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### Publication Date

2018

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

The Lake and The Lake

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Sindhu Thirumalaisamy

Committee in charge:

Professor Ricardo Dominguez, Chair  
Professor Erica Cho, Co-chair  
Professor Roshanak Kheshti  
Professor Kamala Visweswaran  
Professor Mariana Wardwell

2018



The Thesis of Sindhu Thirumalaisamy is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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University of California San Diego

2018



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my committee for the years of kind support and guidance: Ricardo Dominguez, Erica Cho, Kamala Visweswaran, Mariana Wardwell and Roshanak Kheshti. Thanks to Teddy Cruz, Nicole Miller, Brian Cross, Zeinabu Davis, Rohan D'Souza, Leo Saldanha, Vishwanath Srikanthaiah and Lata Mani for their guidance on the development of this film.

Production would not have been possible without the support of Perna Bishnoi, Ishan Gupta, Avril Unger, Amyth Venkataramiah, Renuka Rajiv, Madhusudan Atri, Gopinath Karuppusamy, Kunal Deshpande, Raja Chinnapalaniappa, Chinnapalaniappa N, Ruma, Sharmi, Foundation For Environmental Monitoring, Saurabh Levin, Rajshree Patil, Shubhangi Goel, Akankshi Goel, Ragini Lal, Gauri Sanghi, Vivek Chockalingam, Simar Kohli, Priya Das, Sudha Ravikumar, Niti Jain, Seema Sharma, Shalini Sahni, Vinita Kaul, Nandini Harish, Horlicks and the dogs of Bellandur.

I thank John Dombroski, Paolo Zuniga, Mateus Guzzo, Zebulon Zang, Kate Edwards, Yuka Nakanishi, Lucas Coffin, Tad Linfesty, Lev Kalman, Adriene Hughes, Scott Mcavoy, Katy Gilmore, Umme Fatema, Sitara Roy, Rajasee Ray and Anandita Sarkar for supporting postproduction work in San Diego.

I thank Jonah Gray, Shoghig Halajian, Ayden Grout, Thomas Eduardo, Alexis Hudgins, Allison Evans and Norman Bryson for their regular comments on my writing.

My deepest gratitude for the unwavering long-distance love and care from Thamilselvi Subramaniam, Thirumalaisamy Subbiah Gounder, Mruthun Rajkumar, Lakshmi Subramaniam, Uma Senthil, Arasi Kumar, Avani Tanya, Ishita Dharap, Asa Mendelsohn, Katherine Agard, Bill Basquin and Andrew Sturm.

This project was funded by The Russell Foundation for the Arts, The UC San Diego Institute of Arts and Humanities, The UC San Diego International Institute, The University of California Institute for Mexico and the United States, The Friends of the International Center of UC San Diego, The UC San Diego Graduate Student Association and Walkin Studios.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Lake and The Lake

by

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Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2018

Professor Ricardo Dominguez, Chair

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Bangalore's wetlands are polluted with sewage and waste to such an extent that they produce spectacular foams and fires. *The Lake and The Lake* is a film that responds to a media-driven crisis around these phenomena by offering a representation

of one particular lake, Bellandur, as a *toxic commons*. The lake is toxic in both senses of the word: poisonous to the living beings that inhabit it and high-risk in economic terms. Nevertheless, it remains a space of commoning for various people whose labour sustains the city's development. Unlike environmentalisms that seek to eliminate signs of toxicity, *The Lake and The Lake* invites us to consider how spaces of toxicity are also spaces of life and work. This essay aims to articulate the aesthetic formations and entanglements from which the film emerges.

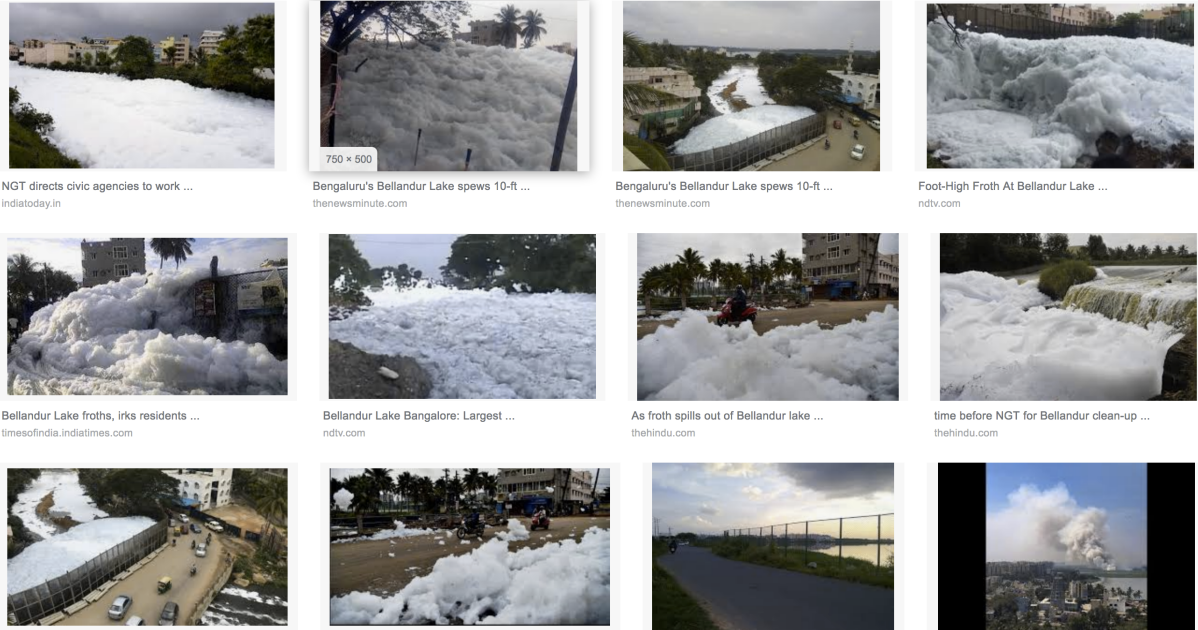


Figure 1: screenshot of a google image search for “Bellandur” on 12/01/2018



## Where I am coming from

In 2015, as I was moving away from Bangalore, the local news was flooded with reports about a toxic foam. The city's urban lake system was so polluted with sewage and solid waste that some of its lakes had started to produce a spectacular white foam during the monsoons. Rain churned the water into huge frothy masses that engulfed everything in their vicinity. The polluted water also produced flammable gases that fueled fires which were inextinguishable for days at a time. People talked about Bangalore, a city known for its pleasant climate and green spaces, as a place that had become 'unlivable' and unable to sustain its own development. I left Bangalore as a crisis was emerging, sensing a resounding question of "where are we?"<sup>1</sup>

