UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

America's Harvest Box: Consent and Sacrifice in Imperial Foodways

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

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The Thesis of Maya Grace Misra is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Co-Chair

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2020

DEDICATION

In commemoration of

Uncle Hy
Venecia Shaffer

I would like to thank the following people, without whom this work would not have been possible:

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

America's Harvest Box: Consent and Sacrifice in Imperial Foodways

by

Maya Grace Misra

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2020

Professor Nicole Miller, Chair
Professor Danielle Dean, Co-Chair

This text is presented in tandem with *America's Harvest Box*, an exhibition showcasing a series of cooking videos that reveal the violent histories behind celebrated culinary delights. These histories are a direct result of aggressive United States military occupation both overseas and at home.

Chapter one of this work shares an excerpt from a piece of writing about the artist's family tales, an archive of oral traditions that build her family's collective story. It deals with the construction of narratives and truth, and the haunting nature of histories that cannot be told.

Chapter two of this thesis paper grapples more directly with issues of consent, violence, and consumption. It includes more referential information regarding the histories of the food items addressed within the artist's cooking videos, as well as deeper analysis of present-day systems of blood sacrifice and colonial control. This chapter also includes personal stories that contextualize the relationships between individual and collective trauma.

INTRODUCTION

America's Harvest Box is a long-term project, encompassing a range of media, that investigates the effects of United States military occupation on food practices around the world. Beginning in 2017 as a small homemade cookbook and a series of large-scale photographs, the project has developed over time to include a multi-episode cooking show. The series of short videos features myself as a hyper-sexualized chef who dons a tactical apron while demonstrating how to prepare dishes that have resulted from U.S. imperialism, at the same time alluding to the destructive histories that led to the creation of such food items.

This has easily been my most ambitious art series yet, as the project ties my earlier preoccupations with American iconography and historical narratives to more recent concerns over authorship, consent, and trauma. Most importantly, I have learned to recognize not just the inaccuracies embedded within dominant historical narratives, but the depth and nuance of the violence that such misrepresentation provokes. Such a lesson is not without its own difficulty on my own part, beyond the usual research and practice with which I engaged prior to entering this master's program.

Over the past three years, I have encountered far more heartache than I could have imagined. At the close of my first year in the program, I ended a nearly eight-year relationship with a partner who, though well-intentioned, was incredibly controlling, manipulative, and emotionally abusive. Sometimes I still fear that he's found a way to eavesdrop on my conversations from the other end of the continent.

Shortly afterwards, I had a terrible fainting spell that practically broke my back, and which for several days left me unable to walk, sit, lie down, or even eat without assistance from family members. Doctors prescribed me opioids and then muscle relaxants. After months of physical therapy, I regained a wealth of strength once again and can now exercise every day, but I know that my body will never be the same.

I fell in love with someone who was kind, quick-witted, and charming, who would excitedly spend hours with me debating the most effective methods for hard-boiling eggs or discussing the historical implications of popular flag usage at protests. We'd spend just as much time rolling around on his sofa while the X-Files lit up every kiss, every steaming breath and shock wave that reverberated and energized us through the night.

It was during this new partnership that my uncle— a bedrock of our family, without whom my life would not even be possible— died completely unexpectedly and in a way that has shaken the whole family to its core. His death continues to haunt me to this day.

Finding support at the time proved difficult, as I became deeply intertwined in a long and drawn out scenario with the person I was seeing and his ex. Seemingly, she had decided that the three of us should become best friends. I wonder if she was trying to kill me. Within a few months, I was dumped by the man who thought I'd become too closely connected with his past.

To endure all of these complicated situations in the middle of working towards a graduate degree meant a seemingly never-ending sway in focus from my work. I could never just be a graduate student, because my time and energy inevitably went towards others. Throughout my first year, this meant spending hours on FaceTime each night with a long-distance partner who demanded evidence of my love, proof that I wasn't sleeping with someone in my cohort. The following year, it entailed helping to care for a dying dog because I became a useful buffer between two people whose ten year relationship held too much tension to not unload it onto a third party. In my last year, it meant frequent trips to visit family because everyone just needed help getting through the grief.

And so in the process of photographing staged food displays, rewriting scripts, and building a large kitchen set from scratch in order to think through issues of imperial control, I found myself deeply entrenched in psychological trauma of my own. I also found that it was through this trauma— a violence in and of itself— that I could more easily recognize the dynamics of power and domination on an institutional level. With my long-term partner, I'd wished at times that he would hit me, if only for the sake of physical evidence. I learned after the breakup that there is a term called intimate partner violence, which I had assumed ends at physical or sexual violence, but which actually indicates a wide range of power dynamics. This lesson broke open a door for me, indicating that violence need not shed blood to cause harm. That the least visible wounds can be the deepest of them all, if for no reason other than that they go unnoticed and unrecognized.

In the cooking videos and in this text, I feel the need to mention my own treatment of those people who have fallen victim to extreme violence at the hands of the United States military. Since the early stages of

the project, the extent to which these communities are a part of the work has dwindled, largely because I do not wish to speak for them or claim to know everything about their subjugation, resilience, and survival. The problematic nature of creating work about communities within which I have no place has prompted me to shift the focus of the work towards critiquing that which I *am* a part of: whiteness and power. Although my own family has been subject to colonial occupation through British rule in India, that does not mean that as immigrants, we do not participate in other kinds of control over others. Ultimately, I wish to argue that "knowing" is itself a form of control that dominant groups wield, and that the maintenance of violent systems is contingent upon consent and the reenactment of power by those seeking to overcome their own lack of representation.

In the final stages of this writing process, my anxiety has grown over how to share much of this paper with my family members. I know that they are incredibly proud of me, and I also know that they would be extremely upset and angry to read vulnerable information which pushes back against values that they have instilled in me my whole life. I have spoken with close relatives over the past several months who I thought would understand my position the most, but whom have nonetheless urged against writing and publishing much of this paper. With this in mind, I hope that you— my reader— are aware of the other audiences for this piece, and aware of the power that you hold simply in digesting this information and holding it within your own body.

Some faculty members have said that my work is no longer about the relationship between food and colonialism, that it's just about violence and domination. While I agree that the work has delved deeper into realms that cannot immediately be traced to food as the underlying "theme," my project for this work has always been to understand the roles of comfort and pleasure in maintaining systems of violence. I've simply developed a greater vocabulary to reckon with it all, due in no small part to the fact that I have plunged deep into my own psychological relationships to men and to power. I have ripped out all the stitches that are my instincts and defense mechanisms, which hold trauma deep within my body.

Writing this thesis paper has been a year-long endeavor that has forced me to confront excruciating memories, reckon with my own relationship to violence, and begin to put everything back together. I have restitched myself. This paper is a new body.

CHAPTER ONE

PART I

My father's stories often center around his upbringing in Uttar Pradesh, his pet dogs, cats, and peacocks. About riding ponies in Nainital alongside the lake, and how it would get so hot in the summer time that he'd often sleep on a cot on the roof. Daddy would tell me what it was like to attend St. Joseph's, where he was required to wear white shorts that he hated. And he'd tell me the horrific tale of how he never learned how to swim because he was a poor, restricted child who was forced to stay indoors and study all summer.[1]

As a twelve-year-old, I'd excitedly beg my dad to let me partake in Holi celebrations in our city of Fremont, California. Holi was an important hallmark of my other Indian friends' cultural identity— so surely, I thought, it was integral to mine as well. Yet I could not yet discern the boundaries between religious and national celebrations, and my dad would thus recount his childhood fear of venturing outdoors during Holi. It wouldn't take much for funny pranks from his Hindu neighbors to morph into an assertion of their political dominance.

Many of my father's tales about India take place in the home that he grew up in— our family home in Lucknow, which has four large rooms laid out in a grid with a smaller room situated at each corner of the house, and a long porch stretching between every corner room on all four sides of the structure.[2] One of these small spaces became his personal darkroom when he was a teenager. In the front yard of the house, Daadi's award-winning rosebushes lined the driveway, alongside a huge mango tree. My dad would convince

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[1] My father was also given to making ridiculous inside jokes with himself while he told me things with seeming earnest. It wasn't until adulthood that I began to recognize the absurdities in his stories, as I learned more about the social and political climate in which he was raised. I can now see, for example, that his lack of swimming lessons as a child had little to do with a restrictive household, but rather with his geographic and cultural circumstances; swimming pools in Lucknow in the 1950s and 60s simply were not a thing. When I brought this to his attention recently, my dad noted that there was actually one pool, but it was at an all-girls Catholic school. He was not permitted to use it.

[2] Today, I wonder who built the house and for what purpose. When I first visited at the age of 18, Pinky gave me a tour of the roof. "You know," she began, unveiling a large crate and stroking the plush wings of a pet pigeon inside, "this house is over a hundred years old." There was something odd about the way she divulged this information, as though I was an outsider with no prior knowledge of the ancestral home. But then again, how could she approach me any other way? Meeting my cousins for the first time, it felt as though we'd already lost a lifetime as we attempted awkwardly— at times, painfully— to get to know one another. No one dared to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth that despite a shared cultural emphasis on family, we were complete strangers.

his friends to climb high up into the tree so that they could toss down fresh mangoes to cool everyone down when the steaming air threatened heat stroke in anyone who ventured outdoors for too long. I can still remember the drawing that he made— including his small figure smiling excitedly at the foot of the tree— as he recounted these details.

Evidently this house is haunted, a stage upon which countless generations of our family return to make themselves known again. My dad was only five years old when his own father died, yet his most potent memories of him arose in this absence. For years, and at a rate of several nights per week— always after dinner time— the fragrant scent of hookah smoke would fill the drawing room. My dad and grandmother were the only ones living in the house then, but neither of them smoked hookah. He says these incidents would drive him nuts, as he'd repeatedly pace around adjoining rooms and verandahs but find no one lingering nearby. One night, my grandmother smelled the smoke and stated simply, "Why do you do this? You are disturbing your son." The smoke soon dissipated, as did future incidents of this nature.

Of course, that didn't dissuade other spirits from coming forward. Daddy says that there was a huge peepal tree on the other side of the back fence, which according to legend, attracts poltergeists. And so these poltergeists took up residence around the property, sometimes throwing rocks at him when he played with his friends, especially in the backyard by the well. It was this same well that killed three-year-old Rajiv, Aunt Blossom's firstborn child, when he died falling into its depths.[3]

My father's stories, particularly those situated within Lucknow and our family house, served as my primary means of learning about India— his home country. They not only provided an underlying sense of our history, but illustrated a cultural and geographic landscape that was so much a part of me and yet so far removed from my everyday experience. A dislocation of space and belonging. A disjointed sense of self. And most of all, an urgent respect for that which I cannot see or even comprehend.

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[3] Though I don't dare verbalize such a thought to my dad, I sometimes wonder whether Rajiv stumbled on his own, or whether he was pushed by a demon.

Uncle Julie, on the other hand, was not much for sharing stories, but he has always been quick to give advice that surely resulted from his life experiences. When I spent a week under his care at Aunty's house in Almora — then a quaint hill station with a single dirt road running its length, and now, just ten years later, a sprawling city nestled in the mountains— he would blurt out warnings for every passing danger. "Don't touch that plant! It has sharp spines that will make your whole arm swell up!" and "Don't pet that dog! It will bite you, you'll get rabies and die" as well as "Don't go near that monkey! It will attack you!" Lessons all, though each with little to no elaboration.

At a family gathering a couple of years ago, Uncle Julie reluctantly shared a story with me. His eyes had grown into large glass orbs as he overheard me talking with my cousin Fiona about our moon signs. In spite of my obvious interest in astrology, he immediately cautioned me against delving deeper into the subject. Evidently astrology played a significant role in my family's history— something my dad had mentioned in passing but never elaborated upon. Uncle Julie explained that their father had commissioned an astrologer to draw up each of his children's birth charts, which chronicled not only details about their personalities and tendencies, but also told of the events that would take place throughout their lives. He maintains that every single event outlined in his own chart has come true thus far, and that he wouldn't wish upon anyone the curse of knowing how their life will proceed and end. Later in the evening, he pulled me aside again to divulge his true fear about astrology. After my grandfather commissioned a chart for his sister — my Aunt Blossom— the astrologer disappeared, leaving no trace behind. Uncle Julie maintains that the astrologer knew how his sister's life would end, but couldn't bear to inform the family. My father agreed. "Whatever he saw," my dad murmured during the car ride home, "it was too painful. So he just left town without saying a word."

Over time, I've begun to suspect that my uncle's reticence to divulge the stories behind his many lessons comes from painful experiences that he dares not articulate for fear that they will return to haunt him. Whether or not these had to do with cunning monkeys or poisonous flora, his goal has always been to protect my generation and keep us safe from harm's way. Perhaps these urgent appeals regarding smaller dangers of the world are his means of ensuring that we never come close to the heartache that he encountered early in life.

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Although my dad has shared some stories about ghosts in India, my Aunt Nina has always had much more to say on the subject. One would honestly think that spirits followed her wherever she stayed.

Before my dad was born, the family spent a lot of time at the house in Nainital, a small lakeside town in the mountains.[4] Aunt Nina has told me about a time that she sat by the stairway, when a British soldier appeared, mounted on a horse. Both the figure and the animal took on a blood red hue. It frightened Aunt Nina immensely, for the man was injured— dead— yet pretended to be alive.

Later on as a teenager, and when the family began spending more time in Lucknow, she was awakened abruptly from a deep slumber in the dead of the night. Her eyes fluttered open to the sight of a woman in a white gown approaching her from the opposite corner of the room. The figure slowly walked closer and closer, stood over Aunt Nina's bed, and raised a hand as though to strike. Although she shook from terror, Aunt Nina now believes that it might have been a long-dead relative who sought to bless her rather than smite her.

She found that many of these frightening encounters took place late at night. During a period in her childhood when she and my Uncle Julie slept side-by-side, Aunt Nina once awakened with a sense of unease. She quickly pulled aside the sheets of the bed to find a cobra lying between herself and her younger brother. It hissed and sputtered at her, poised to attack. My memory about how she warded off the attack is hazy, but I know that she managed to save herself and Uncle Julie. According to legend in India, anyone who can survive a confrontation with a cobra is a rani, a princess destined for great things. Years later, Aunt Nina's in-

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[4] I've visited this house, but it no longer belongs to our family. My dad and I took a day trip from Aunty's home in Almora to return to Nainital in search of the house, and we dragged Uncle Julie along with us since his memory of the twisting, tangled roads was stronger than my father's. It felt like hours that we wandered up and down hills and tight cobblestone paths, before at last we stumbled upon a dilapidated building covered in vines. A small sign by the front door announced the name of its current owners— Daddy says he thought a film producer had bought it— but I wondered if whoever it was even remembered that they have a house here at all. We were all disappointed in the lack of upkeep and care paid to the home. Is this what would happen to the Lucknow home, too?

laws in Florida so admired her that they began calling her their Indian princess.[5] She believes that her encounter with the cobra had been a foretelling of her life to come in the United States, beside a man with whom she fell so deeply in love that they married within months of meeting. She and my Uncle Hy lived happily together for 52 years, until he died this past spring.[6]

There was always some kind of urgency with Aunt Nina's stories of supernatural events, an indication that this was where my culture lies, more so than any kind of traditional holiday. At family gatherings, she'd immediately drop her present conversation if her ears picked up any mention of ghosts from across the room. My aunt's eyes sparkled as she sprung to recount the details of her experiences to me, tales of an ancestral homeland that could speak to our specific family history. And although Aunt Nina has always recounted these many stories with joy, I've found over the years that for everything she chooses to share, something much deeper is buried and obscured in the process.

