

**The 'Outside' Substantiates Academics: Or how theory's situated material history can be foundationalized in music, art and craft**

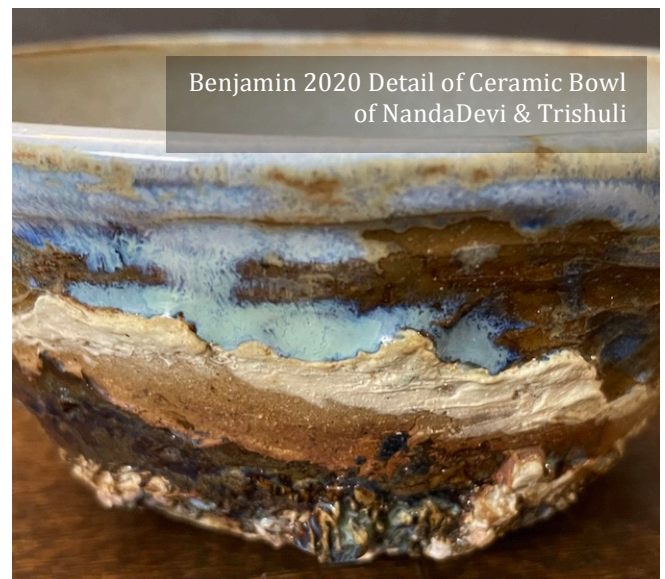
**Thanggou Kipgen & Solly Benjamin**

**29<sup>th</sup> Aug. 3- 4:30 pm Thursday Madhava Hall Room 357 HSS**



Joy of Life; ScreenShot from Shillong Tolpi

*We explore our academic journey co-joined with a 'slow' story of music, art, and craft – usually treated as an 'outside' to academia. Over time, this is both metaphor and a lens through which we have come to think of agency and the city to be co-emergent via everyday materialities. Most often subtle, necessarily opaque, indeterminate spatially, these remain sensed as dream-like and seemingly fragmented. Such sensing is bypassed when both academics and their pedagogy seek and often rule to discipline, an explicit politics centered on 'voice and protest'. Maybe this stems from and reflects academia's own self obsession hidden behind high-ground canonical, disconnects and fear, aggression, where impostership spurs aggressive pedagogy around rote learning. Here, the rich terrain remains as an 'outside' posing the city analytic around categories such as: "...Unplanned, slums and encroachers, marginalized, under-developed tribals, patron clientalism, corruption, liminal'. When instead we take seriously such 'outside', we also argue that theory is deeply enriched, but also both method and pedagogy be kinder to accept and and recognise substantive academic value when discovered experientially via fieldwork by students and younger researchers. Is this 'outside' important for departments to take seriously? In other words, even as a theorisation, does a department, a vital seeding ground to broader academia, need an outside: a space where one can be a musician, an artist, a poet, a cook, an explorer or even a mafia don. And is there need to vision a department as a manifestation of this larger vision to support such outside?*

