INTERVAL

A magazine by Crossmopollinate

ISSUE#02

LONGING AND BELONGING

The Ambiguity of International Studenthood

Illustration from Comic "NRI Masala"(2024), by Kattyayani Joag Courtesy of the Artist.

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Editors-in-Chief
Julia Edelmann · Muhammed Aras

Editorial Team
Kattyayani Joag · Inah Kim · Rishika Rai

Artworks by
Ahsaan Masood · Kattyayani Joag · Jisoo Kim · Norayr Derbedrossian

Magazine Design
Kattyayani Joag

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Contact: transculturalhd@gmail.com
Website: www.crossmopollinate.org

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HEIDELBERGER
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UNIVERSITÄT
HEIDELBERG
ZUKUNFT
SEIT 1386

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REFLECTIONS
OF
THE ARCHI


KALOYAN VELKOV
FATIH
MERCEDES KIBRPACE
VILI VIDREL
HAMZA KURTOVIC

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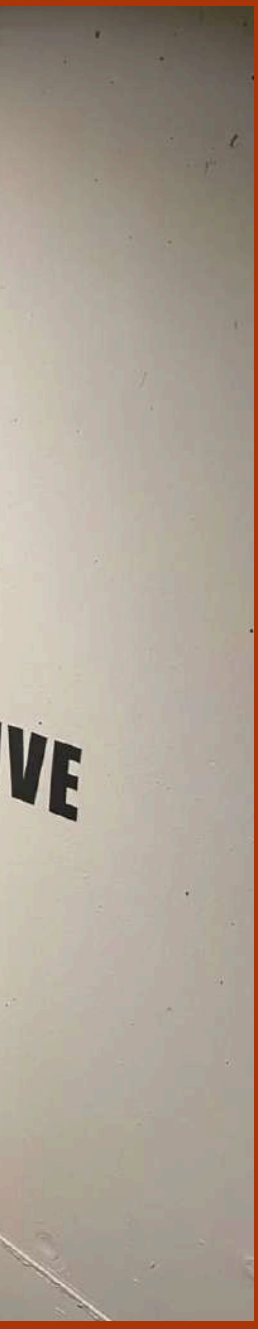


CONTENTS

01 Editors' Note

Longing and Belonging — the ambivalence of international studenthood was born at a time when most of us on the team had either just graduated or were on the verge of graduation. So many of our conversations — in meetings, in kitchens, on walks, over coffees — kept circling back to the same questions. What happens when our visas expire — where do we go? How do we make sense of home when we've found it in so many places: in a cup of coffee, a late-night döner, a friend's hug after sleepless nights filled with news alerts about horrors back home? And what does it mean, in all this, to be foreign?

It wasn't just us. Around us, so many friends and peers were also speaking — urgently, quietly, sometimes offhandedly — about the strange, in-between space of international studenthood. We kept hearing it. Feeling it. That's when we knew: okay, let's do it. Let's make this issue.

There were so many submissions we would have loved to publish — so many voices we wanted to share. But we also found ourselves facing limits we hadn't expected: we realised we couldn't always protect ourselves, or our authors, in the ways they deserved. It has been a painful reminder of how hard it can be to speak freely, even when you want to, even when you feel it's needed. Still, we carry on — each of us in our own ways, in our own practices — hoping for a time when it will be easier, safer, to say what must be said.

To all our contributors: thank you for your vulnerability, your trust, your generosity. Your work has been a joy and an honour to read and to curate.

-Interval Editorial Team

02 About Interval

Through Interval, the magazine of Crossmopollinate, we aim to integrate Transcultural Studies into conversations about art, politics, economy, and society — beyond the confines of academia.

Interval seeks to demystify the theoretical aspects of Transcultural Studies by creating multimedia content — including calls for papers, podcasts, video essays, and more. We believe in the power of diverse narrative practices to promote the horizontalization of what is so often a hierarchical domain: knowledge production.

As students, we felt the need for a publishing platform that was informal — one that allowed us to transform our term papers into formats with more space for experimentation and play.

Interval offers a space to showcase student-driven conversations, bringing them beyond the classroom and making them accessible to a wider audience.

This is our first print edition of the magazine — we hope you enjoy reading it as much as we loved putting it together!

Through the Expansive Glass: A Reflection on (Be)longing and Curation at the Völkerkunde Museum

Paromita Roy
supported by Ilknur Erdoğan

How much of a wall should be cut out to accommodate a window does not always depend upon the purpose of the space or the beings it ought to house.

I did not exactly reach this conclusion the first time I sat inside the Völkerkunde Museum in Heidelberg but for some reason I kept staring at its windows. Expansive and resilient with their wooden frames, the large glass panels seemed to bear the dual responsibility of holding the wall together, along with letting the world in.

Letting the world in must seem like a prerequisite for an ethnographic museum, yet, the Palais Weimer was not originally built as one. Instead, it was a private residence. The expanse of its windows, in Built between 1710 and 1714, the house at Hauptstraße 235 housed the city's commander General von Freudenberg-Mariotte. Over the years, the place has undergone numerous transformations which reflects in the way the space appears to be brimming with stories. One might argue that a museum and a home stand polar opposites to each other in both purpose and presence. A museum emphasizes the material, the curated, and the spectacular, showcasing artifacts and artworks with deliberate intention and careful arrangement. In contrast, a home embodies the lived-in, the ordinary, and the chaotic serving as a space for personal experiences, everyday activities, and the spontaneous ebb and flow of life.

To me, the Völkerkunde Museum encapsulates both. Amidst its grandeur and extravagance, it also contains rooms filled with chaos and care. Volumes are deftly tucked from floor to ceiling, creating overcrowded spaces that compromise on regulated order for the sake of a distinct coziness. This coziness makes one feel comfortably nestled among books, objects, and artifacts from distant places, some of which one may never have visited. It might all sound seamless as I now describe it but the space is not exactly devoid of struggle. Instead, a conflict for struggle is present in every fabric of its being reflected most strikingly in its

resilience to long and belong as the space gets made and unmade through its many lives. In the 1760s, the house at Hauptstraße 235 briefly served as a kind of production building for the "Zitz (variegated cotton) and cotton factory". This was during the mercantilist era when rulers bolstered state finances by supporting local manufacturers. However, Heidelberg soon struggled to compete with the burgeoning English weaving industry, and in 1784, the building was repurposed as the seat of the High Cameral School, an agricultural academy relocated from Kaiserslautern.

The palace provided classrooms, laboratories, collections, and scientific equipment, while its extensive gardens were ideal for botanical experiments. This college functioned until 1818, after which the "cameral building at the Carlstor" was put up for sale again.

James Mitchell, a merchant from Scotland, acquired the property. Mitchell was an important member of the then "English Colony" in Heidelberg, whose artistic taste was naturally satiated by this baroque palace. After this exclusive phase, Prince Wilhelm Karl Bernhard of Saxony-Weimar-Eisenach acquired the house at Hauptstraße 235 in 1902 and named it the "Palais Weimar".

In 1921, the palace switched owners once again and was acquired by Victor Goldschmidt and Leontine Goldschmidt, founders of the J. & E. von Portheim Foundation for Science and Art.

The Goldschimts never lived in the Palais Weimar and instead turned it into an ethnographic institute where they housed their diverse collections. The first exhibition of the museum went on display in 1924. Later, the Ethnographic Museum became the only institute to have survived the Nazi era despite being subject to considerable material and immaterial damage. Reflecting upon the many lives of the Palais Weimar, I am forced to ponder whether a space loses its essence when it is required to repeatedly redefine its purpose, or does its various incarnations shine through like a palimpsest of belongings? I A thing that most likely happens is that the space stops viewing change as a threat and in–stead looks for ways to challenge the facade of stability that is so often maintained by hierarchies.

This spirit shines through in the exhibits at the Völkerkunde Museum, which navigate and reflect on the intricate interplay of materiality, history, and culture. One notable exhibit, Reflections of the Archive*, collaborates with The Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies, utilizing the perspectives of students to offer fresh approaches to access and present museum archives.

"Reflecting upon the many lives of the Palais Weimar, I am forced to ponder whether a space loses its essence when it is required to repeatedly redefine its purpose"

Reflections of the Archive

Preserving and presenting photographs from museum archives is almost always a tricky field to navigate as photographs extend beyond mere visual documentation; they encompass the profound understanding of photographs as archival materials, immortalizing moments of the past within museum collections. As repositories of history, these visual materials undergo meticulous conservation efforts, highlighting their dual nature as carriers of memory and physical artifacts.

Exhibiting archival photographs in an ethnographic museum presents an even greater challenge. Historically, the relationship between anthropology and photography is deeply intertwined with colonialism[1], making it a contested and complex medium to navigate and reinterpret. Perhaps this is

also a reason why such recontextualization is necessary.

The collection of photographs in Reflections of the Archive were created by different people across different periods and geographies for various purposes. None of them had never been exhibited before, and for several, the details surrounding their creation and acquisition also remain ambiguous. Through the exhibition, they were made accessible to questions surrounding how the materiality, actors and meanings of the photographs transformed over time, what the contemporary insights into photographs might be, how individual perspectives are reflected in the exhibition of the archives, and finally, why some perspectives may be more comprehensible than others. In many ways, revisiting and reinterpreting these archival photos was an attempt to shift the power dynamics surrounding their creation and display.

One way of facilitating this shift was by entrusting the curation to students, primarily from international backgrounds. The curation of Reflections of the Archive was done by 13 students who presented 8 different installations. The photographs themselves were quite diverse, comprising personal albums, family vacation shots, official diplomatic stills, scientific photo-documentation, and ethnographic samples of the 'exotic', amongst others. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is indeed right when he says, ... even when the production of the picture is entirely delivered over to the automatism of the camera, the taking of the picture is still a choice involving aesthetic and ethical values."[2]

"This choice simultaneously underscores the unequal distribution of power between the photographer and the photographed. Later, the same unequal distribution of power manifests in the realm of the museum when one chooses to exhibit an image. Photography and its subsequent curation thus involves a degree of ethical discipline and responsibility which was reasonably amplified by our own identities of being students and not professionals in the field.

official flyer of the exhibition

"…even when the production of the picture is entirely delivered over to the automatism of the camera, the taking of the picture is still a choice involving aesthetic and ethical values."

Reflecting on the experience of co-curating this exhibition, I realize that I was initially captivated by the opportunity to work in a museum and learn from professionals. However, on a subconscious level, I was also grappling with the challenge of being an outsider, both in the realm of museum curation and in the country where the curation was taking place. I suppose this abstract feeling of longing and belonging manifested in processes of curation that attempted to move beyond curiosity to reflect responsibility, affect, and power(lessness).

This feeling was shared amongst the other curators as well who articulated this sense of responsibility and how it became central to our curatorial project in the motivation statements that preceded our individual exhibits.

Reflecting on the Exhibition

Reflections of the Archive[3] came to life after four months of work to challenge the roles of the curator and the curated, the personal and the public, and the viewer and the receiver. By viewing the archive as a liminal space between memory and forgetting, the exhibition also sought to uncover additional memories that may surface through the act of displaying the archive. To provide more insight, we will now dive into our installations and the motives behind our curations Marlies Weileder and Ilknur Erdogan worked on a photograph featuring the Strohnickel and the Christ Child. The photograph at first glance was thought by the students to have been transported from Africa or elsewhere. But it was actually taken very close to Heidelberg, and this misleading first impression forced the curators to repeatedly ask the question, "What do visitors expect from ethnographic collections?" As they traced the photograph's history, they discovered that the Portheim Foundation, closely associated with Nazi politics in Nazi-era Germany, had obtained his as well as similar images to support and showcase German folklore in its collection. But, being put together with other images —mostly from a colonial past—I, Ilknur, couldn't differentiate it at the beginning. For me, it was a European bride and a slave man, and the story of this image was an event from a wedding. Reconsidering my shocking mistake, I faced my expectations from an ethnographic collection. Even when looking at a photograph from traditional German folklore, if the people seem unfamiliar, we tend to search for something "ethnic" or "mystical"—often from colonized geographies—in anyone who doesn't look like a Western man in a suit. I expected to see unequal power relations, social hierarchies, and racial classes from a photograph kept in the museum archive.

Keeping with the topic of power, race, and gender Kattyayani Tushar Joag, Nikolai Schuhna and I extend a critical lens at the famous Wiele and Klein Photo Studio that operated between 1890 and 1980 in India. Through one photograph that shows Indian women bathing at a local pond, we raised questions about public and private space. Simultaneously, refusing to fall into the common trope of observing women simply as passive actors, we focussed on women's resistance and, therefore, agency arising from the womens' discomforted glare in the

photograph. In addition, Schuhna was shocked by the dehumanizing note (image below) written by an unidentified person on the flipside of another photo featuring a royal event. Collectively we strove to move beyond what an image may depict on the surface to other interpretations that distribute agency and power amongst actors both visible and invisible.

When a photograph is displayed, who dominates the process of meaning-making central to the image? Is it the curators, the subjects in the photographs, or the audience, whose reception and interpretation generate new meanings from the "static" form? Additionally, does the archive's liminal identity, poised between memory and erasure, also influence the creation and curation of meaning? When a photograph is displayed, who dominates the process of meaning-making central to the image? Is it the curators, the subjects in the photographs, or the audience, whose reception and interpretation generate new meanings from the "static" form? Additionally, does the archive's liminal identity, poised between memory and erasure, also influence the creation and curation of meaning?

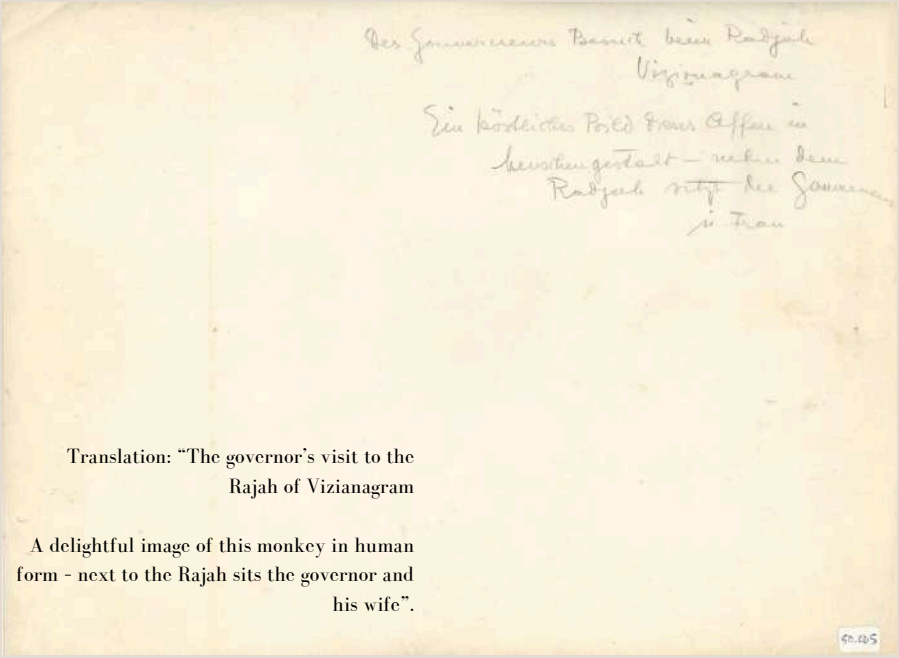
Memory and the Archives

Literary theorist and visual artist Aleida Assmann observes memory and archives as both active and passive agents. She writes, "[i]n order to remember anything one has to forget; but what is forgotten is not necessarily lost forever."[4]

Reflections of the Archive was profoundly influenced by this interplay of memory and forgetting, as a diverse group of students and educators collaborated to curate this exhibition.

Each individual's background, upbringing, experiences and academic perspectives uniquely

> *"When a photograph is displayed, who dominates the process of meaning-making central to the image?"*



Translation: "The governor's visit to the Rajah of Vizianagram

A delightful image of this monkey in human form - next to the Rajah sits the governor and his wife".

Scanned photos from the Wiele and Klein Photo Studio archive (front)

shaped their formation. The convergence of remembering and forgetting from the curators' point of view developed through the negotiation of certain memories that could be voiced and others that one was required to let go of.

One significant memory we had to all move past was the dissociation of our exhibition from the Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie, a contemporary photography event based in Germany. Scheduled to open in March 2024 across the cities of Mannheim, Ludwigshafen, and Heidelberg, the Biennale was ultimately cancelled by the German government. This decision came in response to social media comments made by Shahidul Alam[5], a Bangladeshi photojournalist and co-curator of the event, who condemned Israel's actions in Gaza following the October 7th attack. With the cancellation of the Biennale, Reflections of the Archive was opened to the public as a private exhibition of the Völkerkunde Museum on 10th February 2024. One could say that in the end the event was largely a success. It was visited by several students, professors and guests of Universität Heidelberg and was greatly appreciated. However, it also became a reminder of how much more the exhibition could have been had it opened as a part of the Biennale.

