

# In the Wake of Gujarat: The Social Relations of Translation and Futurity

Nicole Wolf<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The temporal and political intervention of wake work (Sharpe 2016) as an analytic to think the present of anti-blackness through the history of slavery, is ‘translated’ to address the 2002 Gujarat genocide as an interminable event shaping the present. Re-visiting the poetics of evidence in Amar Kanwar’s *Lightening Testimonies* (2007) and *A Night of Prophecy* (2002)—via a refusal operative as documentary event and rupture—as wake work, I ask if translation—as heterogeneous address and social relation (Sakai 1997)—can propagate a future politics of radical solidarity, from the anachronicity of genocidal violence, bypassing the sovereignty and violence of modern democratic citizenry.

---

*What must first of all be responded to seems to be the question of how translation structures the situation in which it is performed: what sort of social relation is translation in the first place?*<sup>2</sup>

*The ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary; it is the ground we walk on. And that it is the ground lays out that, and perhaps how, we might begin to live in relation to this requirement for our death. What kinds of possibilities for rupture might open up? What happens if we proceed as if we know this, antiblackness, to be the ground on which we stand, the ground from which we attempt to speak, for instance, an “I” or a “we” who know, an “I” or a “we” who care?*<sup>3</sup>

*If the Indian army has impunity  
and the militant cannot be questioned  
and if the attacker disappears  
and the family withdraws support  
and the judge is a puppet*

---

<sup>1</sup> [n.wolf@gold.ac.uk](mailto:n.wolf@gold.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity. On “Japan” and Cultural Nationalism* (London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 7.

*and the medical report is unavailable  
and the witness is gagged  
and the survivor falls silent  
Then, can the location present itself in court?  
And if so, which court can it be?<sup>4</sup>*

### A haunting, a requirement and a premonition

The pogrom in Gujarat in 2002, that is to say the genocidal violence against the Muslim population that unfolded in different urban and rural places across Gujarat, the North Western state of India, between 28 February and May 2002, has stayed with me ever since. It haunts the social and political landscape of India and beyond. It haunts because it is still disputed and justice has only been reached in very few cases while evidence has failed in most. It haunts because of frequent news reporting the lynching of Muslim men, the rape and killings of Muslim women and girls and the attacks on Islamic sites of prayer. It haunts through the visibility of urban segregation and economic divides and the quotidian experiences of discrimination shared by Muslim citizens of India. It troubles political and judicial practice, because many recognize that the non-attainment of justice for the victims of Gujarat is part if not the condition of the very system within which many try painstakingly and necessarily to attain that justice. The pogrom in Gujarat also haunts as “anti-Muslim practices and beliefs have come to the fore as one of the dominant forms of racism marking our contemporary era”.<sup>5</sup> Thus, more than haunting, anti-Muslim practices and beliefs as forms of racism appear as a requirement of the democracies I live in, we live in; “it is the ground we walk on”.<sup>6</sup> In this way Gujarat troubles thought, in the present and for *our* future and this is the reason I revisit it.

Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) has been a crucial inspiration to return to the pogrom of Gujarat and with it to re-engage with three documentary events that followed in its aftermath: *Lightening Testimonies*<sup>7</sup> (2007) and *A Night of Prophecy*<sup>8</sup> (2002) by Amar Kanwar and a third, very different, documentary event constituted as radical refusal. Those three documentary events confront, each in their own mode of response, the fallibility of evidence in front of the certifying institutions of modernity,<sup>9</sup> in front of diverse publics and in front of what Amar Kanwar recently called “us

---

<sup>4</sup> Excerpt from Amar Kanwar, *Lightening Testimonies*, 8-channel video installation. 32min. 31sec. (India, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Ghassam Hage, *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Sharpe, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> *Lightening Testimonies* was first shown at Documenta XII in 2008 and subsequently in many different group exhibitions, part of solo shows and in Museums internationally, including recently at Tate Modern (April 2018), testifying to the continued relevance of this seminal work.

<sup>8</sup> Amar Kanwar, *A Night of Prophecy*. Digital Video. 77min. (India, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Introduction of this issue, pp17-19.

good people”.<sup>10</sup> I argue that they do so by refusal of evidence as truth production designed for a sovereign instance—may this be a nation state, a judiciary, a majoritarian citizenry, the normative—while still speaking to it. Rather, their expansion of Evidence through the poetic, i.e. their ciné-poetic translations of genocidal violence being Acts of Evidence, operate with and constitute wake work. Wake work—the sociality, care work, consciousness and politics it affords—arises precisely from and stays with the interminability that marks genocidal violence, violence that seeks to annihilate a people and violence that maims a people.<sup>11</sup> Wake work does not seek memorials or a coming to terms with, but modes of being that cause constant ruptures to remedial closure.<sup>12</sup> Gujarat hereby becomes a significant historical touchstone while a linear thinking through time and history is destabilized and the violence of Gujarat thought anachronistically.<sup>13</sup> Hence, I revisit the social, corporeal and economic deaths Gujarat inflicted and inflicts through the practice of wake work and in order to think Acts of Evidence for a present and future politics and sociality. At stake is futurity, consciousness in solidarity.

