To Whom Have We Been Talking? Naeem Mohaiemen's Fabulation of a People-to-Come

NOIT BANAI

Abstract

This essay considers Naeem Mohaiemen's three-channel video installation *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017) and performance-lecture *The Shortest Speech* (2019/2021) in order to expand the frameworks through which the Cold War might be understood from our contemporary perspective. It analyzes the technologies, techniques, and conventions of social assembly and public address embedded in and animating Mohaiemen's works and makes visible the problematics of imagining a "people" during the Non-Aligned Movement's historical context and in our neoliberal global capitalist present.

Keywords: Cold War, Non-Aligned Movement, Storytelling, Time-based media, Contemporary art

This essay analyzes Naeem Mohaiemen's three-channel film installation *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017) and his performance-lecture *The Shortest Speech* (2019/2021). These two mutually constitutive artistic interventions have contributed to destabilizing the dominant East-West Cold War binary by focusing on the role of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as a third force—itself negotiating multiple, often conflicting, internal agendas—and, specifically, by considering Bangladesh's pivot from socialism to Islamism between the NAM Summit of 1973 in Algeria and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) meeting of 1974 in Pakistan. The

critical conversation around *Two Meetings and a Funeral* and *The Shortest Speech* has predominantly focused on the unfinished, transversal histories and yet-to-be discovered archives of various liberation movements nested within the NAM and its ultimate failure to govern.[1] To develop these lines of thought in new directions, this essay brings to the fore the issues of communication and communicability, which were fundamental to the creation of an alternative socius and clearly preoccupied its leaders. By analyzing the technologies, techniques, and conventions of social assembly and public address embedded in and animating Mohaiemen's works, I would like to make visible the problematics of imagining a "people" during the NAM's historical context and in our neoliberal global capitalist present.

Two Meetings and a Funeral presciently begins with a temporal return to the day before as Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, the foreign minister of Singapore, takes the stage to address the delegates at the fourth NAM Summit on the fifth day (September 5–9, 1973, in Algiers):

> Yesterday, Mr. Chairman, for some reason, we had a technical breakdown. All the equipment that we are using to threaten the big powers is provided by them. They broke down and we could not communicate. We are all sitting here in a place made and built by the great powers. With that we cannot hold this conference. We sent telegrams to our home countries. We

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1. Stephanie Bailey, "The Spectre(s) of *Non-Alignment(s)*," *di'van: A Journal of Accounts* 9 (March 9, 2021): 124–37; Noit Banai, "Documenta: Border as Form," *Artforum International* 56, no. 1 (September 2017): 302–5; Kaelen-Wilson Goldie, "Shifting Ground: On Stories and Archives in the Work of Naeem Mohaiemen," *Afterall* (Spring–Summer 2019): 67–77; Tom McDonough, "Incorrect History," *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 107 (September 2017): 163–65; Chris Moffat, "Dust and Debris in the Films of Naeem Mohaiemen," *Berfrois* (November 22, 2018); Vijay Prashad, "Naeem Mohaiemen's Tragic History of the 1970s Left," *Afterall* (Spring–Summer 2019): 59–67; Bilal Qureshi, "Naeem Mohaiemen's Cinematic Resistance," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 61–64; Eli Rudavsky, "Two Meetings and a Funeral," *Chicago Review*, February 4, 2020.

had to send one to Singapore; it had to go to Paris, London, Singapore. If they turn it off, we are lost.[2]

Speaking to the mostly empty hall, sparsely populated with distracted participants—many of whom have taken their headphones off—Rajaratnam inveighs against the infrastructural dependance on the superpowers while punctuating the air with hand gestures that suggest the many directions in which information had to travel to reach its intended audience (fig. 1).

At the crux of his reflections is what Stephanie Bailey has justly characterized as NAM's problematic "reliance on the developed world for technological expertise, knowledge and equipment" or a "global economic system to which every nation-state in the movement were inevitably connected and often indebted."[3] Yet these deliberations on vexed entanglements and their uneven distribution of power are only a prologue to Rajaratnam's coup de

Figure 1: Sinnathamby Rajaratnam speaking at the fourth NAM Summit, Algiers, September 9, 1973. Naeem Mohaiemen, *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, 2017. Courtesy of artist.