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Amidst these many family members, Daadi— my grandmother— was our head storyteller. She gleefully took on this role, sharing countless tales which were so vibrant and politically charged that they

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[5] As she tells me this, I fight the urge to roll my eyes at the orientalist framework inherent in such a title. Regardless of how I interpret such information, I must absorb her stories with absolute respect; my elders' words are the gospel truth.

[6] Seven months following his death, I still struggle to articulate to friends and acquaintances how much grief it has wrought amongst my family— a rupture that has impaired the very core of our life in the United States. Even Raja was so distraught that he began calling Aunt Nina obsessively from New Delhi so that she could console him for hours each day. Raja insisted that Fiona and Mariah were not caring properly for their mother, as though they didn't already have it hard enough in mourning the loss of their father. I've begun calling Aunt Nina every now and then, as a reminder of the love and support that surrounds her despite the anguish that infiltrates her now-empty home. She has spoken of the daily struggles of completing tasks that her husband had always taken care of— paying bills, filling her car's gas tank, and so on. Mariah and I have tried at times to spark my aunt's memory, to remark upon the strength and independence with which she moved alone to the United States at the age of seventeen. Within a single year, Aunt Nina's father had died and she felt the weight of a responsibility to care for her younger siblings. She was accepted to medical school, before the administrators realized that she was only 16 years old. And so she turned her focus, and soon leapt at a teaching opportunity that dropped her in the middle of Vermont in the dead of winter. Aunt Nina struggled to manage a life knee-deep in snow, but was determined to build a solid foundation for her family.

frequently went over my six-year-old head.[7] And yet, it was in her small room, where she'd sit in bed with a hot water bottle warming her feet as I sat and listened, that I learned tales ranging in topic from her ten siblings and her love of roses, to the time that she discovered my cousin Mariah had been stealing money from her wallet.[8] When Daadi died suddenly in 2003, my entire body ached with a deeply ridden guilt for having not listened more intently, for having not respected her desire to share her life with me. Today, I wish that I could hear her stories again, that I could press for her observations on the partition or Mahatma Gandhi's assassination— not for the particular events that took place, but so that I might know her lived experience of them.

My dad says that only a week before Daadi's heart attack, she had asked him to buy a tape recorder because she wanted to record the story of her brother Norris. He was the second eldest of eleven siblings, and she was very close to him growing up— but, as I'm only vaguely aware, he was possessed by a demon that eventually killed him. Daadi feared that her brother's story would be lost, and given that she knew it in greater detail than any of her remaining siblings, it made sense for her to record the tale before all evidence of his life and death were lost. And yet, no one predicted her own demise so soon afterwards.

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[7] I was perhaps a bit young to fully engage with stories about the movement for India's independence, or her deep-seated admiration for Indira Gandhi's political ascendancy in the 1960s.

[8] Daadi told Aunt Nina what was happening at the time, but she refused to believe it and insisted that Daadi was making things up. As far as I'm aware, no one in the family knows about Mariah's secret besides myself.

PART II

Sixteen years following Daadi's death, when my dad and I visited India together this summer, we set out to spend time with Aunty Olive. Her health has been declining, and it had been quite awhile since either of us had seen her— five years for my dad, ten years on my part. Over the years, my father and Aunty have discussed the importance of recording this story about her brother Norris. Aunty was particularly insistent in advance of our visit that we get to this task, knowing full well that she is the last remaining of her generation, and that with no retelling of the story, it would be lost forever.

When we finally made it to Almora following 24 hours of flights, a full day of train travel, and an arduous car ride with an incompetent driver, we discovered that Bambi[9] had arranged for us to stay in a bed and breakfast. It felt like an extravagant KOA, each cabin with its own wide porch that framed a stunning view of the mountains ahead. Bambi made a joke about the drinks that they brought us upon check-in. They're called "lemon-annas", he said, but the name really doesn't mean anything and that's what's funny about it— that tourists think it's a real thing.[10] Shortly thereafter, I realized that my twin lens camera wasn't working, and Bambi insisted that we would find the exact same equipment at his friend's shop just down the road. Somehow I thought we'd walk, but instead he drove us down the hill, then pulled out his motorcycle helmets and handed one to me. Perhaps this only seemed like a safe move— to usher a woman he's just met onto his motorcycle— because we had already left my dad behind at the B&B. With my Sagittarius rising inclined to exude fearlessness, I didn't dare display any hesitation and quickly hopped on behind him. We zoomed our way through town. It was thrilling. I had never been in India with anyone other than a family

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[9] Through our entire stay in Almora I believed, with absolute earnestness, that Mrs. Banerji's son's name was indeed Bambi. Supposedly it's his pet name used only by his mother— that is, other than my father who finds him so irritating that he uses "Bambi" just to fuck with him.

[10] Was I one of these tourists to him? It had certainly surprised my dad and I to learn that Bambi was arranging for us to stay in a hotel— and an expensive one, at that— when we thought we'd be staying with Aunty. But there was some plumbing issue at her home, or at least that's the excuse that they'd come up with. I wondered how terrible it could possibly be when we were paying 2000 Rupees a night, with a commission going directly to Bambi. How we managed to get Aunty up and down all of those stairs on the first day at this bed and breakfast is beyond me. How she managed to keep up her jovial spirit in spite of her aging body's physical limitations astounded me even more.

member at my shoulder. Of course, this excitement lasted only until I burned my leg on the machinery of Bambi's motorcycle.[11]

The next morning, I woke to the searing pain of my burn against the silky comforter. This was nonetheless one of my favorite moments of the entire trip because I peeled opened my eyes to the sight of Aunty curled up by my side, watching me. A huge smile instantly struck her face. Without wasting a moment — and seemingly against the odds of her small, frail form— Aunty lunged and embraced me tightly. "I love you. Good morning," she said. It felt as though no time had passed since my last visit.[12]

A couple of days later, and with the plumbing issue supposedly resolved, we arrived to Aunty's house just as the rain was starting to come down. We had planned the trip with monsoons in mind, assuming that they'd hold off for at least a few weeks. With the heavy rains came a fear that landslides could keep us stranded in the hills long beyond our intended journey back to Delhi. Not that we didn't want to stay.

The pastor's wife, Priya, cooked a surprise lunch for us— dal, rice, and the freshest, tastiest papadum that has ever graced my tongue. Raja then pulled out the juicy mangoes that we'd brought from Delhi and taught me how to eat one "Indian style."[13] You have to massage the mango in your hands, pressing and crushing it so that the inner flesh becomes nothing but pulp, before popping off the stem and sucking everything straight out of the hole. Together we all ate mangoes, juice dripping down our arms. I kept one eye on a wolf spider that darted around the wall behind Aunty's seat. She was completely unperturbed,

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[11] For someone who mansplains so much, one would think he could bother to warn me that the exhaust pipe becomes extremely hot.

[12] Contrary to awkward visits with Raja who often seems unsure how to regard me, Aunty has always had a way of building space for everyone and sharing her love and joy as family, no matter the distance that has shaped us.

[13] Here we were, fulfilling a lifelong dream of mine: to taste one of these incredibly juicy, sticky mangoes that my dad had spoken of so fondly throughout my childhood. They're only in season in the summer time, and he never thought I'd be able to handle the heat and humidity of India during its most sweltering season.

though Raja made quite a fuss over its presence until we eventually moved to the armchairs on the other side of the room.[14]

We settled in then to hear Aunty's oration of her brother's story, each person cradling a warm cup of chai as the monsoon rains poured outside and the cicadas shrieked. I pulled out the flashy blue-and-purple chrome cell phone that we had used through the trip and set a program to record the conversation, listening as intently as possible to grasp Aunty's words spoken in Hindi.

I could make out only fragments— that when Uncle Norris came to be possessed, his voice and demeanor would change abruptly, and with this he would say things that were extremely uncharacteristic for him. It seems that she said he would become violent. At times, my dad interjected to translate some details for me, including to explain that Uncle Norris's possession took place over the course of about ten years. The family tried everything to improve Norris's condition, including inviting the pastor over to perform exorcisms.

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[14] It was difficult to be in this place. It felt at once that I was back in a familiar place that served as some kind of home for me, and that I could not really settle in lest the pastor and his wife return to find that I've made myself too comfortable. The broken stone steps leading up the hill to Aunty's home felt steeper than before, its path narrowing at times in a way that forced me to balance carefully so that I wouldn't tumble down onto the road below. I glanced up occasionally, pausing as I waited patiently for Aunty to make her way up the steps before me. There was a sign that I didn't recall from my previous trip, nailed to a large tree shading the path, which announced:

THIS PROPERTY IS NOT FOR SALE
THIS PROPERTY BELONGS TO:
1. Mr. Surendra .S. March
2. Mr. Rajendra .A. March
3. Mrs. Olive March [WIFE OF LATE Mr. BIPIN .S. MARCH]
4. Mrs. GRACE OHOL [DAUGHTER OF LATE Mr. mahendra .m. march]
5. Mr. AMIT NEGI [SON OF LATE Mr. RAMESH .U. MARCH]

Evidently there is some rhyme and reason to the inheritance of her home, though I had never known anything about Aunty's in-laws. Leading up to this visit, my dad would mention in passing that although it's technically Aunty's home, it's more like she just lives there now. Any maintenance of the property rests in the hands of the pastor and his wife, who take care of her. My dad and I decided at one point to search for Uncle Bippin's grave. He felt it unnecessary, but I insisted. We both knew that this would likely be our last trip to Almora, to Aunty's home— or least while she's alive. But I wanted to see her husband's grave one more time and capture a photo of it, since my dad's 1970s era photo of the white marble headstone is extremely overexposed, its words rendered invisible. Treading carefully down the precariously muddy hill, we fought past overgrown bushes and spiny plants that whipped my face as the light drizzle turned to a steady rain. "Oh look," my dad paused as he prodded a fresh seven-bladed leaf with his index finger, "Aunty is growing marijuana." Just as casually as he'd remarked upon this discovery, he turned around and stepped down several more steps to Uncle Bippin's grave. We stood silently beside the headstone for several minutes, wondering if we'd ever lay eyes on it again.

Despite my best efforts to listen and interpret Aunty's words, they did not come to me as coherent statements imbued with meaning, but as sharp chords that punctured the air around us, splintering and scattering before my brain could grasp much information. As the story went on and I could comprehend fewer and fewer details, the rain outside slowed and eventually ceased altogether. Within minutes, sunlight from the windows cloaked the walls of her living room, illuminating every crevice of the space with a magical glow. Remnants of the rain dripped slowly before the windows. In the midst of a radiance that completely overwhelmed me, I struggled to decide where to place my attention: on Aunty's home as it transformed, or on her sniffles and periodic silences that expressed the anguish with which she experienced her brother's slow spiral into death.

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Seven months later, my dad and I sat down at his home office computer with chai and namkeen, and proceeded to play the recording of Aunty's story about her brother Norris for the sake of transcribing it in English.[15] At last, I might understand the deeper meaning beneath Aunty's words.

Evidently when they were children, there was a huge banyan tree surrounded by a platform that was used for all sorts of events— performances, funeral processions, and community gatherings. One day, Norris played with his neighborhood friends under this tree, but stayed behind alone when the others ran to the

[15] My hope, of course, was to solidify each and every word into written form with the closest possible translation. While at first my father exercised patience and obliged my request, his frustration grew. Just as we'd discovered through our India trip how we similarly put our own needs aside to put out family fires, sitting down in Fremont together highlighted our differences. I prefer to be extremely methodical and detail-oriented in my work, whereas my dad has been known to tire of the banal processes quickly. Over time, we agreed that he would listen to entire segments of Aunty's speech at a time, taking his own short notes, before translating them to me. It worked for the sake of recording the gist of Aunty's words, but over time I came to trust his intervention less and less. I'm sure that his interpretation was more or less accurate, and yet I was reminded at this moment that any kind of direct translation— any hard information— cannot be communicated without carrying with it the speaker's own subjectivity. I had to let go.

town center to watch a traveling bear show.[16] It was that very night when his fits began. Lots of crying and screaming. Convulsions. His situation got worse and worse. The family met with the pastor on many occasions and tried countless medicines, but to no avail. Eventually their mother began sneaking out with Norris to meet with healers, opening up her options to respected community members of Hindu and Muslim faith. It was only during a visit with a doctor when a presence spoke aloud to the room, referring to itself Seetal Sunar. Despite ongoing treatments over the course of many years, nothing could coax Seetal away. One night, on Diwali, Norris simply said to the family, "Now I'm going." He died.

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In spite of my limited recollection or understanding of every family story, the significance of these tales as a pillar of my family's history is undeniable, given the sheer repetition with which they are told. From the time I was a small child, confronted with Aunt Nina's oration of her encounters with ghosts, I struggled to determine the kind of higher power in which I could bear to believe. As disseminators of the Christian word of God, my elders all encouraged me to trust in Jesus Christ as the son of God and a human manifestation of Him. And yet they also, without hesitation, communicated to me encounters that seemed

[16] Aunty used the term balu-wala, which translates literally to "bear-friend." Friend is not the best word, though a wala usually refers to someone working in the business of whatever other word is attached to the larger phrase. This particular show was a common one, according to my dad, and usually involved one man performing with a bear.

wholly contradictory to the idea that people die and go either to heaven or to Hell.[17] Such stories were nonetheless relayed with such clarity and insistence that they took on greater importance than the more ambiguous word of God. I knew, somehow, that my family's word carried a significance that could not be questioned. In growing older, I hesitate to share these stories, in part because my understanding of them is extremely limited, and additionally because I don't know how they will be received by others. Does Debbie believe in ghosts? Will she think it silly to hear all about my Uncle Norris who was strangled by a demon? And even if she did believe it, there is inevitably a cultural context that anyone on the receiving end of the story likely would not grasp— one situated in Hindustan yet with all the hallmarks of a Protestant Christian faith. Contradictions that exist side-by-side and defy full definition or comprehension.

At what point do I pass off supernatural beliefs as trivial, and at what point do I believe wholeheartedly in them— not simply because I am convinced, but rather as a duty to my family? Belief is, in itself, a family obligation. In all my reservations about the existence of the wholly inexplicable, I have always felt a firm necessity to push aside any ambivalence and simply believe these stories as factual encounters.

In refuting— or simply not believing— the horrid stories about astrologers foreseeing painful events and ghosts murdering my ancestors, I would be rejecting my family's history at the same time. Avery Gordon, in her book *Ghostly Matters*, speaks of untold experiences of history— characterized as ghosts— as realities that "organized violence has repressed and in the process formed into a past, a history."[18] No matter what we read in books as signifiers of a clear-cut history of India, those words cannot adequately hold all of the complex webs of experience that comprise our own truths. My family's stories are not just stories of personal

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[17] Alongside these contradictions, I struggled to comprehend what it meant to be Christian at all. In many ways, Christianity to me meant whiteness. It meant purity and innocence. It was something that I evidently had to strive for, and yet which I never fully fit into. To the people at church, I was exotic. Nonetheless, my parents insisted that we partake in the weekly rituals required for faithful service. Every Sunday on the drive home from church, my parents would talk about the pastor's sermon and their thoughts, often with a critical lens— but they'd just as easily shit-talk other members of the congregation:

"You know what I saw as I looked to the front of the pews? I saw Patti Conner's head, and then I saw what looked like smoke drifting up from her lap. It was steam! She had out a cup of coffee during church— in the middle of pastor's sermon! Can you believe it?"

"What the hell is she thinking? This is not a casual work meeting. This is church!"

