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Feelin' Diasporic: Embodied Memory in Sri Lankan America

by

Mihiri Tillakaratne

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Women, Gender, and Sexuality

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Lok Siu, Co-Chair
Associate Professor Khatharya Um, Co-Chair
Associate Professor Mel Chen

Fall 2022

Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnic Studies

Designated Emphasis in Women, Gender, and Sexuality

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Professor Lok Siu, Co-Chair

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This study explores the role of embodied memory on identity formation in U.S.-born and/or raised Sri Lankan Americans through the frame of *temporal diasporic embodiment*. At the intersection of the body, diaspora, and time, a temporal diasporic embodiment engages with a diasporic experience of the body that exists in multiple locations, times, and racializations simultaneously, and is subject to various forms of power. A temporal diasporic embodiment reveals the impermanent and non-teleological nature of the body, ideologies of home, racializations, trauma, and generational understandings race, place, and time. The tensions between time, memory, and diaspora take on contradictory meanings that affect Sri Lankan Americans' experiences and identities. As they grapple with their temporal misalignment, U.S. born and/or raised Sri Lankan Americans use different methods to redefine what it means to be Sri Lankan in the U.S.

Using an interdisciplinary and queer diasporic methodology, this study analyzes how diaspora is affectively experienced, how diasporic identities are formed and negotiated, and how intimacy influences diasporic imaginings of past and future. Specifically, this study examines how the tattooed diasporic body serves as an archive for embodied storytelling, how Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* depicts the visceral and the failure of the heteronational, how the solo play *To T, or not to T?* by D'Lo, a Sri Lankan Tamil American transmasculine performance artist, reveals how the diasporic body is regulated, how Sri Lankan Sinhala Americans respond to antiblackness within their coethnic community and in U.S. society with a transnational social justice orientation, and how a politics of care manifests through rethinking auntiehood. In doing so, we see how Sri Lankan American bodies formed in diaspora create new epistemologies as they contend with the complexities of living as racialized diasporic subjects.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 - Introduction: Bodies in Diaspora.. 1

No Contest: Public Representations of Sri Lankan Womanhood 1

Temporal Diasporic Embodiment: The Intersection of Body, Diaspora, and Time 4

The Bodily Community: Sri Lankan Americans in Southern California 6

Who and Where Are We? Sri Lankan History and U.S. Demographics 6

Bodily Actors: The Role of Community Organizations 8

Being Sinhala in the U.S.: Ethnic Majorities as Racial Minorities 11

Being Minorities 13

The Intimacies of Ethnography: Participants and Methodology 14

Diaspora, Affect, and Queer Approaches 17

Diaspora and Affect 17

Queer Diasporic Methodology 21

Chapter Descriptions 23

Chapter 2: Thinkin' about Ink: Embodied Temporality and Embodied Storytelling in Tattoos.. 24

Respondents' Tattoos 26

Embodied Temporality: The Diasporic Body Stores 27

The Diasporic Body as Archive 29

The Diasporic Body as Record: Commemorative and Memorial Tattoos 33

The Diasporic Body as Testament: Preserving What Has Been Removed From Records 34

Embodied Storytelling: The Diasporic Body Speaks 36

Perceptions of the Tattooed Body: The Diasporic Body Speaks To Society 37

Access to the Diasporic Body and Accessing the Diasporic Body's Stories 40

How the Diasporic Body Tells Stories: Joy and (In)complete Storytelling 41

The Diasporic Body Speaks For Itself 44

Remarkable: Redoing and Reframing the Diasporic Body 46

Chapter 3: Somatic Remains: Visceral Trauma, Pleasure, and Erasure in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* 49

Common Themes in Sri Lankan American Literature 50

Island of a Thousand Mirrors: A Summary 52

"A Heavy Ugly Smell": The Regulatory Scent of Death 53

"Archaeologies of Desire": The Erotics of Memory and Heteronationalism 56

"Retaining No Record": The Necessity of Erasure and The Refusal to Remember 61

Conclusion 64

Chapter 4: Spillin' the T(ea): Embodied Performance, Race, and Trans Childhood in D'Lo's To T, or not to T? 65

Spilling the Tea: On Fathers, Aunties, and *Fam* 67

D'Lo's Father and Rooting Through Narratives 69

Super Aunties, *Fam*, and the Intimacies of Fictive Kinship 71

"Spillin' the Tea": On The Relationship Between Tamilness and Blackness 75

Spilling the T(ea): On Trans Childhood and Growing ~~Up~~ Outwards 78

Conclusion: Embodying the Auntie and the Tea of Being Diasporic 84

Chapter 5: Bein' Dark: Antiblackness and Developing a Transnational Social Justice Orientation...... 85

Colorism in Sri Lankan America and Protective Antiblackness 86

Recognizing Antiblackness 88

Racialized Experiences in the U.S.: Embodying "The Stranger" 90

Encounters with Police and Embodying The Stranger 92

Reactions to Black Lives Matter 96

Sri Lankan Americans for Black Lives Matter Los Angeles 99

Interrogating Sinhalaness and Developing a Transnational Social Justice Orientation 102

Conclusion: Diaspora as *Décalage* 106

Chapter 6/Conclusion: To Be an Auntie, Queerly: The Future of the Sri Lankan American Community 109

What Is An Auntie? 109

The Auntie Body: What Does an Auntie Look Like? 109

Tea and the Work of Auntie Gossip 110

What Kind of Aunties Are We? The Changing Nature of Auntiehood 112

(Un)Gendering and Queering Auntiehood 115

Doing Auntie Work Differently: The Auntie as Ally 116

Queer Auntiehood as a Politics of Care: The Future of the Sri Lankan American Community 118

The Power to Redefine Sri Lankan America 120

A Politics of Care: Auntying as Activist Project 123

Bibliography 128

Appendix: Tattoo Pictures 132

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Chapter 1 - Introduction: Bodies in Diaspora

No Contest: Public Representations of Sri Lankan Womanhood

I entered my first and only beauty contest in April 2014 in Los Angeles at the annual Sinhala and Tamil New Year celebrations organized by the Sri Lankan American Association of Southern California. At this contest, held annually during the New Year event, one lucky Sri Lankan American young woman is crowned and sashed as Avurudu Kumari, or "New Year Princess." That year, there was a dearth of contestants, so organizers began pulling young women from the event attendees and from those who were manning the various booths around the park. Two unfortunate undergraduates, who were promoting the Sri Lanka Youth Organization's (SLYO) upcoming community work events, were pulled from the SLYO booth to participate, just as I was in the middle of advising them on handling their increased academic workloads in college. Put on the spot and visibly uncomfortable, they reluctantly took the neon green contestant numbers the organizers offered. Feeling sorry for them, I took a contestant number for myself, too. My only intention was to support those who had been roped into participating and to just enjoy myself, since in my cleavage-baring halter top sundress, I knew I had no chance of winning.

During the pageant walk-and-pose portion of the contest, I danced around the grounds, throwing my hands up in the air, high-fiving the cheering crowd. During the casual dance portion of the event, while the band on stage played *baila* music, I shimmied around the grounds and did the Macarena. However, during the question-and-answer portion of the contest, I spoke about my Sinhala fluency, my study of Sri Lankan history and the canonical Buddhist language Pali, and about how my arms ache pulling water from the well in my father's village every year I visit Sri Lanka. In this, I attempted to appeal to a sense of Sri Lankan authenticity (Knowledge of Sinhala: check. Knowledge of Buddhism: check. Knowledge of Sri Lanka and especially the idealized pastoral village life represented by the Avurudu Kumari: check.). Though the audience loved me, I did not win, of course – instead, the title was given to only young woman wearing traditional clothing, a blue batik *reddha* and *hatta*, or crop top and sarong, while second place was given to another young woman in a white sundress. To my surprise, one of the SLYO volunteers in her black leather jacket, SLYO T-shirt with a stylized graphic of the Sri Lankan flag that read "Born to Lead," and black jeans placed third. One of the judges, an auntie in her sixties who I had never met before, approached me after the contest. She told me she had argued with the other two judges for me to either win or at least place in the top three, but the other judges felt that I was not "demure enough to be a proper Sri Lankan woman" and overruled her. I had, in her words, "so much personality and charisma," that she wanted to find me and tell me how she had fought for me. I thanked her and told her that I was perfectly happy being an "improper" Sri Lankan American woman. To this day, those judges' words on my impropriety are still the best compliment I have ever gotten from any auntie.

If I did *not* represent the "demure" Sri Lankan woman the judges were looking for, then what *is* proper Sri Lankan womanhood? To consider this question, let us turn to the Sri Lanka Foundation's Miss Sri Lanka-America (formerly Miss Sri Lanka-USA) and the Miss Teen Sri Lanka Pageant. The Sri Lanka Foundation (SLF), a nonprofit cultural organization based in Los Angeles, held these pageants regularly from 2006 to 2014. The Miss Sri Lanka-America Pageant mission statement begins:

> It is important for us, as a community, to examine our motives and assumptions, and not seek imitation when deciding criteria for our Pageant. Rather, our aim is to create something new, uniquely defining us as Americans of a diverse ethnic and cultural heritage.[1]

The mission statement is the first page in a three-page application document, and therefore serves as the introduction to the pageant. Its placement prior to the application itself is strategic, as it lays out clearly the purpose of the pageant, and more importantly, how SLF defines beauty. In immigrant communities, cultural knowledge and memory is embodied in traditional clothing, jewelry, and hair, especially within and on the bodies of women. Beauty pageants in particular become important sites of embodied memory when diasporic women compete for titles representing their homeland. The mission statement was written by the co-producers of the pageant, Roma de Zoysa, SLF's Executive Officer and Shirani Stanislaus, SLF's Chief Operating Officer. The producers frame not just the pageant, but the Sri Lankan American community as a whole, as active agents in reexamining attitudes surrounding beauty. The contrast between "imitation" and a novel or unique definition of Sri Lankan American identity is specified here as something vital to the Sri Lankan American community. Thus the pageant itself is framed as more than just a contest, but as a statement on "defining" Sri Lankan America.

The statement continues, "We live at a time when every part of our bodies can be redesigned, and there is a belief that we can recreate who we are and how we look."[2] This suggests a resistance to technologies and cultures that facilitate bodily alteration. In mentioning a "belief" in re-created bodies, the SLF statement suggests an understanding of societal attitudes and influences on plastic surgery. The next sentence stands alone and is centered on the document: "What, then, is the measure of 'beauty' if we are designing it?"[3] This suggests the authors are placing a value judgment on individuals who augment their bodies. Implicit here is that beauty that is constructed or created, or beauty that involves some sort of artificiality, is not natural, and therefore not worthy of being defined as beauty. The next statement, in all italics, provides the answer to this question: "*Beauty is measured by the virtue of who we are and how we think, rather than how we design what we look like.*"[4] This italicized statement suggests an emphasis on SLF's definition of beauty, defined here by "how we think," suggesting this emphasis lies in mindset and/or intelligence. However, beauty defined "by the virtue of who we are" suggests a particular unchanged nature to the body, implied by its juxtaposition to "how we think." These values are put in direct contrast to designing "what we look like," implied here to be physical alterations to the body. What lies at the heart of these different values is a question of authenticity. The SLF pageant wishes its contestants to be reflective of a "real" Sri Lankan American womanhood, so *any* modification, bodily or otherwise, is inappropriate.

De Zoysa and Stanislaus go on to discuss the purpose of the pageant in mediating beauty, stating, "This contest validates our beauty and culture not seen elsewhere in the American mainstream."[5] The producers understand that South Asian beauty is underrepresented in American society, and that Sri Lankan American culture is all but invisible in the mainstream.

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[1] Roma de Zoysa and Shirani Stanislaus, "Sri Lanka Foundation Miss Sri Lanka-America 2011 Pageant Application," 2011.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

The pageant, then, serves as a validation of Sri Lankan American beauty, and an opportunity for women unacknowledged by the mainstream to be recognized. The mission statement ends with the declaration, "Our Pageant can now create standards of beauty, competence, intelligence, and goodness that rewards effort and achievements (as well as literal physical beauty), which makes it a worthwhile endeavor."[6] Here, what makes the pageant "worthwhile" is its ability to create standards of ideal Sri Lankan American womanhood. De Zoysa and Stanislaus view the pageant as a site of production, not of the contestants' bodies, but of particular "standards of beauty." These standards of beauty supposedly focus on non-physical ideals, and though this is the only place in the mission statement where this standard is explicated, the authors make sure to include that "literal physical beauty" will also be a criterion for selection.

Below this statement, there is a photo of five previous winners of the Miss Sri Lanka-USA and Miss Teen Sri Lanka pageants. All except for the Miss Sri Lanka-USA 2006, who was the first to receive the title, are crowned and wear sashes with their title and the year they received it, and all wear brightly colored saris. Underneath this picture, the caption states, "Sri Lanka Foundation thanks all the Contestants [*sic*], wish them luck, and view them all as winners and worthy daughters of our rich heritage."[7] This final statement, juxtaposed with the image of five young women in Sri Lankan traditional wear, conjures the notion of the SLF as parents, and as de Zoysa and Stanislaus as mothers, with the contestants as the descendants and recipients of Sri Lankan culture. Jisha Menon describes women's bodies as "somatic texts" through which ideas of nation, religion, and race are communicated. As they describe pageant criteria, the SLF pageant producers' mission statement works in the same way: it does not just describe the pageant, but also makes certain claims about Sri Lankan women's diasporic bodies. [8]

Similarly, Marcia Ochoa discusses how "the logic of the body is the way the body makes sense – it encompasses the principles that govern how people understand their bodies in the world."[9] This logic of the body necessitates an awareness of both the physical aspects of the body as well as the societal implications of how that body is presented and perceived. The SLF pageant producers' bodily logic is a body that must remain unaltered, unchanged, and unmodified in order to be "natural." While the body is a process which is affected by numerous societal and cultural influences, the SLF pageant emphasizes an ideal body, particularly the body of the Sri Lankan American woman, as one that is both affected by society yet remains unchanged. Considering that this is a pageant taking place in a diasporic environment, in which the contestants are diasporic Sri Lankans, this resistance to transformation is gesture towards maintaining an enduring Sri Lankan culture. The SLF pageant seeks to re-inscribe and conflate the bodies of Sri Lankan American women - bodies that are altered *by their very location in diaspora* – with the notion of an unchanged and enduring homeland. With the many women in leadership roles of organizations like the Sri Lanka Foundation, these relationships between the body and homeland become even more salient. Both the role of women in positions of authority and gender-specific events such as beauty pageants, fashion shows, and dance performances help construct notions of "authentic" Sri Lankanness, and by extension, what is means to be Sri Lankan American.

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[6] de Zoysa and Shirani Stanislaus.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Jisha Menon, *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 134.
[9] Marcia Ochoa, *Queen for a Day:* Transformistas, *Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 156.

Temporal Diasporic Embodiment: The Intersection of Body, Diaspora, and Time

While public representations of community reveal how the shifting discourses of gender and nation are made legible, this study takes a more intimate approach, and begins with the question, "How does diaspora *feel*?" That is, how does the body affect memory, and how does this embodied memory affect the formation of Sri Lankan American identities? In this study, I examine the role of the body and memory in Sri Lankan American identity formation - specifically, the experiences of U.S.-born and/or U.S.-raised Sri Lankan Americans who identify as Sinhala. Using an interdisciplinary, affect-oriented, and queer diasporic methodology, I explore how diaspora is affectively experienced, the role of embodied memory in the formation and negotiation of diasporic identities, and how intimacy influences diasporic imaginings of past and future. I also ask, "What are the temporal dimensions of diaspora?" That is, how does being in diaspora and removed from the homeland influence one's sense of time? How does affect influence how Sri Lankan Americans think about the past, present, and future?

This project lies in the intersection of the body, diaspora, and time, which I call *temporal diasporic embodiment*. Thinking of body, diaspora, and time as an equation or recipe, we can imagine the different combinations of these variables, seen in the figure below. For example, we can refer to body + time as *embodied temporality,* or how the body serves as a living archive due to the natural processes of aging, how we react to those processes, as well as the creation and healing of physical scars and trauma. Body + diaspora we can call the diasporic body, or the *embodied diasporic subject*, which refers to the marking of the diasporic body, being marked by others, as well as the expression of the diasporic self through one's own body. Diaspora + time, or *diasporic temporality*, refers to both the temporal and spatial distances of diaspora, and how this distance can "freeze" time to the moment of migration or departure and complicate temporal understandings of homeland and place. The full combination, body + diaspora + time, is *temporal diasporic embodiment*, which engages with the impermanent and non-teleological nature of both the body and conceptions of home, multiple racializations that change through time, as well as mental, psychic, and spiritual scars of trauma that flow, hidden or revealed throughout time. Each of the following chapters engages with different combinations of body, diaspora, and time.

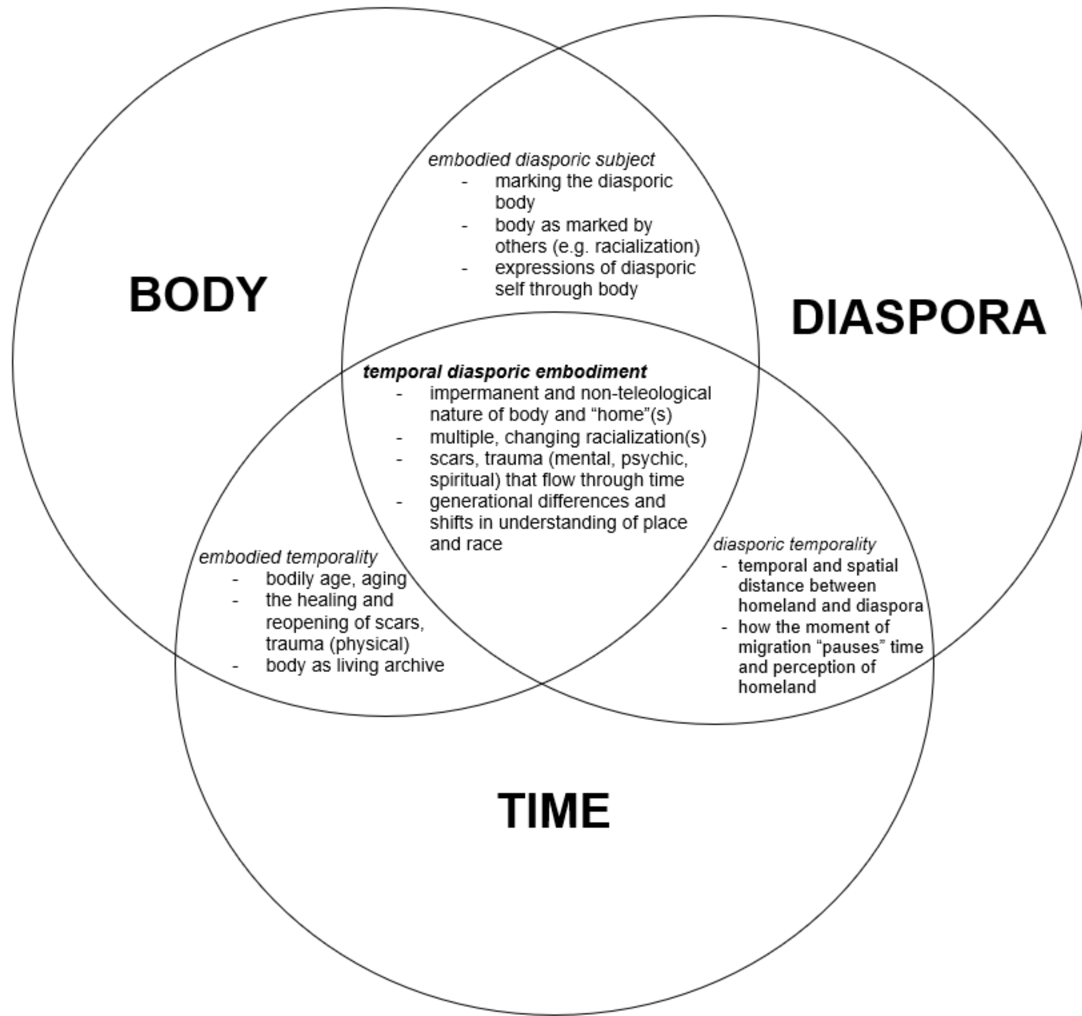

Image 1.1: Diagram of temporal diasporic embodiment

Why, then, is the body such a compelling focus of study? The body is our home – it is something that we live in, we nourish, we decorate, and we choose to show or hide. Our experiences of the world, society, and our location differ based on how our bodies are perceived through the color of our skin, our gender presentation, our hair texture, our weight, our body shape, our bodily ability, and more. Every moment, the body is both read and written upon – once visible, our bodies are written as being certain genders, races, ethnicities, citizenship statuses or belonging to a particular community or nation, etc. There is a measure of performance to the body: in response to being read by others, we write the stories of our racialized diasporic bodies through how we choose to present those bodies – e.g. through grooming, hair, tattoos, etc. The body itself is a billboard of different meanings that we constantly paint but is also in an ever-changing process of being painted over by other individuals, societies, and cultural norms. In both interpellating and performing, we participate in this embodied production when we are hailed and accept interpretations and interpellations of our bodies. This is a multiway process that moves back and forth and changes throughout time.

The body is thus an active social process made material, a "social process of becoming."[10] The body acquires and creates different meanings in various contexts. We use our body to perform our diasporic nature, through ethnic clothing and jewelry, language, or in musical and dance performance, and such "embodied practices can simultaneously hold possibilities of agency and the contradictions of power."[11] The diasporic experience of the body exists in multiple locations, times, and racializations simultaneously, and is subject to multiple experiences of power.

Within diaspora, the body acquires a particular temporality. The diasporic temporality of the body – this temporal diasporic embodiment – reflects how as the body changes due to time, so does diaspora. The diasporic body participates in a particular construction of reality and perceived authenticity in diaspora. This authenticity is temporal, as I attempted to take advantage of in the beauty contest Q&A by appealing to precolonial nostalgia of village. Simultaneously, diasporic subjects' perceptions of the homeland politics and cultural practices are frozen at the moment of migration, while the homeland moves on and changes. The everyday practices of diaspora, such as the clothes we wear, the music we listen to, the food we eat and smell, are also caught in time. However, this temporal rigidity in diaspora is offset by a fluid temporality, which manifests in diasporic storytelling and narration. How and when diasporic subjects tell their stories, what stories they tell, how they perceive these stories, and who they choose to tell those stories to are key to this shifting temporality. For example, when immigrants tell stories to their children born and/or raised in the U.S. about Sri Lanka, they do so about a past homeland that no longer exists in the present time. However this past homeland become the present reality for those later generations in attempts to embody that time through family traditions, cultural events, and religious practices. Further, those born and/or raised in the U.S. face a temporal misalignment as not only children of immigrants (or as immigrants themselves), but also as current parents, aunties, uncles, and mentors to younger generations. As a result, the tensions between time, memory, and diaspora take on contradictory meanings that affect the experiences and identities of Sri Lankan American born and/or raised in the U.S.

This introductory chapter, "Bodies in Diaspora," provides a general background on the Sri Lankan diasporas and the Southern Californian Sri Lankan American community. I describe how the community is a body for Sri Lankan Americans who maintain and nourish this bodily community despite a lack of ethnic enclaves and the spread-out nature of Southern California. I explore the different pockets where the community connects despite sprawl and distance. I then discuss my ethnographic methods and stylistic choices, introducing my participants and their relationship to this bodily community as well as how they define their own Sri Lankan American community. I then examine how a focus on affect reveals the intimacies of diaspora, and how queer diasporic methodologies are useful in analyzing non-normative manifestations of diaspora, and provide a summary of the following chapters.

The Bodily Community: Sri Lankan Americans in Southern California

Who and Where Are We? Sri Lankan History and U.S. Demographics

Sri Lanka is composed of many ethnic groups, with the Sinhala/Sinhalese ethnicity a majority at seventy-five percent. The largest minority is the Tamil ethnicity, whose members

[10] Marcia Ochoa, *Queen for a Day*, 169. See also Diane Nelson and Saba Mahmood.
[11] Ibid., 168.

comprise fifteen percent of the Sri Lankan population.[12] Throughout Sri Lanka's colonial history, the relationship between Sri Lankan Tamils and Sri Lankan Sinhalese has been fraught. Since Sri Lanka gained independence from the British in 1948, Sinhala people have had legislative and political control of the government. Throughout the long project of nation-building after decolonization, ethnic tensions and communal violence arose between the Sinhala and Tamil groups, most notably with the Sinhala-only language movement, which successfully made Sinhala the official language of the country in 1956. From the early 1980s through 2009, Sri Lanka underwent an almost 30-year civil war of ethnolinguistic and ethnoreligious violence. The war had many actors and participants, but the main two parties were the majority Sinhala Buddhist-led government versus the Tamil-led militant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE separatist movement demanded a distinct homeland and territory for Tamil people. The war was not contained to the island, as the global Sri Lankan diaspora mobilized financially and politically around different competing claims to the nation. The LTTE and the Sri Lankan Army both committed numerous war crimes and human rights violations, such as targeting civilians, rape, summary executions, and forced disappearances. The LTTE was known for using child soldiers and adopting suicide bombers as a tactic throughout the war. The war definitively ended in May 2009 with the defeat of the LTTE and the killing of its founder and leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran. After the war, governmental rhetoric has espoused an erasure of differences – whether ethnic or religious – under the idea of a unified yet multicultural Sri Lanka. However, Islamophobic violence, riots, and boycotts have divided the country further.

It can be difficult to track the growth of the Sri Lankan American population, since before the 2000 United States Census, Sri Lankans were included under "Other Asians," so Sri Lankans have been a specific category for only two decades. Despite this, using immigration statistics, we can develop a clearer picture of Sri Lankan migration to the U.S. In immigration records, Sri Lankans were also once included as "Other Asians," but started to be listed as a separate category beginning in 1972. U.S. immigration statistics list Los Angeles as the most used port of entry for Sri Lankan immigrants since 1972. There were 3,230 arrivals from 1972-1979, while 1980-1989 saw 5,546 Sri Lankan arrivals to the U.S.[13] In 1990, the number of Sri Lankan arrivals increased by 275% than arrivals in 1980.[14]

The Immigration Act of 1990 established the Diversity Immigrant Visa program, or the green card lottery, which "makes available up to 55,000 diversity visas (DVs) annually, drawn from random selection among all entries to persons who meet strict eligibility requirements from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States."[15] Under the program, 5,254 immigrant visas were issued for selected entrants from Sri Lanka between 1995-2010.[16] Between 2011-2018, the program selected 6,800 total entrants from Sri Lanka: 515 in 2011, 708

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[12] Sri Lankan Tamils comprise 11%, while Indian Tamil ethnic group comprise 4% of this total.

[13] Statistical Yearbooks of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1972-1997.

[14] Raymond Brady Williams, "South Asians in the United States – An Introduction," in Harold Coward, John R. Hinnells, and Raymond Brady Williams, editors, *The South Asian Religious Diaspora in Britain, Canada, and the United States* (Albany: The State University Press of New York, 2000), 215.

[15] U.S. Department of State. "Diversity Visa (DV) Program." Online at https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/diversity-visa-program-entry.html. Accessed April 2019.

[16] Immigrant Visas Issued by Issuing Office (All Categories, Including Replaced Visas) Fiscal Years 1992-2018. Online https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-statistics/immigrant-visa-statistics.html. Accessed April 2019.

in 2012, 802 in 2013, 1,616 in 2014, 1,303 in 2015, 704 in 2016, 375 in 2017, and 777 in 2018.[17] During this period, the highest number of selected entrants in any year was 2014, with 1,616 Sri Lankans selected for the green card from 91,261 total entries from Sri Lanka. As selected entrants become permanent residents, they can apply for their spouses and unmarried children to immigrate under the family reunification policies listed in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. As a result, every year, more and more the Sri Lankan immigrants come to the U.S.

As of 2019, the population of people in the U.S. of Sri Lankan descent is 61,416.[18] Of this number, 8,000 live in the Greater Los Angeles area, 8,000 live in the New York metropolitan area, or Tri-State area, and 2,000 live in the San Francisco Bay Area.[19] 73% of Sri Lankans in the New York metro area live in the boroughs of Queens and Staten Island.[20] Little Sri Lanka is located in the neighborhoods of Tompkinsville, Stapleton, and St. George on Staten Island, a community which has grown rapidly since 2000, when the Sri Lankan American population was only 700. In 1999, the Staten Island Buddhist Vihara opened, leading to a surge in Sri Lankan restaurants and grocery stores in the area. Little Sri Lanka also holds the first museum dedicated to Sri Lankan artifacts outside of Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan Art and Cultural Museum, opened in 2017 by then 18-year-old Julia Wijesinghe, a restaurateur's daughter.

The New York metropolitan Tri-State area encompasses 3,450 square miles, with Queens' and Staten Island's land area covering 109 square miles and only 58.5 square miles respectively, leading to a high density of Sri Lankan Americans. In contrast, the Sri Lankan American population in Southern California is spread across a much larger area of 56,505 square miles. At 4,058 square miles, Los Angeles County alone has an area greater than the entire New York Tri-State area. While Los Angeles County may have the largest concentration of Sri Lankan Americans, Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley alone has an area almost 100 square miles larger than Queens and Staten Island combined.

As a result, unlike Staten Island's Little Sri Lanka, Little India in Artesia/Cerritos, Little Saigon in Orange County, Long Beach for the Cambodian American community, or the San Gabriel Valley, one of the largest Asian enclaves in the U.S., there is no distinct Sri Lankan enclave in Southern California. There is no Sri Lankan neighborhood where one can stroll through browsing Sri Lankan clothing stores, hearing people speak Sinhala and Tamil on the streetcorners, eat at Sri Lankan restaurants, shop at markets stocking Sri Lankan foods and goods, or where one can just step out and see, hear, taste, and smell Sri Lanka. Instead, Southern California's Sri Lankan American community spans Los Angeles, Riverside, Orange, Ventura, and San Diego counties.

Bodily Actors: The Role of Community Organizations

One of my best friends is a Sinhala woman born, raised, and still living in Orange County, while I was raised and still live in the San Fernando Valley. We are over 50 miles apart

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[17] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Diversity Visa Program Statistics." Online at https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/diversity-visa-program-entry/diversity-visa-program-statistics.html

[18] 2018 American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates, Table B02018: Asian Alone or in Any Combination and Table B02019: Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander Alone or in Any Combination. https://www.census.gov/acs.

[19] Abby Budiman, Pew Research Center. "Sri Lankans in the U.S. Fact Sheet." https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/fact-sheet/asian-americans-sri-lankans-in-the-u-s/.

[20] Asian Federation, Profile of New York City's Sri Lankan Americans.

with a 100+ mile round trip for any visits, which can take hours when taking Los Angeles traffic into consideration. Despite this, I held an important role at her wedding, explaining Sinhala Buddhist customs to the audience during the ceremony as they were being performed. How could I meet, develop, and maintain such a close relationship with another Sri Lankan American so far away? Though the Southern California Sri Lankan American community is spatially and geographically dispersed, it is very organized and active, with 2-3 secular events with 300+ attendees per weekend (pre-pandemic), not including weekly religious services and other weekly events. How do they maintain any sense of community when friends and relatives can be anywhere from 50+ to 100+ miles, and potentially hours of driving, apart?

If we consider this community as a body, then the diasporic community in Southern California works to nourish and maintain a bodily community. It does so through various organizations that cater to a large and growing Sri Lankan diasporic community which has existed in California since the early 1960s. Several self-described multiethnic and pan-Sri Lankan organizations work within Southern California to connect the community to each other, with the Sri Lankan American Association of Southern California (SLAASC) and the Sri Lanka Foundation (SLF) serving as the most influential. The Sri Lankan Tamil Association and Sri Lankan Muslim Association are ethnic-specific organizations serving these communities. There are also cultural and performing arts organizations like the Serendib Foundation, the Southern California Sri Lankan Cultural and Arts Foundation, as well as dancing academies. Organizations like the Sri Lanka Medical Association of North America Western Region and secondary school "old boys"/"old girls" alumni associations often hold fundraising banquets, dances, and cricket matches.

The bodily community also gathers on important days such as Sri Lanka's independence day in February, Sinhala and Tamil New Year in April, the Buddhist holidays of Wesak and Poson in May and June, the SLF's annual Sri Lanka Day in July/August, the Buddhist holiday of Kathina in October, Christmas, and New Year's Eve/Day. There are multiethnic connections and partnerships within secular organizations – for example, there are non-Sri Lankan models walking the catwalk in ethnic outfits at fashion shows organized by SLF and SLAASC. There are also collaborations between secular organizations and religious institutions, which are important gathering spaces because of the lack of ethnic enclaves and the distances. There are approximately 15 Sri Lankan temples throughout Los Angeles, Riverside, Orange, and Ventura counties serving the Sinhala Buddhist community. Buddhist temples are rehearsal areas for dancers, spaces for set construction and decoration for backstage technicians, and meeting spaces for organizers. Several of my non-Buddhist respondents mentioned going to Buddhist spaces for event practices and to meet other Sri Lankans during festival days and holidays.

The bodily community also connects and communicates through social media, ethnic newspapers, and email newsletters. From the late 1970s through 2006, the print newspaper *Sri Lanka Express* moved between the local and the global, bringing news from Sri Lanka to the U.S. and covering Sri Lankan American events and issues. *Sri Lanka Express* also had a matrimonial section for Sri Lankan Americans seeking partnerships with other Sri Lankans in diaspora, though this section was dropped when the publication moved to an online-only format in 2006. Various e-newsletters by the SLF, SLAASC, and other organizations provide local updates and news about Sri Lankan Americans nationally and internationally. Social media is another significant site of connection for disparate parts of this geographically scattered community. Email newsletters run by local community members advertise community events, provide pictures of private events such as weddings, baby showers, birthdays, and anniversary

parties, obituaries, news from Sri Lanka, and the occasional matrimonial ad. Community organizations' social media accounts, community concert organizers, and Los Angeles-area community photographers and videographers' social media accounts also provide avenues for connection and debate.[21]

As popular and active groups, cultural and social organizations are purportedly the voice of the Sri Lankan community in the United States. Those in leadership roles, the majority of whom immigrated to the U.S. as adults, claim to represent the whole community and its interests. They are influential in creating narratives on what *is Sri Lankan* is and on what *being Sri Lankan* means, and it is these narratives take up the most space in the Sri Lankan American community mainstream. How do these organizations define and decide who is part of Sri Lankan America and the Sri Lankan diaspora, and who remains othered, invisible, and on the margins? We cannot discuss this control of narratives without first addressing how Sinhala Buddhist nationalism manifests in diaspora – namely, through diasporic engagement with the Sri Lankan nation-state. A notable aspect of the Sri Lankan nation-state's involvement in Southern California Sri Lankan American community is the presence and role of the Sri Lankan Consulate in Los Angeles, which was established in 1999. In addition to providing visas, the Consulate and Consul General takes an active role in collaborating with Sri Lankan American community organizations and is influential in fostering transnational connections. For example, at many events, the Consul General reads out messages from the current Sri Lankan president and other Sri Lankan governmental officials which are also printed in program booklets, reinforcing the Sri Lankan nation-state's involvement in this diasporic community. The community also demonstrates significant financial power through fundraising, remittances, and promoting trade between the U.S. and Sri Lanka. As a result, the Greater Los Angeles area is a major cultural as well as political center for both Sri Lankan Americans and the Sri Lankan nation-state, and the access and geopolitical positioning of its location is significant.

Further, the Sri Lankan Consulate in Southern California, and by extension, the Sri Lankan nation-state, works to promote long-distance nationalism, "a political movement that extends beyond the borders of individual nation-states, but does not stand in opposition to states as instruments of political organization and power."[22] This active involvement with the Sri Lankan government is facilitated by the fact that a former president of Sri Lanka is a member of this Southern California Sri Lankan American community. Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a member of the Rajapaksa political family and a naturalized U.S. citizen, was the Secretary to the Ministry of Defense and Urban Development from 2005 to 2015 during his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa's presidency. He also served as President from 2019-2022, appointing his brother Mahinda as Prime Minister. Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his brothers were influential in the end of the Sri Lankan civil war and have been accused of war crimes and human rights violations against civilians, prisoners of war, and members of the press. During Gotabaya Rajapaksa's presidential campaign in 2019, members of the Sri Lankan American community traveled to Sri Lanka to celebrate the election of one of their own to the highest office in the country.

[21] There is also a small network of Sri Lankan American YouTubers who discuss ethnic and racial identity issues in their vlogs based in the Los Angeles area.

[22] Nina Glick-Schiller, and Georges Fouron, *Georges Woke Up Laughing: Long Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 270.

Being Sinhala in the U.S.: Ethnic Majorities as Racial Minorities

As this Sri Lankan American community comes together, the perceptions of who composes this bodily community come into stark relief. The creation and maintenance of these transnational connections are vital for the Sri Lankan American community to develop a cultural long-distance nationalism, or diasporic practices that "derive their sense of legitimacy, their standard of authenticity, and often their content from the perceived source of culture."[23] Legitimacy is vital when the homeland is "unstable, undergoing dizzying transformations, and therefore incapable of serving as the ultimate grounding for one's sense of diasporic identity and community."[24] Similarly, Sri Lankan American organizations have sought to create and maintain a stable notion of Sri Lankan postwar identity.