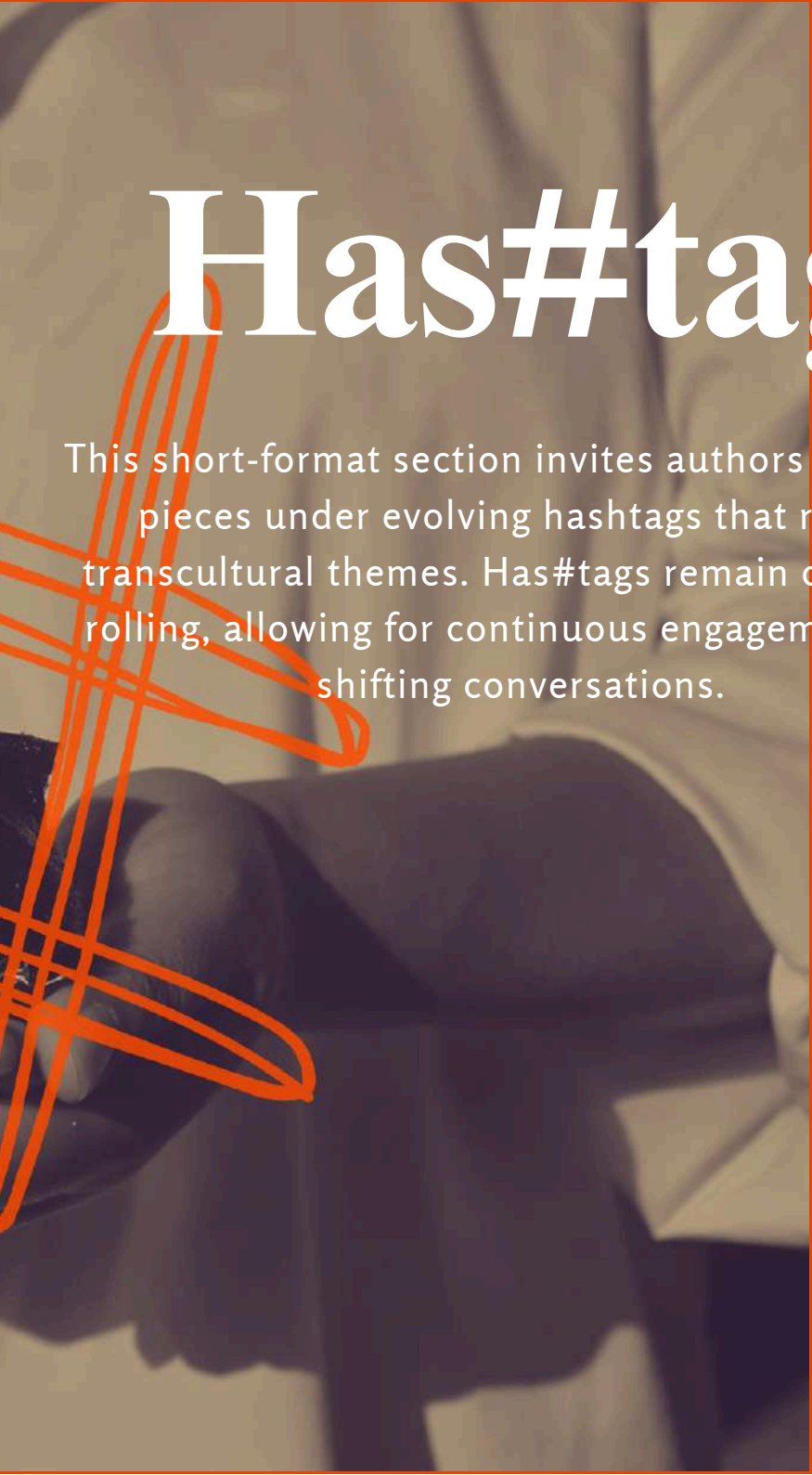
Ultimately, it simultaneously highlighted the unequal distribution of power in society—the very power the students had aimed to challenge through their curation

Conclusion

Reflections of the Archive, both as a project and an exhibition, aimed to cultivate a critical perspective on photography as an archived object in ethnographic museums. Ultimately, it also encouraged a deeper examination of life itself. The exhibition coincidently had its opening exactly a hundred years after the Ethnography Institute's very first exhibition in 1924. In this sense, as well as others, the Völkerkunde Museum, with its enduring struggle and evolutionary resilience, nurtured this examination of life and art and the ways in which they interfere with each other. Simultaneously, by merging the intimate and the public, the lived-in and the curated, its expansive windows transformed the museum into a space where the walls did more than just hold—they truly let the world in.

Scanned photos from the Wiele and Klein Photo Studio archive

Scan here for web article
with citations



Has#tag

This short-format section invites authors to submit pieces under evolving hashtags that reflect transcultural themes. Has#tags remain open and rolling, allowing for continuous engagement with shifting conversations.

Ted Lasso. 2020. "Trent Crimm: The Independent" Season 1, Episode 3. Apple TV+. Screenshot by author.

#Postcol

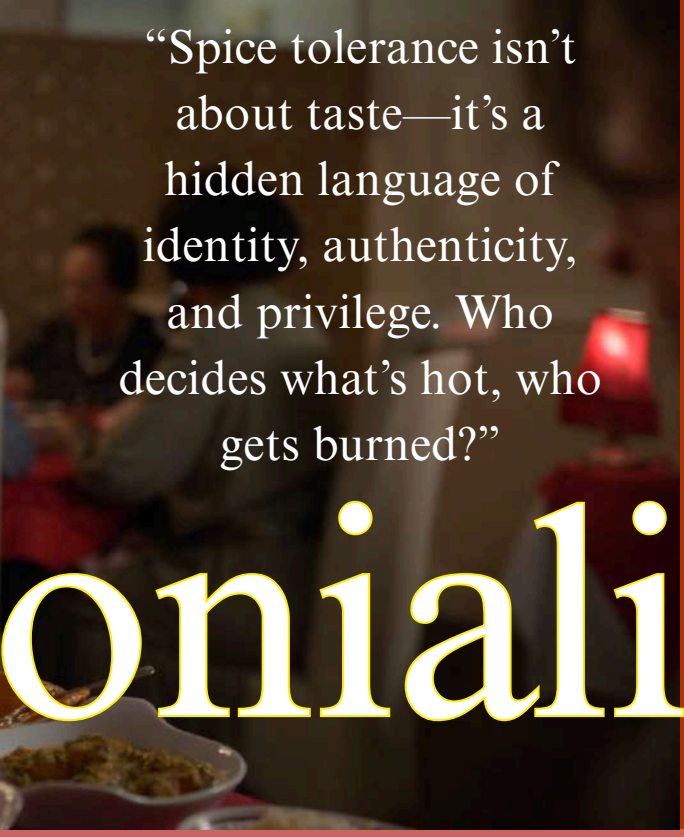
Insert Hot Take: Ted Lasso, Masculinity, and Cultural Cachet

Ninaad Adhvaryu

The third episode of Ted Lasso has the titular character being shadowed by Trent Crimm, the sceptical reporter from The Independent. That night Ted was invited to a family owned Indian restaurant by his former taxi driver. Ted Lasso is out of place not only as a white man in an Indian restaurant but also a US American, from Kansas no less, who is wholly unfamiliar with the cuisine. He makes the unwise decision of asking the food to be prepared like "they are a couple members of the family." The food arrives and neither can handle the spice. Ted soldiers on, not wanting to upset those who invited him. It is this interaction that finally melts Crimm's otherwise icy attitude towards Ted.

An AppleTV+ original, the show Ted Lasso is engineered to showcase men being soft, supportive, and most of all safe. What can be safer than a white man willing to 'torture' himself with spice? The episode ends with Ted getting the shits and rushing home. How, and why, does this signal safety? What inferences are we drawing from spice tolerance? Where does spice sit at the intersection of gender, race and online culture wars?

Your spice tolerance is a significant social signifier; through understanding perceptions of spice tolerance, we gain insight into shifting webs of relationships between identities, like race, gender, and politics[1]. We look at how spice has come to



"Spice tolerance isn't about taste—it's a hidden language of identity, authenticity, and privilege. Who decides what's hot, who gets burned?"

oniality

represent the Indian community globally, how spice is treated within the Indian community, how expectations of spice tolerance falls along gendered notions of strength, and discuss the transcultural implications of observing historic injustice and how trends skewer truth.

Spice as Signifier

Cultures in the global North with significant Indian communities have synonymized spice and "Indianness".

Stand-up comedian Hasan Minhaj's appearance on the YouTube talkshow Hot Ones begins with the question, "How are you with hot food?" Minhaj responds, "As an Indian, I'm pretty good."

"Do you feel the pressure of your people on your shoulders? And you really need to come correct?", the host adds.

Proliferation of identity-based language has created a slew of terms to describe every intersection between "white" and "Indian" culture: American born confused desi (ABCD), fresh off the boats (FOB), coconut, firangi. An ABCD must outdo a white American in spice tolerance, but they, in turn, should be outdone by a FOB, who should then be trumped by any "real" middle-class Indian[2].

On the show, failure to complete the wings results in induction into the Wall of Shame. For Minhaj it would imply he was less of a man and less of an Indian.

It would surprise very few that this perception is no accident. Spice tolerance has evolved into a complex signifier of cultural authenticity, identity, and social dynamics, reflecting deeper issues of identity and belonging in a world increasingly obsessed with authenticity.

Spice as a signifier brings with it deeply embedded

structures of caste. Ragini Kashyap notes, in the paper "Caste: The Main Character of Indian Food," "Today, the perception of Indian cuisine is primarily that of an upper-caste cuisine. It is ironic that approximately a quarter of all Indians are unlikely to ever have access to this food which restaurants around the world serve in abundance." Going on to highlight, "[d]espite boasting a staggering diversity of highly developed cuisines, this division is, incredibly, one of the few constant features of Indian food along the length and breadth of the country. The ghee-laden curries enhanced with elaborate spice mixtures are primarily the prerogative of the upper-castes, while the curries of the lower castes are often simpler counterparts that maximise available ingredients." Failure to eat rakti[3], dish more common among the Dalit population of India, or axone[4], popular among North-East Indians, would make no one feel less Indian. Yet, spice remains the foremost mark of Indian cuisine— a dynamic created by a hierarchy in which historically privileged Indians alone imagine what constitutes Indian.

Having Your Curry and Eating it Too

Under the guise of combating colonial structures, the Indian diaspora continues to spread ideas about food that draw directly from Manusmriti[5]. Often, it is the same people pushing for more inclusive language and conversations in Europe and North America who are complicit in India's backslide on social issues.

In a 2020 survey, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, found that "Indian Americans' policy views are more liberal on issues affecting the United States and more conservative on issues affecting India. Regarding contentious issues such as the equal protection of religious minorities, immigration, and affirmative action, Indian Americans hold relatively more conservative views of Indian policies than of U.S. policies."

Narratives of food shape imaginations of India abroad and at home. The most prominent dishes—biryani, tikka, gravies rich in whole spices and expensive oils—allude to India's monarchical history, where these dishes were prepared through significant labour by marginalised castes and women.

Proponents attempt to claim Indian cuisine as an exemplary model of communal sharing and strong communities, unlike the isolated communities in 'Western' countries. They neglect to mention the underlying caste dynamics and the prevalence of the two-tumbler system, both within and beyond India.

This foray into food implies a greater tension within a global Indian identity: keen to partake in the economic spoils of liberal democracy, granted by cultures tentatively re-evaluating their colonial histories, while continuing to stifle similar introspection within India.

Conclusion

It is hard to avoid patriarchy. Even in efforts to reimagine masculinity, its ideals often persist. Ted Lasso is, of course, a fantastic and aspirational model of masculinity—encouraging, empathetic, and kind. Yet, he must be hyper-competent. Something which extends to most characters on the show. They must be able to effortlessly score a free kick if they set their minds to it, create secret, successful, football tactics, and defy age for a final hurrah. If they were unable to—if Ted couldn't handle the spice, unable to come correct—we might feel shame on their behalf.

This is okay. Apple TV+ should keep attempting to reimagine masculinity, we must keep attempting to avoid patriarchy. The show's use of spice served for us only to be a jumping off point for a rabbit hole into the transculturality of spice.

This rabbit hole, unfortunately, ends where most do; at the bottom is historic marginalisation, enduring oppression, and capitalism. A reading of the text so far may leave you with a simple narrative. Upper caste, privileged, men perpetuate within Indian

communities, at home and abroad, patriarchal notions of spice tolerance and gate-keep away women and minorities through subtle but persuasive ridicule. We should and must resist the urge to perpetuate this paradigm. Good praxis is to accept people for the spice tolerance they have, not pressure or push people and to live and let live.

But there exists some dissonance here. I love spice. I was made to love spice. By friends who pushed me to eat spicier and spicier food, at times directly playing on masculine insecurity. It worked – I loved it. I cherish a biriyani that can clear my sinuses and numb me. When living outside India I freely used my spice tolerance as cultural cachet to bond and talk to those from other cultures. I am perhaps just as tacitly guilty as the Indian diaspora I bemoan.

It has been easy to be cripplied by the sense that all explorations of culture and its origins must result in some newfound disapproval. This is a failing and is avoided by simply being encouraging, empathetic to oneself. We can, and should, continue to think about the transformative, challenging and mundane effect of cultures, and their histories, on our lives without turning to despair. Understanding histories should not lead to guilt that creates shame, shame which creates secrecy. We shouldn't be afraid to make things spicy.

#Mobility, #Hybridity,

Kimchi and Me: Recipes for Tracing My Identity

Risako Tominaga

Going up the stairs of Frankfurter Kunstverein, I was already led by the smell of garlic to the Mak Kimchi Workshop in the installation space of the artist couple La Caoba (Larry Bonćhaka and Sopo Kashakashvili). There were already about 10 participants gathering and chatting, with their containers to bring the kimchi home. I came to join alone, but I was relieved to find a friend and the guest host, Inah. The exhibition room had a greenhouse at the center, jute bags on the wall with signs of "TARIFFS", "FREE WATER", "DECOLONIZE FOOD", and so on, wooden sticks and stones hung from the ceiling with ropes. The right front corner of the room was full of ingredients and cooking utensils. Every Saturday, the artists invite guests to participate in a cooking session that fosters transcontinental community-building. On the table were also Georgian spices from the previous session. In this transcultural and cross-media space, I recollected the memory of the fridge in my family home in Osaka, Japan, which was also always filled with the smell of kimchi.

I remember this one day, when I was in elementary school, I had a friend come over. As soon as I opened the fridge to show her the drink options, she was surprised to find a container of homemade kimchi from my grandmother. To her surprise, I found out that home-made kimchi in the fridge was not ''normal'' in my suburban neighborhood of Osaka. My grandmother would make kimchi with cabbage, radish, and cucumber, but my most favourite kimchi as a kid was with dried squid that my father would buy in Tsuruhashi district, a so-called "Korean town" located in the center of Osaka. Ever since this encounter, however, I have become hesitant to open the fridge in front of my friends.

My father was famous among my friends from kindergarten as a master of BBQ. While he made a fire in a Shichirin (small charcoal grill) in a workspace of his business which my grandfather built next to our house, I would go to our small garden, picked some lettuce that my grandmother grew, and helped my mother marinate the beef slices from a Korean butcher in Tsuruhashi with my

#Labelling, #Normalization

father's home-made BBQ sauce. We sometimes had steamed pork with Gochujang sauce on the same table, which I had recently learned is called Bossam. It was when my friend's family came over to join the BBQ that I realized the red sauce would be too spicy for some of my friends.

For the longest time, I didn't know that these dishes were Korean, which my friends' families would not cook. A Korean couple was visiting us occasionally, and I remember my parents telling me to say "Hi". One day, I asked my mother who they were and learned that they were my relatives.

It was only later that my mother told me, "Your father had a Korean passport, too, but he decided to be naturalized after we married," which came as a shock, since for a decade of my life, I was thinking, "I am 100% Japanese."

Why didn't you tell me about that?

Because your grandmother was worried. In old times, there were discriminations against Korean people, and there might still be…

What she said immediately made me let go of the need to know why no one had told me about the Korean side of my family, and until I entered university, nothing had made me feel comfortable enough to tell my friends about the Korean background of my family.

