

Science Fiction, Speculative Feminism, and the Violence of Colonialism: Listening to an Extremely Grainy Photograph

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Archaeological narratives are frequently sites of epistemic violence. If we are left with the remnants of violent events wrought by colonialism and heteropatriarchy, how might it be possible to pick them up and piece them together towards speculative feminist ends? In this essay, we propose that science fiction and sonic epistemologies can actively oppose the hegemony of violence embedded within archaeology. The rational is shaped by the visually dominant epistemologies of Eurocentric models of knowledge production (Daston & Galison 2007). Yet “there is always more than one map for a territory, and sound provides a particular path through history” (Sterne 2003: 3). We would like to explore how the sonic can be tasked with opening up the potentials of the extra-rational.

What follows is a thought experiment by two researchers, both of whom due to particular circumstances (including the global Covid-19 pandemic) have been unable to visit a site that they have undertaken to investigate—Sitabenga cave in Puta, Chhattisgarh state in Central India. In keeping with the conspicuously partial nature of “knowing” a cave—whether or not one is reliant only upon scholarly and internet sources available—this text is fragmentary. Its fragments are waypoints of thought and consideration along our journey. We begin this knowing that what we imagine it to be might be more than it is. Our wayfinding is complicated; by stopping and pausing to reconsider, we come to know.



Image: Entrance to the Sita Bangira (Sitabenga) Cave, Ramgarh, Chota Nagpur.
Photographer: Beglar, Joseph David. 1874

British Library Online Gallery:

<https://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/e/largeimage58181.html>

The image of the entrance to the Sita Bangira (Sitabenga) Cave, Ramgarh, Chota Nagpur found on the British Library website is quite striking. It is an extremely grainy photograph, with the main abyss of the cave a deep, dark black, the shadows of the rock dimly allowing for the contours of the rockface to emerge. On the left, a smooth curved surface sloping upwards to the top of the cave is discernible on the right, the rockface is rougher and the surface leading up on the ground directly in front of the cave opening appears to show a few large carved-out steps or benches. There looks to be a figure of a person on the right of the picture, bending over, and perhaps another figure seated behind, though the quality of the image makes it difficult to discern. Its dominant shadows and the large dark abyss we are centrally faced with provoke reflection.

In the short story “The Adivasi will not Dance,” Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar traces a history of Adivasi experiences in India, particularly in relation to dominant societies and extractive capitalism. *They pinned me to the ground. They did not let me speak, they did not let me protest, they did not even let me raise my head and look at my fellow musicians and dancers as they were being beaten up by the police. All I could hear were their cries for mercy* (Shekhar 2015: 169). Shekhar writes from a history of knowing and experience that is local to the region of the Sitabenga caves. What we find striking about this passage is the way by which violence is heard, its impact is heard, even if it is not seen. The protagonist cannot see what was happening because he is being forcibly held down.

Control over visibility has longstanding colonial roots, as Ashish Chadha (2002) has argued with regard to visual representation within archaeology as a method for the Archaeological Survey of India. Colonial, scientific, and anthropological gazes merged to create what Tapati Guha-Thakurta has called the “picturesque” lineage by early travelers like James Fergusson (2010). Such conflated forms of seeing, a colonial gaze, produce visual practices that distance, objectify, and control the other. The act of seeing is an act of control.

If we consider Western modernity’s sensorial apparatus as an under-acknowledged extension of its rational, cis-heteropatriarchal, capitalist, colonialist character, how do we approach listening to Sitabenga in the absence of a physical visit to the site? We must take seriously the way Eurocentric modes of perception permeate our ontoepistemological framing of the world (Goh 2020).