The spectacular foam brought to the surface the extent to which the lakes functioned as repositories of the city's sewage. It revealed how much the city had been mismanaging and disavowing the presence of its own waste. However, much of the response to this phenomenon has not been to address corrupt and abusive waste management systems, but to focus attention on the localized, visible pollution around the lakes. Central to the construction of this urban environmental crisis is a persistent imagination of the lakes as 'natural' spaces that ought to look and behave in specific ways.<sup>2</sup> The aesthetic ideal of a 'city of lakes and gardens' and moves to beautify common spaces often impose a bourgeois, majoritarian vision of the city that dispossesses people of their shared spaces of life and work. Such aesthetic paradigms also

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Foams: Spheres III - Plural Spherology*, (Pasadena, Semiotext(e), 2016). *Foams*, an orienting text for this film, deals with a philosophy that shifts "the question of who we are to a more fundamental question of where we are." For Sloterdijk, the structure of foam is a metaphor for spatial pluralism and *co-isolation*.

The foamy structure of uneven development in India is also discussed in: Rupali Gupte and Prasad Shetty, "Frothing Urbanism: Urban Conditions in India", *Arch+*, October 13, 2010, accessed November 2018. [www.archplus.net/home/news/7,1-3904,1,0.html](http://www.archplus.net/home/news/7,1-3904,1,0.html)

<sup>2</sup> Janaki Nair, *Promise of the Metropolis: Bangalore's Twentieth Century*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), 219-28. Nair traces multiple ways in which the middle class aspirations for developing Bangalore reveal a romance for colonial standards of beauty.

ensure that more and more land is available for construction through the containment of ecologically critical wetlands.<sup>3</sup> As it aspires to become Silicon Valley, Bangalore exhausts itself and those who do not fit this desired image.

*The Lake and The Lake* (2018) is a film that intervenes into the production of a media-driven crisis around the foam by offering a representation of one particular lake, Bellandur, as a *toxic commons*. The lake is toxic in both senses of the word: poisonous to the living beings that inhabit it and high-risk in economic terms. Nevertheless, it continues to be a space of commoning for various people whose labour and care sustains the city's development. For me, the foam brings an invitation "to think of life with toxicity, and without banishment."<sup>4</sup> The film provides a durational, vibrational space to do that thinking. This essay aims to articulate the aesthetic formations and entanglements from which the film emerges. The essay is interspersed with documentation stills from screenings of the film that took place on December 6 and 7, 2018 at The University of California, San Diego.

I come to this project through a practice of experimental filmmaking and composition. My work is noisy and interested in noise, which I understand to be that which is excluded from the realm of the *sensible*.<sup>5</sup> I work with the tensions between noise, acts of representation and the generative presence of the camera and sound recorder to produce new spaces, however temporary. I am deeply interested in the sonic, symbolic and material significance of the ambient and atmospheric. Previous projects including *Different Colorful Designs* (2016), *Cada flor tiene* (2016), *Work Notes* (2017) and *Composition for Temple Speakers* (2014), reflect these affinities. With *The Lake and The Lake*, I also address the undeniable presence of waste

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<sup>3</sup> Nair, *Promise of the Metropolis*, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Raqs Media Collective, "Raqs Media Collective dreams of equal division of toxicity", *LiveMint*, August 29, 2018. <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/JuxEvOeT79uyhy5q75DRbI/Raqs-Media-Collective-dreams-of-an-equal-division-of-toxicit.html>

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, (London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

and the ways in which a social alienation from waste enables other kinds of violence to unfold. This comes at a time when there is an aggressive formation in India to reconfigure cleanliness as a moral imperative of the Hindu right.

I then also want to acknowledge that I carry out this project as a Hindu woman with certain privileges to drift through urban spaces, as a student of a US University with some funding to support my work, as a Tamil speaker in Bangalore, as a migrant facing the question of how to live within a toxic atmosphere in the US, as a woman with a precarious relationship to healthcare, and as an artist who survives through commoning.



Figure 2: documentation still, *The Lake and The Lake*, MFA thesis screening

## Bubbles and Foam

The foam visualizes, spectacularly, the pollution of the lakes and an underlying politics of neglect. The striking images that it produces might explain why it became such a popular issue, in Bangalore and beyond. It is an eery expression of the city's exhaustion—a slow, silent sigh that covers everything, stops traffic, shrouds boundaries. It is, ironically, *the* representation of cleanliness—it consists primarily of soap and detergents. It froths, flows and flies with a lightness that is inimitable. It is visually arresting. Air and water, soap, sewage and garbage, coming and going as soft as a brilliant white snow with every rain. News media capitalizes on its hypnotic appeal.

The foam is, however, a symptom. It is an inflammation produced by a particular kind of water, by particular fears and surface tensions. It is proof a number of things: sewage treatment plants release untreated effluents into the water, industries thrive with no regulations on their waste management, a profit-driven garbage economy is pressurized into illegal dumping, encroachments of various sizes have stopped the flow of water that could once clean itself and people continue to live with an obsession for cleanliness (as it is largely detergents and soaps that lather in these tanks). The foam churns up the presence of all of these toxic relationships at once. It is, no wonder, horrifying.

