

HINDUTVA

HOLLOWING OUT



With the rise of right wing Hindu Nationalism (also known as Hindutva) in India and Canada, there has been a marked increase in intimidation, censorship, and hate acts aimed at Canadian artists who are seen as critical of Hindutva. In 2021, Toronto-based Indian filmmaker, poet and actor Leena Manimekalai, who was facing multiple censorship-related court cases in India for her political art and started to experience harassment and death threats in Canada from right-wing Hindutva groups. In subsequent months, it became clear that her experience is emblematic of larger trends in censorship of artists' works in India and Canada.

In response, a group of artists and cultural workers who wished to deepen their understanding and capacities to address this issue came together. We compiled a cursory reading/watch list to deepen our understanding and fuel our discussion to deal

with what we see as a threat to artistic freedom. To add to these texts, we also brought in speakers with a range of political positions to share their experiences of doing this kind of work.

The discussion that we held had elements of soul searching, vulnerabilities, personal explorations and political conversations. We often did not agree with one another, but held space for hearing out each person's unique perspective, experience and opinion. You will encounter the image of the termite throughout this text. We selected the termite to represent our goals for two contradictory and complementary reasons: on one hand, termites are structural pests towards humans; and on the other hand, termite colonies are also known as superorganisms because the collective behaviour of individuals forms a self-governing entity. We find a beauty in this collective work to bring down the structures of the oppressor.

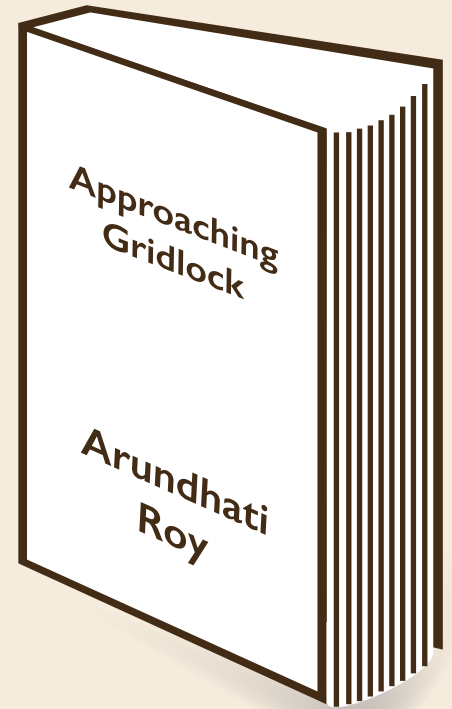
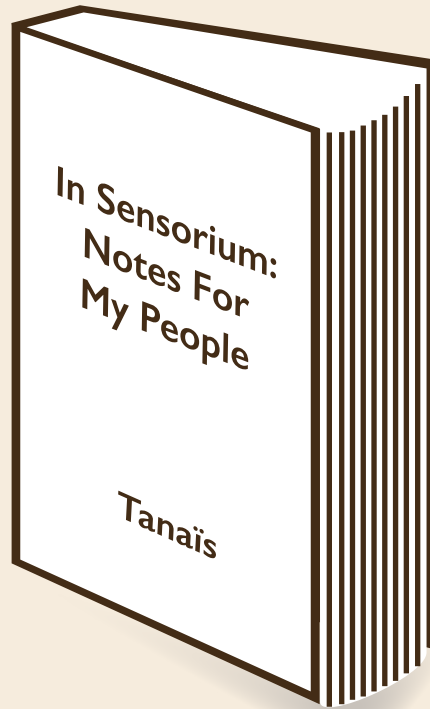
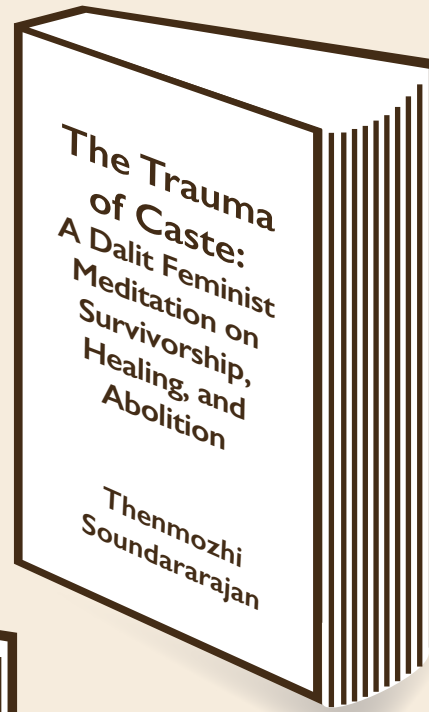
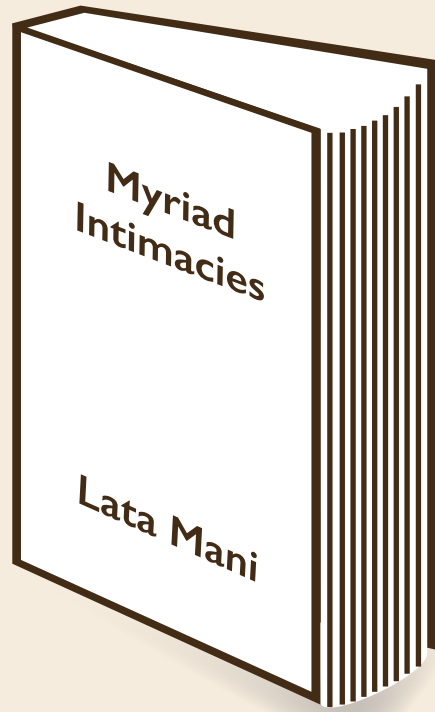


