

Fleshthetics of the Postcolonial Body: Examining Contested Identities in the Works of Studio Oleomingus

Soham Adhikari

Presidency University, India

Aritro Bhattacharya

Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, India

Abstract

Through a holistic analysis of the games by Studio Oleomingus, this paper will explore the concept of "Fleshthetics," examining how the postcolonial body/Flesh is a palimpsest and collage of both lived experience(s) and intergenerational phantom histories. The games chosen for this study are *A Museum of Dubious Splendors* (2018), *In the Pause Between the Ringing* (2019), *The Indifferent Wonder of an Edible Place* (2020), *The Uncertain Repetitions of Truth* (2020), and *Folds of a Separation* (2022). The Flesh is not simply rooted in materiality, but is a symptom of a condition, an assemblage, an absent-present body. In Studio Oleomingus's games, the postcolonial body/Flesh is inherently Plastic. Influenced by discourses enveloping it, the Flesh manifests itself and its Plasticity in a non-linear spatiotemporality. By playing and analysing the games, this paper shows how the blended style of play accentuates the fragmented existence of the postcolonial Flesh. As such, this paper forms only an introduction into the larger domain of Fleshthetics, unearthing untapped potential that can be harvested through further work beyond the simple constraints of media, genre and academic discipline.

Keywords

Fleshthetics; plasticity; postcolonial; videogames; Oleomingus; chrononormativity; erasure; memorypoetics.

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হাঁস ছিল, সজারু, (ব্যাকরণ মানি না),
হয়ে গেল 'হাঁসজারু' কেমনে তা জানি না।

—Sukumar Ray, “Khichuri,” 1923

Introduction

The Untranslatability of Indefinability

This epigraph, extracted from the poem “Khichuri” by the renowned Bengali nonsense poet Sukumar Ray (1923/1987), portrays a sense of becoming untranslatable through an overtly playful and highly localised linguistic order. The nuance of this nonsensical couplet lies within the nexus of Bengali sociopolitics, linguistics and spatiotemporality. As such, it is impossible to translate it without translating the entirety of this nexus. As Sukanta Choudhury comments in his Translator’s Preface to Sukumar Ray’s *Abol Tabol*, “clever men might debate whether nonsense can be translated; but I reassure myself that at worst, the result will still be nonsense” (see Ray, 1923/1987, section “Translator’s Preface,” para. 1.).

This couplet is an appropriate gateway into the paper at hand. Studio Oleomingus, whose games we will be discussing in this paper, have cited “nonsense writing, especially in vernacular, . . . tales by Sukumar Ray” as one of their crucial influences, due to Ray’s “remarkable negotiation with the limits of what language will allow you to remember” (Jani in Dutta, 2022, para. 24.). This highlights how palpably the themes of messiness and liminality of history, memory and identity of the postcolonial subject are present in their games. Consequently, their games are perfectly fit to accommodate us and our own experiences dealing with postcolonial subjectivity.

When we first came across the subtitle of this special issue, “Culturing Videogames in India,” our primary response was to question “identity” in relation to postcolonial bodies. Inevitably, we found ourselves asking a simple question: What would games inspired by indigenous roots and possessing a very “Indian” identity be like? The games by Studio Oleomingus are one version of the answer to that question. Studio Oleomingus is an independent game and art studio based in Chala, India, who practises, as its website proclaims, “at the intersection of post colonial writing and interactive fiction, . . . [using] videogame spaces as sites of discourse, resistance and record” (Studio Oleomingus, 2019a, para. 2.). Through their games, they aim to investigate colonial power structures, the histories they conceal, and how interactive fiction can “pollute” a single, reductive account of the past or a people (Studio Oleomingus, 2019a, para. 2.). Their investigation of profoundly postcolonial themes and topics comes from a desire to introduce an alternative current into formalised ways of thinking about history,

narrative, and identity. The current paper is also written with a similar intent of mutating and rethinking the discourse of the “postcolonial body” with respect to video games. To that extent this essay will delve into the portrayal of the postcolonial body in five of the games by Studio Oleomingus, namely *A Museum of Dubious Splendors* (2018b), *In the Pause Between the Ringing* (2019c), *The Indifferent Wonder of an Edible Place* (2020a), *The Uncertain Repetitions of Truth* (2020b), and *Folds of a Separation* (2022b).¹

Our current paper stems from our inability to formulate a single unifying argument about the portrayal of the “postcolonial body” in Studio Oleomingus’ games. We could identify themes and lines of thought that were common to all their body of work and understand the various aspects of the postcolonial subject’s identity. But, in our hope of analysing the games while preserving the plurality hinted at by them, we realised a flaw in our method of approaching the problem. One of the problems of dealing with postcolonial discourse is its generic nature—postcolonial thought itself has undergone extensive genrefication, and therefore has been heavily categorised and quantised into a concrete and definable entity. This loss of “Plasticity”² has led to a stagnation that looms over postcolonial scholarship. Amidst such stagnation, the question of the “postcolonial body” (hereafter referred to as the “Body”) has remained an unyielding monolith that resists newer, more radical reimaginings. As we shall see later, it is baffling how constrictive and rigid the term “Body”, and the various connotations of it, has remained over the years. Our strife with the idea of the Body especially in connection to postcolonial scholarship lies more with how it merely focuses on the physicality of the postcolonial subjects themselves.

¹ It must be noted here that the choice of these particular games was made simply based on their accessibility in playing either on the PC or on mobile browsers, since most of Studio Oleomingus’ other games are not readily available through their website to play on home consoles—they are mostly presented in art installations and exhibitions around the world.

² Plasticity, according to Malabou (2011), denotes both the capacity to “receive form (as in the plasticity of clay) and give form (as in the plastic arts or plastic surgery)” (p. 63). As such, it goes beyond Derridean and Deleuzean theories of trace, which accommodate generation and regenerations through repetition, hauntings and difference, but do not incorporate discontinuities and degenerations into their fold (see Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, 1994, and Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987). It should also be noted here that the paper employs capitalised words to denote particular theoretical concepts, such as Plasticity, Body, and Flesh, among others. Thus, when capitalised, these words are removed from their commonly held meanings and are given an entirely new signification.

