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JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND VISUAL CULTURE

ISSN (Online) 2184-9218

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To cite this article:

Santasil Mallik (2022) Time, Memory, and Traumatic Histories: “Where birds never sing”, but images tend to, *Archivo Papers Journal*, 2(1), 57-69.

Published online: 31 May 2022.

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ARTICLE

TIME, TRAUMA, AND PHOTOGRAPHY: "WHERE THE BIRDS NEVER SING", BUT IMAGES TEND TO

SANTASIL MALLIK 

Abstract

In contemporary photographic art, the representation of atrocities committed in the past meets several degrees of critical and ethical challenges for articulation. Particularly in the case of state-sponsored violence, it requires wading through scarce archival resources and testimonies from survivors under volatile political circumstances. There is, however, also a structural problem in revisiting past violence and reconstituting narratives through photographs from negligible traces of material history. Contemporary photographers, therefore, often resort to fictional narratives and personal subjectivity to negotiate with this gap of time and historical memory. Documentary practices in India provide an avenue to build counter-archives of violence for political atrocities repudiated by the state. In Soumya Sankar Bose's photographic project, *Where the Birds Never Sing*, the long-denied Marichjhapi massacre takes centre stage. After the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh, the state government of West Bengal, India, executed thousands of refugees living in a delta island of the Sundarbans. With almost no records in the press or state archives, Bose travels back in time to the event of the massacre via oral testimonies, personal dreamscapes, found documents, and allegories surrounding the site to construct a critical-historical narrative seeped in phantasmagoria. This essay explores the relationship between photography and trauma when addressing atrocities after a caesura of time, often incorporating fictional or mythopoetic narratives. Bose's work will be considered a point of departure to reflect upon the temporal modalities of creatively reconstituting traumatic histories and the transformative politics they engender.

Keywords: Marichjhapi massacre, trauma, documentary photography, fiction, heterochrony

On a marshy stretch at night – seen through the partition of silhouetted foliage in the foreground – stands an isolated hut whose outline is made visible by light leaking from inside (Figure 1). In Soumya Sankar Bose's photography book, *Where the Birds Never Sing*¹, this image sits amid a collection of fragmented conversations and oral testimonies revisiting the 1979 Marichjhapi massacre in the delta region of the Sundarbans in Bengal, India. Often considered one of the most heinous state assaults on refugees, the police grazed down and burnt hundreds of such houses and mass murdered thousands inhabiting the island of Marichjhapi². Yet, scarce archival resources remain of it, as the entire episode was closely guarded and executed by the authorities with unfaltering impunity.

Marichjhapi is also a part of the Sundarban forest reserve area, which remains a prohibited site of access to date. Therefore, the photographs of landscapes and spaces corresponding to figments of traumatic recollection in Bose's work figure as allusions or fictional reconstructions. None of the images claims an indexical relationship to the actual site or event of the massacre, notwithstanding the

Figure 1.
Bose, Soumya Sankar. "Untitled",
Where the Birds Never Sing, 2020



pressing ambiguity throughout the work. The assembly of photographs, personal anecdotes, and archival traces conjure a hallucinatory account of what transpired decades ago and largely remains clouded in historical amnesia. It provokes us to think about traumatic histories beyond the fixation on accurate representations and, instead, reflect upon the transformative potential of images in revisiting the past.

What are the critical implications of travelling back in time in the contemporary present to reconstruct a suppressed historical event for the times to come, particularly an event with sparse archives and very few survivors? In this essay, I think through the politico-aesthetic modalities of time, trauma, and photographic representation by looking at Soumya Sankar Bose's project on the Marichjhapi massacre, which prompts a close theoretical engagement with the shifting tradition of contemporary trauma studies and the location of photography in it.

