Fugitive aesthetics: performing refusal in four acts

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I don’t want to die
With my hands up
or
legs open. (Putuma, 2017)

I write this on the winter solstice of 2019, as the darkness in the northern hemisphere slowly begins to recede, amidst an overwhelming feeling of rage and despair. The world is either burning or in mourning, trying to latch on to the last flicker of hope for the new decade.

The season of discontent that began with #MeToo highlighted the widespread misogyny and racism in everyday life. Perhaps those of us belonging to privileged class, caste and race are only now beginning to realise the everyday traumas experienced by Black womxn and womxn of colour from lower classes and castes. On 19 April 2019, a thirty-five-year old woman who worked as a junior court assisant at the Supreme Court of India accused the Chief Justice of India (CJI), Ranjan Gogoi, of sexual harassment in October 2018 (Yamunan and Sharma, 2019). She submitted a detailed report on how she and her family were being punished for refusing his advances. An internal committee that was formed to investigate the matter later absolved the CJI of all charges. More recently, Tarun Tejpal, the former editor-in-chief of Tehelka magazine was acquitted of all charges of raping his junior employee after a trial that lasted eight years, even though there are records of his confession of the crime in his email exchanges with the survivor (Baxi, 2021).
On 24 August 2019, Uyinene Mrwetyana went to the Clareinch post office, on the outskirts of Cape Town, to collect her mail. The man at the counter told her that the credit-card machine was not working and asked her to come back later in the afternoon. When she returned, the employee raped and murdered her, and dumped her burned body (Nombembe, 2019). Mrwetyana was nineteen years old and a student at the University of Cape Town. For weeks after this incident, thousands of womxn marched in the streets to show their fury and to demand an end to the growing femicide in South Africa. The convicted, Luyanda Botha, was given three life sentences in the trial that followed.

Koleka Putuma’s lines above, from her critically acclaimed book of heartfelt poetry Collective Amnesia (2017), painfully echo how Black womxn’s lives continue to be framed by a close proximity to death. Rape culture and femicide is widespread in South Africa, with mostly Black and poor womxn as victims of sexualised violence (du Toit, 2014; Gqola, 2015; Lewis, 2009). While rooted in contemporary realities, Putuma’s poetry also invokes the historical injustices suffered by Black womxn because of the history of colonialism and slavery. Perceived through the prism of an all-pervasive anti-Blackness, her body of work reflects on the fragments and paradoxes of Black citizenship – always distorted, forever fallacious. The refusal Putuma articulates is a refusal to perform victimhood, while simultaneously being aware of the inevitability of an undignified death. This is the curse of the present moment – the refusal does not offer any promises, for repair is illusory. What it does offer is a negotiation with the present – a way to articulate agency and find community through art, activism and performance.

The initial euphoria of the #MeToo movement is slowly beginning to disappear, but the narratives of brutal cases of sexualised violence are not. The celebration and visibility accorded to #MeToo in Euro-America when Alyssa Milano tweeted about it in 2017 overlooked the localised histories of feminist struggles in the global south; the present moment is a moment of its reckoning (Lukose, 2018). Perhaps it was because of the popularity of #MeToo that the junior court assistant in India was able to gather the courage to speak up against the CJJ. But even after she submitted evidence, the legal system failed her. In South Africa, too, femicide continues as before, with vague promises and empty speeches made by the government every now and then.

This chapter originates from a place of anger and exhaustion. It is framed by a sense of urgency. #MeToo led to an interrogation of the framework of legal jurisprudence for its immediate relevance to contemporary feminist politics. The workshop on ‘Injury and Intimacy’ in February 2019 brought feminist scholars, activists and artists from India and South Africa together to consider the meanings of #MeToo in our local contexts, beyond and outside its viral movements in the global north. Springing forth from that workshop, this chapter is an attempt at imagining new languages of freedom and resistance through art and performance, outside and beyond the neoliberal state, as a way of imagining radical hope and practising solidarity.

The failure of legal support and crisis of care for womxn from marginalised communities in the aftermath of #MeToo has exhausted their faith in the state, a faith that was precarious to begin with. ‘Perhaps #MeToo can become raw material for more textured (re)considerations of issues, an archive for art and other interventions’, writes Lata Mani (2018). Following her prompt, my chapter is an attempt at foregrounding ‘layered, intertextual, cumulative encounters with culture, power, narrative frames, pain, skin and soul’ through various performances of #MeToo in India and South Africa (Mani, 2018). The body of archive it strives to create is in equal parts devastating and affirmative. ‘Think[ing] with and through the intersectional and interstitial of experience’, this chapter assembles a few of my thoughts on the different performances of refusal in the context of #MeToo in the two countries (Mani, 2018). Refusal by itself is a negation of the performance of victimhood, with a clear-eyed view of the realities of brutal, systemic oppression. I explore fugitivity as a mode of performing refusal in the work of contemporary artists and activists in South Africa and India, a refusal that is rooted in vernacular formations. I discuss the photography of Thandiwe Msebenzi and an art installation by Labohang Motaung in South Africa, and Vanitha Mathil (Women’s wall), a human chain, and the Blank Noise community art project in India. I articulate what fugitive aesthetics might look like in the face of everyday violence and how it redefines activism and resistance.
in differing contexts. It translates into a performance of agency – conscious or unconscious political agency – and the finding of joy in a world that criminalises you. It is a form of underground rebellion because it is about refusing to play the role that the state expects of you. Sometimes fugitive aesthetics translate into rage that finds space and visibility in the streets; at other times, it is quiet and consistent and yet invisible on the surface. In the artistic practices discussed below, it is an unstable horizon of the political that cannot be easily contained within the definitions of visibility, recognition and rights.