The selected texts reflect the groups' artistic, political and methodological sensibilities. We attempted to center queer, feminist, and dalit voices with the following learning goals:

1. Better understanding and contextualizing the rise of Hindutva groups and the impact on arts and culture in Canada, particularly in relation to bullying and censorship of artists.
2. Building collective capacity and networks of safety to respond to the rhetoric of the Hindutva.
3. Developing implementable strategies to support fellow artists and cultural workers in the face of censorship and bullying.

In this publication, we share excerpts, reflections, and annotations from our readings with the hopes that it will inspire you to self-organize a similar group with similar goals. Click on the book titles to read our commentary in its entirety.





I haven't been part of a reading group ever, and this particular focus was compelling to me as one in which we are all parsing through the challenges of our diasporic experiences, which are myriad, and through understanding how to think about the inherited castes or structures we each come from. This was a beautiful space developed together, discussing the readings, but also trying to work out how to register an ancient system of slavery that the Brahminic patriarchal order has established. Thenmozhi Soundarajan's "The Trauma of Caste" has shifted me...her writing induces a somatic understanding, a somatic response. I had never thought of how my body – or generations prior – received the oppression of caste hierarchy...and how the violence of that oppression exists in all of us, and how we pass it on. This has made me look at everyone differently.

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I am not sure that we came up with any concrete solutions when it came to the principle matter – how do we address the Hindu nationalist agenda in the diaspora. But I don't think that was the point of the group. There's no easy fix. These are ongoing conversations that need to be had to understand the roots of dissatisfaction that can lead to the rise of a fundamentalist rhetoric. However, I was glad of the community and conversations, and the many resources that were shared as part of the reading exercises.

The rise of hate happens when things are accepted as is or quietly left to proliferate in the hopes that it goes away. Avoiding the topic which ties so closely to caste and has led to active censorship and death threats in the diaspora was no longer an option.

I have to work through a lot of discomfort talking about Hindu Nationalism, as though I'm talking behind someone's back. Not being a good friend. Not being a very good daughter.

In her book, *Trauma of Caste*, Thenmozhi Soundarajan writes about the institution of caste in Hinduism, the long-standing backbone of Hindu Nationalism: "Your faith is bound to violence it sanctions. For practitioners of a Brahminical traditions, this reckoning may be painful; it is hard to admit the gulf between your values and the history of our spiritual practice. But if you do not wish to be complicit in the suffering of others, then you must confront these truths."