Peeling off the skin and revealing the Flesh underneath is an extremely liberating process, in the sense that it separates it (the skin-donned Body) from its preconceived colonial sensibilities. Of course, problematising current postcolonial discourses, and most notably the Body, does not necessarily mean we wish to alienate or discredit the plurality and/or the specificity of postcolonial experiences. Being the archetypal “postcolonial subjects” ourselves, our lived histories form as much a driving force behind our autoethnographic endeavour as the postcolonial discourse(s) we wish to mutate. It is inevitable that players from (non-)postcolonial epistemologies would always impose their own epistemological bias(es) on these games. Herein lies the essence of the untranslatability of indefinability: postcolonial experiences can never be defined, for definition and certainty is a colonial endeavour.³ Furthermore, these decentered postcolonial experiences also vary individually, because every individual undergoes their own unique lived history. It is impossible to translate this indefinable plurality without falling into the trap of colonial essentialism. As such, we also do not wish to “define” the Flesh, for this puts on it the exact constraints we claim it does not possess. Our hope with the current paper is to come up with a hermeneutic method of reading the fragmented “postcolonial body” that keeps a space for uncertainty about the subject’s Being.⁴ We have decided to call our approach the “Fleshthetic” method of reading, or Fleshthetics⁵ in short.

Somewhere Lies a Phantom

While embarking on our hermeneutic analysis of Studio Oleomungus’ body of work, we found that all their games contend with a few major absences or uncertainties. In particular, the (non)existence of another “game” of theirs becomes important—their elusive piece of *Somewhere*. For all intents and purposes, this game is not playable because there is no material existence of the game anywhere. Yet, on a deeper

³ As explained in the section on The Taxidermy Project, Spivak (1981) calls this the “colonialist theory of most efficient information retrieval” (p. 382). While a deconstructive approach towards such definitiveness might involve studying each microcosm of colonial knowledge production globally (and particularly across the Global South), what we wish to highlight here primarily is the necessity within each such colonial project of creating predefined grand narratives to fit the colonised others into. While the methodology differed from one project to the other, the desire to define the colonised other remained constant across all of them.

⁴ Here, Being refers to the concept of *Sein* that Heidegger (1988) employs in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, which marks “the ontological difference—the differentiation between [B]eing and beings . . . [and] a being and [B]eing” (pp. 17, 120, emphasis in the original).

⁵ Fleshthetics is a portmanteau neologism that is derived from the words “Flesh” and “Aesthetics.”

conceptual level, it encapsulates the goals of this paper and becomes a crucial component to our current argument. It is not a single game, but rather a collection of projects spanning multiple different mediums and experiments presented in game platforms or as on-site installations. Under this transmedia project, Studio Oleomingus “has built up what Jani describes as ‘a considerable amount of intricate lore’ which is written in such a way that it intertwines and blurs into the actual history of the Western Indian states in the early 19th century” (Warr, 2018, para. 10.). Although at one point they were working on building *Somewhere* as a full-length game, they changed their mind to better suit the kinds of narrative they were interested in imparting. According to the creators, the reason for the perspective shift was “the idea . . . that the listener’s experience of a space is mediated by the person telling them about it” (Warr, 2018, para. 14.). Thus, from a full-length game, *Somewhere* became multiple different projects all distinct in their own ways yet linked to the ghost of it. This foundational aspect and the intent of *Somewhere*’s (non)existence highlights the Plasticity inherent in the body of work by Studio Oleomingus. The promise of *Somewhere* lies in its absent-presentness. The title conveys a deep-seated longing for a concrete place that will always remain unattainable.

A similar longing for certainty is created with the figure of Mir UmarHassan, the fictitious Gujarati Poet whose presence permeates all their games in equally fraught ways. All five games this paper discusses start by stating that they are adapted from some sort of writing—mostly poems, stories and diary entries—by the Gujarati Poet. His presence is not just a random framing device; rather, he accentuates the aforementioned untranslatability: “notoriously difficult to translate because of the mellifluous use of Urdu and Hindi in his compositions” (Studio Oleomingus, 2018a, para. 2.). In the description of *The Museum of Dubious Splendors*,⁶ the developers talk about how the stories were edited and published without the author’s permission, and how repeated endeavours of restoration still cannot erase the doubt about the authenticity of the adaptation (Studio Oleomingus, 2018a, para. 4.). Thus, Mir UmarHassan’s presence becomes obfuscated and distanced due to layers of untranslatability, hasty editing and the game’s nature as an adaptation.

The Taxidermy Project

In our reading of the games, we came across a phenomenon that is quite commonplace and has been extensively theorised within the domain of postcolonial studies—the erasure of the identity of a community. Upon further investigation of this theme throughout the games by Studio Oleomingus, a certain aspect became clear to us: the problem is not only of erasure, but also the reappropriation of the subject’s identity. This problem can be “traced” in various contexts, but

⁶ Hereafter referred to as *The Museum*.

for the argument at hand, this paper will focus on two specific contexts where the problem is pervasive. The first context that we will be focussing on is the statist erasure of identity. The second context, primarily found in academic readings, is the forced calcification of certain aspects of one's identity as the whole of the subject's Being. In the games by Studio Oleomingus, there exists a critique of both these contexts, which makes it all the more important for us to address it. For our purposes, we have called it the "Taxidermy Project".

The reading of a subject's identity through predefined perspectives, without even attempting to preserve the plurality of its constituent organs that make up the whole body, is analogous to the process of taxidermy. In this process, the organs of the animals are discarded and only their skin remains, which is then stuffed to create a lifelike model. This is similar to the Statist agenda of ironing out multiplicity, which Studio Oleomingus addresses and critiques in their latest game, *Folds of a Separation*.⁷ In it, the developers tackle headlong the subject of being bound by "boundaries entirely of (the State's) own choosing" (Studio Oleomingus, 2022a, para. 1.). The recurrence of a pattern of history whereby the subjects change from time to time, yet they "tread the same stones and/ add wear to the same footprints" (Studio Oleomingus, 2022b, n.p.), is highlighted in the game. The palimpsestic nature of the postcolonial subject is suppressed by the State-Nation's⁸ machinery with its numbing uniformity:

Where each step is sealed
within the imprint of another,
and each walk is always an echo
that hardens your confinement. (Studio Oleomingus, 2022b,
n.p.)

In the game, the act of walking itself becomes a contested action with contradictory affects to it. The act of walking stands as a monument to liberation with its allusions to marching for a revolutionary cause:

Until no one remembers
what is it to move.

