

From Kerala to Cottbus: Mapping the Memory of a Marginalized Person



*IF WOMEN IN YOUR HOME CAN WEAR,
WHY CAN'T I?!*

ME TOO IS A LADY JUST LIKE THEM

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Introduction

The act of mapping is never neutral. As explained by Natasha A. Kelly and Olive Vassell in the book *Mapping Black Europe* (2023). It reveals that the black people present has always been debated and contested. To “map” something is not only about describing or locating but also giving it visibility in places where history has repeatedly tried to hide or erase it. Such that mapping becomes a form of resistance, and it challenges the official versions of history that highlight certain stories while completely disregarding the rest.

This paper looks at mapping related to our own experiences in Cottbus while also considering our cultural background from Kerala, India. Kelly and Vassel show how black histories are appreciated and projected in urban landscapes of cities like Berlin, Cottbus; however, they have very little recognition of this. This lack of visibility itself is telling; it shows how selective remembrance culture is and how marginalised communities are often left out of the city's historical background.



Pic 1: Rally is solidarity with Black Lives Matter in Berlin

To explore this, we will focus on Nangeli, a woman from early 19th-century Kerala. She resisted the oppressive മുലക്ക്കരം (Mulakkaram) or “breast tax” by cutting off her breasts in protests, which ultimately resulted in her death from her injuries. Nangeli is still remembered in folklore and activists' discussions but is largely absent from historical records and monuments. We argue that her absence also connects very well to the absence of black histories in Cottbus, both of these cases are a prime example of how dominant groups or authorities control what is publicly remembered.



Pic 2: The Coronation of Nangeli Painting by Zakir Husain Tanha Shaikh

This reflection is organised in four parts. Firstly, we explain the idea of mapping as an act of contestation from mapping black Europe. Secondly, we focus on how remembrance works in Cottbus and what is highlighted and what is forgotten. Thirdly, we introduce the story of Nangeli and how she is depicted in Kerala. Finally, we think about how Nangelis' story could be remembered in Cottbus to challenge the city's current approach to memory.

Theoretical Framework: Mapping as Contestation

Kelly and Vassell, in the book *Mapping Black Europe*, say that black communities have made important contributions to shaping Europe's social and cultural life, but these are rarely depicted or underappreciated by the dominant societies. This lack of recognition is what their work addresses. *Mapping Black Europe* plans to make the invisible visible by documenting city landmarks, historical figures, and community activism in eight European Capitals, so that they treat mapping as a way to oppose dominant histories and rewrite the story.



Pic 3: **Stolpersteine, or stumbling stones laid in honour of two African Germans murdered by Nazis**

Statues are more than crafted stone or metal. They convey meanings, they carry symbols, they are meant to elicit feelings. They are erected not only for what they depict as such ... [they] honour and commemorate historic figures, deemed important by some people at the time [they] were erected – but not by all. (Spirinelli 2022)

Mapping in this view is not a neutral way to record people and places; it is, rather, a political act. To map something means working on what matters, including whose stories are being represented and whose names and faces appear in public spaces. In the words of the authors, urban features like street names and monuments function as “archives of power” that either support or contest the existing social hierarchies. When marginalised groups succeed in including themselves in the histories of the city, it becomes an act of resistance, a way of refusing to stay invisible.

In the first chapter, “Black Berlin” Natasha A. Kelly depicts this idea visibly. Berlin is a city in Germany where Afro-German history is given recognition, albeit still marginally, through street names, plaques, and walking tours. Most of these efforts come from thanks to grassroots activism rather than from the government. This shows us that the mapping is a dynamic process, while Berlin mainly focuses on German memories like the holocaust and the Cold War, there are ongoing efforts to insert the black histories in the urban landscape.



Pic 4: **George Floyd Mural**

This theoretical perspective gives 2 key insights for this reflection. First, remembering the past is always contested; what is not depicted is not neutral but reflects exclusion. Second, the marginalised groups mapped in places like Berlin provide a comparison for how poorly they are represented in Cottbus. Together, these ideas help us understand how other overlooked histories, like Nangelis story from Kerala, could be used to expand and challenge the remembrance culture depicted in histories.

Black History in Cottbus

Cottbus in the eastern German state of Brandenburg shows a stark contrast to Berlin. While Berlin has tried to give some visibility to black European histories, the public memory landscape of Cottbus is shaped entirely by German-German histories. The main memorials-

built focus on the destruction of the Second World War, the victims of national socialism. And the history of the German Democratic Republic. These are very remarkable histories, but they also set constraints on what should officially be remembered. Cottbus presents itself as a German city rather than multicultural or transitional one.



Pic 5: **Soviet war memorial**

This narrowed focus means that the contributions and struggles of migrants, Black Residents, and other marginalized societies are ignored from the Cottbus public memory.