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2. Naeem Mohaiemen, dir., *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (Kassel, Germany: Documenta Und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH), 2017, 1:03–2:03.
3. Bailey, "The Spectre(s) of *Non-Alignment(s)*," 128.

grâce: "Mr. President, this is almost the tail end of nearly one week of speeches and deliberations. . . . I've asked myself: *To whom have we been communicating this last one week? To whom have we been talking? To ourselves? Or, to the 2 billion people we are supposed to represent?* What is it that they would require of our Non-Aligned Conference? Have we provided them the solutions that our peoples have been asking?"[4] While underlining the need for concrete solutions for NAM's diverse constituencies, Rajaratnam also expresses underlying anxiety about the communicability of images, ideas, and experiences through which to constitute an image of a "people" that would be inclusive of all the communities under the NAM aegis but distinct from the dominant ones offered by the capitalist and communist superpowers.

This issue had been crystallizing since the Bandung Conference of 1955 and the formation of the NAM in Belgrade in 1961. What distinguishes the 1973 conference from those earlier moments, as Mohaiemen asserts in *The Shortest Speech*, is that many of the liberation movements had come to power and were governing newly decolonized nation-states. Their dilemma was couched in the double challenge of affirming and strengthening the sovereignty of singular nation-states—many of whom had been colonized by Western powers and contained varied ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups—while also developing a collective ideology meant to supersede the modern power structures that had oppressed so many in the name of nation, class, and race. The political theorist Étienne Balibar, writing about the tensions within the two rival blocs during the Cold War, observes that "each of these presented itself as supranational, as an internationalism, for there was a liberal internationalism as there was a socialist internationalism. It is, however, doubtful whether the 'blocs,' inasmuch as they were mutually exclusive and organized around state constructions, found any other cement for their internationalism than an expanded, loosed-up form of nationalism."[5]

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4. Mohaiemen, 2017, 5:23–7:10. Emphasis is mine.
5. Étienne Balibar, "Ambiguous Identities," in *Politics and the Other Scene* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 59.

The same operative paradox is found in the NAM, a medley of diverse nation-states espousing different ideologies, trying to extend themselves beyond the structures and power relations that had been the basis for colonial empires toward a supranational framework. Because of the colonial legacy, these nation-states and their peoples had long been rendered the "exteriority" to Europe's "internal" population and their "particularity" was not—and is still arguably not—integrated into Western "universality." One of the underlying questions raised by Mohaiemen is whether this structural model and its use of race, class, ethnicity, religion, and gender to fundamentally differentiate between "us" and "them" would become the prototype for NAM or if an alternative vision of identity and belonging could be created via third worldism. As if to underline this dilemma and the complicated relay of identifications (individual, nation, supranational federation of NAM), Mohaiemen repeatedly transports the viewer to the Palace of Nations in Chéraga, just outside of Algiers, where delegates are installed behind plaques bearing the name of their country in English and Arabic, some with newly minted flags perched on their tables, listening (or ignoring) charismatic individuals such as Fidel Castro, Yasser Arafat, Anwar Sadat, Indira Gandhi making passionate appeals to transnational solidarity (figs. 2 and 3).

The footage gathered by Mohaiemen in the archives of Algerian National TV conspicuously shows the army of cameramen, photographers, translators, and typists hired to capture and circulate these leaders' words and images.

Figure 2: Fidel Castro speaking at the fourth NAM Summit, Algiers, September 8, 1973. Naeem Mohaiemen, *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, 2017. Courtesy of artist.

Figure 3: The delegation from South Vietnam (PRG) at the fourth NAM Summit, Algiers, September 8, 1973. Naeem Mohaiemen, *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, 2017. Courtesy of artist.

They mill around in the conference hall searching for photogenic moments—offered willingly by the likes of Castro—and have installed their equipment at the podium, ready for sound bites and sweeping shots of the venue (fig. 4).

The conference participants are intensely aware of this ubiquitous media presence and performatively shake hands and exchange embraces to satisfy the lenses and scribes. They also frequently turn a blind eye to the media when it is at a distance and assisted by newer TV camera technology, preferring to make small talk among themselves or stare blankly into space after many days of epic speeches. It is not only the historicity of the event that is documented but also the fundamental issue succinctly articulated by Rajaratnam when he asks, "To whom have we been talking?" In these montaged episodes, I suggest that we are not simply witnessing addresses made to a ready-made or already determined "people"; rather, in the pressing context of self-governance and a planetary communication system, Mohaiemen makes it retrospectively evident that there was an exigency to simultaneously keep imagining *a people-to-come*. On what

Figure 4: Camerawoman at the fourth NAM Summit, Algiers, September–9, 1973. Naeem Mohaiemen, *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, 2017. Courtesy of artist.

expressive grounds would this NAM collective be envisaged? What would be the relationship between discursive, visual, and political representation? And what would be the most generative means to broadly disseminate an image of this "people" in a political space enmeshed with an intensified media ecology?