Initially, this study focused on community organizations like SLF and SLAASC, and began with the question, "In the absence of Sri Lanka, how do these organizations create a sense of a Sri Lankan American community?" However, as I conducted preliminary research, it quickly became clear that not only is the Sri Lankan nation-state an active presence for these organizations, but so is Sinhala nationalism. Organizations that claim to be pan-Sri Lankan cater to Sinhala-speaking communities, like the SLF and SLAASC make announcements only in Sinhala or English at their events, though there are members who speak Tamil. SLAASC's newsletter, *Sinha Kodiya,* means "lion flag," indicating the lion on the Sri Lankan flag that represents the Sinhala people. The Serendib Foundation is the only organization that makes announcements in English, Sinhala, and Tamil at their events. As mentioned earlier, the ever-increasing number of Buddhist temples in Southern California have also become community spaces for non-Buddhist people of Sinhala descent.

It is difficult to estimate official percentages of Sinhala and Tamil population in the U.S. due to the nature of categorizations and questions on the U.S. Census.[25] During preliminary participant observation, field interviews, and informational interviews, I observed that Southern California Sri Lankan American events are primarily attended by Sinhala individuals with a minority of Tamil and Muslim involvement. Scholars such as Stanley Tambiah, H.L. Seneviratne, Neil DeVotta, and Harshana Rambukwella have discussed the development of a Sinhala nationalist imaginary pre- and post-independence, but there have not been academic explorations of how Sinhala nationalism manifests in diaspora. Further, compared to other Asian American communities, there is very little research on Sri Lankans in the U.S. Most literature on the Sri Lankan diaspora focuses on the Sri Lankan Canadian experience, while there is also literature on British Sri Lankan Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils in Europe more generally. Sri Lankan diasporic studies mainly focuses on the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora's relationship to war and the homeland, and focuses on transnational connections and political organizing by immigrant Sri Lankan Tamils, which little attention to Sri Lankan diasporic subjects born and

[23] Sau-ling C. Wong, "Dancing in the Diaspora: Cultural Long-Distance Nationalism and the Staging of Chineseness by San Francisco's Chinese Folk Dance Association," *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 2(1), Article 15 (2010), 9.
[24] Ibid., 25. Wong looks at how in dances depicting peasants, the peasants experience joy through manual labor, a move that merges with the People's Republic of China's propaganda of happy Chinese workers and ignores the rapid industrialization occurring in China.
[25] For example, if Sri Lankan is put down as nationality, ethnicity is not specified. Tamil is specified as language spoken at home, but this could include Tamils of Indian descent as well.

raised in the U.S.[26] The little work on Sri Lankans in the U.S. involves religious institutions, primarily focuses on immigrants, and does not examine those born and/or raised in the U.S. This dissertation project, with its examination on generations of those born and/or raised in the U.S., and its expanded lens on secular spaces and modes of being outside of religious institutions, provides a much-needed analysis on the lives of Sri Lankans in the U.S. and is an important contribution to the fields of Asian American studies and South Asian diaspora studies.

As there are multiple Sri Lankan identities that sometimes conflict and are at odds with one another, both within the island and across the Sri Lankan diaspora, it is disingenuous to call this a study about "Sri Lankan Americans." To that end, for this study I specifically interviewed Sri Lankan *Sinhala* Americans on their experiences and identity. The Southern California community I examine is primarily Sinhala, which allows me to observe how a majority group perceives Sri Lanka as opposed to organizing from a minority standpoint. In fact, during my ethnographic research, I found that the war is not a primary organizing force for the Southern California Sri Lankan American community in the same way that it is for the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora.

Growing up, my parents never hid the realities of war from me – multiple close family members were killed or forcibly disappeared due to intra-ethnic violence and interethnic violence. My parents described the LTTE as an organization whose tactics did not reflect on civilian Sri Lankan Tamils, unlike some study respondents who heard family and community elders describe Sri Lankan Tamils as "terrorists." In fact, as a person who grew up hearing my father speak more vitriol against USC graduates than Tamil people, I only began to discover the history of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in my undergraduate years. As a young adult, I began to see how embedded Sinhala nationalism was in these community organizations and the events I attended growing up. I began to wonder, how have others experienced the pervasive nature of Sinhala nationalism, even if it is something that they may not be able to name?

In the Sri Lanka and its diasporas, Sinhala nationalism was an organizing force during the war and has remained one after the war. After 2009, a major theme of government speeches at Southern California events has been the "territorial integrity" or "territorial sovereignty" of the island. However, this study's interviewees do not have a vested interest in actively supporting the Sri Lankan government, nor do they prioritize the nation-state's territorial sovereignty. While interviewees may have back and forth transnational financial, familial, and emotional connections to Sri Lanka, keeping the power and the status of a Sinhala Sri Lankan nation-state does not have any psychological weight, nor is it a factor in their identity formation. Since the war is fundamental to the Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic experience financially, organizationally, and spiritually, Sri Lankan Tamils raised in diaspora do not have the privilege of ignoring the war. Most of this study's respondents knew basic information about the Sri Lankan civil war, though I found myself explaining the island's history to two respondents who were unaware of even basic information – for example, one respondent was unaware of who exactly "the Tamils" her parents spoke about were.

Instead, Sinhala nationalism and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism manifests itself in subtler ways. To those born and/or raised in the U.S., Sri Lankan nationalism manifests in an appreciation of "traditions," "culture," "language," "festivals," "temple stuff" (i.e. religious events), as respondents put it. Further, most of their knowledge about Sri Lanka, its history, and cultural practices respondents acquired from their parents, family, attending community events,

[26] See the work of Sharika Thiranagama, Carmilla Orjuela, Amarnath Amarasingam, Gayathri Naganathan, Daphne Jeyapal, Suresh Canagarajah, and Sonia N. Das.

and involvement in community organizations. That the Sri Lankan practices, histories, and perspectives presented in private and public spaces are primarily *Sinhala* goes unacknowledged by those presenting them. As a result, respondents' knowledge of "Sri Lankan traditions" are primarily Sinhala and Buddhist, even for Sinhala Catholic respondents, since Buddhist temples have become community spaces for Sinhala people of all religious identifications.

Some respondents did acknowledge and critique the pervasive nature of Sinhala nationalism. For example, the few who traveled to Sri Lanka on their own (i.e. without familial intervention) understood the island's history and diaspora with more complexity. As we will see in Chapter 5, during the summer of 2020, conversations around Black Lives Matter triggered conversations about Sinhala nationalism and the civil war, with diasporic Tamils questioning Sinhala Americans' acknowledgement of state-sponsored violence against minorities in the U.S. without similarly support ethnic minorities in Sri Lanka. Respondents spoke about being Sinhala in diaspora, and the implications of privilege transnationally, reflecting Sunaina Maira's conception of "critical nostalgia." Critical nostalgia allows for an appreciation of the homeland while also "engaging in a critique of material processes" that goes against the model minority stereotype.[27] As a vital reframing of the older immigrant nostalgia/progressive younger generation binary, critical nostalgia speaks to cultural consumption, notions of authenticity, and the possibilities of diasporic futures while also yearning for a nostalgic past. Similarly, this study critiques Sinhala nationalism from "the inside," while also complicating notions of acceptable cultural practices and epistemologies.

Being Minorities

Due to the undercurrents of Sinhala nationalism on display, some respondents felt uncomfortable attending community events. Others felt alienated from Sri Lankan American social and cultural organizations, most because they did not feel represented. One interviewee expressed her reluctance to attend community events due to fearing judgement. This discomfort was not with Sri Lankan Americans as a whole, but specifically with immigrants who did not share and therefore could not understand her experiences of growing up in the U.S. She asked me, somewhat jokingly but with an undercurrent of worry, if that was "racist" of her, and I reassured her that being raised in the U.S. gave her different life experiences and values that those who immigrated as adults. The way interviewees conceptualize their identities as Sinhala, Sri Lankan, American, South Asian American, and Asian American is far more complicated than the dominant narratives community organizations present. Even within one ethnicity in the same location of Southern California, there are a variety of experiences and perspectives.

The individuals in this study, like most Sri Lankan Americans, primarily experience the world as minorities. All interviewees are of Sinhala descent, and therefore members of the ethnic majority in Sri Lanka, a place where most of the population is visibly brown but composed of different ethnicities and religions. In an inversion, however, they have grown up and live in the United States, where they are marked as Other because of their visible brownness. Unlike immigrant adults who have at least two decades of experience living as the majority, being a minority is respondents' fundamental experience. Most respondents spoke about racial slurs directed at them even as children, and faced subtler racialized microaggressions and assumptions based on what they look like their whole lives. Their brown bodies are subject to

[27] Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City.* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 197-199.

extra scrutiny and surveillance, both before and after 9/11. Most men I interviewed had some sort of encounter with police in which they feared for their safety. While adult immigrants also face racialization and surveillance due to their phenotypes and legal statuses, experiencing the world as a minority from a young age or birth brings with it different modes of being and belonging.

The Intimacies of Ethnography: Participants and Methodology

My previous research examined the Sri Lankan American Buddhist community in Los Angeles. My 2011 documentary, "I Take Refuge", explored Sri Lankan Americans' relationship to their Buddhist temple, while my 2012 Master's thesis, "Multiculturalism, Ethnicity, Religious Identity and the 1.5 and Second Generation in Two Los Angeles-Area Sri Lankan Buddhist Temples," expanded on this work. Similarly, this dissertation project focuses on the experiences of Sri Lankan Americans born and/or raised in the U.S. but focuses instead of how the body and memory affect identity formation more generally.

This is an interdisciplinary project, combining ethnography, analysis of theater and performance, literary analysis, with queer studies analyses of diaspora, memory studies material on generational transmission, and feminist analyses of the body. In this study, I utilize preliminary participation observation, one-on-one interviews, analysis of social media posts and engagement, images and videos on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, email newsletters, publicly distributed fliers and other written materials, and newspaper articles. For the chapter on D'Lo, I attended his show *To T, or not To T?* twice in 2019 prior to writing the chapter. I gave that version to D'Lo, which we discussed extensively. He also sent me the script as well as a video performance of the show. In July 2022, I participated in a conversation with the artist after a performance of *To T, or not to T?* This current chapter is based on these multiple performances and conversations with D'Lo, since as a cisgendered woman, I wanted to do justice to not only D'Lo's personal experiences, but also trans experiences. The chapter on *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* utilizes literary analysis primarily.

Two chapters are primarily based on one-on-one ethnographic interviews. The minimum criteria for study inclusion were:

- a person with any Sri Lankan Sinhala ancestry
- minimum age 18 years old
- English-speaking
- born and raised in the U.S., or
- raised in the U.S., arriving prior to 10 years of age.

For one chapter, an additional criterion for inclusion was having at least one permanent tattoo that may or may not have a connection to Sri Lanka or Sri Lankan culture, defined broadly. For another chapter, an additional criterion for inclusion was some awareness of or level of involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement, defined broadly. Potential participants were identified through snowball sampling, social media outreach, and in casual conversations about my research in which participants volunteered to be interviewed. After some participants spoke with me, they told friends and acquaintances about their experience, and those individuals contacted me to be interviewed. Through this word-of-mouth, I ended up almost doubling the

amount of tattooed interviewees that I planned from 10 to 17 respondents. As a result, out of 25 people interviewed for this study, 17 are tattooed. Prior to interview, I emailed each respondent a PDF with potential questions. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and were scheduled for 90 minutes, with the first 15 minutes spent on reviewing consent procedures and answering respondents' questions, while the recorded interviews themselves were planned to last between 45-75 minutes. The table below lists participants information. All interviewee names in this study are pseudonymous.

Table 1.1: Participant Information

Name	Age	Place of Birth	Age On Arrival in U.S.	Number of Tattoos and Additional Notes
Liyoni	52	U.S.	-	4 tattoos
Yuvani	48	U.S.	-	2 tattoos
Nihal	48	Sri Lanka	2 years	1 tattoo
Dave	46	U.S.	-	1 tattoo; Sinhala father, white mother
Lakshmi	46	Sri Lanka	10 months	Sinhala mother, Tamil father
Eraj	45	Sri Lanka	4 years	
Manu	42	U.S.	-	9+ tattoos, full back and full sleeves on arms
Sakura	38	Sri Lanka	5 years	6+ tattoos: full sleeve on arm
Sharmaine	35	U.S.	-	2 tattoos
Thomas	35	U.S.	-	12+ tattoos: upper chest and full sleeves on arms
Sophie	34	U.S.	-	1 tattoo
Diane	33	U.S.	-	5 tattoos
Ashley	32	U.S.	-	
Anoja	31	Sri Lanka	7 years	
Cassie	30	U.S.	-	5 tattoos
Nayana	29	Sri Lanka	7 years	
Bhagya	29	Sri Lanka	7 years	1 tattoo
Nimali	29	Sri Lanka	8 years	8 tattoos
Sagara	26	Sri Lanka	8 years	
Monica	25	U.S.	-	1 tattoo
Ajantha	25	U.S.	2 years	2 tattoos
Imesha	23	Sri Lanka	11 months	
Chathuri	22	Sri Lanka	2 years	2 tattoos
Nuwan	20	U.S.	-	Sinhala mother, white father
Anjali	20	U.S.	-	1 tattoo

Most participants identify with multiple labels simultaneously or change identifications depending on the context, and find legitimacy in holding different identifications. For example, respondents use terms such as "Sri Lankan American," "South Asian American," "Asian American," "Sri Lankan" (or in the case of Nayana, "Sri *Lankan* Sri Lankan"), "Lankan," and "American." The oldest respondent was 52, while youngest are 20 years old. Of the respondents, 7 were Gen X (born between 1965-1980), 12 are millennial/Gen Y (1981-1996), and 6 are Gen Z (1997-2012). Of the respondents, 14 were born in the U.S., while 11 were born in Sri Lanka. Of

those 11 that were born in Sri Lanka, 7 were old enough to remember their lives in Sri Lanka prior to coming to the U.S., arriving between the ages of four and eight. Two who arrived at 4-5 years old had some memories of Sri Lanka, while five people who arrived at 7-8 years old had significant memories of living and going to school in Sri Lanka. Most of the respondents identified as women – 18 people, while 7 identified as men. All were employed and college-educated, and some had advanced degrees, which is not unusual for Sri Lankan Americans.[28] Seven are University of California, Berkeley alumni. The respondents had careers in medicine, data analysis, environmental sustainability, global health and public health, biomedical research, humanities research, nonprofits, and banking. Respondents had varying comfort levels with speaking and/or understanding Sinhala. None spoke with any Sri Lankan accent – in fact Nimali and Sagara, who had immigrated at the oldest age when they were 8 years old, spoke with full American accents.

This sample is not meant to represent the full extent of Sri Lankan Americans or even Sinhala Americans. Instead, this study intends to complicate the claims and narratives that Sri Lankan American organizations construct. My strategy is to examine individual stories instead of making large declarations of what it means to be Sri Lankan in America. In service of this goal, I use ethnography and qualitative methods rather than survey materials to capture the richness, complexity, and contradictions of personal stories. While a survey-based study can reach a wider audience and allows for faster data collection, asking respondents to note, for example, "On a scale of 1-10, how 'Sri Lankan' do you feel?" flattens the complexity of respondents' competing claims and identities. The diasporic experience is one of multivocality, whether in the voices within the community itself but also in the messaging diasporic subjects are exposed to: from their families, ethnic communities, religious communities, and from U.S. society as a whole. In this project, I attempt to bring in those different voices and let those voices speak for themselves. In addition, this study is purposefully written in non-academic language since it is meant to be read and discussed by a wide audience, both within the Sri Lankan American community specifically and in Asian American communities in general. As the first and currently only dissertation project by, for, and about Sinhala Sri Lankan Americans in the U.S., I find it vital that this study is accessible to anyone who is interested in the subject, regardless of educational background.

Further, in this study, the relationship between researcher and interviewee is porous, and the work of embedded ethnography involves reciprocity in trust and vulnerability. The participants in this study have offered their personal stories, some of which were difficult to discuss or stories that they had never told anyone before. Considering their willingness to be vulnerable, I responded in kind, attempting to horizontalize the relationship between researcher and research subject by allowing myself to be vulnerable as well. As a result, as I share my respondents' stories in the following pages, I also offer my own stories, with candor, in return. Each chapter describes with a personal anecdote about myself, my family, or both. This is strategic and purposeful since my own questions about how *I* feel diaspora and how *I* experience diasporic were catalysts for this study. While there were prescribed questions I asked respondents, the interviews themselves were mostly conversational in nature. As a result, most interviews went over the prescribed 45 – 75 minutes. Most interviews lasted at least 90 minutes, while 4 spoke with me for 2-3 hours. This was unexpected, though I stayed conscious of time throughout the interviews, regularly informing respondents how much time had elapsed and checking whether they wanted to wrap up. Most stated that they never had gotten the chance to

[28] This was not purposeful, but statistically likely. See Pew Center data on Sri Lankan Americans.

share their experiences of being Sri Lankan American before, so this was a rare opportunity that they wanted to take advantage of. I was happy to let them.

Diaspora, Affect, and Queer Approaches

Diaspora and Affect

In attempting to synthesize the multivocal experience of being Sri Lankan American, I utilize affect and a queer diasporic methodology as analytics. Though foundational explorations of diaspora do allow for and acknowledge the complexities of the diasporic experience, I contend that affective and queer understandings of diaspora are most effective in examining the Sri Lankan American community. While previous scholarship on diaspora has moved from typologies to works that acknowledge the variety and diversity of diasporic experiences, a focus on how the affective, the intimate, and the queer interact with broader diasporic trends helps illuminate how the everyday reflects larger power relationships.

Scholarship on diaspora and diasporic communities have theorized diaspora in different ways. Foundational examinations of diaspora have conceived of diaspora through typology, finding different ways in which to categorize diasporic populations into particular "types" of diasporas. However, this approach marks the homeland from which individuals have been dispersed as a primary focus, without engaging with local conditions, transnational interactions, or live experience. Diasporic articulations of self and home can also be conceived as a process: since places and spaces are always in flux, we should always consider the conditions under which diaspora is constructed.[29] Diasporic individuals are not only literal border-crossers, but the ways in which they engage in their local and global contexts go beyond notions of space, geography, and place.

Further, how individuals imagine their diasporic communities and how they develop transnational connections is key to conceptualizing the Sri Lankan American diaspora. Benedict Anderson claims that the nation is "imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."[30] A Sri Lankan American diasporic imagined community which ignores societal hierarchies and inequalities in the homeland, in an attempt to unite the community after the civil war, will reproduce those hierarchies in diaspora. The imagined nature of this community is so "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."[31] Anderson finds long-distance nationalism problematic because it does not hold individuals accountable for their political actions.[32] This is particularly relevant to

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[29] Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson. "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference. Cultural Anthropology, Vol. 7, No. 1, (Feb., 1992). 6-23.

[30] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 2006), 7.

[31] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

[32] Anderson notes, "The participant rarely pays taxes in the country in which he does his politics: he is not answerable to its judicial system; he probably does not cast even an absentee ballot in its elections because he is a citizen in a different place; he need not fear prison, torture, or death, nor need his immediate family. But, well and safely positioned in the First World, he can send money and guns, circulate propaganda, and build intercontinental computer information circuits, all of which have incalculable consequences in the zones of their ultimate

the Tamil diaspora's financial involvement in the civil war and with the Sri Lankan government's encouragement of diasporic political activity and lobbying in the U.S., a long-distance nationalism that is both sanctioned by and initiated by the homeland.

The expansiveness of the imagined community is key, yet in the Sri Lankan diaspora, there are multiple, competing diasporas with different engagements with the Sri Lankan nation-state that may not include certain members in this imagined community. As a result, Sri Lankan diasporas cannot be rooted in stable notions of identity centered on diasporic cultural identity as a shared singular collective experience. Instead, Sri Lankan diasporas are contradictory, highlighting discontinuities and ruptures, in which cultural identities are "a matter of 'becoming' and well as 'being.'"[33] Further, thinking about Sri Lankan diasporas through the lens of consciousness can reveal how diasporic identities are "constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference."[34] Sandhya Shukla recognizes the instability of such diasporic identities, complicating Anderson's imagined communities to describe how Indian diasporic print cultures "simultaneously *represent* and *construct* Indianness by establishing a public."[35] With print culture, "news from 'home' may appear authentically Indian, even though it is produced on their own doorsteps, and in this way the question of origin – where these forms of imagining community are *from,* and where the nation of India lives – is reworked."[36] Instead of a stable imagined community, however, Shukla describes the incoherence of these publications, arguing that the diaspora is "so multiply constituted as to be at times mutually unintelligible to the actors concerned."[37]

Others have advocated for analyzing diaspora through an emphasis on lived experience and affect, asking, "How are these diasporic identities practiced, lived, and experienced?"[38] Instead of rethinking nationalism and citizens' relationships to nation-states, we can examining diaspora as multiple "dislocated sites of contestation."[39] Investigating lived experiences can reveal disarticulations, debates, and ruptures within diasporas. Using an analytic of diaspora that emphasizes the agency of diasporic individuals and focuses on everyday practices allows us to discover how individuals "experience, interpret, and give meaning to diaspora.[40] This underscores the multiple ethnicities, religions, and languages at play in the Sri Lankan American case: within one diaspora, there are many diasporas.

Arjun Appadurai also gestures towards the affective dimensions of diaspora through locality, or "a structure of feeling, a property of social life, and an ideology of situated community" which has been created by historical forces such as colonialism and sustained

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destinations." In Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (New York: Verso, 1998), 74.

[33] Stuart Hall, "Diaspora and Cultural Identity," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference,* edited by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 225.

[34] Ibid., 235.

[35] Sandhya Shukla, *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Postwar America and England*. (Princeton University Press, 2003), 177.

[36] Ibid., 176.

[37] Shukla, *India Abroad*, 178.

[38] Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, "Nation, Migration, Globalization: Points of Contention in Diaspora Studies," in *Theorizing Diaspora,* eds. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 9.

[39] Ibid., 10

[40] Rhacel Salazar Parreñas and Lok C. D. Siu, "Introduction," in *Asian Diasporas: New Formations, New Conceptions*, eds. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 2.

through local subjects.[41] Appadurai describes locality as fragile and requiring constant maintenance – once an imagined community is imagined, serious work is needed to keep that community as it was initially imagined. Locality must be protected from ideologies and peoples that threaten the imagined community and that may change what defines that community. It is a matter of not only self-imagination or self-definition, but self-preservation. Locality helps investigate how these Sri Lankan American organizations approach deviations from the norm that threaten its self-definition and offers alternative possibilities. Bakirathi Mani expands Appadurai's discussion of locality to include affect more explicitly as well as class. Mani argues that the "affective charge of being South Asian" is dependent on global colonial and imperial forces, both past and present.[42] By focusing on the affective experience of class mobility, Mani moves away from nation-state-focused discourses of citizenship to how South Asian subjects position themselves within a multicultural and postcolonial national imaginary.[43] Locality, then, can reveal "the intimate and often vexed relationship between domestic racial formations and global structures of capital."[44] An affective view of locality illustrates how people create affinity and find a sense of belonging through things like cultural production. Using locality and the everyday to think through wider ideas of race, nation, and histories of colonialism can bring intimate and global forces to bear on our understandings of diaspora.

Feminist scholars have analyzed diaspora through dislocations within affective understandings of diaspora. In the volume *The Global and the Intimate,* Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner claim that feminist projects seek "to disrupt tradition organizations of space, to forge productive dislocations, to reconfigure conventions of scale."[45] By juxtaposing the global and the intimate, Pratt and Rosner bring to bear affective examinations on the transnational. Both the global and the intimate involve power, the global most obviously with international relations and globalized economies, yet intimacy also has political and social power - for example, defining family through a heterosexual lens, or how the hijab has been a political flashpoint in the U.S. Pratt and Rosner argue that using affect as an analytic "challenges feminists to think beyond the body and emotions in a globalized frame; it speaks to the grounding and ungrounding of emotional life in relationships, both human and beyond, gesturing to and inculcating the experience of planetwide interconnections."[46]

Likewise, Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier, and Mimi Sheller attempt to recontextualize movement, migration, and conceptions of home and nation through a transnational feminist lens. This transnational work on diaspora and movement and affect rejects binary conceptualizations of diaspora such as presence/absence and movement/stasis. While framing diaspora in similar ways, the authors are more focused on the process of diaspora than Pratt and Rosner. Here, migration and 'homing' are not separate processes, but instead part of a "plurality of experiences."[47] Homing, making home, or home work is a continuous process

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[41] Arjun Appadurai, "The Production of Locality," in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 189.
[42] Bakirathi Mani, *Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America* (Stanford University Press, 2012), 198.
[43] Ibid., 7.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner, *The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in Our Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 1.
[46] Ibid., 6.
[47] Sara Ahmed et al., *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 1-2. For example, in one chapter, Anne-Marie Fortier argues that for queer diasporic subjects, home is what one travels to,

rooted in affect, where "being at home and the work of home-building is intimately bound up with the *idea* of home: the idea of a place (or places) in the past, and of *this* place in the future. Making home is about *creating* both pasts and futures through inhabiting the grounds of the present."[48] That is, the work of a diaspora is entwined with the temporality of home through constructing a past, present, and future. Further, Ahmed et al. complicate the process of creating home, as sometimes this home-making is only possible when someone else is displaced. Connecting seemingly larger transnational processes and movements with seemingly smaller, affectively organized experiences helps us understand transnational connections between these organizations and Sri Lanka and other Sri Lankan diasporic spaces. For instance, it can reveal how the image of Sri Lanka as Sinhala Buddhist nation is an affective construction and utilized by these Sri Lankan American organizations.[49]

Purnima Mankekar also focuses on lived experiences, particularly affective experience, by discussing the affective potency of nationalism as an ideology in Indian America.[50] Mankekar examines how media and the movement of commodities construct "phantasmic notions of India that cannot, ultimately, be located in a specific place."[51] Moving away from physical movement in how diasporic subjects are constituted and defined, she cautions against seeing the homeland is a static entity that does not consider "the imaginative travel engendered by transnational public cultures as a form of migration.[52] In studying how diasporic subjects construct the past homeland, she engages with how temporality and affect work together to both make and unmake ideas of India. Mankekar also examines how "affect circulates between and across objects and subjects," arguing that "affect is socially consequential: affect is what makes us invest in, or rage against, particular social formations."[53] Through her examination of Indian American grocery stores, Mankekar complicates nostalgia and temporality. She finds that memory can be contradictory and ambivalent, as well as haunted.[54] She argues that grocery stores demonstrate the "disjunction of the spatial with the temporal."[55] Moving from ephemeral objects to the invocation of emotion, Sara Ahmed examines the work of emotions and how they influence larger societal forces, asking, "What do emotions do?" Ahmed examines the love of nation, arguing that this love is conditional and that "the conditions of love differentiate between those who can inhabit the nation, from those who cause disturbance."[56] Further, she argues that the question of inclusion is a question of embodiment. Those who are perceived as harming the nation are not included in the national body. Sri Lankan Americans' self-identity and self-definitions is based on their perceptions of who "counts" as Sri Lankan, and more importantly, who does not fit or exist in this definition.

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not departs from. The homes that queer communities create contains an acceptance that is not necessarily present in the home a queer person has grown up in and escaped from.

[48] Ibid. 9.

[49] For instance, the use of affective, emotional connections is illustrated in diasporic fundraising for hospitals and Sri Lankan army veterans. These organizations appeal to emotion by talking about "heroes" of the homeland while supporting a necropolitical project.

[50] Purnima Mankekar, *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 14.

[51] Ibid., 15.

[52] Ibid., 15-16.

[53] Ibid., 14.

[54] Ibid., 89-90.

[55] Ibid. 90.

[56] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 16.

Queer Diasporic Methodology

Diaspora offers contested, messy, and sometimes volatile spaces and subjects of analysis. Therefore, I use queerness in my research to contend with the unstable and unsettled nature of the Sri Lankan diaspora. While my interlocutors identify with different sexualities and gender identities, and not all chapters explicitly examine the queer experience, I apply "queer" here strategically, not only to describe non-heterosexual desire, peoples, or actions, but as an analytical tool to examine the Sri Lankan American community in non-normative ways. There is no normative experience of diaspora – different generations of Sri Lankan Americans born and/or raised in the U.S. necessarily have non-normative understandings and experiences of Sri Lanka. In examining why scholars desire to infuse queerness into research and populations that are not necessarily queer (in the non-heterosexual sense), Margot Weiss explains:

> *Queer*, from its start, was meant to point beyond or beside identity… and instead signify transgression of, resistance to, or exclusion from normativity, especially but not exclusively heteronormativity. Thinking this way, queer is less an object of study (a *who* that we might study) and more an analytic (a *how* to think sexual/gendered norms and power).[57]

In this way, queer is more of a verb, or an active doing (i.e. *to* queer Sri Lankan America) instead of a noun (i.e. *a* queer Sri Lankan American). Queerness, then, is a constructive and valuable analytic through which to engage with diaspora. As Weiss suggests, "it is the frustration of the desires we invest in our objects that makes for a queer anthropology—and that makes anthropology queer."[58] My own frustrations with heteronormative imaginings of Sri Lankan American futures, contingent on heterosexual reproduction of future Sri Lankans in America are part of the impetus for this study. What does an alternate imagining of a Sri Lankan American future look like? Applying queerness means using a lens of non-normativity and finding the unusual in what is seemingly normative. We can use queer to investigate how diasporic communities deal with and understand the non-normative. Diasporic communities are "scattered" and separated from a homeland and what is normal, so how is the normal defined and maintained in a place that is constantly changing, where different cultural shifts and expectations are at odds with each other? Using queerness allows us to look at how diasporic communities rewrite and re-inscribe kinship within their localities, and how kinship networks are transnationally created.

Like Weiss, David Eng moves away from seeing queerness as indicative of identities only, arguing that *queer* "can be used simultaneously to discuss the politics of the personal, to question a spectrum of personal identities, [and] to act against normalizing ideologies."[59] Eng urges Asian American studies scholars in particular to utilize queerness as a methodological tool to better complicate understandings of Asian diasporas, arguing that queerness "helps to articulate how Asian American sexual, racial, and class formations come into existence only in

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[57] Margot Weiss, "Always After: Desiring Queerness, Desiring Anthropology," *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 4 (2016): 628.
[58] Ibid.
[59] David L. Eng, "Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies," *Social Text,* no. 52/53 (1997): 50.

relation to one another."[60] For both Eng and Weiss, queerness is a tactic to be deployed. Similarly, I use queerness as a tactic, as a way of examining how Sri Lankan Americans define what it means to be Sri Lankan and American, how they imagine a future for Sri Lankans in America, and how they create alternative kinship networks. Queer diaspora as a methodological tactic allows us to examine Asian American diasporic formations and reconceptualize diaspora. Eng argues against viewing Asian American diasporas "through a conventional focus on racial descent, filiation, and biological traceability" and instead analyzing diaspora "through the lens of queerness, affiliation, and social contingency."[61] A queer diasporic methodology not only allows us to interrogate traditional kinship structures and the nation, but also complicates discourses of race, transnationalism, imperialism, and global networks. While a queer diaspora methodology highlights alternative kinship structures and new forms of family, focuses on affect and the intimate push against different modes of diaspora. Eng argues that a queer diasporic methodology can not only be applied to kinship, but "to other accounts of subjects and subjectivities, and to other relations of affect and desire dissonant to traditional conceptions of diaspora, theories of the nation-sate, and the practices and policies of neoliberal capitalism."[62] Eng uses this methodology to examine how queerness can help give voice to the trauma of Japanese internment, especially for the generations afterward that did not experience it. While his subjects of analysis are not queer, by applying a queer diasporic method, Eng reveals how this fractured inheritance comes to the surface in alternative ways. Like intimacy with its focus on the indefinable, a queer diasporic methodology allows for intangible modes of being and belonging.[63] It "highlights the breaks, discontinuities, and differences, rather than the origins, continuities, and commonalties of diaspora," and is therefore a valuable tool to explore a fragmented, multivocal, and tangled Sri Lankan American community.[64]

Similarly, Martin Manalansan asks "What happens when disorder and chaos are the elements that make up the archival space?"[65] Manalansan examines mess as way of queering archives, "a spoiling and cluttering of the neat normative configurations and patterns that seek to calcify lives and experiences."[66] The worth and significance of the ephemeral lies in "how it embodies the fleeting, nomadic, messy, and elusive experiences and processes of self-making (and, I may add, history making)" especially among minorities.[67] Manalansan examines the how muddled and uncertain nature of queer lives can be liberatory - e.g. the joy of boundless queerness and being self-actualized - but also a sign of uncertainty. The mess is a physical embodiment of an ambiguous status – that is, with the lack of formal documents certifying their allowed presence, undocumented queers are 'cluttering' America with their very existence. Manalansan's work on expanding the archive to include the ephemeral opens memory research for communities affected by war and violence. Looking at the ephemeral helps to work against silences of the civil war and the silences in diaspora, to see what can be found in the intangible or seemingly unimportant. Tactically employing queerness and affect illustrates how Sri Lankan Americans demonstrate alternative possibilities for a Sri Lankan American future and point to

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[60] Ibid., 42.
[61] Ibid., 13.
[62] Ibid., 14.
[63] Ibid., 15.
[64] Ibid., 14-15.
[65] Martin. F. Manalansan, "The "Stuff" of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives," *Radical History Review* 2014, no. 120 (2014): 102.
[66] Ibid., 99.
[67] Ibid., 105.

alternative modes of kinship. Queering diaspora and using embodied memory provides an alternative to a cyclical way of policing culture, and maintaining static notions of Sri Lankan culture to pass on to future generations when Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans themselves have been disrupted by war, immigration, and racialization. Using affective and queer lenses to excavate and expand a vision of the Sri Lankan diaspora, we can see how smaller, intimate, and everyday moments can reveal larger systemic processes.

Chapter Descriptions

The chapters that follow utilize ethnographic discussions, explorations of cultural productions, literary analysis, social media research, and more. Chapter 2, "Thinkin' about Ink: Embodied Temporality and Embodied Storytelling in Tattoos," examines tattooed interviewees' experiences. Instead of analyzing tattooed images, this chapter focuses on how diasporic bodies become archives and how participants give those archives meaning through the stories they tell about their bodies. Chapter 3, "Somatic Remains: Visceral Trauma and Pleasure in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*," analyzes a novel written by Nayomi Munaweera, a Sri Lankan American woman, on Sinhala and Tamil experiences during the Sri Lankan civil war. The chapter examines how the scent of death works to regulate individual bodies and communities, the erotic nature of diasporic memory, and the failure of heteroreproductive diasporic memory. Chapter 4, "Spillin' the T(ea): Embodied Performance, Race, and Trans Childhood," explores D'Lo, a Sri Lankan Tamil American transmasculine performance artist and comedian, and his most recent play *To T, or not to T?* I use the concept of "spilling the tea" to analyze fictive kinship in diaspora, race and Tamil identity, and the figures of the trans and diasporic child. Chapter 5, "Bein' Dark: Antiblackness and Developing a Transnational Social Justice Orientation," examines how Sri Lankan Americans respond to colorism and racialization within the U.S. This chapter first explores interviewees' experiences with colorism in co-ethnic Sri Lankan American spaces and racialization in non-coethnic spaces, particularly in encounters with police. The chapter then explores diasporic conversations on antiblackness and Sinhala nationalism that arose in the summer of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd. The concluding chapter, "To Be an Auntie, Queerly: The Future of the Sri Lankan American Community," considers the figure of the Auntie in Sri Lankan America and generational shifts in the Sri Lankan American community. This chapter discusses how Gen X, millennial, and Gen Z wield "auntie power" in their everyday and how diasporic individuals can "be an auntie, queerly" as they produce the future of the Sri Lankan American community.

Chapter 2: Thinkin' about Ink: Embodied Temporality and Embodied Storytelling in Tattoos

I have a tattoo of a millstone on my left shoulder. When my father/Tatti, was a child, his mother, my Athamma, would grind grain in the millstone at night for the next day's meals, and Tatti would lay his head on her lap, falling asleep as he listened to "the echoes of the millstone." When I was a child, Tatti would tell me stories of growing up in his small village in Sri Lanka, and I, too, fell asleep listening to his stories. In my twenties, I told him to write down these stories in his memoirs, which turned into his 2014 book, *Echoes of the Millstone: An Ethnographic Account of Life in a Village in Sri Lanka.* In the book, there is a sketch of the millstone that Tatti drew himself. In 2015, when Tatti retired, I got the millstone tattooed on my left shoulder as a retirement present. It was an *event*. My mother/Ammi, Tatti, and I went to the appointment together, and Tatti held my hand asking, "Does it hurt?" at various intervals. At one point, he said, "You are a very good daughter," while tears filled his eyes. I laughed, and the tattoo artist told me not the move. Meanwhile, Ammi started filming the whole thing on her phone, before getting distracted by the tattoo artist's wife, who was interested in Ammi's neuroscience research. Later that evening, at a family barbeque, I was on a post-tattoo high, wearing a halter dress so I could properly show off my new ink. Everyone oohed and ahhed, and thought the gesture was incredibly sweet.

Tattooing is part of my family story. My maternal grandfather, who I call Atta, gave himself a tattoo when he was around 23 years old. A rookie police officer in Sri Lanka, he fell in love with my grandmother, Sumana. One day, after putting a street tattoo artist in remand for drunk and disorderly, my grandfather asked if he could borrow his tattooing equipment. Atta then tattooed "Sumana" in English in the center of the top of his left hand, as he was right-handed, starting from his wrist and leading up to his middle finger. It is clear he ran out of room and had to scrunch the last three letters together - the "S", "U," and "M" are larger, while the "A," "N," and second "A" are a bit crowded as they reach his middle finger. Naturally, the tattoo became infected, and Atta ended up spending time in the hospital afterward. When I got my first tattoo, we took a grandfather/granddaughter picture of both of our tattoos. In it, he leans his fist against my upper back, so that the millstone and "Sumana" are visible together. We are both smiling.

