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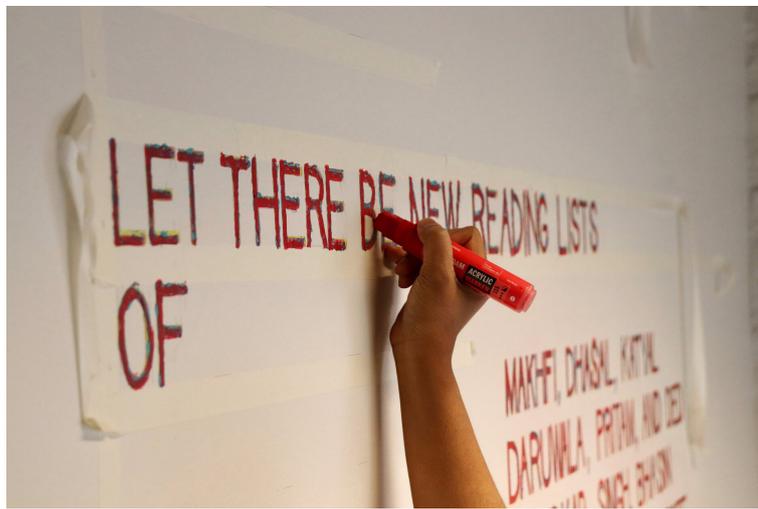
Shadow Libraries

Contemporary artists remind us that libraries are storehouses of 'civilisational' knowledge premised on exclusion and systemic othering.

by [Rosalyn D'Mello](#) | Published on : Nov 27, 2020

Soon after my laptop was stolen while I was riding the night train from Innsbruck to Vienna, my debit card was skimmed, too. It was May 2019. Not only was I suddenly bereft of a device that had felt like a biological extension of my body, I didn't have the means to replace it. I was fortunate to be with my partner and was thus spared the agony of having to immediately calculate the extent of my loss, or strategise how I was going to sustain myself over the next two months I was slated to spend in his home town in northern Italy. Inevitably, I felt provoked by a singular question that would incite a procession of thoughts. I wrote it down in my journal using my ink pen. "What do you really need to write?"

In *The Handmaid's Tale* [Margaret Atwood, 1985], Offred finds a note in a closet carved by her predecessor. Did she use her fingernails? Considering they were inhabitants of a dystopic world, Gilead, in which the penalty for a woman caught reading or writing was the chopping off her hands and the gauging of her eyes, my theory wasn't implausible. "When you run out of ink, write with blood," I remember once recording in my journal. Offred had to decode the cypher—*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. She connives strategies to enter her keeper's library whose use is totally forbidden to her. "The Library is like a temple. There's a long flight of white steps, leading to the rank of doors. Then, inside, another white staircase going up. To either side of it, on the wall, there are angels...", Offred recounts.



Vidha Saumya, Reading Lists

Image: Courtesy of: Pro Artibus Foundation, Vidha Saumya

Her evocation of the library reminded me then of Virginia Woolf's classic, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), when the 'I' in her lecture-essay—meant to be "a convenient term for somebody who has no real being"—contemplates the Oxbridge library and its contents, which include manuscripts of works by great white men, like Milton's *Lycidas*, a copy of which Charles Lamb had articulated his immense desire to see, because to him it was inconceivable that any word in the masterpiece could have been different from what it is. Woolf's 'I' is at the door which leads into the library itself, which may even have opened for her, but she promptly encounters "a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman" who regretted that ladies are only admitted if accompanied by a fellow of the college, or upon furnishing a letter of introduction. That a famous library has been cursed by a woman is a matter of complete indifference to a famous library. Venerable and calm, with all its treasures safe locked within its breast, it sleeps complacently and will so far as I am concerned sleep for ever. Never will I wake these echoes, never will I ask for that hospitality again, I vowed as I descended the steps in anger."