To walk as we once did

⁷ Hereafter shortened to *Folds*.

⁸ Hereafter shortened to State. For an extensive sociosemantic discussion on the difference between "State-Nation" and "Nation-State", see Minal Vaishnav's op-ed article in *Hindustan Times* (2019), titled "From Nation-State to State-Nation."

when we marched.

Yesterday, years ago. (Studio Oleomingus, 2022b, n.p.)

However, the State's intervention carves out the liberating connotation of walking by severing the dissenting subject's connection to the wider world. This is one of the ways that Studio Oleomingus critiques the State's goal of making the citizens its taxidermy subjects. The author's note of the game talks about how age-old colonial draconic laws resurface to incarcerate the dissenters in an "independent" post-colonial⁹ country: the game points out how the spatiotemporal situation of the subjects is disrupted whereby the past melts into the present.

The other context in which the Taxidermy Project becomes relevant is in terms of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1981) comments on in her translator's notes to "Draupadi" by Mahasweta Devi:

When we wander out of our own academic and First-World enclosure, we share something like a relationship with Senanayak's doublethink. When we speak for ourselves, we urge with conviction: the personal is also political. For the rest of the world's women, the sense of whose personal micrology is difficult (though not impossible) for us to acquire, we fall back on a colonialist theory of most efficient information retrieval. (p. 382)

Spivak discusses the tendency in academic thinking of "most efficient information retrieval" to formulate a unified theory of (postcolonial) subjectification. In the character of Senanayak alone, the Taxidermy Project itself is observable in both aforementioned contexts simultaneously. He is an agent of the State tasked with the elimination of the State's subject, Dopdi Mejhen, because of her transgressions against the State's boundaries. On the other hand, he is also embroiled in an interpretive project of his own: of reading the methods and ideation of State resistance by tribal subjects like Dopdi. In his project of "reading" Dopdi and the Tribal Revolutionaries, it is very apparent how he becomes frustrated when the song of Dopdi goes undeciphered. This gap of knowledge stands out as a contradiction in his Taxidermy Project of stitching up a unified theory about Dopdi's whole identity. The games by Studio Oleomingus are deliberately made in a way that challenges this method of reading. Their games elude essential generalising, and "challenge the idea of singular spaces and universal narratives" (Yameen, 2018, para. 4.). This is precisely why we had to come up with the idea of a Fleshthetic reading of texts to counter the Taxidermy

⁹ By employing "post" as a prefix here, we wish to invoke the colonial linearity of history. "Post-" here refers to postness, or the linear passing of time, and the regime change from a colonial government to an independent government.

Project's tendencies while discussing an especially fluid and varied discourse as the postcolonial body.

Theorising the Flesh

The Flesh in the Remains of the Body

Readers of this paper will invariably ask a salient question: why has the word "Flesh" been used over the word "Body"? The question makes sense because of how Body has become ubiquitous with questions of identity and representations. We, however, will counter that with a question of our own: why has the usage of the word "Body/body" not been questioned in connection to the understanding of a subject's identity? In this regard, let us follow a few examples to see the usage of the word in contemporary academic writing. It should be heeded that the following examples are being cited with the intention of highlighting the formalised usage of the word "body" with respect to identity, and not with the intention of critiquing them:

The silenced and wounded body of the colonised is a pervasive figure in colonial and postcolonial discourses. (Boehmer, 2009, p. 127)

The body was the focus, as it was the source both of the unruliness of desires and drives and of the productivity needed in the capitalist system. (Mills & Sen, 2004, p. 1)

The above-quoted lines highlight the ease with which "body" is used to denote the collective identity of a community of people. The same is also apparent in titles of books such as *Politics of the Female Body* by Ketu H. Katrak (2006). In fact, the preface to Katrak's book has a sizable part dedicated to the naming of her book. Her explanation delves into the connotations of each word except for the word "body", thus proving the ubiquity of its usage.

However, through our reading of the word's usage, we can formulate several relevant characteristics. One of the foremost facets of "body" is that it deals with the physicality of the subject, as highlighted in the book *Confronting the Body: The Politics of Physicality in Colonial and Post-Colonial India* by James H. Mills and Satadru Sen (2004). The other usage of the word is in relation to its representation in media as "Edward Said's work had as its focus the representation of the body . . . in the arts" (Mills & Sen, 2004, p. 1). Due to the nature of Studio Oleomungus' games, namely the gameplay format, the postcolonial player-characters do not have any virtually approximated corporeal representations of them in the interactive ludic space. We, as navigators of the ludic text, exist primarily as phantoms with regards to the virtual space at any given time. This is why our problem regarding the reading of the portrayal of the postcolonial subject(s) in their games

arose, because in their games the subject of the text is the ludic space itself.

On this subject of the play format, a contradiction might arise with respect to a few of these games by Studio Oleomingus that we have chosen for this paper. In *A Museum of Dubious Splendors*,¹⁰ *In the Pause Between the Ringing*,¹¹ and *The Indifferent Wonder of an Edible Place*,¹² the players play the games with mechanics, controls and camera perspectives similar to first-person narrative exploration games like *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013), *Tacoma* (Fullbright, 2017), and *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room & Briscoe, 2017). So, one might question the absence of a body in the games when there clearly exists the body of the “player-character”. One would be right to assume the existence of a player-character due to our understanding of games being tied to a material figure whom the player inhabits in that virtual, hypertextual space. In the above-stated examples of other such games, all of them have a definite “character” that the players control. But, in Studio Oleomingus’ games, the characters exist outside of the players’ controls. The games never reveal the existence of any definite characters whom the players are controlling and who manifest behind the ludic lens of the first-person camera. Rather, the absence of a “player-character” is even highlighted in a poignant moment in the final viewing room of the museum in *A Museum*: there is a giant TV screen streaming in real-time the exact view that the players see in their real-life computer monitors (see Figure 1). This scene accentuates the absence of any in-game character being controlled by the players, instead indicating that the viewer is indeed the players themselves.



Figure 1. The TV screen in *A Museum*. Screenshot by authors.

¹⁰ Hereafter shortened to *A Museum*.

¹¹ Hereafter shortened to *The Pause*.

¹² Hereafter shortened to *Indifferent Wonder*.