When Atta tattooed himself, my grandparents were not married yet, but Atta ended up with a permanent reminder of my grandmother that lasted after her untimely death from a brain tumor, two remarriages, after his third's wife death from cancer, and even after his own death. In January 2021, my grandfather got COVID, five days before he was set to get the first dose of the Pfizer vaccine. Three weeks later, he was dead. During this time, there was such a backlog of coronavirus deaths that bodies could not be buried or cremated for weeks afterwards, and Los Angeles County had to lift Environmental Protection Agency restrictions on crematoriums so that bodies could be cremated 24 hours a day. Weeks after he passed, my grandfather was finally cremated. That tattoo of my grandmother's name, in my grandfather's handwriting, is how the crematorium were able to confirm the identity of his body.

Tattooed bodies, such as my own and my grandfather's, can reveal how time and storytelling work together in diaspora. Looking at his tattoo, I can imagine how my young and in love Atta misjudged the sizing of the letters. The scrunched tattooed captures a specific moment in time when he thought, "Oh no!" The tattoo is thus very vivid and emotionally real, as we can see Atta's panic written on his body where he realizes, "I've made a grave mistake, but I

can't turn back. I'll finish this tattoo somehow." Further, part of the significance of a tattoo is in the telling of it. It was a story I asked him to tell often because I found it hilarious, and I was lucky enough to record a few years before he passed. While the image captures a memory, the telling of the story gives meaning to the image.

In this chapter, I examine how Sri Lankan Americans use their bodies as archives and how they give those archives meaning. With tattoos, respondents use their bodies as a kind of cultural production, utilizing creative and artistic tools to make meaning, with the permanence of the tattoo illustrating respondents' investment in creating connections to the homeland. Literature on tattoo takes feminist, philosophical, and religious approaches to tattooing, and considers the semiotics of tattoos. While literature on tattoo cultures in Asia exist, the Asian American diasporic tattoo experience has not been sufficiently explored. Tattooing is not just a bodily practice, but also a cultural production that makes identity and emotions corporeal. Sri Lanka does not have a culturally significant tattoo tradition like Pacific Islander cultures, nor does it have a henna tradition like other South Asian countries. What then, makes Sri Lankan Americans want to, essentially, permanently mutilate the body with images of the homeland and memories?

In considering this question, this chapter examines embodiment through two lenses: *embodied temporality* and *embodied storytelling*. Within the intersection of body + time, the embodied temporality of tattoos illustrates how the body is used as an archive, commemorative space, and testament, and reflects the temporal misalignment of memory. With embodied temporality, I explore how the tattooed diasporic body serves as a repository for memory. Considering the temporal nature of the bodily archive reveals how the diasporic body, by virtue of being tattooed, engages with the past, present, and future simultaneously. Embodied storytelling considers how Sri Lankan Americans tell stories about their tattooed bodies. Combining body + diaspora, the tattooed diasporic body is a canvas as well as a storytelling device. Here, the diasporic body narrates a story about itself, especially in response to the Othering and racializing narratives it encounters in the U.S., and in doing so storytellers enact bodily autonomy in discerning who has access to their bodily archive. While the images themselves are significant, instead of providing an artistic or aesthetic analysis of the tattoos, this chapter primarily focuses on how respondents speak about their bodily archive and the narratives their tattooed bodies hold, revealing how the tattooed body reflects the complexities of being a racialized Sri Lankan American.

First, I explore embodied temporality, or how the diasporic body works as an everchanging archive. This section examines the tattooed body as a living archive that records, commemorates, and memorializes as well as how it works as a testament to preserve what has been removed from formal records. I then examine embodied storytelling, or how the diasporic body narrates its bodily archive. This section examines perceptions of tattooed bodies within the Sri Lankan American context and racialized contexts in the U.S., how access is given to the diasporic body and its stories, how embodied storytelling can be incomplete, and how tattoo stories do not require transmission to be part of an archive of embodied practice. Finally, I examine how the diasporic body is remarkable in many ways – in its ability to be re-marked as well as in how storytellers can change narratives about their bodies.

Respondents' Tattoos

I interviewed 17 people total for this chapter, 5 men and 12 women. Since I primarily utilized snowball sampling and word-of-mouth to find interviewees, several of the respondents had prior connections. For example, there were three pairs of siblings – Ajantha and Bhagya, Diane and Sophie, and Cassie and Monica – and the two sister pairs had matching tattoos. Diane and Sophie had gotten their tattoos together choosing the same tattooed image in different locations on their bodies. Cassie and Monica also designed each other's tattoos and got inked together. Diane also had a matching tattoo with Nimali that they got with other members of their cohort in Sri Lanka during a fellowship for diasporic Sri Lankans. Cassie, Diane, and Nimali all got at least one tattoo in Sri Lanka by Sri Lankan tattoo artists. Only Liyoni and Sakura had tattoos that were done outside traditional tattoo studios in a stick-and-poke style. In total, the 17 interviewees had at least 62 discrete tattoos, though those with full sleeves and torso tattoos had multiple tattooed images within each piece.

Several have tattoos relating to their national, ethnic, or religious background. Liyoni, Thomas, Manu, Nimali, and Nihal all have some version of the lion from the Sri Lankan flag, while Bhagya has Asian elephants and Nimali has a traditional Mayura Yakka mask. Dave, Manu, Diane, Thomas, and Cassie all have tattooed words or names in Sinhala script. Cassie's Sinhala script tattoo is comprised of two Buddhist words, Ajantha has a Pali language phrase from a Buddhist sutta in Devanagari script/Sanskrit, and Yuvani has Buddhist *brahmavihara* concepts in the Pali language written in English script with diacritics. Liyoni also has a phrase written in Sanskrit/Devanagari script, though it represents her family rather having religious significance. Thomas has a dharma wheel and lotus while Cassie has a *sandhakadapahana*, or moonstone decorative carvings used in Sri Lankan Buddhist temples. Cassie and Monica's tattoos, while not explicitly Buddhist images, were inspired by a talk they heard at a meditation retreat. Like Thomas, Nimali has a lotus, but got it for aesthetic value rather than for any religious meaning. Of the 17 interviewees, four - Sharmaine, Anjali, Chathuri, and Sakura – have no tattoos with any familial, national, ethnic, cultural, or religious significance.

Six respondents have only one tattoo. Bhagya has four elephants representing her parents, her brother, and herself. Nihal's tattoo is of the Sri Lankan flag's lion over an image of Sri Lanka. Anjali has an English text tattoo with the name of her late family dog. Dave has a Sinhala script tattoo of his family's Sinhala surname with decorative edging. Monica has a stylized sun with the University of California, Berkeley motto, "fiat lux," in her sister Cassie's handwriting. Sophie's sole tattoo had a hummingbird representing her late grandfather, which her sister Diane also has. Four respondents have two tattoos. At the time I interviewed her, Yuvani only had one tattoo of a monkey, but several months after our interview, she emailed me a picture of her second tattoo of the four Buddhist *brahmaviharas*. Sharmaine has two tattoos, one of a former friend's first initial, and the other of a tulip. Ajantha has two tattoos: a phrase from the Buddhist Kariniyametta Sutta, and the word "love" in Japanese script. Chathuri has the phrase "This too shall pass," and a large botanical tattoo of roses, leaves, and thorns.

Four respondents have more than 3 tattoos in separate locations on their bodies. Liyoni has four tattoos: the lion from the Sri Lankan flag holding the sword, a turtle in Rapa Nui style, the constellation Orion, and "aham prema," meaning "divine love" in Sanskrit to honor her grandmother Prema. Diane has five tattoos: "This too shall pass," the outline of three fish, a hummingbird she got with her sister Sophie, "Ammi, Tatti, Sophie" in Sinhala script in her mother's handwriting representing her parents and her sister, and a glyph of a home that she got

with Nimali. Cassie has five tattoos: "*anithya*" and "*upeksha*", two Buddhist words in Sinhala script, a tattoo of a bird which recreates her grandfather's tattoo, a sun with the UC Berkeley motto written in her sister Monica's handwriting, a sleeping leopard in a tree, and the moonstone temple carving. Nimali has eight tattoos: the lion from the Sri Lankan flag, a quote from Audre Lorde's "Litany for Survival": "So it is better to speak/remembering/we were never meant to survive," a phrase in Mayan, a lotus, a glyph of home that she got with Diane, a Mayura Yakka mask, mint leaves, and a window looking out over a dark desert with a cactus.

Sakura, Manu, and Thomas have the most extensive tattoos. Sakura has a full sleeve with characters and images from the 1993 stop-motion animated film *The Nightmare Before Christmas.* In addition to the full sleeve, she has five other tattoos: the word "soul" in stylized English script, a dragon silhouette that covers most of her lower back, a tribal sun, the number 420 in Roman numerals (CDXX), and a hibiscus. The *Nightmare Before Christmas* sleeve alone took eight sessions, which Sakura estimates took four hours per session. Manu has multiple tattoos covering his entire back and full sleeves on both arms. He has Sinhala script of his family's surname -Kumarawaththage, the Greek letters of his college fraternity, a phoenix rising from the ashes in a Polynesian style, a Polynesian style Sri Lankan lion, a turtle and tiki figure, a water dragon, a Japanese phrase, a caduceus, the American Boy Scout symbol. While Manu may have a similar number of tattoos as others, his are much larger and represent many more hours of sitting. Manu estimates that he has 8 or 9 discrete pieces that he has sat for over a dozen times, saying, "I'm not sure I can count a number, because tattoos are kind of like an evolving piece." Thomas has multiple tattoos covering his top torso and full sleeves on both arms. He has Sinhala words for "pain" and "satisfaction" in Sinhala script, tattoos from the animes *Naruto* and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, Japanese style tattoos of a dragon and an oni mask, two Chinese guardian symbols, or foo dogs, with one holding a ball and another holding a smaller foo dog, a dharma wheel coming out of a lotus, a lion face, and his wife and his sister-in-law's initials alongside his initials. We will examine some of the respondents' tattoos in depth in later sections.

Embodied Temporality: The Diasporic Body Stores

Tattoos exist in multiple moments in the past, present and future, and have an embodied temporality in these moments: there is the moment of choosing the tattoo, the moment of inking, and in the story told about the tattoo afterwards, a story that changes over time. Despite the tattoo's purportedly permanent nature, there is an impermanence to the tattoo: the tattoo's meaning in our minds changes as does the ways we think and speak about the tattoo. Relationships that were important enough to permanently mark the body may no longer exist, so tattoos capture moments in time which are broken or can no longer be captured again. Further, even the supposedly indelible physical aspects of tattoo are impermanent: as the body changes and ages, the tattoo also changes physically.

There is a beauty in the way the body changes and ages throughout time, and visible changes to the body can enhance the poetry of a tattooed image. Some stretch marks on Thomas' arms live next to and in between his tattoos, and some of the marks are overwritten by parts of tattooed images, a physical juxtaposition of the lasting tattoo with the changing nature of the body. Yuvani speaks happily of her monkey tattoo, saying, "It was kind of funny because with each pregnancy, because it's [on] my lower abdomen, the tail would get really stretched!"

Yuvani got this tattoo when she was an undergraduate at UC Berkeley, and almost 30 years and several children later, the monkey has been stretched and altered. Her body marks a life lived, illustrating her pregnancies and the new lives she has created, but unlike Thomas' stretch marks, Yuvani's stretch marks have changed the tattooed image itself. Throughout it all, the monkey has remained but has grown and changed alongside its owner. Similarly, Manu sees his extensive tattoos changing as he ages, and reflects on their impermanence:

> My tattoos get faded over time and I kind of think of them [as] just like how you are physically and mentally in your life, they change. Things affect them, or the sun fades them over time. You might need to get them touched up, if you want to, but you don't have to. The tattoos are kind of like a living thing for me, that changes along with my life.

Tattoos are alive because the diasporic body is alive, and tattoos' ability to get touched up and return to an earlier freshness despite their aging suggest tattoos are temporally misaligned just as the diasporic body is.

Tattoos also illustrate the temporal misalignment of the diasporic body, in their inclusion of memories, relationships, and experiences that have irrevocably changed. In this way, tattoos can be ghostly and haunt the bodies on which they reside. When memory is embedded in the body, the past becomes, remains, and *is* the present. Through tattoos, the body becomes a time machine, allowing the diasporic body to time travel to different moments in life. Several tattoos commemorate life events, such as Manu's caduceus, which represents the end of his residency, while Diane and Nimali's matching tattoos with their fellowship cohort mark the growth and change they experienced together in Sri Lanka. Sharmaine's body bears the initial of a friend that she has since had a falling out with, though the tattoo marks the end of her undergraduate life and represents her attempt codify that friendship. Sharmaine's other tattoo of a tulip that she shares with three friends marks an important trip they all went on. Both Chathuri and Nimali have different tattoos with the phrase "This too shall pass," that they got to remember different moments of struggle and perseverance. The phrase itself directly speaks to both the passage of time and the impermanence of painful or difficult life events.

Like the diasporic body, tattoos move forward and backward in time. Tattoos can represent a past time while the diasporic body moves forward in time and changes. Before getting her tattoo, Monica asked a tattooed colleague about this dilemma:

> I asked him the question that everybody asks: "Do you ever worry that you'll regret any of your tattoos?" And he [said], "No, because my tattoos represent how I feel right now. And that's always going to be part of me, whether it's a memory on my skin or just a memory in my brain." So now I look at [my] tattoo, and it's not really who I am right *now* necessarily, but it always *is* at the same time, so I'm at peace with it.

Similarly, Sophie speaks about how her tattoo is both a reflection of a particular moment, but has also grown with her and changed as her self-identities have changed:

> When I think back to when I got it, it's definitely a snapshot in time of where I was at mentally and emotionally, physically. And then moving forward, it has evolved with how I think of myself. I used to be a person with the tattoo, a woman with the tattoo, a climber with a tattoo, a hiker with a tattoo, and [now] I'm a mom with the tattoo.

Tattoos also serve as individual objects of memory and as temporal diasporic objects in particular. Sara Ahmed explores how diasporic subjects gather objects in in their home, claiming, "diasporic spaces are also shaped by object histories."[68] This collection of objects connects the diasporic subject with multiple locations in time and space, so such diasporic objects "gather as lines of connection to spaces that are lived as homes but are no longer inhabited."[69] However, Ahmed cautions against applying a simple past/present dichotomy onto diasporic objects:

> [It] is crucial that we do not assume that such objects simply take us "back" toward a past that is no longer. The proximity of objects is not a sign of nostalgia, of being sick for a home that is lost...[Instead,] such objects make new identities possible in the "textures" of the everyday. Or we could say that such objects keep the "impressions" of the past alive, and in so doing they make new impressions in the very weave or fabric of the present.[70]

With tattoos, the body is the diasporic space: instead of a living room with artful cultural wall hangings or a bureau cluttered with decorative objects, the body is the space chosen to display diasporic objects. Tattoos, then, are embodied diasporic objects that are gathered differently and their location on the body allows for a permanence that the detritus of diasporic knick-knacks does not allow, making indelible impressions on the fabric of the present.

<u>The Diasporic Body as Archive</u>

When we think of tattoos as a collection of moments in time expressed on the body, the body becomes an archive. What is an archive? The archive is a place to store documents, a place to keep precise records, and is supposedly a place of permanence. Archives are places of institutional power, subject to systemic inequity that influences choices on what is "worthy" of preservation.[71] In thinking about archives built "from below," from minority spaces, from places that push back against institutional ideas that are reflective of complex histories and communities, Sara Ahmed argues that such archives can be bodies:

> An archive too can be built; we can be more or less at home there, even if we assemble our own archives from bits and pieces that are available because of where we have been. A useful archive could be thought of as a form of memory, a way of holding onto things. To use an object is to create a memory that is shared. Each time something is used, we accumulate more stuff to remember with. And to create an archive is to make a body, each part being of use to that body…[72]

When the diasporic body becomes the archive, instead of being a place of institutional power, it becomes a place of empowerment. Yuvani sees the empowerment in the bodily archive every

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[68] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 149.
[69] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 149-150.
[70] Ibid., 150.
[71] Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2019), 15.
[72] Ibid., 20.

day at work, saying, "Your body is a canvas, and this is your expression. Since I'm always examining patients in the ICU, I just revel in what I see. When I'm asking them [about their tattoos], I'm fascinated by it." While Ahmed thinks of archives can be bodies, this section explores how tattooed bodies are archives in themselves. Thinking about the body as an archive illustrates the embodied temporality of tattoos. With tattoos, we can conceive of the body as a *living* archive, a *lived-in* archive, an archive *that is lived*, and/or archive *that has been lived*.

For Sri Lankan Americans in diaspora, the body as archive becomes an active repository for memories and tattooed diasporic bodies specifically can become archives purposefully or inadvertently. When the tattooed diasporic body is a *purposeful* archive, it is creatively and thoughtfully built. Throughout the interviews, some respondents with multiple tattoos see their bodies as archives that mark and remember people who are foundational to them, different aspects of themselves, and/or significant moments in their lives.

Nimali, along with Diane, were part of the same six-person cohort during a one-year fellowship in Sri Lanka for diasporic Sri Lankans. At the end of the fellowship, Diane, Nimali, and the rest of their cohort got matching tattoos inked by a Sri Lankan tattoo artist. The tattoo itself has no Sri Lankan cultural meaning and is, as Diane says, "A triangle with a square and it's just very simple. Very, *very* simple." In fact, Nimali and another cohort member found the image after Googling meanings of glyphs and chose one that represented "home." Even though "It's kind of a random symbol on there," Nimali says, "It feels super meaningful to me. It's the first time that I felt seen in my identity with these five other people. I struggled to find kids who had similar politics to me, so that was the first time that I [found others] aligned with my politics."

The diasporic body as a purposeful archive marks a lived experience and a moment of transformation. For Nimali, the tattoo is a reminder about conversations with her cohort that revealed what "home" represents to different Sri Lankan diasporas, saying, "It's interesting, because I would say at least half of them would not consider themselves to be Lankan at all, in the sense that they would not identify with that title." Similarly, Diane says:

> [The tattoo is] supposed to represent "home," or the concept of home. And not to say that Sri Lanka is "home" but perhaps it's each other, community, and the space that we create within ourselves and our identities. We talked so much about these questions [about our Sri Lankan identity]. We all have such different experiences and such different perspectives but that was the concept [behind the tattoo].

Despite their differences in ethnicity, religion, geographic location, and experiences of diaspora, the fellowship cohort were able to problematize "home" together. Diane and Nimali were the only Sinhala cohort members that year, so they found it powerful to reconsider Sri Lankan diasporic identity with their minority cohort, for whom the fellowship was their first experience in Sri Lanka. For Diane, the tattoo represents even with the cohort's ethnolinguistic differences and "even in their relationship to Sri Lanka, their relationship to identity [and gender]," they were still able to connect and develop close relationships with each other.

In addition to recording how they reframed their identities from *Sri Lankan* diasporic to *Sinhala* diasporic, the tattoo also marks Diane and Nimali's transformed relationship to Sri Lanka as a location. The fellowship was the first time they had lived in Sri Lanka on their own without the buffer of family. Diane explains:

> It's different when you're visiting with your family and it's a short trip. Versus living there, [it's about] how to be present and how to engage. Being a representative of my family, being a woman, being an American, being all these different things, and not wanting to be an asshole! Not wanting to be *not* cognizant of these [power] dynamics, [but] also not wanting to hold myself back and not be fully present, so that [balance] was really interesting. Oh, there's so much I could say! It was really good experience.

Experiencing Sri Lanka for herself was also a turning point for Nimali, who began to reconsider what she had heard about the country and the war growing up:

> Before [the fellowship], the connection I had with Sri Lanka was to the family members I had there, and [with] experiencing the land from the lens of being a visitor. I still do experience going to the island as a visitor in many ways. Living in Sri Lanka, I got to form my own connection to the island and my own way of understanding it. Then from applying different things [I learned there] to think through the information I was getting from other people, from elders, in our community in the U.S. Traveling to Sri Lanka, it feels different going now. Living [there], I felt much more connected to the country, to our politics.

The tattoo marks a moment where Diane and Nimali began to engage with Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan history as independent adults through their own perspectives. In doing so, both built for themselves their own new type of Sri Lankan diasporic community in Sri Lanka. For Diane, the tattoo represents how she found a sense of Sri Lankan community that she did not have in Southern California:

> [When I think of] specifically my Sri Lankan community, I think of family, and I think of, honestly, our cohort. It's very limited to that. I'm not connected to a religious community, I'm not connected to any cultural groups. I did Bharatanatyam [dance] as a kid and things like that, but I'm not really linked up to [Sri Lankan cultural activities]. That's part of what compelled me to do [the fellowship], because I felt the disconnect, I was seeking that space. All the schools we went to, we were the only Sri Lankan family, including university. I felt like I was missing that.

Nimali also sees the tattoo as a marking a moment of finding, as she says, her "chosen family," where the cohort members "might be spread out in different places, but [they are] the people whose connection with me began on the island." The glyph tattoo records the new types of community the cohort found in Sri Lanka with each other. The fellowship was a pivotal moment, changing how Diane and Nimali viewed being in diaspora, being Sri Lankan, their connections to Sri Lankan minority diasporas, and being Sinhala. Even though the glyph itself is not obviously Sri Lankan, the tattoo is Sri Lankan by virtue of the meaning Nimali and Diane are recording on their bodies. Further, getting the tattoo in Sri Lanka also lends itself to an authenticity and legitimacy to the image that could not be experienced by getting the same tattoo in the U.S.

For Nimali the glyph marks another moment of identity transformation during the fellowship:

> That's where I felt the most, [for] the first time as an adult, really engaged with my queerness and queer community. Even then I wouldn't say engaged *fully* with my queerness but it was, in some ways, the place where I started to feel much more comfortable.

In this way, Nimali's body serves as a repository of memories not only in time, but also to different parts of her self-actualization journey. Her Audre Lorde quote and Mayan phrase mark her personal political journey, while her home glyph marks how she emerged from her fellowship in Sri Lanka with a changed perspective on the Sri Lankan nation-state, its history, her own Sinhala identity, and her queerness. Nimali's diasporic body is a living archive that is also lived, with her ongoing journey represented through her tattoos.

The tattooed diasporic body is also a living archive that *has been lived*, so can also become an archive *inadvertently*. When something is documented or preserved in an archive, it implies accuracy and exactness. While preserving a document in an archive connotes a sense of permanence, documents themselves are fundamentally impermanent objects. Ahmed explains how an archive is "not only…something we assembled *around* use but as an archive *in* use."[73] When an archive is in use, documents are moved around, and in the process, can get miscategorized, damaged, or even lost. To put something in an archive to be preserved brings with it the possibility that in its very preservation, it will be changed irrevocably. Documents can be changed over time, added to, recategorized, or like a palimpsest, are rewritten over. In the same way the tattooed body's archive is added to, recategorized, and overwritten. However, when the body becomes an archive inadvertently, it marks moments in time or relationships that no longer exist. For example, even though Sharmaine no longer speaks with her friend, that person's first initial is marked upon Sharmaine's body, so the relationship remains preserved. Other respondents mentioned tattoos of memories, people, or moments that they are now uncomfortable with, regret, or even want to remove or cover up.

None of the interviewees have currently inked coverups on tattoos representing past mistakes, but Sakura expresses a desire to coverup embarrassing tattoos. Sakura got her stick-and-poke tattoo as a teenager of the Roman numerals for "420," which is a popular slang term marijuana. While it seemed appropriate for her in the life stage and headspace that she was in at the time, she is now incredibly embarrassed by it. It marks a specific period in her life, but she no longer feels it represents her as an adult, especially now that she is a parent. When her daughter asked about the 420 Roman numeral tattoo, she says, "I had to lie. I [didn't] do a full circle lie and [just said], 'It's just a tattoo I really regret and I don't really care for it.'" Sakura will eventually cover up this tattoo, but it will take her more time and consideration, since she says, "I don't want to get a cover up *just* to get a cover up. I would really like meaning to my tattoos." She reiterates that point later in the interview when speaking about hypothetical tattoos, saying, "It was never anything that I would probably do unless I really did some research on it. Again, I can't get any more tattoos that have zero meaning." Sakura's bodily archive is no longer accurate to her experience, so her search for a meaningful tattoo reflects her change in attitude towards her tattoos – moving forward, she will create a more purposeful bodily archive.

[73] Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use?*. Emphasis in original.

The Diasporic Body as Record: Commemorative and Memorial Tattoos

The body as archive also serves as a both a record that bears witness to family histories and as a memorial site. As an archive, the tattooed diasporic body is a recording device that commemorates their Sri Lankan Sinhala identity as well as significant relationships and people, such as siblings, parents, and other family members. Apart for Manu, all the respondents with Sinhala script tattoos have non-Sri Lankan names: Cassie, Dave, Diane, and Thomas. For three of them, their Sinhala tattoos were the very first tattoo they got inked: Cassie's Sinhala script tattoos reading "*anithya*" (Sinhala word meaning "impermanence") and "*upeksha*" (Sinhala word meaning "equanimity"), Thomas' tattoos reading *ridhenawa* (Sinhala for "it hurts") and *thrupthiya* (Sinhala word meaning "satisfaction"), and Dave's Sinhala family name tattoo. Diane's tattoo reads "Ammi, Tatti, and Sophie," in Sinhala script. In these tattoos, Sinhala is not used flippantly to decorate; instead, the tattoos mark important concepts that commemorate their identities. In doing so, Cassie, Dave, Diane, and Thomas use their Sinhala tattoos to claim an authenticity. Despite their non-Sri Lankan names, the Sinhala script on their bodies marks them as distinctly Sri Lankan and Sinhala.

Several interviewees used tattoos to commemorate family, such as with Ajantha's "love" tattoo in Japanese script that honors how his parents met in a Japanese class, Bhagya's tattoo of elephants representing her nuclear family, Dave and Manu's respective Sinhala script tattoos with their original family surname, and Thomas' tattoo of his wife and sister-in-law's initials alongside his own. Three interviewees' family tattoos featured their loved one's handwriting: Cassie and Monica's matching tattoos representing their sisterhood have the other's handwriting on their bodies, while Diane's tattoo for her parents and sister in Sinhala script is in her mother's handwriting. Not only do these tattoos record the people who they love, but they are also literally marked *by* their loved ones.

Several tattoos not only record, but also memorialize late friends or family. Liyoni has a tattoo of her late grandmother's name in Sanskrit/Devanagari as well as a turtle tattoo to honor a friend who died unexpectedly. Anjali's tattoo serves as a memorial to her late dog who was a cherished member of the family for 13 years. Sophie and Diane's matching tattoos represent their sisterhood while also serving as memorials to their grandfather, and Cassie also uses a tattoo to memorialize her grandfather. When the bodily archive also is a memorial, such tattoos work as what Marita Sturken refers to as "technologies of memory." Technologies of memory can include nonhuman and human memorials, objects, cultural productions, and bodies, such as the bodies of survivors.[74] Technologies of memory "embody and generate memory," meaning that they preserve memory while also participating in the production of future memories.[75]

There were two tattoos that utilized the image of birds to memorialize late grandfathers. Cassie had one tattoo recreating her late grandfather's tattoo of a bird, while Sophie and Diane had matching tattoos of a hummingbird for their late grandfather. Such birds are not a Sri Lankan motif, but they had different stories for choosing these images, which reflects Sturken's examination of reenactment as a cathartic means for people to find closure after an event. [76] Reenactment through memorial tattoos reflect how diasporic bodies hold the past within the present. Cassie's memorial tattoo is unique, based off her grandfather's tattoo of a bird. It does

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[74] Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 1.
[75] Ibid., 10
[76] Ibid., 43.

not perfectly recreate the original tattoo; instead, Cassie drew a more abstract image for the tattoo artist that reflects the original tattoo without being an exact copy. In reinscribing the tattoo, Cassie put her own mark by drawing the original tattoo herself, so that the recreation honors her grandfather and her past while also representing her present. While Cassie's tattoo reenacts an image, Sophie and Diane's tattoo reenacts a specific moment. Sophie explains the event that inspired the choice of hummingbird for the tattoo:

> There was a story of when he passed. He was a lover of nature, he was a lover of outdoors, gardening, everything. [After] he passed, there was a big earthquake. The door swung open and hummingbirds flew into the room. They did this strange thing that birds don't usually do: they did a circle around the living room, went upstairs towards his room, did something up there, came downstairs, and exited the same way. Even though the upstairs window was open. We [said], "That's so strange for birds to behave that way!" This was two or three days after his death.
>
> [Soon after], we started noticing more hummingbirds around us outside windows. Granted, we have a lot of flowers and feeders and things like that. But when we started digging in, [thinking],"Oh, what is this?", [we found that] apparently the Native Americans believed that the hummingbird was the carrier of spirits into the next world. We were like, "Oh my gosh!"

The sisters' tattoos reenact the moment the hummingbirds came into their family home, and in reenacting this moment, the tattoos allow for Sophie and Diane to remember their grandfather. In both cases, the birds represent the grandfather in different ways: for Cassie, the bird is a tangible reinterpretation of her grandfather's literal tattoo, while Sophie and Diane's hummingbirds is a representation of their grandfather's spirit. Similarly, Ky-Phong Tran speaks about the important of using the body to memorialize, saying of his tattoos representing his parents, "As they carried me, I now carry them."[77]

<u>The Diasporic Body as Testament: Preserving What Has Been Removed From Records</u>

While commemorative and memorial tattoos bear witness to family members both alive and dead, the diasporic body as testament bears witness to lost family histories. Here, the body becomes a site of preservation to record what no longer exists or has been removed from formal records. Two respondents, Manu and Dave, have tattoos of their former family surnames in Sinhala script on their bodies because those surnames do not exist in their families' U.S. identity records. Throughout American immigration history, ethnic names have been changed during and due to immigration, and immigrants' original names are shortened or Anglicized. While in the U.S., naming conventions are "First-Middle-Last" – for example, my full name is "Mihiri Uthpala Tillakaratne" - Sri Lankan naming conventions include far more names. As a result, these surnames and family names can get mixed up, first names can sometimes become last names, or are eliminated completely during immigration to the U.S. For Sri Lankans, these names can be called "*vasagama* names" or "*gedara* names", depending on one's region, status,

[77] Ky-Phong Tran, "Tattoos Are Proof We Exist," Thinking L.A., Zocalo Public Square and University of California, Los Angeles, July 2015. Available online at https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2015/07/21/tattoos-are-proof-we-exist/ideas/nexus/. Accessed 3 June 2022.

or caste. When we spoke, Manu and I called just called them "*ge* names," as "*ge*" attached to the end of a name means "from" or "of." For the purposes of simplicity, I will also refer to these names as "*ge* names" in this chapter. Manu's tattoo is the name "Kumaragewaththage" in Sinhala script, wrapped around his bicep. Kumaragewaththage literally means "from Kumaragewatta," or the Kumaragewatta neighborhood near Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte, the legislative capital of Sri Lanka. This name would have preceded his family surname, which would then be followed by his first name – i.e. configured as "Hometown/Village Name-Last Name-First Name."

A *ge* name can represent a family, a vocation, or a title given by royalty for one's service. For example, my grandfather's *ge* name, Mudiyanselage, given to his great-grandfather (my great-great-great grandfather) by the Kandyan king, indicates that he was the regional/district chief of an area. During immigration, my grandfather's original full name in Sinhala, Sillapanagedara Godamunna Mudiyanselage Lokubanda Godamunna, was changed to "Sillapana Godamunna."[78] Following U.S. naming conventions, my grandfather's name should have been listed as "Lokubanda Godamunna" on his identity documents, as "Lokubanda" was what Americans would consider his first name (or the primary name he was called by) and "Godamunna" was what we would consider his last name. This tendency for the U.S. embassy and immigration officials to use the first part of a person's full *ge* name causes issues for Sri Lankan immigrants. For example, when several people from that family immigrated in the years after my grandfather came to the U.S., they argued for different names to be listed on their immigration papers. Otherwise, every member of our family who immigrated to the U.S. would have the exact same legal name as my grandfather, since they all have the same ancestral *ge* name of "Sillapanagedara Godamunna Mudiyanselage" listed on their Sri Lankan legal and identity documents.

Most importantly, the U.S. legal identity of "Sillapana Gedera Godamunna" removes the Mudiyanselage title passed down through generations, an erasure of family history as well as personal identity. When I mentioned this issue to my parents, my mother suddenly got up in the middle of the conversation to check my grandfather's death certificate. Seeing her father's name listed as "Sillapana Gedera Godamunna" on the document, she became emotional as she realized that my grandfather did not get to die as himself. The removal of names, names which are so significant to people because they are not just identifiers but *identities* which are vital to one's sense of self, is one of the many examples of violence enacted upon migrants to the U.S. Manu's choice to inscribe his *ge* name onto his body, then, is a reclamation of institutional erasure. Having Kumaragewaththage on his body allows Manu to feel connected to other family members and familial generations, serving not only as a testament to his genealogy, but a testament to a specific place of origin, Kumaragewatta. It says not only, *This is where I am from*, but also, *This is where <u>we</u> are from.*

While Manu still has a Sri Lankan surname even though his *ge* name has been lost, Dave has completely lost the surname which connects him to Sri Lanka. Instead, Dave has chosen to tattoo his family last name, Wickramasingha, in Sinhala script on his arm, which wraps around his bicep like Manu's *ge* name tattoo. Dave's father, who fought in the Vietnam War for the United States, had to drop his surname "Wickramasingha" when immigrating. Instead, he used his English/Anglo middle name as his last name, changing his name from "Brian Joseph Wickramasingha" to "Brian Joseph". As a result, "Wickramasingha" has never been a part of Dave's legal name, since "David Joseph" is on his birth certificate and has been Dave's name his

[78] I have made slight changes to my grandfather's name for privacy reasons.

entire life. However, Dave wanted to keep the Sinhala last name that was necessarily dropped when immigrating to the U.S. With the tattoo, this lost name is now an integral part of his body, something that will remain and cannot be removed from Dave's body until he dies unless he chooses to.

Dave's choice of decoration surrounding the tattoo is especially significant for him as a biracial and multicultural person. While Dave's father is Sinhala, his mother is white with Italian ancestry. His seemingly "white"/ "non-ethnic" name is one type of identifier, but his brown skin color is another, racialized, identifier, neither of which he could choose. Wickramasingha literally means "victorious lion," so this name and tattoo also connect Dave to his Sinhala identity specifically. The Sinhala script is surrounded by what looks like branches, which cross at one end and are open at the other, which Dave chose purposefully:

> I don't know what they are. They go around, but I wanted to make sure they didn't connect, for the symbolic reason [that] I didn't want to be trapped. I wanted to keep it open, and then it kind of frames it on both sides and crosses here and then crosses over here. I didn't want to have it standing out there alone. I felt like it needed some type of frame.

These branches, like the branches of a family tree, weave around the Wickramasingha name, holding it, but not restricting it. In this way, Dave can represent all parts of himself, recording his Sinhala family name while not keeping it separate or removed from the rest of his body.

Further, Dave chose his bicep for the tattoo because he wants to share this part of himself with the rest of world. He says of this choice, "I figured I would want to show it off. I'm going to have it, [so] I want to have it on my arm so I can show it." Just as it was important for him not to visually restrict the inked tattoo, he also says, "I didn't want to hide it, though. What's the point of getting if you're going to just hide it, right?" Manu and Dave have used their diasporic bodies as testaments to their family history, recovering lost names and proudly displaying them on their body. Both tattoos allow each person to preserve a name that does not exist in U.S. records. In doing so, these tattooed testaments, while not legally undoing the institutional erasure of the U.S. immigration process, do so psychically and spiritually. These testaments tell the world, *Here is the proof that we exist.*

Embodied Storytelling: The Diasporic Body Speaks

While the bodily archive enacts embodied power instead of the institutional authority that traditional archives represent, both types of archives put objects through an interpretative process. As Taylor notes, "What makes an object archival is the process whereby it is selected, classified, and presented for analysis."[79] Tattoos as diasporic objects are made archival through how they are understood by the body that holds them. Further, what makes a tattoo archival is how its diasporic body speaks – that is, how the tattooed diasporic body's archive is communicated to others. A tattoo is a chosen identifier that resides on the body and tells our bodily story, but the body is also read upon *by* society, so there can be a conflict or disconnect between the stories that one's body tells, the stories that one tells about one's own body, and the

[79] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

stories that others tell about one's body. Victoria Pitts argues that body modifications like tattoos are not instances of self-definition or self-narration, but instead are "complex performances that negotiate between the self and the social."[80] In opposition to readings of body modification as feminist reclamation, Pitts argues that self-narratives created through the body are produced in conversation with society and are therefore not individual.