### Wake work for poetics/politics of relation

A reprise and an elaboration: wakes are processes; through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory. Wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual; they are the watching of relatives and friends beside the body of the deceased from death to burial and the accompanying drinking, feasting, and other observances, a watching practiced as a religious observance. But wakes are also “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved, in water; the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow; in the line of sight of (an observed object); and (something) in the line of recoil of (a gun)”; finally, wake means being awake and, also, consciousness.<sup>14</sup>

In the following I propose to think translation as wake work via a practice of translation itself. I deploy translation as relation and a form of ‘address’ between instances of wake work.

---

<sup>10</sup> Amar Kanwar’s acceptance speech of the Prince Claus Fund prize, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7P95sPBki0>>, accessed February 8, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim*. Debility, Capacity, Disability (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Introduction of this issue, p21.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 26 (2008) 12: 1-14. This anachronicity is inspired by Hartmann’s thinking the archive of slavery, its wide glaring gaps and silences, anachronically, “to imagine a *free state*, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing” (4).

<sup>14</sup> Sharpe, *op. cit.*, 21.

And I regard audio-visual practices, first their refusal and then essayistic documentary works, as translations of genocidal violence in the way that they address and create social relations to that violence. I take inspiration from Naoki Sakai's<sup>15</sup> proposal towards translation as social relation and heterolingual address 'that structure the situation in which it is performed', where "every utterance can fail to communicate because heterogeneity is inherent in any medium, linguistic or otherwise".<sup>16</sup> I hence read the documentary events I cite here as translations, as heterolingual forms of address and social relations where no closure of the translational process is assumed,<sup>17</sup> but which structure the situation in which they are performed, becoming locus of critical thought, wake work as consciousness.

Sakai's translation theory supports an understanding of documentary works as themselves constituted through social relations, in their process of making and in how they address diverse spectators. Advancing translation as heterolingual address amongst non-aggregate communities rather than as a transference from one homolingual community/speaker to another homogeneous community/speaker, resonates with Amar Kanwar's reflections on communications through film, whereby for Sakai "'addressing' is anterior to 'communication'":<sup>18</sup>

If you're able to see the complex inner diversity and heterogeneity within individuals and therefore in audiences, then you're able to see the many dimensions of communication itself. Film is an unbelievable medium—you can do what you want with sound, music, ambience, image and color. You find that when you start putting these together it is possible to create a constellation of experiences that have the capability to relate with the multiplicity of life and audiences and eventually the multiplicity of the maker as well.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Sakai, *op. cit.*, 1-17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin's radical critique of traditional translation theory in his influential essay "The task of the translator" (1923/2007) paved the way for those deconstructionist approaches that work with 'indeterminacy' (Rottenburg 2003) and difference in all translation processes that are the basis for Naoki Sakai's approach and guide this volume. See: Benjamin, Walter, "The Task of the Translator." In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 69–82. Richard Rottenburg, "Crossing gaps of indeterminacy: Some theoretical remarks," In: *Translation and ethnography. The anthropological challenge of intercultural understanding*, edited by Tullio Maranhao and Bernhard Streck (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2003), 30-43. See also: Chakravorty Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Sakai, *op. cit.*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Amar Kanwar in Anne Rutherford, "'Not firing Arrows': Multiplicity, Heterogeneity and the Future of Documentary' *Asian Cinema* 16:1, Spring 2005, pp. 117-124. P. 118.

## Against analogies

. . . it is also my hope that the praxis of the wake and wake work might have enough capaciousness to travel and do work that I have not here been able to imagine or anticipate.<sup>20</sup>

I read the above as an invitation but I do this with precaution. I do not see my work as a comparison of violent histories or creating analogies. I also do this with an awareness that I write as a white European scholar, as a foreigner to Black being writing/translating from the outside, and that Sharpe's claim for and elaboration of Black consciousness and thought through, very specifically, the afterlives of slavery and from the ground of antiblackness, weaving the personal with the broader political, cannot, must not, be co-opted. That is to say that this article is driven by the urgent need to think socialities, relationalities, forms and modes of collectivities, rather than prescribed or thought possible within the given "schemas of configuration"<sup>21</sup> we live in but by way of considering the limits as well as possible openings for socialities and solidarity, when this can only be done through the structure of violence.

Ariella Azoulay's<sup>22</sup> political ontology of documentary photography, and I would argue this for moving image works as well, propounds other forms of social and political relations via a citizenry of photography. The political relations arising through this citizenry have the potential to ignore the sovereign instance, that is to say they open the possibility for relationalities conceived beyond the state, beyond the court, beyond majoritarian citizenry, beyond—I would extend the argument—what Bakhtin calls the "superaddressee".<sup>23</sup>

*Can we think of wake work-in-solidarity through poetics of evidence translating violence anachronistically?*

Wake work advances thought and practice to think and be with interminable violence, it underscores interminability, it does not seek closure, no "resolution" through mourning, but "being in the wake as a form of consciousness".<sup>24</sup> Wake work is manifold, as Sharpe evokes. The documentary events I revisit here carefully negotiate the simultaneous necessity and fallibility to create and hereby offer politically effective evidence. What I see as their wake