The problems surrounding the monolithic conception of the Body therefore led us to theorise the “Flesh”. Flesh is the inherent quality of any phenomenal object—an object that intimately communicates with the phenomenal world. The Flesh is not simply rooted in materiality, but is a symptom of a condition, an assemblage (of identities), an absent-present body. It is Plastic, for it contains within itself the capability to deform, reform, and inform (Malabou, 2022, p. 25). Everyday experiences that affect the Flesh, are also reciprocally affected by the Flesh; subsequently, the Flesh that interacts with (an)other Flesh is also reciprocally affected. Fleshthetics is the study of these (and various other) socioaesthetic qualities of the Flesh, and the various ways it interacts, communicates and influences the phenomenal world. The Flesh is separate from the Body in that the Body always requires the presence and/or absence of materiality—it is only within the confines of corporeal, phenomenal materiality that the Body resides. The “Postcolonial Body”, in particular, is an idea that contains the material margins of a body situated in a chrononormative temporality. In contrast, the Flesh is not confined within the absent-presentness of materiality. It is, as already stated before, inherently Plastic. Unlike the Body, which is talked about in totalising terms, the Flesh facilitates the discourse to deal with component parts of the Body, i.e., the constituents of postcolonial subjectification. The role of reading component parts becomes an important aspect of the Fleshthetic reading of a text. The purpose of distinguishing the Flesh from the Body is in hopes of preserving “an incompleteness” of the subject (see Figure 2).

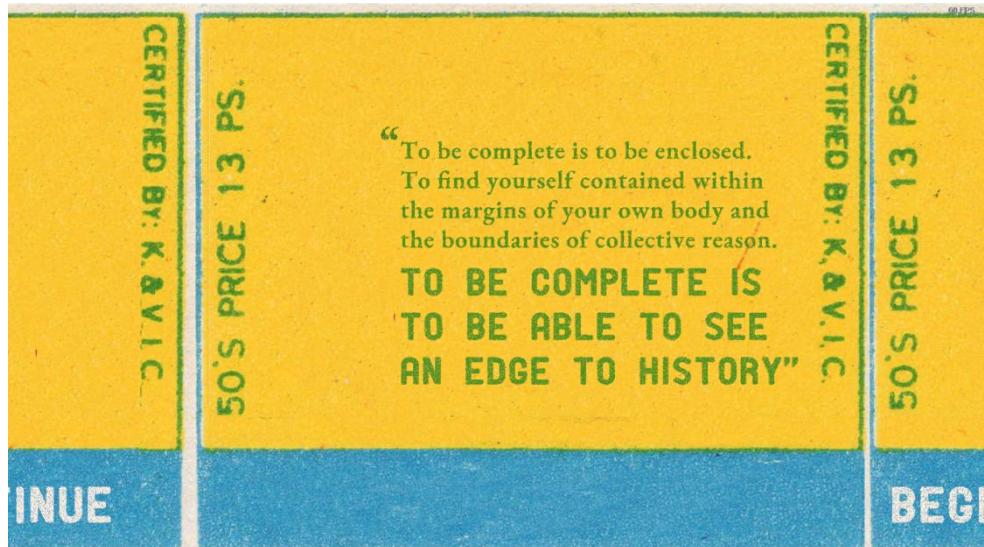


Figure 2. Title-postcard in *The Pause*. Screenshot by authors.

The current paper is an attempt at discussing and understanding the postcolonial subjects’ representation in these games without defining it in a concrete manner. Thus, to suit the purposes of our analysis, we devised the Fleshthetic method of reading. What it translates to in

practice is a method of tracing the (postcolonial) subject through reading its presence (and presence through absence), not in the subject's own materiality but rather in its phenomenological existence in the places it dwelled in and the objects it used, as we will elaborate on in subsequent sections.

Fleshobjects of the Everyday

Many scholars over time have observed that everyday objects absorb memory (Boesen, 2014; Dezeuze, 2007; Udomlamun, 2015)—it is, after all, these objects that lay evidence to our most intimate emotions on a daily basis. Whenever there is a practice of recalling and remembrance, it is often catalysed by the presence of these objects of memory. A great example of this is found in David Malouf's (2007) poem "Revolving Days," where the poet is reminded of his lover in "the colour of the shirts" that he had bought:

as an experiment in ways of seeing myself, hoping to catch
in a window as I passed what I was to be
in my new life as lover: one mint green, one
pink, the third, called Ivy League, tan
with darker stripes, my first button-down collar. (Malouf, 2007,
p. 1)

These objects are, thus, Fleshobjects, since they are plastic enough to retain memories and affectivities of the everyday. This is also why the human relationship with these objects, although at first seemingly nonreciprocal and trivial, assumes an extremely violent animosity. When we feel the need for violence, it is these objects of the everyday that not only witness, but are also subjected to this violence.

Cao Hui's series of sculptures titled *Visual Temperature* portrays this phenomenon perfectly. Hui's sculptures are simple everyday objects, but made of Flesh—or at least, the resin, fibre and other materials that he uses takes on the appearance of Flesh. For the viewer, however, the artificial materials do not quite reveal their artificiality. Something as trivial as the sofa is now transformed into a Fleshobject, with the Flesh bursting through the skin of the sofa (see Figure 3). ItsTheTalia's *Perfect Vermin* (ItsTheTalia, 2020) borrows inspiration from Hui's sculptures, leading to the Fleshification of everyday objects in a ludic space—objects that can be broken violently using a hammer. This simple change (of material and perspective) transforms the violence of the Flesh onto an inanimate object, to that onto an object filled with a potentiality for animation; a violence of the Flesh onto the Flesh.



Figure 3. Sofa from Cao Hui's *Visual Temperature*. All rights belong to Cao Hui and Lin & Lin Gallery.

However, months before *Perfect Vermin*, there was another game that incorporated Fleshobjects into its gameplay—Studio Oleomingus' *Indifferent Wonder*. The game begins with the player-narrator being drafted as part of the Prime Minister Building Eater Employment Program (PMBEEP) by The Ministry of Entangled Histories and the Department for the Disposal of Built Heritage, both fictional entities under the Government of India in the game (see Figure 4). They are, then, provided with the Building Eater Registration and Safety Guide (see Figure 5), and given the task of eating "a tower at the edge of an unnamed town" (Studio Oleomingus, 2019b, para. 3.). As the player proceeds forward and the game truly begins, the player is shown an excerpt from a letter that the narrator has written to their dead brother, a letter ridden with nostalgia and guilt:

Dear Brother,

It is a somnambulant dawn.