[18] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 66.

trauma, then, but of resistance to full definition. Resistance to containment and closure. While Aunt Olive may not explicitly state what it meant to be Christian in India in the midst of Hindu resistance to the centuries-long institution of British colonialism, her brother's story serves as a testament to this lived experience, not only in the 1930s but in the ongoing face of suppression that seeks to dismantle any remaining ruins of British rule. My family's faith seemed antithetical to what many saw as the religious Hindu standard of patriotism and allegiance to the independence movement, yet the story of my Uncle Norris likewise rejects adherence to parameters of conventional Christian assertions of life and death. It defies the underlying logic and trajectory of each history which has been consolidated and sealed in the process of documentation.

Trauma exists on many planes, and it is only in these family narratives that occasionally make themselves known to me that I come to truly understand this. My experience of India is inherently different from that of my father, of my aunts and uncles and grandparents and great-grandparents. And doubly so as someone whose participation and inclusion in a South Asian American community has frequently been interrogated and questioned by friends and acquaintances who see me as "only half." To those outside this community, and particularly to white people, my skin betrays no semblance of cultural difference— but I will always be exotic. In the face of frequent assertions that I do not belong, I find more and more that denying the stories that comprise my sense of my family's collective history would also mean denying my own place in this family history.

Healing from collective trauma, according to Gordon, hinges on coming to terms with the violence that is inherent in the recording of a master historical narrative and in the subsequent denial and repression of a lived experience that does not fit comfortably within that narrative. To acknowledge this oppressed past enables one to "[obliterate] the sources and conditions that link the violence of what seems finished with the present, ending this history and setting in place a different future."[19] Deciding to believe, then, means taking responsibility for the history that made my life possible, and building a life for it moving forward.

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[19] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 66.

PART III

Buried deep beyond these countless family stories that abound— chronicled by my father, Aunt Nina, Daadi, and sometimes Uncle Julie— reside a dearth of unspeakably painful memories. My family has endured centuries of historical trauma in the face of British colonialism and the ruptures of Partition, and yet much anguish surrounds a single person, whose stories have largely evaded my grasp: Aunt Blossom.

Through the early stages of my life, my parents were incredibly busy in California with full-time jobs and the task of caring for us three kids, while Aunt Blossom had so many familial and community obligations in India that she had no reason to immigrate to the United States. She died when I was six years old, and before we even had an opportunity to meet. Not only was my aunt never able to share her stories with me, but she is, by and large, not discussed by anyone in the family. My aunt's presence is rarely acknowledged, yet fills the spaces between us. A ghost.

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I never met my Aunt Blossom, but I keep a framed photograph of her on my desk in my small studio apartment. In this image she sits at a wooden desk in her home in Kanpur, arms extended around a stack of paperwork. A camera flash illuminates the white and rust colored floral curtains hanging behind her, the desk lamp that she surely used late into the night, and piles of papers scattered around her workspace. Most prominently, the flash exposes her magnetic smile as she gazes off to the side, likely in conversation with another person in the room but outside the frame of the photo. This image has hung in the narrow hallway of my childhood home for as long as I can remember, and in passing my father has said that he took it during a trip home to help out the family, soon after she became a principal at a nearby elementary school. Evidently around this time, she had begun to assert herself more, and to take back the life that she had always wanted. Aunt Blossom loved this picture, he says, as it represented the life that she had built for herself

against a social backdrop that largely dissuaded women from pursuing professional careers. This is one of my favorite photographs of my aunt, mostly because it was her favorite photograph of herself.

Such stories inspired me, though they were few and far between. I always loved hearing my mom talk about Aunt Blossom, because she would emphasize her kind, expressive, and fiery personality.[20] They met when my parents visited India for the first time together many months after their wedding, as a delayed honeymoon of sorts. My mom was incredibly nervous, fearing any possibility of discord between herself and her husband's family— discord held in place by the punctures of spoken vows and the exchange of rings in an already-binding contract with a family she did not yet fully know. Before my mother even reached the driveway of the Lucknow home, her ears tingled at the sound of contagious laughter that echoed beyond the verandah, past my grandmother's rose bushes surrounding the mango tree, and through the gate separating the house from the chaos of traffic just outside on Kanpur Road. It was Aunt Blossom, who upon noting their arrival, immediately ran out to greet my parents with tight embraces.[21] My mother knew immediately that she and Aunt Blossom would get along well. They spent the following days getting to know one another in Lucknow, as my mom played with the children and Aunt Blossom snuck her around town for the best shopping in areas that my grandmother did not want her new daughter-in-law to see.

Much like with the photo of Aunt Blossom at her desk, a lot of what I know about her life has been passed on to me in relation to pictures that have captured her image. Occasionally over the years, I'd come across a photo of her and share it with my father, who would feel moved to provide some background on the picture. Such was the case when I found a photo of my Aunt Blossom clutching a bundled baby, flanked on either side by my Uncle Julie and Daadi. They stood in front of a wondrous lake with tall mountains looming high above. My dad explained the deflated expressions on my uncle and grandmother's faces: apparently this

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[20] Aunt Blossom was a Scorpio, born October 25, 19— in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. From what I might gather from this information, she was bold, assertive, extremely matter-of-fact (I have yet to meet a Scorpio who isn't extremely matter-of-fact), and dedicated to the people she loves. This all aligns closely with the personality that has been projected by my parents.

[21] At times when my mom shares this story of her laughter, Aunt Nina remarks that my laugh sounds much like Aunt Blossom's, that my disposition and way of moving about the world make her feel as though she is sitting down in her sister's kitchen again.

was a family day trip to Nainital, and everyone besides Aunt Blossom had learned that her husband Calvin snuck onto the very same train to visit his girlfriend. The baby in Aunt Blossom's arms was their son Danny.

When it became clear to family members that I was a creatively inclined child, many would divulge that Aunt Blossom was an artist just like me. My mom still keeps one of her framed drawings on top of her dresser. It is a drawing of a man and a woman dancing, which now that I think of it could have been a copy of a preexisting work. When I was young, I would lounge on my parents' soft bed and marvel at the curvature of the figures rendered in graphite, wondering how my aunt could draw such perfectly controlled lines freehand. As I grew to love drawing more and more, it felt as though I was fulfilling a prophecy set in action by Aunt Blossom. In light of her death, it was only reasonable that I continue her legacy of creating beautiful things. In many ways, this became the impetus of my growing fascination with art, and my determination to serve my family by continuing to uphold traditions otherwise thought eviscerated through her death.

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As a child, I would spend my Fremont summers playing outside in our inflatable pool, using the backyard hose to fill it up to capacity. The water from the tap was always entirely too cold, but if the air was suffocatingly hot enough outside, I would take the plunge anyway. I especially loved angling the hose to shine a rainbow against the sunlight, and playing the water games that I'd find in my issues of American Girl Magazine, which promised all the best ways to make the most of summer. In spite of the charming dreams I had about sun-splashed summer vacations, the icy water inevitably shocked my lungs while the blades of sharp grass reproduced themselves as hives up and down my legs.

It was during these months that I would also casually ask my dad when Raja would come to live with us. When I was four years old, Raja sent me letters alongside beautiful drawings of peacocks and other things that he saw. My dad would explain the images by telling me stories of growing up in Lucknow when he was a child. It was in this way that I got to know my cousin and my father's homeland— through letters, drawings,

and stories reminding me of all the family and loved ones in India whom I had yet to meet. But by the time we lived in the Fremont house, I wanted to meet my cousin. My parents had divulged that they were trying to coordinate for Raja to move to the United States to live with us, which is surely why I'd asked.

My dad would always hesitate before opening up. "Raja is having a difficult time," he would tell me. "Those people beat him." I'd press for details. Which people? "Well, his stepfather Atiq." What about our other cousins? Pinky and Sunny and the others? "They're okay, but Atiq does not treat Raja well."[22] I had never seen their house before so I could only guess what it looked like. I imagined a sliding glass door from which the light was almost entirely blocked out by white vertical blinds- but the image in my head is only of the lower half of this door, yellow from the repressed light. I would imagine Atiq beating Raja by the door, as his siblings waited it out in other crevices of their home. These days I know that the house looks nothing like this, and looking back now, I'm not sure if it was then or in the following years that I learned of Raja's liver and kidney troubles. My dad would tell me that his organs were weak because of these beatings. Through the course of all the planning for a move to the United States, Danny's jealousy set in. He stole Raja's passport and tried to flee the country by impersonating his brother. The visa application was denied. Raja could not come to the United States after all. He ran away from home eventually and lived for a short time with Aunt Eleanor, before spending years drifting between friends' homes until eventually he needed to work to support himself more fully.

But I only knew some of this. In the midst of the details my dad both shared and withheld, he dealt with a deep-seated grief at the death of his sister. And here I was, a child optimistically looking forward to meeting my cousin, but always aware that something was never quite right. I'd just as easily slide around on the wet plastic of my inflatable pool and crack dumb jokes with my sister as I would overhear whispers, moans, and shrill cries that seemed to shatter the dead air in dark spaces just beyond my path.

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[22] It would be years before I understood that Raja had a different father. Explaining this to an innocent, darling child would mean that my elders would have to acknowledge unspeakable truths, including that Calvin was their cousin and that Raja's father was neither Calvin nor Atiq. Admitting all this would also surely tarnish the image that they'd want me to have in mind of what a family should look like.

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I was young enough when Aunt Blossom died that I don't remember a whole lot— but there are fragments of memories that stick in place.

After she passed away, my elders in the United States could not fly back in time for the funeral. Instead, we held a small vigil at our tiny townhouse apartment in Union City. I hardly knew what was going on, and struggled to mourn the loss of someone who I knew was close family, and yet with whom I'd had no real prior connection. At some point soon after,[23] I recall waving goodbye as my dad, Aunt Nina, and Uncle Julie receded into the bright white hall of San Francisco International airport on their way back to India to sort out family matters. I have no idea how long they were away, but I do remember the red-and-blue beaded pendant that my dad brought back for me. At the time, I was upset that my sister got a charm shaped like a heart, but soon I grew to love the round shape of mine. This necklace still hangs on a wall-mounted coat rack in my old room in Fremont.

I remember another time when I was seven, arriving at Aunt Nina's home in Livermore for a family gathering. Excited to see my grandmother, I immediately rushed through the living room and down the hall. The lights were all out and it was very dark, but I knew my way and easily found my way to Daadi's door, which was cracked open slightly. There was silence through the house, but I could make out soft whimpers within her bedroom. I peered in, and in the darkness I could just make out Daadi sitting upright in her bed, tears streaming down her face and she spoke to Aunt Nina standing over her. It wasn't necessary to interpret their words— I already knew that Daadi was upset over Aunt Blossom. One of my parents had mentioned

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[23] Weeks? Months? I hardly know. I was hardly conscious of what my elders encountered on this trip. Several years ago, I came across a pack of photos titled "India 1996." It contained images of my straight-faced and puffy-eyed cousins, my Aunt Nina and Uncle Julie forcing smiles for the camera, and large piles of soil. A few photos in and I figure out that one of these piles was Aunt Blossom's grave, a simple mound of dirt with a large white cross situated over the top. I cannot help but notice the agony on Aunt Nina's face as she leans over the grave and sobs. These photos remind me of her grief when Daadi died. I recall the emotional intensity with which I stood in a small corner of the hospital room, observing as Aunt Nina walked around Daadi's body, rubbing each and every one of her limbs as tears poured down her face. A ritual, perhaps, that I'd had no prior occasion to witness.

earlier in the day that it had been about a year since she'd passed away. In this instant, however, I did not know how or whether I should make my presence known.[24] It felt as though I had stumbled upon a private discussion not meant for my ears. Probably in an attempt to sneak away, I stepped on a creaky floorboard and my grandmother quickly became aware of my presence. She smiled, wiping away tears and proclaiming her joy at my visit. Daadi swept me up onto her bed before offering me her favorite Werther's hard candy and asking me about my day. It was as though nothing had happened.

Throughout my childhood, explanations about Aunt Blossom's death were largely swept under the rug and kept quiet. Nonetheless, some vague memories lurk here and there.

Somehow I knew around the age of seven that Aunt Blossom was murdered. During a lesson on the Atlantic slave trade in my second grade class, I stood up to announce to the class that my aunt was also subjugated and killed by white people. Some man— in my mind, a British hunter who closely resembled the colonel in *Jumanji*— had shot her just because she was Indian. At such a ripe age and with an extremely limited understanding of my dad's home country,[25] this was what I believed had happened. I doubted my story fairly quickly, upon reading the expression of utter confusion and hesitance on Ms. Johnston's face. From that point forward, I was unsure how else to understand— let alone explain to others— my aunt's death. And yet, I didn't dare ask my parents or my other family members precisely how or why she died. It was a heavily guarded secret, not mine to know. With this in mind, I went on for years in silence, quelling any desire to ask questions. If Aunt Blossom was ever mentioned, it was only ever in vague terms speaking to her kind character. A holy spirit of sorts.

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[24] I am the intruder. I am the ghost.

[25] It didn't help that my mom's way of introducing me to India was through Alfonso Cuarón's *A Little Princess* (1995), which grossly romanticized the subcontinent's role as a British colony and represented Indian people as submissive and exotic. But this was the 90s, and my mom had recently married one of the very first South Asian people to even set foot in Fremont, California. Today, anyone familiar with Fremont knows this to be significant, as its proximity to Silicon Valley has rendered it an affectionately-named "Indian City" by many in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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In college, I thought about my aunt more and more.[26] My art practice became increasingly fixated on this figure in my life— first through a series of miniature paintings depicting the memories surrounding her death, and later by rearranging my apartment as I imagined her home might be in the present day, in hopes of recreating a life for her. However, I found myself continually frustrated by a lack of information. In critiques, I couldn't confidently explain the details of her life and death. It felt like being seven years old again in Ms. Johnston's class, doubting every word as it slipped from my tongue.

Ultimately, there was only one solution to this issue. I began to ask questions.

I knew that I would have to tread carefully in opening up the secrets and pain long buried within each individual's memory. The least invasive place to start seemed to be Fiona, who as the eldest of my cousins in California, might have known a thing or two. We arranged to discuss Aunt Blossom's death over the phone, but I quickly learned through that conversation that Fiona didn't know much. She said that there was a total of two times in the past fifteen years that her mother had referred to Aunt Blossom, and that each story conflicted with the other. My recollection of the details is slippery, but what I do remember is that our conversation took a turn, as Fiona began to direct my own questions back at me. She wondered what I knew, what information she could not access due to the magnitude of her mother's grief which had solidified into utter silence. A refusal to divulge.[27] At the time, I didn't know much— but I promised to keep digging. We

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[26] Maybe this is because I jumped at the opportunity to move to New York at the age of 19, before realizing the excruciating isolation of living 3,000 miles away from my nearest family members. New York felt like an entirely different world, and so I yearned for those who had given me a sense of self. But as immigration and diaspora became pressing issues in the context of my self-exile, I kept returning to the one person in my family who never emigrated from India. By the time my dad and Uncle Julie had followed Aunt Nina to the United States, Aunt Blossom had built a life for herself as a young mother. It made no sense to follow her siblings, given her responsibilities.

[27] In a conversation sometime last year, my father mentioned that Aunt Blossom was not on good terms with much of the family when she died. In particular, she and my grandmother had differences that kept them from speaking, and Aunt Nina was likewise fed up with her younger sister's antics. As Daddy relayed this to me, my thoughts flashed back to the phone call with Fiona, and I couldn't help but think of the guilt that Aunt Nina must have carried. If she wouldn't speak to Aunt Blossom when she was alive, she surely couldn't bear to even speak her name following her death.

said our goodbyes and "I love you"s, and Fiona pressed me to get back to her about whatever my investigation might turn up, as she felt equally uncomfortable with how little she knew.

My mom told me what she understood of the whole situation, and yet the insight that stuck with me the most was her struggle to communicate the agony of Aunt Blossom's loss to her own parents and siblings, who did not even know that she had existed. *What's the big deal?* quickly became the sentiment with which my mother found herself uncomfortably pinned between two cultural polarities, unable to fully fit into either.

