

Politics as Pedagogy

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Protest site at Shaheen Bagh, 2020.
Source: Deccan Herald.

Representation fails to capture the affirmed world of difference. Representation has only a single center, a unique and receding perspective, and in consequence a false depth. It mediates everything, but mobilizes and moves nothing.

The state of India recently introduced a number of divisive and controversial legislative acts, like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), National Population Register (NPR), and a proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC). Against these governmental measures, India has witnessed large scale public mobilizations and insurgent movements. This moment or event can be described as one of the greatest mass/popular movements in the country's post-independent era. From the inception of this moment, universities such as Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI), Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), and more have been the locus of these revolts and resistances.

As it has been unfolding, this mo(ve)ment has exceeded the premises of the university to become a pedagogic moment of a people-to-come. It has brought about a shift in the paradigm of education, which may be summarized as a moving away from the spatial segregations which configure pedagogy as a verbal-centered discourse (of the mind) to a mode that is immersive and includes the desire and will to knowledge. This shift has important implications for future instructional methods. In an insurgent way, this pedagogic moment upstages the teleology of educational imagination and instructions, premised as they are upon the gap between current theory and outmoded practice. This emergent pedagogy is capable of unconcealing the fact that the humanities is precisely a knowledge of enframing, of media and *mise en scène*, understood not as a representation of something else but as a mode of action in the world.

The pedagogic moment of this popular movement has reframed the existing infrastructures of politics. The possibilities it has opened up offer a rethinking of not only the

political as such, but also the question infrastructure at large. What makes this movement even more noteworthy is the role of Muslim women in organizing, leading, and sustaining these protests. The divisive character and sinister design of these legislative acts against minor/marginal community members, and the inherent anti-Muslim structural violence that undercuts them, demands detailed analyses. However, this essay will focus on the emergence of a “new-social” and subaltern-sociality in response to these governmental and ideological measures.

The New Infrastructure of Politics

While New Delhi often projects itself as the political epicenter of the country, its “progressive” politics are largely centered on (and around) the spatial confines of the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). If JNU is the keystone of this architecture of politics, sites like Jantar Mantar, India Gate, and Mandi House become its infrastructural allies.^[2] The legacy of JNU’s politics has been achieved through decades-long student activism and organized forms of political networking. Armed with functional mechanisms of mobilization, the Left student groups (of various hues) at JNU have defined the terrain, medium, and technologies of radical politics in Delhi and India more widely. This infrastructural legacy has resulted in several advantageous circumstances that have not only enabled JNU-ites to position themselves as the sole bearers of the infrastructure of radical politics, but also to become arbitrators of protocols of political thought and action, and in turn, custodians of legitimized vocabularies of politics.

This infrastructural efficacy has enabled these Left student groups to achieve near dominance within student politics in JNU, and has captured the political imagination of student

communities across college and university campuses in Delhi and beyond. This is a significant achievement considering the fact that the presence and influence of the Left in the city-politics of Delhi is otherwise negligible. This consistent domination of JNU by the Left can be linked to the carefully crafted aesthetic lineages of its sloganeering, poster-making, rhythms, theatrics, acoustics, attires, and so on. An engagement with the semiotic and aesthetic dimension of such politics may allow us to explicate both what they enable, and more importantly, what they forbid from the domain of the political.

The Minoritarian Turn

The political legacy of JNU, armored by the representational logic of the Left, has been challenged by various minoritarian political formations in recent times. Among them, critiques put forth by Ambedkarite student organizations both within JNU and other universities across India have framed the politics of the Left as a form of “politics of privilege.” Ambedkarite organizations and student groups point out that this privilege largely stems from the caste-economy of the Indian polity and is antithetical to any transformative politics. They have put forth the critique that the aesthetical or affective dimension of Left politics is incapable of engaging with the fractured world of subaltern/minority communities due to the cohesiveness of the category of “class” that engulfs their narrative and expressive idioms. They highlight the fact that the overemphasis of the Marxian notion of systemic reality (through the sole prism of class) often fails to take stock of the lived realities of the caste-world, and argue that systemic crisis can never be experienced as itself; that is to say, that “systemic” crises are always apprehended as ‘lived’ crises. As a form of praxis or philosophical pragmatism emerging from the ethical principles of egalitarianism, these

critiques have opened up the possibilities of new infrastructural thinking and have thereby redrawn the contours of the politics of pedagogy.

