‘Waiting without knowing\Waiting as knowing’ : My diary notes on ‘Dark Time’ and border regimes

By Meghna Bhardwaj

9\05\2025

Today I have completed 92 days from the date I filed my German freelance visa application in New Delhi. And this waiting period that continues, has led me to many embodied and political reflections that I wish to share in this note. I realise that waiting itself is not the cause of despair. I am a dancer, I understand, to some degree, how time works. Waiting in an exchange that includes trust and communication is possible. What makes waiting challenging and worth questioning is when it perpetuates from practices of secrecy, surveillance, and coercive action. It feels like a trial when you are facing an authority that assumes the right to withhold information that could have a direct and immediate impact on your life circumstances. As artists of the 21st century, one of the key issues at hand for us is international mobility and I argue that it is this kind of waiting, what I call dark time, that artists from the Global South often face in their journeys towards the Global North, and which therefore makes this issue political. This dark time, in my opinion, is not a metaphor or an emotion. It is a strategically crafted bureaucratic device that State powers employ to control and hierarchise international movement. For me in the last few days this dark time has become very palpable- in the way I introduce myself as a file number, and interact with automated responses and nameless officials displaying perfect symptoms of a kafkaesque society. It is dark because it is a time manipulated by procedural disinvolvement of human empathy. In this sense, I don’t see it as objective or reasonable. I find it dramatic, dystopic, excessive, like a ghost house. And I start to desperately seek haptic, trustworthy, human anchors whose promise, I hope, the art and cultural bureaucracies of today can continue to keep.

The measure of and the site upon which this dark time acts itself out is the body. Body processes it in the form of fear, panic, self-suspicion, and anxiety. Body experiences it in the form of suspension of her freedom to act for herself and make her own choices. This is how borders reach and breach bodies. I must admit at this point that I do not have a legacy of transiting and moving across borders. In fact, the opposite is true. I come from parents who have hardly ever sat in an airplane. So, in this sense, my relationship to Western borders is very aspirational. However, at this moment, I find myself leaning into the testimonies of my artist friends from countries facing wars and authoritarian regimes, whose journey to the West has involved confronting situations of life and death. One of them, a Syrian artist, arrived in Germany as an illegal refugee after spending 26 days on a boat route. Another one from Iran, could not make it to an artist residency after they were arrested for a public performance in their own country.

As a dancer from South Asia while I feel trapped at the hands of the visa regimes, I realise it is my responsibility to learn as much as I can the extent to which borders harm the movement of human bodies. Polly Pallister Wilkins in her essay titled, ‘Walking, not flowing: The migrant

caravan, and the geo-infrastructure of unequal mobility' (2019) is very sharp in condemning the use of the words such as flows, pouring, wave, by the Western media while describing the conditions in which Hondurans cross Mexican borders to get to the United States. She writes, "The widespread use of watery and other natural metaphors when talking about migration journeys hides both the realities of and the reasons for the people's journeys. To talk of rivers, streams, floods, and flows masks the experiences of the thousands of people who are walking thousands of kilometers. They are walking along roads, up hills and across borders; they are tired and hungry, and their feet hurt." The dark time experienced in this kind of border crossing is so tactile that it literally leaves very visible evidence on the bodies of those crossing, worse, turns living bodies into dead and disappeared.

On May 1st 2025, the local newspaper Indian express published an editorial on an Indian political prisoner Gulfisha Fatima, written by her former co-inmates, Devangana Kalita and Natasha Narwal[1]. These women were arrested by the Delhi police for protesting against a Citizenship Amendment bill passed by the Indian government, as a crackdown on the immigrant muslim communities of India. The bill had sparked widespread communal riots in Delhi in 2021. While Kalita and Narwal were released soon after, Fatima's bail application remains pending for five years now. Recollecting their own days in prison with Fatima, Narwal and Kalita write, "It was difficult not to get overcome by despair. The question of how long this could last would never leave us." In this context, opposed to incessant walking of the Hondurans, the dark time unfolds in the form of complete immobility. In the form of imprisonment. Yet Fatima works to make this time move. As Narwal and Kalita describe, "Fatima often laughs and complains about having no free time. Co-inmates are always rushing to her cell. There are applications to be written, legal orders to be read out, greeting cards to be made, lipstick to be applied. She is a confidante for many, opening her heart to those who seek solace in her warmth."