As the foam came into contact with different people and things, it triggered different actions and discourses. Farming and fishing communities have raised this issue for several decades.<sup>6</sup> However, it only became widely addressed as a crisis when the foam started to obstruct roads and settle on the neighbouring real estate; that is, when it started to become a

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<sup>6</sup> Rohan D'Souza, "A Study on Bellandur Tank and Changes due to Urbanization", *Collaborative for the Advancement of Studies in Urbanism through Mixed Media* (archive), 2008, 9. <https://casumm.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/bellandur-tank-study.pdf>. In 1997, a group of protesters were beaten by the police before they were able to demand for restrictions on the release of sewage into the tank through their gram panchayat (village council).

threat to the productivity of the wealthy.<sup>7</sup> Since 2014, activism from several groups has precipitated around the issue. Environmental pollution has been an issue that many middle and upper class Bangaloreans have historically organized around, and the foaming lakes can be seen as the latest chapter in that struggle to exercise a right to the city. In the absence of satisfying responses from the local administration, Resident Welfare Associations, urbanists, scientists and students of all ages began to offer up all kinds of solutions.<sup>8</sup> The phenomenon also became popular on social media platforms, accompanied by calls to action to return Bangalore back to its glorious past as a “garden city” and “city of lakes.”<sup>9</sup> Certain phrases became familiar: *Save Bangalore Lakes*<sup>10</sup> and *Save Bellandur, Save Bangalore*.<sup>11</sup>

Wetland ecosystems have also become a topic of study for urbanists who are theorizing alongside chaotic processes of urbanization. Scholars from various fields including science and technology studies, urban planning and design, engineering, data sciences, and law have all shown interest in assessing Bangalore’s lake systems, usually towards policy recommendations. It was amidst this surge of interest and activism that I became interested in the lakes’ potential to resist the homogenizing forces of development in the city.

One specific lake, Bellandur, quickly became the place from which I would make this film. Bellandur is Bangalore’s largest urban lake and the largest repository for its untreated

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<sup>7</sup> Many of the city’s special economic zones and their luxury residential enclaves stand in the peripheries of its urban lakes. When I review videos that document the foam, I often feel that it floats towards these buildings as if they have been waiting to be united all along.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Nix, *Inventing Tomorrow*, (USA, Fishbowl Films, 2018), Film. Sahiti Pingali, the protagonist of Nix’s documentary, proposes data collection as the award winning strategy to save Bangalore’s lakes. Pingali’s approach is an exemplary form of activism for many Bangaloreans.

<sup>9</sup> Groups include *Bellandur Rising Group*, *Varthur Rising Group*, *Hasiru Usiru*.

<sup>10</sup> Save Bangalore Lakes, “Save Bangalore Lakes’ Facebook Page”, *Facebook*, last modified November 9, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/SaveBengaluruLakes>

<sup>11</sup> Save Bellandur, Save Bangalore, “Save Bellandur, Save Bangalore’s Facebook Page”, *Facebook*, last modified November 30, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/978408568847592>

sewage—some studies say 400 million liters a day.<sup>12</sup> Despite this, the pollution has remained imperceptible for several decades.<sup>13</sup> The land around Bellandur (the area is also referred to as Bellandur) has been rapidly developed over the last decade into IT parks, special economic zones and luxury residential complexes. Several battles over land grabbing, encroachment and illegal dumping of waste take place here. Within this environment, *The Lake and The Lake* also became a way to record the entanglements and the spatial fixes that sustain Bangalore’s development as The Silicon Valley of India.

The policy to restore the lakes to an urban island of “greenery” seems to ignore the everyday realities of the daily interactions of the various people who are connected to the lake. Instead, there is the dominant influence of a large-scale conceptual model of conservation, based on the idea of “clean and green” that seems to be in direct conflict with the idea of public or functional use. There exists a lack of clarity in such a framework for a philosophy of conservation, where eco-ethical actions are different from our everyday interaction with nature and the world around us.<sup>14</sup>

I made *The Lake and The Lake* over a year, between two trips to Bangalore in November 2017 and in September 2018. I do not know if I was going back home to make the work or making the work to go back home. Resisting both the beautification approach of Resident Welfare Associations and conservationists, and the policy driven approaches of urbanists<sup>15</sup> my process was to try to understand Bellandur through the time spent dwelling around it, in the company of various lake-workers and friends. Alongside the filming process, I

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<sup>12</sup> Ramachandra, T. V., H. S. Sudhira, B. Karthick, and K. G. Avinash, “Environmental Impact of Developmental Activities in the Bellandur Lake Catchment”, *ENVIS Technical Report: 27*, (Bangalore, Centre for Ecological Sciences, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Only those who used the water knew what had been happening. Chinappalaniappa, a fisherman whose family collects the grass in the lake described to me how all the fish in the lake died in one month in the 1980’s when the “acidic water” started to be released.

<sup>14</sup> Meera Baidur, *Nature in Indian Philosophy and Cultural Traditions*, (New Delhi, Springer, 2015) 201.

<sup>15</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, (Wivenhoe, Minor Compositions, 2013) 81. “Policy’s hope is that there will be more policy, more participation, more change. But there is also a danger in all this participation, a danger of crisis.”

participated in planning workshops, demonstrations, and had conversations with scholars whose own struggles and desires take place in the city.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to be able to reflect on this project with Rohan D'Souza, Leo Saldanha, Esha Shah, Vishwanath Shrikantaiah, Prerna Bishnoi, Lata Mani and members of the Foundation For Environmental Monitoring.





Figure 3: view of Bellandur from the terrace of a fourteen story apartment complex

## Lake, Tank, *Kere*

“Don’t get out there, people will think you have come to commit suicide”, the taxi driver said as we approached the lake. The destination on the Uber app was a pin dropped in the middle of the lake, I did not know what the access roads were like. We knew we would have to negotiate a place to stop when we got there. Though I did not enjoy being told where I should and should not go, I took note of his warning. Bellandur is not a place one would just *go to*. Despite its being defined as a protected urban wetland, it is generally agreed that one is either fated to live in its periphery and suffer its noxious atmosphere or do anything to pass it as fast as possible. Why would someone willingly seek out a lake that is spewing foam, catching fire and burning respiratory tracts? I got off at the embankment of the lake, the main road, and took a moment to orient myself.

