stories  
 always already codified  
 in your systems?

Can't we and our stories  
 exist outside of  
 what is already made available?

Performativity, bricolage, and constant negotiation of opacity and clarity are a deliberate part of its methodology to purposefully decentre and deprive any individual method that might foreground essentialising and reductive representations the writing and the film seek to refute. How and why these writing methods help us in exploring going beyond default imaginaries is dispersed across its content and form.

## Glossary of terms

**Caste:** While the 'caste system' is always qualified by the context, it is broadly characterised by social stratification based on endogamy, hereditary status, hierarchy, graded occupation, and purity and pollution. The 'caste system' consists of four Varnas in the following hierarchy – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. This is followed by a group considered to be so 'low' that they are outside of the Varna system (For more on caste, see Béteille, 2022; Ghurye, 2016; Srinivas, 2019). Dalits and Adivasis are part of this group. Dr B. R. Ambedkar (1917; 1936; 1948), the architect of the Indian constitution and a prominent Dalit thinker, saw the 'caste system' as graded inequality with control of resources and the idea of purity and pollution as its organising principles.

**Dalit:** Literally 'ground down' or 'oppressed'; the term Dalit was popularised by Dr B.R. Ambedkar. In contemporary India, it refers to the preferred political self-identification of social groups belonging to 'ex-untouchable castes'. The Indian State, through its constitutional framework, has designated and refers to this group as Scheduled Castes (SC).

**Adivasi:** Meaning 'old inhabitants' in several Indian languages, it is considered a preferred self-description of communities listed as 'Scheduled Tribes' in the Indian constitution.

**Other Backward Classes (OBC):** OBC is a collective term used by the state to categorise social groups which are educationally or socially disadvantaged but are not listed as 'Sche-

duled Castes' or 'Scheduled Tribes'. This group is constituted mostly of castes belonging to the lowest of four varnas (Shudras). Instead of castes, the term 'classes' is used to incorporate 'backward' groups from religious minorities.

**Subaltern in the Indian context:** Whether we take Gramscian (2021) notion of subaltern social group as 'on the margins of history' or Ranjit Guha's (1988, p.35) definition of subalterns as "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society where this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way", Dalits, Adivasis and a large section of OBCs, fit the category of subalterns in the Indian context.

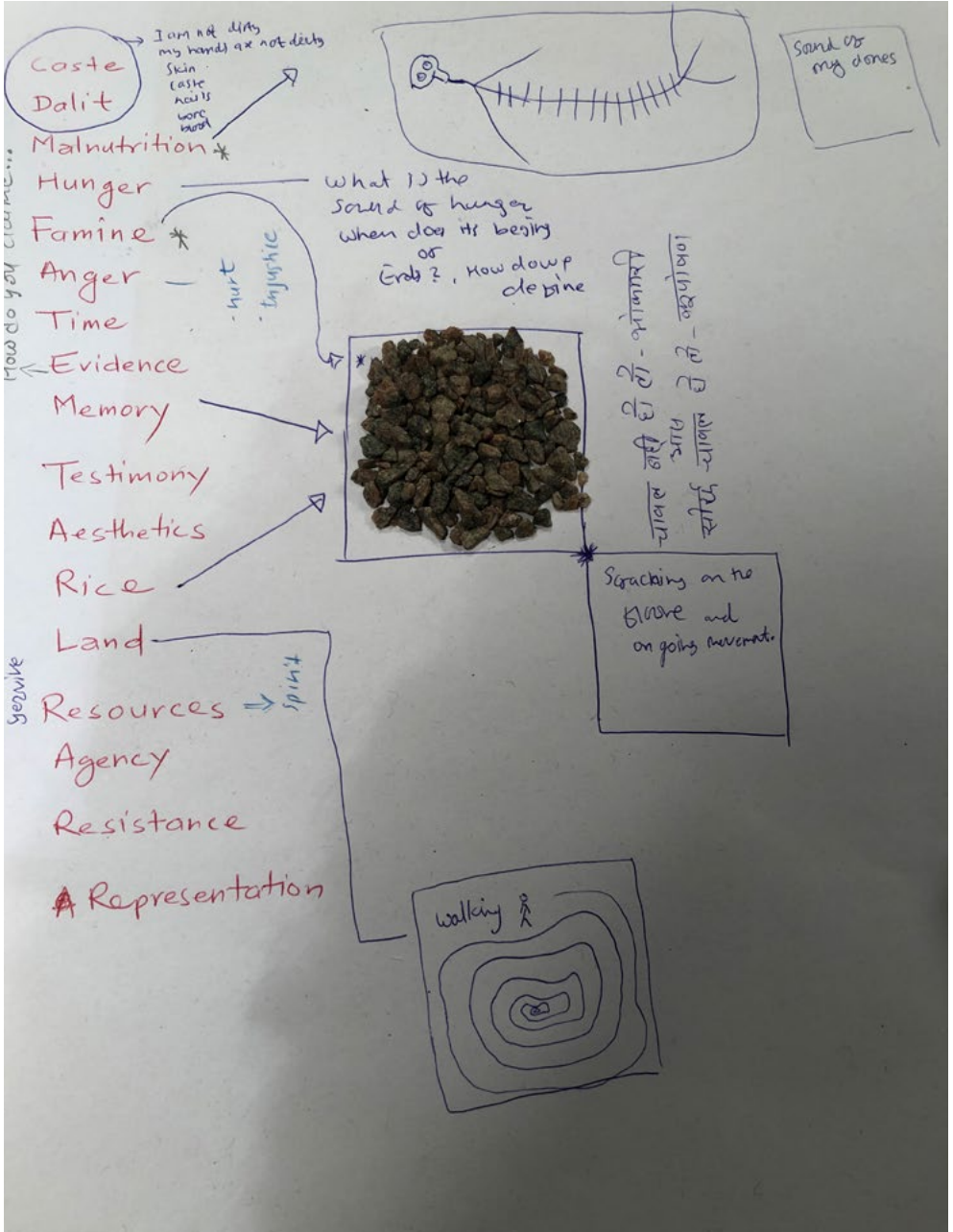
**Caste-subaltern:** I am using the term 'caste-subaltern' to both mark the specificities of subalternities caused by caste and to indicate an incomplete synonymy between the two terms. (For more on this, see Pankaj and Pandey, 2020). Using subaltern as an umbrella term to denote caste-based dominations, subordinations, and experiences along economic, political, and social lines, comes with several theoretical and ethical-political challenges. The risk of heterogeneity and context specificities getting subsumed within this generalised and very broad conception is real. While there are similarities and overlaps between the terms – 'caste' and 'subaltern' – they are not interchangeable in all contexts.