One of the recent instances of such a shift was the massive protest that erupted in response to the institutional murder of Rohith Vemula, a dalit research scholar and activist of the University of Hyderabad (UoH) in 2016. The suicide of Vemula was the result of the administration's expulsion of students from the university hostel under false pretext.^[3] Until this moment, the entire infrastructure of Left radicalism, its resultant vocabulary, and protocols of politics had given a certain illegitimacy to subaltern/minority political expressions by repeatedly projecting them as sectarian in character. This 2016 event produced the first cracks in the solidity of an infrastructure of politics based on representation. The emergent vocabulary of this mo(ve)ment in contemporary history creatively confronted the existing infrastructures, which until then not only defined the very speakability and fluency of language-acts, but also produced palpable dissonance with the protocols of political thought and action defined by this very infrastructure.

What the Rohith Vemula moment/movement signposted was, on the one hand, a crisis in the basic architectonics of such political and pedagogical infrastructures, and on the other hand, a challenge to the very grammaticality of political speech-acts. The emergence of student groups such as Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA) in UoH, and BAPSA (Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students' Association) in JNU, for instance, their entry into student politics, and the political choices that they have since made in terms of affiliations and alliances, presents a rudimentary sketch of this new emergent infrastructure.^[4] Indeed, UoH has been the fulcrum of anti-caste politics and the coming-

together of various minoritarian political formations for at least the past two decades. These formations have also made concrete moves towards making alliances with often-condemned minority student political mobilizations such as SIO (Students' Islamic Organisation of India). Groups such as ASA and BAPSA have not attempted to abdicate the existing infrastructure in its entirety,^[5] but to reoccupy it without reproducing its effects. In other words, such reframing is not aimed at producing a crystallization of language, but rather, generating stutter-effects to the representational fluency of infrastructural efficacy.



Expelled students of University of Hyderabad at Velivada, 2016. Source: velivada.com.

Tale of Two Reclamations: Freedom Square and Velivada

As a move against being branded anti-nationals in 2015–2016 by machineries of the ruling political dispensation (along with the help of an organized media campaign), the JNU community reclaimed the space in front of its administrative building, and renamed it Freedom Square. The teaching and student community of JNU converted that space into a pedagogical enterprise where several scholars, academics, and artists presented alternative ideas regarding nationalism, often critiquing the idea of the nation itself and the violence associated with its very structure.

In mid-2015, during the protest against university administration for expelling students from the hostel under false pretexts—which eventually resulted in the suicide of Rohith Vemula on January 17, 2016—students of UoH erected a tent in the commercial complex located at the heart of the campus, declaring it as *Velivada*. Velivada, a Telugu word, signifies the civic structuring of land based on caste hierarchies. Literally meaning “a street outside the limits of village/city” (or a ghetto), the name designates the outcaste settlement. By bringing a velivada into the center of the *agrahara* (the most pious Brahminic settlement/household) of knowledge—i.e. the university—they broke open the seemingly coherent infrastructure of pedagogic enterprises.

The terms being used—Freedom and Velivada—deserve closer examination. While the former is based on an abstract, universal concept, the latter is rooted in particularity—both in terms of language and cultural significations. What are the performative dimensions of the English word “freedom”—a universal major in character—when juxtaposed with the provincial/regional minor coinage “velivada”? While the first is a floating signifier without limits, the other is a confined space with all the “smells and stench” of caste. Unlike freedom, the quintessential human value par excellence, Velivada, meaning a place outside of the “proper” civic settlement, bears traces that evoke histories of segregation and exclusion based on a caste economy.