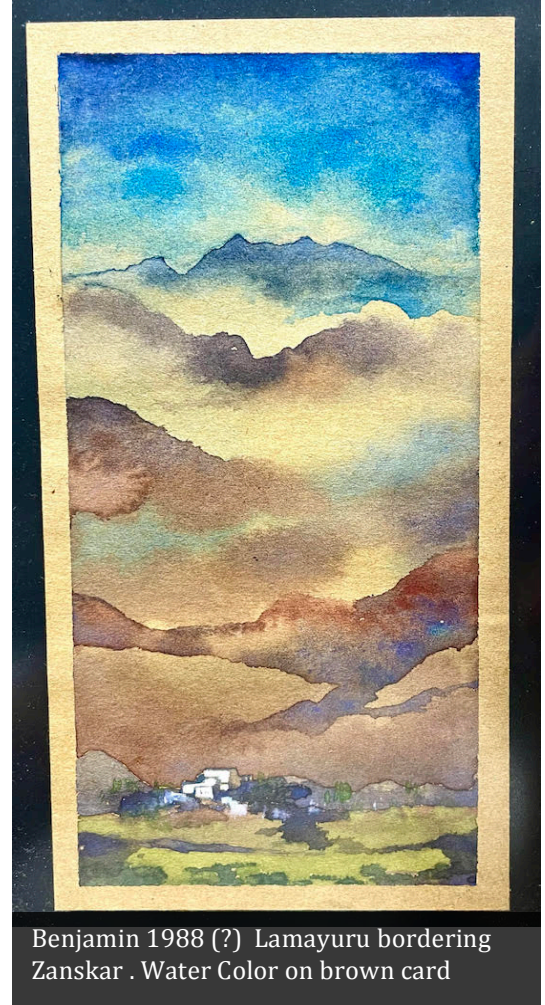
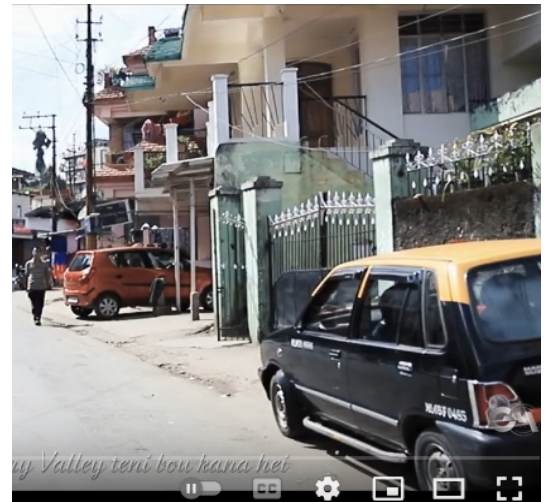


Benjamin 2020 Detail of Ceramic Bowl of NandaDevi & Trishuli

## The 'Outside' Substantiates Academics

Kipgen and Solly in this colloquia illustrate their long and slow journeys, evolved ways to think about city and agency shaping their academic sensibility. We start with Kipgen's youtube video "Shillong Tolpi" evolved from 2009-lyrics, added instrumentation in 2014, into a spontaneous filmography in 2019-20 built around found material of fleeting glimpses of black and yellow Maruti 800 taxis, waterfall landscapes, college canteens conviviality of old and new friends meeting. It also explores the dynamic relationship between the city and individual agency through the lens of a video album that chronicles the journey of a student migrant from rural village life to an urban environment. This visual narrative highlight how migrant's engagement in social networks, hobbies (music etc.) and moments of enjoyment and laughter serve as mechanisms of cultural adaptation, creating sense of belonging, and personal fulfillment. It offers insights into how hobbies and humour function as vital components in the process of adaption of city life, offering a deeper understanding of how one find and create spaces for joy in the midst of significant life transitions and challenges of a chaotic city life. These rich textures form undercurrents of our academic publishing. As Kipgen's interviews and conversations, glances explore social networks, racial discriminations and ethnic food among Northeast migrants in Delhi these in effect remain premised in intense fieldwork shaped theorisation. And these in effect also imply collaboration, remain engaged and reflective of the politics of knowledge production.

Solly's recent journey in ceramics (2016-present) evolved since 1980 photography experienced in various Himalayan treks. Treks then were necessarily slow, meandering and collaborative, and so was learning photography as craft: processing Black White film, printing a landscaped Ladakh that later reworked his water colour within textured paper abstracted into pastels curious about Nicolai Roerich – the Russian artist but also a philosopher and proponent of world peace. Inspiration and discussions over material, technique and especially as this led into carpentry with a keep interest in George Nakashima, another philosopher of live wood, and more recently into ceramics and kiln design and constructions. All of these have consistently disrupted singular authorship to value collaboration and fieldwork shaped entry into academia via the Sarai program at CSDS. Such sensibility has extended into recent works: Cities Untold (Tulika & Colombia University Press, co authored collaborative across ages and disciplinary boundaries. Importantly this curated work holds graphics, fine art, repurposing movie scripts such as Janne Bhi Do Yaaro & Khosla Ka Ghosla, photography, poetry, and curated academic texts, all set in epistemic and ontological equivalence. This sensing facilitates its Mandarin translation to adopt and spur appropriation into new meanings. 'Land, Property, and Territory' a 2023 contribution to the Transactions journal, actively sited deep materialities normally treated as contingent spaces to critique dominant theoretical high-grounded