## You deny my living and I defy my death



<https://vimeo.com/782475864/725988b833>

### Indexing

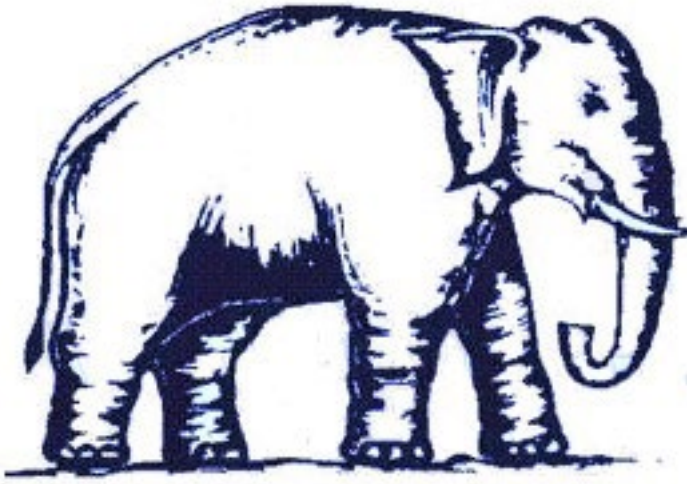




## Indexicality?

Averroes put down his pen [...] From this studious distraction he was distracted by a kind of melody. He looked through the latticework balcony; below, in the narrow earthen patio, some half-naked children were playing. One, standing on another's shoulders, was obviously playing the part of a muezzin; with his eyes tightly closed he chanted: "There is no god but the God." The one who held him motionlessly played the part of the minaret; another, abject in the dust and on his knees, played the part of the faithful worshippers (Borges, 1964, cited in Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013).

Averroes' difficulty translating the term comes from the simple fact that the Greek concept of "mimesis" was totally alien to Islam, and of which— let's say it, just in case— Islam has no need. Mimesis is not a universal concept (Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013).



All of you know that Elephant is election symbol of Scheduled Castes Federation in the coming election. Why I have chosen Elephant as our election symbol? Because this symbol is known to all the Indians. Apart from it, Elephant is a symbol of intelligence, patience and strength. Our people are as powerful as Elephant. It may take them some time to stand on their feet. But once they are on their feet nobody will be able to force them easily to sit on their knees (Ambedkar, 1951, quoted in Darapuri, 2017).

## Invitation as (and) Introduction

To

Durga Bishwokarma  
 Fredrikstad, Norway

Date: 26 January 2022

Sub: Invitation to a collaborative-performative workshop for a PhD project

Dear Durga,

I hope you are doing well. Is your ordeal with the migration agency in Norway over? Have they issued you a residence permit yet? I sincerely hope you will soon be able to travel to Nepal to see your family.

It's been almost a year since we last spoke. Last year has been such a blur for me. I have been so busy with my PhD. I finally have a title for my PhD – *Negotiating caste-subaltern imaginations of the Bengal Famine of 1943 in and through film practices*. I know it's a bit verbose, but I like it. I might change it later. What do you think?

The rough cut of the 'big/long' film is ready now. I don't know if you remember, but this is the film based on my fieldwork-filming in two Dalit villages in West Midnapore, West Bengal, India. The fieldwork-filming centred creative-collaborative practice as a method to engage with caste-subalterns', specifically Dalits', experiences of the Famine. Two local practitioners of the Patchitra tradition (scroll paintings accompanied by songs) were creative-collaborators during the fieldwork-filming. Methodologically speaking, in my fieldwork-filming, I attempted to co-construct subjective truths by involving community members and Patchitra artists to the best of my abilities. While I was both the 'author' and the 'facilitator' during the fieldwork-filming, I fully assumed the author's role at the film's editing stage. When we meet, we can discuss the nuanced politics and ethics of authoring and facilitating. I have tried to weave together fieldwork footage, poetry, and essayistic writing in this film. While the film attempts to foreground caste-subaltern experiences of the famine, it also proposes a need to shift away from 'recovery' and 'representation' of subalterns' 'authentic' experiences of the famine and towards 'negotiated imagination'. I have attempted to define the term 'negotiated imagination' elsewhere (Ranjan, 2021). You can check it here:

<https://glossary.mg-lj.si/referential-fields/constituencies-II/negotiated%20imagination>

Since this film blurs modes and genres, it's difficult for me to define its aesthetic register; it oscillates between – observational, reflexive, expository, performative, essayistic, and poetic modes (for more on different modes, see Nicholas, 1991; 2016; 2017 and Rascaroli, 2008). In that sense, it's a hybrid film – a cinema

in-between. I am developing the argument that the notion of hybrid films lends itself very well to the anti-caste image work. Since no single aesthetic register can capture the heterogeneity of caste subjugation, exploitation, domination and experiences, the critical-creative potential of hybridity might help us pursue anti-caste aesthetics. Irrespective of my intentions and claims, I can't deny that the film has some elements of 'conventional documentary' and can come across as such, especially the segments where there are conversations with scroll artists, community members and documentation of the scroll-making process. You know that I have a complicated relationship with the idea of 'documentary' filmmaking. As a caste-subaltern, I see the necessity of 'documentary' in advancing the struggle. Still, I also get frustrated when 'aesthetics' is denied to caste-subalterns in the name of cause, urgency, and legibility.

My research is hinged on iterations of film practice through different subaltern affinities and methodologies so that the research questions can be explored from multiple perspectives. While editing the film, I kept thinking, what is a 'field'? What if I shifted the spatial, temporal, material, and aesthetic register to a black box? Can I do fieldwork-filming in a black box? Can I follow a similar ethical-methodological approach of creative-collaborative practice but this time in the confines of a black box? What will happen if I work with a trained theatre and performance artist? You know where this is going...

I would be pleased if you could make some time to come to Gothenburg and participate in a collaborative-performative workshop. The idea will be to explore the (im)possibilities of foregrounding Dalits' experiences of the Bengal famine of 1943. I am thinking of filming the workshop. The filming is not intended for purely documentation; it might be turned into a filmic work later. I am attaching the following:

Appendix 1: A Brief description of my PhD research

Appendix 2: Words/phrases that come to my mind when I think of our possible collaborative-performative workshop

I hope you will consider this request. More later.

