

“Notes on Criticality and Belonging: 2020 Alumni Award Winner Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik”

By Becca Imrich (Class of 2020 Grad Fine Arts MFA and Visual & Critical Studies MA)

If it is possible for political critique to be jubilant and cutting at the same time, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik’s practice points us in the right direction.

Bhaumik, who earned an MFA in Fine Arts and MA in Visual & Critical Studies (VCS) at California College of the Arts (CCA) in 2012, is a conceptual artist, writer, and educator. The VCS Class of 2020, in recognition and appreciation of Bhaumik’s work since she graduated from CCA, named her this year’s Alumni Award recipient. Along with previous Alumni Award recipients, Bhaumik has taken the interdisciplinary values of the VCS program, its scholarly approach, and research skills into creative and professional arenas, further evidencing the versatility of the degree and the luminosity of this community. Born in Los Angeles, Bhaumik holds a BA in Studio Art from Scripps College (2002), who also honored her with an alumni award in 2017.

Over the years, Bhaumik’s practice has shifted from hinging on wonder and intuition, to holding the tenets of criticality and belonging. In *The Eye Screamer*, her 2011 CCA MFA thesis exhibition, she created an operational ice cream storefront. Each almond-flavored ice cream cone was adorned with edible recontextualized images of eyes from a 1941 *LIFE* magazine spread published just after Pearl Harbor entitled “How to Tell the Japs from the Chinese.” Seeing the diagram in *LIFE* rightfully made Bhaumik furious. Rather than urging citizens not to participate in hate crimes after such a charged event, the magazine chose to use their platform to further fuel racial stereotyping and discrimination. Tactfully combining her deep sense of critical urgency with compassion, Bhaumik translated her criticism into an opportunity for discourse and solidarity. Using food as an anchor to the conversation, she created a shared space to ask the CCA community: *What makes you want to scream?*

So much has transpired since Bhaumik’s CCA alumni award speech at the 2020 VCS Spring Symposium in early May. Yet her observation still rings true: The “pandemic has made everything neon” foregrounding the existing xenophobia and racism that has always been ingrained in American society and institutions. Americans continue to protest the murders of Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, George Floyd, and countless other Black Americans by the police, as well as the underlying systemic white supremacy that has allowed this state-sanctioned violence to go on for so long.

Bhaumik doesn’t shy away from navigating complex sociopolitical issues in her own practice. She finds ways to carve out the space to coordinate multifaceted conversations surrounding race, culture, politics, and history for wide-ranging audiences with food as the glue holding these experiences together. She has continued to nurture the seeds she planted at CCA surrounding the power of gathering and food with her work as a member of the [People’s Kitchen Collective](#) (PKC) with Jocelyn Jackson and Saqib Keval.

Anyone doubting the capacity of food to be political has to look no further than the Black Panther Party’s Free Breakfast Program, which started in Oakland in 1969 and spread to cities

across the country, serving meals to tens of thousands of Black children and exposing weaknesses and racial disparities in national school programs.¹ The Black Panther Party and its community programs have also come up again and again in activists' speeches in the Bay Area during this uprising, as the Overton window moves towards defunding and demilitarizing the police and we consider where portions of California's \$12.7 billion annual "public safety" budget might be reallocated to better serve our communities' needs.²

The Black Panther Party's interventions are touchstones for Bhaumik and her colleagues at PKC who have honored and extended the Panthers' legacy through their food-centered political work. They create dining experiences that highlight community solutions, build solidarity, and recover and elevate food and cultural histories. Every course and ingredient of their meals are created to thematically reflect each event's focus, which have concentrated on [varied topics](#) such as the signing of Executive Order 9066 which mandated the internment of Japanese Americans, to a 500-person family table orchestrated in the spirit of the Panthers' Free Breakfast Program at L'il Bobby Hutton Park in Oakland.

We need to cultivate community, belonging, and [radical hospitality](#) now more than ever, which Bhaumik along with Jackson and Keval have been mindfully facilitating for years. The work of People's Kitchen Collective provides a road map for how the humble act of sharing a meal can create a small disruption in the hierarchy of the senses, opening up space for community and discourse, creating a ripple effect towards disrupting larger, seemingly intractable power hierarchies.

Bhaumik teaches courses focused on the study of systems of power because, as the VCS saying goes, they are "first and foremost visual systems."³ Bhaumik's pedagogical work magnifies this point, but also broadens it by incorporating social practice and the sensory textures of smell, taste, and touch. Bhaumik teaches an undergrad course called "[A Taste of Resistance](#)" in the Critical Ethnic Studies Program at CCA.⁴ She also has led workshops in [the Netherlands](#) (in tandem with the Future Food Festival) and in [Hong Kong](#) concentrating on how food can create space for cross-cultural dialogues, understanding, and peace.

¹ The Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast Program's success was considered so threatening by J. Edgar Hoover that the FBI used every tactic in their power to shut it down:

<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/black-panther-party-free-breakfast-program-1969-1980/>

² California's 2019-20 "public safety" budget:

<http://www.ebudget.ca.gov/2019-20/pdf/Enacted/BudgetSummary/PublicSafety.pdf>

³ The CCA VCS department's motto, crafted by Tirza True Latimer, is: "There is no social system that is not first and foremost a visual system. Thus, processes of social transformation necessarily transpire within the visual arena. Visuality serves to introduce change—new creative models, new political paradigms, new relational possibilities, new poetic forms—into social contexts. This is what makes the ability to interpret visual information and promote critical revisioning so crucial during periods of transformation."

⁴ Founded in 1968, CCA's Diversity Studies Program has since expanded its interdisciplinary scope, foregrounding its decolonial, transnational, and intersectional approaches to art education. It is now known as Critical Ethnic Studies. See California College of the Arts, "Critical Ethnic Studies," accessed July 9, 2020, at:

<https://www.cca.edu/academics/critical-ethnic-studies/>.

In her forthcoming book from [Kaya Press](#) entitled *We Make Constellations of the Stars*, Bhaumik offers her honed definition of criticality which provides a methodology for balancing critique and empathy. In her keynote address at the 2020 VCS Spring Symposium Bhaumik affirmed, “Criticality begins with the premise that society, history, and culture are unavoidably political, far from neutral, and are never objective. Criticality is about everything that examines the negotiation of power.” However, she elaborated, “Without empathy, feeling, and intuition, criticality is not accountable; it can sting or fracture without repair.” Crucial to this moment, Bhaumik notes the urgency of criticality, but she situates this exigent practice less like an alarm, and more akin to breathing: “necessary and continuous and intuitive as a practice of discernment.”

Bhaumik’s aptitude for multitasking is a superpower. Her ability to balance the drive to teach, write, take up [collaborative projects](#), and advance her own [visual art practice](#) is an inspiration to dual-degree VCS students juggling simultaneous interests in writing, making, and activism. Her projects have drawn [notice](#) and [acclaim](#) in the media, from the *San Francisco Chronicle* and National Public Radio outlet KQED-FM to [Bon Appetit](#), [Smithsonian Magazine](#), and [Vogue](#). Based in Oakland, Bhaumik has traveled the world for research fellowships and artist’s residencies, and invited lectures. With passion and energy to research the routes of migration, the roots of foodways, and to share her joy of making to learn and learning to make in different ways, Bhaumik has constructed a generous and ethical practice that responds to the urgent matters of our time.