Now empty, this cavernous hall appears as a relic of a political project that can only be activated in the present by contemporary narrators who contribute discursive fragments to this history's eventual, if not predetermined, failure. Vijay Prashad, Samia Zennadi, Attef Berredjem, Amirul Islam, and Zonayed Saki take us on a visual narrative journey through Algiers, New York, and Dhaka in search of traces of this not-so-distant past (fig. 5).

Theirs is a project of personal and collective memory, which simultaneously helps draw the parameters of our current inability to conjure an alternative political imaginary. Anecdotes about Yasser Arafat's preferred hotel, reflections on the United Nation's defunct index card filing system, and a visit to the Bangabandhu International Conference Center make evident

Figure 5: Vijay Prashad at the stadium of La Coupole d'Alger juxtaposed with earlier sports competitions, Dely Ibrahim, Algeria. Naeem Mohaiemen, *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, 2017. Courtesy of artist.

the international scope of the sites, apparatuses, and institutions through which the identity of the NAM community was negotiated. As spectators of a cinematic experience woven from dialectical images and a hypnotic electronic soundtrack, we only learn who these protagonists are at the end of the film, when the credits roll, leaving us in the hands of a cast of unknown, unreliable storytellers who reflect on the NAM's emancipatory ambitions, the reasons for its failure, and the complex situations left in its wake in Algeria and Bangladesh. Juxtaposed with the stirring rhetorical performances by the NAM dignitaries in 1973, the improvised exchanges of our contemporary narrators are a stark counterpoint: historic speeches in the name of a dreamed future, on the one hand, and fragmented streams of consciousness about a miscarried past on the other. It is as if, Mohaiemen suggests, there has been a critical rupture not only in terms of a political imaginary but also in forms of enunciation and public address.

To stress this point, Mohaiemen takes us to the publicity circuit—the television appearances at which NAM leaders addressed the masses via one of the most advanced forms of technology at the time. We observe Marcelino dos Santos, the Mozambican poet and revolutionary who served as the president of the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique, FRELIMO) from 1969 to 1977, explain the significance of FRELIMO'S participation at the NAM summit in Algiers (fig. 6).

Speaking in French, he lucidly articulates the stakes surrounding NAM's control of their natural resources and the connection between economic

Figure 6: Marcelino dos Santos giving a televised interview about Frente de Libertação de Moçambique's participation at the fourth NAM Summit. Naeem Mohaiemen, *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, 2017. Courtesy of artist.

and political independence. The argument is not diluted either in content or form. What is evident is that dos Santos considers television a prime tool to disseminate the NAM's demands for equality and self-determination. For the revolutionary, rational linguistic debate goes hand in hand with a televisual image: transmitting a message of self-governance is not at odds with what art historian David Joselit has termed "television's privatization of public speech."[6] On the contrary, because of television's increasing collusion with dominant (Western capitalist) interests, it is the perfect vehicle through which to launch an appeal for an alternative public. Yet, there is something else animating dos Santos's overture: a realm of living speech, which I argue was still extant, if already eroded, by 1973. This is a leader who is speaking to the masses via television but has not altered his conceptualization and register of address to the structural parameters of the medium. Or in an adaptation of Marshall Mcluhan's famous dictum, "the

6. David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), xi.

medium *does not* become the message."[7] As he is soliciting the judgment of a public that had been colonized by Western powers (in the case of Mozambique by the Portuguese), and thus effectively stripped of its right to question, he is also imagining a people-to-come for whom judgment would be an intrinsic human right.

Mohaiemen further explores the potentially radical role of television in the context of Bangladesh's reversal of affiliation from socialism to Islamism. The artist accompanies the Bangladeshi politician Zonayed Saki to the Bangabandhu International Conference Center, a venue built for an NAM conference ultimately held elsewhere that is now available for corporate rental.[8] We hear Saki explain to a well-wisher that he is there to shoot a documentary while attendees of a trade fair circulate in the background. Upon entering the building, the camera is suddenly turned off, and an exchange ensues between Saki, Mohaiemen, and the venue's chief of security. Captured by a live microphone, the artist is heard trying to clarify that he is making a documentary film about the NAM while the official insists that no television is allowed and that NAM is dead. In this misunderstanding over media forms—ironically linked to the NAM's existence—we grasp that neoliberal global capitalism renders certain televised speech as suspect. Allowing Saki, recognized immediately by the official as a left-leaning politician, to