Regards,  
Ram



## **Appendix 1:** A Brief Description of my PhD Research

The Bengal Famine of 1943-44, in which close to three million people died, is considered one of the most violent instances of colonial rule in India. In recent years scholars have turned their attention to scrutinising the Famine from an anti-colonial perspective (see Mukerjee 2010; Tharoor 2017). However, the caste-subaltern question is still largely missing in the study of the Famine. With Amartya Sen's (1981) assertion that entitlement relations play a significant role in dictating who gets affected and to what extent, during a famine, the link between caste and its impact on the outcome of the Famine seems commonsensical, and yet this aspect has not received adequate attention.

Against this backdrop, my PhD in Artistic Practice mobilises the film practice to further and experiment with caste-subaltern imaginations (epistemologies and ontologies of expressions that emerge from the space of subalternity) of the Bengal Famine of 1943. The main research question that underpins this research is – how can the film practice, both as a method and an outcome of the inquiry, be mobilised to explore epistemological and ontological understandings of the Bengal Famine from a caste-subaltern perspective?

Taking the Gramscian notion of subalterns as people/groups on the margins of history, subaltern studies, especially in India, have consistently focused on the need to write history from below (Amin, 1995; Chakrabarty, 1992; Guha, 1982; Perusek, 1993; Spivak; 1988). On the one hand, scholars and historians have looked at archival materials for erasures of subaltern history and reinterpreted them. On the other hand, they have mobilised methods such as oral history to recuperate the subaltern histories. In a limited sense, my PhD adheres to this tradition; it looks at existing films on the Bengal Famine and makes critical interventions in them to foreground the caste question, and it is also aimed at creating 'new' material by way of fieldwork-filming and workshops. But my PhD also departs from the tradition in that it is not a recuperative historical project; it focuses on the creative, layered, and negotiated processes of imagining and engaging with that history. While it takes cues from various academic disciplines, it essentially centres the film practice as a method of inquiry to engage with the Bengal Famine from a caste-subaltern lens.

## **Appendix 2:** Words and phrases that come to my mind when I think of our possible collaborative-performative workshop

Part analysis; Part poiesis; Part in-between  
Part experiences; Part encounters; Part in-between  
Part closed; Part open; Part in-between  
Part facts; Part speculations; Part in-between  
Part oppositional; Part propositional; part in-between  
Part past; Part present; Part future; Part in-between  
Part definitive; Part tentative; Part in-between  
Part transparent; Part opaque; Part in-between  
Part telling; Part listening; Part in-between  
Part singular; Part plural; Part in-between  
Part effective; part affective; Part in-between  
Part fragmentation; Part frustration with fragmentation; Part in-between

An attempt to orient ourselves amidst many parts and to annihilate caste



## Maybe I am the ghost

A script that may or may not be from the film You deny my living and I defy my death

---

Durga:

“I am the ghost.  
I am the ancestor.  
I am the spirit.

I am the dead body.  
Still blaming you.

Because of you, I died at an early age.

I am poking you  
And your stories.”

-time elapses-

“As a Dalit ghost, I wish I had travelled with you to Midnapore and observed you during your fieldwork-filming.

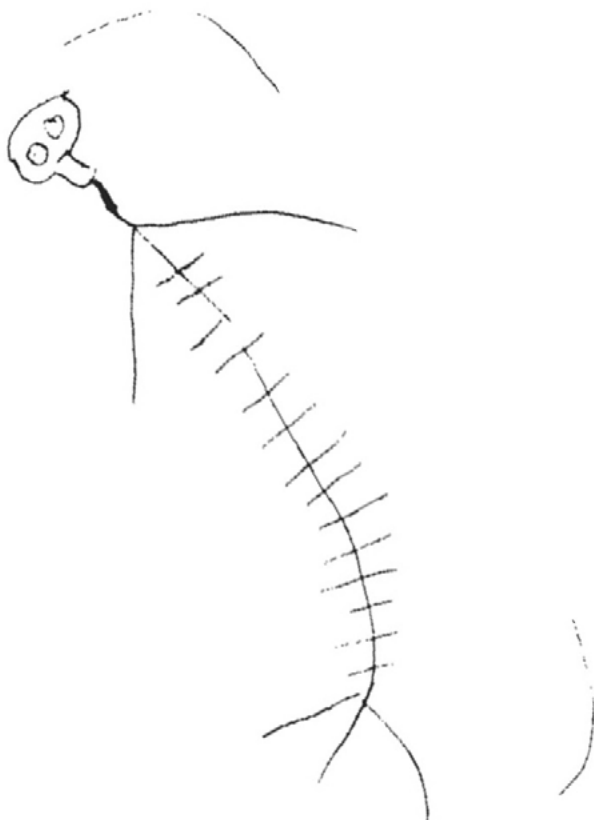
Maybe I would have pushed you.  
Maybe I would have made your papers fly.

Maybe I would have caught your lies.

Maybe I would have gotten distracted from observing you.  
Maybe I would have wandered around in the nearby villages.  
Maybe I would have met my relatives.”

## The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person

If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition. (Gordon, 2008, p.8)



## Why have you invited me?

A script that may or may not be from the film *You deny my living and I defy my death*

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Durga: Am I working on your project because I am a theatre/performance artist or because I am a Dalit artist? What is it? I know it's both. But what is it?

Ram answers the question with a question: What do you think?

Durga: I thought you invited me because I carry Dalit subjectivity. First, it was that. But then... if I had been just a Dalit activist... probably you would not have invited me. I guess the reason behind the invitation is that I carry both – the tools and the subjectivity





## Storying the world

To

Durga Bishwokarma  
 Fredrikstad, Norway

Date: 05 February 2022

Sub: Sharing ideas and references – part I

I know you prefer calling. Much of what I will write here is something we have already discussed over the phone. I am still taking the risk of repeating the content. But I think it's a risk worth taking. Consider it as my notes, a way to rehearse possible imaginaries, or should I say appendix 3. What follows in this letter are my current academic and artistic inspirations, examples, readings, observations, quotes etc.