The extremely grainy photograph above was taken by Joseph David Beglar, an Armenian-Indian engineer working for the Archaeological Survey of India in 1874, and forms part of the many documents in his 1874–76 reports from the South Eastern Provinces. Beglar describes a figure of Sita as a “two-armed female holding a water-can and a rosary;” elsewhere “within the cave are several sculptures; one of a female, broken, represents her with palms joined at the chest, and half-hiding, half displaying, the almond-shaped emblem which I have before noticed.” Later on, he speculates: “It appears from an examination of the valley that it was at some remote period a lake, for this valley has no outlet, except through

the tunnel; supposing it to have been a lake, the caves noticed would be most picturesquely situated on its margin.”¹

In conventional myth, Sita is molded as the ideal wife to Rama, faithful until the end. But in the short story *Forest* written by C.S. Lakshmi—under her pseudonym, Ambai—it is Sita’s strength that is emphasized. In the version of the *Ramayana* which Ambai’s protagonist imagines Sita writing from her own perspective, we discover that Sita, when just a mere baby, found that she was able to lift up Shiva’s bow with one hand, and as a result she felt she must seek out someone who was stronger than her to marry.² If the conventional imbalance of strength can be reimagined, what else might be possible in or with Sitabenga cave? What might the almond-shaped emblem or the lake-side location bring to our reimaginings?

Writing about “cognitive injustice” in his book titled *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*, Boaventura De Sousa Santos writes:

Modern Western thinking is an abyssal thinking. It consists of a system of visible and invisible distinctions, the invisible ones being the foundation of the visible ones. The invisible distinctions are established through radical lines that divide social reality into two realms, the realm of “this side of the line” and the realm of “the other side of the line”. The division is such that “the other side of the line” vanishes as reality becomes nonexistent, and is indeed produced as nonexistent. Nonexistent means not existing in any relevant or comprehensible way of being. Whatever is produced as nonexistent is radically excluded because it lies beyond the realm of what the accepted conception of inclusion considers to be its other.³

If Beglar’s photograph is manufactured and enabled by the colonial gaze, then its centering of an abyss and shadow might well represent the abyssal modern Western thinking that Santos points to, which obviates anything outside it.

Descending the hill by the road we ascended (the only means of access I could hear of), and skirting not the base of the central anvil, but the edge of the plateau at its foot, one comes upon a place known as the Paturia dhas; this is a semi-circular tower-like natural projection of the rock forming a natural round tower rising sheer out of the tangled scrub below, absolutely vertical for several hundred feet. ... This wall, again, is cut into a bench, so that people can comfortably sit round the open space and lean against the wall, which forms, as it were, a continuous battlement to the tower. It is said that Rama and his companions in exile used to sit here and enjoy the nautches got up for his amusement. On one of these occasions the clothes of one of the dancers, who in India are invariably women of easy virtue (Paturias, in fact), had the misfortune to slip off, exposing her person, and she, through shame, immediately jumped down, or rather slid down, the precipice through a gap in the surrounding wall which still exists, and through which I was also very near following her, as the ground inside slopes to this gap, and the grass which carpets the place is treacherously slippery.⁴

¹ Beglar 1882: 37–41.

² Ambai 2006.

³ Santos 2014: 118.

⁴ J.D. Beglar, *Report of Tours in the South-eastern Provinces in 1874–75 and 1875–76* Vol.13 by, p. 38.

In Beglar's report on Ramgarh district, this anecdote appears immediately before a description of the partly carved cave known as Sita Benga, its physicality, its meaning in relation to local practices, and the myths of Rama and Sita. The incident on a slippery patch, which Beglar himself almost falls on, is presented as a mere passing comment.