My grandfather had moved to Japan alone when he was nineteen. He met my grandmother, whose parents are Korean, in Okayama and then settled in Osaka. My grandmother cannot speak Korean, but she might understand a few words from K-dramas. My grandfather, however, could, according to my father. I always wonder if he would have taught Korean to my father and me if discrimination did not exist. Now that I love traveling to South Korea and watching K-dramas, sometimes I wish I could understand the language. I am not saying that it was wrong of them not to teach me Korean. Me not being able to speak Korean is a result of their care to protect me at that time and a gift for me to trace back their thoughts as I do in this essay.

I did not inherit the Koreanness of my family by language, but by food. During the New Year

(Osyōgatsu) season, which is the biggest holiday when many people spend time with their families and eat traditional cuisines, a popular conversation topic around this time in Japan is what kind of Ozōni (a soup with sticky rice cake to be served during the New Year holidays in Japan) each family eats at home. Some people make it with miso, some without. Others cook it with bean paste, depending on the region of the families' origins. Every family had their own way of cooking it, but I didn't know what Ozōni was, and I could not understand why it was a hot topic among friends. This was when I realized my family traditions were not "normal". I had never had Ozōni at home, but Tteokguk soup, a Korean soup with rice cake that is not as sticky as the Japanese ones. On the first day of January every year, we would place the dishes in front of our ancestors' portraits, and bow to the floor for them before we started the holiday meal. This tradition, in Korea, is called Jesa, which would also be different from the Japanese way of celebrating New Year's. Year by year, "What kind of Ozōni do you eat for New Year?" became an uncomfortable question to answer because of the abnormality. "If I tell my friends what we cook for New Year's, they might find it weird", I thought. I would just answer "miso," which seemed to be the most common in my region.

Leading up to New Year's, and as the end of December approaches, my aunts come to my family home to help my grandmother prepare Chijimi (Korean pancake with leek), tempura (how she called it in a Japanese word. n Korean, Yukjeon), Namul (marinated veggies), and kimchi. My mother would put a Hello Kitty apron on me and always take me to the kitchen first to help the ladies. I asked, "How come my little brother doesn't help us? He is still sleeping!" She answered, "Just let him sleep because he is a boy." As I grew up, I became more and more sensitive about this difference in the gender role that was expected of me. As I found my family tradition different from my friends', I started growing a little jealous about not having a "normal Japanese" New Year's dishes with Ozōni and Osechi, a collection of dishes in a lacquer box that can just be ordered.

It was only after I started living in Germany that I began to truly appreciate my grandmother's homemade kimchi. Having tried all the European groceries that I cannot find in Japan and started missing Asian food, I remembered that there was always a red kimchi container in the fridge at home in Osaka. I can easily get kimchi at shops like Go Asia or Rewe, but somehow, they are not satisfying enough. Living apart from my family could have been a chance to have my own "normal Japanese" fridge, one that I wished for as a child, to avoid being "different." However, unlike Japan, where many people have only Japanese relatives, everyone in Germany has a different background. Having Korean relatives as a Japanese person would not come as a surprise to anyone. In Frankfurt, there are many Korean supermarkets; because of the large number of Korean companies, trendy bubble tea shops, and cafés with matcha latte, which are full of locals. This environment might have helped me realize my true identity that cannot be described only with the labels of "Japanese" or "Korean". Although I once wished to have "normal Japanese" traditions as a kid, what I missed at home in Germany was not just a fridge full of Japanese ingredients, but a fridge with kimchi, one that is filled with garlic smell and Korean New Year dishes.

Coming back to the workshop, it started with the introduction of the ingredients by the two guest hosts, a friend of mine from Heidelberg, Inah, and her friend Bora. They had already salted the cabbage in a huge bucket the day before. From their recipe, I thought it might be true that Korean cuisines in Japan have slightly been transformed over time. Watching them marinate cabbage with gloves and spread sesame oil in a pan, I felt like I was back home preparing New Year's dishes with my aunties, mom, and grandma. I was grateful that the constellation of Korean recipes that was descended to me by women back home was reconnected to me in Germany through these women.

On the table were onions, green onions, fruits, sticky rice, sesame oil, seaweeds, and kilograms of Gochugaru (red pepper powder). As soon as I saw this table full of ingredients, I began thinking that how my grandmother makes kimchi might be simpler than how it is usually made in Korea.

In Japan, some Zainichi (descendants of Koreans who forcibly or voluntarily migrated to Japan during WWII and Japan's colonization of Korea from 1910 to 1945) restaurant owners or chefs on YouTube promote a "taste of Zainichi Korean" Because every Zainichi Korean has a different background and associations with Korea, I did not like how they automatically categorize my grandmother's taste. I don't even know if my grandparents on my father's side should be categorized as "Zainichi" or if they want to be. My grandmother's dishes have more gentle and milder flavors than the Korean dishes I eat outside of home. When I sent the photo of the table to my father. He replied, "Grandma doesn't put in that many ingredients. It's much easier!🙂."

If I come to think about it, I didn't know if my New Year's dishes were really Korean style or my grandmother's style. On January 1, 2025, I spent New Year's holidays in my 19-square-meter apartment in Frankfurt. I found myself googling how to make Tteokguk and getting the rice cakes at Go Asia in Zeil at Hauptwache.

I helped my grandmother cook some Korean dishes for the New Year, but I had never helped her make Tteokguk. She would start by making chicken broth, and put egg, rice cakes, tofu, and when serving, add seaweeds and soy sauce with green onions. For some reason, I could not find the recipe with chicken. I just made it with beef as the recipe written by the Korean poster, because I was not sure if Korean people really eat this soup for the New Year, anyway. After a week, I met a Korean friend who showed me a photo of Tteokguk that she had made. It was the first proof I had that Tteokguk is really made outside my family. Interestingly, she had never heard of a Tteokguk with chicken. Again, I wondered whether my grandmother's recipes differ from what is eaten in Korea today.

When I cook what my grandmother cooked, I feel like I am decolonizing all the background history, which eventually prevented me from speaking about my family tradition with pride. If it was because of the discrimination against Koreans and Zainichi Korean people, which made my grandparents obscure their Korean identities, my act of learning Korean culture is

for me, the act of recovering the unspoken part of my family history. What I can do is try to reassemble the Korean culture that my grandparents might have passed down to my family if they had not been pressured to conceal their identities.

After the workshop, the entire gallery smelled of kimchi, from the basement to the third floor. When leaving the building, I felt proud that it was filled with the comforting smell of my family's fridge. Of course, after the workshop, the fridge in my apartment in Frankfurt smelled of garlic like my family's fridge, and I felt a sense of pride in my homemade kimchi.

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(photograph by author)

#Identity

Spice is Relative

Inah Kim

While preparing to move from my tiny, shared 9-square-meter room to a significantly larger apartment to live with my boyfriend, I was confronted once again with two large white plastic boxes I had nearly forgotten. They were filled with the most random assortment of dried vegetables, grains, and flours—ingredients I had hoarded over at least five years during trips to Korea and visits to Asian supermarkets across Germany. The containers had been shoved into a corner of the basement, and I'd never had the chance to go through them during the rush of previous moves. I decided not to sort them in the cramped space I was leaving but to wait until I arrived in the new, more spacious apartment.

After the move—which took nearly two weeks—I finally unpacked and began sorting through the contents. Many of the powders, like mung bean starch or dried gon-deu-re, had expired. I asked friends and my boyfriend whether I should throw them away. Their consensus was, "It's fine. Those things don't really go bad." So I kept them, hoping they'd find their way into something, someday.

With a friend visiting from Lausanne—someone I'd worked with at a Vietnamese restaurant in Mainz—I felt motivated to make kimchi. I trusted her knife skills and knew she wouldn't be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of garlic we'd peel or the precision required to julienne carrots and daikon radish. Occasionally, she'd give me 10 kilograms of kimchi whenever I visited her, especially once she discovered I had none in my refrigerator. I remembered the 1kg packet of gochugaru (Korean chili powder) buried in the pile of things I couldn't bring myself to discard. I suggested we make kimchi as our weekend project in Heidelberg. That's all we needed: garlic, gochugaru, sticky rice powder, apples, pears, onions, a lot of salt, fish sauce, and napa (Chinese) cabbage.

It was late November, when the winds had grown cool and heavy cabbages appeared neatly stacked in supermarkets and markets. Not to question their presence, but I always wonder who in Germany cooks with that much cabbage—and for what? For me, the purpose was obvious. I'd haul back around ten of them, hoping each weighed at least two kilograms. Cabbages are harvested earlier in Germany than in Korea, and I used to be surprised by their smaller size. I'd grown up with ones that weighed five or six kilograms. Now I was simply glad if they weren't hollow or dried in the middle, and weighed more than 1.8 kilograms. In Korean, we call sturdy, full vegetables like these "silhada" (실하다).

Seeing one at the right time of year would immediately make me think of kimchi. But in Germany, I'd never seen a "silhan" (실한) cabbage. A woman from the Korean-German Christian community once told me you have to ask local farmers to harvest them late if you want cabbage suitable for Korean standards.

The night before we began, we salted 20 kilograms of cabbage in a large plastic container placed over the bathtub. By morning, the cabbages had released much of their water and shrunk. We made the filling—called "sok (속)" in Korean, which translates to "the inside"—by mixing sticky rice powder with water, then adding pureed onion, apple, pear, and shrimp paste. When I opened the gochugaru packet to mix it in, I discovered that the chili powder had hardened and was covered in white mold. It was Sunday, and the only Korean acquaintance I could message in Heidelberg wasn't home. We didn't know what to do.

Coincidentally, I was set to start a job at the local Asian supermarket the next day. My friend suggested I just pick up 2 kg of fresh chili powder after work, and we'd finish the batch then. There was no other option. Still, we enjoyed the salted cabbage leaves with "suyuk" (boiled pork belly) and raw garlic—something we rarely let ourselves indulge in, knowing how the garlic smell would linger for days.

There are moments of doubt I carry with me, especially around smell. It might be a kind of habitual obsession that makes me worry about how I smell to other people. Living in Heidelberg among international friends—and in the wake of COVID-era stories of heightened anti-Asian racism—I've come to recognize that smell can be racialized. I spent part of middle school in Texas, where racist comments were common, and I didn't yet have the vocabulary to respond. I recall the confusing embarrassment of offering kimchi to classmates, only to watch them recoil in overacted teenage disgust. Friends in Heidelberg often told me not to overthink it. Still, in the thrill of being halfway done with our kimchi—"kimjang" (김장)—I let myself eat as much garlic as I wanted. Before bed, my boyfriend, who's not at all sensitive to the smell, told me I was "fuming with garlic."

On my first day at the supermarket, I assumed people would be more forgiving—after all, it was an Asian grocery. But even there, I was met with comments. A former Thai chef colleague told me he couldn't stand next to me. Another colleague tried to reassure me, but, standing two meters away, still asked, "What did you do that you smell so much like garlic?" I told them I had made kimchi the day before. And so I became, instantly, the Korean girl who makes kimchi—and reeks of garlic—on her first day of work.

Kimchi came up often at the store. One colleague, who turned out to be a picky eater, told me she couldn't stand the taste or smell of it. Yet one of her regular duties was to pierce expanded kimchi bags—on the verge of exploding from fermentation—and reseal them. Every time she did, she'd squeal, rush to open all the doors, and complain loudly. I understood the reaction, but still, it stung. I felt embarrassed, as if I were the kimchi.

Answering questions about kimchi also became part of the job. It was surprising how much shelf space it took—entire aisles of jars, cans, and refrigerated sections. Over the four months I worked there, I developed a repertoire of responses. The most common question was about spiciness. The first time, a young boy asked how spicy it was. I reflexively said, "Spice is relative. So I don't know how spicy it could be for you." I regretted my snappy answer to such simple curiosity coming from a child. Over time, I realized that within the setting of an Asian supermarket, I was positioned not as someone being interrogated, but as someone expected to answer. These weren't naive or racially charged questions—they were just questions. Sometimes, yes, drunk men would make inappropriate comments. But more often, it was genuine interest.

It was strange to confront how popular kimchi had become, elevated by social media to the status of a superfood. Some customers were looking to boost their probiotic intake. I eventually decided I was fine taking the time to explain what it is. After all, I was

being paid to do so. it's not easy: describing the spice level, the consistency, the cultural meaning of a food that, for me, is simply everyday. Maybe answering those questions with such repetition required a level of dissociation—where it became easier as I gathered a larger pool of automated answers based on what people expected to hear.

That tactic of dissociation became useless when I was occasionally struck by the on-and-off grief of losing my grandma, who had passed away in the summer. I would sit down in the small office/storage room to eat my lunch and see 30g kimchi packages stacked on top of each other. It looked like a graveyard of kimchi, bereft of its soul. One day, answering questions based on cultural curiosity became especially hard when suddenly my phone was ringing with messages from friends in Korea. On December 3rd, 2024, I panicked upon hearing the news that the (now former) president Yoon had declared martial law. I quietly called three friends to ask what was going on—whether there was a war, or if this was the beginning of a dictatorship. Ridden with anxiety that I might not be able to see my friends or family again, I told my co-worker, "The president just declared martial law." His response: "What? Keep working."

That entire day, while the military rushed into parliament and my friends kept each other updated, I tried my best to just stay in the store and act like I was working. By the evening, it had concluded that the worst-case scenario could be stopped. When the store owner stopped by to drop off boxes, I told him what had happened. He replied, "Oh, these things happen all the time in those kinds of countries."

I don't know what kind of response I was expecting. Sometimes it feels like people practice certain reactions so often that when they're faced with something unfamiliar, their response comes off as ignorant, unempathetic, or simply uncaring. I still don't know what to make of these reactions—except to say that some emotions are not shared, perhaps because of cultural prejudice.

Maybe these kinds of unsympathetic responses are also rehearsed and accepted elsewhere, but I can only guess. About three months after our kimjang, my neighbor from across the courtyard introduced himself. He asked what I did—and quickly followed up: "Did you make kimchi a few months ago?" He said he'd like to try it, but all he had to offer in return was bolognese.

It still surprises me how many interactions leave me unsure of how to respond. I left that conversation with a chuckle, feeling both watched and uncomfortable, suddenly highly visible—called out for doing something unusual in Germany. Eating what I eat, making food for myself while worrying about the smell—these have become part of a routine I hardly notice anymore. I'm trying to unlearn these quietly depressing habits. I feel disappointed in myself for having assimilated too much, for not holding on to what I needed to protect in order to be myself. Relearning how to trust what my senses tell me to eat, smell, and feel is part of the process of trying to feel safe—and at home—in this country, where I've now lived for nine years.

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Universitätsplatz, Heidelberg
(all photographs by author)

Fragments of Home Between Santiniketan and Heidelberg

Amrita Datta

Studying abroad has enriched me in countless ways, but there were more days when it felt like I was trapped in a nightmare for a month straight. Navigating through the emotional and bureaucratic complexities of life, mostly alone, in a foreign land that has left a mark I'll carry with both pride and ache. Back home in India, it's common to see young people move cities for better opportunities. But for someone who had never lived away from her parents for twenty-five years and struggled with deep-rooted self-esteem issues, I never imagined I'd cross continents to pursue a second master's degree.

In the first eight months, I moved through at least five private apartments before finally securing student accommodation on the outskirts of Heidelberg. Yet, no matter where I lived, I invariably woke up to the aroma of brewing coffee drifting in from shared kitchens, while gazing out at the changing hues of European nature through the curtainless, old wooden windows. It was a stark contrast to the familiar scent of incense sticks, the pressure cooker hissing, and the fresh smell of rice cooking every morning in my house in Santiniketan[1].That contrast, in itself, spoke volumes about how far I had come, literally. Santiniketan, with its red soil, open skies, and the lingering echoes of Tagore's music[2], was home. And yet, here I was; trying to ground myself on Heidelberg's cobbled Hauptstrasse, walking into one of the oldest universities in the world.

As I write, I realise that experiencing Heidelberg hasn't been just about the picturesque landscapes and academic rigor in a historic university town. It's been a journey through dynamic shared experiences.

I met students from Pakistan, Portugal, Ukraine, Colombia, Hong Kong, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Senegal, Nepal, from several states of India, and of course Germany, with whom I shared a sense of collectiveness in memory and identity that resonated with the flowing idea of home and the longing to belong with the foreignness. Our memories of home often arose from a (deprived) hope of returning, or sometimes from the deep desire to belong to a place that can be felt as a home. We yearned for a sense of normalcy, driven to find parts of ourselves in the pubs and canteens of Heidelberg. In all those moments, I knew that the nature of the pain and fear stemming from the dichotomy of uprootedness and embeddedness transcends borders and nationalities. It wasn't all sad, of course! In Heidelberg I felt the magic spell that togetherness casts on you and the virtue of living for each other that one doesn't forget.