The Hauptbücherei am Gürtel in Vienna

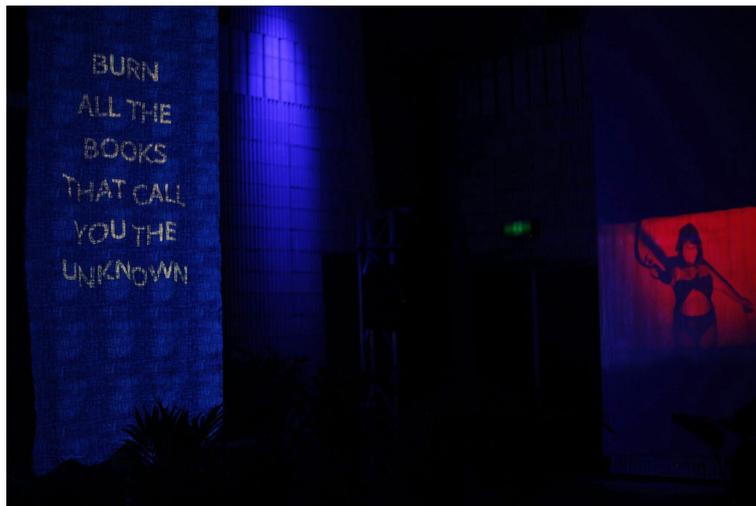
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Eerily enough, the day after my laptop was stolen, I visited the Vienna Hauptbücherei, ascending its many steps in order to enter and participate in the performance, *Time Has Fallen Asleep in the Afternoon Sunshine*, conceived of and choreographed by Mette Edvardsen, who had collaborated with volunteers from Vienna, building a repertoire of 30 memorised books. At the last minute, I decided to 'gift' my spot to my partner. At the appointed hour a woman walked up to us and said, "Hello. I am Orlando." She whisked him away to a quiet spot within the library and narrated to him from memory a few pages from Woolf's marvellous 1928 book about a protagonist who mysteriously changes sex at the age of 30. Edvardsen, who addressed a small audience later that morning, spoke of how she had been influenced by the suggestion at the end of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* that the underground society that had managed to escape the dystopia in which all books were burned had figured the only way to save them from oblivion was to memorise

the book and become it. Edvardsen has been staging her project since 2010, in various cities across the world, in collaboration with numerous volunteers who are allowed to select the books they want to memorise. It seemed to me a wonderfully feminist gesture, to build on an idea that was originally constructed to validate and monumentalise white male subjectivity and to evolve what she liked to refer to as a "Shadow Library," an elusive and evolving collection of liminal, non-mainstream narratives.

"We cannot conflate the history of ideas with white men, though if doing one leads to the other then we are being taught where ideas are assumed to originate," Sara Ahmed wrote in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), the book I happened to be reading at the time. I wrote down this excerpt in my journal: "SEMINAL: How ideas are assumed to originate from male bodies." Ahmed was speaking about her citation policy, and how she was using the academic device as feminist straw to build a shelter that leaves you more vulnerable than safe.

Some days later, I happened to read on my mobile phone Elisa Gabbert's *Paris Review* column, "Mess With a Classic" in which she points out the white supremacist intention behind Bradbury's undertaking in *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), which is in fact abundantly clear if you read the book closely enough, although the author, who had been accused in his lifetime of racism, sexism and xenophobia, spelled it out in his 1979 coda to the book. "In Bradbury's view of the universe, white men write good and important books, while the minorities and 'women's libbers' try to censor them," writes Gabbert in response, categorising the book saviours as the heroes protecting the Western canon from being destroyed by cultural criticism. Bradbury wrote—For it is a mad World and it will get madder if we allow the minorities, be they dwarf or giant, orangutan or dolphin, nuclear-head or water-conservationist, pro-computerologist or Neo-Luddite, simpleton or sage, to interfere with aesthetics."



Vidisha Fadescha's exhibition in Sydney, 'Burn the Books that Call You the Unknown' used the theatrics of a dance floor to emphasise how what appears as collectivity in the moment emerges through how we embody our histories, violence, vulnerabilities and aspirations into our bodies and movements

Image: Courtesy of: Vidisha Fadescha

Vidisha Fadescha's proposition towards such historically marginalising perspectives is straightforward. I encountered their work at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, as part of a show curated by Akansha Rastogi, titled "Right to laziness... no, strike that! Sidewalking with the man saying sorry." Next to their excellent video work, *Qworkaholic Anonymous* hung a banner that read, "Burn All the Books That Call You the Unknown." Their defiant provocation emerges from the cognitive dissonance that accompanies centuries of caste oppression and the accompanying institutionalising of cis-heteronormativity. "It takes from Periyar's 'Burn the Manusmriti' and expands into Transfeminist politics," they said. It is a reminder of how Dalit, Bahujan and trans* subjectivities are still not considered legitimate within mainstream canons, and how, within a South Asian context, institutional knowledge was intimately connected with caste. "Archives don't make sense to us so we make our own spaces and histories," says Fadescha, who extended their firebrand truism into an extensive performance later this year in Sydney.

