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Application for CEE Funding Summer 2022

A Correspondence: Beyond the Politics of Representation in *Jungle Nama*

This application seeks funding for the second part of a documentary in progress, one which began with the process of recording how *Jungle Nama* as a performance came together. As the Center for Experimental Ethnography (CEE) has done before, a group of students documented the performance put on by visiting fellows, this semester Amitav Gosh and Ali Sethi. For the content of the documentary, we seek to establish a connection between *Jungle Nama* the graphic novel and CEE workshop performance, and the Bonbibi Johnnorna which it is based on. While the class at Penn has given full expression and life to Amitav Gosh's adaptation, the story of Bonbibi is also performed by and for the worshippers of this region in the Sundarbans. This second part of the documentary filming process is important precisely as it allows *Jungle Nama* as a project at Penn to be an entry point to a continued conversation – insisting that the audience of *Jungle Nama* realize that the play is also performed in the Sundarbans by people of the Sundarbans. One can think of this project as a correspondence between the two ensembles of Bonbibi Johnnorna performers. Juxtaposing student interviews, artist interviews, rehearsal performance, and final performance imagery, our documentary project seeks a second repertoire of visual material: interviews of performers, rehearsals, and final performances with those who perform Bonbibi Johnnorna in the Sundarbans.

Today in the Sundarbans, the political economy of Bonbibi Johnnorna can be understood as a tourist attraction. Even as praying to Bonbibi is a serious lived practice, people perform for money. In a country where caste notions surrounding performance are active, the embodied practice of performance comes with its own complications. Our documentary interviews will ask performers on the ground what they think of the Penn performance, of Gosh's project, in relation to their own practices. While the show is over, and the graphic novel continues to circulate in its form, this documentary provides the opportunity for a continued conversation, bringing us physically and visually to a set of realities where neither climate change nor tigers are an allegory, and the Bonbibi Johnnorna is a part of the life worlds which people use to feed themselves, as well as interpret and grapple with their reality.

Particularly if you were listening closely to the closing Q&A of the second night of *Jungle Nama*, you would hear Ali Sethi and Amitav Gosh lay out their position on the politics of representation in *Jungle Nama*. Indeed, since the very first Zoom meeting of the course, Sethi and Gosh were anticipating questions such as “how come there is so little Bengali in the soundtrack or play?” Sethi said no one would accuse him of misrepresenting the region if a diverse group of Ivy League undergrads were to perform the lines. In a previous interview, they noted that Sethi needed a gig when the pandemic hit, and his shows were cancelled. The two know each other because Sethi's parents are part of a writerly and political elite in Pakistan. They wanted to work together on a project. They rejected the agenda of cultural purity and territorialism in favor of a mythical and ancient cosmopolitanism, what they called “syncretism.” And so Ali Sethi, after a lifelong training in classical music, did a “masala mix” versioning of the text's soundtrack. From the graphic novel, this allegory of climate change and greed was formed.

In the 10-days of shooting and additional immersion into the class so far, we documented a process in which students were thrilled to return to a medium which allowed for in-person expression, embodied movement, and vocal work in an ensemble context. There seemed to be

consensus of the medium of theater, that it was important we were all doing theater. It was also consensus that the students put on an amazing performance within three weeks. But the question of the story, why *this story*, remains. Thus, a critique on the politics of representation rears itself as perhaps more important if those who have greatest authorship of a project it reject the question entirely, having answered it firmly before arriving at this stage of the project.

As Gosh has addressed in *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans are one of the poorest regions in the world, facing contemporary violence from the State and economic disenfranchisement. Does rendering them in theatrical and graphic novel imaginaries render violence euphemistic? Or does it allow an entry point, the start for developing a necessary imagination against climate change, as Gosh has argued for in *The Great Derangement*? What does it mean to make the stories and people of the Sundarbans “folk” in a children’s play? Is *Jungle Nama* a serious project or a playful one? How is it both? What exactly is the environmental critique of *Jungle Nama*, and what does this say about the politics of interpretation, translation, and representation?