Over the course of our meetings, we had deliberate and open discussions on our experiences, which were disparate. We didn't always agree on every issue but were always open to exploring where our thought processes originated.

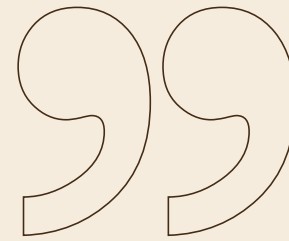
Myriad Intimacies alternates between text and video, poetry and prose. It tells the reader to stop and take a breath. It is written in a way that makes sense to Lata, after meeting with a terrible accident that affected her brain, and from which she recovered by using aspects of tantra. As a reader, however, it offers a visceral experience – reading, watching and contemplating. Her passages on caste draw from her background as a feminist/Marxist scholar.

It is unfortunate that I had never come across Lata Mani's work until I joined this reading group. What a delight it was to discover her work! The book is deceptively thin. But within those pages, there's so much richness – which I suppose comes from life lived fully after a tragedy. Myriad Intimacies alternates between text and video, poetry and prose. It tells the reader to stop and take a breath. It is written in a way that makes sense to Lata, after meeting with a terrible accident that affected her brain, and from which she recovered by using aspects of tantra. As a reader, however, it offers a visceral experience – reading, watching and contemplating. Her passages on caste draw from her background as a feminist/Marxist scholar, highlighting “socially produced differences.” Through the book, Lata asks us to consider how our lives are made up of myriad intimacies. “And yet we approach them as estrangements.” It was such a powerful, and seemingly simple, observance that I was compelled to pause.

We were fortunate that as part of the book club, Lata spoke with us. She even presented a paper! She spoke to our current political climate and how considering Sufi poets like Kabir – who was Dalit, and presented life's quandaries in such simple language, versus the scholarly Sanskrit text – might offer us a way to think. I was deeply moved by her provocations, and hope to carry her words with me forward.

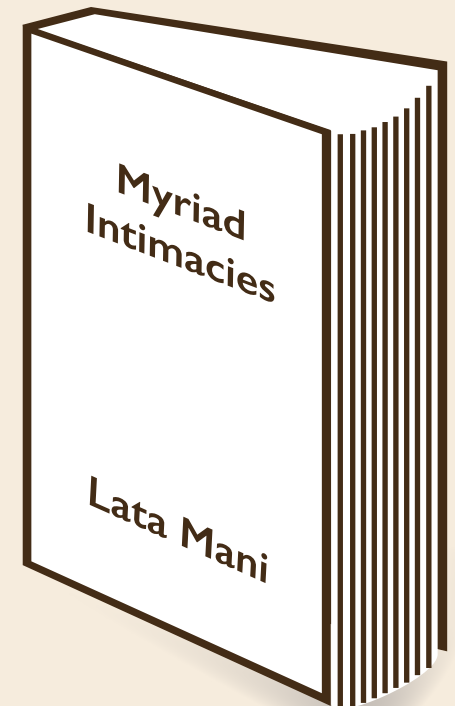


To recenter interrelationality and mutuality would be to pivot political practice. For it would dissolve the self-other binary (a secondary misperception) to lay bare the primary misperception: the disavowal of interrelationship in the production of difference as Otherness. To work from this basis is to restore the intimacy to politics. There is no absolute Other separable from oneself. Both continually constitute each other (Myriad Intimacies, Lata Mani, p. 61).



The way Lata speaks about interrelationality is connected in the way that solidarity operates; where the divide between self and other are firm yet porous. In her work, Dr. Natalie Kouri-Towe discusses that the foundation of solidarity is understanding another beyond shared identification. It requires us to have a particular relationship to ourselves at the same time that it requires us to have difference with another, as well as a way to bridge that difference. She states that solidarity is about more than your own liberation, It is about the liberation of another.

At the core of this group, through readings, conversations and uncomfortable silences, I am continuing to learn and unlearn how to be in solidarity with others. This includes creating capacity for myself and others - specifically working in the cultural sector in Canada - to create supports to stand up against the rampant censorship we are witnessing, through Hindutva and Zionist forces.