A cold awakening of day into night,

of colour into grief and,

of memory into sorrow.

And I write to you my brother

to beg for your forgiveness,

for I have become

a building eater today. (Studio Oleomingus, 2020a, n.p.)

Thus, from the very beginning of its ludic narrative, it is quite evident that the game is not simply about destroying *les lieux des mémoire*,¹³ but is also about history, time, and, most importantly, memory.

GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
Prime Minister Building Eater Employment Program.
प्रधान मंत्री इमारत भक्षक रोजगार योजना।

NOTICE
 NO. PMEP/MP OF PMEP/2019-20 DATE: NOVEMBER 09

Attention is invited to the announcement of Pradhan Mantri Building Eater Employment Guarantee Scheme PMBEEP, which provides a number of legal entitlements to workers engaged in the act of consuming built heritage sites under government directive.

This Program implemented under the guidance of the Ministry of Entangled Histories and the Ministry of Labour and Employment, will provide great relief to the jobless youth of our country and will aid in the necessary removal of all entangled and dubious history that has long prevented our nation from achieving its glorious destiny.

The scheme applies to every adult member who can produce a municipal issue job card and ration allotment certificate from the Mamlatdar office in Matsyapur Zila, no later than the 31st of December of this year.

CHANDRESH D. ISHAH
OFFICER IN CHARGE
DEPARTMENT FOR THE DISPOSAL OF BUILT HERITAGE
MINISTRY OF ENTANGLED HISTORIES

APPLICATION FORM FOR THE POST OF BUILDING EATER
 EDIBLE PLACES RECRUITMENT BOARD CENTRALISED NOTICE / EN NO-11021
 RECRUITMENT CELL JILLA MATSYAPURA, JUMBALI NAGAR, 02401

अनु. नाम उम्र लिंग
 जन्म स्थान
 पेशेवासी पेशावा
 पति का नाम और
 आवेदन करने का
 इलाका (पंचायत समिति का नाम)

ATTACH PHOTOGRAPH HERE

The Edible places recruitment board jointly formed by the Ministry of Entangled History and Ministry of Labour and Employment invites applications for the non technical popular category post of a Building Eater to fill vacancies of _____ at the time of printing this notice.

Figure 4. Application form for the post of Building Eater in *Indifferent Wonder*. Screenshot by authors.

BUILDING EATER REGISTRATION CARD AND SAFETY GUIDE

BUILDING EATER: MATSYAPURAB34B40
 10321 RECRUITMENT CELL ON BEHALF OF THE MINISTRY OF ENTANGLED HISTORIES
 ADMIR A. HAMID

ESC. MENU / CONTROLS

THE EMPLOYEE IS LIABLE FOR ANY LOSS OF OR DAMAGE TO THE EDIBLE BLOCK SCOPE

W . A . S . D + MOUSE MOVE & LOOK
 HOLD SHIFT SPRINT
 LEFT MOUSE CLICK INTERACT / EAT / NEXT ►
 RIGHT MOUSE CLICK DO NOT EAT
 RIGHT MOUSE HOLD USE SCOPE TO FIND EDIBLE BLOCKS

THE + POINTER ON THE SCOPE SHOWS THE POSITION OF AN EDIBLE BLOCK
 WHEN IT IS AT THE CENTER OF THE SCOPE YOU WILL BE VERY CLOSE TO THE EDIBLE-BLOCK.

**EDIBLE BLOCK NUMBERS WILL BE RELAYED BY AUTHORISED PERSONNEL.
 ONLY EAT BLOCKS IN STIPULATED ORDER TO AVOID SEVERE POISONING!**

ADMIR A. HAMID
 N. APR 32

MINISTRY OF ENTANGLED HISTORIES
 MATSYAPURAB34B40

Figure 5. Registration Card and Safety Guide in *Indifferent Wonder*. Screenshot by authors.

Indifferent Wonder transfers the agency of eating to the player themselves—ultimately, it is them who have the choice of eating whichever block they wish to. The game only gives them directions as to which blocks to eat—the player can themselves decide whether they want to

¹³ *Les lieux des mémoire* roughly translates to 'sites of memory' in English (Nora, 1989, p. 7).

follow the given instructions. Thus, the game directly blurs this line between the ludic space of the narrator and the phenomenal space of the player. The narrator laments:

Yes I eat buildings

I wait besides the monitor

for them to tell me what block to eat,

what section neatly carved,

awaits my maw. (Studio Oleomingus, 2020a, n.p.)

Each of these concrete blocks have been Fleshified within the game much like Hui's sculptures (see Figure 6), and the way the player-narrator consumes these blocks is itself quite a violent act—the mouth transforms into *Perfect Vermin's* hammer:

And I consume the building,

piece by piece.

Until ever so slowly the immutable form

starts to lose its shape and decay,

as if it was never there.

Leaving only the omnipresent hunger. (Studio Oleomingus, 2020a, n.p.)



Figure 6. Buildings blocks as Flesh in *Indifferent Wonder*. Screenshot by authors.

The Flesh not only thrives in objects; it can also extend into the very environment itself. The ludic environment of the game itself has been Fleshified—a detail that shares similar aesthetic patterns to the “enviro-plasticity” found in Aleksandra Waliszewska’s paintings. Waliszewska’s paintings anthropomorphise both the animal and the environmental, Fleshifying the latter in the process (see Figure 7). This Fleshified environment assumes the inherent Plasticity of Flesh, leading to its enviro-plasticity. The violence experienced by her subjects is extremely intimate, much like the Flesh of Hui’s everyday objects, causing a visceral reaction within the experiential self. While Hui’s work enables a dialogue between the Flesh and the (inanimate) everyday object, Waliszewska’s works enable a hearty conversation between the Fleshified world of her canvas and the experiential domain of the spectator—much like what *Indifferent Wonder* enables the same between the phenomenal world of the player and the ludic space of the narrator. The environment in the game is quite potently postcolonial: sandals (*hawai chappals*) and a cleaver from the meat shop at the bazaar (see Figure 8), or a Parsi interior with teapots passed down through generations, piercing through time and history (see Figure 9). The enviro-plasticity of these ludic spaces manifest in the way the landscape continuously changes—the teapot breaks, the cleaver shambles, and the tower gets consumed. Every block that gets eaten inevitably and permanently changes the environment around it, restructuring the very fabric of history.