---

<sup>20</sup> Sharpe, *op. cit.*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Sakai, *op. cit.*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008). To elaborate on how Azoulay's proposal must be re-read for moving image and the audio-visual is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>23</sup> Bakhtin cited in Boris Buden, Stefan Nowotny, et al., "Cultural translation: An Introduction to the Problem, and Responses," *Translation Studies* 2 (2009) 2: 196-219, (205). I would like to thank Martin L. J. Waldmeier. Supervising his dissertation "The Artist as Translator" (Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2016) supported my thinking through translation as an artistic practice.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 14. See also Moradi 2017: "The political translation of al-Anfâl continues confronting the memories and bodies of individuals such as Najibe, resisting memory loss and insisting on the right to justice, which marks their *being in the world* and *being with multiple losses* at once." Fazil Moradi, "Genocide in Translation. On Memory, Remembrance, and politics of the future" in: Moradi, Buchenhorst, Six-Hohenbalken, *Memory and Genocide, On what Remains and the Possibility of Representation* (London, New York: Routledge, 2017), 57-74 (72).

work comprises repetition and observation, time and listening, waiting and watching, weaving and drawing, standing in line for a family portrait, sitting by the fire and being-with lightening, but also the currents in water, in air, in light or darkness—also poetry and songs.

### “I prefer not to”—Refusal as documentary event

What struck me as a particularly potent though unruly documentary event during and after the pogrom in Gujarat had unfolded between February and May 2002,<sup>25</sup> were reactions that I came to understand as a conceptual pause. Not a failure to respond but a refusal as an anagrammatical moment and hereby founding a significant rupture.

The anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat erupted, and continued over several months, while I was in India for a longer research period. This research comprised ongoing conversations with documentary filmmakers whose work was political, and partly activist, as in critical of supremacist politics, addressing past and present injustices against minorities, with many of my interlocutors engaged in feminist politics. The documentary languages deployed were varied, from talking head to essayistic to performative and playing with fiction, activist and experimental; none with an illusion of image, or sounds, being the “duplicate of a thing”.<sup>26</sup>

From late February 2002 onwards almost every conversation I had with filmmakers eventually led to “Gujarat”. Editing sessions and rough-cut screenings were interrupted by experiences of people coming back from relief camps or fact-finding commissions and by reflections on what might be necessary activist and possible filmic responses. “Gujarat” was ever present. Importantly, the carnage was the first communal violence extensively investigated through audio-visual media,<sup>27</sup> and “remains to date the only, state-sponsored genocidal violence against a part of the domestic population on a global scale that was broadcast live, 24x7, over several weeks to national audiences by uncensored, commercially competing TV stations from the same country.”<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> I am consciously not citing the 27<sup>th</sup> February 2002 as the defined starting point of the pogrom to not follow a narrative which is until now disputed, namely the revenge narrative which takes the burning of the Sabarmati express train at Godhra as the initiator of the then ensuing violence across Gujarat. This disputed narrative undermines evidence towards the systemic and pre-planned attack on Muslim households and shops by evoking a spontaneous outbreak that could not be controlled. See Britta Ohm, “Live-Reporting and Democracy: The Non-Publishable Crime of the Televised anti-Muslim Violence in Gujarat 2002,” *Vision 2025. Socio Economic Inequalities. Why does India’s economic Growth Need an Inclusive Agenda*, ed. A. Ullah Khan and A. A. Akhtar (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 2018), 91-100, (92).

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London, New York: Verso, 2011), 93.

<sup>27</sup> See Nicole Wolf, 2013. *Kya Hua is Shahar Ko? / What Has Happened to This City? History, Context and Reflections on Re-screening a Political Film*, a twenty two page booklet for DVD edition of *Kya Hua is Shahar Ko?* (D. Dhanraj 1986), (Berlin: Filmgalerie 451, 2013). *Kya Hua is Shahar Ko?* became the only state independent documentation of the 1984 Hyderabad Hindu-Muslim riots, which recorded politicians on both sides inciting the violence for elections purposes. Next to the cameraperson Navroze Contractor only two cameras were present, one owned by the police and one by the only National Television Channel existent at the time (cf. Wolf, *op. cit.*, 19).

<sup>28</sup> Ohm, *op. cit.* 92.

TV stations broadcasted witness accounts and victim testimonies and while couching these within news report formats, seemed to step into at least some of the hitherto independent political filmmaking practices by being present while violence occurred, taking account of ‘ordinary’ people, revealing and presenting perpetrators, collecting and producing evidence, using the camera as a “testimonial apparatus”.<sup>29</sup> What is now widely acknowledged and very much part of our current global media and political landscapes was then much less pronounced: the widespread knowledge about the systemic and pre-planned nature of the violence did not lead to persecutions of culprit politicians and other citizens. What is more, it did not hinder the democratic re-election of the responsible state chief minister Narendra Modi a few months after (December 2002) and his election as prime minister in 2014.<sup>30</sup> It did not hinder many filed cases being closed again, by either the victims due to fear, the police or the court, due to ‘incongruent evidence’, while at the same time news of systematic violence continued to be broadcast and the public display of violence, through video and later mobile phones, operated as trophy.