Two unavoidable concerns emerge in the intersecting discourses of photography and trauma. One relates to the impasse of unrepresentability that pervades conventional approaches to trauma, while the other concerns the oft-claimed structural fallacy of photography in articulating traumatic experiences. A wave of critical literature emerged during the 1990s pioneered by theorists like Cathy Caruth, Soshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman that focussed on the unrepresentability of trauma by drawing upon the limitations of language in the psychological transcribing of experiences. In this discourse, trauma is formulated as a phenomenon that exceeds our perceptive capabilities and ruptures narrative consciousness. It represents a fissure in language and meaning which prevents the traumatic experience from being incorporated into the fabric of life narrative. Therefore, the event persists in a liminal space beyond cognitive and representative processes, haunting the psyche in the form of recurring flashbacks and nightmares. Such theoretical postulations of trauma are heavily derived from poststructuralism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Bessel van der Kolk's neurobiological research. Cathy Caruth's pivotal book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, perhaps embodies this discourse most concretely. Caruth studies literary texts to show how textual-rhetorical properties can re-enact the incomprehensibility and the repetitive impulse of traumatic memories. They capture the split time and identity residing at the dissociative kernel of trauma. Such literary dimensions are often formal and extra-diegetic, where the "rhetorical potential" of certain elements "stubbornly persists in bearing witness to some forgotten wound"³. Therefore, the evocation of unrepresentability is a consistent preoccupation in the traditional discourses of trauma studies, where the traumatic event poses as the limit of representation.

The unrepresentable nature of trauma is, precisely, what grounds the deep-seated iconoclastic inclinations in the discipline. If no representation can touch the truth of traumatic experiences, then the mimetic and indexical potency of images can, at most, ascertain that failure. Most of the theoretical literature suspicious of the

index is formulated around critical-aesthetic responses to the holocaust. The post-indexical, non-figurative artistic response to the holocaust features prominently in the artworks commissioned by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Commissioned artists like Sol Lewitt, Ellsworth Kelly, Joel Shapiro, and Richard Serra created installations and architectural designs by working around abstract configurations of time and space to evoke the experiential incognisance of trauma⁴. Lisa Saltzman's book, *Making Memories Matter: Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art*, further presents a treatise on the critical relevance of the post-indexical by looking at how contemporary visual artists navigate history, time, and memory by working with shadows, silhouettes, negative casts and ghostly evocations. But such overt attachment to the aporia of visual representation potentially deprives the index – the *trace* of past trauma – of its historicity. Georges Didi-Huberman posits this argument in his sustained critique of iconoclastic tendencies around the holocaust in the book, *Images in Spite of All*. Referring to four hastily taken photographs of Auschwitz by an inmate, he notes that the blurry images substantially bear the traces of the excruciating conditions in which they were shot. While they do not encapsulate the entire narrative, the photographs offer a glimpse of truth to provoke imaginative endeavour. For Didi-Huberman, the imagination incited by the photographs is critically more relevant than the well-intentioned but lazy, dead-end attitude of “unsayable” and “unimaginable”⁵. Indeed, he derives the material significance of the photographs by imagining the unimaginable circumstances of their production inside the camp, which becomes an ethical exercise for him.

On a formal-structural plane, the relationship between trauma and photography has substantial positive theoretical precedents in Freud, Barthes, and Benjamin. The traumatic psyche is here an unconscious receptacle of experiences that often remain unregistered to active memory, much akin to the irreducible contingency of photographic elements. As Margaret Iversen puts it: “Just as photography, to some extent, bypasses artistic intention and convention, so also the traumatic event bypasses consciousness”⁶. Photography, therefore, becomes an “analogue of trauma”⁷. Media theorists like Thomas Elsaesser have further extended this strain of thought to claim the “traumatogenic” nature of images in the current age of mass media. For Elsaesser, traumatic memories are not simply analogous to photographs but acquire a form reflective of the peculiar structure of proliferating and reiterating images in modern media.

Iconoclastic postulations of trauma are coterminous with the “crises of representation” paradigm of postmodernity. The critical fixation primarily rests on rhetorically professing the untenable narrative grounds of traumatic memories. But it is imperative to understand the ways that material images activate particular forms of agency in the act of remembering historical trauma. The agency of the image is grounded in the performative – as opposed to the constative – function of bearing witness. Images are not simply testimonial depictions of our historical reality, but they actively participate in its transformation. Contemporary image-

making practices dwell on this image function to articulate new forms of addressing traumatic histories, thereby unfolding multifaceted narratives traversing different epochs.