Bellandur, though it has reduced in size over the years, is massive. It is roughly a thousand acres and encircled by high-rise buildings. About half the lakeshore is lined by defense organizations. Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), Bangalore’s Old Airport, army barracks, a firing range, and other testing sites surround the lake, shrouded in secrecy. The other half of the lake is crowded with apartment complexes of various sizes. In the near distance is a row of massive ‘tech parks’ that form part of Bangalore’s IT belt—this land was notified over the last decade to be developed into special economic zones. Between the water and the nearest buildings, there exists a buffer zone where construction is prohibited. The width of this zone varies from place to place just as the legal requirements for it have changed over the years. This is the buffer zone where most of my filming takes place. Standing here, I sometimes have dystopian visions of the lake overflowing and the tech parks flooding. The

buildings themselves seem to stand with some sort of blind trust that whatever happens can be managed or engineered—or profited from.<sup>17</sup>

Like hundreds of other lakes in the region, Bellandur is a constructed tank, or *kere*, as it is called in Kannada. To me, the word *lake* brings to my mind something that is glacial, perennial, deep and still. Lakes are what feature in the landscape drawings we were taught to make as children. *Keres* are something quite different. *Keres* are engineered structures<sup>18</sup> that harvest rainwater with the help of embankments (or bunds). Since they fill up along the natural slope of the land, they are deeper on one end. Different ecosystems exist along the different depths of water. In this semi-arid hard-rock terrain in which wells are hard to dig and groundwater is hard to reach, tanks were built to provide water security. They were rain-fed and seasonal. Lands downstream of the tanks are marshy or dry depending on the rain and overflows.

*Keres* rarely exist in isolation. Tanks upstream channel water to those downstream through a system of sluices and canals, forming an intricate irrigation system.<sup>19</sup> What collects in one tank eventually flows into the next. Bellandur has a number of inlets and outlets from which water enters and leaves the tank. One can sense the flowing water quite easily when standing next to the lake. Large swathes of hyacinth float across with it, producing an eery movement in a place where one would might imagine stillness. Water gushes through the inlet and outlet canals with a lot of velocity (this is where much of the foam is formed). From a distance or from a height, however, these flows are harder to register.

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<sup>17</sup> Several companies including Blue Water Bio (UK), Tahal Group (Israel) and AG Dauters (India-Germany) have approached the City to experiment with generating electricity from lake sludge, to sell back.

<sup>18</sup> Esha Shah, "Telling Otherwise: A Historical Anthropology of Tank Irrigation Technology in South India." *Technology and Culture* 49, no. 3 (2008): 652-74.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

The *keres* have had different uses and relationships to the city over the years. They have been traced back to as early as the 9th century, as reservoirs of rainwater for irrigation and domestic use. However, when the colonial administration started to connect sewage lines to the city's storm water drains they changed the tanks' relationship to the city fundamentally.<sup>20</sup> The letting of large amounts of sewage into the *keres* led to several epidemics in the 19th century. This gave the British the justification to take up various 'improvement' projects and align a sewage network with the tank system.<sup>21</sup> As drinking water was brought from far away rivers through feats of engineering, it became a fictitious commodity in Bangalore. And as more and more agricultural land was urbanized, *keres* within the metropolis no longer served their original functions. But they continued to be home to diverse wildlife ecosystems, to provide water to people who lived in their peripheries, and act as crucial spaces for "informal" activities like sex, fishing, grass cutting, washing and waste segregation.<sup>22</sup> And through these years, they have continued to be reservoirs for the growing quantities of untreated sewage produced by the city. Despite the important differences between lakes and *keres*, Bellandur is commonly referred to as a lake, and often dealt with as such by various actors.

I do not know how exactly the word lake came to be attached to *keres*. The gaze of the British administration certainly had something to do with it. But I believe that the optic of a lake persists because of the value that this term holds for a particular imagination of the city. Lakes and lake-views are somehow inherently beautiful. They are important placeholders for a pure space that holds no trace of civilization's waste or detritus. They exist in the imaginary to

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<sup>20</sup> Malini Ranganathan, "Storm Drains as Assemblages: The Political Ecology of Flood Risk in Post-Colonial Bangalore." *Antipode* 47, no. 5 (2015) 1300-320.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Meera Baidur, "Bangalore Lake story: reflections on the spirit of a place", *Journal of Cultural Geography* 31, no. 1 (2014), 32-56.

reinforce urbanization as a smooth process without contradictions. Present day *keres*, which are primarily septic tanks, couldn't be more different.

I use the words lake, *kere* and tank interchangeably in this essay to highlight the slippages between these terms and the different functions and ecological models that they serve.<sup>23</sup> I take note of how urban water infrastructures are theorized as assemblages,<sup>24</sup> loosely defined as “a multiplicity of interlocking meanings, materials, and capacities”.<sup>25</sup> Assemblages are also appropriate to thinking about the multiple ways in which Bellandur is represented in the film.

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<sup>23</sup> Rohan D'Souza, “Rachenahalli – Containment of a Kere – A Visual Essay”, *Reflections on the Keres of Bangalore* (blog), May 26, 2014. <https://roha75.wordpress.com/2014/05/26/rachenahalli-containment-of-a-kere-a-visual-essay/>

<sup>24</sup> Ranganathan, “Storm Drains as Assemblages”, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. In reference to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (London: Continuum, 1987).



Figure 4: documentation still, *The Lake and The Lake*, MFA thesis screening

## Lake-views

There exists something of a lake-view-complex in the city that serves the interests of real estate buyers and developers. The number of luxury “lakeview” apartments are proof of the ways in which lakes serve as aesthetic objects to enhance property values. The names of apartment complexes around Bellandur speak of this: Vista Lagos, Lakeview Orchid, Pristine, Genesis, Corporate Leisure, Green Glen, Espana, Euphoria. The list goes on. Representations of *keres* as lakes within the discourses of beautification and conservation, the attempts to turn them into private commodities and the restriction of their use as urban commons are all processes of spatial production that see tanks solely as aesthetic objects. These are the processes that also reinforce notion of the dying city of lakes and gardens. But we can question whether such a city ever existed, and if so, for whom.<sup>26</sup>

*Keres* do not function solely as aesthetic objects. Their role as reservoirs of wastewater complicates this ideal. Tanks that were once seasonal are now perennial because they are pumped with a constant supply of sewage. They store large quantities of the city’s untreated sewage, allowing urban life to continue on a daily basis. This important function of the tanks is ignored in the discourses of beautification and conservation. It is only when the tanks start to froth and foam that the lake-fiction is ruptured. Then, the lakes are neither able to be aesthetically pleasing objects nor can they function as reservoirs of invisible waste. Perhaps this is the rupture that leads them to be viewed as places that no one would go to, except perhaps to commit suicide.