Beglar recounts a story whose meaning for him resides in the violence enacted on a women's body, on a sexualized othered body; his interest seems to expose the deep sense of control within cis-heteropatriarchy and colonial desire. The less-than-human status of the racialized and sexualized other in his narrative is clear. The multiple shame he projects onto the woman around her purported lack of virtue exacerbates her misfortune: she jumps further into danger due to the stigma and humiliation ascribed to her. We wonder: does this woman make it into Beglar's narrative because he fantasizes about hearing traces of her screams as she falls? As he looks down that gap, does his disciplined vision consider the acoustic histories that he will only be able to record as they relate to the violence of the place? Violence cannot be visually or textually represented in the same way that it can be heard.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 1905 short story "Sultana's Dream" inverts traditional patriarchal gender relations: women lead in all matters of intellect, horticulture, sociopolitical life, science, technology, and artistry, and men are shut away, having failed at their war efforts. As a work of feminist science fiction, it contrasts the protagonist's deeply engrained patriarchal worldview with her dreams of a different world. Hossain raises common patriarchal arguments about women's lack of strength compared to men's, only to deny these their central logic as Sultana's companion retorts: "A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race." Women triumph with their cunning technological inventions. Harnessing solar power enables them to defeat enemy troops and keep their society free from disease, free from drought, free from crime, and free from police. Theirs seems to be an existence that is without capitalist exploitation, and with ample time for creativity and pleasure. Perhaps the alternative logics which enable Hossain's imagined society to flourish can be applied to a feminist envisioning of Sitabenga.

Against the purported objectivity of Western science, Black feminists such as Sylvia Wynter have pinpointed how its universalizing principles have come to be overrepresented beyond their specific histories and contexts to operate for all of humanity.⁵ In focusing on the expansive grounds that exist beyond the narrow terrains of Eurocentric epistemologies, we would like to search for the extra-rational, which means acknowledging the always-already excluded as a viable and valuable starting point of knowing.

The manifold epistemic injustices perpetuated daily against us are invisibilized by the epistemic injustice double bind that prevents these occurrences even being fully recognized. Eurocentric modes of perception permeate our epistemological framing of the world, in which knowing and being are conventionally taken to be separate. We bring these precepts with us when we visit a site, and they are encoded in the documents through which we learn about it. The many ways in which colonial sensory regimes shape our understanding of the world means that the challenges of sonic epistemologies are yet to be fully explored. Once we

⁵ Wynter 2003.

are able to critique archaeology's colonial, racist, imperialist, and masculinist biases, as manifest in interpretations of a site such as Sitabenga, how can rethinking the senses and what they deliver to us ontologically and epistemologically help us build critical, novel understandings of the site?⁶ We think that our senses, when taken seriously, have the potential to upend our usual approaches to "knowing" a site; we may have to leave what we think we know about a place, previous human behaviours, and their corresponding sounds and sights at the door.

How can listening be a way of knowing, when one is faced only with static visual and textual documents? Tina Campt's work allows us to find meaning in the silence, to listen to images and what we have been disciplined to see as quiet, so that we can consider their subjects' resistance and agency. Each image contains "the unspoken relations that structure them,"⁷ and our listening can help bring these relations to the surface in an exploration of the "modality of quiet—a sublimely expressive unsayability."⁸ Discursive and archaeological representations of the ancient exist in a contemporary context of quietness, a sonic state in which one has to learn what to listen for or to.

If the traces of screams of an Indigenous woman falling are met in Beglar's tale with cruel indifference, might a feminist reimagining of the scene suggest that the screams were amplified through the cave, its dome-like architecture allowing the soundwaves to focus and ricochet across the lake that Beglar imagined to have once existed at its entrance? Might the magnified screams, instead of signifying shame and humiliation, have been intended to alert other women to her misfortune and need for help?

We would like to experiment with ways of knowing those things that have been hidden from us or erased through the violences of coloniality and heteropatriarchy. The concept of knowledge, as it is commonly invoked as fixed, solid, and discrete, elides the process of knowing. When faced with multiple opacities, with overwhelming unknowing, we can bring the shadows or abysses of knowledge into focus. It is in the graininess of the photograph that we hear a different herstory to Sitabenga cave; it is in not seeing Sita in the cave itself that her strength becomes manifest and the landscape itself indexes her power; and it is in the simple inversion of *Sultana's Dream* that we find the extra-rational and sonic epistemologies coming together within a feminist speculative future.

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⁶ Goh 2020.

⁷ Campt 2017: 8.

⁸ *ibid.*: 4.

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