The work is rendered all the more powerful because Fadescha makes the contents of their call to 'burn' the books that call 'you' the unknown a piece of public text, and doesn't actually incinerate or place within the gallery the ashes of the Manusmriti—the ancient

Hindu text dating to between the 2nd century BCE to 3rd century CE, which legitimised caste-based hierarchical oppression, and which continues to hold sway over public discourse and notions of caste. Fadescha imbues their empowering call with an evangelical fervour through their use of the imperative. They also lay the premise for potential ally-ship between oppressor and oppressed castes. They powerfully convey the immeasurable violence behind how knowledge was constituted at the expense of bodies that were made 'other'. As a book, the Manusmriti regimented caste hierarchies, defining clearly who was allowed to read and whose ears had to be covered with molten led if they were caught overhearing sacred scripture that was to be preserved within the realm of the Brahmanical castes.



Sajan Mani performing at his recent solo at Nome Gallery, Berlin

Image: Courtesy of: Sajan Mani, Billie Clarken, Nome Gallery

Sajan Mani approaches the subject of historical exclusions perpetuated through the institution of the written word that lies at the crux of all libraries by reminding us of the subversive tradition of orality; how repressed subjectivities were rendered liveable and how their legacies were disseminated through the symbiotic gesture of radical speaking and listening. In his recent debut solo show in Europe at Berlin's Nome Gallery, *Alphabet of Touch Overstretched Bodies and Muted Howls for Songs*, he alludes to the Kerala 'prophet', Poykayil Appachan, also known as Poykayil Yohannan (1879-1939), who was born into the Paraya slave caste, converted to Christianity at age five, eventually dismissing it to establish his own church, "Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS)" that roughly translates to Church of the Really Liberating God. Though he was literate, he preferred to use the medium of orality to disperse his empowering and revolutionary ideas among slave castes disintitiled to literacy.

"The songs of Appachan firmly established the history of the slaves as a project of emancipation and empowerment," writes Antony George Koothanady, a PhD scholar at the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the Central University of Kerala, India. "In an event that shook the spiritual authority of the dominant religions in Kerala, Appachan was deified by his disciples, mainly lower-caste women, the most oppressed persons in that patriarchal caste society." Koothanady suggests that his recourse in the collective performance of memories of slavery, 'without reliance on the written word or authentic documented sources, makes him an organic intellectual whose efforts towards the recovery of a history that was under erasure are unparalleled in the history of Kerala modernity."

Mani's performance drawing within the gallery dwells within a powerful poem by Appachan. I wasn't able to see it in person, but am thankful to Cleo Roberts' witness of it in the e-catalogue. "These words and others reach across the gallery's walls and are abstracted into energetic drawings. The loops and curls of the Malayalam script have a dizzying effect. Turning Appachan's words into illegible marks is as much a reflection of the artist's relationship to writing as it is his response to the author's lament: 'Not a single letter is seen / On my race'. A cryptic scramble of colourful forms, an extravagant mesh of 'text', answer Appachan's grievance and evoke his reliance on the oral tradition. Mani's body serves as a receptacle for the mediation between text and orality, between the scriptural and the sonic, reminding us of the precious muscular connection between tongue and hand, and of the existence of the world's many shadow libraries constituted by written and unwritten alternative subjectivities waiting to be re-'instituted'.

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Rosalyn D'Mello

Contributor

Rosalyn is an author, columnist, editor, researcher, art writer and critic. Since January 2016, she has been writing a weekly feminist column for mid-day, and, since mid-2016, a regular column for OPEN based on her visits to South Asian artists' studios, which she has been evolving into a forthcoming book for Oxford University Press, India, thanks to a research grant from the India Foundation for the Arts.

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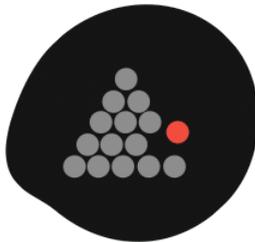


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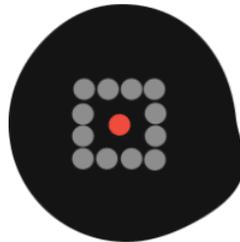
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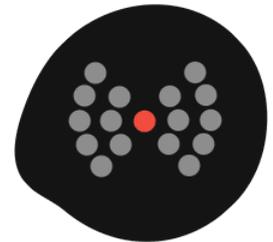
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