I experienced the ecstasy of growing up while making connections that embraced my vulnerabilities. For example, the 7 minutes walk everyday from the Eichendorffplatz tram stop to the student campus always felt like 7 years, with my shoulders drooping down with every step, scavenging for the reason that made existence so heavy those days. Those times I was often saved by simple meals that my friends shared with me. The Western dream to polish and shine through life was nowhere to be seen, but familiar voices and conversations over meals did the magic, every time!

Through havoc trials and errors of finding a firm ground for my emotional self, at every uncertain step, through every struggle of letting go of something, I only found more love wrapped up and sent to me in different packages.

My uncle lives in Zurich with his family. We lived in a joint family together in my birth city in India for the first seven years of my life and reuniting with him in Europe felt surreal. I found a photograph that I added on Facebook, expressing my complete disbelief and gratitude for experiencing the Alps in Zermatt, Switzerland! That day I promised to build more of myself in the present, keeping in my heart

the experiences of the past that shaped the path leading me to the present. As I scrolled through my Facebook feed further down, there was also this photo of me, bundled up in layers, marveling at the first snowfall of my life, it was freezing and I was surprised how spontaneously I went out, gathered my friends and made snow butterflies at 7a.m. We spent at least five hours dancing and jumping in the snow forgetting all about the flu we suffered just a week ago, a visual memory that still makes me hum, "And I think to myself. What a wonderful world!" Re-reading social media posts feels a lot like looking at an old mirror that I hated looking through when I had first arrived in Heidelberg. I hated how my friends enjoyed home-cooked meals every day, (affordable) Uber selfies, varieties of indian cuisine delivered at doorsteps; made me so jealous that I cherished every moment a lot more to compensate, because it did feel a bit criminal to not marvel at the snow-capped cherries or the buildings that looked straight out of a Miyazaki[iii] movie. Yet, I didn't know where to place the strange, deep loneliness that lingered like an unavoidable shadow, always close, always present. Undeniably, as my medical anthropology studies unfolded, I have been increasingly drawn to

the narratives of suffering and resilience more than ever. As someone who always wondered about the facets that make up one's mental health, I kept searching for evidence of how pain and endurance connect us across cultures, even as our stories remain deeply personal.Stories of people caught between "here" and "there," shaping new identities by reusing fragments of an old self, much like mine. Numerous encounters, both in class and beyond, helped me begin to view my own struggles with depression differently. Recognizing the profound influence of cultural context on our experiences allowed me to gradually deconstruct my own biases around mental health. Over time, I've learned a few ways to hold my pain with more compassion and less judgment, better understanding of how deeply our inner worlds are shaped by where we come from. Although I came to Germany by choice, it felt like an exilic torture to be disconnected from my cultural identity and community, away from my lifelong comfort, security, relationships, and privileges back in India, which was not my choice. However, in this chapter of self-discovery, it was a boon to find professors and friends who supported me through the odds I was not prepared for. I am indebted to have found a place where mistakes were allowed and not rebuked at! I even returned to the stage to sing the only Bangla song I had written; shaky, stumbling over the lyrics, but carried away by the

love and encouragement that came just from showing up. What an evening it was, Summerfest 2022 at Heidelberg University!

One of my most meaningful encounters was with Ezgi, a Turkish girl I shared my first apartment with. What were the odds that I'd meet someone just as broken as me at that exact point in life? We were two souls searching for solace, finding comfort in our shared vulnerabilities and quiet dreams, despite coming from very different worlds. Over cups of Turkish tea and bowls of Indian daal[4], we talked about life, interpretations of loss and grief, and the exhausting bureaucracy of finding a therapist in Heidelberg. It was hard when she moved to the Netherlands to live with her boyfriend; life in Heidelberg had been too lonely and depressing for her. I felt the same, but I couldn't leave. My student loan from India didn't give me the luxury to return home. I was happy for her, but deeply sad for myself. She invited me to visit her while I was struggling to find stable housing and a student job. I was crumbling under self-doubt, checking flight tickets home almost every day. I still remember those seven hours on a FlixBus, with each hour closer, I lost a fraction of the weight I was carrying in me.

Since day one, she felt like the closest thing to family, and those seven days in Enschede were quietly healing. I arrived on a grey evening and left on a brighter day, just like my thoughts. We slow-biked through the town, floated in a sunlit pool, spent hours in libraries, hunted for cute clothes on sale, and lingered around coffeeshops for hours, doing simply nothing– Adda5, an underrated side-effect, less medicine for the soul!

In Santiniketan, I couldn't imagine going out for walks in the evenings without my best friend. Two years later, I realized that solitary walks by the Neckar river had become my moments of reflection, where I grappled with anxiety, homesickness, and a slowly growing attachment to this new life. My journey as an international student has been all about embracing the unknown and finding fragments of home in unexpected places, like spontaneously hopping on a bus to explore the hills just beyond the city. Armed with my anthropology texts I began to understand the intricacies of my emotions and the quiet strength it took to keep moving forward.

Life has an uncanny way of making me mourn for things yet to be lost. It's a preemptive grief, a shadow cast by the inevitability of change. My longing for Santiniketan, transformed into an anticipatory ache for Heidelberg, a feeling I know will deepen when I eventually leave. These two places, reflections of each other in the river of my memory, are bound together by this bittersweet thread of longing.

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(all photographs by author)

#Liminality

Finding My Way Home

Amrita Datta

In the previous part of this piece, I was still in Heidelberg, desperately trying to conceptualise the idea of home and belongingness. I felt that I had failed, and I see why. Amidst the chaos of no employment, no stable housing, poor mental health, and an endless stream of uncertainties about life in a foreign country after a half-hearted second master's degree, there was no 'home'. There was 'surviving' from day to day, which I called independence.

In this draft, I am back home in Santiniketan, India. Not much has changed, apparently. I still feel my chaos spilling over, but now, I let it. I'm no longer battling to find order in every moment. When I allow my chaos to breathe, sanity finds its way in, easier. Maybe that's what a home truly offers- a space to let the madness and contradictions of thoughts exist and, in doing so, make room for peace. Honestly, more than a return, this feels like a new arrival, especially after what feels like a war in my head. I've come back to the same two people whom I've called my parents for almost three decades, but it feels like we're meeting for the first time. Sometimes I notice them watching me do my daily chores in the kitchen, and I overhear them discussing how I have changed, that I am calmer and responsible. If only they knew that in all those moments, the outer calm was a disguise to desperately hide the inner chaos – a fragile effort to comfort the terrified little girl within, afraid of being swept away again by the whirlwind of shifting realities. That at 29, she still feels lost, unsure of how to walk herself through the maze of life. Odd as it sounds, my path to Heidelberg began with a heart-led detour; a brief, whirlwind romance

with an Indian who had already made this city his own. Moving to the same city felt like the best decision at the time, a romantic leap that I believed would bring me closer to love. Everything aligned perfectly: I was accepted into the only programme I had applied to, and I looked ahead to all of it with a mix of nervousness and excitement, ready to embrace this new chapter in my life.

However, it was a decision driven by impulse and desperation to find something greater in moving continents for love, when I barely knew how to hold love for myself. A decision as rash and half-formed as that turned against me with all its might, and within three months, I found myself facing an unexpected life. I moved out of a spacious duplex to a small, mouldy room on Plöck Street, leaving behind the only person I knew in the country. Suddenly, after living with my parents under the same roof all my life, I was alone in Germany in cold February, grappling with finances, running out of money for basic groceries, and navigating a world where I couldn't understand the language or make sense of German bureaucracy. Of course, I cried myself to

sleep most nights.

I remember that girl I was when I arrived in Heidelberg in 2021, a story I now recount with equal parts laughter and a tinge of heartbreak. She lived in bubbles, floating from one fleeting moment to the next, innocent to life's bigger struggles. She wasn't exactly curious to learn or grow but rather mischievously spontaneous, carrying the air of someone untouched by true hardship. Life to her felt like it moved in five seasons a month, so quick, so chaotic, and yet so full of possibilities.

I also often think back to the community that quietly took shape around me as I struggled in Heidelberg. We were just six in our cohort when we started, and each one played a role in shaping how I understand myself today. The idea that we didn't need to compete for grades but could create an environment that fostered better thinking and a free flow of ideas profoundly influenced me. The belief that opportunities are not scarce, but can be created, has shifted the weather in my mind. I've come to realize that health, both physical and mental, is non-negotiable. And the understanding that what we consider "mainstream" or "alternative" is often just a matter of perspective has transformed how I view life as it unfolds.

My friends had poured in support and kindness, yet I was depressed and emotionally fragmented in Germany. I keep revisiting and refreshing my lens, trying to understand what went wrong. I tried psychiatric medications, therapy, smoking, loving, studying, escaping, belonging, ideating- everything I could think of, and yet, there remained a lingering void within me, an emptiness that seemed to consume everything, both inside and out. The more I resisted, the stronger it persisted. I tried to delete that void, and it restored itself bigger. It was heavy and hollow like an ancient earthen vessel that has existed as long as I have.

It took years to shift my gaze inward and face that void. The shift happened because I met people in Germany who practiced mindfulness in different ways. They taught me how to listen to one's mind and body when there is discomfort. They taught me how to dance as a difficult emotion arises. I learned ways to release pain instead of suppressing it further. Through long conversations, barefoot walks in nature, and quiet bike rides through open fields, I slowly realised that I'd never truly known how to belong or be present in my own life. My search for an external home (or validation) in people and future circumstances was always bound to be futile. Even now, as I feel misplaced in my home in Santiniketan on some days, I am gradually learning that belonging and placing oneself takes conscious practice. It requires mindful attention and connection to truly listen, understand, and feel at home, with oneself and with others.

Living life on the surface, fueled by spontaneity, no longer feels fulfilling to me, this marks a significant change. Now, I seek practices that help me feel grounded, like writing. I write everything as I feel and witness my thoughts and emotions pass by. This article itself was born in the pages of my diary. Every draft of this piece is evidence to me as of how I have evolved as a person, mostly inward. Writing helps me gather my thoughts and gives me the freedom to flow when needed.

I started this practice some ten days before leaving Germany this time, when my chaos was at its peak.

A chaos that knew no bounds, and it showed in every quarter of my life. I was barely connected to my parents. I could not sort my belongings just like I could not sort my thoughts. I had been unemployed for over 6 months. I had a student loan. I could not decide what to eat, when to shop, when to rest and what to say or even how to walk sometimes. There were at least five different splits in my head telling me different things in different ways, all at once. I went to two therapists, and both of them rejected me on the grounds of the complexity of my thoughts and my poor German.

My mind would set off a domino effect quite quickly, those days, a cascade of "shoulds" that weighed me down.
I should make my bed.
I should care.
I should join Dad's business.
I should give up my German visa.
I should wake up on time.
I should create art.
I should sing and not waste my talent.
I should put family before career.
I should put career before family.
I should put myself first.
I should shower.
I should make my bed.
...

Writing also comes to my rescue when I know a change is about to hit me again. I am back home after one and a half years. My grandfather is gone, which I knew. I walked into his room, (un)expecting the usual warmth; I was greeted by his photograph, his smile still gleaming at me. His wheelchair now sat piled with his clothes, weighed down by memories that seemed to fill the room. The room itself was unmade, untouched. At that moment, I knew that my parents had been struggling, carrying the weight of my emotional absence and my grandfather's final days.

I remember the afternoon I heard of his passing; he was my favourite grandparent. I was in Heidelberg, sipping my favourite cappuccino with hafermilch around noon. Those days, I was numb to much of what surrounded me, wondering if I would ever make something of myself. When I heard the news, a quiet grief washed over me in that café. It wasn't a loud cry but a soft, inward weep, as the reality slowly dawned on me; I would never see him again. But there I was, still holding that cup of cappuccino, finishing it slowly, paid the bill, and walked out, the doorbell's soft twinkle marking my departure, as if nothing had shifted.

My education in medical anthropology allowed me to ask: How do we truly experience a loss when nothing around us signals it? I couldn't hear the cries, the silence, the chaos, or the urgency. There were no smells of medicines or flowers, no palpable absence, nor any presence of the loss. I couldn't grasp what it meant for my parents to lose their father in that moment, or what it meant for my father as he desperately tried to save his father and sit with his grief. I soothed myself, telling myself I would feel it all at home.

Now, I've been home for two weeks, and it still hasn't hit the way I expected it to. I wanted to cry the way I cried for my other grandparents when they left. I knew that the moment had passed, the rituals were over. I missed all of it. And so, I don't remember him leaving. I only remember his wrinkled, soft hands and the tiny diamond ring on his index finger. During our video calls, he would always ask when I'd return. He passed away waiting for me, while I was busy trying to make sense of my life in Germany.

I still haven't found my way in the external world or figured out the paths I need to pave for myself. But what feels almost magical is that I can say this: I am learning to work on and walk with myself. This morning, Ma asked me to shower and pack food for Baba. Half-asleep and unready, I resisted in silence. My mind was still caught in a dream of walking freely down Rohrbacherstrasse, only to stumble upon the haunting image of Palestinian babies dying of

hypothermia. As I stirred awake, I caught myself expecting to wake up in the house in Darmstadt (where I spent the last few months before leaving Germany). The dissonance hit me- I was in my room here in India. Its small windows felt like a pale comparison to the one in Alice's Berlin apartment, the one she doesn't even live by anymore. The layers of displacement, from dreams to reality(s), made me pause, grappling with the subtle ache of existing between worlds that no longer felt fully mine.

From nowhere, I felt a sharp anger at myself for not living mindfully in Germany, for missing career opportunities, and for always letting my room become a mess, whether in Heidelberg or Santiniketan. A few months ago, I might have stormed out of the house, lit a cigarette, and doom-scrolled Instagram until the thoughts faded, only for them to resurface later. But today, I walked out of the room quietly and made myself tea, even though it wasn't "tea time" in the house.

As I poured water into the teapot, something shifted. I felt a little lighter, and it hit me: I was simply missing Germany and the rhythm of doing things on my own. While letting that realisation settle in, I turned on the stove, placed the pot, and watched the water boil. I thought about how, here in Santiniketan, I rarely think about what to cook or clean. House help handles these chores so we can focus on "bigger" tasks like earning money and figuring out life. Yet in Germany, I often complained about how the little things, like cooking and cleaning consumed me, leaving no time to plan a research paper, exercise, or think about life after graduation.

And now, here I am. Post-graduation and all those past anxieties haven't changed this moment at all. I brought my tea back to a messy room and, with courage, asked myself what was wrong. A voice answered that she's scared to let go of the visa. Scared of disappointing her parents, and the little Amrita who once dreamed of a "good life." With the first sip, I reminded her that a good life was never about a place, job, or title. It was always about how she felt in those spaces. Then the conversation between those two selves inside of me was what I would call a fantastic conflict resolution over a cup of tea.

It's indeed taking significant emotional regulation not to fall back into the patterns that once consumed me before I left for Germany. For instance, when my parents argue, I want to jump in and mediate; when my uncle mistreats my grandmother or my aunt dismisses therapy, I feel an urge to fix it all. I pause to remind myself that India will both trigger and heal me, but only if I consciously choose to belong. Judging and running away won't bring me closer to that sense of belonging; embracing the complexity might.

I overthink because I can't decide where home truly is—here or there. It feels like an endless tug-of-war: choosing abroad feels like abandoning my parents; staying back feels like sacrificing the possibility of building a different life. Should I stay to nurture the family business my father built from nothing—the one that gave me the privilege to dream beyond borders—or should I escape the struggles of the Global South for a life of better resources, but only for myself? Do I accept the idea that I'm responsible only for my own growth, or dare to redefine success, challenging the illusion of empowerment tied to upward mobility and creating something meaningful instead?

How do these dreams coexist? How does the local embrace the international? How do I detach yet stay connected? How do I leave and arrive, all at once? Perhaps in the same way I ask and answer these questions, by rediscovering myself where I thought I was lost. By realizing that my void isn't empty anymore, that there's a strange order in disorder and sanity in madness.

My journey, though challenging, has forced me to confront myself in ways I never expected. It stripped away layers of pretence, revealing a strength and resilience I didn't realise I had. Even the heartbreak that initially brought me here feels, in hindsight, like a necessary storm; one that steered me towards self-discovery and a life of deeper fulfilment. Yes, I found love again, the kind that stays through every shape-shift, that softens the edges of becoming. The

kind that shows up, gently and steadily, reminding me that friendship is the first home of any love, near or far, which only reinforces the feeling that perhaps every misstep, every displacement, is part of being placed better.