In the absence of political recognition for precarious communities, Harney and Moten (2013) have called for a joyful celebration of a docile social life that refuses to conform to the idea of a traditional political subject. If the sphere of the political is irredeemably anti-Black, fugitive aesthetics refuse those conditions and coordinates of existence to create new ones. Fugitivity is not an escape or an exit; it is ‘separate from settling’, they say (Harney and Moten, 2013: 11). It is groundlessness, inaction, exile. After Harney and Moten, Tina Campt (2014) defined refusal as rejecting the big narratives of freedom, instead continuing to imagine – with hesitation and apprehension – ways of being in the world fraught with violence, ways that resist traditional definitions of resistance. Refusal is based on living in the breaks from perpetual wars on marginal lives and finding joy in communities. She highlights the tensions between flights of escape and creative practices of refusal that are nimble and strategic. Campt asks to bring attention back to the minutiae of life, as they are the structures in which we navigate the world.

Faced with the bitter disappointments of post-apartheid South Africa, young Black artists are reimagining the future of the country and their place within it. Their art and revolutionary thought, whether consciously or not, is expressed through vernacular discourses (see Livermon, 2020; Pather and Boule, 2019). To insist on joy, friendship, sisterhood, community and celebration when the world repeatedly tells you otherwise is a fugitive act of radical politics. Fugitivity is a backlash against the hope promised but never fulfilled, a collective assertion of a corporeal vocabulary that signals a breakdown of the verbal language. Fugitive aesthetics is born from despair and yet imagines a collective future. It refuses state violence in all its forms. Instead of desiring legibility from a

system that legitimises racialised capitalism, the artists and activists discussed below engage with and dwell in fugitive modes of existence and refuse belonging. Fugitive aesthetics are gestures of silence that invite us to dwell in the absences, in the withdrawal, incommunicability and flights of abandon and abstraction, while at the same time challenging their bodily erasure from political life.

How do we imagine and focus more attention on things that get overlooked, the artistic and everyday practices that are disruptive? The artists discussed below attempt to activate forms of thinking that exceed the limits of permissible and mobilise the quotidian that is contained by periphery. Their work echoes the painful histories of feminist struggles and leaves behind fugitive traces in the crevices of that history – the breaks that exist between the quiet everyday and spectacular revolutions.

Thandiwe Msebenzi

Thandiwe Msebenzi is a young artist who lives and works in Cape Town. She was born in Nyanga, one of the many townships built after the Group Areas Act of 1950, which reserved city centres, farms, beaches and mountains as White spaces, ghettoising Black citizens in townships on the edges of urban areas. In 2014 Msebenzi studied at the Michaelis School of Fine Art and her photographic work has featured widely in group exhibitions across South Africa. In 2017, she was invited to showcase her work at Documenta 14 and the Dutch Design Week. At present, she is finishing a Master’s in Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of the Western Cape and works out of the Greatmore Studios in Woodstock.

Her most recent solo exhibition, *Utata Ndipotha Inwele* (My Father Plaits My Hair, 2019), opened on 10 April 2019 at Smith, a gallery in Cape Town.1 In the exhibition, Msebenzi addresses the question of masculinity and gendered violence. She places her personal story and experiences at the centre of the narrative and complicates easy definitions of victimhood through her images. The title is inspired by the memory of her father plaiting her hair when she was a little girl, as reflected in the coterminal image (Figure 13.1). Growing up in a violent environment in Nyanga, masculinity was
Figure 13.1 Thandiwe Msebenzi, *Utsata Ndiphosha Inwele* (My Father Plaits My Hair), 2019.