While tattoos are contextual and rooted in the intersectional factors that affect diasporic bodies, there is also a temporal aspect to self-narration. That is, self-narration occurs *before, during, and after* the body is modified: there is the narration of decision, the narration of the tattoo's image to the artist, the narration to others after the tattoo has been inked, and narration of all of the above years after the moment of inking. Further, in our bodily story, we gain and lose weight, acquire scars, go through pregnancies and surgeries, so while our tattoos may stretch and fade, they still remain throughout. Our bodily story is the story we tell ourselves about our bodies, so our choices of tattoos become part of that story. Since the bodily archive is alive, when the body changes throughout time, so do the stories we tell about that archive. In the act of narrating, we take ownership over our body and over societal readings of our racialized and Othered bodies. When the diasporic body is controlled by outside forces, control over one's body allows this body to tell stories about itself through tattoos. Further, the story may change depending on who we are telling it to – what we emphasize depends on our audience and our relationship to that audience. In this section, we see how the image of the tattoo is less important that what the telling of the tattoo story reveals.

Perceptions of the Tattooed Body: The Diasporic Body Speaks To Society

In 2016, when I was doing preliminary research on the Sri Lankan community in Southern California, I wanted to volunteer at Sri Lanka Day, an annual event put on by the Sri Lanka Foundation. Hoping to pass out flyers or be involved in behind-the-scenes organizing, I filled out the volunteer application. To my surprise, I was called into the Sri Lankan Foundation offices for an interview. When I got there, the organizers told me they wanted me to emcee the event. Desperately trying to get out of it, I said, "I have a tattoo on my shoulder that is visible when I wear a sari, and I am not willing to cover it up with makeup." When I showed it to them, one of the organizers gasped. Apparently, she had seen my tattoo at Sri Lanka Day the year before and had taken a picture of it. She absolutely loved it, telling her husband then, "It was the most authentically Sri Lankan tattoo I've ever seen." To my surprise, my tattoo was not a blemish that proved my "non-Sri Lankanness" and unfitness to represent the organization at a day all about promoting Sri Lankan culture. However, the last time I emceed for Sri Lanka Day in 2018, a young woman came up to me and commented on this dichotomy, saying, "From the front, you look so traditional! But when you walk offstage, you have this tattoo!"

Despite the Sri Lanka Day organizers' appreciation of the tattoo, the young woman's comments reflect an understanding that "tattoo" and "traditional" are mutually exclusive. Respondents are hyperaware of the negative perceptions surrounding tattoos and the assumptions made about tattooed bodies in the Sri Lankan American community. Sakura remembers her mother referring to tattooed people as *rasthiyadukarayo* - literally "loiterers", colloquially meaning a useless person. Others mentioned how they have heard family and community elders refer to tattooed people as "thugs" or "criminals." Despite this negative perception, all of the

[80] Victoria Pitts, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 92.

respondents are very accomplished: interviewees included multiple doctors, a scientific researcher, a data analyst, multiple interviewees working in the nonprofit field in sustainability, education, and women's issues, and interviewees in college, business school, and a doctoral program. Five were UC Berkeley alumni, while the respondents with the most extensive tattoos are a doctor, a data analyst, and an MBA student. In addition to having middle and upper middle-class careers that are perceived as "respectable" by the wider Sri Lankan American community, nine tattooed respondents are parents, thereby participating in the grand project of reproducing the heteronational.[81] Sophie, one of these tattooed parents, calls herself "a bit of a rules follower" and does not seem to feel a disconnect between her preference to follow rules and having a tattoo.

In addition, respondents spoke about how tattoos are perceived outside of their ethnic community in mainstream America. For example, Yuvani recognizes that her career generally has negative perceptions about tattooed bodies:

> It's so fascinating to be part of a culture that is so, so conservative. [In] medicine, the values are so archaic. For the longest time if you had a tattoo, you wore sleeves or something to cover it. Now things are changing, but none of my [colleagues], no one else has a tattoo. I don't even know if they know I have a tattoo. We recently had to do this training for inclusivity, and I was just laughing, because it was this whole session [where] they showed images of different patients, like a homeless guy with tattoos, and go, "What are your assumptions about these people?" I'm kind of beyond that. I don't assume that because you have tattoos, you're less intelligent. But they had this whole breakout [group] and were talking [about their assumptions of him], and I'm like, "Oh my god, what decade are we in?!"

As a result of such assumptions, some respondents choose to hide their tattoos or choose locations in which the tattoos could be easily covered up by clothing. For example, Dave, who chose a generally visible location for his tattoo, covers it up during work, recognizing that he can be taken more seriously by his patients in doing so, saying, "If I'm talking to you about treating your aneurysm in your brain, and you see [the tattoo] on my arm, you might think, 'Do I really want to go to this guy?' I need to engender trust." Similarly, Thomas also acknowledges how covering visible tattoos aids in one's career:

> I know how you can succeed, financially and stuff, but for eight hours a day, you have to not be yourself. I can even get you a job, but for eight hours a day, you have to conform. I feel like that's very conservative, because I don't feel like the world should be like that. [But] as the days go on, I get looser and looser with my clothing. Now all my tattoos are showing [at work], and I don't care. I put my piercings in [and] sometimes I wear big, long spikes in my ears. I don't care. I work in a corporate office, but your work speaks for itself… You can get there, but to get your foot in the door, [you start by] wearing long sleeves. I feel like that's the only conservative thing [I do].

For some, the negative connotations of having tattoos, whether in Sri Lankan American or mainstream U.S. society, are just one of the many types of negative racializations they already

[81] The next chapter delves further into the themes of sexual reproduction via parenthood and the reproduction of culture through passing on Sri Lankan traditions to the next generation.

experience as bodies of color. As Thomas put it, "So what's one more?" As we have seen in the previous chapter, Sri Lankan American bodies are subject to colorist ideology in co-ethnic spaces and marked by racialization in mainstream U.S. As a result, Sri Lankan Americans are already more susceptible to police surveillance and intimidation. Thomas, a dark-skinned man, notes that even without visible tattoos, he is looked at with suspicion:

> They just look at me differently before the tattoos as well, but the tattoos just add to it. Generally, I always wear black, and then I always have a baseball cap on. Just the fact that I'm dark skinned, I'm automatically the target when I walk onto the scene. The tattoos just amplify it.

Similarly, half-white and half-Sri Lankan American Dave also recognizes how having tattoos add another layer to the many racializations he experiences every day as a visibly brown-skinned man. Speaking about why he chooses to cover his Sinhala script tattoo at work, he says:

> Already because of my skin color they're not giving me the same shake as they would somebody else. That is one thing, but *that* skin with *that* tattoo - now you get two points against you. I just prefer not to deal with that part of it. If my [last] name were Wickramasingha, instead of Joseph, that'd be *three* against me.

Monica, who has faced pushback from her colleagues for not drinking for personal and religious reasons, acknowledges another stereotype she faces:

> I felt very good about [the tattoo], because I also felt boxed in by different things that people assume about me and my feelings based on my sobriety or maybe the model minority thing. I have a tattoo, right? There's nothing wrong with me having this tattoo. If this is incongruent to you, this is your problem, not my problem.

Here, Monica knows that one of the racializations she is subject to is the model minority myth, and that having tattoos complicates that stereotype. Similarly, Stanley I. Thangaraj notes that Hindu and Sikh Indian American and Pakistani American men use tattoos to mark ethnoreligious orientation and "intentionally used tattoos as a way to foreground the 'cool' associated with basketball and urban life, underscore their religious identity, and assert a politics of difference within South Asian American masculinity," thereby pushing back against the model minority stereotype they experience as South Asian men.[82]

Regardless of any negative perceptions they experience within their community or as racialized bodies in the U.S., respondents spoke of the importance of expressing themselves through tattooing, and were all satisfied with their choice to decorate their bodies with tattoos. Embodied storytelling goes both ways: in being stereotyped and surveilled, society already tells stories about brown bodies as figures of fear, difference, and Otherness, so tattoos allow for a measure of control over one's own story. The choice to mark a body that is already marked by racialized ideas of what that body is, is many ways a declaration. Like the South Asian American men in Thangaraj's study, tattoos are a declaration of what that body is, and what is important to that body. This choice says, *No matter the messages I hear about my diasporic*

[82] Stanley I. Thangaraj, *Desi Hoop Dreams: Pickup Basketball and the Making of Asian American Masculinity* (New York University Press, 2015) 99.

body or other bodies that look like mine, I am this person. The choices made about tattoos are thus incredibly strategic and inform others how to read one's body. In this way, while tattoos can be incredibly specific and personal, in choosing to further racialize itself through tattoos, the diasporic body speaks to its ethnic community and mainstream society through a body that is overwhelmingly interpreted through preconceived notions of race, gender, sexuality, and more.

<u>Access to the Diasporic Body and Accessing the Diasporic Body's Stories</u>

Tattooed individuals also have complex understandings of choice, bodily autonomy, and intimacy. There are many bodily choices with tattoos: the choice to control how one's body is decorated, the choice to display the tattoo, the choice of location where the tattoo can be visible or not visible, and the choice of clothing that exposes or hides the tattoo. Most respondents have multiple tattoos, and across all respondents, locations vary. Tattoos are located behind the ear, on the back of the neck, near armpits, on biceps, forearms, over wrists, across backs, underneath breasts, across ribs, on stomachs, upper thighs, and down to the heels and feet. Those with only one tattoo them in locations that could be easily covered up with clothing: the back of the neck, back, armpit, upper thigh, under the breast, and on the bicep. As mentioned earlier, Dave chose a location where he could either show or hide the tattoo depending on the situation:

> And so when I had this [tattoo] in a place where everyone can see it, I chose the arm, because most people I'd seen with tattoos had them on the arm. It was a place where I could show it off if I want to, but [also] I can cover it up so, if I wanted to. I didn't really think any other location would be suitable.

These choices are part of the diasporic body's bodily autonomy. For example, in wearing a short-sleeved shirt that displays the tattoo or a long-sleeved shirt to hide it, individuals choose when they show their bodies, who they choose to show their bodies to, or who they hide their bodies from. That is, there are certain parts of ourselves that we can either reveal or keep private. Ultimately, these choices are all about access to the tattooed diasporic body – who *has* access to it, who is *allowed* access to the diasporic body, as well as *when* and *how* the diasporic body can be accessed. For example, during the consent process, I told those with under breast tattoos that I had no need for pictures of their under breast or rib area. However, several sent me pictures of those tattoos, allowing me to access a part of their body even though I explicitly told them I did not need that access for this study. Sophie, who strategically chose her ribs for her tattoo so it would not be visible, reflects on her choice to keep her tattoo out of sight:

> It's funny, I got it in a spot where you would probably never see it. I don't think anyone really knows that I have a tattoo. The first time my mom found out was like eight years ago, because again, it's something that would never really be seen, which I did because I was like, "This is for me." It felt very intimate and very personal, and something that I wanted to keep just for me…I honestly don't think anyone knows that I have one. Not for any reason other than they can't visibly see it, not because I kept it a secret by any means. I also don't think that anyone would expect me to have one.

While Sophie enacts control over her tattoo's visibility or invisibility on a daily basis by choosing an easily hidden tattoo, Sakura now enacts control over how to decorate her body. Sakura did not feel comfortable extending her *Nightmare Before Christmas* tattoo when she was

with her ex-partner, who did not like full sleeves. Instead, she conceded to his preferences and only inked a half sleeve. When the relationship ended several years later, Sakura extended her tattoo to the current full sleeve, thereby taking back control of her body.

However, a tattoo's visibility only confers access to the image itself, not the meaning behind it. As Sophie mentions, the memories displayed on the diasporic body can be incredibly intimate, so this control over one's body is also related to intimacy. In using "intimacy" here, I am not referring to sexual or romantic intimacy, but the intimacy between friends or families (both biologically connected and not).[83] With tattoos, there are several layers of intimacy: the intimacy between the tattooed person and the individual(s) the tattoo represents, the artist, who (if any) is chosen to accompany the tattooed individual when they get the tattoo, and who has access to the tattoo's meaning. Here, access is given not to only the physical body, but in allowing access to the diasporic body's stories, one exerts control over one's own story as well as who is allowed to hear or witness that story. Similarly, Manu reflects on how he limits access to his tattooed body's stories:

> I'm actually relatively private about my tattoos. That's why they're all below the shirt line. I only talk about it to people that really know me. I tell them the same kind of stories that I told you: how I started, about [the tattoos], and what I'm thinking about doing next. I'm not one of those persons that flashes them or shares the stories without being asked.

Here, Manu touches on how his tattoos can be easily hidden with a crew neck long-sleeved shirt, and who he is willing to show them to. Like Manu, other respondents spoke of how only certain trusted people are allowed access to those stories and therefore access to those histories and memories. The intimacy in the telling of the tattoo story is a marker of trust and familiarity. In addition to providing access to the image, the tattooed storyteller grants access to hidden parts of themselves. In this way, respondents were engaging with a type of intimacy with *me* as they told these stories. For example, when Sophie told me that she does not share her tattoo story with others, but she has allowed me to not only to hear it but also write about it, I was very moved – and I still am, as I write this. While the tattooed storyteller is a discerning one, choosing who has access to hidden body parts and untold stories, as we will see in the next section, they are also ebullient in how they tell those stories.

How the Diasporic Body Tells Stories: Joy and (In)complete Storytelling

At my godmother's funeral in 2018, I strike up a conversation with Liyoni, a 52-year-old writer born and raised in the U.S, about my research. The next thing I know, the two of us are crammed into a one-person bathroom stall so she can show me her Sri Lankan flag tattoo. I help her shimmy her dress down so her back is visible, and she bends over the toilet for better access, foot balanced against the bathroom wall for leverage. The lion on her back has developed keloids, as is possible for tattoos on women of color, but it has done so evenly, giving the image a remarkably 3-D effect. I show her my tattoo, which luckily requires no disrobing or bodily contortions, since it is visible due to the sari I am wearing. Liyoni and I are both very loud and gregarious women, so as we shriek and giggle over our respective tattoo stories, our elbows

[83] We will explore intimacy in further depth in Chapter 4.

banging against the stall's metal walls, I hear an auntie in the next stall exclaim, "What on earth is going *on* in there?" making everyone else in the bathroom laugh loudly.

Liyoni's excitement to share her tattoo with me is reflected in respondents' excitement to share their tattoo stories during interviews. The respondents have very comfortable relationships with their bodies and are very open about speaking about their bodies and tattoos. I did not have any difficulties finding tattooed respondents – one person told me that a previous interviewee recommended she speak with me saying, "[My friend] told me she had a really great time, that it was really fun to do, and 'You should do it, too!'" Most of the interviews, which I had intended to last for no more than 60 minutes, went over the allotted time by at least 30 minutes, and several respondents spoke for me for over 2 hours. In fact, in looking through the interview transcripts, a similar exchange comes up in almost every interview:

> Me: I want to be respectful of your time here, so I have to mention that we have only [number] minutes left.
>
> Respondent: No, it's fine – I can stay on for longer!

Everyone had too much to say about their tattoos and wanted me to hear the full stories and full meanings.

Part of this desire to tell a complete story can be seen in the moments that interviewees asked me to pause the recording to share things off the record. Each time, I was transparent about when I paused or restarted the recording and was clear that I would not discuss what was revealed in these moments in written, oral, or any other format. All respondents who asked me to pause recording wanted to expand on a particular story or provide clarification. In some cases, they wanted to mention specific names of individuals or other identifying information, because I had included a note stating, "Please do not include any information that will identify other individuals in your responses to the following questions," on the list of questions that I had emailed prior to the interview. During the consent process, I explained that I preferred respondents not to use identifiable names in their responses, and instead refer to a specific person more generally – e.g. "my sister-in-law" or "an uncle." However, in requesting off-the-record conversations, they wanted to share their stories as completely as possible, which required them to name specific people or events. During the consent process, I made sure to say something like, "I only want to hear what *you* want to tell me. Anything you don't want to say, or don't want on the record, you do *not* have to tell me." Despite knowing that these off-the-record would not be in the text of the dissertation itself, respondents still felt it was important to tell the full and complete versions of their stories, and that those versions were vital for me, specifically, to hear. As a result, several stories in this chapter are incomplete.

In contrast, Sophie and Diane separately told me, on the record, two halves of the same story about the same tattoo. Diane told me the full story of their grandfather, which she calls, "the folklore of our family," but not the full story behind their hummingbird tattoo. Sophie told me the full story of the hummingbird tattoo, but not the full story of their grandfather, saying "There's so much more backstory to my grandfather, what his role was, and the transformative impact that he had on my family's life." Between the two sisters, I got a wider and more complete picture about not only the significance of the tattoo, but also how the tattoo reflects particular details about their family history. Two diasporic bodies were inked with the same tattoo at the same time, but each body revealed a different story from the bodily archive. In the

same vein, I have purposefully kept the full significance of the tattoo's meaning and their grandfather's story incomplete. For example, I have strategically edited Sophie's quotes about the tattoo so it does not reveal what Diane revealed, and vice versa. This is so Sophie and Diane can retain their privacy and ownership over their tattoo and family stories. I will say this: Sophie and Diane's grandfather sounds like an extraordinary person, and I feel so blessed to have heard their unique family story.

Not only is the telling of the stories themselves incomplete due to the off-the-record nature of some conversations, but also the capturing, organization, and synthesizing of the stories is itself limited due to the realities of what can fit into one chapter. As Ahmed notes, "There is so much material to wade through. The archive too is stuffed."[84] The respondents have almost 100 total tattoos on their 17 diasporic bodies, and every single tattoo has a story behind it, but I realistically cannot describe every story in the constraints of one chapter. There is not enough space for all the stories in their completeness. Further, there was a joy in going through such a stuffed archive: the conversations in transcribed and written form reveal how stories flow and move, go off on tangents, are infused with humor and emotion, and the unnecessary details that nonetheless added flavor to telling of a story. For instance, Nihal is a captivating speaker and holds my attention during our Zoom meeting, one of the many that go over the 60-minute interview time. The transcript of his interview reveals his incredibly ambitious, meandering storytelling style. Nihal includes so many details, both important and not, and in doing so, reveals so much himself. The written form and the constraints of a dissertation does not and cannot capture the full spectrum of embodied storytelling.

Another joy in revisiting the interview data came in the seeing the moments that storytelling was interrupted. For example, Dave's wife came in and gave him a glass of wine, and we said hi to one another. When his baby daughter woke up from a nap, he introduced her to me, and I cooed at her about her chubby cheeks and made faces at her while he spoke. Nihal's daughter interrupted at one point, and he pulled her onto his lap and introduced me to her as "Auntie," which was delightful. Bhagya's dog, painted in rainbow cheetah spots for a recent Pride event, jumped on her lap and refused to move. At one point, as Bhagya spoke, all I saw was an eyeful of colorful puppy rump. When Bhagya described wanting another tattoo to represent her husband, he yelled suggestions from the kitchen, where he was cooking dinner. After these interruptions, I would continue with the interview. These moments felt like a glimpse into how oral tradition and storytelling have been done for millennia: human beings telling stories interrupted by the realities of life.

Similarly, during these interviews, I also gained insight into the lives of the respondents, especially due to the nature of Zoom. Instead of doing interviews in a restaurant, café, office, or other public place, or doing interviews over the phone (as I did for my Master's thesis as well as for the preliminary interviews for this project), I was invited into respondents' homes, providing additional intimacy while they told me personal stories. Towards the end of the interview, Dave moved his laptop to show me his dogs, talking about how they reacted to the new baby. Sakura and Chathuri sat and lay comfortably on their beds, heads propped up as they talked to me. The first part of my interview with Anjali was done with her in her bathroom, with her shower and tub in the background, until she moved to her bedroom. Nimali was outside in her backyard in the sun, while Diane took me with her to her kitchen at one point. As these diasporic bodies were telling their stories while they lived their lives, talking about capturing moments on their bodies, I was seeing their bodies in very human, very intimate moments.

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[84] Ahmed, *What's the Use?*, 16.

The Diasporic Body Speaks For Itself

As noted earlier, diasporic bodies are marked as Other and racialized even without tattoos. The tattooed diasporic body exists in conversation within transnational social forces. For example, Sara Ahmed's work explores how the body in implicated in migration narratives, and Keri Jacqueline Brandt notes that there is a "complex tension between the experience of self-narration, or the re-creation of a new self" and "the systems of power in which the body projects itself is alternately performed and read."[85] In embodied storytelling, we have seen how these forces can generate incomplete stories as well as the moments in which full stories are spoken aloud. This reflects Diana Taylor's conception of "the repertoire," which unlike the archive, "requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by 'being there,' being a part of the transmission. As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same."[86] Taylor argues that the repertoire complicates the primacy of the written and spoken word in Western thought, in which "the dominance of language and writing has come to stand for *meaning* itself. Live, embodied practices not based in linguistic or literary codes, we must assume, have no claims on meaning."[87]

While Taylor conceptualizes the repertoire in live performance, the tattooed diasporic body can also exist in the intersection of the archive and the repertoire. As discussed in the first section, the tattooed body is a living archive storing memories and records, and embodied storytelling, like the repertoire, requires "being a part of the transmission" when told to others. However, unlike the archive and repertoire, embodied self-narration still exists within the individual whether or not someone is there to hear the story. Whether or not I hear the story, whether or not I quote the story in this chapter, the story still has meaning to the diasporic body, even if unheard, even if untold. To put it another way, the story does *not* require transmission in order to be part of an archive of embodied practice. In this way, the tattooed diasporic body pushes back against Western epistemological practices that prioritize verbal declarations.

The story of Yuvani's first tattoo illustrates how unspoken stories still have power to the would-be storyteller. In other tattoo stories discussed earlier, most were inked to represent loved ones or connect with past family histories, but Yuvani's tattoo represents herself. Her tattoo is of a monkey holding a banana in its open mouth, balanced on its two front arms, tail curled up in a spiral, that she got as a college student. She says of her choice of animal, "I felt like the ethos of a monkey was like me back then," and "My personality, especially back then, I would characterize myself as very playful, very fun loving, very quirky, so that's probably the spirit of that animal holding a banana." Reminiscing on her personality when she was younger, she describes herself as "the one with some costume on," smiling as she remembers particular moments and photos of that time. However, she notes that with college and medical school, "Life got quieter and quieter. And then you have to start forming all these layers around yourself. That core person that I was, was never really seen again." As a result, she says:

> I can't be that playful monkey person. Plus, the work that I do - I chose a very somber profession. In the field of medicine, I chose the field that had the highest amount of death

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[85] Keri Jacqueline Brandt, "The Skin We Live In: Explorations of Body Modification, Sexuality, and Citizenship," Symbolic interaction, 2004, Vol.27 (3), 432.
[86] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 20.
[87] Ibid., 25.

> in the ICU. So, the monkey is symbolic of this core self that I don't think is as revealed anymore. Maybe just to my innermost circle it's revealed…
>
> When I see people from my high school, I'm seen and appreciated in a different way than I am now. The people I've met subsequently, they know more outer layers of me, [and] I can't really be that [monkey-like] person. There's not enough trust there that they'll appreciate that and safeguard that sort of innocence. This could be a midlife crisis, I don't know, but there is definitely this part of me that craves that in my mind. That was such an incredible chapter in my life, and the monkey's symbolic of that wonderful, innocent life [that was] so joyful and carefree and fun. My life doesn't feel that way anymore.

Here, Yuvani's self-narration recognizes the nonlinear and non-teleological nature of self-actualization. What Yuvani keeps under these "outer layers" is not the fact that she has a tattoo, or even that the tattoo is of a monkey. Despite her "monkey mind" being vital to her core sense of self, it is not something Yuvani shares with many, so it is the story of *Yuvani*, not the story of the tattoo, that remains untold. Similarly, Ananya Kabir distinguishes between what she terms the narrative impulse and lyric impulse: the narrative impulse "moves forward in time," while the lyric impulse "lingers over moments and demands that we linger with it. Different modes of telling or recounting then appear as on a spectrum defined by these two impulses."[88] Kabir uses this lyric impulse to find nonverbal and nonlinear expressions in things like a piece of art, which has no discernable beginning or end, or a piece of music, which may be nonverbal. While Kabir is speaking specifically of artistic expression, I contend that we can also find this lyric impulse in tattoos. The tattoo, as a lyric impulse, illustrates nonlinearity and multitemporality: the tattoo is a permanent representation of a self that has been interrupted, existing in the present while representing both a past and present experience of self.

Similarly, while the monkey represents a time in Yuvani's life that is past, it still represents part of what she considers to be her core self, despite the many changes in her life. Throughout medical school, residency, marriage, and children, the monkey has become stretched and changed along with Yuvani. The monkey is not secure to the ground and instead has its legs in the air and embodies the unformed, messy, child-like, and silly aspects of youth, reminding Yuvani to keep and cultivate the youthful "monkey mind" and return back to what she considers her core self despite how her life has changed. The tattoo allows her to access that part of herself and is a reminder to return to that self, despite the many external factors that have forced Yuvani to hide such a vital part of her personality with the world. In doing so, for Yuvani, the tattoo does not require narration to function as an embodied practice.

A few months after our interview, Yuvani emailed me a picture of her second tattoo, inked 25 years after her first. She had the Buddhist *brahmaviharas*, or four immeasurable qualities – *metta* (loving kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *muditha* (empathetic joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity), written in English below her right breast. During our interview, she had told me how Buddhism had helped her cope with what she experienced in the ICU during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In getting a second tattoo, Yuvani has added something to her bodily archive that speaks to the story she tells about herself and her sense of a core self. The new

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[88] Ananya Kabir, *Partition's Post-Amnesias: 1947, 1971, and Modern South Asia* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2013), 19.

tattoo, like the monkey, is in a location that is not easily accessed in daily life. However, Yuvani knows it is there, and that is what matters.

Remarkable: Redoing and Reframing the Diasporic Body

As we have seen, the body is a living archive upon which different stories are written, and while the images may remain the same, the interpretation of those stories change over time. The telling of the tattoo story is the opening of the bodily archive and can reveal much about the relationship between diasporic imaginings of self, body, and nation. In this concluding section, we explore two people with similar tattoos that have taken two different approaches to reframing and redoing the tattoo's meaning, metaphorically and literally. Nihal and Nimali both have the lion holding a sword in its paw from the Sri Lankan national flag – Nihal has the tattoo on his shoulder, while Nimali has it on her ribs underneath her breast. Their reflections on their lion tattoos are examples of how temporality and storytelling intersect and inform one another. While one is changing the archive *physically* as palimpsest and overwriting the archive, the other is changing *the story about* their archive.

For both, the initial inking of the tattoo had a similar intention. Nihal's lion tattoo, which he got when he was around 19 years old, had more to do with his hair as well as his Sinhala identity. Nihal, who immigrated to the U.S. when he was 2 years old, believed that the Sinhala people were called lions because "the lion represented the people that came to the country, that those men had huge mess of hair." Nihal holds up his phone, showing me a picture of a photograph of himself when he was in college. "Oh, that is epic," I say, and express my envy for Nihal's once-flowing locks. He explains:

> I got it down to my waist. I was like Samson at some point in my college career. It's a crazy head of hair, actually… I had this amazing head of hair and [thought,] "Man, I must be somehow a lion! Why not? I'm just going to go with it!"

Further, when he was teenager, Nihal was a fan of the series *ThunderCats*, so he also identified with lions in that respect. Nihal's tattoo has the lion superimposed over a shaded image of Sri Lanka. Similarly, Nimali was around 18 years old when she got her first tattoo, though unlike Nihal, she got her lion not due to identifying strongly as Sinhala, but in opposition to being in the U.S., calling her choice of tattoo "a classic tale [of] asserting my Sri Lankan identity in a foreign place." Immigrating when she was eight years old, she says, "[As a teenager], I refused to accept that I was here for most of my life. Because I just never got over moving [to the U.S.], honestly, and my immigration…It was very much a resistant attitude." In short, she got her lion tattoo in defiance of American attitudes towards assimilation.

Their perspectives on their tattoos changed, however, once both returned to Sri Lanka and developed an understanding of Sinhala nationalism. After the 2004 tsunami that devasted coastal areas in Sri Lanka, Nihal volunteered in Jaffna, a majority Tamil area. He says, "I was just wondering, you know, what the people would be like, what would they say, if they saw this [tattoo]? What would they think of it?" As the civil war continued, he says, "I began to doubt, should I have gotten that, or should I have *not* gotten that?" Similarly, Nimali's perspective on her tattoo changed when she did a fellowship in Sri Lanka, where she learned more about Sinhala nationalism and Sri Lankan history:

> [I thought], "Huh, I didn't know that when I got it." It's not that I [think], "Oh, I'm so ashamed of having gotten that!" because, of course, that wasn't what I had in mind or the idea behind it. But now, I really think about if I'm wearing a crop top or when I'm wearing a bikini or something, I think a lot about how somebody who might see it might feel the violence of that image. Especially considering that my chosen community, or in terms of who's my Lankan community, are not primarily Sinhala…I mean, we joke about it, but I do really think [about] who I might trigger if somebody sees it. So, that is why I want to get it covered, or just changed somehow.

Interpreted within a U.S. context, the tattooed image shows the lion on the Sri Lankan flag and is therefore a symbol of national pride. Here, within the context of the U.S., a racialized body bearing cultural and national markers such as the flag is a reclamation of erasure within a white U.S. mainstream. However, learning about and opening other contexts, connotations, and implications leads to discomfort. In the context of Sri Lanka, the lion that takes up most of the flag represents the Sinhala people. Once the history of ethnonationalism behind the image is learned, the image becomes complicated when interpreted through that Sri Lankan context. One can argue that the initial context of the tattoos has not changed since Nimali and Nihal are still Americans whose day-to-day lives are influenced by their location in the U.S. However, though the images remain the same, this new awareness changes the meaning of the tattoo as well as the person's opinion of it. As a result, the tattoo now bears a different sort of emotional weight: instead of an image of Sri Lankan cultural or national pride and a symbol of defiance against U.S. racialization, it becomes an image of Sinhala privilege and violence. This illustrates how the temporality of the archive and how different understandings of the archive leads to altered self-narrations and embodied storytelling,

Nimali says that people who know her current politics tease her about the tattoo, which she takes good-naturedly. She expresses regret over the tattoo, but not embarrassment – the tattoo is something she understands she needed to express at that particular time of life as an immigrant who was being marked by various racializing forces outside of herself. Still, she plans to eventually cover up the tattoo with another piece. When she says she is still unsure of what to cover the lion with, I suggest an elephant, since the sword can possibly be turned into a trunk. This way, the initial meaning of the tattoo as a representation of Sri Lankan identity can still remain, which Nimali liked. Instead of changing the story she tells about the tattoo, Nimali wants to remove the lion from her bodily archive completely. In redoing the tattoo, Nimali will erase the initial meaning and replace it with one that is more appropriate for her present experience. The coverup is not only about the image itself, but about the message the image sends to others who see the tattoo.

Nihal, however, does not plan on covering up the lion. Instead, he has reframed the meaning of the lion over the image of the island. Nihal reflects on what his tattoo has come to mean for him, saying, "I wonder if in some way - and I've thought about this – if it was like a weight I was carrying on my shoulder." This feeling of being weighted is the weight of the immigrant experience, as Nihal explains:

> I think a lot of it stems from remembering some of the things that my parents had to do. And that is something that always scared me, if I ever had to go through that or do that…

> Being an immigrant, but more specifically Sri Lankan, Sri Lankan immigrants themselves, have come here from a lot of different unfortunate situations, so it's hard for me not to consider what I've seen to be a part of how I identify. Not so much how I see myself, [but thinking], "Why am I seeing my parents go through this?" It's always kind of scared me and haunted me a little bit. For so many reasons, I still feel that. I feel that my kids are really blessed to be here. But I still want them to know what it's like for other kids that don't have that, so I really want to take them to Sri Lanka to see [that]…
>
> You think about what could have been the other outcome. What if one step just hadn't gone right? Given where you're from, if that next step had been in a different direction. I always think about that, because for me to get here, I couldn't have made a different choice. Or someone before me could have made an alternate choice [which] could not have landed me here.

Here, we see the renegotiation and reconstitution of self through rereading the tattoo. Nihal has changed the narrative of his tattoo from national pride, to Sinhala privilege, to the current meaning reflecting the difficulties and responsibilities of his immigration story and his immigrant elders. Instead of removing or covering it up, Nihal has created not only a new meaning of the tattoo, but a new story that works within both his mainstream U.S. context as well as within his context as a Sri Lankan American immigrant.

With Nimali and Nihal, we see that the diasporic body is remarkable: it can be re-marked and re-done but also re-thought and re-inscribed with new meanings. In other words, the diasporic body can be *re-marked* with new *remarks* about itself. In its remarkability, the diasporic body is a living archive that is transformed throughout time with transformable interpretations. As body changes, so do tattoos, reflecting the impermanence and instability of the body as archive. There can be multiple changing meanings and stories within the same image, and the tattoo can get recategorized when the connotations of an image change. The tattooed diasporic body is a palimpsest that can be overwritten and re-written on throughout time via coverups, thereby removing and replacing material in the bodily archive. The tattooed diasporic body is certainly remarkable: it is a living archive that holds worlds.

As we have seen throughout this chapter, tattoos are documents in a bodily archive that enacts multitemporality, allowing the tattooed diasporic body to travel through time and exist in many times simultaneously. The tattooed diasporic body tells stories of each location, metaphorical travelogues of lives lived. Similarly, in the following two chapters, the body becomes a space, not in terms of location, but as a map of space and time. Through two different types of cultural production, the written novel and the embodied performance, I examine how Sri Lankan American diasporic creators make meaning of complicated histories. While tattoos reveal how diasporic subjects have reenacted cultural experiences and legacies through concretely imprinting memory onto the body, the literary and performance forms I examine illustrate the centrality of the body to the Sri Lankan American experience in more fluid ways.

Chapter 3: Somatic Remains: Visceral Trauma, Pleasure, and Erasure in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*

Every time I go to Sri Lanka, I come back to the U.S. with my bags weighed down with books. I first encountered Nayomi Munaweera's novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* at Sarasavi, a bookstore in Kandy, Sri Lanka. I was sitting on the floor, cross-legged, a pile of books around me by Sri Lankan diasporic authors like Shyam Selvadurai, Chandini Lokuge, Jean Arasanayagam, Romesh Gunesekera, Ashok Ferry, Michael Ondaajte, and more. I found a teal paperback with silver fish embossed in the cover. As I usually do, I opened the book to a random page to see if the novel was interesting enough to purchase. My eyes immediately fell to the sentence, "We are married in a hotel in Los Angeles under a *poruwa* of plastic instead of palm leaf."[89] Then: "Girls with American accents attempt to sing the Jayamangala Gatha accompanied by a scratchy, much-used tape."[90] I inhaled sharply, knowing right away that I had to purchase this book. Other diasporic fiction I had devoured focused on diasporas in Canada, the U.K., and Australia. It was the first time I felt seen in diasporic literature. Since then, I have taught the novel alongside V.V. Ganeshananthan's *Love Marriage* in Asian American writing courses. *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* is a very specific story in a very specific location: the main character's family live in the Colombo metropole, are English-speaking, and have household help, a far cry from my working-class maternal grandparents, or my rural paternal grandparents who built their home out of dung, mud, and straw with their own hands. I tell students that while the novel is *a* Sri Lankan story, it is not *the* Sri Lankan story. It is one possibility of many, reflecting the multivocality of the Sri Lankan diasporic experience.

Despite its specificity, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* reveals how diasporic authors in the U.S. contextualize complex histories of war and migration through fiction. The novel is a multigenerational story of the Sri Lankan civil war and the Sri Lankan American immigrant experience. When war is such an integral part of the homeland's history, literature allows diasporic subjects to create meaning, juxtaposing the ugliness of violence and the beauty of memory together, which the novel foregrounds with its multiple point-of-view characters. The novel reflects the intersection of body + diaspora in Munaweera's use of the visceral and disgust to describe with wartime violence. The use of the erotic sexuality to rekindle homeland memory engages with diasporic embodiment and depicts a diasporic temporality. The intersection of diaspora + time is also complicated at the end of the novel, in which a return to the homeland location results in death, causing the next generation's relationship to the homeland to be suspended in a moment of violent loss.

Though the text works as a sort of historical recovery to make visible a traumatic national past, it also encourages discarding that past in the name of a better future. There is a simultaneous desire and revulsion present in novel – a yearning for the homeland as a protection from the diasporic experience, yet also a disgust with the homeland as a fetter to move beyond and overcome. Munaweera uses embodied memory, through the visceral, funk, and haunting, to complicate heteronormative understandings of future and generation through two vital parts of the Sri Lankan embodied diasporic experience: death and sex. With death, there is the civil war as a catalyst for immigration, while with sex, there is the necessary heteroreproductive futures that the diaspora envisions. The "remains" of this chapter's title works in multiple ways: the

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[89] Nayomi Munaweera, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (New York: St. Martin's Press. 2014), 166.
[90] Ibid.

remains of a corpse, persistent trauma that remains, and memories that are necessarily left behind to move forward. In this chapter, I examine: 1) how the scent of death works to regulate individual bodies and communities, 2) the erotic and heteronationalism, and 3) the role of erasure and unremembering in the transmission of generational trauma to the second generation.

