Border-Fluid

Kohila Kurunathan

"I don't feel I can go back to either place," I said of Saudi Arabia, my birthplace, and Sri Lanka, the birthplace of my parents. "You're stateless," she said, smiling. I agreed with this identification.

In the 2015 exhibition, *Beyond Measure: Domesticating Distance*, artist Asma Sultana's installation, *Wherever the glimpse of a free spirit exists that will be my home*, expresses the artist's sense of loss after leaving Dhaka—a loss physically manifested in the loss of her hair. Using a white petticoat and blouse as surface and ground, she creates embroidery sketches using her hair as the thread. These gestures take the shape of water, a metaphorical rendering of the artist's stream of consciousness. "Water," writes curator Ambereen Siddiqui, "[has an] ability to find and make space for itself, morphing to adapt to its surroundings, while maintaining its own attributes" (Siddiqui 2015, 36).

From my earliest days, my litmus test for a world map's legitimacy has been to check whether Sri Lanka is included, and the accuracy of its shape. A second test verifies the form of the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula. Surrounded by water, these borders are easy to confirm, and I check on them them as if they were mine to claim

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Info Bomb: The Subcontinent Newsroom (2013) centers on the release of a fictional document by the United Nations. Signed in 1947 by Mohandas K. Gandhi, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and Cyril Radcliffe, "the document agrees to the redrawing of South Asia's borders in the year 2014 on the basis of a more equitable division of natural resources and a greater ecological balance" (Soske 2013). Reactions to and analyses of the document's discovery, the document itself and the circumstances of its creation are collected in a series of video interviews and print articles published across three issues of *The Subcontinent Times* newspaper.

In an interview included in the project's documentary component—*Section 1: New Maps* by Rajee Jeji Shergill and Jon Soske—Dilip M. Menon, Director of the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa, shares his account of a correspondence between Gandhi and French historian, Fernand Braudel (at the time a prisoner of war in Lübeck, Germany). Braudel apparently asks Gandhi about the relationship between nature and sovereignty, to which Gandhi responds "water." Braudel inquires further, "So, do you mean the fluvial as that which stands outside history and asserts its own sovereignty?" Gandhi replies, simply: "Water is God."

Menon highlights that Gandhi and Jinnah's agreement was based on sovereignty over bodies of water, an idea he says has been "mischievously and politically buried because we do not want to share waters; we might want to share a history, but we don't want to share waters." He describes a meeting between the architects of Partition where the redrawn map is revealed—a map in which the five rivers of the Punjab flow over the subcontinent, creating the likeness of a hand raised in a salutation.