Msebenzi’s body is at the centre of most of her images and tells her childhood stories. Violence is a recurring theme and gendered narratives of weakness and strength are complicated through juxtaposition. *Qula* (Stick Fighting) shows Msebenzi armoured with a stick in each hand, looking stern (Figure 13.3). Her grandmother used to hide weapons under her bed, carried them with her all the time and was adept at using them for self-defence whenever she felt the need. When a man laid claim to one of her cows, she challenged him to a stick fight that she eventually won and rightfully reclaimed them. *Phantzi Kuphodini KaNomphelo* (Under Nomphelo’s Bed)

conflated with aggressive violence and men who did not conform were ridiculed and isolated. The image of Msebenzi lying on her father’s lap challenges the gendered norms she grew up with through tender evocation of ‘soft masculinity’ – a subject Msebenzi is also exploring in her Master’s thesis. Similarly, the photograph *Usiya Nebobe* (Siya and his Pigeon) shows a pet pigeon sitting in the small of the neck of Siya, her nephew (Figure 13.2). With his back to the audience, the image captures the warmth, kindness and sensitivity of Siya, a lover of birds.

Figure 13.2 Thandiwe Msebenzi, *Usiya Nebobe* (Siya and his Pigeon), 2019.

displays the overarching fear that dominates women’s life in her community (Figure 13.4). Msebenzi started taking photographs of weapons under beds after she learnt from her grandmother that this was a common practice among women. These weapons were meant to be a means of self-protection in the face of intrusion and attacks by men. The photograph is a close-up shot of weapons, placed in a row, which her friend’s mother hid under her bed. As the legend has it, one of these weapons is identical to the one that was used to mutilate Black slaves as a punishment in the past. These sharp-edged weapons lie on a blue and white bedcover – the harshness of the metal juxtaposed with the soft background. This photograph complicates the notion of home as a safe space for womxn in their communities by drawing attention to the constant hyper-vigilance
and trauma that is contained within. It is not just public street spaces that are marked by sexualised violence against womxn; the bedroom is not free from it either.

*Kwe Mpengempenge* (In the Middle of Nowhere) is a series of photographs that shows Msebenzi dragging a bed across a field, after her grandmother told her that a woman had been raped while crossing it (Figure 13.5). Msebenzi juxtaposes the public and private again by placing the bed – a symbol of privacy and comfort – in the middle of the vast, open, ‘dangerous’ fields. Invoking anger, despair and strength, this photograph is a form of quiet protest, which explicitly addresses the rampant femicide in South Africa. Her refusal to give in to the patriarchal expectations of a docile and fearful life finds a vivid representation in this photograph. The act of dragging the bed across the field is also an act of taking up public space that is otherwise not allowed to her. The lines in the mud drawn out as a result create a feminist map – a map that is not based on the masculine notions of flânerie as adventurous and exciting but an embodied experience of violence and trauma (see Arora, 2020).
Ndilindil (I Am Waiting) has Msebenzi seated on the bed in the same field, with her back to the audience, holding a pickaxe in her right hand (Figure 13.6). She is waiting to see who would attack her and is ready to defend herself. There is fear, anger and exhaustion but also an attempt to overpower those feelings with a quiet resolution. Movement and dwelling are present, simultaneously, insisting on lives that refuse regimes of violence and imagine ‘new ways to live in the afterlife of slavery’ (Sharpe, 2016: 18). The lack of action does not imply stagnation; the intention to wait is itself an act of defiance.

In Listening to Images (2017), Campt asks viewers to listen to the photographic images created by contemporary Black artists and to pay attention to the erotics of stillness and suspension. These images are haunted by the contexts of their production, she writes. They demand listening, not just hearing. The vocal frequency of these images possesses an intensity and intimacy that commands attention, a haptic relationality with the viewer. Attending to the complexity of the relationship between repetition and routine unveils a vernacular practice of affirmation and a demand for visibility. Msebenzi’s photography is a fugitive practice that explores the quotidian as a site of rupture and refusal. Her images require an attunement to a world beyond what the vision permits in the first instance, to allow for a deeper connection with the artist. They conjure a possibility in everyday life and articulate a practice of refusal that negates victimhood. Being receptive to the hum of these images is a possible entry into the world in which they were created, to feel the political contexts they are haunted by. The politics and aesthetics of Msebenzi’s photography dwells in a fugitivity by prompting its audience to pay attention to the concealed realities beyond the surface.

In the aftermath of #MeToo, sexualised violence has been a recurrent theme in Msebenzi’s artworks. In 2017, her exhibition Awundiboni – You Don’t See Me at the ORMS Cape Town School of Photography dealt with it in a more direct manner (Msebenzi, 2017). The tension between public and private spaces is a visible constant in her work. In the artistic statement for the exhibition, she writes:

As much as this project is driven by women’s fear of sexual violence in both public and private spaces, this work is also a celebration of resistance. It seeks to capture both the women’s pain and trauma, but also their immense strength in the face of the sexual violence epidemic that continues to grip South Africa.

Msebenzi’s photographs refuse victimhood to seek out quiet, meditative and creative ways of living while acknowledging the precarity of Black life.

Msebenzi continues to explore her engagement with the power of art and photography in addressing representations of gender and violence through her research. Her current work as part of her Master’s centres her practice as a photographer while engaging with school students, to understand how the lived realities under the apartheid regime played a role in creating South African masculinities.