Sooner or later, I knew that I'd have to speak more directly with my father about Aunt Blossom. He knew I was working on a project about her, so he surely knew that this time would come. Kindly and calmly, he agreed to share what he knew over a series of extended phone calls.[28] Eighteen years following her death, he told me more than I'd ever known about Aunt Blossom's life. Apparently she married Calvin at a young age. No one approved of the union, but as per her independent nature, she did what she wanted. She eventually gave birth to a child named Rajiv, but then buried him three years later after he died falling into a well. Next she had Danny, and maintained a practically single parenthood while her husband slept around with other women. Although it took some time, she fought for the resources she needed for a legal divorce. Throughout much of this period, her three siblings and mother resided primarily in the United States, doing what they could to provide support from afar and to visit for as long as possible when work or school allowed for it. This is when my father shot the photograph of her beaming in front of her desk.

It didn't take long for Aunt Blossom to fall in love once again, this time with a street fighter. I don't really know what my dad means by "street fighter," though it seems that he was in some sort of gang. He and Aunt Blossom had never married, but she became pregnant with Raja. My grandmother was especially upset at this news. Raja was only a baby when his father died in a fight, however, and evidently one of his fellow gang members— an older Muslim man— decided to provide support to Aunt Blossom. It was Atiq. They fell in love. Resolute in her decision to marry him, my aunt officially converted from Christianity to Islam, much to the anger and frustration of her mother. According to my dad, she continued to sleep with a Bible beneath her pillow and still largely followed the faith with which she was raised, but it made little difference to Daadi.

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[28] I still feel incredibly grateful that my father shared what he did. I can't imagine that it was easy, and yet I respect his belief that I have a right to know more about our family's history, no matter how painful.

From this point onward, tensions kept my aunt and grandmother largely unable to reach agreements or understand one another. When Aunt Blossom died unexpectedly, this tension splintered and settled in the space of each of our family relationships.

Explaining the events of her death was more complicated as clear details were few and far between, but my dad maintains that the most reputable information seemed to come from a long letter that his Aunt Eleanor wrote to him when dust began to settle.

Evidently, Aunt Blossom had been running for office in Kanpur. People were always lined up at a small shed outside her house, where she kept office to tend to the needs of neighbors and acquaintances who struggled against a system that refused to serve them. She fought for equal housing opportunities for those of low income and caste, and provided paperwork and legal assistance to women attempting to leave their abusive husbands. The admiration that she garnered amongst religious minority groups and lower class communities gave her significant strength in the election, and she was expected to win. Her opponent was not pleased. He hired some men, who showed up to the supply store that she ran with Atiq. These people shot her several times, and then they shot Atiq. Raja had been in the back room of the store and fled before they could get him, too.

In sharing these details, Daddy stressed the contagious effect that Aunt Blossom had had on everyone around her. Expressing regret that he could not attend the funeral himself, he indicated that it was nonetheless well attended: she was so adored that 14,000 people showed up.

For two years, this is the story that I shared with close friends and those in art circles with whom I shared my work. Learning about her death seemed to me the greater accomplishment than the photographs themselves. As I occasionally thought of new ideas for how to arrange my apartment— "she needs a good bookshelf, with a framed certificate for the work she would be doing today"— Raja was suddenly struck with a bout of severe illnesses. He was in a very bad situation, I was told. My dad spent endless nights on the phone to India, trying to figure out what was going on, as we learned on more than one occasion that Raja's roommate had found him unconscious and within minutes of death. Calls to the doctors. I'd spend mornings feeding and playing with Henry, the toddler I nannied for, then tuck him in for a nap as soon as possible so that I could check prices for direct flights from New York to New Delhi. Sooner or later, my mom called to

share with me the words that all my elders refused to speak aloud: autoimmune disease. Evidently the reason that Raja had had to see so many doctors was because nearly all of them would turn to him and say, "We do not treat this kind of condition." Raja was HIV positive and had developed AIDS.

I began to reach out to him more through Whatsapp, sometimes obsessively as I wondered whether I would ever see my cousin again. I feared that he would try, for a third time, to take his own life. But things fizzled out. His physical and mental health improved, as my dad and Aunt Nina sent money to secure treatment from the best hospital in Delhi. Uncle Julie had angrily backed out of providing financial support at that point.

About a year later, as I toyed with the idea of using AIDS awareness signs in my photographs, it occurred to me that I had never spoken with Raja about his mother. He was there, after all, when she'd died. I messaged him, asking if I could inquire about what he witnessed. He responded almost immediately, noting that no one had ever asked him what he saw and how he experienced his mother's death. We planned a phone call, one which I carelessly expected to take no more than twenty minutes. Over the span of two hours, he described to me how he'd watched in horror as his stepfather's family members bludgeoned his mother, then took an axe to her head and chopped it clean off.

"Do you hear me Maya? Do you really hear me? I watched her head roll to the ground. My mother's head. I will never forget what that looked like, to see her head on the ground apart from her body, and the blood everywhere. They would have killed me too. I had to run. I was so scared Maya, I just kept running until I couldn't run anymore." I stood by the door of my cozy art studio, the distant sound of music floating in from the hallway and lulling my partner to sleep on the cushioned bench by my desk, as I listened to my cousin's words that were sliced intermittently by sniffles and moans.[29]

[29] By the end of the call, David was displeased about how long he'd had to wait for me. He was usually displeased when I didn't devote my attention to him. And truthfully, I had only realized midway through the call with Raja how reckless it was for me to open the door without preemptively recognizing the trauma that surely penetrated every aspect of his daily life. David would just have to deal with it. I had a responsibility to listen as Raja cried over the phone. No one else had ever given him this opportunity over the course of the past twenty years.

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Our lives overlapped by a margin of six years, so by no means am I a reincarnation of my aunt. And yet I wonder what it means to carry on a person's spirit and live in such a way reminiscent of their path. Maybe I'm a ghost, struggling to simply know myself and to understand the forces that created myself and my family in the face of dominant narratives that would have us believe that we don't exist.

CHAPTER TWO

It is Monday, November 11th, 2019— Veteran's Day— and I'm sitting at my favorite coffee shop in Ocean Beach, a small beach-town neighborhood within San Diego. The sun cloaks my skin comfortably as I revel in the breeze on the patio. A family nearby, decked out in Seattle Seahawks gear in anticipation of the game, celebrates the holiday by devouring small cakes from the enticing glass case inside. While luxuriating in the warm Southern California light, I write about blood sacrifice. When I tell others that this is something I've been thinking about a lot lately, I struggle to communicate precisely what that means. It has nothing to do with what one might view as a "primitive" ritual act centered around antiquated religious institutions— or rather, it has *everything* to do with this, in that we remove ourselves from any such system of violence despite it constituting the very core of our livelihoods in the present day.[30] We accept military institutions as vital to our security and safety as citizens— or at least residents— of the United States of America. We know that people enlist for service to fight in wars or even to perform covert military operations during times of supposed peace. Whether or not we like this, we accept it as a system over which we have no control. However, we also fail to see ourselves as the instigators of violence. Let our soldiers travel overseas to fight— we'll praise them for laying down their lives in service of the nation, for the safety of the rest of us. We'll thank them for their sacrifices. Or perhaps we'll feel disillusioned with the idea of the military; let us shame these people for having killed others in an oblique devotion to some trivial set of values, for not having the means or resolve to choose any other career path. Whether we view these acts of service as appalling assertions of dominance or as brave sacrifices is beside the point. Either way, we have made peace with a system of organized violence that enables us to enjoy relative comfort and maintain membership as beneficiaries of the powerful nation.

The above framework through which the United States military systematizes present-day forms of ritual blood sacrifice, fulfilled and worshipped by the general public, was first introduced by Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle in their book *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (1999). American patriotism, they argue— or as I prefer to call it, nationalism— is a

[30] Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4

civil religion that requires ritual blood sacrifice for the endurance of the group.[31] This religion centers around a totem god that we worship: the flag of the United States.[32]

From my seat at the café table overlooking the comings and goings on Newport Avenue, I can see at least five U.S. flags displayed nearby. One flies over the U.S. Bank across the street. A couple of them dot the lamp post banners that line the main drag of the neighborhood. One fairly large U.S. flag flaps against the doorway of the hardware store halfway down the block. And inevitably I glimpse a bumper sticker on a passing truck proclaiming the driver's identity as a veteran of war, a small flag situated on either side of the bold print. As Marvin and Ingle would argue, the driver of this truck could only be reinstated into public life if they kept the secret of who sent them to die in a war.[33] That resounding *who* is in part a somewhat vague reference to the system, to the institutional powers that preside over the greater population— but it is also the set of individuals who comprise public life. Ultimately, it's much easier for us to come to terms with the death of a soldier, because they went into it knowing that this could mean death in service of the country. It's easier because, by virtue of their job description, we know that these are people who have possibly killed before, and who *would* kill if it was required of them— regardless of the racial or socioeconomic constraints that might have incentivized them into this career path to begin with. In the midst of such an expectation, we have authorized service people to kill and be killed. We have sent them to die. We are the practitioners of violence.

It's difficult to swallow, as are a lot of things.

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[31] Ibid, 1.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid, 63.

Figure 1: The United States flag oversees the pre-evacuation sale at a store owned by a proprietor of Japanese descent. Photograph by Dorothea Lange, April 4, 1942.

On the Flag as Protective Gear

There was a time shortly after college that I tried to do research on flags. Not that I had a specific question in mind, but somehow I was aware that there was more I needed to know— about iconography, about patriotism and how people use flags. Randomly, I found an article on JSTOR that seemed interesting, so I printed it out and packed it in an overnight bag to take to David's. It was July 4th, 2016. I remember carefully choosing my outfit for the occasion, dressing in the blue v-neck shirt that David had once gifted me — he insisted that I look *great* in v-necks— with a new red skirt that I adored. *It's independence day*, I'd surely thought; *must dress the part.* Despite my cynicism about U.S. exceptionalism, I couldn't help but partake in the rituals and traditions that I'd engaged in since childhood, when my grandfather would excitedly place me front and center at the annual Twain Harte Lake independence day parade.

As David fired up the grill and I did my best not to spoil the day with remarks about the United States's dependence upon the subjugation of poorer countries, I dragged out a lawn chair and settled in to peruse my relevant reading material for the day: a piece entitled "Sowing Patriotism, But Reaping Nationalism? Consequences of Exposure to the American Flag."[34] It was a 2008 study conducted by sociologists Martin Kemmelmeier and David G. Winter, who sought to understand the effects of widespread flag exposure amongst viewing subjects. The title alone speaks to the authors' underlying findings: that in efforts to increase patriotism— defined as a "love and commitment to one's country"— those who fly the flag of the United States unintentionally foster nationalistic sentiments — "a sense of superiority over others"— in its viewers.[35]

While I've often returned to this study as useful evidence of the power of visual imagery in reinforcing dominant historical narratives, I've also wondered what can be said for those who choose to fly

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[34] Markus Kemmelmeier and David G. Winter. "Sowing Patriotism, But Reaping Nationalism? Consequences of Exposure to the American Flag" *Political Psychology* 29, no. 6 (2008), 859-879.

[35] Ibid, 859.

the flag in the first place. Utilizing the 9/11 attacks as prime anecdotal evidence, Kemmelmeier and Winter refer to the phenomenon of renewed flag display across the United States during this time as "an outburst of patriotism," an assertion of pride and trust in the nation.[36] But how do they know that patriotic sentiments prompted such flag display? This question is not built into the study in any way.

My personal experience with 9/11 was that my own community of South Asian Americans faced extreme hostility at the hands of white supremacists in the aftermath of the attacks. In an attempt to undermine any possible accusations of disloyalty, Middle Eastern and South Asian store owners and residents began flying the United States flag.[37] This was not unlike the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, when racial hostilities towards Japanese people became so pervasive that store owners would hang U.S. flags above the merchandise, in a performance of allegiance to their adopted nation (figure 1).

Given this, I think of Kemmelmeier's definition of patriotism and wonder what a "love of country" really means when said love is born of coercion and fear. I look back to my relationship with David, who encouraged me to wear the clothes that he'd bought— a gesture that he understood as proof of my love and devotion to him. Whether or not I was even aware of it, adorning myself in these outfits was more a performance of my loyalty— to him, and to the nation at large. Performing both compliance and my own desire became forms of protection in which I put myself forth as a seemingly willing participant, because any other course of action could destroy me.

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Mishra, Sangay. "Religion and Race: South Asians in the Post-9/11 United States," in *Faith and Race in American Political Life*, ed. Robin Dale Jacobson and Nancy D. Wadsworth (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 237.

Figure 2: Google Earth view of Miramar National Cemetery, San Diego, CA.

At Miramar

Occasionally I visit Miramar National Cemetery for the sake of research. Not that I always know what that means. Maybe just standing there for hours on end will set forth an epiphany, as though the art that I am going to create will suddenly present itself to me.

It's an odd place, similar to other military cemeteries with bright grassy fields of headstones perfectly aligned into a precise grid, all the exact same size, shape, and marble so that nothing can disrupt the equilibrium of sameness, standardization. But Miramar's defining architectural feature is what they call the "Avenue of Flags": a long, straight[38] road lined with flagpoles, each flying the U.S. flag, that cuts right through the center of the property. At the end of this road sits the real attraction: a monumental wall encircled by more flagpoles, the outermost tip of which holds a significantly larger United States flag than any of the others. The Daddy Flag.[39] This flag oversees all of the operations of the cemetery: memorial services, burials, ceremonies. Sometimes I wonder if the entire flag display, viewed from above, looks like a dick.[40]

I'm on edge in this place. Caught in a state of heightened alert. I am an undercover agent, an imposter.[41] There for the wrong reasons— not to honor the dead, but as a case study. There to observe the communion of flags flapping in the wind of passing jets, while thinking about the implications of dying for

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[38] It's actually slightly curved— but that is nearly imperceptible when making one's way along it.

[39] Or is it the Mother Flag? I'm never sure which title fits best. On the one hand, a Daddy Flag seems fitting because it recalls the nickname of Marines aviation pilots, admiringly referred to as Flying Leathernecks. I learned about this at an aviation museum that is just a stone's throw away from the cemetery, at the opposite side of the base. I'm so unfamiliar with this term, however, that in a slip of the tongue I often refer to them as Flying Leather Daddies. Such a title makes sense to me though— exerting control and domination, ensuring submission on the part of worshipping subjects. Not that I actually know much about leather culture; I could be totally off. On the other hand, flags are commonly referred to using she/her pronouns, and there's an entire area of study devoted to the representation of the national flag as either a goddess or a maternal figure.* Incapable of enacting harm, the flag is the caretaker, the mother who has given birth to its citizens. We are the children of the nation, and we would not exist without it.

* *See both Scot M. Guenter's "Juxtaposing Symbols in Civil Religion" in Raven: A Journal of Vexillology (vol. 17, 2010), and Sumathi Ramaswamy's The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).*

[40] Is this what the pilots taking off from MCAS Miramar see from their jets? I imagine the force of the planes makes everything vibrate around them. Do they look down upon this road— a trembling cannon— as they develop their own virility, learning how to set off explosions from the safety of the cockpit?

[41] Asa and I have talked about how our work over the past several years has necessitated us both becoming spies. We've both had to perform in some sense, feigning alignment for the purpose of research.

one's nation in such a systematic and large-scale way. It's the ultimate sacrifice— to trust the national institution enough to give all of yourself in its name.

My gait takes on an awkward cadence. I tread alongside each grave as though it is a landmine, unexploded ordnance more likely to destroy me with every step.