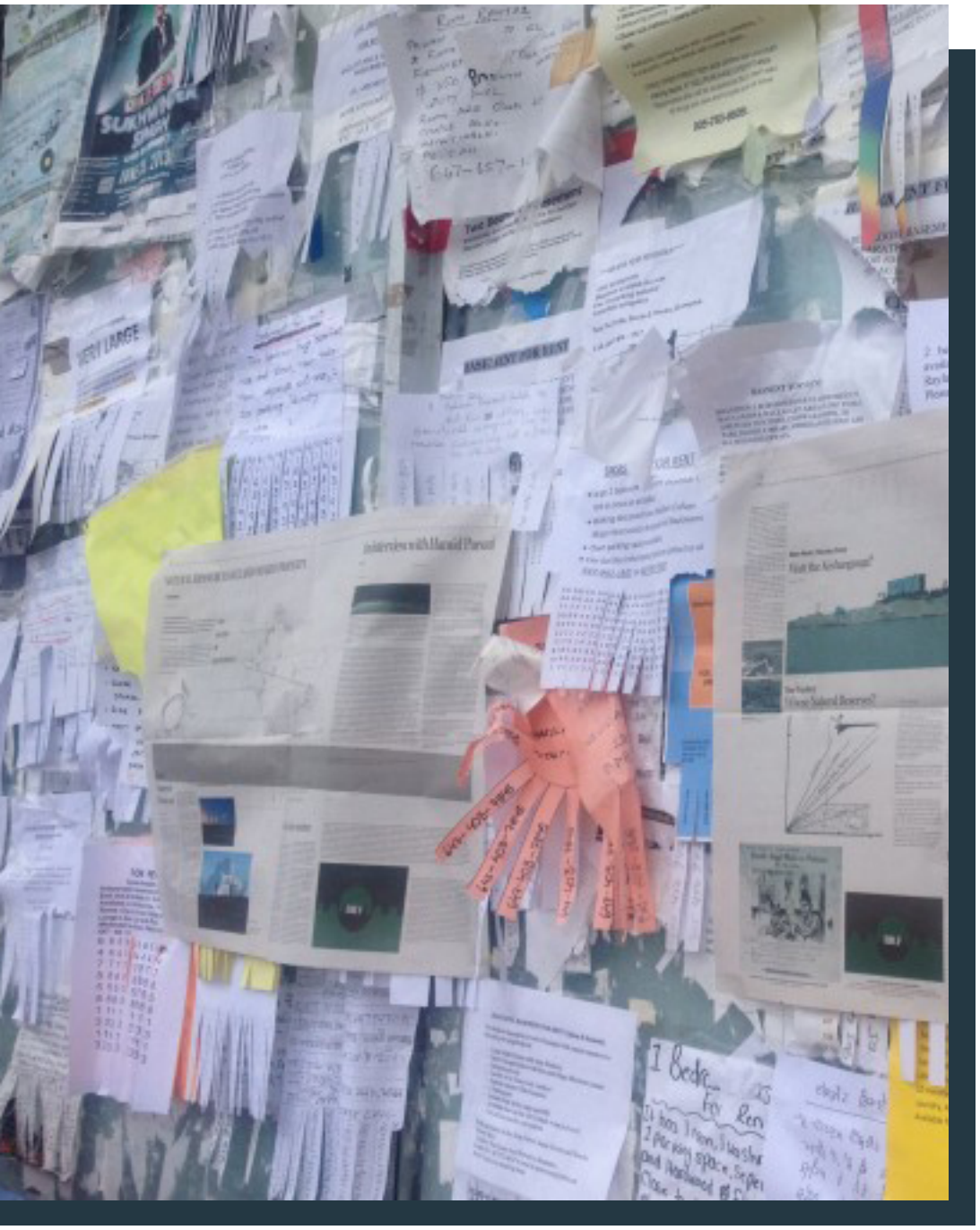
An article in *The Subcontinent Times*, titled "Whose Natural Reserves?," discusses the ambiguous and questionable nature of the logic informing the South Asia's redrawn borders. What exactly is included in the term "natural reserves?" How will they be shared, and how will they be accessed?

Can water, in its materiality, ever be divided? It seems no one knows.

Fathima and Zahra Husain, the artist-curators behind *Info Bomb*, have devised a scenario in which those responsible for Partition take immediate action against their decision, by creating a moment of undoing—"The Unhappening"—sixty-seven years into the future. In this alternative version of the present, the sites of natural resources are determined to be unified spaces and shared between the surrounding nations, although the document provides no instructions about how citizens might reach these areas. Menon suggests water as another method of demarcation, so that borders lose their very definition, as the rivers "assert their own sovereignty" (Shergill and Soske 2013).

The key premise in *Info Bomb* allows for the occupation of spaces that exist beyond dominant histories and their resulting borders. Freed from these impositions, our forms as individuals and communities take on the fluidity of the waterways—confluences, estuaries, tributaries—that are always on the move, and in a state of change. Menon's assertion that "we don't want to share waters" can be further clarified as no *state* wants to share waters, where the sharing of water between peoples leads to a dissolution of arbitrary state lines.

Two articles by factAgency (artist Monika Löve's fictitious news agency) in *The Subcontinent Times* report on phenomena that further fragment these delineations. In one case, the overlapping borders of two states that disagree has resulted in enclaves, which are unwanted by both states, so that the residents of these between-territories are rendered stateless. In a second storyline, an area is so heavily guarded by the military that it becomes isolated from all human activity, and involuntarily evolves into an ecological habitat preservation area—a naturally demilitarized zone. Just as people rely on borders for a sense of identity, so too the space between



borders gains an identity from its people.