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<sup>26</sup> The image of a lake also conceals the structures of custody and care that existed around these tanks. Tanks require labour to be built and maintained. This was caste-based before various state organizations started to juggle custody over them. The murkiness around custody has enabled a number of developments to come up on wetlands.

The title of this film is a reference to China Miéville's novel, *The City & The City*,<sup>27</sup> in which two cities with their own infrastructures and laws are laid out over the same physical space. They remain distinct from each other through intricate planning and a secret enforcement agency called Breach. Citizens of each city are trained to unsee their neighbours (or face dire consequences) even if they are standing right next to each other, even when they can faintly smell the food from the other street. The act of unseeing is an important gesture that also plays out between people in Bellandur. The opening sequence of the film establishes how this happens. It takes place in the interior space of an apartment overlooking the lake. This is the first time we see the lake, and it is very much as a view. Over one long take, a resident of the apartment shows us all of the sunset photographs she has taken from her balcony. The images are striking, arguably beautiful, and they never seem to end. They are also framed very precisely, maximizing the sky and cropping out a sprawling *basti* (an informal settlement of temporary homes) that stands between the balcony and the lake. A map of relations is laid out in this image: technology, class, gaze, beauty, verticality and flood risk. In the following chapters, the film moves away from this vertical view where one particular lake is produced and reproduced through images. The rest of the film dwells in exterior, ground level spaces; that is, the rest of the film is spent unseeing that series of sunsets. Many other lakes exist—for fishermen who collect grass from the lake as fodder, for children who play in its open spaces, for dogs who have been captured and released here, and for migrants who live in the informal settlements on land awaiting construction authorization. Over time we see a place that is toxic but not dead, beautiful not *beautified*, always flowing and never still—a place for work, for play, for life.

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<sup>27</sup> China Miéville, *The City & The City*, (New York, Del Rey Ballantine Books, 2009).





Figure 5: documentation still, *The Lake and The Lake*, MFA thesis screening

## Toxic Commons

Polluted lakes can be thought of as toxic commons—shared problems rather than shared assets. They are toxic in both senses of the word—poisonous to the living beings that inhabit them and high-risk assets in economic terms. But commons do not exist as fixed entities. They come into being through the practices of people who find ways to use these resources for livelihood or leisure.<sup>28</sup> The risk of exposure to lake pollution is drastically different for people who view them from balconies or offices, or from even further through maps, and for those who live and breathe around it at ground level. And it is different for those who draw their water from the aquifers below it. In other words, the risk is differentiated, for those who view them as an aesthetic object of pleasure, and for those who depend on them for their survival. Unlike the fires and foams that flare up with great intensity on social media, the toxicity of the lake persists as a slow violence on the ground.<sup>29</sup> A question that this film asks: what happens to commoning practices when the resources are toxic?

Energy and matter gathers around the Bellandur, sometimes from distant places. In its peripheries, several economies play out. Fishing communities collect the grass that grows in it to sell to cattle farmers and the Bangalore Zoo. It becomes a playground for children, a dumping ground for construction debris, a sorting site for recyclable waste, an open toilet for residents of *bastis* (informal settlements). People come to take a break, find a moment of quite and calm. At night, several lorries pass the fences. There are rumors of tankers that fill and sell

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<sup>28</sup> Jayaraj Sundaresan, "Planning as commoning: transformation of a Bangalore lake" *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, No. 50 (2011), 71-79.

<sup>29</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2013), 2. "Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence.

the lake's water to uninformed buyers. People come to drink, fight, cry, have sex. And for the most part, all of this work continues despite the pollution. Amidst the groves that grow acidic coconuts fed by lake water, there is something of a dream of life that cannot be extinguished.



Figure 6: documentation still, *The Lake and The Lake*, MFA thesis screening



Figure 7: documentation still, *The Lake and The Lake*, MFA thesis screening

I walked around a lake one Sunday morning with a citizen-activist and an urban planner. I was visiting after a year of being away. Since the last time I was there, a new Sewage Treatment Plant and a controversial pipeline project were being built to send “treated water” to parched agricultural lands in Kolar and other districts downstream. These developments were partly in response to accusations of negligence and corruption in the city’s waste management systems. I was interested in seeing what these changes looked and felt like. L was there to learn more about how master plans were executed on the ground and J, who was leading us, was conducting his weekly vigilance round. We walked for two hours, barely covering half the lake’s periphery.

We cut through some of the city’s last remaining agricultural fields where flowers were blooming in bright colors under the hot sun. They were said to be cultivated because of the stigma attached to growing edible crops with polluted lake water. Ironically, many farmers in the area do not use lake water. They use bore-well water or a mixture of well and lake water. In some places the mixed water lathered as it flowed out of pipes and hit the earth. Foam clouds showed up in patches amidst the flowers. They slowly popped and melted in the sun. The cloudy water coursed through hand cut channels, seeping slowly into the ground.

Farmers said that the water was acidic and that it caused all sorts of skin problems. I would often mention how bad it smelled near the water and people would nod in agreement without much else to add. “What do you do about that?”, I had once asked, and immediately wished I hadn’t put out such a impossible question. An older farmer responded by explaining how he shortened his breath to take in as little of the fumes as possible. This probably sounds like an illogical strategy as I write it now, but at that time I recognized that I was doing the same thing with my own breath. We were shortening our breath and depriving ourselves of oxygen so as not to draw too much of the pungent fumes. Standing there amidst those oddly fragrant flowers, it seemed an incredible injustice that we had to give up that most basic right.





Figure 8: lake-water flowers growing around Varthur *kere*

## Document

As we continued to walk, we saw a mud road that sliced one edge of the lake. Plots of land were already being measured and prepared near it. An access road was being paved into this nowhere—signs of the development to come. It is hard to dispute such things when the land belongs to someone powerful. Further ahead we began to see more garbage strewn around us, collecting in heaps under shrubs. J got more and more agitated as he mentioned the menace of a “garbage mafia” that was dumping around the lake to save money. Soon, we were walking past an informal settlement. Indian flags waved awkwardly over tin roofs, shop signs were hand painted in Bengali, chickens and children dashed in and out of alleys, it was Sunday and people were relaxing. J chose this moment to share a proud story from his years serving in the Northeast of the country where he claimed to have defeated a Bodo insurgent group. He then turned to me and said decisively, “document these illegals”. I had my camera with me, it was already in my hand before we had gotten to this place, I was already feeling ashamed for walking with it. He said something like, “They have everything, *Aadhar* (biometric ID), passports. But I know they are illegal. I listen to them and I know. They are Bangladeshis.”