The urgency to stress the singularity of the event, i.e. the need to narrativize it as not being “just another riot” was glaring. The fragility of evidence turned into facing an almost absolute lack of evidence’s efficacy in front of the law while mainstream media had turned into a quasi-state-critical platform.<sup>31</sup> All of this led to a condensation and heightened urgency of questions towards the communicative potentials of the kinds of languages that had previously been sought to translate/address violence through audio-visual narratives and poetics.<sup>32</sup>

Thus when in conversations we addressed the urgency to react, I often encountered a pause that came to resemble Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to”<sup>33</sup>—Herman Melville’s scrivener figure who responds with this line when asked by his employer to copy a letter during his working hours. The decisions to not make images that were familiar and expected within a given logic of practices where victims and activist filmmakers were already prescribed

---

<sup>29</sup> For an extensive discussion of the medium specificity of testimonies in diverse documentary film formats, see Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker, *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> On 27th April 2009 the Supreme Court ordered a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe into the role of 63 top BJP politicians, IAS and IPS officers in Gujarat, including Narendra Modi. This was preceded by an SIT ordered in 2008 to look into nine incidents of violent attacks against the Gujarati Muslim population in 2002 as well as campaigns against Narendra Modi running for prime minister in national level for the Lok Sabha elections in May 2009. See e.g. “Gujarat on Trial,” *Communalism Combat*, 15 (2009) 140, available at <https://www.sabrangindia.in/content/gujarat-trial>, accessed July 20, 2018. Charges were dropped on 26th December 2013.

<sup>31</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this ‘success’ and ‘failure of TV publicness, see Ohm, *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> This was also connected to the specific history of documentary filmmaking in India and a felt stagnation concerning the relation between the image and the political following a legacy of state independent revolutionary cinema that had from the mid-1970s born new film forms closely related to political movement building. See: Nicole Wolf, “Foundations, movements and dissonant images: documentary film and its ambivalent relation to the nation state.” In: K. Moti Gokulsing & Wimal Dissanayake (eds), *Routledge Handbook on Indian Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2013), 360-373.

<sup>33</sup> Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener. A story of Wall Street* (Dodo Press, 2006 [1853]).

in their film and political subject position, with their social and political relations pre-constituted, became aligned with a radical refusal, a refusal of a presumed logic of actions and relations in a given “schema of configuration”. The “I prefer not to,” an often also silent refusal to create ciné-testimonies or other audio-visual evidence that would capture the violence that occurred, created a necessary rupture. It resembled Bartleby’s speaking through not speaking, “... as if he had said everything and exhausted language at the same time”.<sup>34</sup> Bartleby’s “formula ‘disconnects’ words and things, words and actions, but also speech acts and words—it severs language from all reference...”.<sup>35</sup> “I prefer not to” “... will also send language itself into flight, it will open up a zone of indetermination or indiscernibility in which neither words nor characters can be distinguished”.<sup>36</sup>

While the decision to not depict violence has a long and varied history and is much discussed in documentary and visual cultures theory contexts, I evoke Bartleby to stress how Gujarat thwarted a common sense of how image and sound could signify as evidence or could communicate experiences of violence to create a rupture in the daily logic of things.<sup>37</sup> What I see as actively refused here is what Sakai calls the “homolingual address [that] assumes the normalcy of reciprocal and transparent communication in a homogeneous medium”.<sup>38</sup> The refusal augmented an indiscernibility of genocidal violence, not by lack, as failure or not knowing how to, but as a refusal of the given state of order, a refusal of normalcy, a refusal certainly to produce pre-given narratives (including the narratives of revenge)<sup>39</sup>. A refusal to produce evidence as truth production for the seeking of justice within the given judicial system, for a national and international public that was either not able to see or for whom this did not disturb the norm.

What is more, the refusal seemed absolutely necessary to articulate Gujarat as singular event, for it not to be “just another riot”, to create a rupture in a narrative of continuous riots between two equal communities. In this way, I argue, the rupture allows one to see Gujarat as part of a democracy conditioned by its violence, with no assumable instance of justice to be called on. The refusal, the anagrammatical, must thus be prolonged as an extended turbulence while new translations must be practiced that can think relations and modes of address otherwise.

The refusal to make images<sup>40</sup> led for some to initiate diverse other practices instigating new relations, through setting up nationwide email lists amongst independent

---

<sup>34</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Bartleby; or The Formula,” *Essays Critical and Clinical*, ed. G. Deleuze (London & New York: Verso, 1998), 68–90, (70); See also Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 203f.

<sup>35</sup> Deleuze *op. cit.*, 73f.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>37</sup> See e.g. Frances Guerin, *On not Looking: The Paradox of Contemporary Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2015)

<sup>38</sup> Sakai, *op. cit.*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> See footnote 24.

<sup>40</sup> My argument does not counter the fact that over time many documentary films were made about Gujarat, but stresses a parallel mode of addressing the productivity that characterised the immediate post-Gujarat moment.

filmmakers, city groups that organized anti-communal workshops in schools, the founding of the shared footage project (its material now accessible through pad.ma)<sup>41</sup> and other activities that significantly paved the way for the collective resistance that ensued later against state censorship in 2004 under the initiative *Vikalp—Films for Freedom*.<sup>42</sup>

*What practices of organizing ourselves might constitute wake work?*

“... the air current behind a body in flight”—wake work time images in *Lightening Testimonies*

How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know? How does one listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory, and then assign words to all of it? Is it possible to construct a story from “the locus of impossible speech” or resurrect lives from the ruins? Can beauty provide an antidote to dishonor, and love a way to “exhume buried cries” and reanimate the dead?<sup>43</sup>