For instance, there are no plaques or monuments dedicated to the contract workers from Mozambique and Vietnam who lived in the city during the GDR period, nor to the recent immigrant communities that are part of Cottbus today. In contrast to Berlin, which has slowly begun to appreciate and recognize Afro-German Histories, Cottbus remains almost completely silent



Pic 6: **Contract workers in GDR**

From Kelly and Vassell's perspective, this silence is not accidental. It shows how the dominant narrative shapes urban histories. By excluding non-German and marginalized histories from its public spaces, Cottbus generates a narrow and exclusionary image of itself. Yes, this same silence creates a room for contention. If mapping makes invisible visible, then Cottbus can be portrayed as a place where adding marginalised histories could fundamentally change public understanding of belonging.

Nangeli: A forgotten figure from Kerala

Nangeli was a lower-caste woman who lived in the early 19th century in Cherthala, then a princely state of Travancore, Kerala, India. The Travancore family king Maharaja Sreemohan Thirunal enforced a very brutal caste system where the lower caste women were denied of wearing any clothes on the upper half of the body. If they want to cover their chests, they would have to pay the “breast tax” famously known as മുലക്കരം (Mulakkaram) in Malayalam. On top of that, the pay would increase depending on the size of their breasts; the

larger the breasts higher the tax. Every tax was to be paid in the form of rice grains presented on a banana leaf. Mulakkaram was one of the many struggles our ancestors had gone through at that period of time. this tax is evidently both economically exploitative and symbolically degrading, strongly reinforcing the existing caste hierarchy and the oppression of lower-caste women.



Pic 7: **Statue of Nangeli**

According to oral histories, Nangeli was a toddy tapper by profession. Nangeli was strongly against this tax system and decided to cover her chest and walk proudly on the streets. Upper caste males became enraged and publicly humiliated Nangeli, but Nangeli paid no heed to it. They questioned her right to equate herself with upper caste ladies. As a result, one day a large group of upper caste males led by Parvatiyaar arrived at Nangeli's house for payment but she refused. Instead, she cut off her breasts and presented them on a plantain leaf. Unfortunately, Nangeli passed away due to bleeding from her wounds. Nangelis' husband, Chirukandan, unable to bear the loss, committed self-immolation on her funeral pyre. This site of their residence came to be later known as "Mulachiparambu" or the land of women with breasts.



Pic 8: Paintings of Nangeli by T Murali

"Nangeli is the first feminist that Malayalis have seen," says artist T Murali, who also adds that "Nangeli's blood finally ended up in the pond of Padmanabhaswamy temple because the onus is on the Maharaja. Her blood represents that of all oppressed women."

The sacrifice of Nangeli and her husband spread like wildfire, which led the women belonging to Nadar and Ezhava communities to start the Channar Revolt, also known as Maaru Marakkal Samaram, which was against the breast tax. Finally, the king had no other choice but to remove Mulakkram.

Another interesting thing was that during this revolution, Christian missionaries took hold of this opportunity to put forward a proposal that they would be able to cover their chests only if they converted to Christianity. Which was successful to an extent, but clothes they had to wear were very different from upper caste women.

Nangelis' story has been circulating for generations in oral traditions, folklores, etc, but is largely absent from the histories of Kerala or India. Her act of resistance has been remembered among Dalit and feminist movements as a powerful symbol against caste oppression. There are still no state-allowed statues, memorials to her name, which brings us back to whose history is being written and whose isn't, and the authenticity of the histories is very questionable.

Bhattacharya (1983: 15) argues, *"History of 'the people,' or the history of 'the oppressed,' or 'history from below'-by whatever name one calls it promises to offer a new perspective on our past."*



Pic 9: **Lower caste women with bare upper bodies.**

In many ways, Nangeli's absence from official recognition equates to the invisibility of black history in Cottbus. Both of these cases show how dominant groups succeed in writing history according to their convenience. Just as black contributions to Europe are underdiscussed and silenced from public memory, Nangeli's defiance has also been left out of the national narrative.

Remembrance of Nangeli

The remembrance of Nangeli today is shaped by competing narratives. On one side, local communities and activists invoke her as a heroine of resistance. She is often appreciated in Dalit feminists' writings, independent documentaries, and popular retellings on social media. For marginalised communities, she was the representation of the dignity of oppressed women who refused to accept caste exploitation. She is the epitome of strength, courage, and true feminism.

On the other hand, mainstream historical accounts completely disregard her part of the story; they have either ignored it or cast doubt on the veracity of the story. They say that it is a work

of fiction and lacks sufficient historical documentation. Some historians argue that her tale must have been exaggerated or mythologized. This skepticism mirrors the politics of memory. Nangeli's life is an existing challenge for dominant caste narratives, so they slowly erased her existence from history.