Do they see me? I avoid eye contact, fearful that someone will confront me and inquire as to what I'm doing or what I want from this place. Fearful that they will want me to put forth information about myself, give myself up as a sacrifice.

On Trust

A series of jolts and a whine. It felt almost like an earthquake, but even in my grogginess I knew that it wasn't one. I felt L's slender limbs pull away from my waist as he sat upright, breathing heavily.

"Is he okay?" I asked. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure. Let me check on him."

The moonlight streamed in through the blinds, illuminating L's skeletal form as he pushed aside the sheets and stumbled over to a cot at the foot of the bed.

"Is he breathing?"

"Yes, he is. God I just feel so sorry for him though." L's voice cracked. "Maya, I don't know what to do."

I crawled out of bed and hovered next to him, placing my hand on the dog's furry nape. We sat over him for awhile as he panted with such furor that he seemed he might just heave and fall unconscious at any moment. The heaving slowed over time. We cried, arms wrapped around each other as we whispered loving words in Toby's ear. Eventually it seemed there was nothing else to be done. Gave him some water, cried some more.

We crawled back in bed. I hugged L silently, unsure what to say for a few minutes, before the words came to me at last. "I can't imagine what you're going through right now," I whispered. "But just know that I'm here."

Burning tears streamed down his face, dripping onto my arms. "Thank you, Maya. You have no idea how much that means to me. Thank you for being here."

L stretched his arms around me. I turned away so that we could nestle bodies, his limbs long and comforting over mine, the quilt gently caressing our bodies.

"What was that anyway? I couldn't even tell."

L inhaled sharply. "I know exactly what it was… it was another seizure."

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Just a few weeks prior, I was running around town on a busy Sunday, starting with a quick trip to the farmer's market in the morning before Mohkam would pick me up at 10:30. It had been a month seeing L, and it was about time I admitted to Mohkam that things were going well with another person— well enough that I should really stop seeing anyone else. In my rush to get ready, I decided to call my mom for a quick check-in, not knowing when I'd get another chance through the day. The home phone went unanswered, so I tried her cell phone. When she finally picked up after countless rings, she was incredibly silent.

"I tried the home phone but there was no answer," I said, hastily folding shopping bags and placing baskets of strawberries in the fridge. "Where are you?"

"We're in Livermore," she replied softly.

Odd to think that they'd be with my aunt and uncle on a Sunday morning, rather than at church.

"Oh, okay. What's going on there?"

She paused for so long that I thought the connection dropped.

"Well, it's about your Uncle Hy. We think he had a seizure in his sleep…"

She said nothing else— simply waited for it to hit me. If they only thought that he'd had a seizure in his sleep, it meant that he wasn't able to communicate that to everyone himself. He'd had countless seizures before. But then it really hit me. *In his sleep.*

No no no no no no no no no no. NO. This word reverberated throughout my skull, and although my memory is hazy, I suspect this is all I said on the phone to my mother.

"I'm so sorry," she responded, sniffling.

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Nine months later, I struggle to fall asleep at night. I used to be really good at setting a bedtime for myself, forcing myself to climb into bed at a certain hour and shut off any conversations in my head. But I can't anymore. Last night, as with most nights, I couldn't stop thinking about the events of the past months. Going to bed is suddenly a terrifying endeavor.

I think of the arms that used to entangle me, the comforting feeling of L's soft breath grazing my shoulder. I think of that night, lying on the edge of sleep because we had no idea whether this dog would last through the darkest hours. My eyes sting with salty tears as I recall the seizures that woke Toby up, that woke us up. And the seizure that did not wake up Uncle Hy, nor even Aunt Nina as she lay beside him.

I begin to fall asleep, but the moment I realize it I jolt back up. Blankets take shape around my body, hold my legs down. The air suffocates me.

Nationalism as a Form of Masochism

A friend suggested awhile back that I watch Marina Abramoviç's *Lips of Thomas*. Truth be told, I had to keep from rolling my eyes because I've always thought of Abramoviç as an artist who takes herself too seriously. She makes herself the focal point of each and every piece. Then again, maybe I'm not so different.

Lips of Thomas was originally performed in 1975, then reproduced for *Seven Easy Pieces* in 2005 at the Guggenheim Museum.[42] As usual, Abramoviç performs a range of extremely masochistic gestures, but here she shifts emphasis to regard the dominant partner not as an individual, but a structural power. A nation— or at least, in the absence of concrete specificity, a signifier for a nation.

Throughout the performance, Abramoviç partakes in ceremonial duties, first sitting at a table beside a metronome while consuming honey and wine. The artist stands, takes a knife to her belly, and slices a diagonal line straight through her skin. She moans and bleeds, approaching a pair of combat boots and a military cap before holding her arm high for a salute. As the tune of a Slavic nationalist folk song fades in, the viewer witnesses Abramoviç's eyes well with tears.

Remember the times of glory,/ In thy name to wars we went/ The war is our eternal burden, Our life is of a true faith.

The artist then continues a cycle of gestures, lying on a bed of ice before returning to the honey and wine, and continually slicing gashes through her stomach until they form a pentagram. At times, she holds her hand up for a salute while also waving a white flag.

Abramoviç quite literally sheds blood for her practice as she recalls the blood shed in service of a nation. She demonstrates a model of trust in the nation at large, but also calls into question the nature of the relationship between citizen and nation, which necessitates the submission of the former to the latter. Marvin and Ingle, in *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*, suggest as much when referring to the seemingly victimless gesture of the salute as a "bodily submission to the sacrificial flag," a tribute through which citizens and residents put

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[42] Babette Mangolte, "Seven Easy Pieces by Marina Abramoviç (2007)," *Ubuweb Video,* http://www.ubu.com/film/abramovic_seven.html.

their own bodies forth as willing sacrifices.[43] What is typically regarded as devotion to the supposed greater good thus transmutes into a vow of submission. Documentation of *Lips of Thomas*, produced by filmmaker Babette Mangolte, includes footage of the audience watching from a distance, observing as Abramoviç inflicts excruciating pain upon her own body. They observe passively, demonstrating both their acceptance of the violence in which Abramovic partakes, and their impotence in stopping her. To Marvin and Ingle, such passive acceptance of violence is not only the norm, but a vital component in maintaining the endurance of the nation state.[44] Moving well beyond any question of consent, observers of violence— who in the case of *Lips of Thomas* have paid admission to the museum, funding its programming— are just as much instigators of said violence.

Presumably Marina is well aware of Gilles Deleuze's writings about masochism. He asserts in *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* that a sadist relies upon absolute power— a physical violence— whereas the masochist, while seemingly submissive, nonetheless dictates the rules of the engagement.[45] Maybe this is why I feel uneasy about Abramoviç; everything feels like such a power play. Deleuze argues that such psychological control is highly contingent upon contractual agreements.[46] There are certainly ways to think about this in relation to the national public— what components of our relationships to the government are mediated through social and legal obligations? A bulk of our taxpayer money, for example, goes towards "defense" spending.[47] If someone were to withhold such financial support, it would be filed as tax evasion, a crime punishable through prison time. A loss of the right to vote,[48] to choose, to have any kind of say moving forward.

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[43] Marvin and Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag*, 50.

[44] Ibid, 1.

[45] Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 18-19.

[46] Ibid, 76-77.

[47] I put "defense" in quotations because such a term implies securing safety for those within our borders, when we know that this is not the case. It suggests that anything conducted in the name of the United States military serves the sole purpose of protecting those under this blanket, bearing no mention of the incredibly aggressive advances that our government makes on nations with lesser military power.

[48] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York and London: The New Press, 2010), 2

For Deleuze, the real turn-on for a masochist is not the pain that they endure, but the moment immediately preceding it: the image, to use one example, of a whip about to make contact.[49] It's the anticipation of the pain, rather than the pain itself, that proves irresistible to the masochist. In the context of nationalism, this would surely include flags and other patriotic symbols— images that serve to reaffirm the clean narratives that we'd like to believe, without holding the pain and suffering that projects outwards onto bodies that we do not see. The anticipation and excitement spurred from the sight of a U.S. flag flapping in the wind— the *idea* of devotion and sacrifice— enables us to assume that all is well. In this way, the image is just as violent— not because it appears so, but precisely because it conceals violence in the suggestion of innocence.

Patriotism, a *love of country*, is hardly innocent.

[49] Ibid, 70-71.

In the production of historical narratives, marginalized perspectives are necessarily rendered unimportant through their omission. Scholar Marita Sturken indicates, in her book *Tangled Memories*, that "[f]orgetting is a necessary component in the construction of [collective] memory."[50] Telling the story of a national identity, particularly one that upholds institutional power through a patriotic discourse, hinges on the erasure of marginalized groups of people within those narratives, denying their very existence. But this doesn't mean that these perspectives do not exist— as sociologist Avery Gordon reminds us in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, they remain alive through individual memory— however unspeakable— and a present-day experience of that memory.[51] For this reason, we cannot view events through a closed and defined linear script, because such a script can never be completed. Experience is definitively nonlinear, as the "ghosts" of our dominant narratives— Gordon's metaphor for individual experiences unacknowledged amongst a collective story— "remain nonetheless alive and available to encounter."[52] Whether or not we can change our modes of exploration and cultural production will determine the extent to which we can acknowledge and give due credit to these experiences.

When I speak with my college-age students regarding what we think we know about history, we usually speak about the lessons that we encountered in the K-12 educational period. In fourth grade, for example, all California children moving through the public school system are expected to learn about the state's history— and when I was a child, this focused in large part on the Spanish "discovery" of the land and the construction of Catholic missions in a northward path up the coastline.[53] These missions are all protected historical landmarks now, a public devotional to the institutional structures that have enabled our present-day

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[50] Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1997), 7

[51] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 66.

[52] Ibid.

[53] "Chapter 7: Grade Four—California: A Changing Site," in *History-Social Science Framework*, California Department of Education, last reviewed September 5, 2019, https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/hs/cf/documents/hssfwchapter7.pdf.

systems of power. But what about the Ohlone people native to the land that is presently referred to as the San Francisco Bay Area? We certainly learned about them— but they were only ever addressed in the past tense, as a novel example of primitive daily activities and a testament to the technological advances that we now enjoy in some semblance of progress. Use of this past tense served to indicate that these people no longer exist, though as a child, I never thought to question why or whether that was even the case.

In addition to all of the "history" that we learned growing up, we must also contend with current events and the information that we consume and reproduce on a daily basis. In my time as a research intern at *Artforum Magazine*, I quickly learned that in the process of fact-checking articles for publication, my managers held certain news forums in extremely high regard as "reliable sources," while the sight of less reputable forums would practically make them rip their eyeballs right out of the sockets. "The Huffington Post *does* not fact-check," Miriam disdainfully said to me early on in my stint at the magazine. "Try again." Any information that I could confirm using the *New York Times*, on the other hand, was highly revered— a beacon of light illuminating readers with its thorough research and long-standing reputation. At the time, and mostly for the sake of keeping my internship, I hesitantly accepted the idea that fact-checking could be the end-all-be-all when it comes to determining truthfulness in a written assessment of events or situations.[54] But if the Democratic primary elections of both 2016 and 2020 have confirmed any longstanding suspicions of mine, the most notable is that any news forum, as an institution, *always* has an agenda. On Super Tuesday of this year, Bernie Sanders won California— a historically neoliberal state that tends to vote left-of-center— and yet such a monumental win for the comparatively radical senator went completely unacknowledged in the *New York Times*'s coverage of the day's elections.[55] Writers and editors employed by the newspaper willfully chose to focus on narratives that would sensationalize unexpected wins by Joe Biden, while effectively demolishing the public image of others such as Senator Sanders, for whom a nomination win would mean certain threat to

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[54] There is, after all, something to be said for a publication's insistence on thorough research and information. Who wants to perpetuate fake news? Maybe all news is fake news though.

[55] "Live Analysis: Super Tuesday," *The New York Times*, last updated March 12, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/03/us/elections/live-analysis-super-tuesday.html?searchResultPosition=11. See the update several hours after polls had closed from reporter Nick Corasaniti on March 4, 2020 stating: "For those just tuning in, The A.P. called California for Sanders as soon as polls closed. The Times has not called the race, but our forecast says he'll "quite likely" win."

the establishment politics on which the newspaper relies. For my supervisors at *Artforum*, the conditions under which these revered news sources produce and distribute information hardly mattered. It did not matter that while the *Times* might put forth information that could be used to confirm material for a random editorial piece (ranging from strict art speak to discourse steeped in sociological and political issues), the newspaper could also withhold other lived realities that might change the story— change the *facts*— entirely.

School systems and news outlets are fairly easy to criticize, as their means of disseminating knowledge is so explicit. There is power in the cold knowledge that serves as the backbone for our collective understanding of history— and yet, it is not only historical texts, but also representational imagery that works to craft our collective interpretations of history. Authorship lies just as much in forms of cultural production such as television shows, national and regional imagery, and even cookbooks. These forms circulate in low-level situations, produced and reinforced by consumers, as well as by the institutional powers themselves that seek to assert and maintain dominance through the reinforcement of historical narratives. Examples include flags— on a national level, with the flag of the United States— and on a state level, in which state flags typically tell the story of the capture of the land and the subjugation of those who called it home before colonization sought to destroy them. Postage stamps, designed and disseminated through the framework of the United States Postal Service, likewise serve to produce a series of visual representations of the nation's history that are contingent upon dominance and power.

Cultural production related to food is particularly interesting, as it involves reinforcing prevailing narratives, while maintaining the innocence of arguments for cultural sharing and a basic need for sustenance. Cookbooks, for example, entail recording a recipe in a written form, affirming the proper way to prepare a dish. Tieghan Gerard's 2017 *Half Baked Harvest Cookbook: Recipes from My Barn in the Mountains*, for example, includes recipes ranging in geographic provenance from Moroccan Lemon Chicken Kebabs[56] and — to Al Pastor-Style Beef Enchiladas.[57] The author proclaims proudly that she had never even tried enchiladas until

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[56] Tieghan Gerard, *Half-Baked Harvest Cookbook: Recipes from My Barn in the Mountains* (New York: Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 2017), 125.

[57] Ibid, 202.

she was 19 years old— and yet only a few years later, upon publication of the book, her written instructions for how to prepare the dish solidified her role as an expert on how to prepare it.

As Miriam would often tell me at *Artforum*, anything that has been published and printed is a reliable source, because book publication requires rigorous fact-checking. But how does this apply to printed matter that holds a more explicitly cultural value? And how can we begin to sift through the privileges that might have contributed to a chef's position in the first place? More often than not, those who are granted the authority to produce a cookbook cannot also claim participation or inclusion in the groups from which those dishes come. These chefs nonetheless maintain a position of authority and are given the benefit of the doubt regarding the most authentic and delicious way to prepare a given dish. Solidifying the steps of a recipe through a published cookbook necessarily entails crowding out the voices of those for whom these food items represent their culture and livelihood.

The artist collective Cooking Sections recently created a book, entitled *The Empire Remains Shop*, which documents a wide range of issues surrounding food and British colonial rule.[58] A primary impetus for the project was a found 1928 recipe for "Empire Christmas Pudding," which called for ingredients from far-reaching corners of the earth under British occupation.[59] The artists indicate that "[m]ore than a recipe, the list of ingredients operates as a map" of colonial control.[60] This is surely true of ingredients in popular cookbooks today which consumers will find are rarely produced in their home country; as Cooking Sections asserts, labels such as "packed in the UK" demonstrate that "[n]ew economies of origin do not promote a sense of place but an erasure of it."[61] The ghosts of origin are there, but go unacknowledged.