The incessant work of women’s activist groups brought to public knowledge the extent and brutality of sexual assaults on Muslim women during the first days of the Gujarat carnage. While sexual violence against the women of a community were well known in the history of India and is part of warfare and a marker of genocidal violence internationally, Kanwar recounted that the news of sexual assaults being followed by celebrations, the accumulation of stories of public sexual attacks orchestrated as spectacles, triggered the making of *Lightning Testimonies*,<sup>44</sup> which “... throw[s] the nation up into air in order to re-imagine it”.<sup>45</sup>

Spread over 8 screens for the video installation format and, to an extent, narrated historically during the 113 minutes of the single screen version, *Lightening Testimonies* accounts for the numerous cases of rape and sexual violence during the time of partition in 1947, the partition that created Bangladesh in 1971, during the conflict in Kashmir since the 1980s, in Gujarat in 2002, against Dalit women, against women in military occupied Manipur and Nagaland. Rather than linearity *Lightning Testimonies* (LT) creates however another temporality; rather than analogies it attends to and evokes singularity; rather than an enumeration it paints sexual violence as the very condition of a democratic nation state.

---

<sup>41</sup> See information on the Shared Footage Project and most of its video material at <pad.ma>, accessed July 20, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> See Shveta Kishore, “The Political in Indian Documentary Film: Material and Aesthetic Interventions, Post-Economic Liberalization,” *Studies in Documentary Film* 7 (2013) 2: 119-133; Wolf, *op. cit.*, 2007.

<sup>43</sup> Hartman, *op. cit.*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Apart from shorter meetings and email conversations I had two extensive conversations with Amar Kanwar on 2nd and 3rd December 2010, focused on *Lightening Testimonies*. Kanwar’s first response to Gujarat, following an invitation to present his work in Gujarat itself, was a short, silent and quiet film – *To Remember*, video, 8min. (India 2003) -filmed entirely inside the Gandhi memorial Museum in New Delhi.

<sup>45</sup> Kanwar cited in Urs Stahel and Daniela Janser, *Amar Kanwar. Evidence* (Göttingen: Steidl und Winterthur: Fotomuseum Winterthur, 2012), 7.

Precisely through this and through the women who have come to understand the requirement of the violence against them, LT evokes a consciousness, a form of being, through this violence and despite of it.

I argue that through its particular film-essay style and through the documentary mode research process preceding the screen presence, the film and the installation—though editorially in different ways—crafts images as Acts of Evidence through and as wake work. Their ensuing poetics of temporalities and relations translates forms of being through and despite of violence and offers new social and political relations in turn.

What characterises many essay films and what attains a particular political urgency also for Kanwar's work is a meticulous stress on needing to look again. "If violence continues, does it mean we are not seeing it?"<sup>46</sup> As discussed earlier, Gujarat "disconnected" words and things—events and images—, it "severed [words] from all references" and LT practices persuasively how a "remembered image" might "gain new hold on our lives".<sup>47</sup>

The carefully edited image work strikes me as aligned with "... a method that reckons with the fissures, gaps, and interstices that emerge when we refuse to accept the 'truth' of images and archives the state seeks to proffer through its production of subjects posed to produce particular 'types' of regulated and regulatable subjects".<sup>48</sup>

The first two minutes of the two-hour film version and the two-minute sequence that regularly aligns all eight screens of the video installation include images that become key citations guiding the viewer through the entire moving image work: Close ups of an orange tree and a tree with bright red leaves that later appear as witnesses of the brutal sexual assault on Mangyangkokla, in February 24<sup>th</sup> 1957 in Ungma village of Nagaland, by Indian army soldiers. A brief glance of a black and white photograph followed by a woman weaving with bright red thread, evoking the red sarong, the Luingamla Kashan, designed and crafted to commemorate the death of Luingamla, the 17-year old Manipuri girl assaulted and murdered by the Indian army. Then black and white archival footage from the time of the Partition of 1947: a woman in a white Salwar Kameez is being helped onto the overcrowded train by passengers sitting on the roof, stretching their hands out towards her—an image that has become iconic, both as an image of the overcrowded train (transporting refugees between India and the new nation Pakistan) and as an image of a rescue that for many was ambivalent. The footage is slowed down, accentuating this rescue gesture.

The contemplative ambience is enhanced through reoccurring instrumental sound, like a connective bass, Kanwar's voiceover as well as some testimonies spoken by women. Those off-screen voices oscillate between being parallel to the image and in direct relation to it. "Does the truth need a memorial image", is one of the guiding questions of LT and its overall form supports Laura Rascaroli's elaboration on the essay film as a form of thought.<sup>49</sup>

Kanwar builds the narrative and poetic imagery of LT upon and from the image of the

---

<sup>46</sup> Amar Kanwar in conversation with author, see FN 41.

<sup>47</sup> Kyo McLearn cited in Roger Halles and Frances Guerin, *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* (London, New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>48</sup> Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2017), 8.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Laura Rascaroli, *How the essay film thinks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

woman who is helped onto the train, which soon after, in the early part of the film, is elaborated on as a massive rescue operation for the so-called “abducted woman”, led by Mridula Sarabhai.<sup>50</sup> This means that alongside sequences that fill the screen with rolling lists of names or locations where sexual violence occurred, Kanwar attends to the stories of individual women. Rather than a gesture of rescue he described the research process as needing to understand and ultimately desiring to create images that could support seeing differently.

