Examine the ways in which visual/material practices have been mobilized in political expression using ethnographic examples.

The concept of *tabula rasa*, or "blank slate" in Latin, implies the belief that every single entity, living and even non-living ones, exists to eventually have meanings ascribed upon them by the individuals that perceive and assess them on a regular basis. (Duschinsky 2012) Such a mode of thinking finds relevance in the academic discipline of social anthropology, where concepts such as materiality and symbolism are instrumental to anthropologists' investigations into the ways our sociocultural imaginations are collectively projected onto tangible — but otherwise purely functional— fixtures of our daily lives, to create inspired lived realities for ourselves. In response to the given prompt, the essay that follows aims to analyse two aspects of political expression grounded in visual and material practices. Firstly, how and what political meanings are attached to bodies, images, objects and spaces (in essence, their symbolic meanings and materiality), assigning them second meanings of designated tools and sites for political expression. Secondly, how political expression via these tools and sites is sparked in order to materialise the realities that are grounded in the political meanings. Hence, within this essay, "mobilized" is defined as action motivated by the major political implications of symbolisms and materiality.

Prior to delving into the essay, some points of discussion must be clarified. "Political expression" is defined as making a statement pertaining to a matter that concerns a governing or influential institution, whether it be civilians either opposing or supporting state legislation or the government enforcing a hegemonic code of discourse. Concerning power tussles in business organisations, Alcadipani and Islam (2017) found that visuals and materials are effective tools to use to contest for autonomy in both sides of a presumably imbalanced power dynamic. Following suit, the various ethnographic examples used to substantiate any claims in this essay serve to show how the mobilization of visual and material practices empowers both ends of a power relationship. Nonetheless, the findings from Alcadipani and Islam's study are still applicable to the context of political expression. With regards to another key phrase in the prompt, "visual/ material practices" strictly refer to political expressions executed with images and media from a variety sources, as well as physical objects and spaces of any kind.

Firstly, sustaining political negotiation can be accomplished through cultivating justice-seeking as an integral, deeply-embedded value of one's identity through historical symbols. Historical symbols have a place in both history and the present, being socially, culturally and politically relevant across time. Hence, when negotiation has a constant presence and position in the fabric of society, the struggle for justice endures and yields progress with time. This can

be seen in the ethnographic example of the '*birangonas*', Bangladeshi women who were raped during the Bangladesh Liberation War by the Pakistani army, allies and collaborators in the Indian subcontinent. In the aftermath of the war, the *birangonas* were recognised by the current government of Bangladesh as "war heroines", to allow them to recover from their trauma and to completely avoid stigmatization as victims of rape. (Mookherjee 2015) Hence, from the 1970s up until today, wartime rape has been a crucial topic of discussion in Bangladesh's public discourse, having also become the focus of predominant arts and media such as as plays, literature and film. The popularity of such media has made the *birangona* a permanent fixture in the imaginations and livelihoods of the Bangladeshi people. This is coupled with how widespread the sexual abuse had been, to the extent that many people knew someone who was raped in 1971; they are often "remembered through [their] "disheveled hair," "her loud laughter," or her "quietness" or "muteness," or as "the one who stares into space" with "deadened-eyes."". All these factors culminate in an indelible, haunting and heartbreaking portrait of the *birangonas* as broken warriors who embody pain in their beauty and lives after their abuse. The (international) recognition of their heroism, especially in the aftermath of the war, has made them iconic figures of Bangladesh's history. The visual encapsulations of their struggles have empowered and rallied society together to always remember the painful trajectories embarked on to achieve present-day Bangladesh.

While the beneficial power of historical symbols is strongly demonstrated in the example above, not all histories should stand the test of time and maintain political currency. In the United States, there are numerous standing monuments of the Confederacy that advocated and carried out the enslavement of Africans in the country's post-independence years up until the Civil War, as well as rampant racism that lasted throughout the early half of the 20th century. In lieu of present-day concerns surrounding the eradication of such monuments, much opposition is encountered because of fears that the legitimate history of the United States is being removed. (Arnold-Patti 2022) While a majority of the Black community associates these statues and buildings with egregious acts of racism committed against them, many members of the White majority frame their hypothetical demolition as shifting the blame onto the entirety of the White demographic. It can be argued that meanings of timeless White superiority are ascribed upon such physical sites, with their existence across decades being seen as a testament to the dominance of the White majority. Hence, these sites are maintained to uphold such discriminatory beliefs, which do not align with the progressive outlook of the present day.