Instead of structuring traumatic recall in terms of aporetic experiences, it is relevant to process the multi-temporalities involved in navigating the past. Mieke Bal posits the idea of 'multi-temporalities' to conceptualise the heterogeneous phenomenon of time involved in the varying rhythms of movement and stagnation, of haste and waiting, during migration⁸. She terms the experience of multi-temporality as heterochrony, which is analogous to the functional structure of memories. Memories construe the past by being rooted in the present, in the split experience of time. More significantly, as Bal notes, "people perform acts of memory and they do so in their present moment"⁹. There is a creative investment in the past rooted in the present perspective, unlike the passivity of trauma where the "unwanted and repetitive invasion of earlier horrors escapes the subject's agency"¹⁰. In the photography book, *Where the Birds Never Sing* by Soumya Sankar Bose, these questions come to the fore as he revisits the Marichjhapi massacre in 1979. By recalling a past with incoherent historical records, he mobilises time to negotiate the incommensurability of the event. The work does not present trauma as an inexplicable and unrepresentable temporal chasm. Instead, it invokes a dynamic temporal modality to engender creative and imaginative modes of situating the complex historical reality of the massacre. Linking folklore, archival fragments, oral recollections, and contemporary politics, the heterochronic design of the book enunciates subjective agency in assessing traumatic histories.

Bose's ingeniously curated set of photographs, found documents, letters, and archival resources create a composite set of evocations invoking the long-suppressed Marichjhapi massacre. During the struggle for freedom of East Pakistan and the formation of independent Bangladesh in 1971, millions of religious minorities became homeless due to widespread atrocity and genocide. It led to the unprecedented migration of Bengali Hindu refugees through the border state of West Bengal in India. In the earlier waves of migration, the caste elites and the relatively well-off resettled in West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, and other spaces voluntarily granted by the Indian state¹¹. But in the later phases, a large number of lower-caste refugees, namely the Namashudras, were markedly neglected by the same government. They were rounded up and sent to refugee camps in the arid, inhospitable region of Dandakaranya in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. The living conditions in the refugee camps were horrendous and numerous people died out of starvation and sickness¹². In 1977, the Left Front party won the state elections in West Bengal by promising the Namashudras to relocate them to Marichjhapi – an island in the delta belt of the Sundarbans. Yet they soon turned their backs after coming to power and strictly restricted all entries of refugees in the state. Thousands of stranded refugees, nonetheless, defied the government and moved to Marichjhapi by braving all the harsh measures by the police to physically

intercept their movement. Within two years, they established a community on the island with proper embankments, paved roads, fisheries, dispensaries, and a school employing local teachers¹³. In response, triggered by the anxiety of mass solidarity and prospective revolt, the Left Front government gradually blockaded the island with police boats and economically isolated the islanders. All forms of communication and transportation were cut off by the police and no reporters were allowed in the island's vicinity. The people were persistently harassed for months and barely managed to survive feeding on grass, wild leaves, and brackish water. On the last week of January 1979, hired gangs and the police force landed on the island, burnt the entire settlement, persecuted thousands of villagers and dumped their bodies in the surrounding Raimangal River. The number of casualties was never registered officially, but surviving oral accounts claim that tigers in the area became habituated man-eaters after this genocide¹⁴. As aforementioned, the island is presently access restricted as it remains closely guarded as a part of the Sundarban forest reserve area. One can neither depict the geographical location of this historical trauma, nor are there any visual evidentiary accounts of the event. Only some survivors remain to animate this traumatic history through oral testimonies. At this juncture, it becomes difficult to assess the past and articulate it through photographs, straddling the customary burden of veracity and historical verifiability.

There is a well-established practice in art photography, where artists revisit events of past violence by photographing the actual sites of those traumatic events. Joel Sternfield's photography project, *On this Site: Landscape in Memoriam* (1996), captures empty spaces in the American landscape bearing high-profile violent pasts. The serenely composed, unsuspecting images carry momentous histories of violence that changed the American civil imagination, be it the murder of individuals such as Emmett Till in 1955 and Rodney King in 1991 or mass killings like the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. Similarly, Chloe Dewe Mathews' work *Shot at Dawn* (2014) photographs spaces where young soldiers were executed by their fellowmen for offences such as desertion or cowardice. After 100 years, she visits those spaces, juxtaposing contemporary situations with historical memory. In both these works, the ordinary, non-eventful reality of the muted photographs stand in stark contrast to the traumatic histories the spaces carry. This incongruity creates an interpretive space to reflect upon the themes of photographic indexicality, past trauma and the limits of representation. In *Where the Birds Never Sing*, Bose adopts a more creative, aestheticised response to an event that remains shrouded in confusion and historical denial. With fictional recreations and allusions, he provides different narrative strata, complicating our processual encounter with the event and its heterochronic meaning in the present contemporary. The theme and colour scheme of the book appear dipped in shades of black, suggestive of the persisting halo of darkness accompanying the event. The photographs also exude the sense of fantasmatic dreamscapes due to long exposures, artificial lights, vignettes, and uncanny colour grades (Figure 2).