Labohang Motaung

Black hair is never ‘just hair’ – it is about female friendship and solidarity, about love and revolution and about owning one's
rightful place in the world. When colonialism and racial capitalism continue to thrive by fostering a disconnection between Black womxn and their bodies, perpetuating a beauty aesthetic that conforms to having White skin and straight hair, Lebohang Motaung’s *Formation* (2019) tells a different story. Black hair does not need to be straightened or misunderstood, it is a thing to be celebrated and loved, a means of forming and nurturing friendships with other Black womxn.

I witnessed Motaung’s *Formation* on 2 May 2019 on my visit to the Youngblood Gallery in Cape Town. It was the first Thursday of the month, when art galleries in the city are free to the general public and open until late. Street spaces that are otherwise perceived as ‘dangerous’ and ‘unsafe’ for the middle classes are transformed into social hubs where an audience that would not normally venture into the city late in the evening or would be unable to afford tickets feels welcome. Consequently, the art works that are exhibited on these First Thursdays are chosen with care and political awareness.

Motaung is a young South African artist whose artistic career received a much-deserved boost when she won the Cartier Johannesburg Art Fair competition in 2017. She rose to popularity in 2019 after her installation art piece *Formations* went viral on social media. A trained hairstylist, she combines her braiding skills and artistic vision to tell everyday stories about ordinary women. In *Formations*, head shots of three Black women are arranged in a triptych, looking away from the viewer’s gaze, flaunting their hair. Their beautifully done braids hang down from different levels and are tied together in a knot that almost touches the floor. A simple gesture of braiding is an act of bonding between womxn; it creates a safe space where hairdressers and customers have long conversations while the hair is being braided. The connection between braids in *Formations* emphasises Black sisterhood and intimacy. Her Instagram page (lebohanglang) is a bounteous collection of her work, showing images of people whose hair she has plaited in real life. All the designs and patterns are her original ideas.

The topic of beauty and Black hair and what is considered acceptable and admirable has been a battlefield in South Africa. Reminiscent of Beyoncé’s single *Formation* which invited solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement and won the Grammy Award for best video in 2016, Motaung’s installation draws attention to how South African history is fraught with anthropological perspectives on race, with its roots in biological determinism. Hairstyling practices on the African continent have changed with colonial trajectories, class hierarchies and growth of urban city centres. Influence of the Western ideas of beauty, promoted by the European civilising mission, encouraged hair straightening to acquire social validation in the early twentieth century (Biya, 1999; Mercer, 1994). Following the Black Power movement in the 1960s in the US, ‘Black is Beautiful’ became the guiding motto and afro hairstyles became a mode of cultural resistance against White beauty ideals (Kelley, 1997). The Black consciousness movement, strongly rooted in African traditions, rejected all forms of hair modifications as imperialist.

For Zimitri Erasmus (2000), this binary between natural afro as radical, and straightened Black hair as conservative, promotes an essentialised relationship with Black hair that continues to use Western standards of beauty as a reference point. The time spent on straightening one’s hair at the weekend, in the company of other womxn, was an opportunity to create a ‘gendered cultural space of intimacy’ (Erasmus, 2000: 5). The process of tending to one’s hair became an important ritual and a site of self-care away from the male gaze; White ideals of beauty were irrelevant. For bell hooks (1995), this time spent with other women was also a space to understand and acknowledge desire by tending to one’s body, signalling a journey from girlhood to womanhood.

Motaung’s journey as an artist began as a hairstylist, where she experienced the power of intimacy that hair salons fostered in Johannesburg. Finding joy in creating community and a strong sense of self in other womxn motivated Motaung to pursue this craft as an art form. Exploring Black identity in her installations, Motaung portrays ordinary womxn with ordinary desires while focusing on self-expression as an empowering motif in her work. Her installations are rooted in finding ways of creating a strong relationship with one’s self, without referring to White standards of beauty.

Black womxn have always exercised power and choice through hairstyling practices, but the art of braiding has been incorporated into surveillance regimes and is increasingly done to ‘control’ hair
today (Banks, 2000). Discrimination based on hair disguises inherent racism and colonial ideas of beauty in contemporary schools and classrooms. As recently as 2017, Windsor House Academy in Johannesburg came under scrutiny after one of its headmistresses asked around ten Black girls to leave after labelling their braids inappropriate. The previous year, students at Pretoria High School were told not to have “untidy afros” and forced to chemically straighten their hair (Giard, 2016). With its long history of apartheid, discrimination based on skin colour and ethnicity runs deep in South African society and Motaung’s installation is a significant intervention that causes a rupture in its hegemonic racist aesthetics.