Figure 7. “Untitled” by Aleksandra Waliszewska. All rights belong to Aleksandra Waliszewska and Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.



Figure 8. Cleaver and sandals forming an enviro-plastic space in *Indifferent Wonder*. Screenshot by authors.



Figure 9. Teapots and a Parsi interior forming another enviro-plastic space in *Indifferent Wonder*. Screenshot by authors.

On Memory, Death and History

Disrupted Chrononormativity

In all of Studio Oleomingus' games there is an interesting confluence of lived history with more mythical elements. This is why the (re)presentation of history, and how/what we read of that history in their games becomes an important point of discussion.

The discourse of "history" has always been a contested ground for the postcolonial subjects who were "denied selfhood and even the full status of humanity" (Mukherjee, 2017, p. 76). History, in all its colonial understandings, appears as a linear progression through time. In colonial discourse history gains a laminar flow—a teleological means towards an end, without any stoppages, gaps or multi-directionality; a flow from darkness to light, from innocence to experience. The idea of history influenced by Hegel has dominated Western epistemology for the

better part of the last few centuries. In his seminal book *Videogames and Postcolonialism* (2017), Souvik Mukherjee outlines the comments of various philosophers throughout the ages to show how they either rejected the idea that the colonised had a history, or subsumed their history as parts of the coloniser's history.

In this regard, Studio Oleomingus holds a special position, because of how their games deal with India's colonial past, and the concept of historicity itself. These games try to answer the question: Can the medium of video games do a proper job of representing history? The key to their answer lies in the word "representing." Their games playfully blend historical facts and artefacts with the absurd and the magical in an extremely unique manner.

One of the primary features of these games is their deformation of linear temporality. As players, we are never explicitly given the details of the narratives' temporal location. For example, in the game *The Pause*, there is "the ghost" who lies in perpetual longing for their story to be brought to an end. Through the looping of the narrative, the game foregoes a concrete sense of ending, thereby challenging the teleological view of "history" and blurring the distinction between the past and the present. As Souvik Mukherjee (2017) writes in *Videogames and Postcolonialism*,

the presentation of history as a mono-narrative is problematized by the multiple endings of videogames and the alternative histories they present. Instead of a Eurocentric narrative of progress, other possible ways of looking at history become evident. (p. 102)

While his statement stands true about games with multiple endings, the statement can also be applied to the (un)ending flow of the narrative of *The Pause* (see Figure 10).

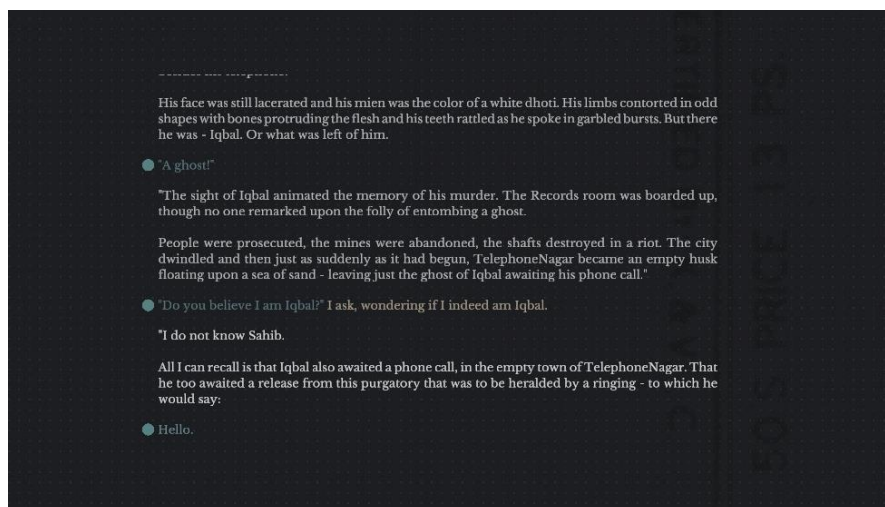


Figure 10. (Un)ending narrative flow of *The Pause*. Screenshot by authors.

In this way, history becomes decentered from its teleological biases whereby it still breathes within the walls of the buildings and the mundane objects lying around. In *A Museum*, the objects on display are not simply presented with their ontological parameters noted down; for each of the different objects, we are treated to a story from the anthology of Mir UmarHassan. There are recurring themes throughout the stories associated with the respective museum artefacts. Yet, one underlying theme that connects the apparently disconnected stories, apart from them being part of the *Sanghraya* (museum), is the theme of uncertainty surrounding the origins of the artefacts. In many of the stories there is either a mythical explanation alluded to utilities of the different objects (the Giants and the Cassette tape, IshtarShuhai and the "Punkha"), or there remains an uncertainty of their purpose (Cantor and the Toothpaste, Mehta and the Pillow). Within the narratives of the objects we get glimpses into troubled histories entangled with the lives of different beings. This is reminiscent of Aubrey Anable's (2018) comments on a feminist approach to (videogame) history:

Feminist approaches to video game histories and theories should reject those that present mythologies of completeness and teleological timelines. Staying in the dark, looking at fragments, feeling our way around the neglected objects of video game culture and overlooked modes of play might produce feminist gaming histories and cultures that are more expansive than what Lara Croft's body signifies. (p. 3)

This is precisely what a Fleshthetic reading of history attempts to incorporate: dreamscapes, mythologies and impossibilities are as much a part of history, deconstructing the absolute certainty that is otherwise propagated by colonial notions of history.

Uncertain Repetitions heavily utilises and politicises this Fleshthetic reading. The game, beyond all things, is an extremely pertinent commentary on the nature of plural (postcolonial) experiential time. Within the colonial imagination, historical time is clock-time. As such, the only way of progressing through the game is by rotating a small circular dot clockwise across the rim of a circular watch. For all intents and purposes, you are forcefully locked within the one-dimensionality of your exercise of linearity—you cannot even wind back the clock, and undo all that your clock-turning has produced in the narrative of the game. You are thus forced into an extremely colonial hegemonic temporality, while simultaneously encountering the breaks and distortions that pluralise the passing of time and the recollection of history.

The Fleshobject of this narrative is the watch itself—made, quite literally, out of the

Bone from the finger

of a dead watchmaker,
 who had been murdered
 in a street in Amritsar,
 during an argument about the exact
 extent of the Radcliffe line. (Studio Oleomingus, 2020b, n.p.)