Now, I find myself re-inhabiting spaces I once thought I knew, only to see them through fresh eyes. In the process, I'm crafting a home within myself, not bound by geography, walls, or fleeting circumstances. Writing has become my broom, sweeping the neglected corners and making room for clarity in that home. This home may shift with seasons, its walls weathered by time and its windows facing new horizons, but it will always offer me sanctuary. And in this space, I hold the power to decide who enters, who stays, and in what capacity. This is not just a home; it's a testament to belonging, shaped by the grace of choosing and the courage to keep building.

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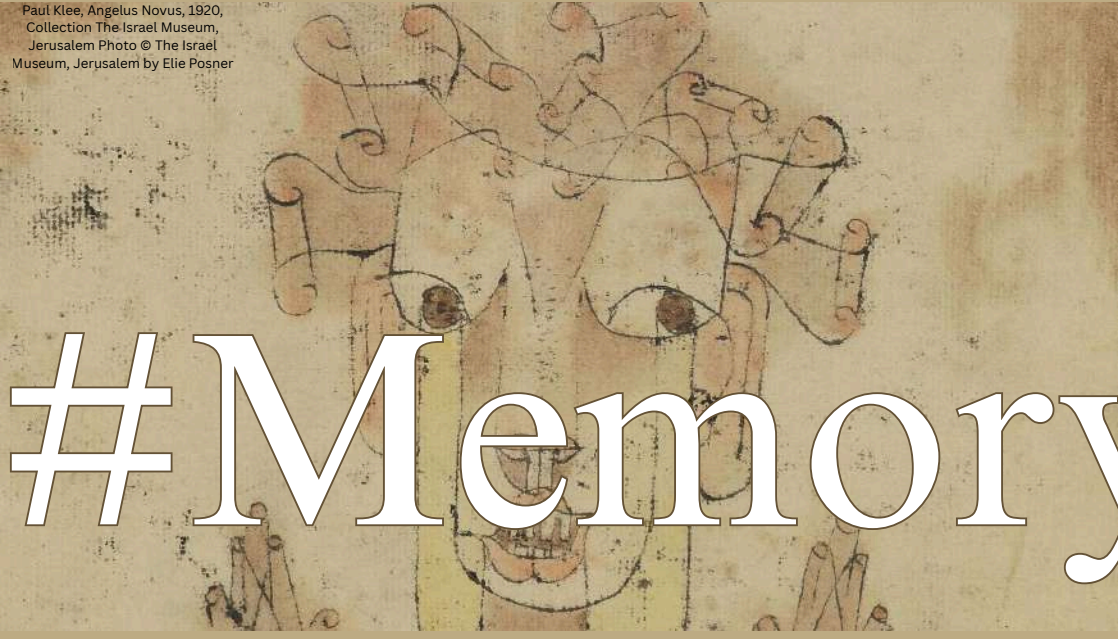
TEA



Paul Klee, Angelus Novus, 1920, Collection The Israel Museum, Jerusalem Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Elie Posner

Retrotopian Longing: Procedural Curation and Transcultural Dynamics

Rishika Rai

In his essay "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," philosopher Walter Benjamin describes Paul Klee's painting Angelus Novus:

"A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."[1]

In an age defined by technological progress accompanied with economic uncertainty which has been escalated due to the pandemic, wars in different parts of the world, and an increase in climate disasters, it is not surprising that people reminiscent to the angel of history are turning their heads to the past and are longing for an age before social media even if the search for this nostalgia is very much facilitated not from memory but from code. Nostalgia, as artist Svetlana Boym writes, "is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy." She argues that nostalgia is a symptom of modern progress, which thrives in fast-paced technological progress, where the sense of time and self can become disjointed.

It is at this junction of nostalgia and innovation enabled by a gamified social media algorithm that we see the transformation in the creation of cultural content, how it is shared and experienced. While gamified algorithms provide a mechanism for

recreating imagined pasts in a dynamic transcultural form, it is the disjoined sense of time which has become the fertile ground for the longing of what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls "Retrotopia".[2] The concept of retrotopia captures a collective longing for the perceived certainties of the past. Unlike utopias, which project ideal societies into the future, retrotopias look backward, framing the past eras as the pinnacle of stability and harmony.

Social media platform designs enable their users to voice a kind of longing, a retrotopian nostalgia which is conjured by code. It's the mechanism of procedural rhetoric at work that threads us back to a past that feels familiar, even if it never quite existed. Author Ian Bogost defines procedural rhetoric in his book Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames as the ways in which different digital systems, video games[3] in particular, use rules, regulations, mechanics, and interactions to persuade and shape user experience and ideology. On social media platforms, procedural rhetoric reveals itself in platform designs, algorithms, and gamified interactions that subtly guide user behavior.[4]

Facebook's "On This Day," Instagram's "archives", Snapchat's "Flashbacks", all of them conjure a version of our lives that feels more whole than it ever was. They hand us curations, pieces of a story we're meant to believe, a story that frames the past as something cohesive, something worth longing for. It's a kind of nostalgia built by the tidy mechanics of code manifested by procedural rhetoric of these platforms. These features of the platforms do not merely show all memories; it selects those with high engagement. This selection creates a perception of the past as inherently joyful or significant, amplifying retrotopian longing. The procedural framework of these platforms subtly convinces the users that the platform is a vessel for preserving and reliving a better, more authentic era, even if that era is reconstructed and even idealized. This retrotopian nostalgia is further amplified by the visual cultural aesthetics promoted by the platforms. Retro-inspired filters and challenges such as TikTok trends using 1980s synth music or Instagram filters mimicking vintage film, which creates an emotional link to an imagined past. Another example of visual cultural aesthetics endorsed by platforms that promote a longing for retrotopia is the resurgence of interest in Polaroid photography and cassette tapes. Social media's procedural rhetoric frames these technologies as symbols of authenticity and simplicity, contrasting them with the perceived complexity and superficiality of the present. This framing persuades users to participate in practices that reconstruct these retrotopian ideals.

Procedural rhetoric plays a key role in promoting and curating filters and challenges. Algorithms prioritize retro-themed content based on user engagement, reinforcing its visibility and appeal. This cyclical process of promotion and interaction persuades users that these nostalgic elements are universally desirable, fostering collective longing for an idealized past.

Platforms like Reddit and Facebook that have a feed sorted algorithmically via a reward system through upvotes or likes foster digital communities that are centered around retrotopian nostalgia. Groups dedicated to sharing vintage photographs, old music, or retro gaming culture use social media's structural mechanics to create spaces that celebrate the past, which also reinforces the participation and collaboration within these communities. By shaping how users interact and engage with content, procedural systems cultivate an atmosphere where the past is not only remembered but actively idealized.

While the reconstruction of an imagined past is deeply personal, the procedural systems of social media promote the formation of algorithmic tribes which encourages the process of a collective cultural production of these retrotopian ideals which lead to the transculturation of nostalgic elements. The past gets remembered through a hybridized longing nurtured by the mechanics of algorithms.

Digital communities actively merge, reshape and transform imagined histories and identities. The mechanics of the platforms push us together;

sharing fragments of a past we've never quite lived. Aesthetic gestures like a filtered Polaroid or a soundtrack pulled from a mixtape separate these memories from their realities, sand them down until they can slip easily into the collective imagination. The algorithm, with its ever-increasing appetite for emotion, keeps us coming back. This is how retrotopias emerge, hybrid dreams of a past pieced together from disparate cultures and timelines, freed from linear logic and lived truth. They comfort us, these fictions, even as they dislocate us further, leaving us untethered from any sense of the now.

And yet, here we are, in an age where global loneliness has grown into a shapeless ghost, our dependence on social media is the framework that both holds us up and hems us in. Memory, identity, technology—these threads knot together in ways we barely notice, in ways that demand critical reflection. To engage with the past critically, to reflect instead of merely scrolling, may be the only way to understand the stories we tell ourselves to create a sense of belonging.

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#Agency, #Migration #Mobility

The Great Wall in the People's Republic of China. It also evokes the notion of the "Great Firewall," a term referring to the blend of legislative measures and technological controls implemented by the country to monitor and restrict domestic internet access. Photo taken by the author.

Drifting Beyond the Walls – Queer Chinese International Students in Search of Liberation

Bertolt Yaeger

Walls, whether physical, like the Berlin Wall, or virtual, like the Chinese "Great Firewall," often divide the world into two distinct spheres: the world "within" and the world "outside". The "within" sphere typically represents restriction, censorship, and surveillance (as seen in East Berlin and the Chinese network environment). In contrast, the "outside" world often symbolises freedom and prosperity (as exemplified by West Berlin and the wider World Wide Web). People raised within these walls often become so accustomed to societal constraints that they may not recognise them as inconveniences. However, some individuals yearn for life "outside" and are even willing to sacrifice their lives to attain freedom.

This dynamic echoes the plot of the popular anime/manga Attack on Titan (nerd alert). The protagonist, Eren, was born and raised within walls that separate his people from the Titans—mysterious, gigantic creatures that prey solely on humans. Eren dreams of a life where humanity can live freely in the vast world beyond the walls that "protect", even though most people within the walls are content with their peaceful, albeit restricted, existence.

In the series, Eren is often metaphorically depicted as a bird soaring freely in the sky. This short reflection similarly explores a group of "bird-like" people who yearn for freedom "outside" the wall – the queer minority in China. More precisely, it focuses on queer international students holding Chinese citizenship. Why queer and Chinese? In China, like in many other countries that do not support queer rights, queer people grow up learning that homosexuality is considered a significant deviation from the norm. What makes the experience of Chinese queer individuals unique, I believe, is the contrast between the Chinese system and the system in democratic countries. In democratic nations, the legalisation of same-sex marriage can be and has been achieved through the exercise of fundamental rights, like engaging in civil society movements or staging protests. However, the authoritarian nature of China prevents queer individuals from even envisioning the possibility of fighting for their rights through legal channels. How, then, is China different from other homophobic authoritarian countries? Lawmaking in other

homophobic countries might be influenced by economic sanctions from other nations, for example, but the growth of China's influence on the world economy makes this less likely to happen in their case.

Despite these limitations, the influx of soft culture, such as music, films, and Japanese BL (Boys' Love) themed literature and art, has inspired a significant number of queer Chinese people to dream of a life outside China. In this imagined space, they can love freely without facing persecution, a stark contrast to the often restricted, sometimes tragic and traumatic realities of their lives as queer individuals in China.

Queer Chinese students studying abroad offer a compelling case of migrants actively shaping their own "escape." Due to the legacy of the one-child policy, most individuals of my generation are only children, receiving significant financial support from their parents, who aspire for them to lead successful lives. Sending children to study overseas has become an attractive option for many Chinese families, where they can gain access to prestigious global universities without the intense pressure of the Gaokao, China's university entrance exam system. For my MA research, I interviewed 14 queer Chinese students who were either studying or had studied abroad. Many acknowledged that their pursuit of academic achievement was closely intertwined with a hidden longing for the "free world"—a place where they could openly embrace their queer identities. By securing financial backing from their parents under the promise of future success, they effectively concealed their deeper desire for personal liberation. This phenomenon underscores how these students strategically navigate familial and societal expectations to forge a new life abroad, exercising a distinct form of migrant agency.

Living away from their biological families and the social norms they once had to follow, queer Chinese students experienced a newfound sense of freedom while studying abroad. However, this liberation came with its challenges. Tristan (pseudonym), a trans-masculine interviewee, shared that it was in the United States where he first encountered the academic field of gender and sexuality studies—an experience that deeply empowered him.

Additionally, Tristan was able to navigate the comparatively accessible process of starting hormone therapy through his student insurance, an opportunity that allowed him to affirm his gender identity. The ability to engage with queer scholarship and access medical transition in the US services gave Tristan a profound sense of liberation. However, each time Tristan crossed the US border, he was required to queue in the lane designated for "aliens." He found this label deeply unsettling and offensive, believing it dehumanises migrants by reducing them to a mere legal status, stripping them of their rights and dignity. Tristan also expressed frustration with US visa regulations, particularly for international students who had just completed their degrees. For Tristan, the stark contradiction between the US's celebration of queerness—promoting diversity and inclusion—and its treatment of migrants as "aliens" and potential security risks became a major source of psychological distress. This experience also resonates with other interviewees who studied in Europe, where their queerness was acknowledged and respected, yet their migrant status remained a point of exclusion and discrimination.

In April 2024, Columbia University enlisted the NYPD to crack down on students who were peacefully protesting through an encampment, speaking out against the United States' complicity in the oppression of Palestinians. Since then, numerous other prestigious universities across the U.S. have followed suit, escalating their suppression of student activism. This wave of repression has also spread to Europe, where police in countries such as Germany, France, Sweden, and the Netherlands continue to harass and detain peaceful protesters. Following the inauguration of the new U.S. administration, authorities have taken their actions even further, now detaining and attempting to deport international students who support Palestinian rights —even those who hold green cards.

As an overseas Chinese individual myself, who has been deeply affected by learning about the state's violent suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement—another student-led protest that faced violent state repression—the current scenes are profoundly unsettling.

The United States and Europe once stood as beacons of democracy, guiding and inspiring queer Chinese nomads in their search for freedom. Now, that beacon seems to be fading, leaving once-liberated hearts lost in a void.

Spoiler alert In the final chapter of Attack on Titan, Eren ultimately achieved his goal of venturing beyond the walls and eliminating all the Titans. However, his hope shattered when he realised that the world outside was not the land of freedom he had envisioned. Instead, he was compelled to keep fighting for the freedom of his people. I found the entire storyline deeply resonant with the experiences of queer Chinese students who, yearning for liberation "beyond the wall," eventually discovered that what awaited them was not the promised and imagined "freedom," but even greater challenges, obstacles, and a profound sense of disillusionment.

Like Eren, I also believed that leaving China might lead me to freedom, democracy, and justice. But as I continue to follow the news of the continuous oppression of innocent Palestinian citizens by armed settlers and the world's complicity in it (ironically, China backs Palestinian rights), I feel nothing but tremendous despair. The world "beyond the wall" is not the paradise of freedom I once imagined. Palestinian and queer people share a common struggle. Queer liberation is a universal fight that transcends the experiences of privileged white gay men. It encompasses individuals of all races, genders, cultural/social backgrounds and immigration status. Everyone in the world has the right to live freely, to express their identity without fear of persecution, and to have their dignity and cultural heritage respected.

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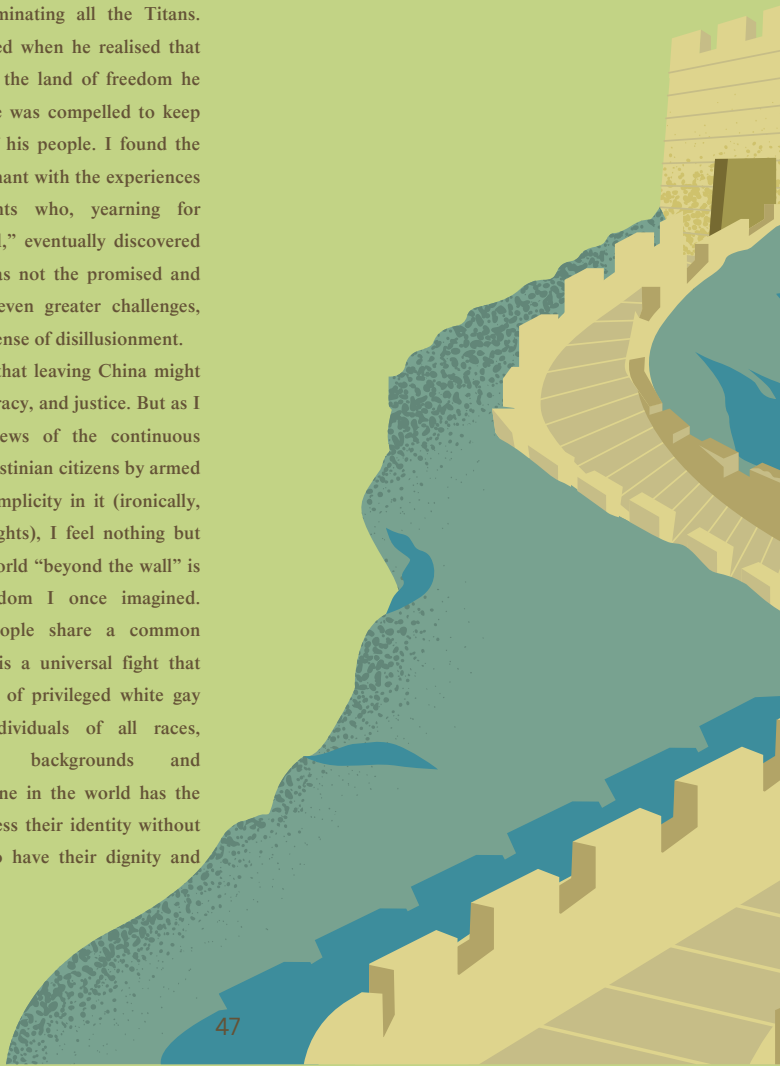


Mind the

Uncivilised – Fictional Narration and the Transitional Nature of the Migratory Experience

GAP

by Çem Catakli

It is the morning of my departure, and I am trying to get an insight into how I feel about leaving. I'm also getting a haircut by a barber who breaks the silence by telling me about his friend who is in prison and about to be deported. As he cuts my hair, he mentions that he used to have a life in Iraq which he left behind to come to Germany, and how once, in the middle of the night, the police raided his home to attempt to deport him too. He says they came to pick up his wife and kid to deport them as well. He tells me that when he asked them why, all they said to him was because. Because they could. His name is Mustafa.