The reclamation of a space by naming it Freedom Square is an attempt at restoring “lost glory,” and is thereby an act of strengthening the existing infrastructure. However, the entry of Velivada into the spaces of a pedagogical enterprise anticipates a reframing of the infrastructural logic itself. Instead of relying on the virtues of a politics of restitution, students from the UoH preferred to install new-

universals. They brought back the constitutive other/outside of the empty-universal and instilled them at the heart of the universal. The most visible outcome of such cracks in infrastructural logic is the unavoidable presence of slogans like “*Neel Salam, Jai Bhim*,”^[6] and pictures of B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, and more recently, Fatima Sheikh in any anti-authoritarian mobilizations today.^[7] These are the cracks through which a new pedagogical intent has entered into the pristine confines of academia, both in terms of curricular interventions as well as redistribution of lived experiences.

Velivadas of Indian Politics: Jamia Millia Islamia and Shaheen Bagh

While JNU appears as the epicentre of revolutionary politics based on secular principles, Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) is often projected either as apolitical, or as the bedrock of a reactionary politics mobilized through religious identity. Along with neighboring localities like Jamia Nagar and the now-infamous Batla House, JMI appears in the dominant infrastructural imagination of the city-universe as a black-hole (a Muslim ghetto).^[8] Notwithstanding its geographical proximity with the citadels of power (i.e. South Delhi), JMI has remained distant from the cityscape of politics; an evasive, unruly geography, which hosts at the heart of the capital the “anti-nationals.” In other words, while JMI and its surrounding localities remain spatially within the city-state of Delhi, they are perceived as socially outside of the city-limits.

In the psycho-geography of the city-state’s “proper” citizenry, there is an insurmountable distance between JNU and Lutyens’ Delhi (of Mandi House and Jantar Mantar) on the one hand, and JMI and its surrounding areas, on the other. This is evident by the fact that in contrast with JNU, which is a popular pilgrimage site for

education-aspirants and the politically-motivated, JMI, despite its rich legacy beginning with anti-colonial struggles and institutional achievements, remains a destination-unknown. This is also evident in the character of the anti-national tag ascribed to these institutions in recent times. The anti-national characterization of JNU is framed either as a marker of its radical politics, or as an aberration of (Hindu) students due to ideological indoctrinations of the Left. Either way, the term “anti-national” in the context of JNU signifies a certain radicality in terms of political action and thought—owing often to the “universal values” that it endorses. But the anti-national tag attributed to JMI (or Aligarh Muslim University, for that matter) is based solely on its name, the presence of Islamic linguistic and cultural heritage, and an imaginary religious geography constructed around its location. This is how the recent infliction of police violence on the students in JMI have been projected by the state and its allied media machineries as acts of taming the “unruly.”^[9]

As a response to police atrocities in the JMI University campus on December 15, 2019, protests erupted across various parts of India. One protest camp was set up that very night right in the middle of one of the major highways that connects commercial hub Noida (in neighboring state Uttar Pradesh) with Delhi, nearly three kilometers away from the JMI campus, in Shaheen Bagh. Primarily occupied and organized by Muslim women of Shaheen Bagh, this protest site has heralded a new chapter in the politics of the capital city-state. The protests here, unlike their counterparts elsewhere in the city such as at Jantar Mantar, India Gate, and Mandi House, deterritorialize the city and its political geography. Shaheen Bagh has not only produced a new topology of political actions, but also paved way for the emergence of a fresh pedagogic and infrastructural thinking.

The venues of these protests are not venues in any conventional sense. Rather, they are clear indicators of the ways in which infrastructures have been reinvented. Both of these protests at JMI and Shaheen Bagh have occupied the public road and converted them into spaces of congregation. In the case of JMI, the protesters have occupied one side of the road, regulating traffic flow through the other side, monitored by volunteers throughout the daily protests. There are constant speeches of solidarity, poetry recitals, testimonies, performances, and so on. Behind, around, and besides the temporary stage that has been set up are demonstrations, temporary libraries, and reading rooms, art camps, and poster making workshops, to name just a few. Each of these activities are singular in character, but stitch themselves together through an affective bonding charged with responsibility towards one another.