Figure 2.
Bose, Soumya Sankar. "Untitled",
Where the Birds Never Sing, 2020

Since the location of the massacre is inaccessible to Bose, he coordinates such photographs of spaces with recollections from survivors that rhetorically elicit the formal and affective qualities of the images. However, there is a deliberate lack of coordination between the image and the testimonial recollection allegorically referring to it. They do not communicate page-to-page as stable referents. This discrepancy harbours the logic of displacement, mnemonic slippages and a delusory sense of time and space reminiscent of traumatic memories. It also encourages an imaginative and interpretive approach around the clues residing in the interstices between words and images. As recorded in a fragment of conversation at the beginning of the book, Bose himself comes from an ancestral generation of partition refugees who migrated to India from Jessore, Bangladesh¹⁵. Therefore, the imaginative exercise of his project also serves as a portal to engage with inherited intergenerational trauma.

Marianne Hirsch coined the term "postmemory" to describe the experiences of the "generation after" who bear the personal and collective trauma of their ancestors transmitted through the means of stories, images, and behaviour amid which they grew up¹⁶. These experiences are often so deeply affecting that they

exert themselves as memories in their own right, even to the point of displacing and evacuating the person's own experiences. As Hirsh puts it, "postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation"¹⁷. The correspondences between Bose's creative response to the Marichjhapi massacre and his intergenerational identity are not far from apparent.

Aside from the imaginative and fictional elements, there is a strong current of historical 'proofs' throughout the book. It contains a rich repository of archival and found documents like refugee rehabilitation application forms and ration card tokens, soiled photographs of the Dandakaranya refugee camp, letters of appeal, political speeches and a critical essay on the massacre written by Annu Jalais. Throughout the book, on the right-hand margin of every page, different individuals and their respective ages are enlisted who "departed on 31 Jan 1979"¹⁸, with some being as young as two months old. Most of the infants were left behind by their parents or died from starvation during the economic blockade and the eventual open firing by the police in Marichjhapi. Indeed, the book opens with a photograph

Figure 3.
Bose, Soumya Sankar. "Untitled",
Where the Birds Never Sing, 2020





[Left] Figure 4.
Bose, Soumya Sankar. "Untitled",
Where the Birds Never Sing, 2020



[Right] Figure 5.
Bose, Soumya Sankar. "Untitled",
Where the Birds Never Sing, 2020

of the Marichjhapi Island shot from the Kumirmari Island opposite it, separated by an expansive river (Figure 3). It is the only image that squarely refers to the actual site of the massacre – albeit from a distance – after which the book plunges into its critical-aesthetic logic. The sporadic narrative composed of the texts and the images oscillates between factual verity and fictional interventions. But Bose tries to move beyond the concerns of fiction and non-fiction, or authenticity and inauthenticity in responding to historical trauma.

The book's endeavour rests in addressing new modes of remembering a historically suppressed traumatic event after a caesura of time. A significant component of it is the critical engagement with oral narratives. By conversing with the few survivors of the massacre, Bose fleshes out fragments of conversations that elliptically invoke certain elements for reconstructing traumatic memories through photographs. Focussing on the recurring tropes and motifs in the oral accounts of the survivors, he stages symbolic scenes with actors. It includes the nightmare of huts burnt by the police (Figure 4) and the constant threat of Royal Bengal tigers nearing human settlements in the Sundarbans after tasting the blood of massacred refugees (Figure 5). Oral accounts provide a vehicle for the photographs to travel back in time and visually envision the scenes of historical trauma as an alleviative exercise. They open up a heterochronic site in creative dialogue with memory and subjectivity.

As Bose recounts, people have developed new rhetoric and language of recalling the past of Marichjhapi. Instead of remembering the horrific, they

often narrate their tales of valorous escape, either by “punching a policeman” or deceiving the police by hiding inside a boat¹⁹. Such retellings instigate narrative agency to work through the traumatic event without excoriating the extremity of its violence. An acute sense of agency also surfaces in the portraits of the survivors, where the staging reflects the physical elements, emotions, and authority conjured during the testimonial process. The atmosphere evoked in the oral recollections by the survivors provides the backdrop of their portraits. Unlike the prevailing image repertoire of refugees in mass media and journalistic discourse, the survivors of the Marichjhapi massacre participate in the lyrical construction of their images through oral narratives (Figures 6 and 7). Every retelling of trauma is also an act of reconstituting the image of the self, transcribing the event as an agentive component of the survivor’s identity.