He puts the scissors away, brings in a second mirror, then asks me if I like it. My haircut seems rushed while he explains with care how much he is frustrated about the news of his friend's impending deportation, and I realize that my slight frustration weighs nothing against his own, so I smile, thank him, and leave.

Realizing I'm about to miss my bus to the train station, I wonder if stories like these will be what the TV show I am going to start working at will be about. If it is going to be not only a portrayal of these realities but also a discussion about what these events seem to revolve around, about getting into the depth of these experiences.

I arrive at the central station and am waiting for my train. A man approaches and asks me whether the one that's waiting on the platform will stop at Mannheim.

It is the train before mine that's waiting there. I tell him yes, confirm that this would be his ride, but for some reason he isn't trying to get in yet, and after a while, we start getting into a conversation. He asks for my name, then about me, where I'm from; I assume because we are speaking in English. "I am Turkish but I was born in Germany," I say. He replies, "Oh, German?" He nods,

I nod as well..

…German.

It is my turn to ask. He tells me that he is from Guinea. I don't quite hear him. The messy train station noises are distracting and blending with his

voice. I also don't really know the country. While his train is about to depart, he tells me about the other Guineas, Papua and Bissau, if I remember correctly. He asks again if this train stops at Mannheim. I try to reassure him, yes it does. I also tell him that he should hurry up if he would like to catch it still. Eventually, he starts walking to the train but he is too slow; the wheels start to turn, and now he's running. As the wagon is picking up pace, a train worker is standing between an open door and the platform. As my newly made companion approaches him, the

1: Press Photo Uncivilised - ZDF Mediathek
November 2024

worker only looks, smiles as he shuts the door. Policy, I think. Don't let people into moving trains. Maybe it is about insurance…

…Germany

I wonder how people get into trains in Guinea and West Guinea and Papua New Guinea. From where he ran to, he turns his head around and looks at me. I anticipate him. He asks me if the next train stops at I am headed for Cologne, you see. I tell him yes as it already arrives on the platform. I don't want to miss it. Together, we walk towards the white ICE as he shows me his ticket, asking if it is valid. I take a close look and I don't think that it is. I tell him I don't want him to get in trouble. He stops and I step between the doors. They are about to close. He stands outside, looking at me. "The red trains," I shout as heavy whistles blow, "You can take the red trains." I press the button, trying to keep the door open, hoping that he can hear me - but they close. Through the window he looks at me, gives me a thumbs up, and I try to smile. "Good luck," I think as I get into the train. "Good luck" I think as I sit down in my seat. And my seat is where I realize I forgot to ask his name. I think about the irony that is presenting itself to me. I got into this train for the same reason I got this haircut. Because I am about to start working as an intern in the directing department for a TV series on everyday racism. The world suggested itself to me this morning in the way I was conditioned to see it. Before I applied, I found out that the scripts were being written from interviews with real people who shared their lived experiences. Meaning that they trusted the filmmakers with fictionalizing their real and non-fictional realities. And I have found myself in the middle of both. Transitioning. Witnessing realities while moving into fiction. I asked myself whether the fiction was less real because it had been dramatized, adapted, turned into less than what I had seen around me. Had it been made digestible? And I realized that in order to better understand, I would have to understand and ask the question: What does the fictional narration do to the transitional nature of the migratory experience?

But in order to properly answer this question, I think it is necessary to first try to understand the nuances of the migratory experience. Drawing information from the experiences of many members of my family, I will try to encapsulate their anecdotal points of view.

Migrating has been described as an experience of estrangement, leaving behind what is familiar to be

surrounded by everything strange. Navigating this change of surroundings and social relations can be a deeply lonely experience since building a new life and new connections takes time, chance, and effort. Privilege can shorten, and the lack thereof can prolong these processes of finding space within a new place and new people, but mostly it is finding a life where there was none before. And throughout this process, there remains a longing. A longing for this struggle to end, a longing to arrive, to rediscover a lost feeling of familiarity. Instead of its fulfillment, it is not uncommon that this desire will rather be met with further conflict and confrontation on both a practical and an existential level. This is where the fictional narration can have a great effect; it is the very creation of a possible narrative of the migratory experience by the people most proximally shaped by the immediacy of this lived experience; it is representation; it is the transitional nature of the migratory experience represented.

Representation, ideally, submits the conditions of the possibilities of experience to its mirroring to the extent that there is no difference between the initial presentation and its reformulation. Through that, it can help process the impalpable reality into something more tangible and concrete, providing a steady point of orientation in the contextual vagueness. Further, it kickstarts recognition in an interplay with accessibility. Because it is through this accessibility that representation manifests itself and allows for the possibility of confrontation and that through this confrontation an understanding of a perspective separate from our own can arise. This is a process of recognition.

Therefore, in viewing content on the screen, our experiences become concentrated in and centered around a mutual experience. A once individual reality, although it might be a shared one, can now inform a collective experience in a different way than just words and the shared experience itself. We start to see the same thing. Presentation fades into the background as its representation becomes the new point of reference and perhaps even kickstarts a process of identification and empathy. Now representation becomes a powerful tool against efforts of turning the subjects of presentation into invisible nothing, as representation makes people be seen. In the context of everyday racism, this means that cheap shots and systematic endeavors towards hiding whole groups of people and the attempts of pushing them into the shadow edges of society can be exposed for what they are: transgressions and violence. They no longer can be hidden. Similar to the fables of Aesop (or the myth of him) who exposed the immoral sentiments and actions of kings and priests within the adventures of anthropomorphized characters, the representation allows for the same, if not even more directly focused, criticism of such ill agents. Visibility can give rise to debates, which in turn can lead to acknowledgment and further recognition, two vital steps for the dismantlement of racial violence.

"Over there I am something, here I'll always remain the son of a guest worker." I am on the set and we are having lunch. I managed to sit next to an absolute legend who played in one of my favorite films, and this is what he tells me in between sips of black tea. That was his answer to a question I asked him about how he likes his role in this episode. "It is good that I get to play someone that breaks with the silly stereotypes we get exposed to all the time in usual TV." He is playing the role of a father, who after his sons have put themselves through an unnecessary and dangerous struggle, decides to closely listen instead of judging and imposing himself onto the situation. Similar to the boys in the episode, I am drawn into the immidacy of words and am listening in admiration, at the same time I can't believe that an actor of his standing and experience is still being defined by and reduced to his cultural identity and has to justify himself because of it.

"The shooting is done and everybody is busy with the edits now. I get a message with a link; it's the first raw cut of the first episode, and my chest is pumping with excitement.

It took us 3 months to shoot everything, and things weren't always going smoothly, but in the end, we managed, and I was about to see the results for the

"Babaanne" - Cem Çatakli - (Heidelberg, Germany 2024)

first time, hoping our efforts had not been in vain.

I went home to my parents. They represent the second generation immigrants, the first ones to be born abroad and obviously so much more than that, and as we are watching the first few minutes, it is not the screen but their faces I am most focused on; because it is in their reactions that I seek some sort of proof of the quality of the content we produced. And ultimately, the stories we tried to tell were their stories too.

The episode is over and I ask them what they thought of it. I really want them to have liked it, and I am afraid of having wasted their time. My dad begins to laugh. I grow more nervous. “That’s insane,” he says. “What do you mean?” I ask him.

ZDF paid for this?” He seems surprised. I am relieved to see he seems impressed. “Yeah,” I answer, “Ordered, financed, paid for, the whole deal.” He seems to be in disbelief. “If they end up airing this… a lot of Germans will be pissed.” I have to laugh. Because he gets it and also because he is right. The resonance they felt makes me think of how it could have gone wrong. How we could have failed and falsified the experience, creating a reference point that had nothing to do with the initial presentation, one that neglects or negates the experience.

Yet I catch myself thinking, why? Why would he think like that? And what could potentially piss people off about exposing racist behaviours and tendencies on national TV? I guess, in a way, the question answers itself. Those who perpatuate racism, will find themselves confronted with the suffering they cause. They will see the pain that upholding their world view brings onto those on the receiving end, will see people where there only was projection because a face was far away enough to hate. Now it is up close, breathing a testimony. That might be a possible way of answering the latter question, but what about my father? What would drive him to have this expectation? He could have said that Germans might be happy about the realities exposed in these series and I am certain there will be people who will.At the same time these exisiting voices of support are not what the content of the series revolves around. There absence is.

Press Photo Episode 1 – “Hanau” - ZDF Pressemappe 21.November 2024

I try to imagine my dad's life and all the instances in which there was a dissonance - dispite his thick German Kurpfälzer dialect that he can turn on and off as he needs to – a dissonance between how he felt about being treated wrongly and how a german counterpart entierly dismissed his point of view only to create a new one for him. The narrative of the migratory experience was rarely in the hands of those having the actual experience. In a

form of testamonial injustice, in a clash of identities oscillating between the lived reality and the created fiction, the cultural identity of those who have to create their own is being dismissed in everyday racism. So maybe he got used to it. It has been normalised.

This is why this series is so important, especially considering the current political climate; it is laying the narrative back into those hands that ache from having to protect themselves from it. And most importantly, it can make us understand that migratory experience, while it is not experienced by all of us, does in fact involve all of us. It effects all of us. And this reconstruction of the narrative will allow for a dialogue with and not a debate against all who are affected - a dialogue which is based in the reality of the situation.

My worry was that incentive and corporate interest could get in the way of an honest and authentic retelling of the migratory experience. And that this migratory experience itself could get exploited and changed into a branding tool for seemingly liberal broadcasters. I realized how great the responsibility for the filmmakers is to remain truthful and accurate in the fictionalization process and yet how at the same time it is impossible to maintain the original experience itself due to the nature of the process of

"Baba" - Cem Çataklı - (Heidelberg, Germany 2024)

fictionalization and perception. You can only get as close to it as possible. Simulation of reality is hardly a re-creation.

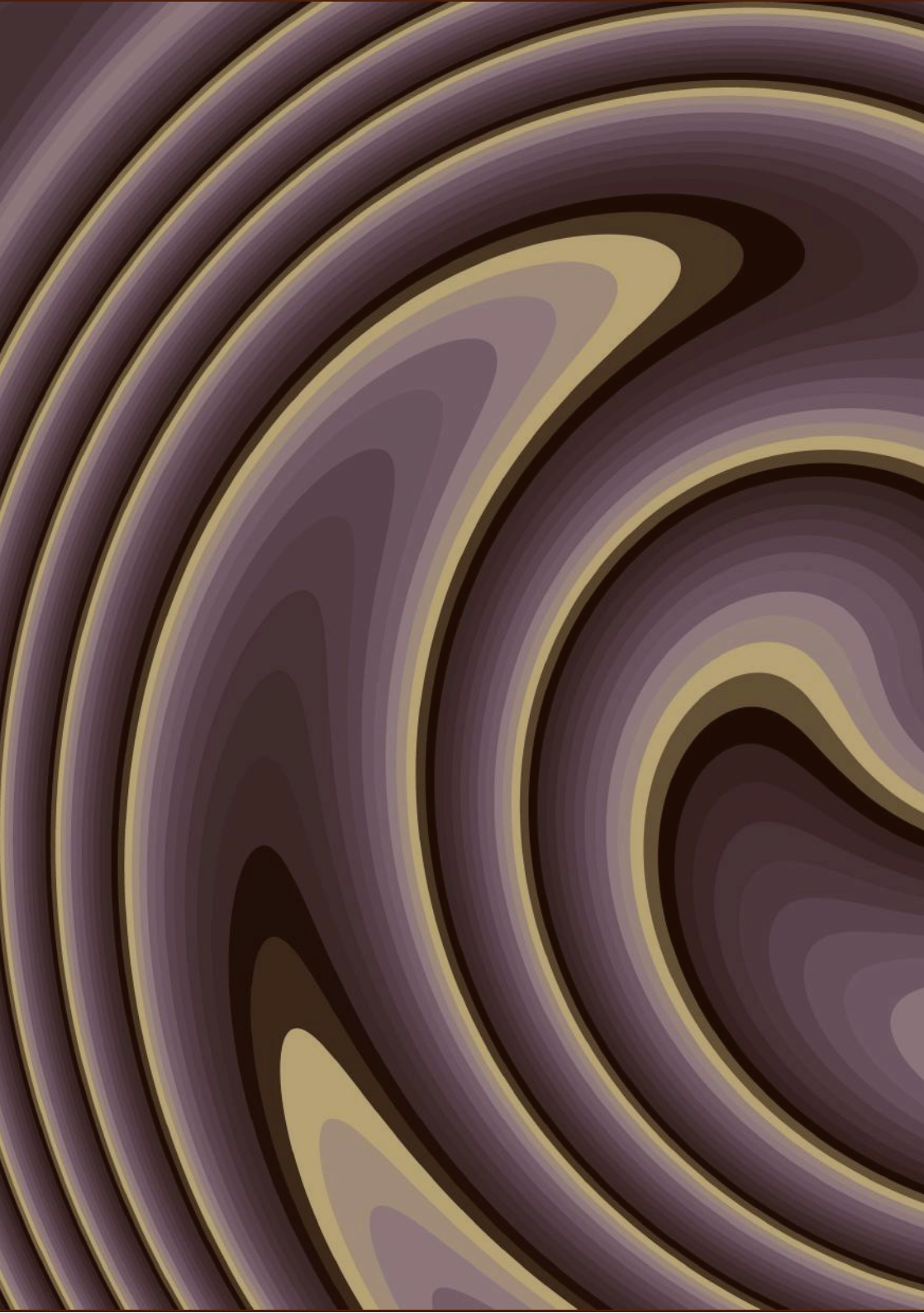
The next day, I get a call from the director. He asks me how I liked it when I watched it. I told him about my dad and what he said and that I loved it a lot. He continues to ask me about the music, whether I thought it was too much, too dramatic. I said I felt it fit very well. “I am asking because of the strings, you know? Anytime you put strings into the score of a German production, people will crucify you for being overly dramatic and your overpouring pathos.” But it fits, I think. And very nicely so. “I decided to keep it. I don’t think this is the time for me to cater to their expectations. These are our stories. We decide how we tell them.”

My worries were once more laid to rest. I felt like I was able to trust the people who were under the final stages of this responsibility of representation. It reminds me of my initial question and gives me a possibility for a new answer to it. What is it that the fictional narration does to the transitional nature of the migratory experience? I think it gives it value. It elevates seemingly

useless suffering from made-believe worthlessness into confidence and empowerment. Into the ability of facing the world, of being able to say: This is me, this is I, uncivilized…

About the Author

Cem Çataklı was born in 2000 in Heidelberg as the son of Turkish parents and grandchild of guest workers. He works with film, text, poetry, photography, and music to explore questions of identity, memory, and belonging. After discovering poetry and music in his school years, he began writing in English while living in London. He now studies Philosophy and English in Heidelberg, focusing on phenomenology, migration ethics, and the emotional textures of experience. For him, creative and philosophical work are ways of making sense of the world — and of staying in touch with what moves us.