The watch, thus, is imbibed quite literally with the ghosts of a postcolonial subject, and pre-contains all its affects, because

watches
 are no counters of history,
 they are the implements of ghosts,
 who linger. (Studio Oleomingus, 2020b, n.p.)

This ghost produces an urgency within the linear ludonarrative, a potentiality for breaking through—engendering, as Barad (2017) says:

[An] urgency to trouble time, to shake it to its core, and to produce collective imaginaries that undo pervasive conceptions of temporality that take progress as inevitable and the past as something that has passed and is no longer with us is something so tangible, so visceral, that it can be felt in our individual and collective bodies. (p. 57)

Within these past-pregnant presentnesses that the Flesh resides in, and “[l]ong beyond the arc of mere time/and into the future of memory,” there is a disjoint in the very fabric of historical reality (Studio Oleomingus, 2020b, n.p.). The watch, thus, shatters (see Figure 11). The broken watch, frozen in history, contains the language of the postcolonial Flesh, and all its plural, subaltern realities and memories.



Figure 11. The shattered watch in *Uncertain Repetitions*. Screenshot by authors.

Memorypoetics

Memory is a palpable entity, rooted in materiality. This materiality of memory is extremely important for formulating a cohesive poetics of memory underlined with socioaesthetic affectivities. A particular way of pairing memory with dialectical materialism was theorised by Mao Tse-Tung (1968), who argued that

the world outlook of materialist dialectics holds that in order to understand the development of a thing we should study it internally and in its relations with other things . . . There is internal contradiction in every single thing, hence its motion and development . . . the moment the new aspect gains dominance over the old, the old thing changes qualitatively into a new thing. (pp. 26, 55)

Herein lies the object-relation(ship) of memory. Memory absorption and resorption occurs on stratified levels: initially, an event occurs that is witnessed by people and objects around them; then, this memory is tarnished, adulterated and distorted as a result of various phenomenal factors; and finally, the now-transformed memory is resorbed into both individual and collective consciousness(es).

Memory, therefore, forms a great political tool for the State to employ for the satisfaction of its political needs. Often, this is done against minorities and minority (historical) narratives, resulting in manufactured histories containing distorted narratives that are fed to the public—the lay citizen unaware of the pluralistic narratives surrounding geopolitical and sociohistorical events, and whose primary consumption of these narratives occurs through State-fed channels (Adhikari, 2022, p. 124). As Slavoj Žižek (2013) observes,

the power of “unmaking [*défaire*]” the past is conceivable only on the symbolic level: in immediate life, in its circuit, the past is only the past and as such is incontestable; but once one is situated at the level of history *qua* text, the network of symbolic traces, one is able to wind back what has already occurred, or erase the past. (p. 16)

It is precisely at the symbolic level that the State functions, unmaking and remaking the past continuously. The dialectical materiality of memory allows the State to alter the immediate materiality surrounding historical subjects, engendering a string of generational remembrances devoid of historical authenticity, thereby giving way to the politics of erasure.

Erasure of Erasure

Erasure is an extremely potent political weapon for the State. It can enable the creation of a new history ripe with falsified and manufactured narratives, and hide negative facets of the State from the larger public

(and future generations) unaware of these past events. It is important to study these politics of erasure in order to deconstruct and reconstruct history, and remove it from its manufactured artificiality. Erasure is the primary indicator of the presence of absence: it is only when there is an act of erasure and a void in sociohistorical memory, that the present punctured with the absent is made more visible—the absent present is illuminated through the Beingness of erasure. Absence is a quality of being present; what is absent is always also forever-present, by virtue of the “trace” of the present that absence carries in its spirituo-materiality, the trace that is “the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience” (Spivak, 1976, p. xvii). This quality of absence has a particularly useful archival effect—it is through the “absent present” that one can spot and rebel against the “erasure of erasure” (Makdisi, 2010, p. 555). If forces of erasure succeeded in achieving this erasure of erasure, it would be quite impossible to discern traces from manufactured artificiality. Therefore, as Kevin Hetherington (2003) argues, “[t]he absent can have just as much of an effect upon relations as recognisable forms of presence can have. Social relations are performed not only around what is there but sometimes also around the presence of what is not” (p. 159). The effects and affects of absence have an extremely important role to play both in material culture and socio-political history. A scholar aware of this erasure, thus, would be able to look at an archive (a place saturated with histories that have been systematically altered by the State), find the gaps in its narrative that do not fit within a pluralistic view of history—gaps that lay evidence to Statist manufacturing and alteration—and thereby unearth oral and vernacular (lived) histories that not only refill these gaps, but also pluralise history further in this process.

However, when forces of erasure come around and erase these erasures themselves, it leads to an erasure of erasure that removes all traces and exorcises all ghosts. This, however, is extremely problematic, because it reconfigures the very notions of time and historicity. Time is always pregnant with ghosts from the past and the plural possibilities of future-becomings (Barad, 2017, p. 86). History—a sociopolitical extension of the dimension of Time—is therefore also a plural entity, often made up of absences that need to be documented in order to decentralise and decolonise all preconceptions. Histories and lived realities are often at odds with each other in the global cultural imagination due to the very fact of it being predominated with colonial sensibilities. As such, it is extremely important that the gaps and voids remain in its otherwise (colonially) advertised linearity—a fact that colonialists, neocolonialists, and the postcolonial State with traces of colonial sensibility try their hardest to avoid and eliminate. Erasure of erasure is the death of plural histories; it is the signalling of one true History. As the narrator observes in *Indifferent Wonder*,

The town is no more.

They ate the walls of the courthouse,
they ate the fort atop the hill.

They ate our mosque
and our roadside shrines.

They ate the hospital and the old bazaar,
the copper domes of the lantern factory.

They ate the monastery and the jail.

They ate all the secret chambers and the nooks.

They ate every corner.

And we fled. (Studio Oleomingus, 2020a, n.p.)