The relationship with afro hair is never without contradictions, but it is always about complex journeys of self-acceptance and growth for Black womxn. In her fascinating book Don’t Touch My Hair (2019), Emma Dabiri writes about the tiring, time-consuming and expensive process of chemical straightening that she grew up subscribing to. Having grown up in Ireland to a Black Nigerian father and a White Trinidadian mother, Dabiri had a difficult relationship with her curls and the book is her journey of acknowledging and celebrating them. Refusing to chemically straighten the coils was a political decision she made to re-establish a connection with her body and the natural world. Black hair as a symbol of power and heritage is also a subject for Lucinda Roy’s poem “If You Know Black Hair” (1988). Born to a Jamaican father and British mother, Roy writes about the complexity of relationships that are passed down through one’s hair.

If you know, you really know black hair,
the way it feels like bunched-up cloud
or dense-packed candy floss,
If you know, you really know the smell
of milky coconut easing through
the careful braids or the relaxed curls
of women just as bold with chemicals
as all the white girls with their tightly perms,
if you know all this, then you know
that there is nothing softer sweeter tougher
than black hair.

Similarly, by celebrating cultural identity and self-worth, Motaung shows how owning and embracing Black hair is a revolution in itself. Her aesthetics highlight a blueprint for resistance that is quietly grounded in building a strong relationship with one’s body. Motaung’s refusal is grounded in sisterhood and community and is a rejection of racial capitalism’s standards of beauty. Her use of labour for aesthetics and bonding with other women is a refusal of performing gendered labour for capitalism.

Vanitha Mathil

What does refusal look like when it challenges the upper-caste hegemony of the state? What form does resistance take when questions of faith and tradition are challenged for their violence? What is the significance of occupying the streets and partaking in its pleasures and perils?

In the state of Kerala in southern India stands the temple of Sabarimala, dedicated to the celibate Hindu god Ayyappa. The site is the destination of one of the largest annual pilgrimages in the world, inviting forty to fifty million devotees each year. But for decades, girls and womxn aged between ten and fifty were barred from entering the temple premises because of the belief that allowing menstruating womxn inside the temple would be disrespectful to the deity. A landmark Supreme Court ruling in September 2018 overturned the tradition when, responding to a twelve-year-old public interest litigation, it decreed that accessing the temple was every Indian’s constitutional right to religion. The ruling was a powerful challenge to the centuries-old Brahmanical hegemony that perpetuates itself based on caste and class exclusions.
The Supreme Court ruling of 2018 was not received well. Huge counter-protests erupted when upper-caste men, incited by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the volunteer paramilitary group of the ruling right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), blocked the temple as womxn tried to enter after the verdict. In the run-up to the national elections in the summer of 2019, the BJP tried appealing to the more liberal section of the Indian populace by including women’s rights in its agenda (Krishnan, 2020). The irony of campaigns like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter) and Selfie with Daughter could not be more evident. Kavita Krishnan’s detailed analysis of these campaigns shows how their underlying patriarchal language and ideology continues to paint daughters as a burden until they prove themselves to be good wives, mothers and daughters-in-law. Moreover, the issue of women’s rights becomes synonymous with increased surveillance and limiting access to public spaces in the name of protection and safety (see the discussion on Blank Noise in the next section). RSS’s violent attacks at Sabarimala is only one example of BJP’s fight to consolidate its sexist and casteist Hindutva agenda despite its rhetoric of women’s development and empowerment.

On 1 January 2019, around three million women, cutting across class, caste and religion, formed a 620 kilometre-long Vanitha Mathil, translated as a women’s wall, running from Thiruvananthapuram in the south to Kasaragod in the north of Kerala – a ‘model’ state in South India with a communist government in power at the regional level. Organised by the ruling Left Democratic Front government in the state with the support of other left-leaning organisations and leadership of lower-caste communities, the human chain protested gender discrimination and state repression. Various sections of society, including students, homemakers, daily-wage labourers and domestic cleaners, as well as famous writers, artists, local ministers and political representatives, participated. The event garnered massive media coverage and was supported enthusiastically by activists nationwide.

Although Kerala became the first state to elect a communist government in 1957, hierarchies based on caste continue to run very deeply. Its efforts surpass those of the BJP government, but Kerala is also a state where caste is not a determining factor. Caste hierarchies are entrenched in the state: caste-based community is stronger than community based on national identity because of the intertwined histories of caste, class and land ownership (see Menon, 1994; Mokkil, 2019). The state does not follow the common four varna systems but considers the landlords, Nambudiri Brahmans, as the highest caste and the rest as low castes. Even Iyers – otherwise a high caste – are considered as low caste by Nambudiri Brahmans. Born in Kerala, Chirappad’s poetry exposes these hierarchies by highlighting the contradictions and complexities of the state that lays claim to modernity because of its highest literacy rates. The irony in her poem ‘Wasteland’ is self-evident: the constitution of India grants equal rights to all citizens, but the terrain of gender, caste and sexuality is fraught with violence. The economic, social and psychological wounds of Dalit women render them almost invisible (see Anil 2016; Priya, 2018).