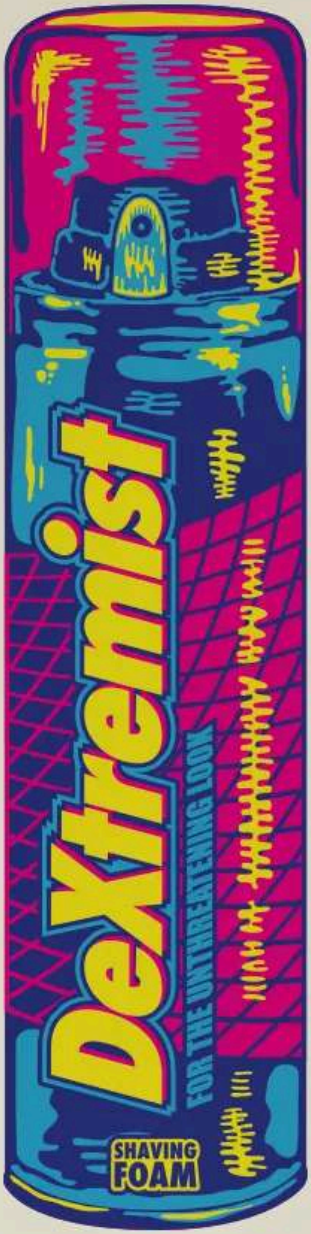
Vortex

A space for artistic practitioners working with transcultural themes, Vortex features visual artists, photographers, performers, and filmmakers whose work resonates with the themes of the magazine. This is an ongoing section where we showcase creative practices that challenge borders and reimagine connections.

You are Free to Pray, Land of the Pure 2018

You are Free to Pray, Land of the Pure 2018

White Wash
Land of the Pure
2018



De-Extremist
Land of the Pure
2018

Love State
Land of the Pure
2018

Ahsan Masood

Ahsan Masood is a Queer Pakistani artist, currently located in Heidelberg, Germany to pursue his second Masters in South Asian Studies. The artist completed his MFA from Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Finland in 2014, and his BFA from National College of Arts in Pakistan. The artist has exhibited his work nationally and internationally, and has been the recipient of the International Artists Residency program by Greatmore Studios in Cape Town 2011, the International Artists Residency program by NoArte: Wall of Europe, in Sardinia 2013, and "Taking Time" Artists Workshop, Helsinki, 2013.

Ahsan's practice strives to articulate the processes of representation and the power dynamics associated with authoring such representations. He further locates this dialogue within the religious and socio-political context of the artist, as a Pakistani. These are the politics of representation pertaining to one's nationalistic, ethnic, religious or gender identity and their intersectional relationships with media-representation, censorship, and religious freedoms. The body of work further explores the safety—or its sheer absence—within the relationships between such representations, those who author them and the ones such representations aim to portray.

Additionally, the artist's practice aims to articulate the notions of safety within physical and intellectual spaces of representation: the safety of being visible for having non-conforming ideas within a militant-state and of being proclaimed the Other by the spectator's eye. This is the un-safety of being seen through the lens of sexual taboos, gender binaries, ethnic hierarchies, religious freedoms and the public availability of that information. These are the struggles of being looked at and judged, of being reduced to a cliché or a racial slur.

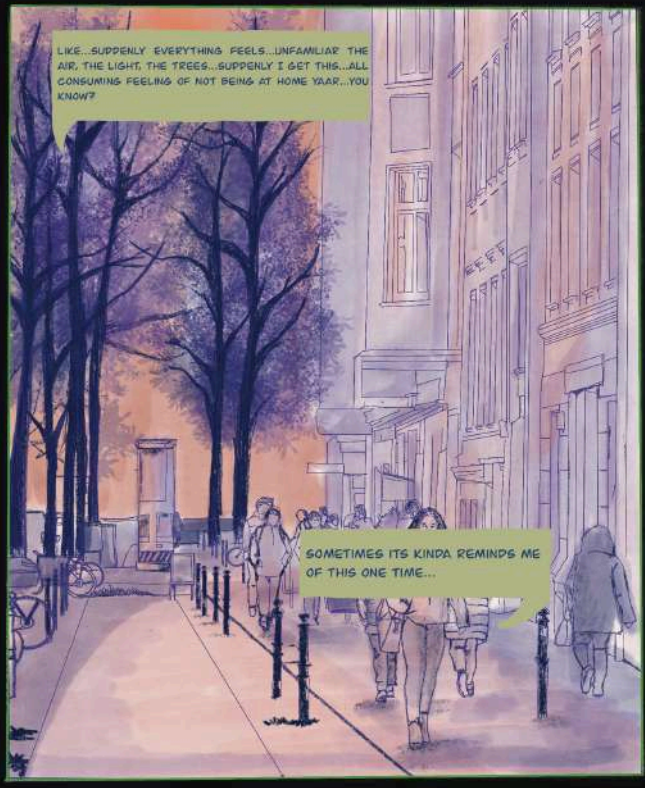
The artist attempts to declare the queer brown body as a contact zone and proclaim its struggle as sacred, understanding the queer brown bodies as spaces which allow the dangerous coming together of orthodox religion, state sanctioned oppression, colonial laws which criminalize their conduct and queer sexuality.

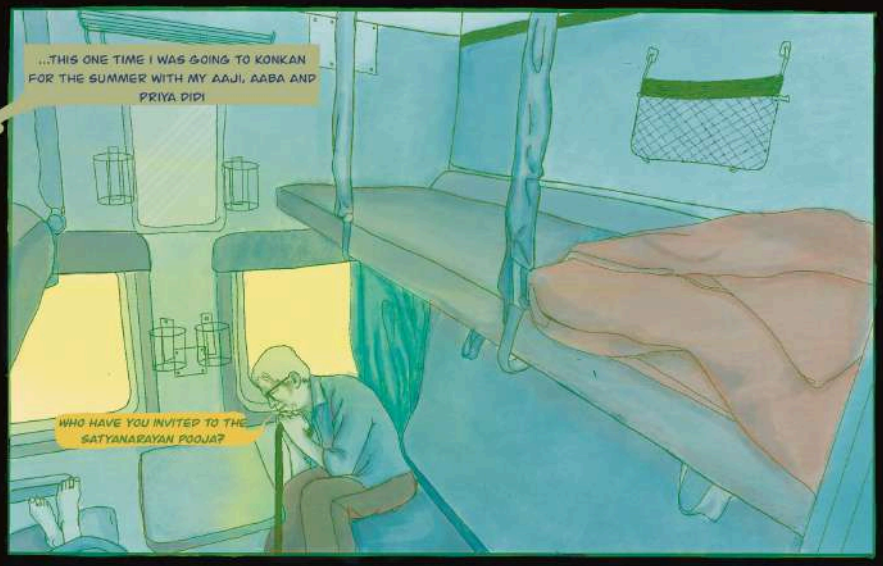
Works from series:
Land of the Pure 2018
check out Ahsan's work at:
ahsanmasood.com


NRI
Savarna Delusion
Masala
Spice blend for convenient self-victimisation and occasional (performative) acknowledgement of privilege
Net wt. 100g | 3.5oz
NRI
store in echo chamber


OUR DEAR OVERSEAS PROTAGONIST WAS ON THEIR WAY TO THE GROCERY STORE AS THEY HAD WHAT THEY THOUGHT WAS A PROFOUND REALISATION...
WELCOME

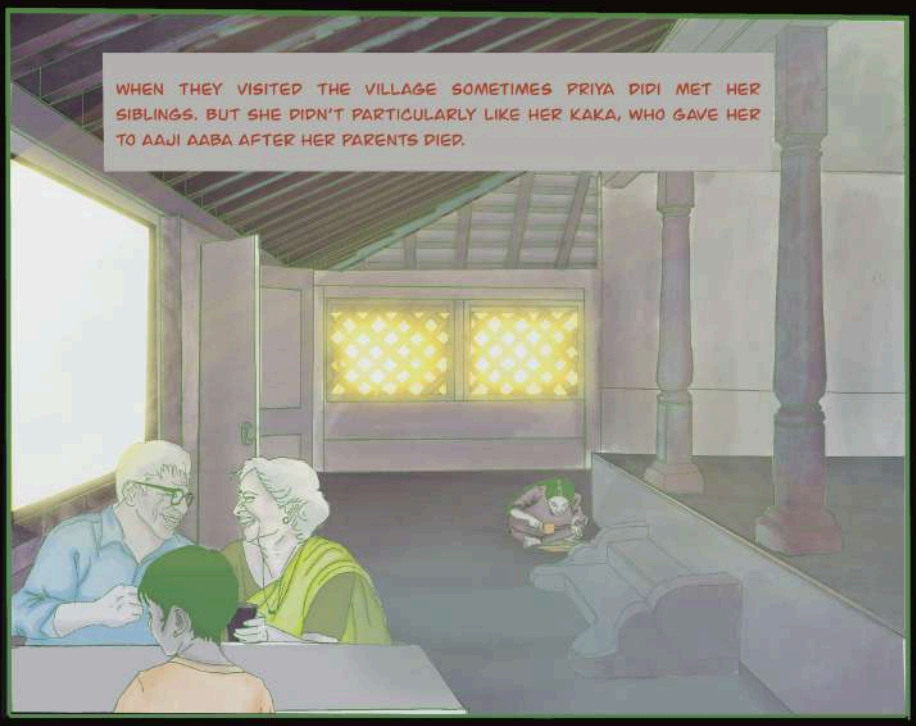

GOSH SOMETIMES IT REALLY HITS ME THAT I'M NOT AT HOME YOU KNOW...


LIKE...SUDDENLY EVERYTHING FEELS...UNFAMILIAR THE AIR, THE LIGHT, THE TREES...SUDDENLY I GET THIS...ALL CONSUMING FEELING OF NOT BEING AT HOME YAAR...YOU KNOW?
SOMETIMES ITS KINDA REMINDS ME OF THIS ONE TIME...


...THIS ONE TIME I WAS GOING TO KONKAN FOR THE SUMMER WITH MY AAJI, AABA AND PRIYA DIDI
WHO HAVE YOU INVITED TO THE SATYANARAYAN POOJA?

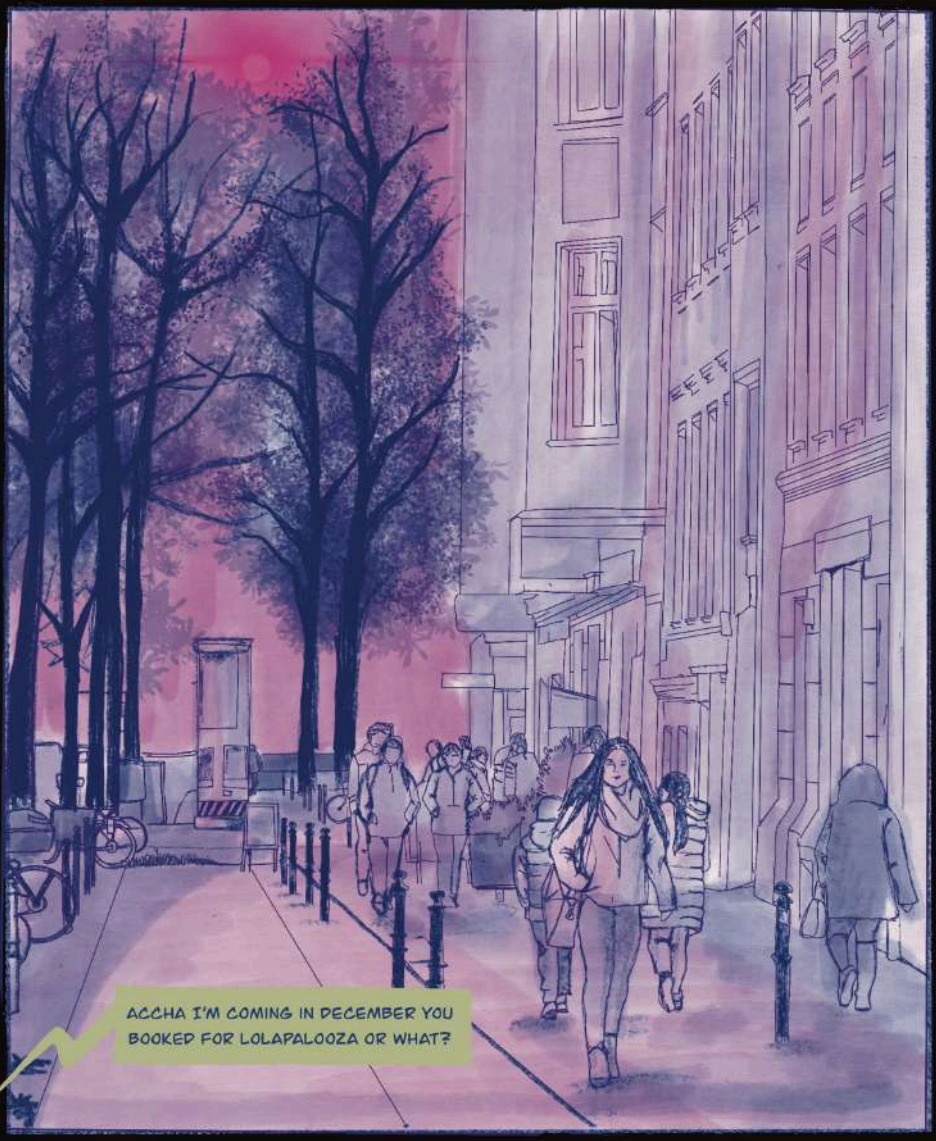

DIDI, I DON'T HAVE ANY CLUBS
NEVERMIND, YOU CAN PLAY SPADES
PRIYA DIDI WAS ABOUT 16 YEARS OLD, SHE DIDN'T REALLY KNOW HOW OLD SHE WAS, BUT HER BEST GUESS WAS, MAYBE 16.
SHE LIVED WITH OUR PROTAGONIST'S AAJI-AABA IN THE CITY, HER FAMILY LIVED CLOSE TO AAJI-AABA'S HOUSE ON THE PROPERTY IN THE VILLAGE


DIDI ENOUGH GADHAV-PISHI CAN WE PLAY BHIKAR-SAHUKAR NOW?
AFTER THIS LAST ROUND WE CAN PLAY BHIKAR-SAUKAR
YOU SEE...AAJI AND AABA HAD WON THE ANCESTRAL LAND IN A LEGAL BATTLE AGAINST THE EXTENDED FAMILY A FEW YEARS AGO...EVERY SUMMER THEY WENT TO KONKAN...TO REMEMBER "THE GOOD OLD DAYS"...AND HOW THE LEGAL FEES WERE SOOOOO WORTH IT

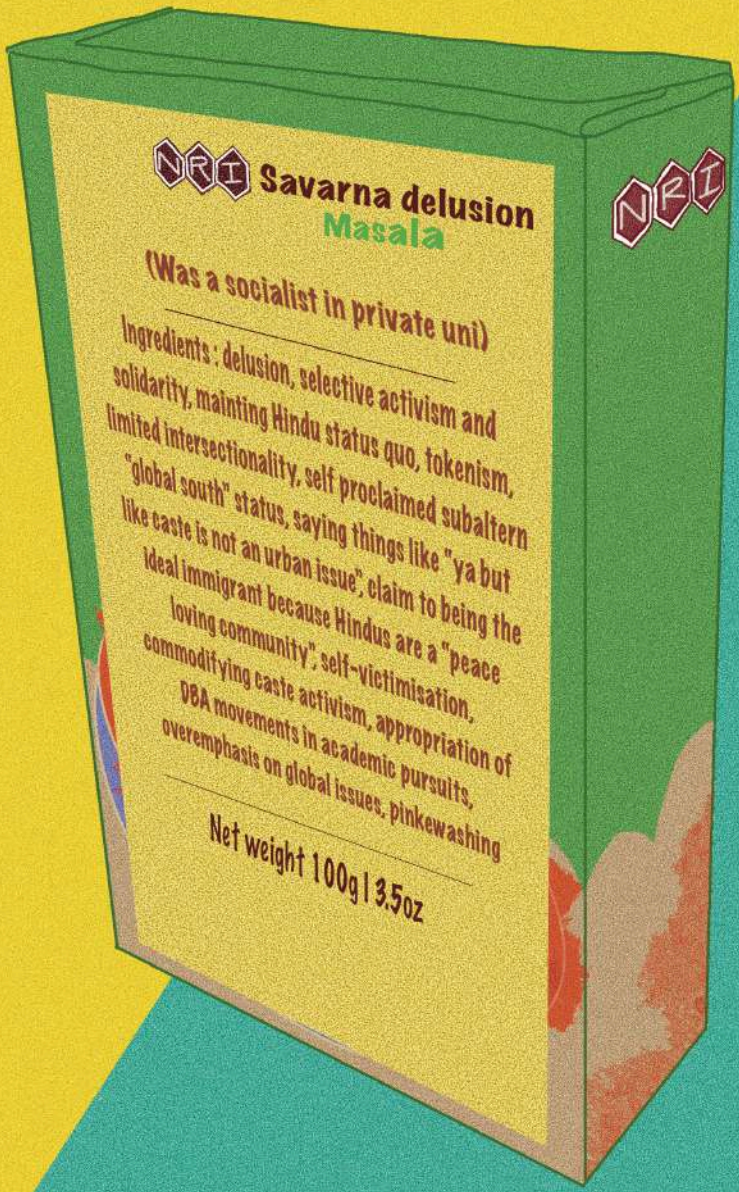

WHEN THEY VISITED THE VILLAGE SOMETIMES PRIYA DIDI MET HER SIBLINGS. BUT SHE DIDN'T PARTICULARLY LIKE HER KAKA, WHO GAVE HER TO AAJI AABA AFTER HER PARENTS DIED.