The first section of this chapter provides background on South Asian American and Sri Lankan diasporic fictional literature and describes general common themes amongst these works. This section also summarizes the stories of *Island*'s two point of view characters, Saraswathi and Yasodhara. The second section examines how a regulatory scent of death permeates Saraswathi's life. Saraswathi is a Tamil teenager living in a border village under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). After Sinhala soldiers rape her, Saraswathi joins the LTTE, trains in torture methods, and becomes a successful LTTE soldier and eventual suicide bomber. This section draws upon Zeb Tortorici's queer conceptions of viscerality and disgust to analyze how the scent of decay and blood, particularly in scenes depicting how Saraswathi witnesses the LTTE's violent response to transgression and her active role in torture sessions, work disciplinarily for both the character and her community. The third section discusses how heteronational imaginings of Sri Lanka influence Yasodhara, a Sinhala woman who immigrates to the U.S. as a teenager. Yasodhara tries to recapture her memories of Sri Lanka in her choice of husband. This section utilizes LaMonda Horton-Stallings' concept of funk to discuss Yasodhara's first meeting and subsequent marriage with her first husband Siddharth, analyzing Yasodhara's desire for a heteronationally reproductive relationship. The failure of this marriage reflects the difficulties of maintaining heteronationalistic imaginings in diaspora. The fourth section focuses on Yasodhara's daughter, Sam, as metaphor for a postwar Sri Lanka. Sam is born to Tamil and Sinhala parents who refuse to tell her about her heritage, and the novel paints this as a hopeful ending. Using Avery Gordon and Grace Cho's discussions of haunting and David Eng's concept of affective correspondences, I examine how the epilogue contends that narratives of erasure rather than narratives that witnesses are necessary for individual, national, and diasporic healing.

Common Themes in Sri Lankan American Literature

Rajini Srikanth argues that South Asian diasporic writers "complicate the idea of place. In their writing, a location is both the site for the planting of roots and a launch pad from which to spring to other locations."[91] Authors transverse multiple locations because they are "impelled by various emotions – nostalgia, despair, deprivation, curiosity, adventurousness, and a sense of moral responsibilities that transcends national boundaries…"[92] For Indian American authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, author of *The Namesake, Unaccustomed Earth* and the Pulitzer-winning *Interpreter of Maladies,* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, author of *Arranged Marriage* and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives,* this urge lies in nostalgia and the deliberate assertion of stability. Lahiri and Divakaruni are rooted in upper and middle-class sensibilities, choosing to explore characters who are highly educated professionals who have achieved the American Dream, and it

[91] Rajini Srikanth, *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 68.
[92] Ibid., 69.

is these stories – namely, Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* - which have been turned into U.S feature films.[93]

Sri Lankan diasporic authors, however, examine characters who are haunted by war and violence, who permanently unsettled in location and mind. Sri Lankan Burgher Canadian Michael Ondaatje writes primarily about the Sri Lankan minority Burgher population, and is the most internationally known Sri Lankan diasporic author, receiving critical acclaim for his novel *The English Patient,* later adapted into an Academy Award-winning film.[94] Sinhala and Tamil Canadian Shyam Selvadurai's semi-autobiographical *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea, Funny Boy* (adapted into a Netflix feature film in 2020)*,* and *The Hungry Ghosts,* examine queer Canadian Tamil and Sinhala characters who have survived wartime interethnic violence. Sinhala American poet Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's work deals with a queer, crip, and multiracial awareness, while Tamil American poet Indran Amirthanayagam's work examines war through a diasporic lens.

As we examine Sri Lankan American fiction, common themes emerge. One is the role of generational trauma in familial and diasporic storytelling. Mary Ann Mohanraj's *Bodies in Motion*, V.V. Ganeshananthan's *Love Marriage*, and *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, all novels by Sri Lankan American women, list family trees after the title page. All three works span the course of decades and multiple generations, so the family trees encourage the reader to take note of and refer to complicated family dynamics, illustrating the importance of generational memory to these narratives. Each chapter of Mohanraj's *Bodies in Motion* focuses on a different family member – while some stories intertwine, the book allows for many generations of the family story to be told through glimpses of individual lives. The protagonist of Ganeshananthan's *Love Marriage* captures family stories as they are narrated to her by her dying uncle. The first 60 pages of Munaweera's *Island*, one-quarter of the novel, focus solely on protagonist's Yasodhara's ancestors.

Other works play with storytelling itself, and how stories of violence, memory, and sex are narrated. Like the above works, Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts* also tells a multigenerational story, but does so nonlinearly, playing with memory and time. In Munaweera's *What Lies Beneath*, the reader ultimately discovers that its protagonist is an unreliable narrator who has left out significant parts of her story. Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* follows a first generation forensic anthropologist dealing with the physical remains of intraethnic political violence as she tries to piece together the story and identity of the body she is working on. Return narratives are another common theme in Sri Lankan diasporic works, where a return to Sri Lanka is a significant moment for multiple characters. The diasporic protagonists in Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts,* Munaweera's *Island,* Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost,* Chandani Lokuge's *Turtle Nest*, and some characters in Mohanraj's *Bodies in Motion* all return to Sri Lanka for various reasons, with protagonists experiencing this move as both a return to their family and culture. In contrast, the main character in Ganeshananthan's *Love Marriage*'s protagonist's return to her heritage occurs when she travels to Toronto, Canada.

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[93] Both authors have also entered the mainstream, as Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* have been adapted into American feature films.

[94] "Burgher" refers to a Sri Lankan of Dutch, Portuguese, or British descent.

Island of a Thousand Mirrors: A Summary

Island of a Thousand Mirrors was first published in 2012 in Sri Lanka, 3 years after the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in May 2009. It was then published in the U.S. in 2014, with slight edits to appeal to an American audience. The novel allows for postwar articulations of Sri Lankan diasporic life and offers different ways forward for diasporic people that other works published prior to the end of the war do not. *Island* is a multigenerational story covering 1948 to the present, providing an on-the-ground Sri Lankan history of war, violence, and migration. Munaweera roots the narrative in the long history of communal and ethnic tension in Sri Lanka post-independence, the rise of the LTTE, and the advent of the war in the early 1980s and focuses on two characters' - Yasodhara and Saraswathi's - stories. Yasodhara Rajasinghe is a Sinhala girl who migrates to the U.S. as a teen with her family, while Saraswathi is a Tamil village girl whose life is defined by war. Saraswathi's two older brothers have both died after joining the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) family, while she (as the next eldest) is being recruited by LTTE soldiers. After a group of Sinhala soldiers rape her, she decides to join the LTTE. Yasodhara's neighbors and closest friends are a Tamil family, who leave for England after the 1983 riots, and Yasodhara's family moves to the U.S. soon after. As an adult, Yasodhara undergoes an arranged marriage to a Sinhala man, which ends in infidelity. Eventually, she and her sister Lanka's return to Sri Lanka, and rediscover her childhood friend, Shiva. Here, Yasodhara and Saraswathi's stories converge. Munaweera herself migrated to Nigeria from Sri Lanka as a child, then moved to the U.S. after South Asians were pushed out of the country, so Yasodhara's story is somewhat autobiographical in nature. The women in the novel move the plot, whether it is Yasodhara's grandmother stopping a mob of drunk Sinhala men from entering her home and discovering the Tamil family she has hidden, Lanka's return to Sri Lanka after a failed romance with her professor, or Saraswathi's choice to train as a suicide bomber, and in carrying out her mission, causes Lanka's death.

Literature can tell stories that can have been silenced within a diasporic community and allows us to think across generations. With its focus on multiple generations within one family, *Island* helps schematize how certain dynamics play out (or are imagined to play out) across generations. The novel is told from multiple points of view and has perspective shifts, sometimes within the same chapter, so this singular novel contains multiple stories. The Sri Lankan civil war used as a literary structure, illustrating the malleability of narratives even in discussing one family. The novel is semi-autobiographical in nature, and Munaweera has acknowledged that certain moments gesture towards actual family history, illustrating the imperative to tell one's story not as one narrative but as multiple stories with competing claims and perspectives. *Island* acknowledges these multiple narratives describes a history of scapegoating, Othering, and vast divisions based on ethno-linguistic and religious grounds by using the alternating point of views of two women from different ethnicities (Tamil and Sinhala) and positionalities (child soldier and 1.5 generation American).

Munaweera attempts for Yasodhara and Saraswathi to serve as foils of each other, as their names are significant in Buddhism and Hinduism - Yasodhara was the Buddha's wife and Saraswathi is a Hindu goddess of knowledge and learning. The use of "a thousand mirrors," represent how Yasodhara's and Saraswathi's stories just two stories on an island (and diaspora) of many stories. Despite this, Saraswathi's story is not given the same weight. The novel focuses primarily on multiple generations of the Sinhala Rajasinghe family and Yasodhara's experience as a 1.5 generation Sri Lankan American. Saraswathi's story remains within her own generation,

and while a few paragraphs in her sections describe her parents' stories, Saraswathi is the only focus. Further, Saraswathi's name is never stated, nor are the names of her parents, who are only called "Amma" and "Appa." Understanding Yasodhara's story depends on understanding her parents, grandparents, and great grandparents' stories before her. As a result, Saraswathi remains an underdeveloped as a character and inadvertently comes to represent the experiences of all pro-LTTE Sri Lankan Tamils in the novel.

"A Heavy Ugly Smell": The Regulatory Scent of Death

The first paragraph which introduces Saraswathi describes how she is fortunate her family still lives in their Sri Lankan village home instead of a refugee camp. Saraswathi says, "You can tell where the [refugee] camps lie from miles away by the smell. Thousands of people without running water or toilets, there is bound to be this terrible smell."[95] Here, the camp's odors pervade "from miles away," and is seen as predictable and expected. From the beginning, Saraswathi's story is one full of nauseating scents, and smell takes on a regulating function in her daily life. Saraswathi is a sixteen year old Tamil village girl whose life is defined by war. Her three older brothers have both died after joining the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a separatist group. Her family hesitates when she is being recruited by the LTTE, but after a group of Sinhala soldiers rape her, she decides to become a LTTE soldier. In this section, I use Zeb Tortorici's concept of the visceral to examine on how Sarawasthi's life prior to her joining the LTTE is defined by visceral reactions to scents and how smell serves to police the characters by its association with fatal consequences.

Zeb Tortorici defines viscerality as "the experience of intense and highly mediated bodily feelings or affective responses that manifest themselves through conflicting corporeal and emotive reactions."[96] Viscerality is therefore a response that combines the physical and the mental. While Tortorici uses viscerality to describe historical and archival responses to particular criminalized acts, viscerality is a useful means for understanding how Saraswathi reacts to scents of death and decay. Further, Amber Jamilla Musser uses empathetic reading as a methodology for thinking about bodily sensation, arguing that a sense or flesh-based reading "articulates a particular relationship to embodiment in that it is mediated through the social. Flesh connects bodies to the external world by emphasizing the various conditions that make bodies visible in particular ways; it is about power and difference."[97] This discourse of bodies, power, and difference is particularly salient for Saraswathi's experiences, since she and her community deviate from the expected norm. As a Sri Lankan Tamil and a Hindu, Saraswathi and her family stand outside the norm of the Sinhala ethnic majority and Buddhist religious majority in Sri Lanka. Further, her life in a village in the middle of a warzone in northern Sri Lanka places her on the fringes of Sri Lankan society. Through her ethnicity, religion, and location, Saraswathi deviates from the norm. However, the decaying bodies of rule-breakers in the novel she encounters also deviate from the expected norm – not of the Sri Lankan state, but of a community ravaged by war.

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[95] Nayomi Munaweera, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (New York: St. Martin's Press. 2014), 129.

[96] Zeb Tortorici, "Visceral Archives of the Body Consuming the Dead, Digesting the Divine." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 20, no. 4 (January 1, 2014), 407.

[97] Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 19.

Saraswathi is introduced halfway through the novel, and her opening descriptions of her life paint a perilous picture. All three of her brothers have been taken to become soldiers for the LTTE, and have all died. Regularly, white vans come and take away children and young people to fight for the LTTE, and Sinhala soldiers menace Tamil children as they walk past military checkpoints. As she describes her everyday life, she explains:

> Some days a heavy ugly smell rises from the fields. Then we know that someone has been out at night, maybe a child, or an old man. They have stepped on a land mine that lay buried like a subterranean fruit and now they are in pieces, rotting and raising this terrible smell. We walk past this place quickly, with a piece of cloth covering our noses, swallowing our bile, angry at this person who has forgotten the obvious rules: never step off the roads, never forget what is buried underfoot.[98]

Here, breaking rules will literally break a person into "pieces." The fact that the dead are left "rotting," instead of taken away by family to be buried or cremated, implies that the bodies are left as a directive. The smell is characterized by its "heavy" ugliness, with the smell itself serving a regulatory function, reminding villagers not to break the rules. Saraswathi and her sister "walk past this place quickly" to avoid not only the body, but also this physical reminder of consequences of rule breaking. They use "cloth covering [their] noses" in order to put a barrier between them and the body as a visceral response. While Tortorici argues that the "visceral is a response evoking an immediate reaction, often of disgust," yet the visceral reaction Saraswathi has is not for the rotting decay and odor of a dead body- instead, her immediate reaction is anger at the dead person who "has forgotten the obvious rules."[99] The fact that these rules are "obvious" indicate that her "immediate reaction… of disgust," while prompted by the smell of decay, is actually motivated by anger at a seemingly simple rule being broken.

A later scene illustrates the regulatory function of visceral violence. One day, as Saraswathi and her sister Luxshmi are walking to school, they come across a crowd of people gathered at an intersection in the village. As Saraswathi pushes through the crowd the scene is revealed to her:

> I am overtaken by the smell of shit and death before I see it. A man's body sagging forward, held against a lamppost by arms tied behind and a thin piece of wire that bites into the mottled scarlet skin of his neck… his intestines burst forth, like an intricate and exuberant flower. Flies buzz within the coils.[100]

Here, the odor is of "shit and death," and Saraswathi experiences the smell before seeing the body. That is, her nose is the sense organ that orients her to scene by causing a physical reaction. Further, this grotesque display is purposeful - the LTTE have tortured the man and have publicly displayed his body with a list of his supposed crimes. A tablet hangs from the man's neck, which "lists, in careful chalk letters, the crimes for which this justice has been enacted."[101] The display, as well as its location at an intersection that makes it visible and accessible to many,

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[98] Munaweera, 136.
[99] Tortorici, 408.
[100] Munaweera, 139.
[101] Ibid.

serves to police and regulate the villagers by bringing them face-to-face with the consequences of betraying the LTTE.

Further, the body is "popeyed, openmouthed, as if he had been taken by surprise last night, while eating with his family, or maybe later while walking outside to the toilet."[102] The corpse itself is displaying a visceral reaction of surprise, reflecting Saraswathi's emotions. Villagers in the crowd are disgusted, exclaiming, "'Bloody traitor, got what he deserved. Must have been informing the [Sinhala] soldiers for a long time.'"[103] The villagers' reactions are not of shock, but instead of disgust that the man was an alleged traitor to the LTTE. Upon closer inspection, Saraswathi recognizes the man as her friend Yalini's father, after which she states, "I make myself look more closely at the slightly squashed tomato face."[104] Here, the sight of the dead body is easier for Saraswathi to handle than its smell, and she does not have an extreme reaction to the visual sight of the body, a substantial contrast to the earlier moment where the sisters walk past the field, "swallowing [their] bile" at the smell of decay.[105] This illustrates Tortorici's claim that "forms of ocular and tactile consumption… have the power to elicit visceral reactions — moments of extreme bodily sensation."[106] That is, Saraswathi experiences a "[moment] of extreme bodily sensation," only when encountering the amorphous smell of decay, but when presented with the visual display of a literally gutted and tortured body, she has no physical reaction. Scent, in its intangibility, is similar to the rules that govern the villagers that are obvious yet remain unspoken.

Significantly, jasmine and floral scents bookend this gory scene of retribution for breaking these rules. At the beginning of this section, Saraswathi states, "At this hour, there is a freshness to the air, the day still blooming, a blushing pink that will unfurl into garnet, amethyst with the sun."[107] Here, "freshness" and "blooming" suggest hope, while the "blushing pink" of the sky contrasts sharply with the "mottled scarlet skin" of the corpse's neck. The mention of gemstones native to Sri Lanka such as garnet and amethyst connote wealth and abundance, which clashes with the later image of flies buzzing in the corpse's intestines. Immediately before they encounter the gory display at the intersection, when they pass the village flower-seller, Saraswathi notes, "As we walk by we both inhale, catching the fragrance of the jasmine garland that unfurls, celestial in our nostrils."[108] Here, the repetition of "unfurl" to refer to both the day and flowers implies possibilities. When Saraswathi notices that the intestines are "like an intricate and exuberant flower," the contrast between the metaphorical image of the flower and the actual image of spilling intestines, these possibilities are spoiled once the reality of Saraswathi's life and the regulations which surround her are painted in sharp relief.[109]

Immediately after the sisters see the body in the intersection, the nearby flower seller encourages the girls to take a jasmine garland:

> "Take one," she says. "Have something sweet to smell today."… And already Luxshmi is searching for the freshest, most fragrant string. She holds one up triumphantly and we take turns burying our faces in the creamy blossoms,

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[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid., 140.
[105] Ibid., 136.
[106] Tortorici, 411.
[107] Munaweera, 138.
[108] Ibid., 139.
[109] Munaweera, 139.

> inhaling slowly so the thick fragrance drives out all other thought, a miracle entwined around our fingers.[110]

Here, the "fragrance drives out all other thought," and sweet smell fosters forgetting – not of the rules themselves, but of the consequences of breaking them. The "burying" of their faces, while being reminiscent of death, also allows the sisters to hide their memories of the corpse. In fact, the story structure itself works similarly to this scene, where the brutal display of the body is buried between two moments invoking floral scents. While it is effective at providing an immediate contrast, it also serves as an example of how, as Tortorici claims, "disgust and delight — both of which are highly visceral responses to particular stimuli — are inextricably bound together."[111]

In discussing the visceral, Tortorici also claims it refers to "how certain individuals — upon encountering corporeal or textual spectacles that elicit the confused emotions of disgust and desire — experience intense affective responses to specific corporeal encounters and criminalized bodily acts including necrophilia, fellatio, masturbation, and erotic religious encounters..."[112] The criminalized acts that inspire visceral reactions are crimes against and/or involving the body. In contrast, in Saraswathi's life, the acts that inspire these "intense affective responses," are breaking established rules of war. While they involve the body, they are not acts committed on or against the body. Instead, these acts are against the societal rules and norms of a village in a warzone, crimes of deviance from the norm and scented with the smell of decay. The arrival of a decaying odor forces the characters to directly face the deadly consequences of this deviance. Yasodhara's story, which we turn to next, also deals with the embodiments of societal pressure, but through sex and heteronationalism instead of violence.

"Archaeologies of Desire": The Erotics of Memory and Heteronationalism

When Yasodhara wants to find a husband, her parents put her information and picture on Sri Lankan marriage websites and in newspapers. Soon, she is inundated by letters from various men and their families, with pictures, horoscopes, and resumes attached, each stating what kind of woman they are looking for. Yasodhara is overwhelmed, afraid of "so much palpable need, such archaeologies of desire."[113] Yet Yasodhara herself is motivated by a need to connect to her memories of Sri Lanka, and contains within herself her own archaeology of desire. She and her family move to the U.S. when she is a preteen, at the onset of the Sri Lankan civil war in the early 1980s. She is a 1.5 generation Sri Lankan American, having arrived in the U.S. young enough to be shaped by it, but old enough to remember the homeland. It is this desire to connect to her past homeland that drives her actions throughout the novel. In this chapter, I use a flesh-based reading to examine the sensory experience of diaspora through In this section, I examine Yasodhara's relationship with her first husband, Siddharth, and how sex and memory are intertwined. Using LaMonda Horton-Stallings' concept of funk, I explore how memory is "funky," and how sexual acts work as sites of memory for Yasodhara.

[110] Ibid., 140-141.
[111] Tortorici, 415.
[112] Ibid., 407-408.
[113] Nayomi Munaweera, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2014), 164.

LaMonda Horton-Stallings describes funk as "a philosophy that usurps the divide between eros (life) and thanatos (death) since it is sustained by otherly human and nonhuman beliefs in the supernatural, afterlife, and reanimation."[114] To Horton-Stallings, funk is an amalgamation of the physical and the spiritual, greater than the sum of its parts. Horton-Stallings explains that funk is composed of three separate, yet interrelated elements – "nonvisual sensory perception (smell/odor), embodied movement (dance and sex), and force (mood and will)."[115] She claims that "sometimes *funk* and *fuck* are intertwined and interchangeable. The interchangeability of funk and fuck relies on context and aesthetics."[116] In this way, Horton-Stallings examines funk through nonreproductive sex in cultural productions, and argues funk is a political project, discarding and reshaping Western imperial modes of thought. Horton-Stallings argues that funk uses "sexually explicit expressions and unique ideas about sex and work to undo the coloniality of being/truth/freedom."[117] She specifically focuses on "sacredly profane sexuality," which "makes sacred what is libidinous and blasphemous" in Western philosophy.[118] These elements of funk – sense perception, embodied movement, force, different modes of being human, and sacredly profane sexuality - are found in Yasodhara and Siddharth's relationship, where Yasodhara's yearning for the homeland is reflected in her sensory memories and her sexual relationship with Siddharth. The physical acts of sex are motivated by memories of Sri Lanka, while the memories themselves contain within them a sexual intimacy.

Munaweera uses strategic remembering to connect Yasodhara and Siddharth, a remembering that is rooted in the physical and sexual. After some time on the marriage market, Yasodhara's parents find Siddharth for her. In their first meeting, Siddharth has no personality outside of the memories he evokes in her - he is simultaneously erased but is also something Yasodhara projects and reconstructs her sensory memories of Sri Lanka onto. The sexual connotations of this first meeting are readily apparent in the rush of words Yasodhara uses to describe the conversation, almost entirely through his words:

> He talks of the Galle Face Green when it was still green, the kite sellers and peanut men, the spray dashing against slick, mirrored, black rocks, the daredevil drive up to Kandy through mountain passes in a miniscule bus clinging to the silver-ribboned road, the granite cliff face rising on one side, falling into clouds on the other, the sudden startling darkness of tunnels. On the way down, the flower boys racing barefoot, their arms full of upcountry blossoms, scarlet and crimson clutched against their own flushed faces.[119]

Siddharth never speaks a line of dialogue here – instead, we are only privy to Yasodhara's description of the conversation. In this moment, Yasodhara does not see Siddharth for who he is, but what he represents. This description involves a myriad of images, but only takes up two almost-run on sentences. This "waterfall of words" threatens to overwhelm with its focus on sensory imagery, just like Yasodhara is overcome by her memories.[120] Further, there is a sense

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[114] LaMonda Horton-Stallings, *Funk the Erotic, Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 3.
[115] Ibid., 4.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid., 10.
[118] Ibid., 11.
[119] Munaweera, 166.
[120] Ibid.

of danger in his words, a danger of missing an opportunity, in the use of "dashing," "clinging," "rising," "falling," "racing," "clutching." These words not only evoke a sense of urgency, but are also evoke sensuality – hearts race, fingers clutch, arousal rises, and bodies fall and cling to one other, dashing towards orgasm. It is breathless and frantic, as if Yasodhara is gradually becoming more and more aroused by Siddharth's words.

As a result, for Yasodhara, falling for Siddharth is "disarmingly easy," especially since his words represent what she has lost.[121] Even in his name, Siddharth is symbolic - he is named for man who became the Buddha, while she bears the name of the woman who was his wife. Yasodhara acknowledges that "The ancient intimacy of our names is impossible to ignore."[122] The other significant aspect of Siddharth that Yasodhara comments on is that he "uses his fingers in the island way, mixing to the second knuckle and no higher."[123] She notices his hands and the way he eats, and in focusing how the food only reaches his second knuckle, Munaweera once again evokes sensuality. Not only do Siddharth's words reflect the sensuality of Yasodhara's memories of Sri Lanka, but so do his actions. The "forgotten images" that Siddharth invoke "[flare] up like lit matches in the huge dark space of America."[124] Siddharth, then, is a fire that fills up or penetrates Yasodhara's emptiness without Sri Lanka, and Yasodhara sees that "falling into this man could be as easy as regaining a childhood."[125] Yasodhara's "falling" is about regaining her memories - America is a "huge dark space," – that is, a place without memories, while Siddharth will fill her with the memories she so desperately wants. She asks, "How could I not be seduced by my own lost memories?"[126] Here, Munaweera explicitly connects memory and sex when Yasodhara acknowledges that she is seduced not by Siddharth the person, but by her own memories of Sri Lanka.

Yasodhara and Siddharth's traditional Sri Lankan wedding immediately follows this question, and diverges greatly from the lush descriptions that came before. In a short, tersely worded paragraph, Munaweera describes the wedding. The two are "married in a hotel in Los Angeles under a *poruwa* of plastic instead of palm leaf" while her bouquet is made of "white roses trimmed to look like lotus buds."[127] The *poruwa* - a wedding platform similar to a *mandap* or *chuppah* - and flowers are physically and visibly changed to evoke an imperfect memory of greenery back home. An important moment in a Sinhala Buddhist wedding is the singing of a traditional religious songs that blesses the couple, usually done by young girls or adolescents. At this wedding, "girls with American accents attempt to sing the Jayamangala Gatha accompanied by a scratchy, much-used tape."[128] Once again, memories of a proper homeland wedding are invoked, but imperfectly – the tape is "scratchy," just like the blessing song is performed in accented Sinhala by the 1.5 and second generation. While Siddharth is symbol of lost memories for Yasodhara, one that is rooted in physical sensation and arousal, the marriage ceremony itself is a superficial, imperfect, and sterile recreation of Sri Lankan wedding traditions.

In contrast, it is in the intimate moments where Yasodhara and Siddharth connect, where these imperfections are subsumed by sex. Horton-Stallings argues that private actions can serve as sites of memory. In discussing artist Ernie Barnes' work, she claims that his work:

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[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Munaweera, 166.

> evokes perception and sensation [that relies on] body memory…The subjects in the painting worship and find their ecstasy not solely with each other…but with the greater force not seen but felt by everyone all at once. While the expression of the body—sex as art—is key here, it is the shared communal expression of humans with a higher power rather than each other that leads to the ecstatic moment.[129]

The moment of ecstasy, then, moves beyond the physical and into the spiritual, where the connections between people are greater than the sum of its parts – a force, a sensuality, and an encompassing feeling that the subjects share. In the same way, Munaweera describes Yasodhara and Siddharth's sexual encounters not only as a way the two connect to one another, but also to the larger force of Sri Lanka that binds them:

> In the darkness we learn each other's contours and textures. The velvet expanse of his belly, cream to my roving tongue. The shape of him in my mouth luscious as fruit. I move above him and he slits his eyes to watch me with the most rapt of concentrations. I know he is listening for the slightest gasp in my breathing, the quiver of my wetness holding him. I see the shine in his eyes about to spill, an admission of the enormity of this thing that is between us, the whisper of his ragged breathing.[130]

The "enormity of this thing that is between" them is the memory of Sri Lanka. Though the two connect physically, exploring each other's' bodies and watching each other intimately, these sexual acts become a site of memory – or as Horton-Stallings states, "these moves are also memories."[131] In describing filmmaker Shine Louise Houston's work, Horton-Stallings argues that the camera "alternates between kissing and fucking to visibly illustrate and capture the interiority of penetration as arriving at truth, sharing, or diffusing—as possession, specifically as a ritual meant to elicit ecstasy that is only possible from excessive spirit and human appropriation of each other."[132] In this sexual encounter between Yasodhara and Siddharth, Munaweera similarly alternates between exploration, penetration, and contemplation to evoke the memories that bind Yasodhara and Siddharth together, a shared truth of their connection, and a shared "appropriation" of one another's bodies to evoke memories.

When the two hear reports of the civil war in the news, they also turn to each other physically as comfort, but also in attempt to forget the images of "bombs, bodies, and spilled blood."[133] Yasodhara states, "On those nights we make love as if dying, our two bodies rafts in a tumbling, turbulent midnight sea. The succor of mouths and skin sliding on skin driving away the images. Each of us climbing a mountain to that single shining moment when the images are shut out."[134] Here, the turbulence of their coupling reflects the turbulence of their emotions, in contrast to the slow explorations earlier. Unlike the flare that lit up Yasodhara's dark spaces

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[129] Horton-Stallings, 181.
[130] Munaweera, 167.
[131] Horton-Stallings, 199.
[132] Ibid., 168.
[133] Munaweera, 168.
[134] Ibid.

without Sri Lanka in their first meeting, here light is used to erase. Horton-Stallings claims that "War… impedes human connection and intimacy...The living and afterliving cannot wait for wars to come to an end to be remembered, or to remember their connection to each other. Sexuality is a site of memory."[135] However, in this moment, sexuality is used to forget. Each "tumbling" movement of Yasodhara and Siddharth's bodies, while working to re-inscribe their shared connection, is also an attempt to erase pain and fear. However, since they "make love as if dying," they are actually enacting the very images they wish to forget.

Yasodhara's and Siddharth's relationship illustrate the power of sense memory on diasporic bodies. Yasodhara and Siddharth's relationship begins with sensual images that evoke memories of Sri Lanka, and their sexual encounters reflect the complex dynamic between sexuality and memory. Horton-Stallings argues that "the process of creating out of the body and sexuality is in and of itself evidence of power that exceeds the human."[136] For Yasodhara and Siddharth, this "power that exceeds the human" is memory, specifically a memory rooted in the human sensory and sensual experience of sex. Like funk and like sex, which has an odor and a physicality, so do memories – memories leave a mark. Even the use sex to erase painful memories will still leave physical and emotional evidence behind. These moves are memories, and they go beyond the human, becoming something greater, something funky, something profound.

Ultimately, however, their marriage - one that is arranged between two coethnics with a wedding that purposefully yet imperfectly evokes Sinhala Buddhist tradition - fails, and they divorce. While the marriage is passionate it is built on ephemeral memories of Sri Lanka, Siddharth is still in love with his white American ex-girlfriend of several years, and only agreed to a marriage with a Sri Lankan woman under pressure from his family. Soon into the marriage, he begins cheating on Yasodhara by restarting his relationship with his girlfriend and eventually divorcing Yasodhara. Similarly, while Yasodhara attempts to connect to her lost past by having a properly arranged marriage to an acceptable man chosen by her parents, she is actually in love with the images and sense memories of Sri Lanka that Siddharth evokes, not Siddharth himself, so the wedding that they have is sterile and imperfect, and they do not have children. In setting up and then dismantling a relationship that is based on the sense memory of homeland through sex, the novel complicates heteronormative, heteroeproductive, and heteronational imaginings of diaspora. The heteronational and coethnic arranged marriage ends in divorce and is nonreproductive. Rather than showing the continuation of culture in diaspora, the novel shows that the good marriage to the good Sinhala boy fails. In this way, the novels reflect Lauren Berlant's notion of cruel optimism, or the idea that the desired object/status is actually a deterrent to achieving that object/status, concerning the fantasy of a "good life." While Siddharth represents a failed ideological return to the homeland for Yasodhara, their divorce is the catalyst that pushes her to return to Sri Lanka. While Yasodhara enacts her memories of Sri Lanka on Siddharth's body, attempting to recreate something she feels she has lost, it is only due to the failure of the relationship that she can make her return. This failure to create a proper Sri Lankan reproductive future is what I turn to next.

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[135] Horton-Stallings, 162.
[136] Ibid., 150.

"Retaining No Record": The Necessity of Erasure and The Refusal to Remember

While *Island* is a novel on both violence and the politics of war in Sri Lanka, it also deals primarily with cultural memory's role in the aftermath of war in diaspora. The novel's epigraph is a quote from Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." Immediately, Munaweera indicates the importance of cultural memory to the narrative, which she returns to in the epilogue. In the last chapter, Yasodhara returns to Sri Lanka, a return that ends in tragedy with the loss of her sister in a suicide bombing carried out by Saraswathi. At the beginning of the epilogue which follows, Yasodhara marries her childhood Tamil friend Shiva and moves to San Francisco. The couple do not engage with their friends or family, neither at home nor in diaspora. Yasodhara states, "We have learned not to care about the state of that other place even as it burns or drowns. We cut ties, never calling across the oceans… We do not seek out brown faces. Instead we have burrowed down… and built a fortress around ourselves."[137] Yasodhara is not invested in Sri Lanka or its future. She "[builds] a fortress" to prevent her memories from returning and ignoring those that may share common histories.

A major focus of the epilogue is Yasodhara and Shiva's daughter Sam, whose name Samudhra, means "ocean," as she is "named for the ocean she has never seen."[138] Sam is both American and Sri Lankan, and both Sinhala and Tamil. Like the ocean, she has no boundaries and is able to encompass all identities, just like the ocean surrounds Sri Lanka from all sides. However, she "calls herself Sam."[139] The Americanization of her name reflects this sense of multiple identities – the name "Sam" can be applied to individuals of all genders. Further, Yasodhara feels responsibility for "explaining the world to this new creature. It seems beyond possibility."[140] Though Yasodhara wishes to explain the world to her daughter, she says, "I never speak of Sri Lanka to her. I do not mention it in story or rhyme or memory… I wonder sometimes if I have stolen something that is hers by birthright, if she should know the details of where we are from."[141] There is a particular uneasiness here, a recognition of the rootedness of memory, while also acknowledging that the world she wants for her daughter is not one in which Sri Lanka plays a huge role. When Sam finds a photo of her late aunt Lanka, Yasodhara "[grabs] at fairy tales to shield her from what cannot be spoken. Distract her with other tales… She forgets easily enough. But when I put her to bed that night…I must pry [the photo] out of her sleeping grasp."[142] Though Yasodhara tries to cover up her painful memories by chasing fiction to make her daughter forget, Sam literally cannot let go of Lanka. The memory of the past and the homeland cannot be taken away easily – this erasure must be forced.

Some things are more visible in their absence, and some narratives are haunted. Memory brings the past to the present – that is, while people and trauma may be in the past, the ghosts of those people and experiences are still presences in the present. Like negative space in art, these people and experiences are more significant and more visible in their absences. Not only does this literature reveal what was once silent, but the stories are acts of creation in and of themselves. Haunting can be the result of violence (literal dead bodies), but also purposeful

[137] Munaweera., 226.
[138] Ibid., 227.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid., 228.
[142] Munaweera, 231.

erasure is an act of (psychic) violence. Avery Gordon examines haunting and ghosts in literature as not just indicative of cultural change or reinvention, but as an active and social presence. Examining the haunted presence not only reveals the past, but also how the past directly affects our present. Building upon Gordon's work, Grace Cho examines silencing and transgenerational haunting, which she calls "constellations of affective bodies transmitting and receiving trauma."[143] Cho argues, "When an unspeakable or uncertain history, both personal and collective, takes the form of a 'ghost,' it searches for bodies through which to speak. In this way, the ghost is distributed across the time-space of diaspora."[144] Like Gordon, this unremembered and unspeakable history has an active social presence, and is "an assemblage," that is, "it is not an individuated body but rather a spectral agency made up of different material and immaterial forces.[145] Haunting for Gordon is about the "visible invisibility"[146] and "seething presence"[147] of the ghost. The ghost is not only representative of the dead and a social figure, but it is more importantly a sign that there is something wrong with the reality we perceive. Being haunted, then, is a "transformative recognition," an affective realization that the structures we inhabit and assumptions we make about those structures are inherently flawed.[148] Here, Lanka the person and Sri Lanka the country are the "seething presence" which haunt Yasodhara and Shiva.

David Eng uses silences around Japanese internment to discuss the nonvisible and what he terms affective correspondences, which "keep the past affectively alive in the present" and "becomes a site of both individual and collective repair, of collective racial reparation."[149] Affective correspondences go against normative modes of history and instead are cobbled together constructions of history rooted in emotion. Affect is necessary when the normative mode of history is incomplete or unable to express an experience. In the face of her parents' silence, Sam has only the "catastrophic detritus" that remains, the photo of her aunt Lanka, to piece together Lanka's absence – both Lanka the country as well as Lanka the person.[150] Sam's refusal to let go illustrates how the "ethics of history is constituted through an affective longing… that refuses the notion of a present that is not in transition… and provides a ghostly language for loss – a new story, a new history helping us to remember differently."[151]

Despite the attention given to Yasodhara's uneasy relationship with her memories of Sri Lanka, Munaweera ends on a hopeful note, where Yasodhara imagines a future visit to Sri Lanka with Sam: "I see her emerging from the ocean, as she will be in some distant future… Her skin is shining dark, polished by sun and salt. She walks in purpose and self-knowledge... She is a child of peace, the many disparate parts of her experience knit together in jumbled but peaceable unity."[152] Sam, with her multiethnic background that is "jumbled together" in "peaceable unity," represents her mother's hope for the future of Sri Lanka. Not only is Sam the child of a forgiving and non-discriminating ocean, she is also a "child of peace." She is the future of Sri

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[143] Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 41.
[144] Ibid., 40.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 16.
[147] Ibid., 8.
[148] Ibid.
[149] David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 186.
[150] Ibid., 179.
[151] Eng, 188-189.
[152] Ibid., 237.

Lanka, who sets out from the ocean "with purpose and self-knowledge," like Sri Lanka can be a country that has learned from its mistakes and can progress forward. However, in an interesting subversion, this hope for the future rests in the body of the second generation child. Sam's status as alien outsider allows her to become a central nationalizing figure. In this imagined future, Yasodhara hopes Sam will learn to "become one with the skin of the water until she feels its fluid pulse as her own. To claim this submerged world as her own."[153] Here, we see that when Sam's body becomes one with the ocean, Sam is able to lay claim a nation she has never been to and has no knowledge of. In this way, Sam is cleansed of the sins of Sri Lanka's past, and in doing so is metaphorically baptized into a clean and unhaunted future.