You—the player—are as much a State-sponsored building eater as the narrator, because it is your agency that leads to the eating of these memory places. You pressed the necessary buttons that lead to this devastation. You had all the opportunity to not make these decisions—to simply refuse to play the game and take part in the Statist agenda. But you decided to play a key role in this erasure of erasure. You, too, “have become a soldier of the locust army/a vulture of rubble/a concrete maggot” (Studio Oleomingus, 2020a, n.p.). Therefore, you too need to bear the responsibility for this ensuing devastation, for, as Derrida (1994) proclaimed,

no justice . . . seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism. (p. xviii)

This is, of course, a deliberate ploy on the part of the developers of the game. In an interview with Angshuman Dutta (2022) from *Sportskeeda*, Dhruv Jani—the founder of Studio Oleomingus—observed that “privilege in various forms withdraws from us the right to consume our own histories. And in the overwhelming presence of such hegemony, some stories can simply not be told, because the violence of their recollection

and the absurdity of their form is not accommodated in the method of their telling" (para. 9.). The only way to narrate and navigate these stories is through the ludic space of games and hypertext. Studio Oleomingus revels in this format by turning the Statist forces of erasure on its head, implementing a singular conceit—that of the manufactured history of Mir UmarHassan. In doing this, they perform "a deliberate delegitimization of the authorial and historical veracity of the stories being told from within the shadow of colonial rule (or any similar authority)" (Dutta, 2022, para. 32.). Jani refers to this "conceit" as "Redacting Authorship": a process where the studio nests their work "inside a series of fictitious translations and appropriations until any original source for the work is completely obfuscated. A specific kind of pollution . . . that fosters an uncomfortable and distrustful relationship with [their] text" (Dutta, 2022, para. 33.). This is necessary, "[e]specially amidst the contemporary revival of a despotic colonial political order, when there is a palpable danger of erasure of plural voices from the margins, there is a grave and urgent need for a pirated history of our times without the burden of authoritarian authorship" (Dutta, 2022, para. 36.).

The world of *Indifferent Wonder* may be fictitious and hypertextual, but it projects an incredibly honest reality. The narrator laments that these concrete pillars of places of memory are the "only food that will still the gnawing hunger, /of yearning for a place that is no longer mine," and as they eat through the tower,

There is no noise to this process.

Just the sound of my jaws crushing

the debri (sic) of mortar and lime and stone and wood,

made pliant by boring of time.

Devastation, you see, occurs in its own peculiar silence. (Studio Oleomingus, 2020a, n.p.)

Silence is a necessary symptom of erasure, and almost always accompanies devastation and the manufacturing of erasures. Silence, also, forms the primary acoustic architecture of a graveyard—a graveyard is always enveloped in silence. A graveyard is a physical manifestation of erasure, of stoppages in history and time. So, when even the graveyard is eaten, an erasure of erasure happens; the Beingness of the person is permanently removed from the folds of history. As the bearers of erasure, that is the final frontier of the Building Eaters:

Perhaps that is why I eat buildings, my dear brother.

Perhaps one day I will be asked to eat a gravestone.
 And then I will know if I am hungry enough to eat it.
 And then my condemnation will be complete,
 and I shall lose all hope of ever reaching you.
 And then perhaps,
 secure in the knowledge of the gulf that separates us,

I shall find peace again. (Studio Oleomingus, 2020a, n.p.)

For the narrator, erasure of erasure is the only reality that the State has left for them, and that, also, is the case in our present sociohistorical (postcolonial) reality. Steeped in ideology, our Flesh dons skin, becoming puppet-Bodies for the State with its colonial sensibilities to manipulate as they seem fit.

Conclusion

As we reach the concluding paragraphs, the reader would have surely noted that this paper is hard to follow—it bends, takes sharp turns without prefacing its intentions, and brings in examples and comparisons from seemingly disparate disciplines. It was, indeed, our very intent to keep the paper so organic and raw—as palpable as the Flesh we are dealing with, without predefined inhibitions and boundaries to contain its contents. As such, the paper itself resolves into the plastic entity it wishes to demonstrate, and hopes to alleviate the stagnation that threatens every discourse from time to time by engaging with the monolithic postcolonial discourse in a newer, wildly experimental fashion.

In this paper, we have investigated the idea of Fleshthetics through a comprehensive analysis of the games developed by Studio Oleomingus, investigating how the Flesh is a palimpsest and collage of both lived experiences and transgenerational phantom histories. We have demonstrated how the Flesh is intrinsically Plastic since it is an assemblage of identities, a symptom of a condition, simultaneously absent and present within and without the constraints of materiality. The discourses that surround it have an impact on how the Flesh and its Plasticity manifest in an aberrant, nonlinear spatiotemporal order. In pushing and tearing at the arbitrary boundaries surrounding the connotations of the word “Body”, we ended up with a method of reading texts and postcolonial subjects through Fleshobjects and lived-in spaces. Our claim is that every subject has its traces in the places that they dwell in and the objects that they interact with, in turn Fleshifying those objects and spaces. It is through identifying these traces, while also

acknowledging that every reading of the subject's Being through them will remain undefined and uncertain, can we hope to preserve the plurality of the subject in our hermeneutic plight.

However, this paper forms a relatively minor introduction to a radically different way of dealing with postcolonial reality and the affective subjectivity(-ies) it symptomises. With this paper, we hope to start a dialogue which strives to build upon the existing scholarship on postcolonial subjects and videogame analyses towards a hitherto unexplored manner of thinking. Our research for the paper brought us across several different strands of thought in relation to Fleshthetics. Due to the spatial, topical and generic limitations of the current paper we had to leave much of the explorations of those topics for an "indefinite" future. An area that we wished to explore further, but could not quite find the opportunity to do, is postcolonial thanatopolitics and what it implies in relation to Fleshthetics, since the politics of death complements the politics of erasure. A socioaesthetic reading of the same is necessary for engendering a dialogue between the two. Fleshthetics also raises interesting implications for how we read game narratives, especially with the connection to paratextual dimensions. Another topic we wished to investigate is postcolonial heterotopias, and how Studio Oleomungus deals with them. However, we realised that their portrayal of heterotopias would require a standalone paper for a proper exploration of that topic.

In short, the existence of potential areas of interest inevitably means that we have merely scratched the surface of what can be achieved with this hermeneutic method that we have termed Fleshthetics. Considering the volatile and troubling times that we presently reside in, it is necessary for us to tear down the boundaries of genre and compartmentalised disciplinary spaces, instead endeavouring towards a deeper, pluralistic understanding of the personal-political. It is with this hope that the ideas raised in this paper will have further formalised theorisations across all areas of academic, socio-historical and political focus, that we bring this paper to an open-ended conclusion.

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