Benjamin 1988 (?) Lamayuru bordering Zaskar . Water Color on brown card



debates in critical geography. Here Kowloon's Border street entangled in Chinese clan and British colonial authority while Mumbai's Malad overlaps rich Portuguese and British tenorial practices into earlier Maratha ones. Their situated histories via the frame of Spatial Stories engaged four of us working collaboratively: Wing Shing Tang and myself as human geographers with Prasad Shetty and Rupali Gupte, both urbanists turned visual artists now famous via their installations in the Shanghai and Venice Biennale. The adjoining image of the Velakani Shrine in the Kurla Gowthan and a land grant claim under Portuguese Roman law, is mobilized to counter the Mumbai's planning authority to use 'slums' spurred urban renewal. Her substantial theorization across disciplines has been premised in joined fieldwork from five hour long neighbourhood walks in both Kowloon and Malad. Spurring conversations with also students this framed exciting collaborative pedagogy – emphasizing how students too can take charge of theorizing.



Such spaces accept and afford collaborative writing questioning singular brand seeking authorship. In the Transactions article, not surprisingly, the reviews and counters extended from 2019 to 2023. Ours was to resist norms that underpin the academic fashion industry in which thinly made windscreen speed research perpetuates and intensify schizophrenic power divide between academic hegemony and their native informant slaves. Instead a counter political framing evolves necessarily unhurried, but disciplined into conversations: in ours, it was via consistent and rigorous once a week (often two and three day) sequenced Google meet 8 pm IST to 10:30 HKT. Such persistence witnessed two editorial shifts in Transactions, and also when, lost in creative collaborative writing beyond editors and reviewers, Tang and Benjamin's meanderings into theory on their own terms, often forgot as to which journal project they were working on. Such collaborative writing with Abdou Maliq Simone, and later his anchored group of Popular Economies lie evidenced in Social Text and Public Culture – a curatorial exciting space of conviviality only possible in larger authorships. In these works as process thoughts remain, some seemingly random conversations and who knows, may yet to emerge more coherently in a few years into the future.



SB's 2016 Ceramic explorations of Zaskar foregrounding Lamiayuru's Monastery and silk road from 1981-82.

Kipgen and Solly make a jointed argument here. This is expansive from music, film, art and ceramic craft to pose both broader and immediate questions: practicing academia that entangles textured field work is to experiment music, art, craft, and perhaps, shaping our own agency of enjoyment, laughter, and of good cheer. And in this, perhaps to return to the music that Solly once played as a college favorite of Pink Floyd: *'We don't need no thought control, No dark sarcasm in the classroom..'*, to promote among younger scholars a collaborative camaraderie, taking field work seriously to evolve agency via their own theoretical agency. In other words, does academia need to slow down, where in, departments allow (not give) space for slow intent, to catch one's breath, to relieve the ceaseless anxiety of grades, CGPA, publishing ranks that often mask impostership, fear, spur aggression and insecurity, all often justifying false promises of achievement? And rather than placed on the individual, is the problem then systemic – and as more common place, wherein power hierarchies, reluctantly release agency, seeking instead shelter in canonic literatures that only obliterate and subjugate. In other words, even as a theorisation, does a department, a vital seeding ground to broader academia, need an outside: a space where one can be a musician, an artist, a poet, a cook, an explorer or even a mafia don. And is there need to vision a department as a manifestation of this larger vision to support such outsides?