...a curious researcher who wants to tell the story of South Asia from the survivors' point of view, the notes are all written in pencil. Impermanent. Easy to erase. Most documented narratives of the birangona are anonymous, or they are named by pseudonyms, to protect their privacy and safety from more violence. Archiving the lost stories of the birangona, undertaken by artists, academics, and activists who preserve their memories, includes sensory

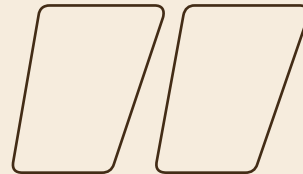
details, though that isn't often their focus. I read the text for vasantas to build a sensorium of this history that I've inherited. Pieces of poetry, plays, films, and interviews with women whom I will never meet myself become the precious threads of a loom- a tantra — of their memories and stories of survival. (Tanais, In Sensorium, 236)



The book In Sensorium was full of details and intricate histories which reminded me of the well-researched historical novels I have read in the past. Something about giving flesh and blood to numbers in dusty ledgers which mark passages of wars, migrations, and other historical events make history feel you as you do the same.

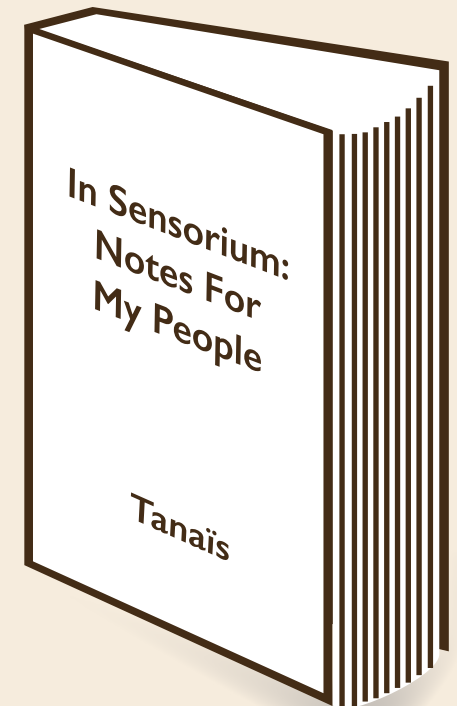
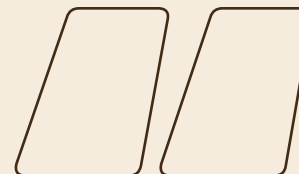


In Sensorium is an offering and an invitation to understand history, experience and the felt sense together. Tanais uses scent conceptually, materially and as memory to delve into the complexity of South Asia, the silk route, intermingled with colonialism and caste consciousness. This book is a non-linear composition into what constitutes 'self'.