> *Following the events of 1983's Black July, thousands of Tamils left Sri Lanka and migrated to Europe, Australia, Canada, and the Middle East—the last being the closest in proximity to the place that was called home, but also the one least likely to grant any sort of citizenship. In some ways, there was a repetition of what had just been left behind/escaped—an un-wanting that happens all over again.*

In the 2009 exhibition *South-South: Interruptions & Encounters*, Allan deSouza's installation *Bombay* weaves together two narratives: one of an East African man who is kidnapped into slavery, taken to India, and later returns to Zanzibar; the other of deSouza's own father, who leaves India for Kenya.

deSouza begins with a precise historical moment: a photograph of Bombay, the man whose story he pieces together. Named after the city of his residence, Bombay is released after his master's death and sent back to Africa. In Zanzibar he joins a retinue led by two British officers, serving as a translator with his knowledge of Hindustani.

Bombay, in this photographic starting point from 1860 Zanzibar, is described by the photographer J.A. Grant:

> His face is turned to one side, away from the camera, with his eyes seemingly focused at a point out of the camera's frame. Closer inspection reveals his eyes to be angled back; not looking at, but watching the camera as if from behind the shelter of gauze. It's an apprehensive gaze, knowing he is being recorded; turning his face away to avoid the camera's scrutiny, but glancing back just to keep an eye on the watcher. (Ajji and Soske 2009, 30)

Bombay's self-consciousness and awareness separate him from the photographer's intentions. Despite almost being lost to history, this photo serves as a beginning and an anchor, and Bombay remains a distinct figure throughout the exhibition.

With the camera standing in for historic inspection, this self-conscious framing can be applied to that imaginary moment in 1947 when Gandhi, Jinnah and Radcliffe, realizing the impending impact of their work, sought to belatedly atone for their actions by sending into the future a gesture that attempted to undo the conflict that would come to characterize the subcontinent over sixty years later.

After drawing a line between Bombay (the place) and Zanzibar, deSouza overlays the story of Bombay (the man) with the path of his father's migrations, from Bombay to Kenya, and incorporates his own journeys from Kenya to India and England.

Standing at India Gate in what is now Mumbai, deSouza, his father, and the man Bombay are transposed onto one other, creating a fixed point multiplied across time. deSouza's text-based wall installation reads, "Now, all I have are the fantasies and inventions of the passage from India to Africa. They fabricate genealogy; not a family tree but a root of familiarity. I swaddle myself within this security blanket of imagined history."

My mother's stories have been the root of my familiarity with Sri Lanka—particularly those stories about my grandfather, ones that demonstrate commonalities between he and I. Growing up, I nurtured these traits, so that when we eventually met and overlaid ourselves onto one other, there would be no boundaries or gaps in continuity. That moment, trapped in the future, remains a fixed point in my own imagined history.

From afar, the lines sewn into in Sultana's fabric are invisible; from a middle ground they just begin to be discernible, still only a slight distinction from the fabric. But up close, they are defined lines, weaving through the petticoat and through each other, strengthened in their repetition.

In shifting the definitions of that which is outlined, defended and neatly demarcated to a fluvial space, the flag of permanence is lowered, and then drowned. This alternative space is labeled "in-between" when viewed from the borders, and deemed uninhabitable.

Unchecked by boundaries, the movements of those who traverse this space reshape its form from within. The fluid passage the space affords makes it more freely inhabitable, as bodies cease to be defined by their borders. In this way those who are labeled as unwanted or in-between reject the border and its ability to define, giving new form to the process of definition itself.

Today, I have erased the number of my house
And removed the stain of identity from my street's forehead
And I have wiped off the directions on each road
But if you really want to meet me
Then knock at the doors of every country
Every city, every street
And wherever the glimpse of a free spirit exists
That will be my home.

Amrita Pritam, "Mera Patta" [1]

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