I took a badly framed photograph. I was afraid that he would call me an anti-national. That term is a particular form of blacklisting that I did not want to deal with. I was upset that I could not say something defiant in that moment. Why did I feel obligated to appease this man in any way? He asked me to post the photographs on Facebook. I told him that I did not use Facebook like that and I would email the pictures instead. I thought to myself, *no way*. He took out his cellphone and started to take his own photographs. He did not need me, he was simply testing my willingness to participate in his citizen-surveillance project. The fact that simply documenting people was enough to threaten their legitimacy—I could not digest the levels of hyper-nationalism that were at play for this action to be sensible. How had we gotten to the



point where the mere sight of certain people was evidence enough for their removal? The documentary filmmaker in me was shaken that day. I went back home swearing to myself that I must make a film that refuses that demand to document.



Figure 9: a badly framed photograph

I now ask myself what it was that kept me going back to the lakes. Sometimes I went alone, sometimes I went with friends who wanted to see where Bangalore's sewage went—the “kidneys of the city”. We were witnessing a transformation. The foam and the pollution had shifted the status quo beyond a certain threshold. Things had risen to the surface. The noxious air changed me, changed us. I filmed from that a state of light-headedness. Further away from the water, we would find shade, calm, have small exchanges with people who also used the space freely, just beyond the reach of policy and planning. This place changed how I saw the city. The images I made there complicate what a Silicon Valley usually looks like, what it usually does. The growing hyper-nationalism and the scramble to enclose these lands felt like attempts to hold on to a bubbled vision of the city, a ‘city of lakes’ that we could not go back to. I was witnessing, recording and becoming a part of these transformations all at once.

Cinema is only a hundred and twenty five years old—a very young medium.<sup>30</sup> Are we perhaps too intent on fixing its origins in the documentary paradigms of providing evidence and building knowledge? To what other impulses can we orient ourselves instead? When so many fictions already abound in the production of this place,<sup>31</sup> what exactly is it that this film will be proof of? The challenge, for me, has been to navigate between two forces: one that sees value in filming from within a place in a significant moment of transformation (the university, spaces where films circulate), and another that uses documentation as proof to police that very place. As a makeshift response to J's demand, I reframed for myself that nothing would really *happen* in this film. Rather, I would make a *kere*-fiction that decentres the lake-view-complex. If space is produced in part through its representations,<sup>32</sup> then this film would be way to dwell

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<sup>30</sup> Shaina Anand, “The New Medium”, *18th Mumbai International Film Festival* (press release document), 2018. <https://www.mumbaiinternationalfilmfestival.com/images/press/7061-New%20Medium.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 2013, 39. “Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct ‘fictions’, that is to say material rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done.”

<sup>32</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (Malden, Blackwell, 2016).

in a *thirdspace* that is open to being configured by the people who traverse and inhabit it.<sup>33</sup>  
This can be a space where potential is understood without needing to be measured, where presence can be felt but not policed.

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<sup>33</sup> Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1996).



Figure 10: documentation still, *The Lake and The Lake*, MFA thesis screening

## Developments and Encroachments

The overlap between environmentalism and violence against minority groups grows in the contested spaces of the lake. Residents of the *bastis* are often accused of encroaching ecologically sensitive wetlands and polluting them by dumping garbage around them. This is the basis on which they are constantly policed. The question of where that garbage comes from, and of why it ends up there and not in a distant landfill is seldom brought up. Trash and those who work with trash are simply seen as encroaching and interchangeable for removal. There is little recognition of the fact that the people in need of removal also built the apartment complexes and tech parks, sort their waste and take care of their domestic needs. They allow Bellandur to be what it is, every day. The tenants of the *bastis*, some of whom have migrated from North East India and Bangladesh, face multiple threats: a lack of affordable housing, exposure to the foam and fumes, cycles of accusation, eviction and resettlement, and the growing xenophobia and islamophobia of their neighbours.

The frothing lakes instigated a lot of activism from concerned Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs). The priority for these groups, has been to maintain their health and the value of their properties.<sup>34</sup> Their demand to the city administration is that the lakes be “cleaned up” and the illegal dumping and encroachment around them be stopped immediately.<sup>35</sup> Some have said that since Bellandur is one of the highest tax-paying neighbourhoods of Bangalore, the city should listen to these tax-payers.<sup>36</sup> This customer-style approach to civic dissent (in which the wealthy have the most rights to space) demands that the lake be “returned” to a

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Vinita Kaul, a resident-activist from Bellandur, September 19, 2018

<sup>35</sup> In November 2017, Prerna Bishnoi and I interviewed a group of RWA members from across Bellandur who also acknowledged that they (the apartment residents) were “criticized by locals for being part of the problem”. In that moment the roles of local and migrant shifted briefly. Later, they too expressed their discomfort with “the sight” of their illegal Bangladeshi neighbours.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Bellandur RWA members, November, 2017.

pristine condition without any visible trace of poverty. For most RWAs, lakes are ideally dredged, fenced, surrounded by jogging tracks and given ‘timings’ when they can be accessed (which usually coincide with walking times for the elderly or people with nine to five jobs).

Filming the re-construction of Iblur *kere*, a tank upstream of Bellandur, I met a number of residents from Corporate Leisure apartments. We talked about many things— festivals, drinking water, what the timings of their new lake would be, and what issues people in the neighbourhood were facing. Several residents told me that things were moving well with lake clean-up except for the “nuisance” of their “illegal” neighbours who “dirty the place”. With that one word, *nuisance*, a whole set of power relations were laid out.<sup>37</sup> The demand for slum evictions is often put forth by residents who are thoroughly alienated from the ways in which they themselves encroach— they also live in homes constructed around the lakes, they generate the larger share of the city’s waste, they too migrated to the city in search of work. Despite these similarities, encroachment, for them, is a localized visual phenomenon that is associated with poverty.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> D’Souza, “A Study on Bellandur Tank”, 2008, 12. “Many residents around the tank view it as a nuisance that emits foul smell and is a breeding ground for mosquitoes and would possibly welcome it being filled in and developed”.