A long process of moving from one context to the next only if some form of understanding was found that could lead to finding a poetics that would translate the kind of thought that was shared, is tangible in an immensely detailed attention to each knowable detail of a story of violence as well as the commitment and time given to each scene of crime and the wake work that allows it to remain. Hereby each episode anchors its narrative in different modes of audio-visual telling, with only very few ‘ciné-testimonies’<sup>51</sup> spoken directly into the camera and only one media image that partly reveals a violated female body. Each violent episode creates another “testimonial apparatus”, fills the screen in different ways. LT often presents the image itself as if on stage or in a court, installed within the frame, or through delicate drawings and sketching of outlines of female bodies (by Sherna Dastur), through quiet observations of mundane street scenes, through conversations, through voiceover, through scrolls of texts and names. The necessity to produce evidence, the fragility of its efficacy and the need to look otherwise locates witnessing and evidence in manifold locations, in hilly landscapes, in a tarmac road, a window, in craft practices, in trees, in color, in rain.

Each part thus relates to us as viewer through different forms of address in image, sound and through the cognitive and affective space that is created. Each violent act is translated otherwise by LT not settling into one way of speaking, one way of translating living with violence into images. What this creates is a sense of a continuous search for singularly possible translations of violence into poetic Acts of Evidence. But more than expanding evidence as truth production through a performative understanding of evidence,<sup>52</sup> I argue that LT relates to plentiful practices of wake work and translates those wake works, with care, into audio-visual language, often offering “beauty as an antidote to dishonor”, making the installation and the film an experience of being “in the wake”:

*The Adivasis who gave shelter and clothes to Bilkees—the young pregnant Muslim woman who was the only one of her family to survive the attack by men shouting*

---

<sup>50</sup> The sending back of Hindu women to India and Muslim women to Pakistan became a question of national pride on the part of both countries that thus got built on the struggle over the female body.

<sup>51</sup> Sarkar, Walker, *op. cit.*, 1-35. Sarkar and Walker refer to Michael Chanan’s term *ciné-testimonio* when addressing documentary testimonies in the Latin American context of political struggles. P. 9.

<sup>52</sup> McLear, *ibid.*

*anti-Muslim slogans—left a shrine with clay pots and flags at the location of crime, as “they, too, cannot forget” (voice over Amar Kanwar).*

*A stupa is built in Nagpur to commemorate the rape and killing of Dalit women.*

*The Luingamla Kashan (sarong) is woven in red to symbolize Luingamla’s blood that must have been boiling, as she was known to be brave. The woven design was sought as to recite beauty, dignity, defense, journeys back and forth to seek justice and indicate the place of the court. The weaver, her sister, expressed that she wanted to weave into the cloth every aspect of the crime and that she wanted to make it as beautiful as she could for it to be a strong symbol. It is unremittingly worn by women in Manipur.*

*Luingamla’s extended family gathers in contemplative silence and stillness for a family portrait.*

Meaghan Morris stresses that for Sakai, translation as a social practice is “a practice always in some way carried out in the company of others and structuring the situation in which it is performed”.<sup>53</sup>

A description that strongly reminds me of Kanwar’s elaboration on the process of preparing for the sequence which shows first the Mother of Luingamla seated in her kitchen in front of many empty chairs, as if addressing a big crowd holding a wake, and then a slow camera pan moving from one family member to the next and ending in a wide angle family portrait. Kanwar narrated how if he was to explain how these images came about, he would have to start at least 6 months before, the extended period of time that was involved in meeting the mother, in preparation of the actual shooting. When the small film team arrived, Luingamla’s entire extended family was unexpectedly present, well dressed to pay respect to Luingamla. Images of co-appearance, of stillness, of each family member looking straight into the camera are taken to respect their being in the wake.

*What does that image evidence? What does it translate?*

The reoccurring image of the orange tree and the tree with bright red leaves was taken far up in the hills in Nagaland. Behind it, “structuring” it, is time, is time involved in getting to a location far up in the hills through various different means of transport including walking, behind it, is being “in the company of others,” is the work of research, of being present, being in the wake. An image as a condensation of wake work, translated as heterogeneous address “without either an assurance of immediate apprehension or an expectation of uniform response”.<sup>54</sup>

*“As always everybody knew” (voice-over Amar Kanwar).*

---

<sup>53</sup> Meaghan Morris, “Foreword” in Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity. On “Japan” and Cultural Nationalism* (London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), ix-xxii, xiv.

<sup>54</sup> Sakai, *op. cit.*, 4.