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7. In his analysis of the media through which information and knowledge is communicated to the mass public, Marshall McLuhan famously stated that "the medium is the message" in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

8. Bangabandhu International Conference Center (BICC) was renamed in 2013 to replace its former title, Bangladesh China Friendship Conference Center. Funded by the People's Republic of China and designed by the Beijing Institute of Architectural Designs and Research, it was completed in 2001 with the intention of hosting an NAM summit that was ultimately held in Malaysia in 2003. Under Bangladesh's newly elected government of prime minister Khaleda Zia, the finance minister Saifur Rahman "had termed NAM a dead horse and insisted that Bangladesh cannot afford to spend millions of dollars for its burial." See 'Non-Aligned Summit in Dhaka Next Year Put Off: Official," Zee News, October 16, 2001, https://zeenews.india.com/news/south-asia/ nonaligned-summit-in-dhaka-next-year-put-off-official_23287.html.

occupy an enunciative space that might destabilize the consumerist image of the venue or represent a different social relation to capital is inconceivable and the camera is summarily turned off.

It is telling that Mohaiemen's own voice is heard twice in *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, both times as an off-screen presence, when he negotiates camera access at the Bangabandhu International Conference Center and while pitching questions to Vijay Prashad at the stadium of La Coupole d'Alger. In contrast, the artist is a central protagonist in the performance-lecture "The Shortest Speech," his soft, accented narration intersecting with the montage of images and weaving another layer of interpretation around *Two Meetings and a Funeral*. Framing Rajaratnam's speech as a minoritarian moment of doubt that punctuates an otherwise affirmative conference, Mohaiemen moves between the visible apathy and inattentiveness of the remaining participants and the momentous events that await them. The Afghan delegate, Mohaiemen remarks, is lazily smoking a cigarette, unaware that his socialist government will be overthrown by the Soviet Union in six years. Anwar Sadat, pipe in mouth, cannot foresee that breaking with the Arab Pact and normalizing relations with Israel will lead to his assassination in eight years' time. Salvador Allende, visibly absent in Algiers, will be assassinated only two days after the end of the conference, on September 11, 1973—what the film calls "the Other 9/11."

Mohaiemen embeds Rajaratnam's speech within these dramatic elisions and ruptures between a present (in the past) and a future (in the past, present, and a time to come). It is only this short-story writer turned politician who gives the shortest speech, who can foresee the new problem emerging in the wake of the signing of the SALT I treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1972. In Mohaiemen's telling, this is a "pivot moment in third world solidarity." . . . "If non-alignment was partially premised on socialist solidarity outside of alignment with either of the Cold War powers. . . . What happens when your entire reason for existence is partially taken away by a treaty between two superpowers, what remains

after opposition? . . . We all agree on what we are against, but what exactly are we for?"[9] Here, indeed, is Mohaiemen—a historical subject born into these geopolitical shifts—speaking *through* the open questions elicited by Rajaratnam's speech. Stated differently, the message of the short-story writer (Rajaratnam) is delivered by a contemporary storyteller (Mohaiemen) who personally experienced the outcomes of the NAM's failure to conjure an image of a people that would be in sync with both a mandate of governance and revolution.

Importantly, in confronting this historical past via subjective memory, the artist assumes the right to fiction or what Gilles Deleuze has called, after Henri Bergson, "fabulation."[10] According to Deleuze, it is fabulation or "legending" that allows "a minority discourse, with one or many speakers, to take shape."[11] In Deleuze's parlance, legending is an act of counternarration that renders visible the fictions that have become accepted as orthodoxy *without* presuming to offer another concretized or completed ideal. It is open-ended, processual, and requires the participation of a collectivity to vitalize and acknowledge it. Importantly, "to catch someone in the act of legending is to catch the movement of constitution of a people. A people isn't something already there. A people, in a way, is what's missing."[12] Thus, to be made aware of the legending that is occurring is to be part of a process of generating new truths that are "not already out there" but "have to be created in every domain."[13]

Mohaiemen's fabulating, legending, or storytelling—in spoken form and time-based media—takes a slightly different register from the written format of the short story. While the artist "performs" his "lecture" from an already drafted textual piece and an attendant visual presentation of still and

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9. Naeem Mohaiemen, *The Shortest Speech,* performance-lecture delivered at the Narrating Cold Wars Conference, Hong Kong Baptist University, November 11, 2021, 28:25–29:04.

10. Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press), 125.

11. Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 125.

12. Deleuze, 126. Emphasis is mine.

13. Deleuze, 126.

moving images, it is the oral delivery that is crucial. According to Walter Benjamin, storytelling, at its inception, was linked to a collective public and the shared experiences that bind them together. For Benjamin, "the storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale."[14] In assuming this role, Mohaiemen generates a reciprocal relation with a processual public: we *become* listeners while a shared history is emerging during the live process of performance. Here, the scene at the Bangabandhu International Conference Center is decisive. As the camera is switched off, the head of security aggressively quizzes Mohaiemen: "How many years are you in media? Where do you live in Dhaka? Where did you study? All your schooling was in America? What year at Dhaka college? . . . I also went to Dhaka college. Are you sure you went there? I remember everything."[15] What surfaces in this back and forth is the way in which the head of security tries to assess Mohaiemen's status through his biography and, specifically, his schooling: local or foreign? public or private? In their exchange, class emerges as the central criterion for interpersonal differentiation, and the power of memory is claimed as an arbiter of historical truth. As the scene unfolds, one of Mohaiemen's concerns—to understand the internal disintegration of the NAM and trace how and why Bangladesh's initial embrace of state socialism was renounced—comes to the fore. Even as the NAM nations committed themselves to decolonization and to countering the Western and Eastern blocs' model of a "people," they were not able to eradicate certain structural elements, class among them. In *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Deleuze's notion of the "people to come" is expanded: "A minor people, eternally minor, taken up in a becoming-revolutionary. Perhaps it exists only in the atoms of the writer, a bastard people, inferior,

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14. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900–2000*, ed. Dorothy J. Hale (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 364.
15. Mohaiemen, *The Shortest Speech,* 1:14:02–1:14:45.

dominated, always in becoming, always incomplete. Bastard no longer designates a familial state, but the process of drift of the races."[16]

While power differentials may persist within a society, to remain revolutionary, concepts such as race, class, ethnicity, religion, and gender must remain in permanent drift, without ever fully concretizing. This, in turn, leads us to ask, with Mohaiemen: Was a *doxa*—or majority prejudice—established when the NAM nations started to govern? Did they compromise their revolutionary goals—and the image of the "people to come"—when they assumed genuine political power? Crucially, is it possible to simultaneously constitute both a people and people to come?

As a way to maintain a constitutive openness—or drift—in the present, Mohaiemen regularly makes the audience aware of his narrative's "constructedness" and its potential for multiplicity. For instance, commenting on the general distraction in the conference hall, he states, "You wonder when the break will come, for coffee and the endless cigarette; *but an anachronism is revealed in the way I narrate a script of impatience. Coffee and cigarettes are what I insert as the elements that are awaiting impatient delegates*. But this is 1973, a time when you can freely smoke inside airplanes, in lobbies, in offices, cafeterias, and certainly at a conference."[17]

By exposing this speculative condition and disrupting the possibility of a seamless history, Mohaiemen clarifies that he can only engage in this act of mnemonic reconstruction from a contingent and ever-becoming present. Paradoxically, it is precisely this narrative partiality—or what Donna Haraway has called his "situated knowledge"—that lays the groundwork for a collective experience in today's global context. Imagining a people means developing "the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different and power differentiated communities."[18] For Mohaiemen, such a trans-

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16. Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 4.

17. Mohaiemen, *The Shortest Speech,* 15:12–15:42. Emphasis is mine.

18. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn, 1988): 580.

lation among "power differentiated communities" goes hand in hand with an intentional evasion of authority: he is not the omniscient Bard who acts as the definitive repository for a completed history but, on the contrary, he is the fabulator who carves out a temporary, performative locus that any of us could also potentially occupy, embody, and animate.

In the dynamic of speeches, stories and spaces of assembly, address and publicity that constitute *Two Meetings and a Funeral* and *The Shortest Speech*, Mohaiemen poses the question: What modes of discourse and means of communication were necessary to fabricating the NAM's emancipatory image of the "people" circa 1973–1974, and, by extension, what are the grounds for such an imaginary today? The complex visual, sonic, and aural *fabulations*, *legending*, *storytelling* through which these artworks materialize suggest that politics and art operate on a shared terrain in which knowledge and power are permanently negotiated, dissolved, reformulated, and translated. Animating both is a kernel of fiction, a polyphony of voices, and sediments of situated knowledges that are in search of a "people-to-come."