Accessing oral history as a means of entering the past in the present not only entails an interpretation of the testimony but also includes a thorough, reflective engagement with “the language employed, the ways of telling, and the structures of explanation”²⁰. The densely aestheticised language of the visuals in the book brings this interpretive translation to the surface, giving way to the rhetorical interplay between oral recollections and photographs or words and images.

The aim, therefore, is not to reproduce the incomprehensibility of the traumatic event but to develop new ways of creatively processing it – not as victims but as storytellers. Since oral narratives go through perpetual transfigurations over time, there is no definite closure of traumatic recollection. James E. Young notes that

[Left] Figure 6.
Bose, Soumya Sankar. “Untitled”, Where
the Birds Never Sing, 2020

[Right] Figure 7.
Bose, Soumya Sankar. “Untitled”, Where
the Birds Never Sing, 2020



testimonies are not neutral embodiments of proof or truth; they actively intervene in the historical discourse by interpreting the past in the light of the present²¹. Testimonies mutate according to the fluid relationality between the traumatic past, the present contemporary of recalling, and the future. In this traversal of time and narrative axes lies the transformative potential of Soumya Sankar Bose's project, putting forward a processual exercise of assessing the past trauma. While the locus of the work is the Marichjhapi massacre, Bose does not fix his approach to the eventive nature of historical trauma. Instead, he seeks to locate trauma in the dynamic temporality of Marichjhapi and the memories of people who survived the state assault – whether a particular photograph in the book is a staged event, an allusion, or that of an actual survivor ceases to matter. Working beyond the attempt to document the massacre or represent the lack of narratives about it, *Where the Birds Never Sing* activates an inventive hermeneutic process of responding to the traumatic past with creative and imaginative investment.

In the present context of citizenship crises in India, the contemporaneity of Bose's work figures acutely. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed in 2019 claims to provide citizenship on religious grounds only to six non-Muslim refugee communities from the neighbouring countries who entered India before December 31, 2014. Bose produced his book against the backdrop of such unbridled expression of religious xenophobia by the Indian state. The Marichjhapi massacre gathers renewed significance mirroring the present political scenario, both connected by a heterochronic tissue. As Giorgio Agamben writes, thinking about the contemporary introduces an "essential dishomogeneity" in time, for "the contemporary puts to work a special relationship between different times... an encounter between times and generations"²². A figure or a work achieves contemporaneity through its function of interpolating time, which also entails the capacity of "transforming it and putting it in relation with other times"²³.

The narrative fabric of the book is rooted in multimodal time as it creatively situates the past in the present to initiate a memorialisation process for a traumatic event that remains denied or disputed. There is a conscious attempt to inflect the articulation of historical trauma towards a transformative praxis. New modalities of accessing the past engender new forms of envisioning agency. On the other hand, recording a traumatic history as an objective, verifiable archival resource risks reinstating and triggering the source of that particular traumatic memory. Indeed, the structural design of the book addresses this issue. In the first conversation fragment in the book, there is a dialogue between the photographer and a survivor who is "reluctant to divulge anything" about the Marichjhapi massacre²⁴. The survivor claims: "past is past. Whatever gone is gone. Walking down a memory lane 40 years back would only bring fire and blood"²⁵. When asked about a rape survivor he knows since the massacre, he sharply asks, "what will you get out of this?"²⁶ Soon, the conversation breaks down and the hallucinatory journey of the book starts in the following pages. Here, the opening page mounts a self-critical introspection about the project. Eventually, the book ends in a polyptych composed of four

staged images of an actor with a bird mask perched upon a tree, accompanied by a letter of appeal written by the rape survivor to the Refugee Committee of Bengal. No definitive answers attend to the truth or the extent of the massacre as the book consciously experiments with the muddy terrains of traumatic memory. Neither does the project showcase itself as an accurate representation of the massacre. But it provokes conversations regarding the representative paradigm of historical trauma beyond the indexical burden of photographs and stable archives. Bose's project evokes the lyrical potency of images and fictional reconstruction, revisiting the past quivering with different modulations like a song. After all, "while every morning the birds sing everywhere else, in Marichjhapi they never do..."²⁷

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