Sam works against Lee Edelman's concept of reproductive futurism, which "works to affirm a structure [and] to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child. That Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention."[154] The Child, then, is the future for which communities work for, a future imagined as an "unquestioned good."[155] Reproductive futurism is applicable to diasporic discussions around creating and maintaining a second generation of Sri Lankan Americans who are culturally aware and engaged. With her self-chosen American name and ignorance of the past, however, Sam serves as a function not of maintenance and connection to a historical past, but of forgetting. In the last line of the novel, as the imagined Sam walks out of the ocean, "The waves lick away at her footsteps, the sand retaining no record of what came before her." Thus, the novel ends on a note of literal erasure of "what came before" – that is, Sam's history, which is Yasodhara's history, and thus the history of the Sri Lankan conflict. Edelman claims that the Child serves "as the repository of variously sentimentalized cultural identifications" and "has come to embody… the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust."[156] Here however, instead of serving as a repository for Sri Lankan culture, in this moment, the future of Sri Lanka rests on erasing a painful past of war.

In discussing the necessity of erasure, Jack Halberstam proposes the term 'suspect memorialization,' so that "*forgetting* becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inspection."[157] Further, Halberstam argues that forgetting can be a matter of psychological, physical, and spiritual survival. Halberstam argues that "Under certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world."[158] Forgetting and losing makes the most sense for certain bodies to live more self-actualized. For Yasodhara and Shiva, the only way for them to survive and continue in the world for themselves and their daughter is for them to unremember Sri Lanka.

While on this individual level, suspect memorialization is appropriate as a trauma response, on the national level, this active erasure is harmful. Following the end of the civil war in 2009, a major mission of the Sri Lankan government has been to unify groups through multiculturalism, a project that is exclusive by being purportedly inclusive, where diversity is

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[153] Ibid., 237.
[154] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.
[155] Ibid., 7.
[156] Ibid., 11.
[157] Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 15.
[158] Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 2-3.

subsumed under one “Sri Lankan” umbrella. This unification erases the diversity of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups in Sri Lanka. Munaweera seems aware of these postwar narratives that seek to erase the past when Yasodhara watches President Mahinda Rajapaksa speaking on television: “He says, ‘I don’t want to dig into the past. I don’t want to open up this wound.’ He knows the wound is there, just under the surface, waiting to erupt. Over the decades we will witness how it heals or festers.”[159] The body of the nation, then, is injured, and contains within in potential sores. In the novel, instead of perpetually holding on to a social order, the future and progress is only possible through letting go of past histories. Despite this acknowledgement of the complications of erasure, Munaweera’s ending moment reflects Rajapaksa’s choice to ignore the past - but a wound can only heal if the sore is drained.

Conclusion

Island of a Thousand Mirrors articulates the possibilities of a postwar Sri Lanka and its diaspora, and ultimately illustrates the failure of the heteronational and heteroreproductive nationalism. Women’s bodies are sites for national imagination, but some of these bodies choose to not actively reproduce, or try to reproduce and are unable to (e.g. miscarriage). Munaweera’s second novel, *What Lies Between Us,* which explores the effects of child sexual abuse and infanticide. The next generation is seen as receiving a cultural memory or inheritance, but it is one of violence and/or erasure. Saraswathi, as a girl on the margins of Sri Lankan society, does not have the luxury of imagining the future - let alone heteronational imaginings of future - because she is more concerned with her own day-to-day survival. Her future and her life itself are regulated through violence, and when she joins the LTTE, it is not to support its mission towards the survival and continuation of the Sri Lankan Tamil people, but out of revenge for the horrific violence acted upon her body. Instead of being reproductive, she chooses to end her life and the lives of others via suicide bombing, hiding the bomb around her stomach under her clothes to purposefully impersonate a pregnant woman. In the end, Saraswathi uses mimicry of the reproductive to enact death. Yasodhara’s proper marriage to a coethnic chosen by her parents fails, as memories and sex are not enough to maintain the relationship. Yasodhara’s reproductive marriage with Shiva fails to inscribe any cultural knowledge to the next generation - Sam does not know where her parents are from, or where Sri Lanka is, nor does she have connections to her family in America. Though Yasodhara produces a child, Sam does not to receive any cultural inheritance since her parents actively shield her from it, the future of Sri Lankan heritage stops with the child instead of being passed down. While Sam may seem to embody a postwar Sri Lanka unencumbered by ethnic boundaries, the character instead reflects the complications of national memory. The postwar future Yasodhara’s imagines in the epilogue is only possible through forgetting and actively erasing a traumatic present and past. Just as Munaweera’s work subverts a future-focused heteroreproductive temporality, the next chapter examines how transmasculine performance artist and comedian D’Lo subverts heteronational and teleological understandings of diaspora through his queer diasporic body. In this way, literature and performance allow diasporic subjects to narrate Sri Lankan diasporic experiences and in doing so, better understand the temporal diasporic embodiment of their lives.

[159] Munaweera, 235.

Chapter 4: Spillin' the T(ea): Embodied Performance, Race, and Trans Childhood in D'Lo's *To T, or not to T?*

To T, or not to T?, a solo play written and performed by D'Lo, a queer transmasculine Sri Lankan Tamil American performance artist, writer, and comedian, is a collection of vignettes throughout his journey towards transition. While the title hints at the depressing aspects of *Hamlet*'s "To be or not to be?" monologue - i.e. "Do I live, or do I die?", or to put it another way, "Do I live as myself, or do I fall into despair?"- *To T, or not to T?* illustrates the process of becoming and self-actualization. The play depicts a different type of diasporic experience than the one portrayed in *Island*: a diasporic experience which is affected by the war, but instead centers queerness in reflecting on diasporic identity. While Munaweera's work contends with how she affectively understands diaspora as a cisgender Sri Lankan Sinhala American, D'Lo uses his queer diasporic body to engage with his lived experiences as a transmasculine Sri Lankan Tamil American.

When I took my parents to watch *To T, or not to T?,* they thought they knew what to expect, as I had breathlessly told them all about the play after I saw it for the first time. When we attended together, they witnessed an incredibly intimate performance, and giggled, laughed with their whole bodies, and wept - sometimes at the same time - as D'Lo swept us along a whirlwind journey of his life. After the show, my parents told me the "Sri Lankanness of it all" affected them most viscerally and made them struggle for breath. A transmasculine Sri Lankan Tamil American artist's narrative of his journey towards self-understanding and acceptance somehow captured the Sri Lankanness and diasporic-ness of their own cis heterosexual experiences. Afterwards, I knew I had to write about D'Lo - there were just too many questions, too many conversations spilling out from us for me not to. How did D'Lo's trans narrative capture a much broader diasporic experience?

The driving question in *To T, or not to T?* (besides considering whether to start testosterone) is "Who am I?"/ "Who is D'Lo?" Throughout his work, D'Lo engages with and critiques subject-making and disciplinary practices.[160] D'Lo illustrates how the diasporic body, specifically that of the diasporic child, is formed and regulated. The queer diasporic body is a text on which others try to enact certain meanings about Sri Lankan, American, and diasporic futurity, but D'Lo uses that very queer body to actively reimagine and re-image family and community, thereby infusing these spaces with his own queer ontologies and epistemologies. Gayatri Gopinath argues that South Asian queer bodies "infuse the space of home with multiple forms of queer desire," therefore undermining the heterosexual underpinnings of home, community and nation.[161] D'Lo uses his queer body to control his own narrative, strategically taking on the mannerisms of immigrant family as they attempt to discipline him, thereby reversing scrutiny onto his family instead.

"T" is multivalent for D'Lo, it names the transition and testosterone of his queer transmasculinity, but also refers to tea as a drink. Towards the start of the play, he invites the audience to sit and enjoy some tea with him. D'Lo sits, spins a tea tray, and takes a sip of the tea

[160] D'Lo's work is in different anthologies, and he runs a writing workshop series for South Asian LGBTQ+ individuals called "Coming Out, Coming Home." As an actor, he has had roles on the shows *Transparent, Looking, Mr. Robot,* and *Sense8,* and has appeared on Buzzfeed.
[161] Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures,* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005), 186.

quietly, the saucer clinking. He uses silence and softness to contrast his frenzied energy to capture the audience's attention. The audience is here to hear about his struggles with transition, and in the process, D'Lo "spills the tea," so to speak, on himself and his family. In this chapter, I use the term "spilling the tea," a euphemism for gossip, to explore how D'Lo's embodied storytelling praxis reveals secrets and narrate stories hidden from the American mainstream. With only D'Lo on stage throughout, *To T, or not to T?* lends itself to an intimacy between audience and performer. In this way, "spilling the tea" reveals personal and private information, engenders trust, and invites the audience into an intimacy facilitated by embodied performance. D'Lo's incorporation of various racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities into his lived experience reflects the expansiveness of his embodied storytelling praxis. I examine different variations of "spilling the tea" through D'Lo's embodied performance of family members, his use of black culture to navigate ethnic and racial identity, and his reflections on trans childhood.

First, I examine D'Lo's embodied performance of family and his use of his father to play with narrative expectations. I then examine diasporic intimacy through the Super Auntie character and the term *fam*, a colloquialism for fictive kinship, and the potential for queering *fam* in a diasporic context. Secondly, I explore how hip hop and black culture gave D'Lo the vocabulary to shape his identity, both as a racialized minority in the U.S. subject to white supremacy, and as an ethnoreligious minority in Sri Lanka and in the Southern California Sri Lankan American community subject to Sinhala nationalism. Finally, examining D'Lo's narration of his trans childhood, I discuss the urgency of disciplining of nonnormative bodies for the Sri Lankan Tamil community and frame the experience of trans childhood and the diasporic childhood as *growing outwards*, instead of growing up.

D'Lo not only demonstrates the power of the diasporic child to spill the tea, but also shows the power of the queer diasporic body to create culture itself. In addition to telling his family's story through embodied performance, D'Lo uses his body to describe the Sri Lankan American diaspora. In doing so, a multiply minoritized queer transmasculine Tamil body becomes the center of national and diasporic narratives. Discussing transgender cultural production, Julian B. Carter et al. argue:

> Transgender cultural production is not only evidence for and generative of collective discourse around individual experience and social relations; it is also affective and epistemological movement embedded in and expressive of the material conditions that support and limit our imaginations about who matters and what is possible.[162]

D'Lo's embodied performance describes how he complicates Sri Lankan diasporic norms, and in doing so, he both creates and illustrates those norms. Diana Taylor explains the power of such embodied performance to create meaning: "Embodied performance makes visible an entire spectrum of attitudes and values. The multicodedness of these practices transmits as many layers of meaning as there are spectators, participants, and witnesses."[163] Here, meaning is made through the audience witnessing the performance. Through his body, D'Lo makes claims in the public sphere about Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan Americans. For many audience members, D'Lo's embodied performance is the first Sri Lankan American story they have been exposed to, since

[162] Julian B. Carter, David J. Getsy, and Trish Salah, 'Introduction', in 'Trans* Cultural Production', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): 469–481; 472.
[163] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 49.

American media does not depict Sri Lankan culture outside of news segments focused about war and political conflict. D'Lo does not explicitly center ethnic conflict in his work - it is one part of his many multilayered identities. Unlike other Sri Lankan diasporic fiction, which may necessarily feature the war as a central theme, D'Lo shifts focus from ethnoreligious conflict and geopolitics, emphasizing the everyday, intimate experiences of Sri Lankan American life, and describing rituals, beliefs, communities, and conversations about identity that are unseen in the American mainstream. Through his embodied performance, D'Lo creates, remakes, and redefines Sri Lankan American culture. By offering nuance to the spectacle of diaspora of the Sri Lankan body, his very trans play speaks to a much broader audience, creating a Sri Lankan culture that is legible to cisgendered first generation immigrant aunties and uncles like my parents.

Spilling the Tea: On Fathers, Aunties, and *Fam*

To T, or not to T?, written and performed by D'Lo and directed by Adelina Anthony, and originally ran from October 4 through December 8, 2019 at the Davidson/Valentini Theatre at the LGBT Center of Los Angeles. The solo play was originally scheduled for October 2019 only but was extended twice to add additional shows in November and December 2019.[164] The Davidson/Valentini Theatre is an intimate space, with 50 cushioned seats in rows. The stage is flat, so the audience and performer are on the same level for the first three rows, while the last three rows slightly elevated. Two adjacent walls bracketing the stage are painted in purples, blues, and grays, and one wall is painted to resemble a chain link fence, while the other is has a moon a few feet off the floor. The floor is black juxtaposed by large white cubes of varying heights, which D'Lo sits, leans, and climbs on throughout his performance. Off to the left, there is a doorframe, painted by D'Lo's mother in yellow and golds.[165] The doorframe, from which D'Lo enters and exits, is painted to represent Sri Lankan carvings, with curving peacocks moving towards the center of the frame. Between the frame there is a curtain of red and white flower garlands, decor traditionally used in *manavarai* during Tamil Hindu weddings. To its right, there is a yellow, gold, and black batik fabric wall hanging. In front of the doorframe there is a clay pot on a *puja* tray, used in Hindu religious ceremonies. Towards the foreground of the stage, on the left, fabric in wispy, gauzy gold and solid white fall in folds from the ceiling. The space itself is both inviting and expansive, intimate and large.

D'Lo uses space strategically, climbing, leaning, and jumping off white cubes placed throughout the stage. When the play begins, D'Lo enters, leaving *manavarai* decorations swinging in his wake. Projected against the walls and floor are tiny white lights, resembling stars: when D'Lo steps on stage, he becomes the center of the universe. Every part of stage is used to project images of people, music videos, pictures, and art. As he reminisces about watching Queen Latifah music videos, the cubes are used as televisions. He returns to one particular cube each time he imitates his father. A painted moon on the wall is used to project paintings of Hindu deities when D'Lo describes his artist mother. He uses fabric hanging from

[164] The show also ran at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City, Los Angeles from June to July 2022, which had a slightly different stage space. In this chapter, I discuss the 2019 stage space. However, I discuss aspects of the 2022 run in this chapter's concluding section.
[165] Conversation with D'Lo, October 17, 2019.

the ceiling for imitation, grabbing and manipulating it deftly to dress as and become various characters.

D'Lo switches between characters seamlessly: When his father speaks, he takes on his father's bodily expressions - his hand clutches the middle of his shirt, his posture is erect, his head high, his shoulders betraying a sense of discomfort. When imitating his childhood friend, D'Lo's arms and legs are akimbo, in the loose, messy, unstructured nature of children. When imitating his sister, he mimes painting his nails primly, a picture of teenage insouciance. D'Lo's body forms and contorts to represent aunties, uncles, cousin-sisters and cousin-brothers, friends, and at one point, the elegant bearing of Queen Latifah striding confidently through a club. Kimberlee Pérez sees D'Lo's personification of family members as a "performative intervention that criticizes, but also demonstrates his love and commitment to, his family."[166] In doing so, he "transforms his body into the body of family members to tell *his* story of *their* story of him."[167] D'Lo therefore controls the narrative about his family, a narrative that shows care and love, but also chastises. Pérez continues:

> Despite his allegiance to maintaining and navigating these relationships, the performances of family members include criticism that does not let them off the hook for the violent denials, disciplinary practices, and dismissals they layer on his body. Outside of the performance, the audience is not privy to whether or how D'Lo actually lives his familial relations. This is the function and the possibility of performance: to reflect, imagine, and to possibly create relationality.[168]

Regardless of D'Lo's actual relationship with his family, his performance allows him to create and reflect on family dynamics through his body.

D'Lo's embodied performance practice reflects Diana Taylor's distinction between the "*archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)."[169] While archival memory "works across distance over time and space… and succeeds in separating the source of 'knowledge' from the knower,"[170] the repertoire, however, "enacts embodied memory" which is "live, [and therefore] exceeds the archive's ability to capture it." [171] The repertoire necessitates an audience, and "people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by 'being there,' being a part of the transmission."[172] Cultural memory is alive, embodied, resistant to set structure, and is changing as practitioners create and pass it on, an active process and practice of transmission. In performance, especially, "witnessing is transferable: the theatre, like the testimony, like the photograph, film or report, can make witnesses of others."[173] D'Lo creates and constructs living memories and narratives through the embodied practice of performance, and in doing so, makes the audience witnesses to his story on *his* terms. His memory-making is in the enacted practice of storytelling, and

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[166] Kimberlee Pérez, "Staging the Family Unfamiliar: the Queer Intimacies in *Ramble-Ations: A One D'Lo Show*." *Text and Performance Quarterly,* 39:4, (2019), 383.
[167] Kimberlee Pérez, "Staging the Family Unfamiliar,"373. Emphasis in original.
[168] Kimberlee Pérez, "Staging the Family Unfamiliar,"383.
[169] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 19.
[170] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 19.
[171] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 20.
[172] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 20.
[173] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 211.

specifically, in telling stories through the eyes of others, whose mannerisms and accents he takes on. In imitating first generation individuals, like his father, mother, various aunties and uncles, he reveals the complexities of the first and second generations' relationship. In doing so, D'Lo controls the narratives about himself, thereby creating first generation subjects and reversing scrutiny back onto them.

When performing as his father, mother, aunties, and cousins, D'Lo puts on a Sri Lankan accent. Shilpa Davé notes that most popular South Asian American characters in television and film are comedic, and these characters have accents to indicate their racialization and/or difference from the norm. [174] However, accents are imperative to D'Lo's embodied storytelling method, and uses the accent to purposefully draw focus to a character. An accent informs the audience not just that the actor has changed characters, but also that this *particular* character is different from what is expected or normative. Accents make the characters aurally separate from D'Lo's monologue, and so brings focus to differences, but D'Lo does this with care. The accent itself is not supposed to be funny – instead, what the character is *saying* is funny. The Sri Lankan accent is racialized in the U.S., but the way D'Lo uses it is not racializing. Especially considering he grew up in a location where white supremacy was a visible and active force, instead of using accents to racialize or exclude, D'Lo uses the Sri Lankan accent to reenact a particular experience for the audience. By taking on family members' body language and ways of speaking, he creates an intimacy between himself and the audience, strategically taking the audience into his memories in a comedic yet layered way, to bring the audience into his confidence on his terms.

D'Lo's Father and Rooting Through Narratives

Throughout the play, D'Lo reveals details about his family and his relationship with his father in particular. His father's speech at D'Lo and his partner's commitment ceremony is used as a framing device, and excerpts from the speech are interspersed throughout the play. D'Lo returns to the speech throughout the performance, especially after particularly emotionally difficult scenes, to break the tension. Once source of regular humor is D'Lo's father's constant introductions of his wife. Each time the father mentions his wife during the speech, he says, "When Sita (my wife, D'Lo's mother)…" gesturing towards himself, Sita, and D'Lo.[175] The repeated introductions are purposefully comical, but also a constant affirmation of their familial connection – i.e., they may be at odds throughout the play, but they remain a family. Whenever returning to the speech, D'Lo climbs onto the same white cube at the front of the stage. The physical elevation of his father reflects the South Asian and Sri Lankan patriarch as familial authority figure. This authority is subverted, however, at the end of the play, during a conversation between D'Lo and his father taking place the day after the commitment ceremony. D'Lo's father notes how many guests came up to him, praising him for the speech, visibly impressed at his eloquence and humor. It is then we find out that D'Lo *himself* wrote the speech for his father to give. The audience erupts in laughter and delighted applause. D'Lo has pulled the wool over our eyes, and in doing so, has deftly crafted a narrative through which D'Lo's family and his life is presented.

[174] See Shilpa Davé, *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).
[175] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*, directed Adelina Anthony. October-November 2019. Los Angeles LGBT Center.

Immediately after this revelation, D'Lo exits the stage while the lights dim. Projected against the wall is a short clip from the actual commitment ceremony. D'Lo sits on a Sri Lankan wedding settee with his partner on his left and his father on his right, who is clutching a stapled speech.[176] Their arms are interlocked and they are holding each other - they are linked and unbroken. In the clip, D'Lo's father concludes his speech and the play ends. The relationship between queerness and death "opens the door to a ferocious articulation of negativity," so D'Lo's focus on the joy and laughter of queerness is refreshing.[177] The narrative D'Lo composes in his embodied performance asserts that while a queer life may have struggle, a happy and even triumphantly queer ending is still possible.

Throughout the play, there are pictures and video clips of D'Lo's sister, his partner, and his friends, but D'Lo chooses to reveal his father only at the very end, once D'Lo has left the stage. It seems D'Lo is letting his father take the stage for the audience to see his father as he really is. But is he, really? While the wedding speech is about his father's views of D'Lo, in reality, D'Lo is our window into his father. D'Lo determines how we construct our image of his father, so once the real clip of his father plays, it is tinged with the behaviors and performance we have witnessed earlier. Even though D'Lo's father's words end the play, the audience now knows that it is actually D'Lo's written speech which his father delivers. Any authenticity and veracity given by playing the clip do not matter, because the audience is already aware who his father is through D'Lo's performance of him.

In constructing his own narrative of familial roots, D'Lo complicates reproductive notions of diaspora that are generationally-oriented and emphasize lineage. When D'Lo takes on the mannerisms of his father, D'Lo's storytelling itself constructs the roots of the father-son relationship in the first place – that is, talking about his roots creates these roots. The creation of roots, then, occurs in the very act of D'Lo describing them, thereby crafting a narrative for the audience of what diasporic and familial ties matter to him. Queer scholars of color like Gayatri Gopinath and Jarrod Hayes argue against a roots or origins-based system of theorizing diaspora.[178] Instead of the scattering of seeds that "diaspora" suggests, Hayes takes the image of a mangrove swamp's complex and interwoven root system as a conceptual tool to theorize the complicated and tangled nature of diasporic memory. Instead of the scattering that the term "diaspora" implies, Hayes describes roots as "rhizomatic," or constantly building and tangling with one another. A return to roots can reveal alternative, and sometimes queer, possibilities. Roots sometimes are not the return to stability we expect - tracing one's roots can reveal histories of violence and pain, but also offers the possibility of reclaiming those histories. To return to one's roots, in this sense, requires an uprooting and untangling of roots.

Similarly, the narrative of D'Lo's family relationships twists and weaves, moving in unexpected ways. D'Lo's work thus reveals the complexity of being an American-born diasporic subject and how Sri Lankan Americans use certain practices to remain whole in diaspora. With D'Lo, we see the uncertainty of diaspora as well as the uncertainty of the body - the body in diaspora is molded in certain (gendered) ways, which D'Lo navigates and at times,

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[176] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*

[177] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2011), 107.

[178] In *Impossible Desires*, Gayatri Gopinath uses queerness as a framework for critiquing diaspora. The inability of hegemonic diasporic discourse to articulate queer desires and queer subjectivity is what makes queer subjects "impossible." Gopinath uses the lens of queer female subjectivity and its impossibility as she analyzes a variety of South Asian diasporic cultural productions, such as music, literature, and film. Focusing on the relationship between heteronormative nationalism and globalization, Gopinath theorizes community across multiple locations, also moving away from descent-defined theories of diaspora.

rejects. D'Lo deftly steers the audience towards accepting a certain point of view, then pulls the rug out from the audience to reveal that his father's opinions on D'Lo throughout the play that we are privy to are actually D'Lo's view of his father. D'Lo's work underscores the multiple, multivocal, and scrambled experiences of diaspora reflecting how "the multiple roots of the mangrove ground a collective identity that is heterogeneous rather than homogeneous."[179]

Not only does D'Lo queer diasporic roots, but he also queers Sri Lankan Tamil cultural conventions, thereby redefining and remaking diasporic culture. In his opening monologue, D'Lo takes out a flask to "pour one out to [his] ancestors."[180] Saluting with the flask, he gestures to the left, right, forward, backward, up and down. Traditional Sri Lankan dance performances start with bowing to the six directional points (north south, east, west, up, and down) to honor the gods. While D'Lo gestures towards this ritual, he instead does it in honor of his ancestors, rather than Hindu deities. When describing his family, D'Lo utilizes a *kolam,* or a type of drawing made by sand, rice flour, shredded coconut. Taking sand from the clay pot, he pours it through his hands onto the *puja* tray, drawing a symbol of parallel lines with a triangle over them. This is not any traditional Hindu, Tamil, or Sri Lankan symbol, and D'Lo does not explicitly explain what the symbols mean in the play. Instead, the meaning is personal. He explains to me later that the two parallel lines represent the parallel lives of himself and his father. The triangle he overlays over the two parallel lines represent "devi" or "queenly womanness." [181] During the play, he describes how in Sri Lankan astrology, he and his father were born under signs that echo and run parallel to each other. Their lives will always reflect each other - they will share highs and lows. In these calmer parts of the play, not only does D'Lo take Sri Lankan ethnic and religious conventions and make them his own, but he also brings the audience into a quiet reflection of how his family's beliefs have influenced his worldviews and sense of belonging.

Super Aunties, *Fam*, and the Intimacies of Fictive Kinship

Such queer diasporic roots reflect the complexities of fictive kinship that move against and beyond biological and heteroreproductive epistemologies. D'Lo also uses his queer diasporic body to both embody and make cultural claims about the figure of the Super Auntie. D'Lo jumps on a cube with a pose the stage directions note as "looking like a statue of honor," as he describes her:

> She's there for the morning rituals, dousing you with milk, then she jumps in her mini-van to drive all the way out to fucking Rancho Cucamonga to pick up a cake, and make it all the way back, in time, to do the last ceremony looking FLY, blingin' and shit.[182]

As he praises Super Auntie's ability to multitask, D'Lo wraps the gauzy golden orange fabric hanging from the ceiling around his body in the imitation of a sari and of a superhero's cape, raises his chin, and struts the strut of Super Auntie. Here, the usually unseen labor Super Auntie performs, like last minute wedding errands, is valued. When D'Lo acknowledges the labor of

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[179] Jarrod Hayes, *Queer Roots for the Diaspora: Ghosts in the Family Tree* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 4.
[180] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*
[181] Conversation with D'Lo, November 19, 2019.
[182] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*

Super Auntie and her frantic handling of wedding logistics, he does so by grabbing the orange gauzy fabric and flapping it up and down: the Auntie is an undulating being of constant movement.

To T, or not to T? recurringly explores what constitutes a "proper" Sri Lankan child and how D'Lo has pushed back against this ideal. D'Lo's misalignment with social norms is illustrated in an opening scene about his and his partner's commitment ceremony. On the dance floor, his Sri Lankan *fam* and queer *fam* are dancing together, when Ginuwine's "Pony" starts playing. D'Lo, to his partner's horror, starts gyrating to the song, undulating his body all over the walls of the stage and the floor. It is purposefully erotic and transgressive – D'Lo is humping the furniture, hilariously. Then Super Auntie deploys what D'Lo calls the "immigrant grab," where an elder will squeeze the upper arm, as D'Lo describes it, "on the part of your arm where you didn't even *know* you had a muscle."[183] The immigrant grab disciplines children and is a way of ensuring D'Lo behaves and remains aligned with social and familial norms. There is something to be said about the visceral nature of the immigrant grab – its immediacy, its urgency, its aggression. The immigrant grab is a universally understood gesture that speaks forcefully, saying, "Stop doing that!" It says, "Pay attention to me *now*, and listen up, because I am about to *school your ass*." The use of the immigrant grab in public situations – like Super Auntie does here - allows for disciplinary methods to remain subtle, yet paradoxically, the immigrant grab itself is very much *not* subtle to those on the receiving end. This suggests, as Gopinath argues, that "familial 'harmony' is predicated on strict forms of gender disciplining of unruly bodies."[184] In this case, Super Auntie uses the immigrant grab to get D'Lo to stop fucking the dance floor. Despite the implicit violence of the immigrant grab, D'Lo laughs it off as normal, and almost as if it was deserved.

The first time I attended *To T, or not to T?,* I took along my queer Asian American *fam*. We met a kind Indian American Los Angeles LGBT Center volunteer in his late 40s, and we spoke at length about the Super Auntie character. "I know that Auntie!" he said. I asked if he meant that he knew the actual auntie who the character was based on. "No," he said, "But I know aunties!"[185] Likewise, when D'Lo describes Super Aunties, he says, "You know a Super Auntie - every community has them, because, hello, women and femmes are superheroes! And you *know* this Auntie."[186] As D'Lo noted, Super Aunties do all of this while looking impeccably dressed, with their hair and makeup done. In other South Asian American comedy, like standup, web series and comic videos, the auntie is shrill, derided, and speaks in an exaggerated accent. In refusing to mock the Super Auntie, D'Lo's accented parody of aunties allows for complexity, ironically making the imitation more real, lived-in, and intimate.

The second time I attended *To T, or not to T*? a month later, I took my Sri Lankan American *fam*. One of the theater staff came up to our little group: my parents, who immigrated to the United States in 1981, myself, and a Sri Lankan American UCLA student from Arizona we unofficially adopted, and who adopted us in turn as her "LA Sri Lankan *fam*." They looked at my Ammi, all 5'1 of her, at her pleasantly round and deceptively innocent face that hides both a wicked sense of humor and a righteous anger for injustice. "Are you Super Auntie?" the staff member asked. Ammi tilted her head, thinking for a second, and said, "Well, yes!" She paused.

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[183] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*

[184] Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 123.

[185] When speaking with other POC folks and some white folks, about this very subject, everyone spoke about POC aunties. There are no white aunties.

[186] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*

"But I'm probably not the one you're looking for." We all laughed. The staff member then moved to another gaggle of South Asian folks. We kept chuckling to ourselves after, and our UCLA adoptee exclaimed, "Auntie, you are *totally* a Super Auntie!"

After the show, D'Lo came out to the courtyard and mingled with the audience as he usually does post-performance, hugging people he knew and taking pictures and selfies. As we spoke with D'Lo about the play and his work, Ammi was ecstatic. She had tears in her eyes, genuinely proud, and kept hugging him, saying things like "You're amazing!" and "I am so proud of you!" He accepted her hugs with grace and a matter-of-fact affection. Why could Ammi open her arms to D'Lo and fold him into her embrace, and why could he accept it with gladness, when they had just met? First off, the Super Auntie in Ammi overpowered and overshadowed any awkwardness from the two being virtual strangers. Secondly, Ammi felt like she knew D'Lo because of the personal nature of the play, so they were able to share a moment of familial intimacy even though they had just met.

D'Lo deploys intimacy strategically in *To T, or not to T?*, by slowly and steadily inviting the audience into his life, his world, and his changing perspectives about being transmasculine. This use of intimacy is complex and flexible, "[resisting] ideological reifications of family, sexuality, or community."[187] Concepts associated with intimacy, like family, are made complicated by how global capitalist modernity has affected a variety of issues such as familial networks existing over multiple borders, leading to transnational intimacies and intimate economies. [188] Further, fictive kinship in diaspora widens the nature of the intimate, the private, of what is considered "home" or "family," whether it is the "othermothers" of Black feminist literature, Filipino migrant workers transnational "communities of care," or through theorizing immigrant social networks as a wheel, with "hubs" in diaspora that create economic opportunities for various "spokes" of immigrants to take advantage of.[189] This flexibility of intimacy helps us examine the intimacies created in Sri Lankan American diasporas, and how fictive kinship influences diasporic structures. Intimacy is about who we include and who we exclude, but more importantly, who we feel comfortable including and making a home with. Reflecting the flexibility of Hayes' rhizomatic mangrove roots, the power and complexity of intimacy allows us to think about the local in a broader global context and how Sri Lankan Americans interact with each other, their communities, other Sri Lankan diasporas, and Sri Lanka itself as both a location and a nation-state.

Intimacy also reflects the messiness of fictive kinship and allows us to think of different types of *fam*, a term originating in African American Vernacular English. Though used for decades prior to its official inclusion, "*fam*" was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2018, which defines it as an informal noun referring to "a close friend or trusted companion" and "person's close friends or trusted associates, esp. when considered as fellow members of a particular social or cultural group."[190] D'Lo describes the joy of seeing his queer of color *fam* and Sri Lankan *fam* dancing together at his commitment ceremony:

[187] Ara Wilson, "Intimacy: A Useful Category of Transnational Analysis," in *The Global and the Intimate,* 48.
[188] Ara Wilson, "Intimacy," 47.
[189] See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Valerie Francisco-Menchavez, *The Labor of Care: Filipina Migrants and Transnational Families in the Digital Age* (University of Illinois Press, 2018); and Vilna Bashi Treitler, *Survival of the Knitted: Immigrant Social Networks in a Stratified World* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2007).
[190] *Oxford English Dictionary*, Third Edition, Sept. 2018.

> I remember it was the reception time! And I'm seeing all my Tamil Sri Lankan family, and my Queer Trans People of Color family, and everyone's loving up on each other, and I'm feeling so emotional.[191]

These are two *fams* that have become one to create a third, united third *fam*. The concept of a "fam" reflects the notion of something that is both "not family" and "family." "Fam" as a cut off version of the word "family" may indicate that it is not "fully" family, but at the same time *fam* can be even closer than family. *Fam* indicates something that is both separate from and deeper than family.

In diaspora, when biological family networks can be widely transnational, developing intimacy through fictive kinship is vital. *Fam* is created through the intimacy of being from the same village in Sri Lanka, attending the same school, church, or temple, or even just being the only Sri Lankans in a particular location, such as Southern California, prior to the advent of the internet and cell phones. *Fam* is the intimacy of having to band together to survive materially, psychologically, and spiritually when there is not one else similar around. This *fam* intimacy goes beyond religious, linguistic, and/or ethnic differences – for example, Sinhala people in Southern California who immigrated prior to the start of the civil war would attend both Buddhist and Catholic services together. Some, like my family, still do decades later, because those were their first, and sometimes only, *fam* in diaspora, where biological family were on another continent. *Fam* is a byproduct of diaspora, providing kinship where family relations are altered, recreated, and reimagined through necessity. That is, *fam* reimagines family within the diasporic location itself.

The idea of one's chosen *fam* resonates in queer communities, due to finding acceptance in chosen *fam* after encountering rejection from biological family. But is *fam* queer in diaspora? It may be queer in the sense of altering relations between people and changing family structures. Diaspora unmakes kinship networks within the homeland and blurs the lines between biological and nonbiological family. For example, Aunties reside outside of the nuclear family unit but also within extended family networks and facilitate connections between biological family networks and nonbiological networks.[192] Aunties move within the in-between spaces of "family" and *fam*, at once belonging to both and neither. Aunties can be whoever and whatever they want: they can be first cousins once removed, they can be friends of parents, or they can be people who you have just met. In many South Asian languages, there are multiple words for "aunt" and "uncle," words that differentiate between aunts who are related through one's mother or through one's father. There are clear distinctions in both Sinhala and Tamil between mother's siblings and father's siblings: For example, mother's elder sisters are *lokuamma* (Sinhala)/*periamma* (Tamil), while mother's younger sisters are *punchiamma* (Sinhala)/*sinnamma* (Tamil). The English moniker "auntie" or "uncle" takes away any reproductive ties to an elder, so "Auntie" becomes an ambiguous figure. Kinship and intimacy in this way blurs the lines between the social and the biological.

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[191] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*

[192] See Patricia J. Sotirin and Laura L. Ellingson, *Where the Aunts Are: Family, Feminism, and Kinship in Popular Culture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013).

"Spillin' the Tea": On The Relationship Between Tamilness and Blackness

D'Lo's construction of identity is based on multiple factors - his gender identity, his sexuality, his experiences with his family, his understanding of the Sri Lankan civil war, and his understanding of hip hop and the black experience. Consequently, the term "spilling the tea" reflects both the complexity of D'Lo's life as a queer diasporic person in the United States and the significant place of Blackness in South Asian American identity formation. An African American Vernacular English term originating in Black gay culture, "spilling the tea" generally refers to sharing gossip or disclosing sensitive or private information. E. Patrick Johnson explains, "In Black gay vernacular, 'tea'… is often used as a euphemism for gossip, as in, 'Chile, spill the tea' or 'Pour the tea!'"[193]

In one scene, D'Lo talks about how as a child, he mistakenly thought Queen Latifah was an African immigrant due to her clothing and name, and identified with her due to what he felt was her understanding of the immigrant experience. As he speaks, Queen Latifah's "Come Into My House" starts playing and the music video is projected against the white cubes on stage. The song is from the album *All Hail the Queen*, which has a cover with a circle with the title and artist in green and red, with an image of the African continent in black within it. As she welcomes us into her Queendom, there is a flash of a Bharatanatyam dancer.[194] When she sings, "The time is now for you to par-tay," we see the same woman now dancing in silhouette, however, this time, the Sri Lankan flag moves past behind her.[195] This must have been a powerful image for a young D'Lo – a way for him to feel seen as a brown person in a white area, and as a Sri Lankan instead of mistaken for Indian. As Queen Latifah sings, "Come one, come all," and "I prepared a place on my dance floor," she is inviting everyone, from all cultures and all walks of life, into her queendom: one nation under Latifah.

In the anthology *Desi Rap*, D'Lo describes hip hop as essential to defining himself as a Sri Lankan American.[196] He claims, hip hop "strengthened my own grasp of who I was. Hip-hop gave me ownership of my ethnic identity, which allowed me to escape being thrown in and lumped together as just your typical South Asian."[197] He finds commonality in what hip hop expresses about minority identities and describes it as a catalyst for understanding himself as a diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil. No wonder Queen Latifah had such an effect over D'Lo, especially since he felt alienated on multiple fronts. In one scene of the play, D'Lo is an undergrad at queer club, putting up flyers for a UCLA QPOC event, when Queen Latifah walks in. He drops to his knees so quickly, it must hurt. Kneeling, head bowed deferentially, arm stretched out towards her, raised in supplication, he beseeches, "My Queen, My Queen!"[198] Voice cracking, he says, "Please take a flyer."[199] He does not even look at her, as if he is afraid to see her in all her glory, strutting through the club. He describes how Queen Latifah instead left the club with gorgeous women on each arm. Queen Latifah is a cultural icon, but she is also a personal icon for D'Lo: he has respect for her and her blackness and bows down to her like the queer Queen she is.