Unlike JMI, Shaheen Bagh has permanently occupied the highway, converting it into a site of protest. It is predominantly occupied by women who sit in a tent, facing the temporary stage/structure, keeping a round-the-clock vigil. Some of them undertake fasting during the day, and yet this is no Gandhian model which despises the body. In fact, the women of Shaheen Bagh constitute a new body-politics ingrained in an ethical “care of the self.” The morphology of the entire structure and gathering resists stasis. On an everyday basis, one sees creative modifications in terms of size, décor, the space that the stage occupies, the audio-visual technologies that it relies on, the iconographies that it ascribes to, and the mediatory role of the people who manage the stage and decorum in the conventional sense. Faith and religiosity is inscribed in their pious acts.

Each of the activities in these sites are self-monitored, but the affective fields of their collectivities produce a flow, and stand as

poetic acts of pluralization. Each are slices of time, space, and dividualities. Walking into the protest site at Shaheen Bagh, you encounter people rehearsing the art of sloganeering, and witness that the topology of rehearsing itself is the creative moment of the protest. They are acts of spontaneous extensions, de-formations, and re-inventions. There are aspects of repetition, but they defy the protocols of mimesis. Such acts of repetition have to be read not in the conventional sense of repeating the same but as a politico-linguistic strategy. Here to repeat something is to begin again, to renew, to question, and to refuse remaining the same. The reclamation of political symbols of national importance, the re-citation of revolutionary idioms, the re-distribution of the word *aazadi* (“freedom”), and so on, only exist within this specific context.

These sites have the character of an epiphyte in the sense that they use the existing infrastructures of politics to constitute a rhizomatic existence. In that sense, they are *para*-sites. But unlike parasites, they do not necessarily have an adverse effect on their host. They cultivate a new ecosystem/infrastructure from the thin air around them and germinate life among and from its debris. The resurgence of Shaheen Bagh-like sites across the country is a result of this epiphytic character of its infrastructural design.^[10] They do not rely upon the production of a new infrastructure to begin with; they are the Arte Povera of a new infrastructural politics. They produce a reticular structure that generates new affective fields and “elective affinities.”^[11]



Fatima Sheikh Savitribai Phule Library at Shaheen Bagh protest site. Photo: Santhosh S.

Constituent Paradigm

The ever-evolving morphology of the protest site at Shaheen Bagh resists existing architectures of political imagination. It is this seeming lacuna in infrastructure that itself provides new possibilities to reconceptualize the vocabularies of political thinking, thought, and action. It opens up the creative moment of politics over and above the highly orchestrated representational politics that otherwise dominates the political discourses of the Left.

I use the word “creative” here in a very specific sense. Innovation, creativity, and so on, are often used as extensions of an existing morphology of concepts and percepts. But here, an elusive-yet-concrete, a mobile-yet-rooted, an angry-yet-joyous, a confronting-yet-celebratory form of collective becoming achieves a new speakability, moving beyond the grammaticality of representational idioms. It is creative because of its fermented nature where the victim and the heroic submerges, resurges, and enfolds, thus producing unforeseen assemblages of affinities and affective domains. The topography of the pre-existing infrastructures of politics and the surety of their solidity and coherence is upstaged here by defamiliarizing topological

moves that transgress and transform the circles of thought into ovals, spirals, and back again.

In any visit to these sites, one encounters the presence of contradicting intensities. Speakers from all walks of life occupy the temporary podium—from a local human rights activist to a renowned lawyer, people holding positions in various political parties, academicians of varying degree of repute, social activists, religious leaders and scholars, artists of various vocations, to name a few. One may not find a common narrative among this array of expressions and articulations, but without exception, one witnesses the intensity of the listeners, often applauding this polyphony of opinions, ideas, and articulations. But the listeners are not mere spectators; in fact, the stage is for the lesser-mortals. The women are themselves both the stage and the enactment. Unlike the bourgeois public sphere where production of consensus (of and through speech-acts) is essential to its functionality, these sites are beyond the confines of a singular and cohesive narrative. It is rather the polyphony of articulations and the intensity of reception which constitute the strength of this coming-together. The false depth of the proscenium, the cohesiveness that it produces to the normative narratology, and the centrality it ascribes to the protagonist is displaced by a new spatial and immersive logic. It is akin to an aesthetical moment in which the Forum Theatre of Augusto Boal meets the carnivalesque of Mikhail Bakhtin.