Acknowledging Kerala’s complex histories, Navaneetha Mokkil (2019: 6, 200) has argued against grand narratives of ‘a quick transition from silence to celebration’ and asks that attention be paid to ‘flickering moments that cannot be reified’. The event of Vanitha Mathil speaks to the lines by Dalit poet Vijila Chirappad above, in their refusal to comply with the gendered and casteist regimes of religious and patriarchal violence. Vanitha Mathil was a significant event, which was able to overcome centuries-old caste-based hierarchies – even if temporarily – in the hope of an inclusive society. Sabarimala is now etched in public memory as a site of struggle for gender equality. The memory of collective action created history that is not limited to the written document but is embodied in the form of a ‘repertoire’ (Taylor, 2003: 20). Vanitha Mathil allowed for ways of knowing and being that are grounded in intimacy, participation and connection. Thinking through this event on the basis of Dwight Conquergood’s three i’s, this performance of refusal was a work of imagination, a pragmatics of inquiry and a strategy of intervention (Conquergood, 2002: 152). Coming from varied classes, castes and religions, these women were not the everyday face of protest in metropolitan cities in India and the noise their protesting bodies made continues to ‘echo’ and reverberate in collective memory (Schneider, 2011: 105), reminding us that for informal innovations to succeed, they need to be seen as such.
Circulating as ‘reappearance and reparticipation’ (Schneider, 2011: 101), performance challenges loss of such moments of collective joy and community.

Chirappad uses poetry as a site of performance of caste and gender to undo all the essentialised narratives of equality and highlight the multiple oppressions that Dalit women experience. Womxn in her poems are not those who are adorned in silk sarees waiting for rain and pining for their lover but womxn who get their feet dirty walking through potholes, earning a daily living. Evoking images of the absence of wealth and other material comforts, confinement to domestic spheres, inhabiting the streets for survival is not a lamentation of a lack but an active effort in Chirappad’s poetry to tell the overlooked stories of Dalit women who live in the margins.

In our home  
there is no TV  
no fridge  
nor grinder  
no LPG  
not even an iron-box.  
yet my mother knew  
how to operate these  
much before I did.  
because  
like in Madhavikutty’s stories  
and the novels of MT  
she is Janu –  
the servant. (Chirappad, 2009)

Chirappad refuses the grand narratives of equality that the state lays claim to and provides an embodied narrative of herself and other Dalit womxn in her community. The quotidien is a site of struggle as well as a source of community.

Blank Noise

The aesthetics of refusal took the form of rest and non-productivity in an initiative by Bangalore-based feminist performance collective Blank Noise. Formed in 2002 by Jasmeen Patheeba, then a design student at the Srishti College of Art, Design and Technology, Blank Noise uses creative public intervention strategies carried out by young, middle- and upper-class urban women. They started out by calling themselves ‘Action Heroines’, but now identify as Action Sheroes / Action Theyroes / Action Heroes. Their campaigns and urban projects revolve around female desire to occupy the city without fear. The creative interventions run by Blank Noise were the first of their kind in India and their work has gained an increasing urgency since #MeToo. Blank Noise uses social media to invite testimonies and encourage participation across different cities in India. Their campaign, Being Idle (2006), encouraged women to stand idle in public spaces. Blank Noise had collected testimonials of street harassment though their Blogathon in 2006, where several bloggers had shared their experiences of street harassment. These anonymous stories were handed out to strangers on busy streets in the form of bilingual letters titled Dear Stranger, with the hope of inviting solidarity and connection (Figure 13.7). Another campaign,
I Wish, invited women to share their dreams for a more inclusive city, which were then enacted in a public park.

The campaign Meet to Sleep (2018) invited women to sleep collectively in parks. Participants bring rugs and sleep on the grass or on benches (Blank Noise, 2018). They are encouraged to take photographs to share on their website, and Facebook and Twitter pages. The photographs portray women looking directly into the camera, sprawled on the grass, smoking in public spaces, wearing risqué clothes – images that are not routinely associated with ‘respectable’ womanhood in India. The question of women’s mobility in India has acquired a widespread currency following Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade’s Why Loiter? (2011), which encourages women to take risks in order to experience pleasure on the streets, and has intensified since the anti-rape protests in Delhi in 2012. The initiative challenges BJP’s discourse of limiting women’s access to public spaces in the name of protecting them by calling on women to take risks for their azaadi (freedom) and to loiter on the streets. Blank Noise’s initiatives encourage women to refuse the position of victim and assume agency through performative action, and the drive to occupy urban spaces has become increasingly popular (see Arora, 2019; Lieder, 2018; Mani, 2014; Phadke, 2013; Phadke et al., 2011).