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[193] E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 17.
[194] Queen Latifah's "Come Into My House," 00:17-00:18.
[195] Queen Latifah's "Come Into My House," 00:28-00:30.
[196] This essay was written prior to his transition.
[197] D'Lo, "Beats, Rhythm, Life," *Desi Rap: Hip-Hop and South Asian America*, edited by Ajay Nair and Murali Balaji (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 141.
[198] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*
[199] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*

In the U.S., D'Lo is multiply minoritized: he is transmasculine, the child of immigrants, visibly brown, Sri Lankan Tamil, and Hindu. Recently, D'Lo asked me to discuss the wider themes of his work in a post-performance talkback, or conversation with the artist. At one point, I told the audience, "I have to acknowledge the significance of the two of us speaking together on this stage, since I'm Sinhala and D'Lo is Tamil." D'Lo interjected, "Which basically means we hate each other!" We both laughed as I nodded and gave a little shoulder shimmy of agreement. While D'Lo does not explicitly engage with the civil war or empire in the show, it is a running theme in his other work and shapes his approach to diaspora. In *Ramble-Ations: A One D'Lo Show*, another solo play, D'Lo describes Sri Lanka as "a small island with big ass issues."[200] *To T, or not to T?* does not mention or engage with the civil war explicitly except for a projected map of Sri Lanka at the start labeled "Ammaland." By using "Amma," the Tamil and Sinhala word for "mother," he is deploying a purposeful re-appropriation of the term "motherland" that gives it a distinctly Sri Lankan edge, demonstrating that the play is a distinctly *Sri Lankan* diasporic show. This re-imagining puts a queer member of an ethnic, linguistic, and religious minority at the center of "homeland." D'Lo's map divides the country into north and south, the only implicit mention of the war. In other shows, D'Lo describes the roots of the war in the British's divide-and-conquer colonial strategy, saying, "Anytime someone is trying to colonize, they take the smaller group and put them in places of power, so there can be a rift and it can never get back to the British. That's part of imperialism, right?"[201] He acknowledges the multiples narratives of the civil war, saying, "But if you talk to a Sinhalese person they would give you a [different] history."[202] These different histories he sees are reflected in the conversations he grew up hearing in the 1980s and 1990s. He was acutely aware of the war, and describes hearing background discussions in his family and community about it:

> Raised in America in a Sri Lankan community, I heard the civil conversations and arguments around the civil war taking place on the island. I was the first American-born child in my family. My worldview was heavily influenced by my father, who went from being a full-fledged Tiger supporter to retracting when Rajiv Gandhi was killed.[203]

Calling it "the tea that I've been infused in," D'Lo acknowledges how essential hip hop became in defining who he was as a Sri Lankan Tamil American, due to the shared understandings of marginalization and state violence between black Americans and Sri Lankan Tamils.[204] Despite being American-born, he was "politicized at a young age," as the civil war began when he was old enough to remember.[205] Reflecting on his early life, he says, "[I] knew

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[200] D'Lo, *Ramble-Ations: A One D'Lo Show*.
[201] D'Lo, "Interview with D'Lo: Will the Real Queer Transgender Tamil Sri Lankan-American Please Stand Up?" interviewed by Jeffrey Masters, LGBTQ&A by AfterBuzzTV. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UxFguiC6_EQ&A. 6 December 2016.
[202] D'Lo, "Will the Real Queer Transgender Tamil Sri Lankan-American Please Stand Up?"
[203]D'Lo, "Beats, Rhythm, Life," 140-141. In 1991, Rajiv Gandhi, former Prime Minister of India, was assassinated via suicide bomb by a seventeen-year-old member of the LTTE.
[204] D'Lo "D'Lo Is The Only Trans Person In The Room," interviewed by Laura Cathcart Robbins, *The Only One in the Room* podcast. 18 June 2019.
[205] D'Lo, 'Poetics Statement', in *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*, ed. TC Tolbert and Tim Trace Peterson (Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books; Lebanon, NH: Distributed by the University Press of New England, 2013), 123.

there was a war going on in [my] parents' homeland and the way [my] father talked about it led [me] to compare it to the way Public Enemy spoke to Black folks."[206]

Growing up in Lancaster, California, a city 70 miles north of downtown Los Angeles which was 79 percent white in 1990, almost 63 percent white in 2000, and 50 percent white in 2010, D'Lo says, "I think there is something when you are like the fly in the buttermilk, then you start almost drowning the buttermilk, and then you are like, 'I *am* the buttermilk.' And that didn't happen to us. Like we were *Tamil*."[207] His community could not organize around a Sri Lankan national identity because Sri Lanka as a nation-state was hostile to Tamil people. Instead, his family had to build their community around their Hindu religious identity.[208] As a result, unlike "a lot of POC immigrants who want to be white," D'Lo "grew up in a pro-LTTE immigrant household and community that shied away from confrontation on American soil."[209] Part of this was to avoid white supremacists in the Lancaster/Palmdale area, where D'Lo claims, "The KKK was alive and in effect there in Hicksville, so much so that trust issues kept our parents from allowing us to become close with White people."[210] His doctor father had neo-Nazis patients, but would repeatedly tell D'Lo to "keep your head down and live a good life" instead of engaging with the white nationalists in their city. D'Lo says, "And that's when I saw the parallels between hip-hop as a voice of Black frustration and the struggles of my own people."[211]

While his love of hip hop began at an early age, with D'Lo describing breakdancing in the kitchen as a child, it was later that he found pan-racial solidarity with Black, Latinx, and Filipinx friends in Lancaster: "We danced and wrote and hip-hopped together because we had to stick together; we couldn't afford to get lost in a sea of White."[212] Nitasha Sharma calls such South Asian American pan-racial identification a "global race consciousness" that "reconceptualizes 'race' rooted not in shared biology and identity, but in a shared ideology and consciousness of how power operates through racism."[213] The incorporation of black culture into one's lived experience allows for South Asian Americans to name the racializations they are affected by. As a result, hip hop was a "sanctuary" against the racism and fear D'Lo experienced, but because he was not Black, he claims, "I always wondered if it was truly mine."[214] When his cousin Omkaran, a Sri Lankan immigrant to Canada, came to D'Lo's house wearing a Malcolm X hat, D'Lo confronted him, claiming that Omkaran was "exoticizing Black America" and coopting a struggle that was not his to represent.[215] However, D'Lo realized that Omkaran "had heart and soul and loved his hip-hop, so much so that he felt he melted through the color lines, happily dark enough to enjoy his music and his new culture without being bothered by anyone who dared say anything about his new life love."[216]

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[206] D'Lo, "Beats, Rhythm, Life," 138.
[207] D'Lo, "Will the Real Queer Transgender Tamil Sri Lankan-American Please Stand Up?"
[208] D'Lo, "Will the Real Queer Transgender Tamil Sri Lankan-American Please Stand Up?"
[209] D'Lo, "Poetics Statement," 123.
[210] D'Lo, "Beats, Rhythm, Life," 140.
[211] D'Lo, "Beats, Rhythm, Life," 140.
[212] D'Lo, "Beats, Rhythm, Life," 140.
[213] Nitasha Tamar Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.
[214] D'Lo, "Beats, Rhythm, Life,"139.
[215] D'Lo, "Beats, Rhythm, Life,"139.
[216] D'Lo, "Beats, Rhythm, Life,"139.

Ajay Nair and Murali Bulaji frame such South Asian American affinity for black culture as collaborative activism against racialization and inequity in the U.S., as pushing against narratives of assimilation and model minority, and as a vehicle for navigating diasporic identity issues, claiming, "for some of us, hip-hop culture became a means of cultural expression and, in the process, invoked tensions about identity, the meaning of community, and the concept of authenticity."[217] For D'Lo, hip hop invoked tensions around alienation from a pan-South Asian American identity. He says, "I was the one Sri Lankan cousin, the lonely ol' South Asian who was doing spoken word and hip-hop in different cultural communities throughout LA. I didn't feel South Asian because I was Sri Lankan, and we Sri Lankans don't see ourselves as even related to the mainland."[218] D'Lo felt excluded in purportedly "South Asian" groups that were primarily focused on Indian, specifically North Indian, issues and culture, and even felt alienated from Indian Tamils. He describes Indian Americans' ignorance of the Sri Lankan civil war or thinking that Sri Lanka is in Africa; this further isolated him from a supposedly inclusive South Asian American community.[219]

Hip hop further helped develop D'Lo's sense of masculinity, which he describes as "associated with Black masculinity" and "urban masculinity."[220] He says, "In so many different realms my body is policed in a particular way that isn't typically what is South Asian. Like I don't get the terrorist stereotype on me, I get the other stereotypes."[221] Nitasha Sharma argues that hip hop facilitates such alternate masculinities:

> D'Lo adopts the [b-boi] persona as a way of being that allows for the expression of [his] queer and masculine identities in forms borrowed from hip hop and expressed through performance… As it does for other queer rappers, hip hop allows D'Lo to showcase [his] sexuality— [his] love of women—while also encompassing [his] racial and dancing identities, which are malleable in [his] hands. D'Lo also expands the repertoire of desi masculinities beyond [cisgendered] desi men.[222]

D'Lo's exploration of transmasculinity is bound up in modes of Black cultural expression, assimilation and resistance to whiteness growing up in Lancaster, diasporic modes of respectability, and transnational legacies of the Sri Lankan civil war.

Spilling the T(ea): On Trans Childhood and Growing ~~Up~~ Outwards

Throughout *To T, or not to T*?, D'Lo plays a child or adolescent version of himself in numerous scenes. At one point, pictures of D'Lo as a child are projected on the back wall of the stage, so the audience simultaneously sees multiple D'Los, and can compare the past child D'Lo was with the present adult version standing on stage in front of the projected picture. In childhood scenes, D'Lo navigates through his relationships with friends, grapples with

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[217] Ajay Nair and Murali Balaji, "Introduction," *Desi Rap: Hip-Hop and South Asian America*, edited by Ajay Nair and Murali Balaji (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), ix.
[218] Nair and Balaji, "Introduction," *Desi Rap*, ix.
[219] D'Lo, "Will the Real Queer Transgender Tamil Sri Lankan-American Please Stand Up?"
[220] D'Lo, "D'Lo Is The Only Trans Person In The Room."
[221] D'Lo, "D'Lo Is The Only Trans Person In The Room."
[222] Nitasha Tamar Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis*, 182.

community and parental expectations, and changes his behavior depending on the situation.[223] There are multiple moments where D'Lo is read as a boy by others during his childhood. When attending parties with family, D'Lo's sister says that a cute girl "said that if you were a boy, she'd have a crush on you!" to his slight embarrassment that hides his utter delight.[224] At one point, D'Lo runs around, arms and legs flying, as he plays a boys versus girls game of tag at recess. He is tagged by a girl, in the ensuing argument, she says, "D'Lo counts as a boy!"[225] While he is read by fellow children as a boy, D'Lo discusses aunties and uncles reading his body and behaviors as something abnormal. Aunties and uncles were constantly "sniffin' out" that D'Lo was queer and asking him if he was gay, he says, sniffing twice to emphasize his point.[226] The enforcement of normative behavior is given a sensory dimension here, with D'Lo miming that his refusal to adhere to rigid gendered behaviors had an odor, a stink, that pervaded his kinship networks and brought unwanted attention towards him.

The trials and tribulations of transness that manifests in the tests from aunties and uncles illustrates the other resonances of T(ea) I discuss in this section: trans childhood and transtemporality. The child, as concept and figure, is an embodiment of the temporal misalignment of memory. The child is an investment who exists in the present, who represents a future that has not yet come to pass, and who we teach about the past.[227] In *To T, or not to T?*, childhood is depicted as an unruliness, a changeability. Children are best seen "not as pre- adults figuring the future but as anarchic beings who partake in strange and inconsistent temporal logics."[228] Jack Halberstam offers a reading of the child as a nonadult body with "a propensity to incompetence, a clumsy inability to make sense, a desire for independence from the tyranny of the adult, and a total indifference to adult conceptions of success and failure."[229] Here, childhood is messy, resisting the logics and teleological designs of adulthood.

The 2013 documentary on D'Lo directed by Crescent Diamond, *Performing Girl,* leans into this childness. It includes stop-motion interludes with Legos depicting various scenes over D'Lo's narration. Legos, a seemingly childish thing, a toy that kids play and explore with, are used in the documentary to reenact important moments from D'Lo's life. For example, Legos depict the first time D'Lo heard and understood the word "homosexual" in class as a fourth grader, when D'Lo decides to run away from home at the age of eleven, and the Sri Lankan Tamil coming-of-age ceremony where D'Lo is bathed in turmeric. [230] The use of Lego stop-motion, instead of a traditional talking head or b-roll, to recreate these scenes may seem to distance D'Lo from such emotionally fraught moments. Legos are hard, inflexible, and painful if stepped on, and are used here to represent painful memories. However, Legos also carry with them a changeability - children take Legos apart and put them back together in new and interesting ways. They can follow the pattern on the box, but more often than not, children create their own designs and worlds as they see fit.

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[223] See Shyam Selvadurai, *Funny Boy* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1994) and Gayatri Gopinath's *Impossible Desires* on Arjie, a queer Sri Lankan Tamil child who is mocked and disciplined by family for his transgression in playfully wearing a sari.
[224] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*
[225] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*
[226] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*
[227] See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2004).
[228] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 12.
[229] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 120.
[230] Crescent Diamond, dir., *Performing Girl*, (San Francisco, California, 2013).

This unpredictability of childhood gets hindered during puberty, when gender distinctions become enforced more vehemently. In one scene of the play, D'Lo is sitting on one of the white cubes, shoulders and body hunched over, looking away from the audience uncomfortably. D'Lo suddenly jumps up to play his father, circling around the cube excitedly, his hands holding up an imaginary video camera. As his father, he tsks, "Kunju, look here!" trying to capture D'Lo's attention, but D'Lo is clearly too upset to engage.[231] It is the day of D'Lo's *periya pillai,* or coming-of-age ceremony that celebrates a person's first menstrual period. Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhala cultures have ceremonies and parties celebrating a child's menarche wherein the child is ritually bathed and given gifts of gold jewelry, clothing, and money. *Performing Girl* includes photographs from that day where D'Lo is dressed in a sari and looks utterly miserable.[232] In *To T, or not to T?* as his father tries to get D'Lo to engage with not only the camera, but the ceremony itself, D'Lo wails that he feels like "a clown whose only trick is bleeding!" or "a superhero whose power is bleeding!"[233] Instead of coming of age being represented at a specific age, such as with a bat mitzvah or quinceañera, Sinhala and Tamil Sri Lankan cultures mark menarche, which indicates a body's new ability to reproduce, as the moment a child becomes "grown." The "trick" or "superpower" D'Lo describes here is the start of the child turning into the heteroreproductive subject.

As Sara Ahmed notes, "it is over the bodies of children" that debates about safety – safety of the nation's moral fabric, safety of children, safeguarding the future– are fought.[234] Ahmed argues, "The child comes to embody, in a narrative that is both nostalgic (returning to an imagined past) and fearful (projecting and unimaginable future), all that could be stolen or lost by the proximity of strangers," or in this case, stolen by migration and living in diaspora.[235] The child is not only used as justification for exclusionary policies, but also for how people choose to remember and reconfigure the past. The child is the repository for knowledge about a group's past, and so becomes the organizing point for Sri Lankan diasporic imaginings of the future. Being a "good Sri Lankan child" requires adherence to the reproduction of the family line, so when "parents imagine the life they would like for their child, they are also imagining what they will 'give' to the child as a gift that becomes socially binding."[236] The child's future is thus envisioned through a heteroreproductive lens, which "becomes a social as well as familial inheritance through the endless requirement that the child repay the debt of life with its life."[237] Once the child reaches adulthood, they must then reproduce not only future children, but also the societal practices and ideologies they were inculcated with.

As the child simultaneously embodies the past, the present, and the future, it is vital for the Auntie to subtly and overtly discipline the unruly and nonnormative child to enforce cultural expectations. Auntie's disciplinary practices are especially urgent in the Sri Lankan diaspora due to ethnoreligious conflict and war. D'Lo's Sri Lankan Tamil American community in "SriLancaster" are displaced both physically and in the Sri Lankan state's Sinhala Buddhist nationalist imaginary. Customs like the *periya pillai* ceremony have extra resonance for a Tamil minority who are further alienated at purportedly pan-ethnic Sri Lankan American events in Southern California, in which the cultural traditions represented are overwhelmingly Sinhala and

[231] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*
[232] Crescent Diamond, dir., *Performing Girl*.
[233] This varied depending on the date of the performance.
[234] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 31.
[235] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 31.
[236] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 85.
[237] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 86.

Buddhist. Further, the coming-of-age ceremony moves the diasporic child from immaturity towards an imagined reproductive future. *Performing Girl* shows video footage of young Sri Lankan Tamil American children dancing at festivals, religious events, and community functions in colorful dance costumes, an attempt to create and maintain a younger generation in the U.S. who are culturally aware and engaged with their heritage. Jack Halberstam calls this "the time of inheritance," which "connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability."[238] This cultural inheritance allows for a shared sense of Tamil community separate from the mainly Sinhala Sri Lankan American imagined community.

D'Lo's queering of Sri Lankan American norms illustrate the urgency of correcting the diasporic child's transgressions. In one scene of *To T, or not to T?*, D'Lo argues with his mother, refusing to wear a dress on his birthday. He appeals to his father, who tells him, "Just wear the dress for the cake and then change" after pictures are taken.[239] D'Lo is performing girlhood for photographs and video, things that are archival, and therefore solid and permanent. The time of inheritance facilitates the diasporic body itself becoming an archive, which was explored in the previous chapter. This archive is further complicated by expectations of trans diasporic bodies' adherence to cisnormativity. In middle school, D'Lo decides to grow out his hair, observes how other girls hold themselves and move, and then molds his bodily behavior towards heteronormativity. This attempt to un-queer his body as a child makes the moment later in the play when D'Lo throws his arms in the air and announces, "And then I got top surgery!" a triumph. Every performance I attended, the crowd went wild and whooped their pleasure in response. D'Lo describes top surgery as "one of the most selfish and self-loving decisions I ever made" so he could be "the me I had dreamed of when I was little." [240] The memory of a trans childhood is a remembrance of self-knowledge. It is a narrative of knowing that despite these performances of girlhood, D'Lo was still transmasculine. D'Lo remembers having queer desires as child, saying, "I was attracted to women at a very young age. I had crushes – knew I wanted to kiss girls at like age 3. And I think it's weird that people come out later. I'm not judging, I'm like, you didn't know you wanted to kiss somebody at that age?!"[241] He remembers this knowledge, as well as seeing a trans person on a daytime talk show, a moment that opens him to different bodily possibilities and different epistemologies.

At the end of *To T, or not to T?*, D'Lo visits his parents' home the day after his commitment ceremony. His cousins welcome him now as a family man, excitedly gesturing him towards the house. His mother, Sita, is sitting down, telling the family how when she was pregnant with D'Lo, she encountered a holy man in Sri Lanka. D'Lo reenacts this moment: as the holy man he bows, arms in prayer, and says, "Blessings on your baby boy."[242] "Oh, no," D'Lo's mother replies, "We went to the doctor, and we're having a girl."[243] D'Lo as the holy man pauses, tilts his head, smiles smugly, then shakes his head swiftly: "No."[244] The audience titters. He bows again, more deeply, and says again, emphatically, "Blessings on your baby *boy*."[245] The audience howls in laughter. At this revelation, D'Lo yells, "Amma, why didn't you

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[238] Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure,* 3.
[239] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*
[240] D'Lo "D'Lo Is The Only Trans Person In The Room."
[241] D'Lo, "Will the Real Queer Transgender Tamil Sri Lankan-American Please Stand Up?"
[242] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*
[243] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*
[244] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*
[245] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*

tell me this *before*?!"[246] This is the other reveal that ends the show, taking place immediately before the reveal that D'Lo wrote his father's speech**.** This knowledge reflects the retrospective nature of transness: To D'Lo, and the audience, the holy man's prediction is a validation of D'Lo's journey.

The holy man's accuracy is only recognized in retrospect, reflecting the transtemporal nature of trans childhood. Transtemporality has been theorized as non-teleological, a lag, as a constant present and state of becoming, and as a multiplicity of time.[247] Hormone replacement therapy, surgeries, and other medical procedures are predicated on patients' claims about their self-knowledge of transness from a young age.[248] Access to medical interventions depends on having the memory of a trans childhood and naming that childhood as trans in retrospect. While the body, "the very site of transgender experience…cannot be captured" by the archive, the memory of a trans childhood is a type of archive that the trans adult must access to provide justification for medical procedures.[249] However, claiming a trans childhood can be difficult for others to accept, since "the child is always already seen as incomplete, as not yet fully formed; its gender is not fully mature, and the child is also seen as not fully capable of knowing its own gender."[250]

With trans childhood, the child grows in unexpected ways, a growth that is only viewed as growth *in retrospect.* This growth is temporally messy, requiring a reconsideration of the past, an articulation that is "the act of adults looking back."[251] Kathyrn Bond Stockton's examination of the queer child names this as "an act of growing sideways, by virtue of its *future retroaction* as a child."[252] That is, "the child who by reigning cultural definitions can't 'grow up' grows to the side of cultural ideals," resulting in a nonnormative adulthood.[253] The trans child also grows sideways: as D'Lo says, "I always thought I was a dude." In this retrospective nature of transness, does the trans child becomes trans only in the looking back and in naming the past self a trans child? Trans autobiographical narratives of trans discuss this self-knowledge, but is it a recognition, or is it a reading of one's childhood through the lens of transness? The child is not fully formed – it is messy, unstructured, and subversive – so trans childhood also resists easy narrativization.[254]

D'Lo says his family and his community "saw me as a little boy throughout [childhood] and I used to hear them say, 'She'll grow out of it.'"[255] Not growing *up* but growing *out* - as a leaving behind of childish desires and the rowdiness of childish behavior. "Growing out" of something assumes that there is something to grow out of, something that must be excised to facilitate normative growth. Childhood is messy, erratic, and volatile, and necessarily involves growing in all directions. This multidirectional nature of childhood cannot be contained. Instead of seeing growth as duality of either staying outside of culture norms or within them, I see the

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[246] D'Lo, *To T, or not to T?*
[247] Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici, "Trans, Time, and History," TSQ (2018) 5 (4): 518–539.
[248] Jasbir K. Puar, "Bodies with New Organs: Becoming Trans, Becoming Disabled, "Social Text (2015) 33 (3 (124)): 45–73.
[249] K. J. Rawson, "Archive," TSQ (2014) 1 (1-2): 24–26.
[250] Claudia Castañeda, "Childhood," TSQ (2014) 1 (1-2): 59–61.
[251] Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child: Growing Sideways in the. Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 5.
[252] Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 11.
[253] Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child,* 13.
[254] See Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) on the complexities of linear trans autobiographical narratives.
[255] D'Lo, "Will the Real Queer Transgender Tamil Sri Lankan-American Please Stand Up?"

diasporic child and trans child growing both within and outside of cultural norms simultaneously, experiencing normative and nonnormative queer growth at the same time. Here, I frame diasporic childhood and trans childhood as a *growing outward* instead of upwards, combining roots-oriented diasporic models with queer analyses of childhood, and grafting Stockton's growing sideways onto Hayes' mangrove roots. Diasporic community practices reflect a fear that the diasporic child will grow out of family, community, kinship networks and so will not properly inherit language, religious beliefs, and cultural practices. *Growing outward* is an expansive analytic that entangles the diasporic child within the family, knitting roots in rhizomatic ways, like the mangrove swamp roots, while also allowing for the possibility of breaking out and creating something new. That is, we can keep things that have built and influenced us, things that have become irrevocably tangled in our histories and memories, and they can twist and become fused with the parts of us that break away. We can take those tangled parts with us as we grow outwards, while still remaining rooted to some degree.

However, there are no easy continuities nor are there any clean breaks. D'Lo says, "I think that my family has been the marker for my growth until I realized I couldn't use them as my marker, because I wasn't growing."[256] After college, he came out to his parents and moved to New York City. D'Lo had to separate from the biological family unit in order to grow, in a narrative that is familiar for queer people: the pushing away from family because of one's inability to behave normatively, and the subsequent rejection and/or ejection from the home. D'Lo sees this separation as essential for his future, saying, "If I was waiting around for them, I was going to live a horrible depressed life. I can't always be coddling you."[257] When D'Lo returned to California, his family continued to reject him, and he says, "Some of the more painful things were the more subtle things," like when his parents refused to speak with him when he was at a Sri Lankan community event, and D'Lo thought, "'I'm your fucking *kid*.'"[258] We are always someone's fucking kid, and whether we like it or not, seen as children in someone else's eyes, regardless of our actual age. We will always be children *to* someone, even after our parents die. D'Lo interacts with his parents first as a daughter and then as a son, but always as their child.

When he tours universities in the U.S., D'Lo's gives the following advice to young queer people on handling parental relationships: "If you feel like there's a little sliver of hope, allow for that seed to grow."[259] D'Lo went through a continual process of attempting to reconcile, being rejected, healing with one's *fam* and then trying again with his parents because there was a "seed" to nurture and cultivate. In one scene in *To T, or not to T?,* D'Lo is eleven years old, throwing clothes into a backpack as he runs away from home. The aunties and his mother form a search party and find him on the other side of a chain link fence. The painted chain link fence on the stage wall, which up until then has been a benign indication that a scene was happening on a playground or during recess, is now a barrier between D'Lo and his mother. Though they are separated, Sita reaches through the fence to grab his arm, holding him and pleading for him to come back. D'Lo's face is twisted in grief as he reaches, reaches, reaches out as far as he can to grasp – his arm straining, his feet on tiptoe, his entire body leaning forwards. Like tree branches leaning towards the sun, D'Lo and Sita lean towards each other desperately. Perhaps

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[256] D'Lo, "Will the Real Queer Transgender Tamil Sri Lankan-American Please Stand Up?"
[257] D'Lo "D'Lo Is The Only Trans Person In The Room."
[258] D'Lo "D'Lo Is The Only Trans Person In The Room."
[259] D'Lo "D'Lo Is The Only Trans Person In The Room."

remembering moments like this is what allowed D'Lo and his parents to reconcile after he came out. "When there's a sliver," D'Lo says, "it will be fruitful."[260]

Conclusion: Embodying the Auntie and the Tea of Being Diasporic

In summer 2022, D'Lo performed *To T, or not to T*? at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City, Los Angeles.[261] D'Lo asked me to moderate a talkback with him after one performance. To my excitement, two queer Sri Lankan American graduate students were also in attendance, and before the show, I encouraged them to ask questions during the Q&A even though they were nervous. From my position on stage during my post-performance conversation with D'Lo, I could see the other 10-15 Sri Lankan Americans in the audience, but noted that the audience members in the front few rows were almost all white. When I opened the discussion for the Q&A portion, immediately, two older white women in the front row raised their hands. In that moment, the Auntie in me came out: I waited, eyebrows raised at the queer Sri Lankan American graduate students in the farther back rows. I sat in the awkward silence that followed, and after what felt like a surprisingly uncomfortable amount of time, but was only 10 seconds, one of the students finally raised their hands and spoke.

The graduate students were frankly, adorable, in expressing their admiration for D'Lo. At one point, D'Lo said, "Let's start a queer Sri Lankan gang!" In our Zoom planning meeting the week prior, when I expressed some anxiety about the event, D'Lo told me, "Just remember that you are held in this space." This play and conversation was an explicitly queer Sri Lankan American space, so just as D'Lo held me in that space, I held those twentysomething queer brown graduate students in turn. In my obvious refusal to call on the white women first, I prioritized queer Sri Lankan American voices. A queer Sri Lankan American gang is a queer Sri Lankan American *fam*, and *fam* holds each other in spaces in diaspora that are uncomfortable or hostile for queer diasporic bodies. In embodying not just the Auntie, but the *queer* Auntie, I firmly stated, without words, "This is *our* space."[262]

To T, or not to T? is at times hilarious, contemplative, and moves the audience through D'Lo's life with an air of mischief. D'Lo uses this mischievousness to spill the tea about being an embodied diasporic subject, navigating many multilayered forces. There are so many sides to D'Lo: he is queer, Sri Lankan, Tamil, transmasculine, actor, comedian, performance artist, and more. D'Lo says to an interviewer introducing him, "If that bio really described me, we would get to five lines until I get to what I actually do!"[263] Whether it is his relationships with his various communities, his infusion of blackness with his brown and Sri Lankan Tamil identity, or in his recognition of his trans childhood, D'Lo creates and continually pushes against identity markers, some that contradict and defy each other. *To T, or not to T?* demonstrates D'Lo's power as a storyteller in not only crafting a biographical narrative, but in his articulation of the weaving nature of identity in diaspora. As we see with D'Lo's embodied storytelling praxis, the next two chapters examine how Sri Lankan Americans have reinterpreted normative epistemologies in diaspora.

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[260] D'Lo, "D'Lo Is The Only Trans Person In The Room."
[261] With an audience capacity of over 300, the Kirk Douglas Theatre is a much larger venue than the 2019 run's Davidson/Valentini Theatre.
[262] After the graduate students spoke, I eventually allowed the white women to ask their questions.
[263] D'Lo, "Will the Real Queer Transgender Tamil Sri Lankan-American Please Stand Up?"

Chapter 5: Bein' Dark: Antiblackness and Developing a Transnational Social Justice Orientation

On May 30, 2020, a photograph of a Sri Lankan American woman at a Black Lives Matter demonstration went viral on social media.[264] The photo of Mihiri Weerasinghe was shared widely on Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, and emailed throughout the Sri Lankan diasporic community, sometimes photoshopped with alternate text on the sign. A debate ensued in social media comments, with some questioning her motives and calling out the hypocrisy of using the Sri Lankan flag considering the Sri Lankan government's treatment of minority communities. However, others supported her wearing the flag, and others still stated that bringing a Sri Lankan flag to a Black Lives Matter protest was unnecessary, irrelevant, or outright offensive. This moment captures the conversations, disagreements, and tensions within the Sri Lankan American community. Weerasinghe's publicly posted picture attempted to challenge racial inequity in the U.S. as well as antiblackness within her Southern California Sri Lankan American community. However, in doing so, she began a discussion on the responsibilities of being Sri Lankan Sinhala in diaspora. As we will discuss later in this chapter, this debate led Weerasinghe to create the group Sri Lankans for Black Lives Matter Los Angeles. This was a pivotal moment that brought different conversations together: that of being Othered and racialized in the U.S., but also a discussion of how various Sri Lankan diasporas have inherited different discourses, all of which came together in informing this debate.

This chapter examines discourses around antiblackness that respondents have encountered, specifically with colorism and racialization, and how antiblackness manifests in their communities. At the intersection of body + diaspora, this chapter reveals how diasporic bodies are subject to overlapping antiblack ideologies: one originating in colonial rhetoric valuing the appearance of whiteness, with the other based on U.S. racial rhetoric that expose bodies of color, particularly dark-skinned male-presenting diasporic bodies, to verbal and physical violence. Further, ethnic nationalism becomes apparent in adulthood, causing respondents to reconsider their inheritance of a "Sri Lankan" identity as a specifically *Sinhala* identity, as we saw with Nimali and Diane's tattoo reflecting their redefinitions of "home." As respondents navigate the effects of racial and ethnic discourses in both the U.S. and Sri Lanka, they engage with what I call a *transnational social justice orientation*, or an awareness of the multiple forces of privilege and marginalization they experience as racialized diasporic bodies.

First, I examine how transnational ideologies around whiteness and skin color manifest within families and coethnic communities. Employing linguistic analysis of how Sinhala words for "white" and "black" are used colloquially to indicate beauty and/or worth, I explore how colorist discourse and language are perpetuated in diaspora. Memories of colorist rhetoric and particular Sinhala words being used against them affect interviewees' lives in the present, their identity formation, and in their everyday lives, daily conversations, and behaviors. I also examine the intergenerational nature of conversations around skin color and race, and how interviewee navigate conversations on skin color with their bi- and multiracial children and other young family members. I contend that within the U.S., this colorist language serves as a *protective antiblackness* that acknowledges the realities of racialization and state surveillance.

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[264] Weerasinghe, Mihiri. 2020. "Sri Lankan-Americans owe so much to Black Americans who have tirelessly fought for the rights we now benefit from." Facebook, May 30, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/mihiri.weerasinghe.7/posts/10158255674509932

I then examine respondents' experiences with racialization in the United States. Most respondents remembering hearing racial remarks during childhood from adults and fellow children. I explore their explore feelings of alienation and frustration during moments of extreme U.S. nationalism post-9/11 and in the Trump era. I pay particular attention to police violence, as most of the men I interviewed had some sort of negative encounter with authorities in which they feared for their safety, and women spoke about witnessing or seeing police violence against black bodies and fellow South Asians. Here, I also discuss how experiences of racialization differ within the same family based on family members' different skin colors. The shared experience of being subjected to racialized violence has affected how Sri Lankan Americans have reacted to and engaged with the Black Lives Matter movement.

I then turn to the summer of 2020, examining the debate surrounding a photograph of a Sri Lankan American at a Black Lives Matter demonstration in Southern California wearing the Sri Lankan flag and holding a "Sri Lankans for Black Lives Matter" sign, which received international attention. In examining these debates, I utilize Monisha Das Gupta's distinction between "space-makers" and "place-takers" in her analysis of Indian American social justice organizations. I also delve into the resulting social justice organizing in a moment that galvanized this community, particularly in the creation of the Facebook group Sri Lankans for Black Lives Matter Los Angeles. Finally, I consider the possibilities of developing a transnational social justice orientation for Sri Lankan American activists and community leaders, one that makes space for critical reflection of postwar diasporic complexities.

Colorism in Sri Lankan America and Protective Antiblackness

When I first met Anjali and she asked me about my research, I gave her the typical graduate student elevator pitch on my dissertation. As I began to describe this chapter, however, she gasped and stopped me. "Oh my God!" she exclaimed, "Colorism ruined my life!" This was a not unusual reaction with other respondents. In recent years, the Black Lives Matter movement has sparked discussions within South Asian American communities and Asian American communities more broadly on the effects of colorism and shadeism on self-identity and life paths, such as career options and marriage prospects. Within South Asian America, there have been many academic articles, think pieces, and activism on colorism, such as the push for the global conglomerate Unilever to drop "Fair and Lovely" whitening products.[265] Unilever's Fair and Lovely products are every store in Sri Lanka and are sold in Indian and Sri Lankan grocery stores throughout Southern California.

Within the Sri Lankan American community, colorism and shadeism is a transnational issue. Girls' and women's bodies are already surveilled in diaspora, yet skin color is the first aspect of one's body that is remarked upon, particularly if one's body shade changes even slightly. In Sri Lanka, family members have gifted me fairness packs, or whitening masks, as if that was something that I wanted or needed, especially when I was a child, and whenever I came back from Sri Lanka, aunties and uncles would comment on how "black" or "dark" I had gotten, with the implication that this was a negative. This reflects the influences of Portuguese, Dutch, and British imperialism. In fact, some claim Burgher, Dutch, and/or Portuguese descent as a marker of social status. Ethnic ambiguity is a positive and having a Dutch or Portuguese name as an indicator of one's closeness to whiteness. This nearness to whiteness works on multiple

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[265] See the work of Hareem Khan.

valances – that is, being physically close to whiteness in class or family surname, physically representative of whiteness in one's genetics, and physically *being* white in appearance despite being Sri Lankan. In Sri Lanka, bridal makeup is done several shades lighter than a bride's natural skin tone, so Sri Lankan Americans who return to the homeland to get married or participate in family ceremonies are often pictured on social media with foundation on their faces, necks, and chests in shades much lighter than the rest of their bodies. Despite the obvious discrepancy, this is a normalized practice to Sri Lankan Americans who immigrated to the U.S. as adults. The normalization of colorism reflects Sara Ahmed's arguments on whiteness, wherein "Whiteness becomes what is 'here,' a line from which the world unfolds, which also makes what is 'there' on 'the other side.'"[266] In this way, "whiteness is invisible and unmarked, as the absent center against which others appear only as deviants or as lines of deviation."[267]

Not only is colorism and shadeism rampant within Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan American community, antiblackness pervades not only the Sinhala language, but the norms of communication. In Sinhala, "kalu" means "black" and "sudhu" means white. Respondents discussed the many contexts in which they have heard these words. For example, there are nicknames given such as "Sudhu Akka"/ "White Big (Older) Sister" and "Kallu Malli"/ "Black Little (Younger) Brother," while some people are just called "kalla"/ "black." Respondents also describe how family members are referred to by their skin color instead of their name, for example: Sudhu Achchi ("white grandmother"), Kalu Mama ("black uncle"), and Sudhu Nanda ("white aunt"). This is such a common naming convention that one respondent describes not knowing extended family members' real names. Below are some examples of Sinhala words and phrases that respondents describe hearing:

Table 5.1: Sinhala Terms on Skin Color

Sinhala term	English meaning
Kalu	Black
"Kalu wela!"	"[You have] gotten dark!"
"Me sere kalu una ne?"	"This time [you have] become dark, no?"
"Ketha wela!"	"[You have] become ugly!"
Sudhu	White
"Sudhu wela!"	Literal meaning: "You have gotten white!" Colloquial meaning: "You have become more beautiful/attractive!"
"Hari sudhui!"	Literal meaning: "Very white!" Colloquial meaning: "Very beautiful!"
"Apey sudhu kella/kolla!"	"Our white girl/guy!"
"Sudhu menika"	"White jewel"
"Sudhu baba/putha/duwa"	"White baby/son/daughter"

As we can see, "sudhu"/ "white" is synonymous with beauty and positive attributes, while "kalu"/ "black" is associated with ugliness and negative appearances.