Secondly, images can also influence public discourse by rallying people together for political expression. By encapsulating sentiments and ideas that are associated with political expression, individuals participating in such movements can align themselves with a distinct way of communicating themselves to push for changes. One example of such is the symbols used to commemorate the victims of the 2014 Sewol ferry sinking — particularly the yellow ribbon and the colour yellow itself. (Chung and Sarfati 2018) Amidst protesting against the authorities that were responsible for the tragedy, the yellow ribbon enabled specifically students to form a collective identity grounded in opposition, giving them a voice to grieve as a form of protest. While the above is a rare example of positive-leaning propaganda, propaganda in many contexts is not necessarily created with the best intentions. This can be seen in the campaigns of Italian neo-fascist organisation of CasaPound Italia, which are known to romanticize and glorify violence. (Froio and Gattinara 2014) Within their campaigns, violence is framed as a response to oppression, and as a channel for the oppressed to be rallied together. For example, the "Social Mortgage" campaign, features hanged mannequins as a symbol of the people's poverty struggle. Meanwhile, the "Stop Equitalia" campaign is based on images of taxpayers taking their own lives. These images are harmful and toxic, albeit powerful in gaining the support CasaPound needs owing to their brutal reflection of reality. As they aim to severely sway people to rally them for their cause, the images of their campaigns portray unhealthy extremes to empower the people with negative responses and rally them together for their cause.

Lastly, intentionally occupying — usually physical and public— spaces are symbolic of negotiations with dominant discourses on institutionalized expressions of sovereignty and power over their citizens (or neighbouring states). This is because when spaces are ascribed with meanings associated with the entities in power, contesting such a notion is viewed as a concrete way of negotiating with them. Moore's ethnographic study (2013) on the 2011-2012 occupation protests by students at McGill University in Canada found that students perceived the occupation of physical spaces as a transcendence of dominant code: they are causing disruption by being in a space where they are not supposed to be in. Moore's findings also find relevance in an example of successful political negotiations can be found in the Occupy movement protests of 2011. (Lubin 2012) On Wall Street, protestors occupied Zucotti Park to protest against predominant corruption — formerly known as 'Liberty Plaza', it was renamed for the corporate owner of a firm with an office there. As the space bears the name of a business executive, meanings of economic superiority and ownership are attached to it, delineating an unspoken hierarchy of who is allowed there and who is not. Hence, the occupation, or 're-

occupation' of the space during the protests can symbolise the rejection of routines of accepting such circumstances, causing a disruption to the standard code of behaviour: contesting the ownership of the space as a call to negotiate for a more balanced power dynamic between corporations and employees.

Nonetheless, the contestability of spaces as a marker of one's power ultimately can benefit those who take advantage of it in the first place. In Singapore, sources that publicly disseminate information are strictly monitored by the government, which looks to ensure that legitimate information is presented; the Infocomm Media Development Authority board (IMDA) regularly scours the local — and licensed—internet domains for content with malicious intentions like causing religious discord and perpetrating racism. But more importantly, it censures social media so that the government is only spoken of favourably. (Hussain 2016) Despite the inherent boundary-less nature of the internet, such measures in place allow the Singapore government to expand their autonomy over the cyberspace and negotiate with the freedom of speech supposedly granted by the internet. (Soh 2020). This is evidenced in the numerous defamation cases that have been filed by the government, with one of the more notable cases leading to the eventual removal of the The Real Singapore (TRS), a socio-political website. (Au-Yong 2015) Many of TRS's articles had been flagged for promoting hostility between different classes and races, albeit the image of Singapore being painted was a brutally honest one that differed from that put forward by the government. Like the previous example, TRS is a platform for the publishers, and perhaps like-minded Singaporeans to share their views that negotiates with the dominant discourses imposed by the Singapore government. On the other hand, the government attaches meanings of authority and hegemony to the cyberspace. Thus, they continue to exercise its agency and counter-negotiate the negotiation of political dissidents through their upper hand over the internet, by controlling the ownership and occupancy of such organizations within the cyberspace. This demonstrates how the mobilization of material practices are also beneficial to the political processes of entities with excessive amounts of power.

In conclusion, visual and material practices have been mobilized for the sake of political expression in three different ways. Firstly, historical symbols have been used to sustain a culture of negotiation. As seen from the example of the *birangonas* in Bangladesh, pushing for the dominant narrative of their trauma as heroism and beauty in art, media and daily life has allowed them to remain an important part of Bangladeshi society and livelihoods. In turn, this has allowed their spirit of negotiation to persist and empower Bangladeshi society. Secondly, images can rally people to unite for political expression through creating a singular collective

identity. As demonstrated by the protests in the aftermath of the Sewol ferry sinking, the colour yellow came to stand for commemoration and protest, while the yellow ribbons and umbrellas eventually embodied the grief experienced by students as well as their fight to eradicate corruption in the greater political system. Lastly, the occupation of spaces typically under the control of entities in power is an expression of autonomy in one's negotiation. The Occupy Movement's protests of 2011 demonstrate that in disobeying authority and taking up spaces where one is usually not allowed, an uncomfortable boundary is crossed to express dissent. Nevertheless, all the arguments above are double-edged swords; the counter-examples in the United States, Italy and Singapore are evidences of how visual and material practices may be mobilized to fulfil the objectives of greater evils.

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