Isabel Wilkerson's (2020) book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* has rekindled my interest in a comparative study of caste and race. Using the analytical framework of caste, she connects and studies hierarchies across civilisations, particularly focusing on studying race subjugations in the USA. She writes:

As we go about our daily lives, caste is the wordless usher in a darkened theater, flashlight cast down in the aisles, guiding us to our assigned seats for a performance. The hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power—which groups have it and which do not (p.17 )

Caste is the bones, race the skin. Race is what we can see, the physical traits that have been given arbitrary meaning and become shorthand for who a person is. Caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place (p.19).

While reading her book, I am constantly thinking of a shared history – after all, Dalit Panthers were formed in India along the lines of Black Panthers in the USA. I am meandering. There is a different reason for bringing her book up. I was discussing this book with a colleague from South Africa, and she gave me a beautiful gift during the conversation. She introduced me to the work of Katherine McKittrick (2022), especially the article titled *Dear April: The Aesthetics of Black Miscellanea*.

In this article, McKittrick offers her thinking on black methodology and aesthetics, which I think might be very valuable for us and the workshop. You can find the article here: <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12773> I have collated some significant sections that I find illuminating.

My methodological premise, or assumption, is that black people have always used interdisciplinary methodologies to explain, explore, and story the world, because thinking and writing and imagining across a range of texts, disciplines, histories, and genres unsettles dismal and insular racial logics. By employing interdisciplinary methodologies, and living interdisciplinary worlds, black people bring together various sources and texts and narratives to challenge racism (p.5).

Black methodologies do not follow a trajectory of seeking, finding, and making an analytical site knowable; black methodologies are articulations of wonder, curiosity, and sharing. For this reason, I observe that black methodologies are wavering knowledge processes that move in and out of clarity (p.6).

Black aesthetics oscillate between clarity and opacity and are underwritten by stories and ideas that are fleeting, flexible, new, and old; these stories and ideas teach us how to navigate infrastructures of harm, these stories and ideas reside within, across, and outside prevailing knowledge systems. Black aesthetics generate a deciphering practice and this deciphering practice contextualises black worlds as painfully contradictory and thick with meaning. The painful contradiction is not a site of representation that demands resolution but instead elicits the rebellious potential of black aesthetics—stories, music, poetry, visual art, the beautiful ways of being black that are unarchived yet tell us something about how we can and do and might live the world differently (p.10).

My reason for choosing these sections is not to indicate an attempt at faithful implementation and translation of these ideas in our workshop. The specificity of my inquiry, coupled with the specificities of our contexts, interests and working styles, will inflect, extend and expand these ideas in ways I can't foresee now. Questions that have consistently cast their shadow on the project – would we ever know how many Dalits died in the Famine; can we ever 'recover' and 'faithfully represent' the caste-subaltern experiences of the Famine; and where is the archive that can unlock answers to these questions? These rhetorical questions point to the fact that perhaps it's not fully knowable, and may we should not make the mistake of turning the caste-subaltern into an analytical category/site that is fully knowable. As suggested by McKittrick, one way to move forward is to story the world through an interdisciplinary approach. I am curious to see how our different artistic practices inflect each other and how we go about storying and imagining the Famine from our respective vantage points. I am looking forward to experiencing the politics and poetics of our relations.

I remember Glissant. *In poetics of Relations*, he writes: "The imaginary does not bear with it the coercive requirements of idea. It prefigures reality, without determining it a priori" (1997, p.192). These two sentences capture the spirit of the proposed workshop, at least for me. I know this workshop has a predetermined thematic core, but I want us to engage in imaginaries. To quote Manhar Bansal (2022):

Imagination is sometimes considered to be antithetical to history, in its vigours of evidence and objectivity. The truth, nonetheless, is that all history is imagination. This is not to deny the immense significance of historical evidence but to say that it is the manner in which we choose to interpret and construct our understanding of the past, indeed, how we imagine it that forms the bedrock of historical thought. But who constructs this imagination? Using what? Does everyone get to imagine their own past, or are there 'fragments' whose collective memory is obliterated by the hegemonic imaginations of the 'mainstream'?

In this endeavour, it must shun the hegemonic and homogenising forces of mainstream imagination and use oral tradition, collective memory, poetry, literature and fiction – alternative sources I broadly call ‘fantasy’ – to reimagine our multiform pasts. I contend that this ‘reimagination’ is imperative for us to address both the erasures of the past and the crises of the present. We must take, as it were, a flight of fantasy.

I want to take this ‘flight of fantasy’ with you. I know that this, like subaltern histories, will be scattered, fragmented and heterogeneous. I think it’s only by letting go of the anxiety of producing absolute, clean, singular, and totalising histories and narratives, even if it’s emerging from subaltern quarters, that we can destabilise grand, homogenous, and hegemonic historiography. The mainstream historiography fears the subalterns’ affective, fragmentary, and other alternative ways of storying the world because it breaks open the narrow corridor of consensus on history and conception of historiography elites are invested in. To invoke Bansal (2022) again, we should let “fragments speak on their own term without anxiety”. In this regard, Glissant’s (1997) conception of opacity can be interesting for us to consider. Opacity, for Glissant, is an unknowability, a poetic, unquantifiable alterity, a diversity that exceeds categorisations of differences. It exposes “the limits of schemas of visibility, representation, and identity that prevent sufficient understanding of multiple perspectives of the world and its peoples” (Blas, 2016). For Glissant (1997), opacity is a conception that distracts us from becoming the guardians of absolute truths. Methodologically and aesthetically, I have been drawn to opacity. However, I am slightly concerned about the uncritical mobilisation of opacity as a catch-all phrase. In the name of opacity, we can’t unquestionably accept works that are vague, apolitical, unintelligible, inspired by a particular kind of European abstractionism, and obscure for the sake of obscurity.

Moreover, we can’t dismiss evidentiary ethics, aesthetics, and politics in the name of opacity. We can undoubtedly re-think and re-imagine ‘evidentiary’. Still, we don’t have the privilege of metaphorising the immediacy and urgency of subaltern causes and concerns to the extent that it becomes utterly bereft of any critical potential. This is why McKittrick (2022) warns us that “opacity is not simply about vagueness, or claiming unintelligibility, but about the politics of sharing ideas carefully” (p.7). She also cautions us against turning opacity into a stable category or designation, “we cannot grab opacity and retreat into a space of sustained obscurity” (p.7).