With cookbooks, I find that the promotion of certain kinds of lifestyles often takes on just as much importance as the dishes recorded within the pages. In *Half Baked Harvest Cookbook*, photographs between sections advertise both the beauty of Gerard's surrounding exterior landscape and her carefully composed interior space, including a kitchen that holds all the gadgets she could possibly need to complete her culinary

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[58] Cooking Sections, *The Empire Remains Shop* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

[59] Ibid, 22.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid, 23.

dreams.[62] The book is just as much about capitalism, wealth, and abundance; even the term "harvest" emphasizes the wealth of the land as a backdrop to the well-stocked kitchen— never mind the labor that produced the ingredients or tools that it holds. None of these images comes even close to referencing the cultural heritage from which the recipes are derived.

Thinking on the spaces that cookbooks both promote and erase reminds me of Sadie Barnette's summer 2018 installation at MCASD, for which she blew up her own family polaroids to a large size and hung them on walls that were plastered with her own designs.[63] The wallpaper depicted, at a large scale easily recognizable from a distance, the inked stamps from declassified FBI documents regarding her father's participation in the Black Panther Party.[64] What unsettled me about this installation was its reminder that privacy between family members and within a home setting will always be in tension with the forms of privacy and confidentiality imposed by the governing institution, which seeks to protect its own interests. For Barnette, the intrusion of private intelligence quite literally lines the walls of a space meant to provide comfort and shelter to its inhabitants. In regards to surveillance of the Black Panther Party, the maintenance of systemic power relied upon infiltrating family life and invading personhood. The murder of Fred Hampton is a prime example; at 21 years old, Hampton was a leading member of the Panthers who was assassinated by FBI agents as he slept in his Chicago home in 1969.[65] Records show that the FBI had had an informant who provided authorities with a full floor plan of the apartment's interior space, a testament to the mapping that took place in efforts to know and undermine actions of resistance.[66] To regard such an incident as a regrettable blip in time would also mean neglecting to confront the ways in which such actions are reproduced and reinforced in the present day. On March 13th of this year, police officers in Louisville,

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[62] Gerard, *Half-Baked Harvest Cookbook* (New York: Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 2017).

[63] Sadie Barnette, *Untitled (Dad, 1966 and 1968)*, San Diego, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, August 26, 2018.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2003), 463.

[66] Ibid.

Kentucky shot and killed Breonna Taylor, a black woman, while she lay in her bed.[67] History does not repeat itself— the events of the past simply never came to a close in the way that we'd like to believe.

Carmen Maria Machado writes that "[a] house is never apolitical. It is conceived, constructed, occupied, and policed by people with power, needs, and fears."[68] This is surely true of kitchens in particular, where food is cooked and served. Where mouths are fed, bodies either sustained or poisoned from the food items that one can find and afford. In Hawaii in the 1920s and 30s, many educated white women found footholds in academia by taking on authoritative roles to oversee public education curriculum, resulting in the heightened importance of home economics classes that would teach "proper ways of living" to nonwhite schoolchildren.[69] The idea was to ensure that information disseminated within the school setting could additionally infiltrate the home space, Americanizing children as well as their parents.[70] Food knowledge thus became a powerful tool for control and a special assertion of white female dominance over people of color, prior to World War II and the enforcement of more overt forms of violence.

To think of a kitchen as a stage upon which power can be demonstrated, then, elucidates the role of cooking shows in perpetuating such control tactics. Much like a cookbook, a show entails careful instruction, but it also highlights the kitchen as a site of intervention. The Food Network's *Pioneer Woman* follows Ree Drummond, a dimpled and brightly smiling home cook from Oklahoma who can't wait to share a wealth of recipes that satisfy her husband, kids, and friends— even the pastor![71] Throughout each cooking demonstration, the audience gets to bear witness to both the colorful kitchen and scenes on the surrounding ranch where her family works hard to provide for the family. Drummond's moniker speaks to the nature of her character; she is a pioneer both on the range and in the kitchen, a settler whose role is to educate her

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[67] Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, "Months After Louisville Police Kill Woman in Her Home, Governor Calls for Review," *New York Times*, May 14, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/14/us/breonna-taylor-louisville-shooting.html.

[68] Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House: A Memoir* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2019), 76.

[69] Rachel Laudan, *The Food of Paradise: Exploring Hawaii's Culinary Heritage* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), 101-103.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Food Network, "How to Make Ree's Pumpkin Cinnamon Rolls | Food Network," Youtube video, 4:25, October 12, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BevqA5Ifx4w.

viewers on the most effective ways to prepare dishes ranging from "Knock-You-Naked Brownies"[72] and the "Best Carnitas."[73] Her methodology is appropriately controlled— each pepper sliced squarely, every teaspoon of cinnamon measured precisely. It's almost like a form of fact-checking, as Drummond maintains such a meticulous approach to every component of the dish that her expertise on the matter is simply unquestionable. The end product is a highly polished image of the completed dish, a mouthwatering example of something for which we now have the tools and knowledge to consume.

An esteemed chef and writer who hails from none other than San Diego, Samin Nosrat has spoken of her discomfort at typical representations of Persian cuisine on TV: "I am very aware of the feeling of having something taken from you, repackaged, and not being given credit for your own tradition."[74] Such a statement speaks to the violence inherent in representations of dishes that are stripped of their cultural and political context, particularly when authors, including Drummond and other cooking show hosts, do not share its background.

To whom do we grant the benefit of the doubt in writing our collective history?

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[72] Food Network, "Recipe of the Day: Ree's Knock-You-Naked Brownies | Food Network," Youtube video, 3:38, January 23, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJcWRRjqxWI&t=56s.

[73] Food Network, "The Best Carnitas Recipe with Ree Drummond | Food Network," Youtube video, 4:51, January 16, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtXcTo14JWQ.

[74] Maura Judkins, "Netflix's new 'Salt Fat Acid Heat' is unlike any other food show on TV." *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/voraciously/wp/2018/10/15/netflixs-new-salt-fat-acid-heat-is-unlike-any-other-food-show-on-tv/.

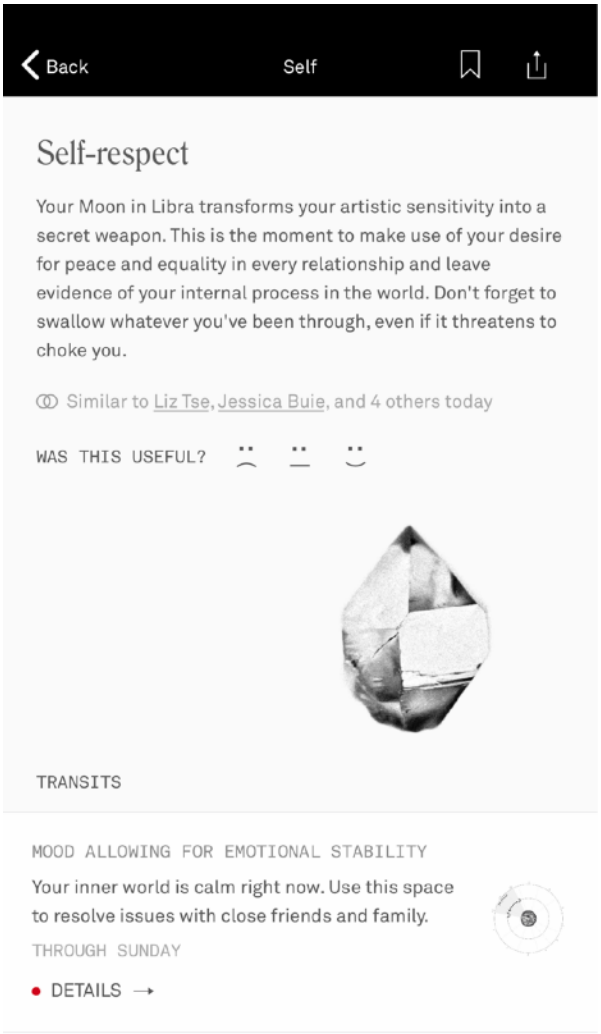

Figure 3: Personal horoscope, May 15, 2019. Co—Star Astrology App.

Pleasure does not go hand-in-hand with pain. Pleasure *is* pain. Memories of joyful moments feel like a sharp blade sliding downward along my esophagus, gutting my ability to ever speak for myself again.

He shares a funny story. Laughter radiates across the room, bleeds from my lips until I heave and drop to the floor. He finds my delight attractive, revels in my fluids.

I have nothing left.

Performativity and Multiculturalism

> "Today, the nation closes its eyes neither innocently nor without warning. It has renewed a commitment to blindness: to be blind to the words race, class, and gender and all the worldliness these words carry in their wakes… What does it mean for a country to choose blindness as its national pledge of allegiance?"
>
> —Avery Gordon[75]

Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag was published in 1999 by Cambridge University Press. Based on the breadth and depth of research, however, I wonder if it took the authors— both scholars at esteemed universities— an entire decade to rake all the research together.[76] In the late eighties and through the nineties, academia was deeply immersed in an era of multiculturalist fever. An era of turning off all blinders to our many differences in hopes that everyone can get along in the name of positivity.

I don't mean to shit on multiculturalism as an insufficient form of social justice advocacy. Well actually, I kind of do. Maybe it's useful here to share a story of my own. I can't think of multiculturalism as a movement and era without recalling the time when I first encountered the word, in 1996 and in the midst of its reign over primary educational theory. My mom was a kindergarten teacher at Vallejo Mill Elementary School, meaning that long before my time as a student there, I was fully immersed in a learning environment that emphasized multiculturalism above all else. Every year, Mrs. Johnson used the school cafeteria to host what she called the Multicultural Fashion Show. I loved this show because it gave me an opportunity to share a part of my cultural identity that was not already obvious to others. I loved it because for one night, I could

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[75] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 207.

[76] Marvin and Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*, i.

exude the confidence of being Indian, of demonstrating to my friends what proper attire looks like in my father's home country.

On the occasion of my very first fashion show, I pulled my hair back with my favorite white-and-gold braided headband before helping my mom set up chairs for the event— as much as a five-year-old could really help, that is. By the time the show was on, I had completely forgotten to take off my headband and ended up wearing it down the catwalk while flaunting my salwar kameez. It didn't even occur to me until later in the evening, which was then shadowed by a deep-seated shame in having misrepresented my culture, in having shattered the entire premise of authenticity that I'd hoped to project.

Daddy assured me that it was fine, that girls wear headbands all the time with their traditional clothing. But as I found myself pinned between two cultural markers that had always seemed so distinct and distant from one another, it nonetheless felt like I'd betrayed any hope of pretending that I know a damn thing about my own culture. Did anyone notice that I'd fucked up? Could they tell I was an imposter? As someone of half Indian origin, the extent to which I could claim authenticity was always marginal at best anyway. I didn't have the language for this at such a young age, but I certainly knew it.

Maybe this all seems extreme. But the fact that I still so clearly remember the intense agony that I felt that night surely serves as a testament to how these questions have spilled over into adulthood, including an undeviating consciousness about how others read my body. It's not entirely unlike W.E.B. DuBois's idea of double consciousness,[77] and though I do not fear for my physical well-being in the same way that black men must do so, I fear for the kind of violence that cages me through words and categories, placing me in boxes without my consent. Participating in this "multicultural" fashion show— and striving to live up to wholesome ideals that simply did not have a place for me— was an early instance of how I learned to label myself based on the expectations of others. I knew that no matter my cultural background, others would read me as white and that therefore I *was* and *am* white. A movement that served as the foundation upon which I learned to fight for others has also been my greatest obstacle in such an endeavor.

And so I return to *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*, which at times really shows its age. Much like an older person who, while well-meaning, may simply have inherited long-standing biases that make themselves known

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[77] W.E. Burghardt DuBois, "Strivings of the Negro People," *The Atlantic*, August 1897.

in the middle of conversation. Don't get me wrong— there's an air of excitement every time I'm given the opportunity to share with friends and mentors the ideas that I've pulled from this text— but even so, at times its language smacks me and I feel the need to double back to know whether I'd read the passage correctly. The authors refer to people in the LGBTQ+ community, for example, as "homosexuals."[78] They exclusively use the term "African-American"[79] to refer to black people, and while the phrase certainly has its appropriate uses, I can't help but remark upon the exclusion of other black folx that it necessarily invokes. Even the premise of the entire book is based upon the "American flag," which I have taken to mean the flag of the United States of America— an assumption that I can safely make as someone who was nurtured from birth within this imperial state that often sees itself as *the* reigning power across multiple American continents. Ultimately, I confront the words that Marvin and Ingle use to describe marginalized groups (of which they are not a part) and their own nation not because I believe that these terms hold everything that the authors wish to argue, but because they provide context that amplifies my suspicions regarding their recognition of race, socioeconomic status, and privilege.

Words can serve as weapons, no matter the intentions behind the person wielding them. For the authors— both scholars who benefit from white, cisgender, and heteronormative privilege— this means checking off the necessary boxes to claim a carefully considered and *inclusive* approach to American patriotism, while inevitably barring the entryway for some. The renewal of the nation-state is discussed in terms buried in polarities between "male sacrifice" and "female regeneration," an analysis entirely predicated upon heteronormative standards.[80] Race is hardly mentioned in the text, but when it is, the authors refer to revolutionary movements including the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam as "affiliative groups" which seek to compete against the nation-state.[81] These groups only serve to renew the enduring state, however, because during times of peace when its borders have "nothing to feed on," the nation simply "feeds

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[78] Marvin and Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*, 106.

[79] Ibid, 90.

[80] Ibid, 69.

[81] Ibid, 90.

on itself," allowing groups within the larger collective to fight amongst themselves.[82] I suppose it's an interesting idea, theoretically speaking. But something has itched and scratched and scraped at me throughout the process of reading, re-reading, and re-interpreting Marvin and Ingle's words. It's one of those things that crawls under my skin, racing through my limbs with a sense that something is not quite right, and yet putting a finger on it means running the risk of putting words in someone else's mouth and being the victim of gaslighting once again. If it wasn't explicitly expressed— only implied— does it hold any meaning?

Well of course it does. It's just a ghost screaming to get out.

Where *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation* succeeds in using language as hierarchical as its own theoretical framework, this style also ensures inaccessibility to a wider audience— an audience which includes the very soldiers who serve as a major topic of consideration for the authors (the *food*, if you will, for the enduring state). As irony would have it, many of these soldiers enlist in the military in hopes of greater access to a college education further down the line. It is in this way, and in the omission of closer discussions regarding race, that Marvin and Ingle neglect to address the positionalities that place certain people at the border to begin with. I walk away from the text with many insights about sacrifice and physical violence— but with countless more questions about consent and whether this form of violence is the only kind worth investigating.

The authors contend that "*willing* sacrifice" (emphasis my own) is what feeds the nation, but the conditions under which someone goes into the military is surely a matter that bears more attention.[83] In *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*, Lisa Marie Cacho touches on military recruitment tactics, which are aggressively targeted towards both black and Latinx communities.[84] She argues that high rates of enlistment amongst Latinx communities is often explained away by recruitment officers as an inability to "resist the adrenaline rush of honorable, freely chosen disposability."[85] These characterizations are deeply marked with racial undertones, implying that people within these communities have "compulsively

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[82] Ibid, 188.

[83] Ibid, 74.

[84] Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), 107-108.

[85] Ibid, 108.

[chosen] to die even when given the choice to lessen the odds."[86] Supposedly, these individuals consent freely and willingly to putting their lives on the line, even when provided few alternative options. Those designated to kill and be killed are not merely patriots; they were relegated to such roles long before they even set foot into recruitment offices. In this way, Marvin and Ingle fail to consider the nature of consent and coercion when they contend that we *send* people to the borders of the nation for sacrifice.[87] Some groups reside in the borderlands at all times— geographically, mentally, emotionally, economically.