While earlier waves of women’s movements in India focused on legal reform to counter sexual violence, many of the women who participate in Blank Noise’s interventions have adopted a ‘do-it-yourself grammar which lays claim to equality as entitlement and seems not to use the vocabulary of women’s rights’, writes Mitra-Kahn (2012: 113). The focus on individual agency without recourse to legal measures is reflective of India’s turn to neoliberalism, argues Hemangini Gupta (2016: 153), where ‘individuals are exorted to take responsibility for themselves and to produce themselves as entrepreneurial citizens’. The circulation and consumption of these images feeds further participation from women with similar middle- and upper-class backgrounds.

In the times of #MeToo, racial capitalism and xenophobia across the world, artists and activists are increasingly exhausted. As the #MeToo movement gained popularity across the globe and women began to share narratives of sexual harassment on social media, they also faced having to deal with the male perpetrators either outrightly denying the act or further traumatizing the survivor with threats and court cases. The demands for organising, protesting in the streets and shouting slogans overlooks the fatigue it produces in minoritarian bodies. Every act of making the world a little safer requires the emotional labour of making others aware of the different forms of marginalisation and oppression. Meet to Sleep challenges – and refuses – the labour required to gain legitimacy and visibility in the eyes of the state by refusing to participate in the economy of production and reproduction. Women’s labour, mostly unpaid or underpaid, contributes to the functioning of racialised capitalism; withholding that labour by choosing rest and community is a fugitive practice that ruptures the system. The insistence on rest and sleep, care and mental health is seldom seen in art works of Black and Brown womxn, even when the focus on self-care has become central to resistance vocabularies in White (online) communities. By highlighting inaction and non-productivity, this initiative refuses the capitalist regimes of violence that consume women’s bodies. The angularity of the body, existing at 180° instead of the upright 90°, is also a fugitive tactic – a movement that is neither upright nor linear and refuses visibility to the ever-present male gaze.

Meet to Sleep, like all Blank Noise initiatives, focuses on access to the outdoors: gathering women together to loiter, chat and sleep at odd hours of the day, when they would otherwise not be out on the streets. Their practice finds resonance with Msebenzi’s photographs as they seek to articulate different forms of quiet resistance outdoors. Loitering on the streets is deemed unrespectable and therefore prohibited for middle- and upper-class women, who invariably belong to upper castes; women from lower classes and castes have always had to use the streets for economic reasons. Domestic workers, sex workers, fruit sellers, financially poor women always inhabit – and, in fact, have to endure – the extremities of the streets: to sleep, rest, earn their daily wage, and to support themselves and their families. The presence of working-class and lower-caste women does not invite surprise or disgust since the urban outdoors has always been their source of survival. When middle-class women attempt to access public spaces as an act of defiance during a performance event, the
radicality of the initiative is already defined – and bound – by the temporary nature of that desire (Arora, 2019). After two hours, the participants return home to their comfortable beds. But the homeless poor and the sex workers have no such hope. This mode of ‘occupying’ the urban through sleeping outdoors, construed as a radical and liberating act, overlooks the concerns of minority women who belong to different castes, religions and socio-economic backgrounds, and who inhabit public spaces in very different ways – either out of ‘compulsions of economics’ or due to dire infrastructural gaps like lack of toilets (Chatterjee, 2011: 170). Collective participation in sleeping by privileged women also excludes how, under Brahmanical patriarchy, middle- and upper-class women can rest while lower-class and lower-caste women must work.

An upsurge in similar artistic groups and urban interventions across the country in the previous decade, like Pinjra Tod, Women Walk at Midnight, Take Back the Night reveals an impatience with the legal reform practices of the state, which have never displayed their solidarities with the feminist movement, leading to digital movements like #MeToo. The imaginations and hope of these young artists are the struggles of Indian feminists after independence. Despite their exclusions at the beginning, these groups are consciously trying to adopt an intersectional approach to their art and activism by trying to be more inclusive (Krishnan, 2020; Lieder, 2018; Roy, 2016). Their dreams of a better future are rooted in a refusal of the patriarchal state and its restrictions in the name of protection and safety, and an insistence on community.

Performing refusal/refusing to perform

‘Political vernaculars untethered to the state can help us imagine how we want to live with each other’, writes the Kenyan writer Keguro Macharia (2016). ‘They create possibilities for different ways of coming together – from short-lived experiments to long-term institution building – and they also impede how we form ourselves as we-formations, across the past, the present, the future, and all the in-between times marked by slow violence and prolonged dying’, he says. The four examples discussed above are instances of creative strategies of resistance that are rooted in the quotidian. Each of the artists have imagined a version of fugitive practice that allows for freedom through disobedience.