The evocation and celebration of the Indian constitution and recitals of its Preamble are some of the other recurring features in this movement of resistance. One obvious reason for this is the defining ethical content of the Preamble, which guarantees equality among its citizenry and the way that it defines India as a secular, socialist, and democratic republic. Another reason is that it works as a platform to evoke the chief-architect of the Indian

constitution, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. The anti-caste crusade of Ambedkar has an enlivened traction among the dalit-bahujan and minority communities. At the same time, one cannot reduce these evocations as a mere espousal of constitutionalism. This can perhaps be described as a rare instance where the Indian constitution has acquired a constituting function for a (coming-) community, rather than a book of reverence alone. What is most noteworthy here is the fact that the constitution exceeds its juridical dependence and becomes the constituting agent of the political. The hermeneutical axis of the constitution is shifted away from the domain of the experts (and/or law-makers) and towards the people at large. The constitution emerges as the people's document, and they assume the role of the creative interpreters of it against the juridical devaluation of core universal principles.

Unlike the juridical imagination of the constitution as the basis (or the stasis) of the republic, it acquires here the performative potential of an infrastructural object. The constitution becomes an affective object and its existence is an outcome of relations among people who are not only constituted by it, but are also the primary constitutive agents of it. While the mere reliance on (human) rights-discourses reduces politics into a domain of juridical debates, this new infrastructural politics brings it back into the domain of popular contestations. This is the pedagogic lesson on "jurisprudence" one learns from the ferment of the moment.

Shaheen Bagh and the Coming-Community-of-Politics

The resilience of the women of Shaheen Bagh is a story of epic proportions. The polyphonic character of this epic produces an epistemological crisis in political thinking, be it in terms of its pragmatics, protocols,

vocabularies, or idioms. They not only make new thinkability possible, but also provide an expressive idiom for the unthought. Unlike conventional (muscular) politics, which is reduced to a battleground of competing interests, here politics re-emerges as a space of the unknown—an interstice where faith is anterior to reason. The operative principles of representational politics and its accumulative logic are displaced instead by a politics of divestment, the emergent infrastructure of which is futurological. A mere historicization of women's presence in politics (or women's movements) alone may not enable us to experience the intensity of this embodied event. Historicization relies on the creation of stable categories, which subordinate difference to identity. Such a representational logic is incapable of engaging with the affirmation of difference. Thus, it may create a false depth and mediate everything, but mobilize and move nothing.

Most of the accounts on the Shaheen Bagh protest, despite best political intent, fall prey to this representational logic. Perhaps what this moment demands is a “conversion”—making sense of old ways of thinking and seeing their morphologies, mechanics, technics, and design for what they are.^[12] Such a positioning is a *partage*—a proximal distance of partaking logic, or an illogism of politics of embodiment. This critical ontology pierces through the emptiness that has enveloped concepts such as freedom, equality, fraternity, and so on. It also unconceals the pitfalls of a symbolic economy that engulfs and contains the affective potentials of language, articulation, and expression. This politics beyond representational logic marks the emergence of a “new people” or “coming-community.” It aims to construct a new universal by divesting freedom from its juridical dependence. The locus of freedom here becomes the body of the participants themselves. It marks the dawn of a new critical ontology of politics—a threshold

where the borders between bodies become porous, their identities fluid.

The epiphytical infrastructure that enables the protest event at Jamia Millia Islamia and Shaheen Bagh brings into being multiple ecosystems of becoming, which, by traversing worlds of differences, reconceptualize both platforms and protocols. Their acts are not symbolic; they construct fluid-solids of what matters to the ontology of politics. The Left-liberal representative logic that struggles to contain their presence by reducing them to “photo-ops” of brave Muslim women only does them disservice.^[13] More than the immediate outcome or debating the success or futility of their protest, what is significant is the fact that they are the “event” of becoming the “political-of-knowledge.” Their afterlives will undoubtedly produce, shape, nurture, equip, and celebrate a coming-community-of-politics.

Postscript

Not only does this moment mark a new era of protest, but it has also produced a generation of political in-dividuals. Better yet, a pedagogic practice of deindividuation. What art do these acts of de-individuation produce? This moment opens up the possibilities of a pedagogical turn in art; not in terms of representational protocols or in terms of functional principles, but as intensifiers of the affective fields of language and expression. They may act as avenues through which the deregulation and reclamation of spaces takes place as an expression of collective will. They actively reconvert a hostage situation imposed by state machineries into a domain of hospitality; a heterotopia of hope and resistance.