This letter is already so long. I don’t know where my proclivity for writing lengthy letters comes from. I guess we can always use the excuse that since our ancestors did not get to write, we must compensate for all the words they never got to speak all the words which were invisibilised, erased, misheard, or never heard.

Let’s speak soon.

Regards,  
 Ram

## In the black box

A script that may or may not be from the film *You deny my living and I defy my death*

---

Author and Durga, one named after a Hindu God and the other Hindu Goddess, are in the black box. These two caste-subalterns from India and Nepal are standing against a green screen. They speculate. They imagine.

Author: “Let’s say... I come to you as a filmmaker with a conundrum. How do I visible caste? How do I represent caste without the discursive/descriptive (text, subtitles, surnames, voice-over etc.)?”

Durga:

“  
 —Silence—  
 —and/or—  
 —Scream—  
 —and/or—  
 —blank screen—  
 ”

Ram: “Is there any ‘metaphorical/allegorical/abstract’ way (as opposed to the ‘documentary’) to talk about caste?”

Durga:

“  
 —NO—

(For me, No. And that’s beautiful. If it’s not possible to define it, then why is it practised?)

## Living is both denying death and proving it

Stretched out beside the blacksmith's furnace  
 I have been privy  
 To the argument of the hammer and the iron

I have become the plough  
 And travelled far, riding on the farmer's shoulder  
 Tilled the vast expanse  
 So that the field teems with crops

Just to fight the pangs of hunger

Still I have to witness Amlasol\*\*  
 I have to feed my family ant-eggs  
 That look like white grains of rice (Charal, 2021)

\*\*Amlasol

was is in the news for starvation deaths. In 2004 five Adivasis starve to death in Amlasol village (see Ghosh, 2004). District – Midnapore. State – West Bengal. Ruling Party – Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI-M). Fifty-seven years after independence. Sixty-one years since the Bengal Famine of 1943.

\*\*Lalgarh

was is in the news for starvation deaths. In 2018 seven Adivasis starve to death in Lalgarh (see The Hindu, 2018). District – Midnapore. State – West Bengal. Ruling Party – All India Trinmool Congress. Seventy-one years after independence. Seventy-five years since the Bengal Famine of 1943.

\*\*Delhi

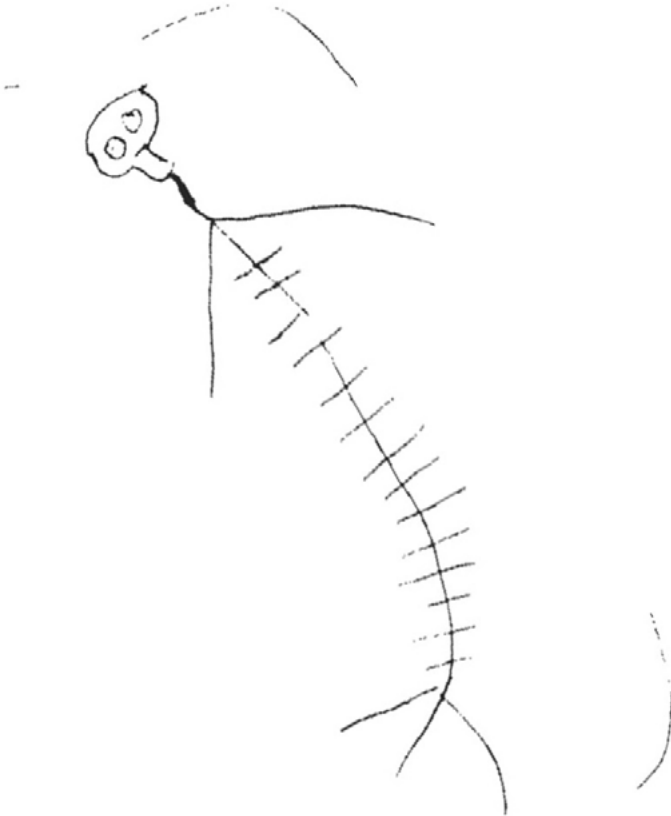
was is in the news for starvation deaths. In 2018 three children of a family, all aged below 10, starve to death in Mandawali (see Bhardwaj, Johri and Mander, 2018). District – East Delhi. State – Delhi. Ruling Party – Aam Admi Party. Seventy-one years after independence. Seventy-five years since the Bengal Famine of 1943.

\*\*Latehar

was is in the news for starvation deaths. In 2020 five-year-old Dalit girl starves to death in Latehar (see Ranjan, 2020). District – Latehar. State – Jharkhand. Ruling Party – Jharkhand Mukti Morcha. Seventy-three years after independence. Seventy-seven years since the Bengal Famine of 1943.

\*\* [            ]

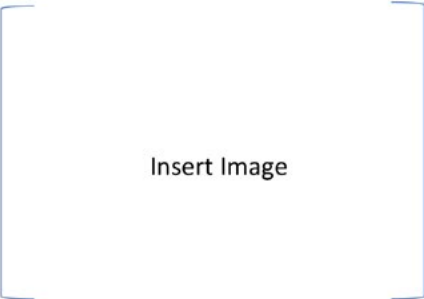
will be in the news for starvation deaths. In [            ] ... .. District – [            ]. State – [            ]. Ruling Party – [            ]. [            ] years after independence. [            ] years since the Bengal Famine of 1943.



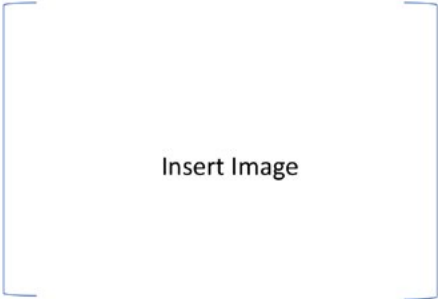
Living is both denying death and proving it. I wish to shift the register from the dead to the living. For the dead. For the dead has not come to terms with its unnatural death. For the dead remains unequal even in its death. For the dead want a better death for those living. For the agency of the living is in determining the manner of death.