A failure to address economic precarity thus calls into question the authors' treatment of death as the ultimate indicator that the nation consumes its own to survive. "Violence," they state, "is contagious, devouring everything in its path."[88] But destruction and consumption are not only physical processes— they can take on other forms that are often more difficult to identify as violence in a traditional sense.

During World War II, Hawaii became a major stopover location to allow United States soldiers to rest in between battles.[89] The islands were conveniently situated between the western coast of the nation's logo map and its enemies abroad, giving rise to what Teresia K. Teaiwa calls "mili-tourism:" an entire industry dedicated to providing pleasure to soldiers, which consequently birthed Hawaii's present-day tourist economy.[90] Food for the stomach as well as the eyes were the key focal points of these programs, as military branches coordinated lu'aus where soldiers could feast on kahlua pig and gleefully observe Native women performing traditional dances.[91] It hardly mattered that none of these things aligned perfectly with the traditions of islanders, because that simply wasn't the point. The point was to entertain, to provide comfort and sustenance through visual and gastronomic stimulation.

Years later, when Hawai'i became the 50th state, former U.S. Air Force motion picture operator Ed Schuman produced a short film entitled *I Live in Hawaii* to familiarize mainland citizens with their new sibling

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[86] Ibid, 108.

[87] Marvin and Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag*, 69.

[88] Ibid, 66.

[89] Adria Imada, "The Army Learns to Luau: Imperial Hospitality and Military Photography in Hawai'i'," *The Contemporary Pacific* 20, no. 2 (2008), 333.

[90] Ibid, 330-332.

[91] Ibid.

state.[92] The main character, a young boy named Randy, emphasizes the similarities between viewers and Hawaiian people, deflating any semblance of cultural difference.[93] There is a common saying in culinary circles— that people eat with their eyes first, then their mouths. Next, I would imagine, comes digestion— here, in the form of Americanization and incorporation into the status quo. Consumption on an institutional level. The new state is swallowed up by the nation at large, any differences consolidated within a single white star that joins forty-nine others on a blue field.

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When I was five years old, walking in a fashion show and thrilled to showcase my background— my blood— by quite literally wearing it on my sleeve, I was aware of the ways in which audience members would view me, read me, and assess their findings. I hoped that they could get a taste of not only an unfamiliar culture, but a familiar body in association with something they might otherwise deem distant. Conditioned and encouraged by an atmosphere so heavily saturated with neoliberal ideas of multiculturalism, I felt the need to share this part of myself not only for the sake of the dominant cultural group— so that they could see and acknowledge my difference— but for my Indian friends and acquaintances, to prove that I should have a place in this South Asian diaspora. Nonetheless, performing in this way meant modeling for the dominant cultural group how they might come to consume me. They certainly wanted to know what is

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[92] "Ed Schuman," Academic Film Archive of North America, accessed May 20, 2020, http://www.afana.org/schumaned.htm.

[93] A/V Geeks, "I Live in Hawaii (1960)," Youtube video, 14:17, February 26, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbU_CQ2kmq8&list=PLjtRlQdMF6lLOCRVItnNlTwSoTWK10sya&index=8&t=691s.

authentically Indian. I provided a safe space for them to poke and prod at such a concept, because my white skin betrayed some semblance of openness, of *safety*.

Multiculturalism comes, perhaps, out of a desire to blur boundaries between groups of people with notable differences in appearance. It sits alongside arguments for cultural sharing, by which I mean the assertion that culinary influences are merely inevitable because that's just how people eat. But the word "sharing" alone implies that there is no power differential, that the back-and-forth movement between groups that seek to expand upon their own culinary boundaries is equal in ability and resources. Some can cross over cleanly and safely and return to the comfort of their own homes without danger. Others cannot.

On Choking

I remember the last time I choked L. It was one of the last times that we made love, too. As always, I found myself in need of some kind of stabilizing support as I straddled him, so I slipped my hand up just under his chin and groped the rubbery skin over his trachea, my weight placing pressure on his throat. I asked if it was okay. I always ask— best to be sure things are fully consensual, even though I enjoy being in charge. He said yes— move your hand a bit lower, but yes. I remember the look on his face as we continued. Sometimes when there's a lot of energy at once, he makes this funny face— braces his teeth, appears almost angry, or as though he's fighting off some kind of attack. His eyes were closed too, and there was an expression of utter concentration cloaked over his features. I couldn't help but wonder if he was thinking of someone else, imagining the very same gestures forced onto his body at the hands of another woman.

Is it Claudia?

I am not Claudia.

I have imagined saying this so many times with utter disdain. With anger, defiance, resolve. In a variety of contexts, too.

Maybe I look a bit like her— short, curvy, brown hair. Maybe I'm a stand-in for what he really wants.

I am not Claudia.

Maybe I look a bit like her, but he's terrified of reenacting a ten year relationship that he says should have ended after five.

I am not Claudia.

Maybe he thinks that I am trying to embody her to better suit what I think he wants. He's fucking wrong.

I am not Claudia.

I pull his skin tighter. Wake the fuck up. Look at me. We both came soon after— always in sync, and always so much more electric than with anyone else I've ever fucked. We napped briefly until the late afternoon sun filtered in from the window over his bed, waking us to the reality of our responsibilities through the coming week. Maybe next weekend we can go to the zoo— wouldn't that be nice? We'll stroll

around the aviaries again. Oh, and let's cook another dinner together. There's this tamarind salad dressing I learned about that I want to try out. I think you'd love it.

As I drove home that evening, I began to think about choking and why I always have the urge to restrict a man's breathing during sex. Immediately upon walking in the door, I pulled out my laptop and wrote a bit about it, eventually turning focus toward the implications of injecting every pleasurable experience with some measure of brutality. Maybe, I thought, choking was a way to mediate my own relationship with pain. But this was also when things felt good with L. There was inevitably a host of indulgences in writing about him. Had we slept together enough times for it to be a thing? It certainly felt like it, and in transforming our physical contact into written words, I surely hoped that I could cement this into more than just a casual fling. But now, several months later, I find myself sharing with friends the hilarious and painful story of how it all blew up in my fucking face. Every time I flip past the page in my planner listing some favorite recipes to cook with him— butter chicken pizza, peach and tomato salad, cocktails— I feel a tight knot in my throat and a sudden urge to throw up. Perhaps this is his way of strangling me back.

Shortly after that day, this idea of choking came up during a critique. A friend informed me that every astrological sign is not only ruled by a particular planet, but also has a corresponding body part. Taurus is ruled by Venus, and the body part most frequently associated with this sign is the throat. My Venus is in Taurus. I guess it's written in the stars, then— I have a fixation on throats.

This could just be mere coincidence, or a convenient train of logic that would support whatever I wish to argue. But I can't help but recall the time that Uncle Julie pulled me aside to warn me about astrology's power to predict death in the most intimate and horrific ways. Of knowing what is to come. Not only are my sexual tendencies explained by astrology, but so too was my aunt's death predicted through its study. Nonetheless, what exactly happened has always been shrouded in mystery. Throughout my life, and amidst a flood of lies and delusional stories, the actual details of Aunt Blossom's death have seeped out before me only intermittently. Aunt Nina would tell her daughters stories that do not line up with one another, or which might have been true but had nothing to do with the actual moment of her death. Whether or not my elders are aware of it, I've learned from Raja that Aunt Blossom was not shot or stabbed, but beheaded. An axe to her throat.

Astrology doesn't make sense. Why would it? Kurtis used to give me shit for talking about it, always smirking at me with a slight curve at the corner of his mouth that meant he was just humoring me. He's a double Capricorn, though— of course he's skeptical.

Nonetheless, astrology interests me in the same way that Avery Gordon's explanation of ghosts does: "[Following the ghosts] is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look. It is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a countermemory, for the future."[94]

I like to think of astrology as just this kind of ghost story: something that fills in the gaps between those things that we can more easily categorize, which aligns and moves in ways that defy all reason or comprehension. For me, it means pushing back against that which has pushed me down through labels, through any suggestion that someone knows me. The irony, of course, is that many see astrology as doing just this: labeling and determining precisely what a person's personality is like based on seemingly arbitrary guidelines. I see it a bit differently— that there are so many planets in a person's chart and so many nuances in their lived experience that none of those things can ever be fully understood. Astrology is useful for recognizing oneself, and trusting in a purpose that moves far beyond reasonable credibility.

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[94] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 22.

On Capture

Recently I visited Miramar again, this time with the intention of capturing sound recordings of the jets taking flight from the Marines air field next door.[95] On this occasion, I was feeling particularly desperate to rework the sound for my film. It felt important to confront— and document— the source of my anxieties for the sake of an art practice. It was a chilly November morning. A Tuesday. I dragged myself out of bed before dawn, brewed coffee as incentive for a long morning ahead, and carefully chose my outfit for the excursion. I would need to dress the part— to camouflage myself— depending on who else might be visiting that morning. At last I decided on a floral t-shirt, a pair of black sweatpants, and (perhaps the smartest option) a Padres cap. Before embarking on the trip, I loaded up the trunk of my car with equipment: a mirrorless Sony camera, a tripod, a Tascam audio recorder, a blimp microphone, a lavalier microphone, and a boom pole. Pulling my sedan into the driveway of the cemetery, the weight of these items seemed instantly heavier, dragging me closer to the pavement. Contraband in my trunk.[96] I drove down the long stretch of road, a knot tightening in my stomach as the circle of flags came into view. Lounging at the foot of the memorial were about ten older men. Adorned in black leather jackets and dark caps proclaiming participation in the Vietnam War, these men leaned against large, imposing motorcycles that were arranged in a loose circle. Eyes fixated on me as I slowly drew closer, my mind racing as I calculated the options. I was afraid to pull up my car too closely, for fear of drawing attention to myself and providing these men with plenty of time and proximity to ask me questions. Thank god all of the equipment was hidden from view, at least for the time being. Do they search vehicles here? What is the security like? MCAS Miramar is just next door— surely there's some form of surveillance. Regardless, staying in my car would surely seem suspicious, so I picked up my coffee mug and stepped out into the brisk air, loping awkwardly to the other side of the monument while

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[95] This is the closest I've ever been able to get to the source, though I've been talking on Tinder with a guy named Jan who flies the jets that take off from Miramar. We initially got to talking thanks to a mutual love of Slayer, but soon I realized that I'd never spoken with an actual Leatherneck. Jan says he hasn't been able to fly much lately because all of their planes are broken after 15 years of use. It surprises me to hear this because everyday— and particularly since Soleimani was assassinated— the barrage of passing jets is such a vicious assault upon the ears of anyone running to classes or trying to find respite in quiet corners of the UCSD campus.

[96] Is documentation a weapon to those who frequent this cemetery?

averting my gaze. My mind wobbled— I hadn't planned for an entire congregation of people. Stay safe, I told myself— but stay focused, too. I walked over to the largest flagpole, looking out to the airfield beyond. No planes yet but surely they'd pass by soon.

Trying to lose myself in the peacefulness of the space, I was nonetheless hyperaware of my position. The sound of a twig crunching startled me and I jumped around, only to find a man walking towards me, wearing a navy blue windbreaker and a baseball cap. He seemed to work at the cemetery— a managerial type of person. We greeted one another. I tried to plaster my face with a smile, thinking that being amicable was the only way not to raise questions.

Following some casual small talk, he paused for a moment, then turned to me. "You know, I'm just curious. Do you have a family member buried here?"

I trembled. Do visitors need to have family here to enter the grounds? "No," I replied. "But my uncle died about eight months ago. He served in the Navy. He's not buried here though— he's in Northern California."

Releasing these words from my tongue felt at once like a safety net to justify occupying the space, and a distressing assault, as memories surrounding Uncle Hy's death flooded my consciousness. I thought of the the military escort that my cousins had secured for the funeral. It was such an emotionally fraught day that as the groundskeepers lowered his casket slowly into the ground to the tune of shotguns and bagpipes, I despondently fixed my gaze upon the lieutenant saluting nearby. His face was so chiseled and unsmiling as he carefully lifted his arm upright into a salute. His eyes seemed ready to pop right out of their sockets, but he maintained a level of control that seemed so unbelievably absurd that I completely lost it. I burst out laughing. In the middle of my uncle's burial.

A breeze kicked up over the grounds and I lapsed back into the conversation at hand, glancing toward the manager.

"I see," he said. "Well, I was just wondering. You never know the story behind a person's visit." He noted that he had just seen another woman around here and wasn't sure if I was the same person, but said that she had gotten scared as he approached and walked off before he could speak with her. Maybe I'm not

the only woman who feels uneasy about this place. But for fear of blowing my cover, this man had to believe that I don't feel this way. "Oh no— that wasn't me," I said.

"Well, at any rate," he said, "we have a ceremony starting soon here. You're welcome to join." He explained that every Tuesday at 8:30am, they hold a memorial to honor the deaths of veterans who have no family, to be sure that their sacrifices are adequately recognized. Suddenly the large group of Leathernecks made sense. He encouraged me to stand in, stating simply as he stepped away, "don't be shy."

My unease mounted, yet it suddenly seemed important to stay and witness the ceremony— to participate as a means of performing a patriotic respect to the nation. To demonstrate agreement without needing to verbally consent. And really, to acknowledge those who have died, no matter their politics.

Yet as the following twenty minutes passed, I became nervous about how to speak to these people. When the ceremony began, I stood far back and observed from a distance. I wanted to pay respects, but could not determine the degree to which I was welcomed by all of those in attendance. Jets flew overhead as they folded the flag, and I surreptitiously shot a video with my camera phone, fearful that someone would look over and see me documenting the ceremony. I tucked my phone away as soon as the sound of jets receded into silence and the chatty birds living in the airfield beyond could make their voices heard once again.

At the close of the ceremony, the participants slowly retreated my way as they headed back to their cars and motorcycles. Many of them stopped to say hello. One older man introduced himself as Leonard. He wanted to know my name— and I was never good at making shit up on the spot, so I tell him my name is Maya.[97] Leonard sized me up, his forward and confident demeanor oozing from the large grin spread across his face. We spoke for a minute. He invited me to come to the ceremony every Tuesday. As he walked away, he stopped and turned back.

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[97] Even this seems dangerous though. My name is, at times, enough to signal my difference. Will he ask where such a name comes from? Would I have to tell him that I'm half Indian? That I'm a person of color? Maybe he'll think I'm exotic. And maybe he already does. The longer I live in San Diego, the more frequently friends and strangers remark upon how tan I've become. A mentor even tells me to stop considering my position as a white person within systems of power, because to him, I'm a brown girl. He has also made advances on friends of mine before and I feel uncomfortable receiving his observations about my body. Regardless, I never know whether I'm passing for white— whether my ambiguity can act as a tool for change, or simply as a weapon that keeps me complacent. Maybe both.

"Maya, one last thing: are your eyes green or hazel?" My stomach lurched. For such an apolitical question, it was a loaded one. Nonetheless, hesitance would destroy me here. Responding was the only way to adhere to the standards of this place in which I am an outsider, the only way to imply sameness.

"Green," I said.

Leonard smiled slyly. "That's nice," he replied, as he turned and walked away with his friend, eyes lingering upon me.

I've been thinking a lot lately about trust. How I don't trust people anymore— how I *can't* trust people anymore if I'm going to survive. This conflicts with the common advice that human connection and trust are the hallmarks of a healthy relationship and a fulfilling life. I'm often told that it's hard to trust people because it means sharing information or feelings that make you feel vulnerable, which in turn means that the other person can hurt you deep on the inside. But somehow, it is said, placing this kind of trust in a person is meaningful and worthwhile because you also receive unconditional love and understanding.

It's not like I haven't heard these things all my life. But for me, opening up and making myself vulnerable— trusting someone— means that they hold a certain power over me that I can't get back. That power lies in knowing. Knowing me too well. Having too much of me in their mind and memory. The more someone knows me, the less I own myself. Opening up is an act of submission, whereby the only form of consent is an outright refusal to divulge.