The repetition and accumulation of stories of sexual assault on women show these violent acts as giving “the nation its coherence”. *Lightening Testimonies* hereby “proceed[s] as if we *know* this”<sup>55</sup> and brings about a consciousness that recognizes this violence, including the systematic violence against women during the pogrom in Gujarat, not as exceptional anomalies but a ground from which we must now attempt to speak. It visits past violent acts not to finally find closure but to provide a space for an ongoing process from the grounds of the violence that “give the nation its coherence,” as the “underbelly”, of democracy I would add.<sup>56</sup>

What develops out of this knowing is indeed a way of speaking, of shouting: *Lightening Testimonies* culminates in a rupture of this very coherence by leading into narratives of resistance and possibly a gesture towards futurity. Twelve Manipuri mothers stand outside the Indian Army Camp, following the court’s closure, i.e. denial, of a rape case. They are naked and they scream in protest: “Rape us, kill us, we are all Manipuri mothers.”<sup>57</sup> They defy the norms of political action and the pattern of how female bodies are violated and then rescued as well as the normalcy of how female bodies are present in the public sphere. In this powerful act of protest, Manipuri women reclaim their bodies, their bodies and voices demonstrating a radical disrespect for the protocols of how to relate to a sovereign, a ruling power. An act that goes beyond the seeking of justice through certifying institutions but that also posits another form of relation between those standing on the ground from which their bodies are perceived as property.

The delineated relations between acts of violence as sexual assaults and the wake work which makes them interminable and structures thought, a different way of being as a “striving for futurity”,<sup>58</sup> do not form a homogeneous We. The relational space created by the installation offers each spectator multiple positions of attentive looking and looking again, staying with the dead, and relating, “in the wake”. Its mode of address, I would argue, is heterolingual, informed by “a will to communicate de-spite an acute awareness of how difficult it is”.<sup>59</sup>

*In this non-aggregate community, can one strive for the futurity of solidarity because togetherness is not grounded on any common homogeneity?*

---

<sup>55</sup> Sharpe, *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, “The Position of the Unthought,” *Qui Parle* 13 (2003) 2: 183-201, (187).

<sup>57</sup> Based on Mahasweta Devi’s story *Draupadi*, which tells of the rebellion of the Naxalite couple Dulna and Draupadi, later directed by Heisnam Kanhailal and performed by Heisnam Sabitri, through one of the first scenes of female actor naked on stage. The desecrated protest is included in *LT* through pre-recorded footage. See also Madhusree Dutta’s *Scribbles on Akka*, 35mm, 60min (India, 2000) where Heisnam Sabitri’s decision to perform naked originated; a lineage of images of the female body which deserves closer attention.

<sup>58</sup> Campt, *op. cit.*, 11.

<sup>59</sup> Sakai, *op. cit.*, 7. See also Christi Merrill, *Intimate Interrogations*. The literary Grammar of Communal violence, in: Moradi, Buchenhorst and Six-Hohenbalken, *op. cit.*, 11-25. Merrill elaborates, with Sakai, on the “mortal divisions” manifest in language and via her own translation practice argues for an ethics of translation which implicates itself in these divisions and inscribed violences (*ibid.*, 24).

### *A Night of Prophecy*—for non-aggregate communities

The civil contract of photography assumes that, at least in principle, the governed possess a certain power to suspend the gesture of the sovereign power seeking to totally dominate the relations between us, dividing us as governed into citizens and noncitizens thus making disappear the violation of *our* citizenship. ... Being governed along with and beside individuals who are not citizens also causes damage to the seemingly whole, unimpaired citizenship of the citizens who *are* recognized as such. No attempt is implied here to claim symmetry between populations of citizens and noncitizens or to lay a foundation for their comparison. Rather, this is an attempt to rethink the political space of governed populations and to reformulate the boundaries of citizenship as distinct from the nation and the market whose dual rationale constantly threatens to subjugate it.<sup>60</sup>

*A Night of Prophecy* “throws the nation up into air” by annotating its history of violence through poetry and songs of protest and resistance. Moving between the urban space of Mumbai, rural locations in Maharashtra and Telangana, between Nagaland, Manipur and Kashmir, *A Night of Prophecy* creates another cinematic zone of attentive looking and listening. Similar to *LT* there is an underlying style through a camera work focused on details in often domestic spaces, connecting the intimate to the public, and nevertheless each song, each poem is again given a singular audio-visual space, avoiding a formula while creating recognizable traces—a piece of cloth, a rock, the strike of an oar, a baby hammock, a singer’s voice. In addition to the editorial interweaving of contexts through images, songs at times travel over. A sense of simultaneity is created that carefully evokes relations rather than prescribing these. There is no explanatory voiceover and the viewer is left with listening and watching and crafting their own connections, every time we watch and relate. An archive of anger, protest and resistance as well as suffering is created through the collection of songs and poetry whereby a strong sense of suffering violence and injustice and speaking out against it at the same time is attained. Again, the connecting tissue of being through and despite of violence arises. On the one hand does the focus on domestic spaces and the dedication and craft of the singer or poet not allow songs and poetry to become abstract or detached while on the other hand the thought and consciousness that the film advances is structural violence as the condition of this democracy.

Translation is an instance of “continuity in discontinuity” and a poetic social practice that institutes a relation at the site of incommensurability.<sup>61</sup>

The possibility I see in *A Night of Prophecy* and which hereby extends *Lightening Testimonies*, even though it is chronologically situated earlier in 2002, is the framework of the nation—as a governing body defining citizenship but also a majoritarian instance—being pushed away further, even if it is not completely undone.

---

<sup>60</sup> Azoulay, *op. cit.*, 23f.

<sup>61</sup> Sakai, *op. cit.*, 13.