**\*\* Varanasi**

Varanasi is the parliamentary constituency of Narendra Modi – India’s Prime Minister. Modi suddenly announces a nationwide lockdown on 24 March 2020 to ‘curb’ the spread of the COVID pandemic. During this 21-day lockdown, a news report from his constituency emerges. The report by Vijay Vineet and Manish Mishra in the Jansandesh Times is published on 26 March (see Srivastava, 2020 and Awasthi, 2020). The report claims that members of the Musahar (Dalit) community in Koiripur village in the Prime Minister’s constituency are surviving on grass. The report carries a photograph of children eating grass. The report is circulated widely on social media. The Varanasi District Magistrate (DM) Kaushal Raj Sharma sends a show-cause notice to Vijay Vineet (one of the journalists) and Subhash Rai (his editor-in-chief). The notice calls on them to publish a denial of the report. In the notice, District Magistrate claims that the news report is fabricated because he has gotten it investigated by an Additional District Magistrate (ADM) -level officer. He adds that the Dalits are not eating grass but ankari dal (wild pulses) that grow along with wheat in the fields. He circulates a photograph of himself and his son with a bundle of ‘ankari grass’. Journalist Vijay Vineet (quoted in Srivastava, 2020) says he will not back down from the story - “I have all the photos and videos related to the report, which I have sent to the DM. The condition of Musahars in Koiripur village has been very poor for the last three to four days. Due to the lockdown they are unable to go anywhere and have no money either.”



Insert Image



Insert Image

Both are images of the living – in them, already inscribed, different densities of existence.

## Possible to make Famine-images?

There is no singular context that governs engagement with the evidentiary power of images or their limits. My context is very different from that of the journalists I cite above. They are dealing with a District Magistrate who is simply discounting and discrediting the idea of the evidentiary power of images altogether. His strategy is to relativise the images (and, by extension, the truth) to the point that it creates enough doubts. Therefore, I want to be careful in accepting or rejecting the evidentiary power of images entirely. If the District Magistrate's strategy is to discount the evidentiary power of images and the response to that is a further unsettling of the evidentiary power of images. In that case, we have a serious conceptual problem. Images can be partial and fragmentary, but we simply cannot discount the evidentiary power of all images.

This PhD project is at a crucial remove from the urgency and immediacy of important journalistic work but is interested in poetics and politics of responding to the erasure of caste-subaltern narratives through image-making. While I am interested in probing the limits of images and their evidentiary power, I am not arguing for the invalidity of all images. I am making images on hunger and famine, but I want to work with images in a way that takes into consideration the limitations of images. Images, every now and then, can compel the state to intervene by mobilising its evidentiary powers and claims but it is also true that starvation/hunger deaths happen not because there is a lack of images – it happens despite images.

Faced with the difficulties of representing atrocities like famine, we are confronted with the limits of photography, a machinery that cannot do anything, but represent; a practice that cannot go beyond representation. Therefore, no matter how one photographs the (Sudanese) famine, the single image will always, in some way or another, take something away from the intensity, scope, and complexity of the very atrocities that cause their photographed victims to suffer. In a situation where an atrocity is of such a character that it can never be adequately represented, our desire to represent and our call for representation activates the very atrocity we pretend to vilify, ensuring inaction and thus continuing the atrocity (Guerts, 2015, p.9).

Those images  
 may or may not come  
 but refusal from making images  
 forecloses that imagination



Possible to make?

Images that exceed juxtaposition

Images that exceed evidence

Images that exceed representation

Juxtaposition, evidence and representation –are simultaneously productive and reductive. Something that is productive can't be entirely dismissed, and something that is reductive can't be entirely left unattended. Exceeding is to go beyond, but it is not a denial of what it is exceeding from; the traces of what it is exceeding from can always be found. The precursor to any exceeding is a dissatisfaction, a doubt, or a hesitation.



## Imagine a feast here!

A script that may or may not be from the film *You deny my living and I defy my death*

Durga: Can you just eat rice forever? Can you?

(Time elapses)

Durga: Imagine a feast here – Greens...Greens...Greens!!!

Fruits  
 Apple  
 Banana  
 Mango  
 Lemon  
 Lentils  
 Beans  
 Vegetables

Salad  
 Paneer  
 Chana  
 Eggs  
 Milk  
 Ghee  
 Dahi  
 Rice with a bowl of  
 dal and vegetables

A good source of water  
 Bhindi  
 Baigan  
 Greens  
 Lots of greens  
 Greens...  
 Greens...  
 Greens...

## Touch of the Image

To

Durga Bishwokarma  
 Fredrikstad, Norway

Date: 12 April 2022

Sub: Sharing ideas and references – part II

I hope this letter finds you well. I am glad that you could come to the workshop. It was such a joyful experience. I hope you also had a similar experience. I have been devoting a lot of my time to the editing of the film, and I think I am not too far from the film's rough cut. The tentative title for the film is *You deny my living and I defy my death*. Considering the time I spend with images and sound, it feels like either I am touching them, or they are touching me. I know the workshop is over, but I still feel like sharing some ideas and references with you. In some ways, the workshop and the filmed material have made me think about these things. In the absence of the workshop, I am not sure if I would have arrived at these ideas and references in the same way. Again, consider it as my notes, a way to share and rehearse my current thinking on film practices, or should I say, appendix 5.

In the last four-five days, I have been reading about two connected and yet very different propositions – 'caste as a sensorial regime' and 'sensorial turn in ethnography and cinema'. In the very first paragraph of his article *Odor and Order: How Caste Is Inscribed in Space and Sensoria*, Joel Lee (2017, p.470) proposes:

to understand the tenacious persistence of caste and untouchability in the present we would do well to take a phenomenological turn and inhale deeply. Heeding our senses and our embodied relationship to place, we may exhume meaningfully patterned relations between caste ideology, the organization of space, and the marking of bodies and sensoria by the sensuous content of the environment. Caste functions, among other things, as a spatial-sensory order. It is experienced as an inscription into the environment — indeed, into the chemical and olfactory content of the air we breathe — of the Brahmanical ideological premise that every caste has its own distinctive, hierarchically ranked "place" in the world, and that the places inhabited by subordinate castes should not only be set apart but should look, smell, and feel differently from those of the rest of society.