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[\[http://localhost:4200/strands/critical-pedagogies/politics-as-pedagogy\]](http://localhost:4200/strands/critical-pedagogies/politics-as-pedagogy).

[1]

Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press 1994), 55–56.

[2]

Jantar Mantar is a place that is designated/earmarked by the government to conduct political demonstrations within the capital city; India Gate is a popular tourist destination built as a monument for martyrs of Indian independence, but came to prominence as a site of protest in 2012 as part of the civil society protests against the brutal gang rape and murder of a woman in Delhi; Mandi House is the cultural hub of Delhi, often used to mobilise citizenry for marches to the parliament.

[3]

In late 2015, a group of Dalit student-activists, including Rohith Vemula, were accused by the UoH administration for partaking in anti-national activities. What led to the suspension of these students from the university was an event organised by Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA)—a political outfit of Dalits and other minority communities in UoH—condemning the extra-judicial killing of Yakub Memon, an alleged terror suspect in the infamous 'Mumbai bomb blasts' in the wake of the demolition of the historic Babri Masjid by Hindu extremists. ASA had organised a public meeting and film screening highlighting the procedural lapses in the judicial execution of Memon on the one hand, as well as an attempt at foregrounding the ethical stand against capital punishment endorsed by B.R. Ambedkar.

[4]

I have elsewhere written about the emergence of a new politics emerging from minoritarian becoming vis-à-vis the Left-dominated discourse on politics. See [here](#).

[5]

This is evident in the way ASA had affiliated with the mainstream Left student organization SFI (Students' Federation of India).

[6]

"Neel Salam, Jai Bhim" can be translated as "Blue Salute, Victory to Bhim." Bhim here refers to both, B.R. Ambedkar and the Buddhist genealogy of Dalit politics. The Blue Salute draws from Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism and the new path (*Navayana*) that he envisioned. These slogans are counter to the dominance of Lal Salam (or Red Salute) which is central to the enactment of Left political mobilization.

[7]

Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) was a radical social reformer and anti-caste crusader. Savitribai Phule (1831–1897) had along with Fatima Sheikh initiated several concrete measures for the emancipation of women through education and organisation, such as the setting up of a school for girls in 1848. The exact dates of Sheikh's birth or demise are not recorded publicly yet.

[8]

The Batla House encounter in 2008 was covered by constant live news telecasts and press coverage. Aerial shots were used as a means of conveying the congested nature of the "ghetto." Since then, Batla House has become synonymous with the "potential Muslim terror" narrative within the spatial imagination of the city.

[9]

HT Correspondent, "A blow-by-blow account of Jamia protest in last 24 hrs over Citizenship Act," *Hindustan Times*, December 16, 2019, see [here](#).

[10]

See [here](#).

[11]

I draw this term from Walter Benjamin's usage in his essay "Goethe's Elective Affinities," published in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 1: 1913–1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[12]

Conversion is used here in both the phenomenological

and historical sense. In a phenomenological sense, it implicates a certain exteriority that is central to the deep interiority of existence. In this specific context, it demands a process of deindividuation where the certainty of the coherent individual becomes an impediment in terms of embodying the event. In a historical sense, the word conversion is evoked in order to trace the legacy of Ambedkarite politics. Ambedkar's preferences of transformative politics over the so-called revolutionary politics resonates with the present political reconfiguration that is central to the argument of this essay. It evokes the historical memory of Ambedkar's decades-long ruminations on religious conversion as an emancipatory act, his thoughts on various religions in this process, and his conversion to Buddhism on October 14, 1956 (along with half a million Dalits). Ambedkar did not convert to an established religion of Buddhism; rather, he carved out a new pathway within Buddhist thought, calling it *Navayana* (new vehicle), which revitalized the inherent egalitarian principles of Buddhism and called for a closer integration of the individual and the social world.

[13]

They are fractal images of the becoming-political of the world; they exceed topological imagination.