I've stopped trusting people. I'll allow others to trust me though— in fact, I *want* them to trust me.

Sarah has often said that I need to stop bending over backwards to make others more comfortable. It's unclear to me what that means, until I give it more thought. In the absence of emotional availability, I will spend monstrous amounts of time drafting text messages to friends to say that I'm thinking about them and support them in whatever hardships they're facing. In person, these words cannot be properly transmitted because I don't know how to emote appropriately. And so I make up for it by sitting down and writing it out, struggling to find the right words until it feels adequate.

In the middle of a hectic school term, I will spend hours baking cookies and compiling music playlists to ship to my sister-in-law's mother when her breast cancer has returned.

During a busy weekend, I'll make an extra trip to a faraway farmer's market for fresh grapefruits, so that I can make home-squeezed citrus juice for a friend in hopes that it will ease his cold.

I will crouch beside a lover's dying dog and change out pee pads while an ex-wife lounges on a nearby chair, proclaiming on the phone to a friend that she *desperately wants to know who L is dating.*

By no means do I intend to itemize my deeds for others. I'm not taking notes or expecting anything in return, but rather trying to recognize my own patterns. Despite limitations in my ability to demonstrate emotional investment in another person, I'll find ways to show I care— even when it destroys me.

Sometimes I think that intimacy is a kind of violence, in that you must trust someone in such a way that they inevitably hold a certain kind of power over you. Whether they choose to wield that power is another matter, but either way you submit yourself, allow them to consume you.

This can be applied beyond interpersonal relationships between two individuals, on a scale at which this "they" is the national institution. How much do you trust the nation? I think about those who lay down their actual bodies as a sacrifice for consumption by the state— but when so many people have few alternative options beyond military enlistment, what does consent really look like? It's easy enough for someone to say that on principle they would never join a branch of the armed forces. But to actually be in that position, to be at the mercy of the nation which determines— based on factors including income and race— who is disposable and who is not, means making a choice between two different forms of impending

death. Who actually trusts the nation, then— those laying down their lives, or those who can rest assured that they won't have to die in its name?

Humanitarian Efforts

In the 1860s, Union and Confederate troops fought for their own respective definitions of freedom. Amidst this scuffle between North and South, the purview of the United States of America continuously pushed westward through settler colonialism.[98] The Diné indigenous people, referred to by present-day colonists as the Navajo, attempted to hold onto the land that their ancestors had lived on for centuries.[99] [100] But as the Union garnered more success in its battles and retained greater control over southern states, military officials redirected troops to follow orders under colonel Kit Carson to defeat the Diné in what is now Arizona.[101] [102] Carson's troops utilized scorched earth tactics such as burning crops and killing livestock, to cut off the resources of the Diné people and ensure their eventual submission.[103] Once Carson gained control of the land for distribution amongst the settlers, he forced approximately 11,500 Diné people, under military supervision, to embark on the Long Walk— a 400-mile trek to eastern New Mexico, where they would live on the Bosque Redondo Internment Camp at the Fort Sumner army base.[104] Throughout the harrowing wintertime journey, soldiers raped countless women and killed anyone traveling too slowly.[105] An

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[98] "THE WEST - Events from 1860 to 1870," *PBS*, accessed May 20, 2020, https://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/events/1860_1870.htm

[99] Traci Brynne Voyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 1

[100] Manley A. Begay Jr., "The Path of Navajo Sovereignty in Traditional Education: Harmony, Disruption, Distress, and Restoration of Harmony," in *Navajo Sovereignty: Understandings and Visions of the Diné People*, ed. Lloyd L. Lee (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017), 68-69

[101] "Fort Sumner Historic Site/Bosque Redondo Memorial: History," *New Mexico Historic Sites*, accessed May 20, 2020, http://www.nmhistoricsites.org/bosque-redondo/history

[102] "Indian Fry Bread and Indian Taco Recipe and History," *What's Cooking America*, accessed May 20, 2020, https://whatscookingamerica.net/History/NavajoFryBread.htm

[103] "The Long Walk," *The Bosque Redondo Memorial*, accessed May 20, 2020, https://www.bosqueredondomemorial.com/long_walk.htm

[104] Ibid.

[105] Doris Seale and Beverly Slapin, *A Broken Flute: The Native Experience in Books for Children* (Lanham and Berkeley: AltaMira Press and Oyate, 2005), 48

untold number of people died of starvation and exposure to extreme weather conditions.[106] Upon arrival at the camp, the 8,500 Diné who had survived the journey quickly found the local environment unsuitable to grow the beans and vegetables that had constituted their very livelihood for centuries on their ancestral lands.[107] Without adequate sustenance, many of the Diné people began to starve— a situation so dire that the United States army began distributing nonperishable food items to those living at Bosque Redondo.[108] The circumstances by which the Diné came to starve in the first place didn't matter; the government could cleanly profess its humanitarian empathy, by *feeding them, providing them sustenance, and keeping them alive*.

Providing sustenance for target groups in this way has enabled a form of control that first entails destroying or dislocating available resources, before putting those vulnerable people in a position such that they have no viable option other than reliance upon the state to survive. This kind of move has become standard practice. Upon acquiring[109] the Marshall Islands from Japan during World War II, for example, the United States deployed Navy forces to study the effects of nuclear weaponry on its warships by conducting 67 nuclear tests on the islands over the course of twelve years.[110] The Navy frequently displaced indigenous people from their native islands to expand the detonation range, resulting in their mass starvation throughout this period— an issue that has continued to this very day.[111] The nuclear fallout on the islands has been so significant that the military must supply food aid to the Marshall Islands every three months.[112] These shipments primarily consist of nonperishable items such as white rice, spam, and Kool-Aid.[113] [114] Researchers

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[106] "Indian Fry Bread and Indian Taco Recipe and History," *What's Cooking America*.

[107] "Life at Bosque Redondo," *The Bosque Redondo Memorial*, accessed May 20, 2020, https://www.bosqueredondomemorial.com/life_at_br.htm

[108] Ibid.

[109] capturing, seizing, subjugating

[110] Dan Zak, "A ground zero forgotten," *The Washington Post*, November 27, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2015/11/27/a-ground-zero-forgotten/?utm_term=.038c06b0ce97.

[111] Ibid.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Ibid.

[114] Brenda Davis, "Defeating Diabetes: Lessons from the Marshall Islands," *Today's Dietician* 10, no. 8, 24, https://www.todaysdietitian.com/newarchives/072508p24.shtml.

studying the high rates of diabetes in the Marshall Islands rarely acknowledge the hand that feeds these people, nor the consequences of U.S. militarism at large.[115] In this single example of a militarized island nation, one bears witness to the contamination of natural resources, the delayed deaths of people who must sustain themselves using food that will kill them, and perhaps most deadly of all, documentation of such violence that suggests these are isolated incidents with only the victim to blame for their own undoing. These realities are symptomatic of the slow violence that perpetrators— namely the United States armed forces, backed through support from its citizens— enact not through physical force, but through a residue of militarism that continues to haunt and kill its targets.

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Several months ago, and following an explicit story about a guy I'd once dated, Kurtis remarked that I'm "so open." As someone I'd been seeing for just a matter of months, he couldn't believe that I'd so readily share stories about waiters that I've fucked or assorted romantic pursuits. At first I shook off his comment, though it was one that he continued to make on several occasions thereafter. He had no idea, of course, about David or L. He'd told me all about his six-year relationship. I'd never divulged the weight of the trauma that was my nearly eight-year relationship, nor the consistent blows that I continue to deal from the man who I actually *really* fell in love with after seeing for just a few months. He doesn't know that I'm utterly convinced that this person's ex-wife is trying to kill me, as she sends me daily messages and gifts me small objects with a smile that could surely shred my skin to pieces. She'd definitely repurpose my body into a quilt just for L— another birthday gift that he'd cherish for the rest of his life.

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[115] Ibid.

Though Kurtis feels that he knows me so well, this is exactly how I manage to maintain my distance: by encouraging others to trust me. By sharing tales with them, with the suggestion that I'm putting myself forward completely and unquestionably. I'll gladly share all sorts of stories, but I withhold those which still serve as a chokehold on every facet of my psychological being.

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I did an experiment once for Nicole's class. It was Valentine's Day. I made a cranberry tart— mostly because I had recently purchased a 2lb bag of cranberries for just a dollar at Ralph's, and the cranberry curd would take on a seasonally appropriately pink hue. So I baked this tart, ushered the class into my studio on a rainy day, and served up slices for everyone to enjoy. As they ate, I read a piece that I had recently written about my aunt, detailing all of the gruesome ways that I've been told she died. The hope was that I could provide comfort to my audience, with the condition that consuming the food would also build a knot in each person's throat as they slowly consumed my words. Pleasure and violence existing together, entangled.

Anthony Bourdain, renowned food expert and arguably a misogynistic imperialist, proclaimed in his book *Medium Raw* that "[if] cooking professionally is about control, then eating successfully should be about submission, about easily and without thinking giving yourself over to whatever dream they'd like you to share."[116] I can't help but think about control and the ways in which I exert it— through, for example, feeding others a cranberry tart while making them choke on the words that I speak as they swallow. In these kinds of situations, I am speaking my own truths while also manipulating the participant into experiencing that truth in a very particular way.[117]

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[116] Anthony Bourdain, *Medium Raw: A Bloody Valentine to the World of Food and the People Who Cook* (London, New York, and Berlin: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 203.

[117] What is the dream of those operating under the protection of the United States government (those employed by, those represented by)?

Sharing stories and food— providing for others— is perhaps my only means of control. I'm simply feeding them the truths that I'd like them to know. Such a tendency is a bit like writing history; the idea is to share so many stories that no one thinks to question whether there are more. It's one of my few means of maintaining power, but it's also how those with greater political leverage control national resources and maintain their own position.

When I think of all the ways of asserting one's own truths— through writing, speaking, demonstrating, recording— I cannot help but wonder what happens when those truths are communicated to others. "Knowledge is power" goes the saying, generally used in reference to the importance of an education. But who produced this knowledge? Who benefits from knowledge, and over which people does this power reside?[118] Perhaps the process of getting to know someone or a group of people necessarily means devouring them by rewriting the script about them.

I'll share an example. When my parents were dating, most of my mother's friends and family members had never met anyone from India before. My dad was one of the very first South Asian people to settle in Fremont in the 1980s, and my mom's acquaintances in California's rural Central Valley were especially befuddled to meet someone from such an *exotic* place. Many people would request that he join them in visiting an Indian restaurant sometime, so that he could introduce them to his home country through food. Over the years, my dad has come to loathe suggestions from new acquaintances that they should eat Indian food together, as he knows that their interest in his cultural background begins and ends at what they can possibly consume.

Reading, learning, and eating— though seemingly submissive acts— are nonetheless practices of interpretation that cannot be undertaken without bringing one's own assumptions and intentions to the table. Especially in the example of food bloggers and influencers, when the individual seeking to learn and consume holds power and privilege, their regurgitated experience provides the sustenance for cultural production and the reinstatement of dominant ideologies surrounding that which has been investigated. If you don't believe me, I'll speak from my own irritating experience of trying to discern the quality of a small

[118] Given my own upbringing in a household that placed education above most everything else, I feel uneasy about weaponizing such a seemingly innocent phrase. But then again, it has always been a weapon.

takeout spot in Greenwich Village that serves kati rolls, a popular snack in Bengal. Reading Yelp reviews, I can name several dozen instances in which non-South-Asian reviewers refer to kati rolls as "Indian burritos," suggesting that a kati roll must be predicated upon something else, and cannot be defined in its own terms. [119] Such a label also effectively indicates to bewildered or hesitant customers that the dish resembles something safe, something that we already know— or rather, that we have already consumed.

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I guess there should be a conclusion to this paper, but then again I don't know that the work will ever really feel complete, and I'm not one to provide happy endings. Instead, I'll share a piece that I wrote in my first year as a graduate student, and which I have revisited and reworked countless times over the past years. It's my way of thinking about how destruction can course through a person's veins and eventually become their means of survival— a contamination that ultimately becomes a crucial part of one's culture and resilience.

[119] "The Kati Roll Company," *Yelp*. New York, NY, accessed May 20, 2020, https://www.yelp.com/biz/the-kati-roll-company-new-york-5?osq=kati%20roll%20company&q=indian%20burrito.

Residue

My mother once told me a story from when she was a child. She said that she wanted to make mustard when she was eight years old. It must have been 1958 at that point, thirteen years after the proclaimed end of World War II, and as the Cold War continued to incite anxiety amongst the general public. So my mother traipsed out to the mustard fields near her family's small home in the San Francisco suburb of Belmont, California, and picked as many mustard flowers as she could hold in her arms. She snuck into the kitchen to grab her mother's mortar and pestle and smuggled it out to the backyard, where she meticulously plucked off every mustard petal, letting each flutter gingerly into the deep bowl.

It was springtime, when the mustard flowers blossomed in the very same way that I now see them blazing and blurring alongside Interstate 5 when I drive home to see my parents. During that very same spring, in April and May of 1958, the United States Army loaded the SS William Ralston, a WWII-era ship built in Okinawa, Japan, with 6,832 tons of sulfur mustard and 448 tons of lewisite, and intentionally sunk the ship just 118 miles off the coast of San Francisco.[120] Although WWII had long since ended, complete disposal of chemical warfare ammunition remained to be seen. World powers came to a general agreement to thrust all remaining mustard bombs overboard, hurtling and sinking to the sea floor, as seemingly the only way to ensure that we could not reach for them again.[121]

Roughly grinding the mustard with the mortar and pestle, my mother struggled to transform it from a bright yellow flower to a sour, edible condiment. In her relatively short life, she had not yet learned that mustard is produced from the seeds of the plant rather than its flowers, and that it also needed to be mixed with vinegar and spices. At least she got the plant right. Sulfur mustard is also produced not from the petals, nor even the seeds of the plant, but was named primarily for its pungent smell reminiscent of the condiment. It is composed of chemical compounds such as sulfur dichloride and ethylene, its effects often heightened by the addition of arsenic oil, which binds the compounds even more and prevents excessive corrosion when submerged in water.

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[120] Joel A. Vilensky, *Dew of Death: The Story of Lewisite, America's World War I Weapon of Mass Destruction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 109.

[121] Ibid.

Those bombs dropped down to the ocean floor have been preserved by the cold waters and chemical bonds procured from the sea. While this lessens the extent to which these weapons contaminate the oceans, it also ensures that they cannot truly ever go away.

Researchers from Britain's University of Central Lancashire recently developed a means of identifying soil that has been contaminated by chemical warfare, including sulfur mustard.[122] The key to this identification process is, in fact, the white mustard plant, which grows easily in a range of soil conditions and absorbs available acids within its tissue.[123] When chromatography can no longer detect chemicals in the soil that have aged, mustard plants have the capacity to produce and store enough of these acids for adequate identification.[124]

Perhaps the mustard flowers that line the California highways today could tell us about our own history. A residue that serves as a map of our national footprint penetrating the earth, often for the sake of our own consumption and to the detriment of those with lesser military power. My mother's freedom to traipse about as a child is not unrelated to the domination that her own— my own— nation exerted as victors of a war.

How is it possible to create something from any existing matter in the world that cannot be dissolved or reincorporated into the earth in a non-threatening manner? How does the environment adapt to this contamination and even consume it? And most of all: how does it thrive despite everything else?

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[122] "Mustard plants, not mustard gas," *The Economist*, July 19, 2014, accessed May 20, 2020, https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2014/07/19/mustard-plants-not-mustard-gas.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Ibid.

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