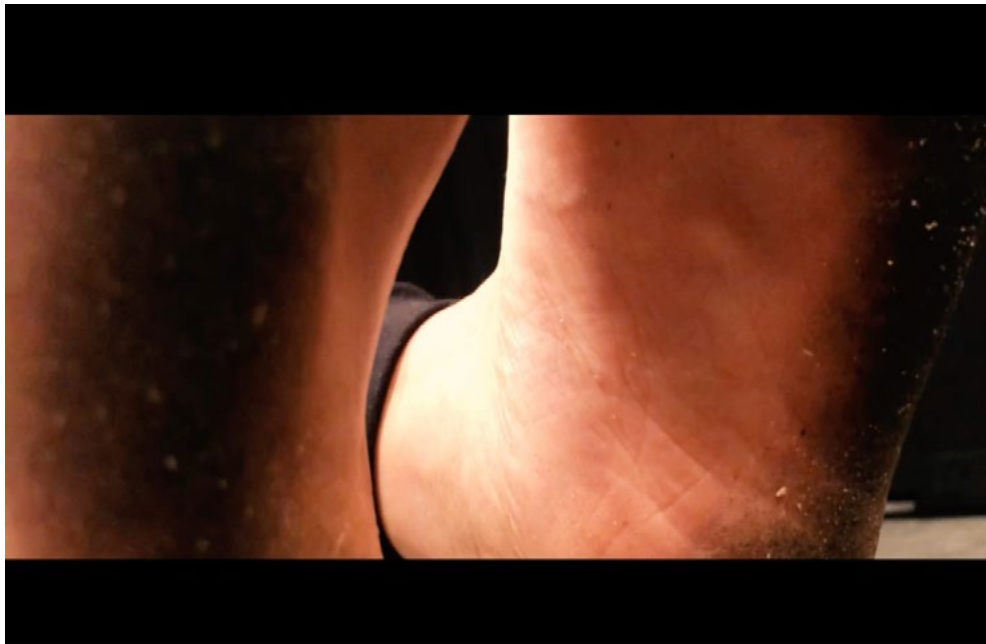
In ethnography and cinema, there is a growing interest in exploring how focusing on, and foregrounding, our multisensorial (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch etc.) perceptions and experiences can pave the way for alternative ways of understanding and engaging with our contexts and surroundings. In her book *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, Sarah Pink (2009, p.1) argues that "multisensoriality is integral both to the lives of people who participate in our research and to how we ethnographers practice our craft". She highlights the importance of smell, taste, touch and vision in ethnographic research. This sensorial turn has, in parts, emerged out of discontent with overreliance on the 'mimetic-representational-verbal' order of

the world. I don't think that the aim is to dismiss it but to establish multisensorial experiences and perceptions at par with it.

Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab (quoted in Brody, 2014) describes its mandate as providing "an academic and institutional context for the development of creative work and research that is itself constitutively visual or acoustic — conducted through audiovisual media rather than purely verbal sign systems — and which may thus complement the human sciences' and humanities' traditionally exclusive reliance on the written word". I have watched some of their films, and I find their work quite interesting for their serious engagement with the materiality of the image and sound. I recently watched *Levithian* (2012), a film by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel of the SEL. I would highly recommend this film to you as well. Another film that comes to mind is Tracey Moffatt's *Night Cries* (1990). Images are not subordinated to words here. You don't get pulled into a narrative arc. You experience the film as opposed to just watching it. You get touched by the film. In film theory, scholars have tried to theorise it and have given different terms – from 'haptic visuality' (Marks, 2007), 'embodied cinema' (Rutherford, 2003), 'tactile eye' (Barker, 2009) to 'corporeal image' (MacDougall, 2005). Although different in their conceptions and manifestations, these terms have a certain common ground. I think they all allude to – an experience beyond mimetic representation, an approach that invests not just in thought but also in the materiality of that thought beyond written or spoken language, and an embodied spectatorship that engages our senses. Laura Mark (2007), in her theorisation of the term, states that haptic visuality takes place when images go beyond the visual representation of experiences and allows the spectator to see film as a physical and multisensorial embodiment of culture. Foregrounding the importance of tactility and textures of images, Burt (2013) describes haptic visuality as "touch response gained when presented closely with the tactile image – one which can be described as a caress". Similarly, David MacDougall (2005) emphasises how the value of visuality and images has been eclipsed by words, especially in our epistemologies. I think what these scholars are arguing is that the film medium has a certain sensorial quality which must be paid attention to and that multisensorial experiences can also be a bedrock of conceptions and understandings of our contexts and surroundings.

This makes me think – if caste operates as a sensorial regime, can we mobilise the film medium's sensory and affective qualities to break the caste's spatial-sensory order? Can we 'pollute' the viewer with an 'impure' touch of the image?

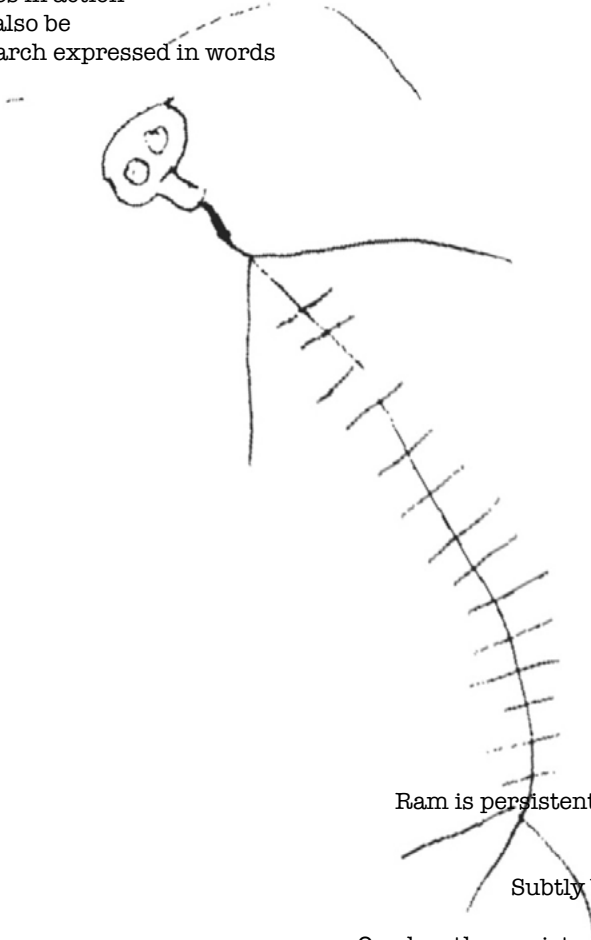
Love,  
Ram



## Action in the black box

Notes taken by the ghost:

research expressed in words  
 can also be  
 bodies in action  
 can also be  
 research expressed in words



Ram is persistent with verbalising everything.