Pic 10: Painting by artist T Murali

But artist T. Murali, in his interview with the BBC, has shed some light against this narrative. He spent a lot of time in Cherthala, where Nangeli was believed to have lived. Even though this tale is not recognised in any of India's historical accounts. The locals confirm her existence.

Maniyan Velu, her cousin's great-grandson, is not happy with how her story is dealt with. He says, *"Her act was selfless, a sacrifice to benefit all the women of Travancore, and ultimately forced the King to roll back the breast-tax,"*.

This clearly shows that she was a real person whose story was purposefully left out of history.

It's also important to note that marginalised histories were purposefully erased from formal education, as exemplified by the removal of "Caste, Conflict and Dress Change" from the NCERT class curriculum. This section highlighted the historical prejudices against lower caste communities in the form of dressing restrictions and revealed their act of resistance. This removal illustrates how official narratives suppress uncomfortable histories regarding gender and caste oppressions

So, who shapes her remembrance? The answer is layered. The upper caste and the authorities have created a remembrance culture where she is neglected. While marginalised societies have found ways to keep her story alive. In this sense, remembering Nangeli itself is an act of contestation: it challenges the historical dominance of dominant group narratives and the ongoing marginalization of lower castes in Indian society.

Reimagining the Remembrance of Nangeli

Nangeli, as mentioned earlier, is depicted too little in historical terms. Kelly and Vassell argue, mapping marginalized histories across different contexts can produce new solidarities and challenge exclusionary narratives. Despite the widespread recognition of her legacy and her remembrance is still marginalized within historical narratives. State-sanctioned monuments, memorials, plaques, official inclusion in textbooks, or public commemorations are largely absent.

Reimagining Nangelis remembrance involves actively considering how marginalised histories can be written in a collective memory in ways that are meaningful and inclusive.

Educational Integration

- Introducing Nangelis' story into schools and universities can help students understand the silenced perspectives and information on social resistance and oppression.
- Textbooks and syllabi could contextualize her act of resistance along with broader discussions related to caste, gender equality, racism, etc, ensuring that learners could encounter history “from below” instead of elite-centric perspectives

Cultural and Community Commemoration

- Community-led initiatives like murals, art installations, theatre performances, and exhibitions can bring her story into public spaces. Communities can also collect funds to film a movie so that it reaches a wide variety of audiences.
- These practices not only honour her courage but also allow local communities to claim ownership over their historical memory.

Digital and transitional Memory

- Online archives, social media campaigns, digital storytelling, and virtual exhibitions can make Nangelis' story available to a larger audience.
- Such digital initiatives provide opportunities to link her story with contemporary struggles for dignity and equality.



Pic 11: Movie poster of Pattonpatam Nootandu, where Nangelis' life is portrayed

This reflective approach gives importance to participatory engagement, allowing communities, scholars, and audiences to negotiate meaning and relevance collaboratively.

In this way, Nangelis' story is not preserved but also used as a tool for reflection. Social awareness and empowerment. This also ensures that her legacy will continue to inspire discussions in the future. She would be able to reshape the inclusive histories within India and beyond through media, education, and community initiatives

Reflection

The story of Nangeli deeply resonates with us because we are both from the lower caste. We grew up learning the struggles our ancestors went through just to survive. Mulakkaram was just one of them; they were denied entry to temples, they could not legally own land, were not allowed near upper-caste homes or public water sources, had very limited access to

education, and the list goes on. They considered our ancestors as untouchable, meaning their entire existence was invalid for dominant societies.

Our experience in Germany as international students could also be connected with what Nangeli and our ancestors had faced, especially when it comes to discrimination based on color, nationality, or ethnicity, as both narratives reveal systematic marginalisation. Although the discrimination is not as intense as what Nangeli had gone through, it is still very hurtful. Because right now in Kerala, casteism and discrimination have considerably reduced, thanks to our revolutionary heroes like Nangeli, Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, and we personally have never experienced any type of discrimination while staying in Kerala. We recognise that others may have had bad experiences, and we do not intend to dismiss or minimize those experiences. So, it's safe to say that experiencing racism was something fairly new to us.

In the beginning, it was uncomfortable it sometimes the stares, sometimes the jokes around our stereotypes like Indians smell, we come from slums, we are dirt poor, we are unhygienic, we smell, and whatnot. And also, recently, hate against Indians is out of control. People are ready to consume whatever they see on social media, like on TikTok and Instagram, and the growing racist attacks on us are also concerning. It certainly terrifies us to what awaits us in the future.

In each situation, power hierarchies enforce social exclusion, judgments based on identities, and constraints on agency. We see structural similarities in oppression across different timelines and places. Her story reminds us to give importance to marginalised histories. Her symbolic resistance to injustice parallels how we navigate spaces where my identity can make us vulnerable.

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