ON THE MORNING OF THE FIRST DAY I SAID TO HER
DIDI YOU KNOW...I FORGOT THAT I WASN'T HOME WHEN I WOKE UP...IT WAS SO CONFUSING
...AND SHE SAID...
...YOU'LL GET USED TO IT
DUDE NOW I TOTALLY GET WHAT SHE WAS SAYING YA

THEY REALLY THOUGHT BEING A STUDENT IN A WHITE COUNTRY WAS COMPARABLE TO DEBT-BONDED DOMESTIC SERVITUDE



SO HARD TO BE A "MIDDLE CLASS" SAVARNA :(


NRI
Savarna delusion
Masala
(Was a socialist in private uni)
Ingredients : delusion, selective activism and solidarity, mainting Hindu status quo, tokenism, limited intersectionality, self proclaimed subaltern "global south" status, saying things like "ya but like caste is not an urban issue", claim to being the ideal immigrant because Hindus are a "peace loving community", self-victimisation, commodifying caste activism, appropriation of DBA movements in academic pursuits, overemphasis on global issues, pinkewashing
Net weight 100g | 3.5oz
NRI

Kattyayani Joag

Kattyayani J is a graduate of Sociology and Transcultural Studies whose comic NRI Masala explores international studenthood as a position of privilege. Through satire, she examines how savarna privilege enables mobility—allowing certain non-resident Indians to romanticize their summers in the village. While they encounter racism and otherness abroad for the first time, they often lack a real understanding of systemic inequalities back home and their own complicity. The comic draws from her own experiences, those of her peers, and encounters with the diaspora, poking fun at their contradictions.
Kattyayani is set to begin her PhD in Anthropology at UIC, where she will study informal waste related economies in Bombay.

Works from Book Show I

Stills from 'Falling Landing': 2023
check out Jisoo's work on our website

gewiesen oder abgeschoben oder ist ein Antrag
auf Erteilung eines Aufenthaltstitels abgelehnt oder eine Einreise in die Bundesrepublik Deutschland verweigert worden?

ja - ~~nein~~ / yes - no / oui - non / si - no

Have you been expelled or deported from the Federal Rep. of Germany, had an application for a visa or residence permit rejected, or been refused entry into the Federal Re
Avez-vous été expulsé
ou une demande d'attr
ou un voyage en Répu
Lei è stato espulso opp
mania o è stata rifiutat
è stata negata l'entrata

Ich beantrage
I hereby apply for a vis
Je sollicite un titre de s
Richiedo il titolo di sog

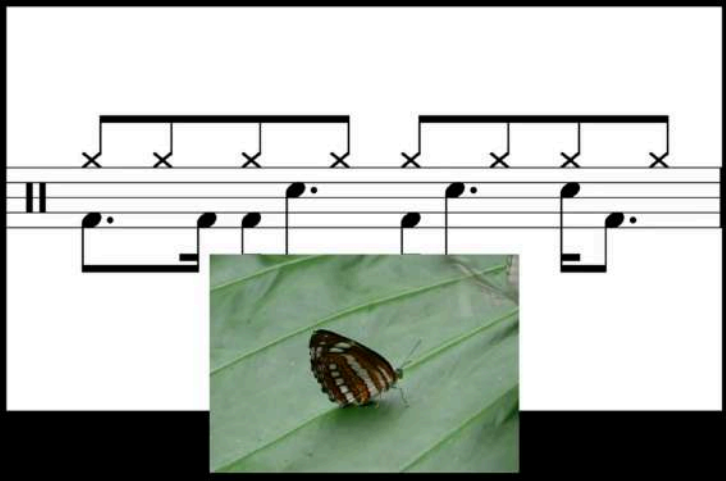
/ Jahre) .

Ich versichere, v
Falsche oder u
Bundesrepublik

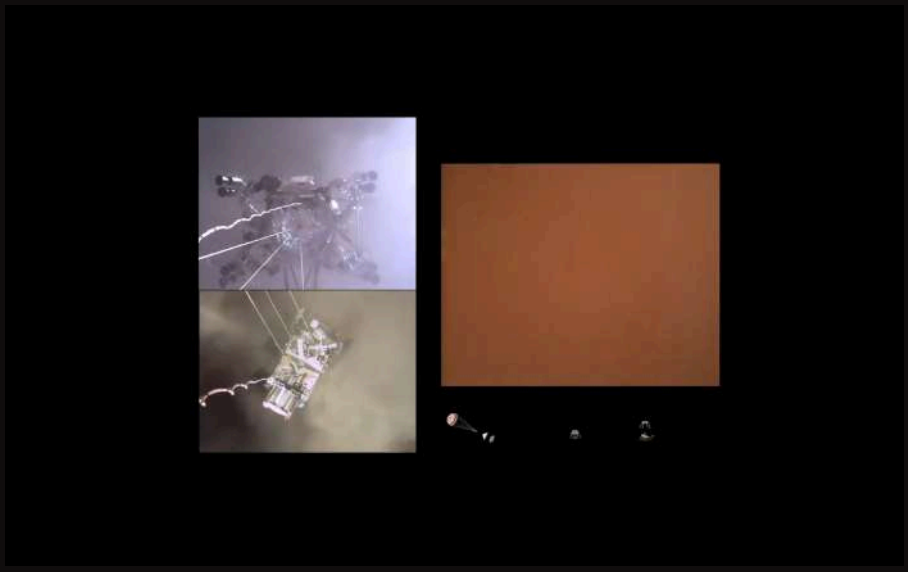
ndig gemacht zu haben.
ne Ausweisung aus der

I declare that to the be
procedure could result
Je certifie que les déc
présente demande ou dans la procédure ultérieure pourrait entraîner mon expulsion de la République fédérale d'Allemagne (§ 54 Abs. 2 Nr. 8 Aufenthaltsgesetz). /
Dichiaro di aver fornito le precedenti indicazioni in modo esatto e completo secondo mia miglior conoscenza e coscienza. Dichiarazioni false o non veritiere nella domanda o nell' ulteriore procedimento possono avere per conseguenza la mia espulsione dalla Republica federale di Germania (§ 54 Abs. 2 Nr. 8 Aufenthaltsgesetz).

Es wird darauf hingewiesen, dass Ihre persönlichen Daten, soweit diese zur Erfüllung gesetzlich vorgeschriebener ausländerrechtlicher Aufgaben der Ausländerbehörde erforderlich sind, gespeichert und entsprechend den rechtlichen Vorschriften automatisiert verarbeitet werden.




Anything else is a crash.



Jisoo Kim

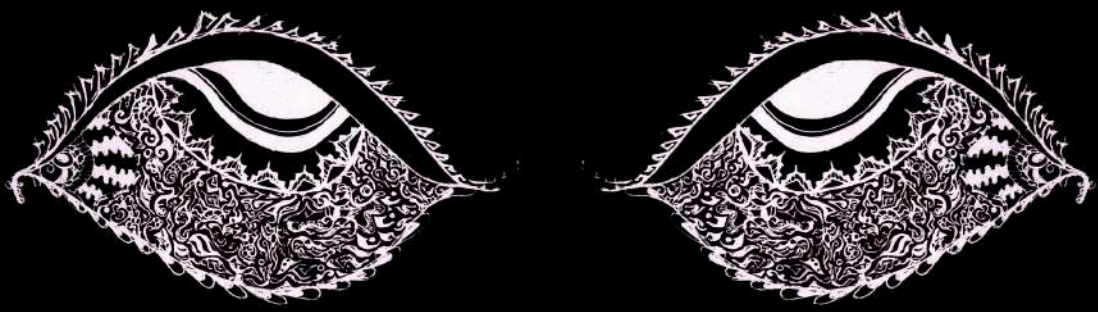
Kim Jisoo is a Korean artist living in Braunschweig, Germany. After graduating with a BFA in painting from Hongik University in Korea, she held three solo exhibitions in Korea and is currently studying Freie Kunst at the University of the Arts Braunschweig.

Ever since moving to Germany, the artist has focused on autobiographical video works. In her art, she reflects on identity, belonging, and language. Living in a foreign language, she reflects, forces one to constantly answer questions. Where are you from, who are you, what do you do – questions that would never have been asked in her native country, and the process of answering them in an imperfect foreign language forces her to sharpen her blunt answers. Fluency in her native language, she has realised, gives you the illusion that you've told a clear story, even a convoluted one. A poor foreign language makes you realize the complexity of your existing story.

The artist is immersed in explaining her existing narrative as if unraveling a thread. In “Falling, Landing”, the shock of being placed in an unfamiliar place is interpreted positively. And the gaze turns to the past. In “Diagnose,” she writes answers to questions such as why she stayed awake so many nights, and in "Taste of Green Banana," why she lied to her family so many times. Kim Jisoo’s work addresses how the experience of changing one’s life space becomes an opportunity to write an answer to who you were in the first place, in order to answer who you are there.

Check out Jisoo’s Film ‘Falling, Landing’ on our website

“Vaulted”



I SEE YOU

Norayr Derbedrossian

Norayr Derbedrossian is a queer Syrian Armenian visual artist and designer, who's art took form in jewellry design as well as abstract pieces.

Norayr's work incorperate personal individual stories turned into jewelrry pieces, that allows people to wear a piece of themselves and projects them onto the world.s Works often include personal and cultural representation, combied with calligraphy. Each jewellry piece was customized to the individual's personal element that is attached to it.

His abstract pieces confronts certain emotions or events, where certain elements are reshaped in the artist's specific style, bringing his own personal struggles and stories to life in a visual form, such as how anxious overthinking feels like in the "VAULTED" piece and being observed in the "I SEE YOU" piece.

Norayr views his work as 'vague confrontational', a space created by the pieces that encourages discussion. The artist's pieces always tend to have a vague element in them that leaves a room for questions and allows viewers to dig a bit deeper within themselves and bring out the courage to share their honest thoughts about their struggles.

The artist is currently located in Heidelberg Germany, coming from architectural background and persuing studies in design, his pieces are now found in several countries across the globe,such as several countires in the middle east, Germany ,France, Armenia, United Emirates and the United States.

Announcements

ECSAS Path: Disentangling the Object from the Gaze

In collaboration with artist, Sharmila Samant

Sharmila Samant's work Visiting Cards (2003) turns the format of the international boarding pass into a critique of mobility under globalisation. Boarding passes are the last official documents before departure, yet for many from non-European countries, movement is heavily restricted. By redesigning them in the style of Lufthansa, long implicated in deportation flights from Western Europe, Samant foregrounds how cultural workers from the Global South are simultaneously invited into international circuits of visibility while remaining subject to regimes of exclusion. Her alteration of the duty-free advert to read "Fly, See, Buy" underscores how curatorial practice and cultural circulation often replicate the logic of consumption.

In Heidelberg's old town, Samant's critique takes shape through three visiting card/boarding passes, installations realised together with Crossmopollinate's Tara Brahme and Kattyayani Joag.

Scanning these tags reveals AR objects from the Völkerkundemuseum archive. Each is linked to personal memories, poems, and drawings contributed by researchers and students with connections to South Asia.

These objects: wicker baskets that carried daily produce, canvas bags that cradled market finds, or small boxes that whispered stories of home are imbued with new meanings as museum objects. ...Who decides their worth?

Objects and artefacts are extracted, displayed, and fetishised, while the people who gave them life are increasingly restricted, targeted by deportation regimes, and caught in anti-immigration politics. By placing these objects in the city and foregrounding associated stories, poems, and images, the work on one hand **disentangles them from the museum gaze**, showing that their meaning exists in everyday use and lived experience, while also highlighting the tension between the mobility of objects and the immobility of people is part of a global pattern, exposing the politics of visibility, value, and belonging.

Join this collaboration by engaging with the objects and adding your own responses:

Flip through the images of the objects from the archive on our Google form
(link in bio)

Tell us your story:

a memory,
a sound,
a poem,
a drawing

Which object holds value for you—and why?

Scan here to send us your responses

Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies

ECSAS
HEIDELBERG 2025

COMING NEXT IN INTERVAL

the Burial & the Yield

Futurity has long been imagined through the logics of development, accumulation, and extraction—each promising to deliver us into utopia. Yet our present is saturated with the live streaming of genocide, the aftermath of a pandemic, ceaseless wars, and the looming dread of a climate crisis. This resonates with what Lauren Berlant has called crisis ordinariness: a condition in which the anticipation of collapse structures everyday life.

In The Imagination of Disaster, Susan Sontag reminds us that "The expectation of the apocalypse may be the occasion for radical disaffiliation from society." Today, disillusionment and disaffiliation mark many narratives of futurity—drifting toward nihilism and annihilation.

But departure from these junctures of disaffiliation can also open space for new epistemologies of futurity, grounded in cultivation. With our next issue, The Burial and The Yield, we invite you to collectively imagine a futurity through the cultivation of hope. Hope as a radical practice: the willingness to plant amidst ruins, to care within uncertainty, to welcome yields not as planned outcomes destined for consumption, but as emergent entanglements of care, uncertainty, and time.

We welcome submissions of essays, poetry, visual work, and experimental forms that germinate, sprout, and grow new imaginaries of what is yet to come.

📅 Deadline for submissions: 15 December 2025

Stay tuned for details about our bootcamp, a space for germinating ideas together through workshops, collective thinking, and shared exploration.

Join our book club!

In preparation for our next issue “The Burial and the Yield”, we will have a monthly book club meeting to exchange!

It will take place online, the link for the meet-up will be shared on the day of the book club.

FIRST MEETING

10.10.2025

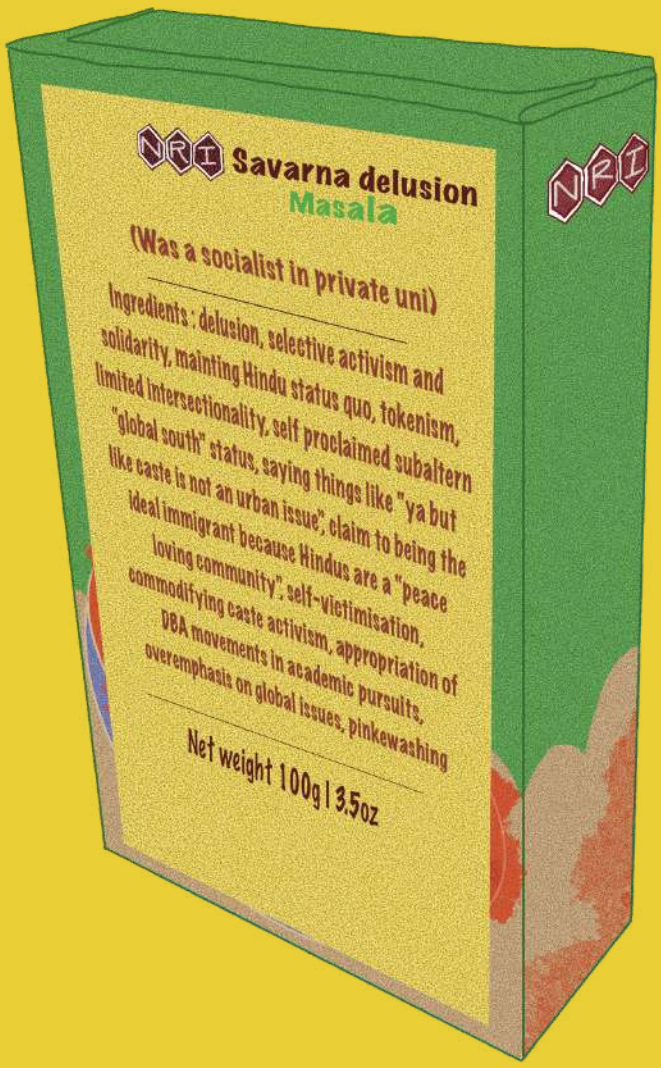


Illustration from Comic “NRI Masala”(2024), by Kattyayani Joag Courtesy of the Artist.

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