Durga is angry.  
 Subtly but clearly, she says: Enough.

One has the anxiety of letting go of the discursive.  
 And the other insists on the affective.

They must negotiate  
 to realise  
 the futility of this binary.

## Going beyond

To

Durga Bishwokarma  
Fredrikstad, Norway

Date: 15 February 2022

Sub: Sharing ideas and references – part III

You will soon be in Gothenburg. Again, consider this letter as a way for me to share my notes on artistic practices, or should I say appendix 4. I am still thinking about what you said the other day over the phone. There is indeed a tendency in some art and cultural institutions and communities to expect people from marginal spaces to talk exclusively about their marginality. A single individual is turned into a totalising category of the whole community to which that person belongs. In other words, one person, or a small group, is made to stand in (represent) for the whole group. Moreover, they are expected to perform critical-radical work on alterity. I sincerely hope we will consciously attempt to be mindful of these tendencies. What you told me the other day also resonates here in Sweden. In the context of Black Lives Matter, a letter titled *Silence is Violence* was circulated by artists and cultural workers. The letter raised several critical points. However, the one that has stayed with me is the following:

Can a BIPoC artist paint a surrealist still life of onions? Are they treated with the same lens as White artists? Do they have equal rights to opacity, the same breadth of expression and range of subject matter? Do they have equal rights to poetry and play? Do they still have value if they/their works do not clearly function as discursive, diasporic, or diversity entities for your institution? If they are not clearly bearers of your benevolence, progressiveness and goodwill?

After reading this, I have been wanting to do an artistic work which will be nothing but a series of paintings on the still lives of onions. If I get bored, I will add tomatoes. Keeping aside this rebellious desire, at the core of this is a sense of frustration with the default imaginary that is assigned and afforded to subalterns. Why can't subalterns once be political and poetic? Why should they not be able to, and have the right to, engage in poetry and play? In the dominant representational regime, subaltern stories and identities are either erased, stereotyped, or misrepresented. In such a scenario, it's critical to react and respond to such representations with better representations. However, if subalterns only react, when will they create? I am aware that this sets up a futile binary, but we can't ignore the need to exist and make work outside of the default settings. Perhaps, we should bypass the supposed impasse of 'representation' and 'crisis of representation', which the field of arts, humanities and social sciences has spent considerable time investigating and deliberating upon (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 2004).

In this regard, I find Manju Edacharia's (2020; 2021; 2022) work quite exciting in the sense that she takes examples of films made by Dalit filmmakers such as Pa Ranjith, Nagraj Manjule and M. Selvaraj to show how it's possible to go beyond default imaginations. Invoking Jean Luc Nancy, she differentiates between critical presence and representation (2020, p.52).

For Nancy (1993: 1–4), "representation is what determines itself by its own limit," whereas presence is to be born, a verb which is always in action, "to find ourselves exposed, to exist." To be born is not used as static but "to transform, transport and entrance all determinations" (Nancy 1993: 2). These directors explore this possibility—to express the unnamable—of bringing into presence a previously absent entity to a sensory reality. In the process, they create affective expressive archives of anti-caste sensibilities, which not only reject stereotypical representation, but also affect the other by producing a generative discourse of "presence."

In her analysis of *Karnan*, a film by M. Selvaraj, she (2021) demonstrates how the film is based on an actual incident but goes beyond 'real' by breaking away from it now and then. There is an intermittent shift away from the social-realist mode and towards an affective-expressive register where feelings, emotions, a sense of embodiment, metaphors, and visual and acoustic sensory experiences are mobilised in the engagement of a historical event. For her, this is more than representation. She (2022) calls it critical presence and argues:

critical presence is more about challenging the established representational regime, which are essentialising and reductive. In other words, this opens up possibilities of transcending the essentialised identities, not only through "talking back" but also through "talking with" the community. And when it transpires through arts and aesthetics, the possibilities are limitless beyond the default imaginaries.

I appreciate her thinking that she is not dismissive of representation. She acknowledges that critical presence builds upon the critical discourse on representation, but she (2022) also insists on the need to go beyond "the reductive reading of Dalit as a representation alone". She nuances it further by stating that this critical presence or Dalit presentation should not mean or invoke pure presence, as there is no such thing. For her, it is "an act of being present, which does not subsume into the framework of representation."

I would strongly urge you to watch a presentation by Manu Edacharia before we meet. Knowing our practices and interests, it will give us much to talk about. Here is the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5RSPICeXeg> In any case, I have collated some excerpts from her article (2020) *Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema*. With slight alterations/appropriations, I have turned these collated sentences/arguments into verbs. I know it might read like a manifesto. But I promise you it's not. I have always been slightly sceptical and suspicious of manifestos. However, I must admit I like the idea of turning nouns into verbs.



- *(go) against the aesthetic regime of stereotypical representation, through innovative techniques in visuals, sound, music, and cinematography*
- *argue for an enabling anti-caste aesthetics articulated through an embodied sensibility in films*
- *bring into presence what was previously impossible through the processes of denunciation (of casteist images) and innovation (of anti-caste aesthetics)*
- *critique mainstream cinema but also affect the medium itself, through an affective expressive aesthetics that is at once political and poetic*

I guess this is my last letter before we meet. We have plenty to discuss and do.

Much Love,  
Ram

## Postscript: This is hard

A script that may or may not be from the film *You deny my living and I defy my death*

---

Durga: Why do we have to represent it as it is?

Durga lies on the floor. Drained and exhausted.

Cut to:

Durga rushes to the balcony of the black box. The iron railings of the balcony have become a prompt to break open the representational realm. But breaking iron rods is not an easy task. She puts her hand between two railings and the hand hangs in the air. Suddenly she starts biting the railings.

Durga: THIS IS HARD.

Cut to:

We hear Ram's voice.

Ram: Was that for malnutrition, starvation, hunger, or famine?



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## Films

- *Akaler Sandhaney*, 1981. [DVD] Directed by Mrinal Sen. D. K. Films.
- *Karnan*, 2021. [film] Directed by Mari Selvaraj. V Creations.
- *Leviathan*, 2012. [film] Directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel. Sensory Ethnography Lab, Harvard University.
- *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy*, 1990. [film] Directed by Tracey Moffatt. The Australian Film Commission.

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