In the year 1978-79, Taiwanese performance artist Tehching Hseih created Cage Piece as part of which he lived inside a cage for a whole year. Hseih had migrated to the United States illegally to pursue his artistic career, and had spent about 14 years without legal documents. With Cage Piece, his intention was to investigate endurance, and convert life time into art time. These days, I am quite frequently reminded of the days of the pandemic, when all of us experienced a traumatic self-caging, a locking down of our bodies. Back then I had attempted some investment into this idea of self-caging, mostly to cure myself out of isolation and claustrophobia by devising creative and communitarian artistic actions. In this time, I developed the first two works of my ongoing artistic research Yarning, in which I work with knitting gestures and moving body. The first one is titled 'bearing witness to the knotting skies'[2] which I created in a small triangular corner of my room while contemplating a dichotomy between containment and horizons. The second one, titled 'Do you remember the touch of a stitch?'[3] is a curation of visual essays I collected via an online open call that was motivated at gathering as many hands as

[1] https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/devangana-kalita-and-natasha-narwal-write-our-friend-gulfisha-fatima-9975469/
[2] https://www.meghnabhardwaj.com/bearing-witness-to-the-knotting-skies
[3] https://www.meghnabhardwaj.com/do-you-remember-the-touch-of-a-stitch

possible to relive/recreate a sense of touch, in the midst of the existing crisis of congregation and community.

To wait in the dark is to endure is to suffer: In the words of Hannah Arendt, 'Is not a sufferer a political agent?'[4]. And therefore as one waits to seek mobility, one suffers, urges for action, and eventually acquires a political agency. This agency is what I believe is the fruit of this waiting, this dark time. I have constantly been filling up this waiting period with my acts of reading and honoring stories of migration from varied contexts. In some moments out of a sense of responsibility, in others to tune into a sense of suffering. Always with an aim to claim my time out of its standstill-ness, and rescue it into intuitive, meaningful, felt, and politically evolving time.

Artistically, I am excited by the idea of duration in the way performance scholar Andre Lepecki conceptualises it with examples of several durational performance art pieces including Hseih's[5]. Lepecki argues that duration, or that which takes a long time, provokes us to act rather than to be acted upon. In this sense, duration or what I am referring to as waiting time or dark time is transformational. Just like the days of the pandemic, these days too I once again find myself staying in the same room with the triangular corner all the time, other than a short 40 minute walking break I take to go to the nearby park. The time is getting darker because while I wait for my visa, I am witnessing blackouts and emergency mock drills as threats of an Indo-Pak war loom over Northern India. I try to find a balance between my sense of mobility and immobility, between my political momentum and a complete lack of physical momentum. As Hannah Arendt said, we can claim freedom if we continue to move politically (Arendt, 1993). And therefore, my question is no more just how to move between borders, it is now how to move politically and collectively, so freedom can be claimed. I want to search for this political movement in my dance and artistic movement. Yet a part of me resists dancing. Because I realise that to tune into the sensations and intuitions of immobility is also a lot of work to be done. Maybe some answers on how to continue to move politically lie in acknowledging and embodying immense immobility that some parts of this world fight today, while others continue to flow and flourish.

Note: *This text was originally meant to be presented live at Backstage Club, Dusseldorf as part of a Professionals Meet dedicated to questions of multiplicity and strategies of togetherness. However, it had to be delivered as a zoom talk due to my visa situation at the time. I had to eventually withdraw my freelance visa application after a wait of nearly five months, and file an application for a short stay visa that I received in 8 working days. During this time, I suffered considerable financial, professional, and emotional loss I am still recovering from. I express my gratitude for the team of Backstage Club and Tanzrecherche NRW KULTURsekretariat for giving space to my voice. I understand that to be able to express myself freely and publicly is a huge privilege that many in this world continue to fight for.*

[4] Maurizio d'Entrèves, The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt (London: Routledge, 1993, 87
[5] https://intermsofperformance.site/keywords/duration/andre-lepecki