<sup>38</sup> Hasiru Dala, “Demolition of the Homes of Poor at the Complaint of Rich”, *Stories of Waste and Waste Workers* (blog), August 20, 2018. <https://wastenarratives.com/2018/08/20/demolition-of-the-homes-of-poor-at-the-complain-of-rich/>





Figure 11: view of Iblur lake under construction



In this film, I want to question the murkiness between encroachment and development as *processes* of claiming space. Development is viewed as legal, profitable, something that we ought to make sacrifices for. For Development, the lake is an image on a map, a master plan, a view, something that can easily be erased and built over. Encroachment, on the other hand is “loaded with illegality”.<sup>39</sup> For Encroachment, the lake is an opportunity, untapped potential, a physical presence that can be negotiated, in secret, with tentativeness and caution. Development and encroachment are not mutually exclusive by any means. Both are produced through a number of fictions. Fictional companies manage to buy land around Bellandur, fictional documents are forged on an everyday basis to facilitate the various processes of dispossession, the fiction of flood-proof development and (a return to) a pristine past and is constantly fed to buyers. The right to space is thus exercised based on an arbitrary partitioning of development from encroachment. This film complicates an easy distinction between development and encroachment by depicting the apartments as the ones that crowd around the lake, with their own construction debris growing in piles around them.

The predicament of being human involves the production of waste on a monumental scale. This is generally called civilization; sometimes it is simply a copper smelter. This is not a matter that can be resolved metabolically, or bio-chemically. It doesn't just all get sublimated, recycled, or used up in some arithmetically sorted way that leaves the debit and credit sides of production, consumption, waste, want and excess all neatly squared up. Each hillock of refuse on the outskirts of a city represents a demand made by the present on the future, with no promise of recompense, until the archaeologists come calling... Hierarchies are invented and maintained so that not only the accumulation of toxic waste, but also its consequences, can be shunned and offloaded.<sup>40</sup>

How many fictions are necessary in order to see certain structures as encroachments and others as developments? How many are needed to deem people as pollution? As illegal?

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<sup>39</sup> Usha Ramanathan, “Illegality and Exclusion: Law in the Lives of Slum Dwellers”, Working Paper, *International Environmental Law Resource Centre*, 2004. Quoted in Gautam Bhan, “‘This is no longer the city I once knew’. Evictions, the urban poor and the right to the city in millennial Delhi”, *Environment and Urbanization* 21, no. 1 (2009), 127–42.

<sup>40</sup> RAQS Media Collective, “RAQS dreams...”, 2018.

No amount of engineering can solve the lake's pollution and frothing until these toxic social relationships are acknowledged—the “civilizational blind spot that can only think of maintaining the life of some by the banishment of others.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> RAQS Media Collective, “RAQS dreams...”, 2018.



Figure 12: documentation still, *The Lake and The Lake*, MFA thesis screening



Figure 13: documentation still, *The Lake and The Lake*, MFA thesis screening

## Sacrifice Zones

The building and demolition of informal settlements is a calculated dance of power between influential land owners who rent plots to immigrants and authorities who respond to the xenophobic demands of citizens. The demands to remove informal settlements are never fully met. The evictions are never complete or final. The tenants of the *bastis* pay a lot of rent to those landowners who cannot do much else with their properties (since these lands are within the buffer zone where formal construction is no longer allowed). And so, parts of the settlements are periodically razed while others are allowed to remain, continuing to generate rent. People move from plot to plot as they put up with these sacrificial gestures of appeasement.

On our way to film the mounds of construction debris dumped behind the tech parks, a friend and I walked past a settlement. A resident questioned us about what we were doing. When we explained that we were making a film about the lake and the land around the lake, she asked us, “You know that there was a flood in Bangladesh? You know it drowned, right?” Yes, I replied. We stood on loose soil that would certainly turn into a swamp when the rain came. This was where she now lived—yet another flood-prone place. Near us was a plot of rubble where an eviction had recently taken place. “If we were bad people do you think they would give us this land? We work with waste, we do small jobs. It’s just that we don’t have status”, she said. No one is illegal, I wanted to say to her. Valuable trash was piled up all around us, waiting to be sorted and sold again. There was a mound of every kind of thing: a mound of plastic containers, a mound of bags, of toys, of bottles, of canisters... In this place the term *work from home* takes on a new meaning. *Home from work* is perhaps a better way to think about it.

Is this the form of encroachment that so badly needs to be removed: a spirit of life that takes almost nothing and makes something with it?<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Vinay Gidwani, "Six theses on waste, value, and commons" *Social & Cultural Geography* 14, no. 7 (2013), 773-783. "The origins of capitalist value theory lie in transformations of property through enclosure of 'commons-as-waste' and practices of 'commoning' that supported these. These processes, repeated with difference, remain with us. Capitalist value production becomes a structure of necessity in societies that are profit seeking rather than needs oriented; the history of capitalist value is one of the unrelenting attempts to subordinate needs-oriented forms of value production to its accumulative logic. In the process, it continuously casts certain people, places, and conducts as wasteful, superfluous, or residual. In short, capitalist value constantly battles to assert its normative superiority over and autonomy from other forms of value production that interweaves with it. Waste, immanent to capital's becoming-being, poses a jeopardy to capital accumulation: it is, on the one hand, capitalist value-in-waiting and on the other hand, it is an omnipresent logic of dissipation that evades or exceeds capital's dialectic, threatening its legitimacy and existence."



Figure 14: documentation still, *The Lake and The Lake*, MFA thesis screening



## Containment

On the mesh wall surrounding the lake hangs a signboard announcing that “flood control works” are under way. The foam does show up as a flood in some ways. It certainly breaches boundaries the way floods do. And it brings seemingly disparate things into contact with each other the way floods do—water and waste, trash and property, memories and materials. But what strikes me about the signboard is that it declares the state’s response to the foam as one of containment and control, not one of managing waste. Since the National Green Tribunal (NGT) intervened into the pollution crisis in 2015, a number of rulings have been made to protect Bangalore’s wetlands. The NGT’s intention has been to make sure that the local government takes action against the illegal dumping of waste around the lakes. Their legal orders come filled with words like *shall*, *must*, *will*, *before* and *unless*. But how these orders translate into practices of care and custody has been far from ideal. The city administration’s response (which always feels like a calculated deferral of responsibility through minimal intervention) is to fence off, surveil, remove and contain the visual markers of pollution. When the very employees and contractors of the city corporation are the ones who are driven to dump the waste there to cut corners, this focus on containment seems hopeless.