Sara Ahmed (2010: 592) writes that ‘revolutionary forms of political consciousness involve heightening our awareness of what there is to be unhappy about’. Amia Srinivasan (2018: 126), drawing on Lorde, has noted that anger is ‘a means by which women can come to better see their oppression’. When we pay attention to modes of action that render certain bodies legible and minoritarian bodies illegible, we realise how the state shapes the lives of Black and lower-caste women differently from privileged White, upper-class, upper-caste women. But the right to rage and unhappiness is not available to minoritarian subjects who are ‘already stereotyped as rageful, violent, or shrill’ (Srinivasan, 2018: 136). A ‘collective subject’, writes Silvia Federici (2018), recognises the collective need for care and mutual support, and refuses the false promises of repair and inclusion offered by patriarchy and racialised neoliberal capitalism. The four artists discussed above argue for a more expansive sense of feminist agency in joy, play and fun – countering the historic ways in which women in the global south have been produced through the lens of development and poverty alone. Rage and anger have always marked the tired bodies of women from marginalised communities, but these artists from India and South Africa offer a range of more affirmative affects.

The artists engage in a performance of refusal, which exceeds the textual and the verbal. These imaginative acts defy the delayed and partial justice in that they offer an alternate feminist response outside and beyond the legal jurisprudence system – which favours the upper-class, upper-caste, White, heteronormative subject – and allow for the creation of communities and solidarities rooted in ‘a riskier hermeneutics of experience, relocation, copresence, humility and vulnerability: listening to and being touched by the protest performances’ (Conquerwood, 2002: 148). They chronicle the everyday forms of inaction, non-productivity, stillness and sisterhood as a structural critique as well as a flight of survival. Msebenzi’s photographs are powerful meditations on Black life and survival while refusing the victimhood that is expected from womxn, challenging aggressive notions of masculinity with the
delicacy of the images; Motaung’s playful renditions of Black hair inspire a revolutionary relationship with one’s body – she refuses to perform her labour for racialised capitalism but insists on care and beauty in her work; Vijila Chirappad’s poetry and Vanitha Mathil refuse to comply with the gendered and casteist regimes of political violence that the state demands; and Blank Noise’s Meet to Sleep initiative refuses the capitalist logic of labour and productivity by centring rest and community – it asks its participants to pause and slow down amidst the rising decibels of protest marches. Attempting a festivity of fugitivity, as it were, these artistic endeavours invite us to participate in a mode of being in the world that allows for articulating a relationship to ourselves, to one another and to the world in which we live, in tender ways, beyond and against the demands of the racialised, capitalist and patriarchal state.

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Notes


3 Earlier that year, organised religion had already come under the purview of #MeToo when a nun from Kerala accused Catholic Bishop Franco Mulakkal of raping her multiple times between 2014 and 2016. The key witness in the case, Father Kuriakose Kattuthara, was eventually found dead (Economic Times, 2018).

4 Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Selfie with Daughter campaign to counter the rising numbers of female foeticide and sex selection practices in the north Indian state of Haryana, which became popular in the country. Eventually, Selfie with Daughter was launched as an app to encourage people to send their photographs and create an archive. See the Selfie with Daughter Foundation, http://selfiewithdaughter.world/Default.aspx. Accessed 15 October 2020.

5 The website of Blank Noise has more information about their campaigns: www.blanknoise.org/home. Accessed 2 December 2020.

6 Since the election of Narendra Modi as the prime minister in May 2014, regressive campaigns like the love jihad campaign and the anti-Romeo squad across north India have been prevalent, intensifying, in particular, since the appointment of hard-line Hindutva advocate Yogi Adityanath as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh in March 2017. The love jihad campaign is run by Hindu right-wing groups against what they say is a Muslim conspiracy to convert Hindu girls to Islam by feigning love. The anti-Romeo squad seeks to ‘protect’ women from suspected youths who harass them. For this, the ruling BJP trains scores of Hindu men who patrol public spaces to prevent the freedom of movement and expression of women, in the name of Hindu nationalism.

References


Reflection: ‘Gay boys don’t cry when we’re raped’ – queer shame and secrecy

Jamil F. Khan

Bodies like mine were never meant to be cared for. They are always to be advertised, yet perpetually hidden. People like me are a warning, warding off wayward, intrusive thoughts of freedom. Pleasure is not meant for us to have – it is taken from us.

I was raped when I was nine. A childhood friend, a few years older than me, did it. He was one of two older neighbourhood boys I started exploring my body with. Until then, our fascination with our erections led us as far as touching and feeling the shame and condemnation building up in our penises at the most inopportune times. We liked the sensations; however premature they were to us.

On the day I was raped, the weather was wonderful. It was the height of summer in Cape Town, on the South African coast, and I had invited my friend around for a swim. As always, we touched and played with each other under the water – incorporating our little explorations into the rules of our make-believe games. When we had enough of swimming, we would lay our towels down on the hot paving and lay on our bellies to dry in the sun. Eventually the sun always got too hot for us and we would seek out shade. Although there was ample shade along the boundary walls enclosing the pool, he insisted that we go to the other side of the house where the garage wall and the neighbour’s boundary wall made a concealed alleyway. He told me to stand facing the wall with my hands up. I was not allowed to see what he was doing behind me. He pulled my shorts down and gently penetrated me. The shade suddenly seemed too much, with me still not allowed to see what was being done to me.