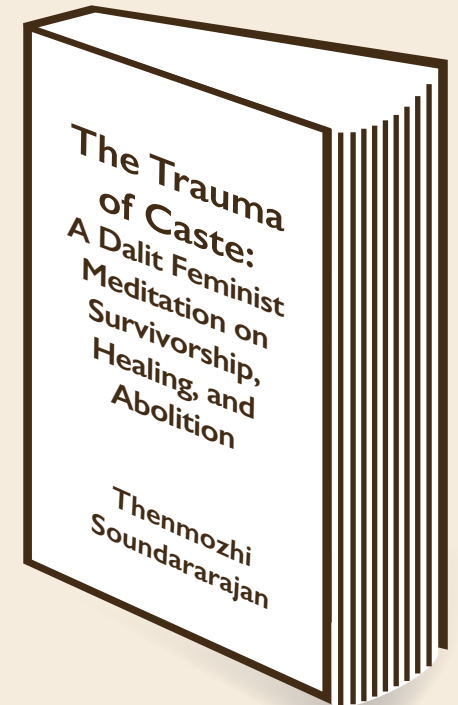


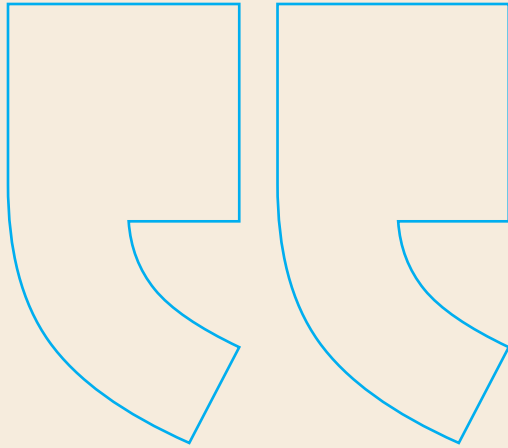
It's curious how sandalwood trees are parasites. They need host trees like whistling pines and acacia to draw nutrients and water from their roots. Just as royalty inflicted their rule upon the people, without their hosts, sandalwood would never survive. (In sensorium, 112)

...their bark stripped in the pattern of camouflage, almost like birch, but deeper in color- they were agarwood- from which oud oil is extracted. Agar, like the agarbatti, or incense. When the trees are infected with fungi, they respond by producing a thick, resinous heartwood. Its scent is woody, animalic, with a touch of kalamata olive and stone fruit (In Sensorium, 123)



I've been following Thenmozhi's work in the United States for a while. I had read some of her other writings in media publications, and watched one of her presentations. I had not gotten around to reading her book. For those who may not be that aware of just how central a role the caste system plays within Indian society, **Thenmozhi's book is a good introduction to a Dalit perspective.** By weaving in elements of memoir along with facts and figures from human rights organizations as well as dives into historical and religious texts, Thenmozhi offers a layered look at the caste plays out in the US and other diasporas. Astonishingly, the book is written with great equanimity. However, you can say that the matter-of-fact way in which she talks about the discrimination she's endured as a child is deeply troubling. Thenmozhi offers various ways in which savarna folk can engage with caste, and I found these suggestions a welcome beginning to my own questions around how do I approach caste given my own privilege.



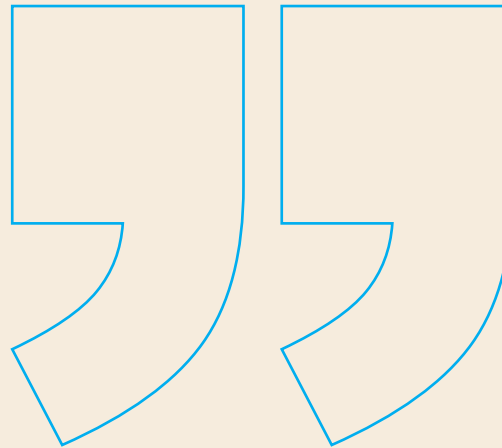


If we lock ourselves into the prison cells of the very labels and identities that we have been given by those who have always had power over us, we can at best stage a prison revolt. Not a revolution. And the prison guards will appear soon enough to restore order. In fact, they're already on their way. When we buy into a culture of proscription and censorship, eventually it is always the Right, and usually

the status quo, that benefits disproportionately.

Sealing ourselves into communities, religious and caste groups, ethnicities and genders, reducing and flattening our identities and pressing them into silos precludes solidarity. Ironically, that was and is the ultimate goal of the Hindu caste system in India. Divide a people into a hierarchy of unbreachable compartments, and no one community will be able to feel the pain of another, because they are in constant conflict.

It works like a self-operating, intricate administrative/surveillance machine in which society administers/surveils itself, and in the process ensures that the overarching structures of oppression remain in place. Everyone except those at the very top and the very bottom—and these categories are minutely graded, too—is oppressed by someone and has someone to be oppressed by.
Arundhati Roy, [Approaching Gridlock](#)



I found this piece compelling enough to return to it several times. Roy weaves together the way that the public imagination of itself and others are put into a vice by the rise of fascism, failing democracy and technology. This very lack of imagination, or state of intellectual paralysis comes from a fear of messy relationality as Roy puts it another way “solidarity is not pristine.”