Any utterance always has an addressee . . . whose responsive understanding the author of the speech work seeks and surpasses. ... But in addition to this addressee (the second party), the author of the utterance, with a greater or lesser awareness, presupposes a higher superaddressee (third), whose absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed, either in some metaphysical distance or in distant historical time .... In various ages and with various understandings of the world, this superaddressee and his ideally true responsive understanding assume various ideological expressions (God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, the court of history, science, and so forth).<sup>62</sup>

With Azoulay's proposal for a citizenship through photography and via the above insertion of Bakhtin into Sakai's understanding of translation as heterogeneous address, I see both *Lightening Testimonies* and *A Night of Prophecy* as cinematic spaces for thinking relations anew, namely thinking social and political relations between citizens where citizenship is deterritorialized,<sup>63</sup> not for symmetry but to assert a certain power where the superaddressee can and must be ignored for the thought and practice of sociality otherwise.

This calls for a constant refusal of the "homolingual address, the experience of not comprehending another's enunciation or of the other miscomprehending your verbal delivery [being] grasped immediately as an experience of understanding the experience of not comprehending"<sup>64</sup> as well as a refusal to address "the superaddressee [as] a privileged site of ideology and ideological battles."<sup>65</sup>

### "Which court can it be?"—wake work as new sociality for future solidarity

Citizens cannot be equally governed if they are governed with others who are not governed as equals.<sup>66</sup>

A reiteration and open process: If we think translation as social relation or even regard translation as a field of social practices engaged with relationality, invested in social relation through forms of address, then the continuous challenge of translating violence and in particular translating genocidal violence, into evidence, can be thought, must be thought, as an ongoing process of being embedded in and thinking through relationality, which is to say it becomes a mode of consciousness. That is to say a mode of being in sociality through interminable violence, through violence of a past that doesn't cease to be. If we think the translation of violence against a community of people with the aim of annihilating or maiming those people, into audio-visual evidence, into poetic Acts of Evidence, than a practice of filmmaking that is constituted through and becomes social relation itself-rather than

---

<sup>62</sup> Bakhtin 2006, 126, cited in Buden, Nowotny, et al., *op. cit.*, 205.

<sup>63</sup> Azoulay, *op. cit.*, 25.

<sup>64</sup> Sakai, *op. cit.*, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Buden, Nowotny, et al., *op. cit.*, 205.

<sup>66</sup> Azoulay, *op. cit.*, 25.

representation of, or proof of a “truth”—then those ciné-poetic practices take part in creating fields of practice and thought through which modes of being after genocidal violence are upheld, constantly renewed, gesturing futurity.

The images of art do not supply weapons for battles. They help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible. But they do so on condition that their meaning or effect is not anticipated.<sup>67</sup>

In this way we might think of *Lightening Testimonies* and *A Night of Prophecy*, of their temporalities and non-aggregate communities, as sketching new configurations, not only of what can be seen and what can be thought, but also of social relations, within the works themselves and beyond and through the works in each instance of viewing. We could thus think of the installation of *LT* as the very court, or rather a people’s tribunal with no superaddressee, with no instance that defines the truth of evidence or any outcome. The space of the installation but also each cinematic space, whether in dark rooms or public open air sites, is then a space of listening, of watching; not one of understanding as closure, as empathy, as melancholia or as seeking ourselves in redemption, but as a practice of social relation that is continuous, a form of justice that is worked out in process, not by a sovereign, but by the constant re-telling of stories that speak of violence, to stay “in the wake”.

Hartmann and Wilderson cite Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he refers to settler colonialism as “... a splinter to the heart of the world” that “puts the settler out of the picture”.<sup>68</sup> I have here tried to address, to translate, to make interminable the splinter that Gujarat can, I think, signify. I am doing this from the situated knowledge of a former colonial power and one marked by current Islamophobic practices and ideologies, “out of the picture” while not “equally governed”. The need to make Gujarat anachronistic, to think it as present and beyond its direct time and place of crime, is hereby thought together with and for imagining radically other forms of sociality, of past and future narratives; new socialities that seek to acknowledge the albeit differently protected grounds we stand on while acknowledging the structural prohibition (rather than merely a willful refusal) against whites being the allies of blacks.<sup>69</sup>

The uncommon, the heterolingual, the dissensus, the interminable, the evidential acts need to be worked with, despite of and because they might not prevent further genocidal violence. Doing wake work, doing allied wake work might thus support those invaluable efforts that continue to seek justice through the frameworks of the legal and the court, but might also open paths for new socialities and solidarities, if we keep translating “despite an acute awareness of how difficult it is.”

---

<sup>67</sup> Rancière, *op. cit.*, 103.

<sup>68</sup> Hartman and Wilderson, *op. cit.*, 187.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 189-90.

I think it's the difference between those who wanted to aid the newly freed to fit into the social order and those who had a vision of black freedom that was about transforming the social order, about the promise of the revolution.<sup>70</sup>

The “I” or the “we” who know, the “I” or the “we” who cares must therefore think, act, relate, continuously translate, outside this ‘structural prohibition,’ for Acts of Evidence as wake work to think a future politics of radical solidarity, from the anachronicity of genocidal violence while exceeding the sovereignty and violence of modern democratic citizenry.

#### Acknowledgement:

I would like to thank Amar Kanwar for his generous time and openness when discussing his work, my insightful reviewers for their helpful comments, and the editors for their support throughout. All errors remain mine.

---

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.