Flimsy fences exist demarcating zones of legality but they can barely hold back the foam in monsoon months. Other signs have been put up announcing the presence of CCTV cameras and a hefty fine of Rs. 500,000 for dumping garbage or construction waste. Sprinklers have been installed to douse the foam with the very water that produces it. They remain unused these days—they do not work very well. Garbage continues to burst from under the vegetation and security guards continue to perform the act of watching. Downstream there are massive piles of upturned earth from the construction sites of the SEZs and apartments.





Figure 15: documentation still, *The Lake and The Lake*, MFA thesis screening

The approach of containment goes together with larger patterns of enclosure and neglect. Containment is not only a response to a crisis, but the principle that ensures that more and more private property can exist, bubbled and undisturbed by what happens in the shared spaces of the streets, parks and lakes. Containment seems to be the problem and the cure, the only mode through which we are able to think within these cycles of development. This model extends to the container of a nation that wants to keep immigrants out like never before.

Like every *kere*, Bellandur is protected by a guardian deity. The Dugalamma Devi temple sits below the lake bund (embankment), now Bellandur main road. The temple has sunk so far below the level of the road that it frequently floods. The entrance has been sealed off with a cement wall to prevent water from flooding the shrine. The god that protects the lake from flooding is in need of protection from floods herself. The temple's caretaker takes her time to gingerly maneuver over the cement structure to let me inside. I film the idol, whose eyes are fierce even in the darkness. She tells me that no one offers prayers here anymore. We perform a small ritual together and then talk about other things.



Figure 16: entrance to the Dugalamma Devi temple

## Sonic-possible worlds<sup>43</sup>

Sound is often regarded as something that exceeds containment. In films, the rectangular, bounded space of the framed image is often contrasted with the expansive field of the aural. The soundtrack of this film serves to create vibrational, rhythmic and hyper-real spaces. In some moments, images and sounds are synced, bringing a sense of there-ness that is the norm within observational cinema. The landscape is washed over with devotional music, religious speech, jet engines, rifle shooting sessions, children playing, the rhythms of work, the chatter of hundreds of birds and insects. Like much of my work with ambient sound, these moments are about presence, about dwelling in common. In other moments, the soundtrack feels much more constructed. I treat some sounds as residual echoes, mimicking my experience of the music that echoed over the surface of the lake. When music reached me from across the lake, it would be hollowed out with only a faint traces of its melody. I recreate this effect of the sonic residue in some segments of the film, producing an uncanniness that I associate with the lake. Often, the slippage between these two approaches to sound (presence and residue) occur seamlessly.

I listen to the ways in which Trinh Minh-Ha disentangles sounds from images. Doing this allows the spaces in her films to remain alive filmically, not simply as traces of things that only “really” exist in the world. The Otolith group’s *The Radiant*<sup>44</sup> and *O Horizon*<sup>45</sup>, Beatriz Santiago-Munoz’s *La Cueva Negra*<sup>46</sup> and Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*<sup>47</sup> also stay with me as influences for their approaches to constructing space through symbolic montage and their use of sound

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<sup>43</sup> Salome Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, (London, Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> The Otolith Group, *The Radiant*, (2012), HD video.

<sup>45</sup> The Otolith Group, *O Horizon*, (2018), HD video.

<sup>46</sup> Beatriz Santiago-Munoz, *La Cueva Negra*, (2013), HD video.

<sup>47</sup> Andrei Tarkovsky, *Stalker* (USSR, Mosfilm, 1979) DVD.

to produce *thirdspaces*. I also look to the ways in which Christopher Harris, in his film *still/here*<sup>48</sup> uses a minimal palette of non-sync sound to sustain a sense of absence over observational shots of neglected neighbourhoods in St. Louis. Harris manages to “not use the documentary power of film to recuperate a sense of closure but instead dwell within the space of rupture occasioned by the presence of a profound absence.”<sup>49</sup>

Sound in the form of acousmatic voices also alter our relationship to the film’s images. Acoustic voices speak of the interiorities and migrations that cannot be filmed. Acousmatic voices punctuate the film’s landscape images, sometimes commenting on what appears on screen, sometimes on the process of filming. Long exhalations, short conversations, jokes and exchanges come and go in different languages. The final section of the film carries the sounds of an Islamic sermon in Bangla over the evening landscape of the mounds. This sound plays through loudspeakers from the *basti*, affirming the lake as a devotional space and a space of love. The film ends in the company of women from the *basti*, against a sunset that mirrors the photos from the opening scene.

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<sup>48</sup> Christopher Harris, *still/here*, (2001), 16mm transfer to HD video.

<sup>49</sup> Christopher Harris, “Artist’s Statement”, *Urban Video Project*, October 18, 2018. <https://www.urbanvideoproject.com/artists/screening-qa-with-christopher-harris-stillhere/>



Figure 17: documentation still, *The Lake and The Lake*, MFA thesis screening

## Where we are going

Different kinds of environmental crises unfold around the lake: the inflammation of the foam, the rupture of a lake-image complex, the poisoning of lakes-as-septic-tanks, the slow seepage of toxic water into the ground. More and more forms of environmentalism respond to these crises by attempting to contain and eliminate toxicity (and anything that is proximal to it). However, making *The Lake and The Lake* taught me that toxicity and life are never mutually exclusive. The film is attuned to birth, life, work and play that take place amidst so-called dying spaces.<sup>50</sup> Spaces of toxicity are also spaces of work, spaces of life. Being conscious of these entanglements will be crucial to ecological action.

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<sup>50</sup> Nicolas Grandi and Lata Mani, *The Poetics of Fragility*, (India/USA, 2016) DVD.

“Beloved Shakti, teach me in this unbearable now about the cosmic dance of creation/destruction  
We are so much more aware of destruction, so asleep to creation  
Teach us in this now what we need to know  
For strong women are strongly prepared to grow.”





Figure 18: documentation still, *The Lake and The Lake*, MFA thesis screening





Figure 19: documentation still, *The Lake and The Lake*, MFA thesis screening

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