These Sinhala words and colloquialisms around skin color affected respondents growing up. Most interviewees had some sort of negative experience with colorism within their coethnic community, most in which they were called certain names or terms – both affirmative or pejorative - that were used to exclusively describe their skin color. As a result, not only did they internalize colorist ideologies that lighter skin is more beautiful than darker skin, but also colorist

[266] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 121.
[267] Ibid., 121.

language. When many respondents mentioned specific colorist Sinhala phrases they heard and understood, it was clear that the Sinhala words they were able to say with the most accuracy were those words and phrases around colorism. Those uncomfortable with speaking in Sinhala could say basic food words, family relation words (e.g. “Amma”/“mother”), and “sudhu”/“kalu”. Even those who were not fluent in Sinhala or felt they had limited Sinhala ability as adults could say phrases around skin color in a grammatically correct way, without hesitation. This illustrates the significance of colorist language not only on the identity of Sri Lankan Americans born and/or raised in the U.S., but also on their language ability. The words that they understood and could repeat with the most accuracy were words that either praised or ridiculed them about their skin color.

Consequently, respondents refused to use these words with their current and future hypothetical children, nor with any other young person in their lives – i.e. sibling, cousin, etc. Instead, they hoped to foster an environment for young people in which their skin tones are not only normalized but seen as worthy of beauty. Multiple respondents mentioned the importance of seeing Simone Ashley, a dark-skinned British actress of Indian Tamil descent, as a lead character in the Netflix series *Bridgerton*. It was the first time they had seen a dark-skinned South Asian woman as an object of sexual and romantic desire. Interviewees' experiences with colorist ideologies and rhetoric have influenced how they talk and plan to talk about skin color with their future bi- and multiracial children. Nihal, who is married to a biracial woman of black and Italian descent, discussed supporting multiracial daughters:

> Right now, [my four-year-old] is all into princesses and things. [She says], “Which princess do I look like?”... A lot of the dolls that we buy for our girls, they're colored, brown-skinned dolls. I think we have a couple non-brown skinned dolls, but the majority are ones that she's like, “This one's my baby!” They'll pull it off the shelf and [say], “This one!” without any context [or] any kind of politics. It's just identity...seeing yourself and wanting to be near things and have things that are like yourself.

Recognizing Antiblackness

While some of the comments respondents' heard growing up are about staying out of the sun to stay as light as possible reflect transnational beauty norms, Sri Lankan womanhood, and the classed connotation of lighter skin, there is another aspect to avoiding being dark. Liyoni remembers community members telling her, "'Put on a T-shirt or you're going to get dark!' I did get the constant litany of 'don't get dark, don't get dark,' and I just think what's wrong with being dark?" However, when Liyoni questioned this, the answer was:

> “You don't want to get mistaken for being black,” and I just thought that's a *lot* to unpack. You look around and you saw how people who were black were getting treated. It was hard enough to be an immigrant! The last thing you wanted was to double down! A lot of that is directly tied to “Don't get dark.”

Staying out of the sun then, is not a purely aesthetic practice for Sri Lankans in diaspora. Instead, this worry about a child's skin color recognizes how darker bodies are not only perceived in the U.S., but also how certain bodies experience the world in different ways. While family members, community members, and community organizations mostly did not

acknowledge racialization and racial hierarchies within the U.S., many respondents indicated that their families engaged in what I term *protective antiblackness*. Protective antiblackness is a fear of being mistaken for a black person, not rooted in racial animosity towards black people, but instead, rooted in understanding how dark-skinned bodies are racialized. This is a colorism concerned with preventing racial misidentifications, so that one's children do not experience the consequences of being seen as black, particularly through violence. Protective antiblackness is an understanding of not only of racialization and but also the cautions and protections needed against it. While conversations about race are not discussed at private and public community events, Sri Lankan immigrants still recognize the dangers of racialization.

Respondents also discussed how they have seen racialization and antiblackness in their lives. Ajantha learned from a young age how differently the world seems when a person is racialized as black:

> I remember going to Disneyland with my [biracial] black Sri Lankan cousins. This man had said a racist thing to her. I was like, maybe 10 or something. At that age, I recognized that well, we're both Sri Lankan, but just you being black made you experience something that I never had experienced before. That made me more aware about not just the nuances of what race and identity are, but also seeing that oppression [and] how that oppression works firsthand.

Nihal also understands how antiblackness affects him as a dark-skinned man, not only in the U.S., but around the world, saying, "Before going to Europe, I look at YouTube videos [with titles like], 'Which countries are great for people of color to go to?' I spend all my time converting my money to Euros and then get treated like shit. I'm well aware of who I am when I'm walking around."

When he was 18 years old, Nuwan realized his mother understood antiblackness in a way he did not, despite being half-white, half-Sri Lankan, and dark-skinned. In August 2020, Nuwan took a cross country road trip with his boyfriend and friends, during which they were pulled over by police four times. He immediately noticed how the tenor of conversations with his mother changed after he told his mother about the experience:

> My mom [said], "You need to be careful. You're not like your brothers, you look different." That was the first time that she ever really brought up that this is a significant impact of [me] being darker. My mom was never one to [be] gung ho about civil rights or political dilemmas within the United States. She was very removed from all of that. It was more of my dad and [my brothers] having these political conversations. But when I told her, after the third or fourth time I remember being pulled over, she was like, "You have to think differently. You have to act differently and you have to understand." Even though I understood what she was saying to me, it sounded like a little bit ridiculous. I'm not African American.

Nuwan was confused because he identifies as a biracial man, just like his lighter-skinned brothers who share his Sri Lankan and white European heritage. However, he began to understand his mother's point:

> But then I saw from her perspective, [which was], "You are just a dark skinned individual." For her, there wasn't really any necessary distinction. Maybe she was right in

> terms of [saying], “You are still a dark-skinned individual being pulled over three, four times in a span of two weeks.” It was never a conversation that she ever tried to initiate until that point…But she felt that this was a conversation that she needed to have *just* with me, and that struck something in me. This is different than the other advice that my mom gives me that I just throw out the window, because it's coming from my mom. It was the significance of this never happening before.

Nuwan recalls other conversations after the death of George Floyd:

> We've had a couple of arguments actually, where she will say, “Don't drive home late at night. Don't go to a friend's house at this time, because when you come home, it will be late at night….She would say, “Don't come home before dark,” [or] “Don't leave now, it's nighttime.” It's struck up a few arguments where I was just like, “Okay, well, this is just silly!”

For Nuwan, it when his older brother started giving him the same talks and advice, that he began to see the seriousness of the issue:

> Oddly enough, on the days [my brother] was home and these conversations would come up, he wasn't on my side. Which was odd because whenever it's my mom giving me a lecture, we both are on the same level [saying], “Okay, that's not reasonable.” But with *this* stuff, it was actually him agreeing and rewording it in a different way than my mom. That was kind of eye opening to me [realizing that] he's not on my side… I definitely started to realize more the importance of what the both of them were saying, just because my *brother* was agreeing with my *mom*, which to me was mind-blowing, because that never happened.

Nuwan’s mother and older brother recognized how antiblackness affected him even though he identifies as a biracial white and Sri Lankan man, due to how Nuwan is perceived in the U.S. mainstream. These conversations are similar to what is colloquially referred to as “The Talk” in African American culture, in which black families discuss with their children how to safely navigate a police encounter.

Racialized Experiences in the U.S.: Embodying “The Stranger”

In addition to hearing discussions on skin color and antiblackness within their family and community, respondents also experienced racialization outside of their coethnic community. For instance, respondents remember hearing racial slurs directed towards them as children. Sagara was called “Oreo” and “coconut” – i.e. white on the inside and black or brown on the outside, respectively. Due to her dark skin, Sharmaine was called “charred-maine.” Eraj recalls several racist encounters: he was called “Stupid Mexican” as a child and “Dirty Iraqi” by a stranger in public, and his mother was spat on by neo-Nazis while walking home in a white suburban area of Los Angeles County. He recalls another incident on a family camping trip in Utah when a white man began throwing rocks at them and shouted for them to “go home.” Yuvani remembers racial comments directed towards her, but felt they were not harmful:

> I was the only Asian kid. It was literally [an] all white [school]. In second or third grade, I had all kinds of nicknames: "jungle bunny," "pineapple princess," "Amazon woman." It's funny though, I remember coming home, [and] it didn't feel malicious. It was just things people said. I didn't feel like I didn't have friends or I wasn't liked.

Yuvani does not see these experiences as "malicious," as they occurred the context of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Respondents also discuss how moments of intense U.S. nationalism, like 9/11 and the Trump era, have affected them. Lakshmi describes the shift from the mainstream multiculturalism of the 1990s to post-9/11 era, saying, "I feel like I kind of exist. I've lived here in L.A. [and] I've just existed. [Then] 9/11 happens [and] I was very aware of people. I could tell by the way people were looking at me in a way that I've never been looked at before." Similarly, Eraj describes arguing with his uncle about his appearance after 9/11:

> He [said], "You need to shave your beard. Otherwise, people are gonna think you're Middle Eastern, and you're gonna get shot." I'm not worried - I'm in Berkeley and the chances of something happening like that [are low]. We ended up fighting about it. I think there was a Sikh guy that got shot in Orange County by some like crazy white guy that was just mad that "we got bombed."

Here, Eraj's uncle recognized the danger of being perceived as terrorist, just like Nuwan's mother recognized the danger of being perceived as black. Further, without prompting, respondents regularly brought up how the Trump era has changed their relationships with conservative family and friends. Anoja grew up in in the Santa Clarita Valley, which she describes as "the three R's: 'rich,' 'racist,' and 'Republican,'" and says, "Having Trump as our nation's president has been so horrifying and a daily reminder to so many people of color that they don't belong, essentially. That's the messaging over and over and over again. In his rhetoric, in his policies, in everything." She describes how her formerly conservative white friends became extremely liberal post-2016, refusing to vote for Joe Biden for not being progressive enough:

> Some of the conversations I had with them were like, "You need to realize you're in such a place of privilege. To not vote and essentially not participate, knowing fully well that that could mean one vote less for a Democratic [candidate]… For me as a person of color, I don't have the luxury of being, "Well, if it's not Bernie, then it's bust." …I really tried to [explain], "If you see it from my perspective, I don't have the luxury of just abstaining. I understand what it took for my parents, how long it took them to get their green cards, to get their citizenship, [and] what it means for me to be a first generation American who can vote. To just sit back and abstain? I could never even consider that.

Anoja's politics are directly connected to her experiences of being an embodied diasporic subject. Similarly, Liyoni understands how black struggle and activism has directly led to her family being in the U.S., saying, "I wouldn't exist as an American if not for the Civil Rights Act. And that wouldn't exist if it wasn't for the Civil Rights Movement. I cannot ever deny or forget what predicated my existence as an American." Sri Lankan Americans born and/or raised in the

U.S. recognize the privilege of existing in the U.S. as immigrants and/or children of children of immigrants and therefore choose not to remain apolitical.

Encounters with Police and Embodying The Stranger

This affinity for and empathy with the black experience also resonates with respondents because they understand dangerous encounters with police. Respondents are acutely aware of how racialization affects bodies of color, particularly male bodies of color, through their personal experiences, community work, and activism. Race, antiblackness, and policing came up often during the interviews. Nayana says, "I see it firsthand. When you have parties in [my university], if there's a party of people of color, there are cops out, versus any other party," where there would not be a police presence. All of the dark-skinned men interviewed had some sort of negative encounter with police in which they were assumed to be a suspect. These were not one-off encounters – these respondents had multiple encounters with police, and Thomas alone has had over a dozen encounters with police throughout his life. Tattooed interviewees made it a point to tell me that their tattoos were not visible or were covered by clothing when they were questioned and/or detained, so tattoos were not an additional variable for their surveillance. The regularity of these encounters was primarily because these respondents were male presenting and dark-skinned people of color.

Women have not had similar encounters with police, though some have witnessed or heard stories from men in their lives who were dark-skinned South Asian American, black, or Latino friends and family. Nimali, for example, witnessed a black friend getting roughly detained then arrested. Sakura, who is often mistaken for half-Japanese due to her name, has had many conversations with her black best friend about encounters with police. Yuvani sees directly how skin color affects how she and her siblings are treated, saying that she is most often mistaken for Latina, since she speaks Spanish fluently, while one brother is fairer skinned and "looks Persian." However, her dark-skinned brother and her dark-skinned husband have both had multiple encounters with police:

> I felt I had brown privilege… But that's because of my skin color, because I'm light skinned. [My husband] and my older brother have had very different experiences. My older brother, I remember him driving and getting pulled over because of his skin color. [My husband], the same thing. They, because they're dark skinned, learned early on that they had to have different behaviors in a public setting because of their skin color. So [within] the spectrum of brown, I felt I had privilege.

Eraj's first police encounter was as a teenager driving home from work at eleven o'clock at night.

> I had a Raiders beanie and because it was cold, I was wearing it. A police car pulled me over... I'm trying to think, "Was I speeding? Am I going to get a ticket? How am I going to talk myself out of this ticket?" I look over and the guy's pulled out his gun and he's yelling at me to put my hands on the roof of my car. I do that and I'm immediately scared looking at a barrel [of the gun].

> [In retrospect], my interpretation of that is that me wearing a Raiders hat with dark skin, he thought I was black. He thought, "Why was the black guy in Santa Clarita?" He didn't even give me a ticket, [which] proves that he was just racially profiling people. I remember I didn't tell my parents because I think I was still trying to process it. I was angry. I actually wrote a letter to the editor to the local paper, but I never mailed it.

Eraj was pulled over because the cop thought he did not belong in a primarily white neighborhood. In this moment, the cop thought Eraj was a stranger. Sara Ahmed argues that the figure of the stranger is not an unknown, and in fact, the stranger is quite recognizable. In this case, Eraj was the stranger because he was a dark-skinned teenager existing in, and therefore a danger to, a white space. Ahmed argues:

> The definition and enforcement of the good 'we' operates through the recognition of others as strangers: by seeing those who do not belong simply as 'strangers' (that is, by not naming *who* are the ones who do not belong in the community), forms of social exclusion are both concealed and revealed (what is concealed is the brute fact of the matter – only some others are recognizable as 'the stranger', the one who is out of place).[268]

A similar incident where Eraj was profiled for being an out of place dark-skinned man occurred when he was a college student at UC Berkeley. He was fixing his car out on the street because his studio apartment did not have a dedicated parking space. Eraj recalls:

> I was going in and out of the house trying to figure out what I had to [do]. I kept going in and out and hanging around the car. I'm pretty sure I know who called [the police], because there was a guy that was always looking out the window, a white guy. Somebody called the cops on me, and the lady [cop] came and had me go and unlock my apartment and prove that I was [living] there. But again, I felt like it was because I had a beanie on and they probably thought I was black.

This time, Eraj had to actively prove that he lived in that neighborhood, even though he merely was trying to fix his car on a public street that had no parking restrictions. Once again, the neighbor who called the police did so because they perceived Eraj as "out of place." Similarly, Dave remembers when he was eighteen years old, hanging out with his friends at a Denny's, when suddenly police showed up:

> They made us sit down on the sidewalk and take our shoes off! And I [said], "I live right up the street here. Look at my ID, I'm not." [The police said] "No! Sit down!" At that point, I felt like it wasn't fair the way that I was being treated. That was the first time where I felt, "Hey, this is a problem."

When Dave said, "I'm not," he meant that he was not a stranger and not out of place in that neighborhood. While Eraj and Dave had to prove they belonged in their neighborhood space, Nihal recalled a moment when the police could not figure out where he belonged racially:

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[268] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 29-30.

> I remember once I got pulled over by a policeman. They won't write me a ticket or whatever, and I'm looking at them in my sideview mirror. They're standing where they are in their safety zone with their hand on their gun. When they were asking for identity and whatnot, they asked me, "Are you Black or Mexican?" I said, "I'm Sri Lankan." And then they asked me, "Is that Black or Mexican?" So I said, "Both." They check both boxes, and then handed me that citation. You know, that's just how it was.

In both instances, Eraj and Nihal were subject to questioning about where they belonged, in that specific neighborhood, and within the racial hierarchy itself. Sara Ahmed notes that the very act of questioning is in itself a stopping device:

> For bodies that are not extended by the skin of the social, bodily movement is not so easy. Such bodies are stopped, where the stopping is an action that creates its own impressions. Who are you? Why are you here? What are you doing? Each question, when asked, is a kind of *stopping device*: you are stopped by being asked the question, just as asking the question requires you to be stopped.[269]

In such moments, "Being stopped is not only stressful, but also makes the 'body' itself the 'site' of social stress."[270] The police forced Eraj to prove he was a resident of the neighborhood, while the police unsuccessfully attempted to question Nihal on his identity, because their dark-skinned male bodies were recognizable as strange and "out of place."

Earlier in the chapter we discussed how Nuwan realized the seriousness of how antiblackness affected him specifically as a dark-skinned man. During the road trip with his friends, they were pulled over four times, each time by white cops. Three times, Nuwan was the driver. In Arizona, he was pulled over for the first time at around ten o'clock at night "for driving on the white line excessively." Three days later, he was pulled over "in the back country roads of Colorado" for driving three miles over the speed limit. The third time, in Minnesota, Nuwan says, "After these two times, I was like, 'I'm not going a mile over the speed [limit],' so I had the cruise control set at 80." Despite this, he was pulled over anyway, recalling:

> There was a cop sitting in the median of the highway perpendicular to us. Whenever [I] pass a cop, at least when I'm driving, I always look in the rearview mirror for the next minute, just to see if they pulled out, because that just freaks me out. And he ended up pulling out and pulling us over! He waited two or three minutes before coming up to my window, and all this time I'm thinking, "Okay, well, what could this be about? What could I possibly do when I was going the speed limit? I was driving center in the lane."

The cop claimed he stopped him because of a small cross hanging from Nuwan's friend's rearview mirror, which is illegal according to Minnesota state law. Nuwan and his friends took the "teeny-tiny" cross down, and the cop sent them on their way. Nuwan did not think much of that encounter, until he spoke with his family later that day about the incident:

> My older brother [said], "There's *no way* that wasn't racially profiling." I said, "Well, if it was state law?" He said, "Think about it. The cop was sitting perpendicular [to the road]

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[269] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 139.
[270] Ibid., 140.

at zero miles an hour and you pass at what, 80 [miles per hour]? And he *impossibly* sees a teeny-tiny cross from your rearview mirror? No, they saw a dark-skinned person in the driver's seat with a license plate in California in Minnesota."

As Ahmed notes, "strangers are those that are already recognized through techniques for differentiating between the familiar and strange…"[271] What made Nuwan recognizable as strange, was his dark skin, his license plate, and being the driver. His dark skin immediately marked him as "one who is out of place," while the California license plate proved that he was crossing state boundaries. It is the stranger's mobility and freedom of movement that has the potential to harm the "we" that police protect, so the license plate combined with Nuwan being in the driver's seat illustrated his supposed danger to the community. Ahmed argues that "it is the recognition of others that is central to the constitution of the subject," and that this recognition "operates as a *visual economy*: it involves way of *seeing the difference* between familiar and strange others as they are (re)presented to the subject."[272]

Nuwan's mother called him the next day and suggested his two white friends drive for the remainder of the trip. In fact, the fourth time Nuwan and his friends were pulled over in New York, the encounter went very differently. Nuwan's white friend was driving 15 miles over the speed limit, but unlike the other three times, where Nuwan received a written warning, his friend received only a verbal warning. Nuwan says, "It stuck with me a little bit, because I got a physical written warning. For three miles! Literally, it said, 'Speed limit 50, observed speed 53' [on my warning]… And [for] 15 miles an hour, all it was was a verbal warning. I got an official, *actual* piece of paper, physically, that they felt the need to put in all my information onto [it]." In this way, Nuwan was penalized for being the "out of place" stranger.

These experiences with policing are not experiences that these men would have regularly in Sri Lanka, due to being Sinhala. During these encounters, they are tangibly experiencing antiblackness in a dangerous way. This is what protective antiblackness attempts to shield them from. Further, these issues are pervasive: while Eraj, Dave, and Nihal discuss police encounters in the 1990s, Thomas' encounters happened in the early 2000s, and Nuwan, who is one of the youngest interviewees at 20 years old, was racially profiled in 2020. Regardless of generation - Gen X, millennial, or Gen Z - and regardless of whether they were born in the U.S. or not, police surveillance is a significant part of their experience in the U.S. as dark-skinned male bodies. As Ahmed notes, "Stopping is a political economy that is distributed unevenly between others, and it is also an affective economy that leaves is impressions, affecting the bodies that are subject to its address."[273] For Nuwan, this became a formative experience: "That was the first time that I [realized that] everything that's going on with BLM [during the summer of 2020] seemed to have more of a personal significance to me, [one] that I never really established for myself, other than just being a supporter and someone who understands [racism]." As a result, all of them could understand the impetus behind the Black Lives Matter movement, especially during the summer of 2020.

[271] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 37.
[272] Ibid., 22. See Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014) for further discussion on how emotions like hate and fear are "economies."
[273] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 140.

Reactions to Black Lives Matter

As a result of their experiences with racialization and antiblackness, respondents had strong reactions to the Black Lives Matter movement before and during the summer of 2020. Ahmed notes about bodies of color:

> For as we know, the experience of negation, of being stopped or feeling out of place, of feeling uncomfortable at home, does not "stop" there. It is around such experiences that bodies gather, getting together, acting, refusing this inheritance of whiteness, refusing even the desire to follow that line… In other words, collective anger about the orientation of the world around whiteness might reorientate our relation to whiteness.[274]

Many respondents spoke about how discussions around race became a more mainstream issue with the Black Lives Matter movement. For example, Lakshmi said about this shift:

> America has amnesia, and that amnesia is going to shoot yourself in the foot. Because if you forget your past, you're going to relive it and it's going to come back in a bad way…It was always interesting to me the way that America covertly had overt racism, right. They had a way of just shuffling it because inflammation was low. People were not speaking to each other the way that they are now.

"The way they are now" as Lakshmi puts it, is a nationwide conversation about race. While the Black Lives Matter movement began years before the death of George Floyd, it became a mainstream issue during the summer of 2020, bringing discussions of race and inequity into a nationwide focus throughout political, social, cultural, and economic realms. Respondents reacted strongly to the moment and felt a responsibility to be involved as people of color in this moment. For instance, Chathuri discusses how she felt in May 2020:

> I was very angry during [the death of George Floyd]. I was very, very angry. It was definitely close to the anger when Trump was elected President of the United States. It was definitely that kind of anger. It was the type that is like, "I want to do something so much about this!" And obviously I'm going to do as much as I can, but it's one of those things that is so out of my hands. So many people need to come together for this kind of thing. It's like not one individual person that can fix it. It made me very, very angry.

Sagara echoes this responsibility towards social justice and found that her parents' perspective frustrating:

> I wanted to go out and protest, but I had this huge fight with my parents. I had constant fights with both parents about this because my best friend and I wanted to go out and protest. We were like, "This is happening to people that are just like us!" For my parents it was very different. For them, it was more of, "Keep your head down. Don't. Nothing is going to change based on protests, so don't put yourself at risk for something that is inevitable." They saw more differences between two groups of people than I saw similarities.

[274] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 155.

Other respondents working on racial inequity or in social justice in their careers or in their activism felt that this moment could change U.S. discussions more generally. For example, Anoja hopes for a shift to discussing racism as a systemic issue:

> I discovered public health as an undergraduate and have been in the public health space ever since. My entire adult life, race, systemic racism, [and] institutionalized racism are very much topics that we discuss in public health very purposefully and actively…
>
> To see that type of conversation happening in the mainstream and on social media and just everywhere, it was really, really refreshing… I hope [that] the majority of white people understood the ways in which racism can be more subtle or it can be more institutionalized…. It's also important to think about policy, housing, voting, education systems, prison, criminal justice reform - bigger, macro-level issues that need attention.

Liyoni finds this moment as way for people of color, specifically, to fight institutionalized antiblackness, saying:

> All people of color need to participate in the dismantling of power structures that continue to oppress black people. I live a life where I encounter microaggressions every day and we live in a racist society. I accept that. I don't like, but I acknowledge that that's the status quo. It doesn't compare to what black people go through. There's no way to compare. We *have* to participate in their struggle, if only as allies.

Ajantha and Ashley both express a desire to work within the Sri Lankan American community, feeling that community-specific discussions on antiblackness are more useful. Talking about a forum he led on antiblackness and shadeism in South Asia in his university's South Asian Students group, Ajantha says, "working with my own cultural community of like-minded folks was way more productive for me. I like enjoyed engaging in activism in a space that was identity-specific because it helped us do the work in our own communities." Ashley echoes Ajantha's need to work in a community-centered way, specifically because Sri Lankan Americans experience antiblackness due to lingering colonial ideologies in addition to being racialized in the U.S.:

> Seeing how [antiblackness] is very much connected with colonization and the negative impacts that colonialism has had on [our] culture really solidified a lot for me. I was able to understand why we, as a Sri Lankan society, idolize this white skin. It's from these negative impacts left over from the colonial era that should not be there. We're essentially perpetuating that not only in our own [Sri Lankan] society, but [in diaspora] as well.

Ajantha and Ashley both speak to the importance of Sri Lankan American communities discussing these issues amongst themselves and doing the work of unlearning antiblackness as they join social justice movements.

Respondents' reactions indicate these conversations were happening amongst their peers and friends, in their workplaces, and multi-generationally within their families. News outlets covered the protests 24/7 and myriad social media posts and infographics on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter were created and shared. This was a moment that could not be ignored,

so one could not claim ignorance of this national and international discussion. Despite this, there was silence and no acknowledgement from the Sri Lankan American community organizations and institutions. Perhaps community leaders were discussing Black Lives Matters amongst themselves, but as institutions and organizations, no Sri Lankan American organization in California publicly acknowledged the national reckoning that was occurring. For these organizations, it was as if the death of George Floyd did not happen or not worthy of public discussion.

One exception to this silence was Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara, which released a statement on the death of George Floyd signed by its Chief Abbot, Venerable Walpola Piyananda. This was the only Sri Lankan Buddhist temple in the United States, let alone Southern California, that released such a statement. The Dharma Vijaya Vihara Facebook page made a public post on June 3, 2020, with an image of a written statement, "A Time to Practice Wisdom and Compassion." Part of the statement read:

> I have been a Buddhist monk for sixty-seven years. I am also an American citizen. I am so saddened by the disregard of life that occurred in Minneapolis by four police officers that led to the death of George Floyd.
>
> In Buddhism, we learn that each one of use is accountable for our actions; that a human being is responsible for their actions or inactions…
>
> Those people in positions of power should not abuse their power, but use it to promote understanding through communication to generate mutual respect…

This directly addresses police violence and abuse of police power and how despite not being black, Floyd's murder affects Ven. Piyananda as both a Buddhist monk and as an American.

Dharma Vijaya is located on a main street in a primarily and historically black neighborhood in the Crenshaw area of Los Angeles. During the last week of May 2020, the monks at the temple called my family, since we have been part of the congregation for over four decades, asking how to support protestors when they marched through the streets. We told them that handing out water, juice, and snacks to protestors was a great way of supporting the protestors' needs. I also said that the image of brown Buddhist monks in their saffron robes would also make a powerful political statement. After our conversation, the monks started moving the temple's stockpile of water and snacks to the side of the temple facing the main road so they could immediately move if protestors came by.

No other Sri Lankan American organization in Southern California acknowledged the death of the George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter protests happening nationwide and globally, or the discussions on surveilling and policing within black communities and communities of color more generally. This silence is significant and reflects the generational disconnects between major Sri Lankan American community organizations and younger members born and raised in the U.S. that they wish to serve and recruit. As we have seen, race is an important part of Sri Lankan American lives – from extra scrutiny at airports, being more susceptible to being pulled over by police, to experiencing racial remarks throughout their lives. While Dharma Vijaya provides an exception, most of the organizing around Black Lives Matter during the summer of 2020 came from Sri Lankan Americans born and raised in the U.S. In the next

section, we look at a specific Sri Lankan American group that began in the wake of a transnational debate on racism and Sinhala nationalism.

Sri Lankan Americans for Black Lives Matter Los Angeles

Image 5.1: Photo of Mihiri Weerasinghe posted to Facebook on May 30, 2020. Photo courtesy of Aaron Bennett.

Mihiri Weerasinghe was one of the thousands of Southern Californians who gathered to protest in the days following the extrajudicial murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. Protests and candlelight vigils of various sizes were held in Southern California, organized by multiple groups, such as Black Lives Matter, activist groups, student groups, religious institutions, and individuals in the days and weeks to come. On May 30, 2020 at 11:33 PM, Weerasinghe posted a picture of herself onto her Facebook timeline. In the public Facebook post, Weerasinghe stands in front of a police car, eyes defiant, wearing all black, with the Sri Lankan flag's golden lion on her T-shirt. The Sri Lankan flag is tied around her neck, draped behind her like a cape. She holds a white handmade sign stating, "Sri Lankans for Black Lives Matter," with "Sri Lankans for" written in the red, green, and orange of the Sri Lankan flag, and "Black Lives Matter" written in black. Initially, the picture's caption read, "Sri Lankan-Americans owe so much to Black Americans who have tirelessly fought for the rights we now

benefit from. It is time for us as a community to show up for our Black brothers and sisters." The post currently has 602 total reactions (293 Likes, 256 Loves, 39 Cares, and 14 Hahas), 321 comments, and 576 shares on Facebook alone. The image, which was also distributed on Twitter and in the Sri Lankan blogosphere, was memed, altered, and commented on by thousands. Though the image was also shared outside of Facebook, I focus on the heart of the debate in the comments and shares of the original Facebook post.

Most of the first Facebook comments were supportive, thanking Weerasinghe for representing Sri Lankans and Sri Lankan Americans, others commenting with emojis of black hearts, raised fists, and the Sri Lankan flag. As the post was shared outside of Weerasinghe's Friends list, a debate emerged in the comments, manifesting as a battle of images, links, and information. Some posted an altered version of the picture with the text changed to "Tamil Lives Matter," whiles others spammed the comments with photos of the founder and leader of the LTTE, Velupillai Prabhakaran, photos of violence during the war - such as naked men held at gunpoint by Sri Lankan soldiers, injured women and children, and burning homes and villages. Others shared infographics with facts about the war, such as the 1981 burning of the Jaffna library and the 1983 anti-Tamil Black July pogrom. In response, others posted infographics on the number of civilians killed and the number of suicide bombings carried out by the LTTE, photos of child soldiers used by the LTTE, and photos of the aftermath of various LTTE-organized suicide bombings. In addition to infographics and photos, the commenters utilized online content from multiple media sources outside of Facebook. Screenshots of Instagram posts criticizing Weerasinghe as well as Instagram posts analyzing the problematic imagery of the Sri Lankan flag, links to Wikipedia pages on the LTTE's use of child soldiers, and links to documentaries about the war and YouTube videos of British rapper MIA (who is of Sri Lankan Tamil descent) speaking about the war were posted.

One person responded to every single initial comment on Weerasinghe's post with different versions of "Charity begins at home," and "What is your opinion on Tamil lives?" These comments have since been deleted. In response to this person's barrage of comments, as well as other commenters asking about Weerasinghe's position on the war, some Sri Lankan Americans argued that since they were children during the war, or that they had not grown up in Sri Lanka, "we have no understanding of what went on in sri lanka 20 or 30 or 40 years ago [sic]." Others took issue with Weerasinghe identifying as "Sri Lankan-American," some argued that Blacks Lives Matter was a "terrorist organization," and some claimed the "Sri Lankans for Black Lives Matter" sign's emphasis on nationality and race sowed division, asking "Why are you drawing lines across humanity?" In response, others posted comments and images calling for Sri Lankan national unity. Outside of her Friends' comments, Weerasinghe did not respond to the comments on the post. However, on June 2, 2020 at 7:42 AM, Weerasinghe added the following to the post underneath the original text: "*disclaimer* I in no way associate myself with the Sri Lankan government or their actions. This picture is to show solidarity to show black Americans that other races support them and support anti racism. I stand against ALL racism."

This debate reveals how postwar narratives of unification and multiculturalism translate to a diasporic context. Benedict Anderson claims that the nation is "imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."[275] A Sri Lankan American diasporic imagined community which ignores societal hierarchies and inequalities in the homeland after

[275] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 2006), 7.

the civil war, even in an attempt to unite, will reproduce those hierarchies in diaspora. The expansiveness of Anderson's imagined community is key, yet in the Sri Lankan diaspora, there are multiple competing diasporas who may not include certain ethnicities, religious groups, or linguistic groups in their imagined community. While unintentional and careless, Weerasinghe's use of the Sri Lankan flag reflects the Sri Lankan government's postwar narratives which seek to subsume differences between Sri Lanka's many ethnic groups under one national identity.

Monisha Das Gupta's discussion of Indian American immigrant rights activists tackles such issues of privilege and power within diasporic communities. Das Gupta explores the differences between what she terms "place-taking politics" and "space-making politics," which "operate concurrently but in tension with each other."[276] The former indicates the "India-centered, elite, accommodationist politics" of the mid 1980s and 1990s, while the latter "struggle to transform oppressive institutions and systems go through collective action and empowerment."[277] Das Gupta argues that "place-takers rework notions of culture to restore the social privileges they enjoy at home."[278] In contrast, "space-makers intervene in these social hierarchies by reaching for emancipatory strands in their homeland histories."[279] The difference, then, is that place-takers act to benefit themselves and reflect the cultural and political hegemony of the homeland, while space-makers challenge this hegemony. In this way, the work of diaspora can either be a purposely revolutionary project or one that actively reproduces hierarchies.

On June 5, 2020, three days after she posted the disclaimer, Weerasinghe founded the Facebook group Sri Lankans for Black Lives-LA. In less than 3 weeks, the group grew to over 200 members. "SLxBLM-LA," as its organizers call it, is a Visible group, so it can be searched for and found on Facebook, but the group is set to Private, so only members can see its content and members list. The group description reads, "This group aims to unite Sri Lankan-Americans who support the Black Lives Matter Movement. This is a space to share resources, organize, connect and support each other. This is an uphill battle but we don't have to do this alone." Multiple posts and comment conversations during the first weeks of the group reveal that members had different experiences with activist work in general and varying expectations of the Black Lives Matter movement. During the first two weeks, there was a rush of performative posts from various members, many of which were reposts of police violence against black people. Multiple conversations during the first two weeks of the group illustrated that members had different experiences, understandings, and expectations of social justice organizing. After the first two weeks, the performative and unnecessary posts that cluttered the group fizzle out, the vast majority of those initial posters stopped interacting in any group discussion despite their continued membership. The majority of posts from that point onward were useful, thought-provoking, and moving towards educating and enacting tangible changes within and/or outside of the Sri Lankan American community.

As a result, SLxBLM-LA began a webinar series under the heading "Social Justice 101." I was the speaker for its first webinar, "An Introduction to Race, The Model Minority Myth and Being Antiracist," which explained important terms and fundamental concepts for those new to these conversations. Other webinars included "Technology and Activism," "Endemic Anti-

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[276] Monisha Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 256.
[277] Ibid., 9.
[278] Ibid.
[279] Ibid., 57.

Blackness in Higher Education," "Passport Apartheid," and "Vote or Die." In addition to Social Justice 101 webinars, the group held Zoom meetings on "Being A Minority In Sri Lanka" and "Coping Strategies for Election Day Anxiety." In creating these spaces for learning and dialogue for all regardless of levels of critical consciousness, SLxBLM-LA was moving towards a politics of space-making and attempting to both understand and honestly discuss the complexities of transnational diasporic life.

Sharmaine expressed her appreciation for the group, even though she did not make any posts:

> Our community isn't that large, but we do have a community in LA, and just to think that the younger generation was trying to be an ally to this bigger thing that was happening, it felt important. It felt significant because I don't feel like that stance has ever been taken [in the Sri Lankan American community], especially towards the black community. That felt pretty significant.

Interrogating Sinhalaness and Developing a Transnational Social Justice Orientation

The SLxBLM-LA Social Justice 101 webinar event, "Being a Minority in Sri Lanka," highlighted the experiences of Tamil and Muslim Sri Lankans, and allowed Sinhala participants to reflect on privileges they may not have examined of even been aware of before. Lakshmi, however, grew up with a Sinhala mother and a Tamil father, so has always been aware of how her Tamil last name Others her in Sri Lanka, where Sinhalaness has power. She and her siblings have two last names on their Sri Lankan birth certificates: their father's Tamil name and their grandmother's "generically Sri Lankan" Sinhala maiden name. Having both names allowed her siblings to attend schools they otherwise would have been unable to with a Tamil surname. While Lakshmi's family immigrated to the U.S. years before Black July in 1983, she acknowledges that based on her family's location in Colombo, and her father being a well-known figure in the community, her family "all would have been massacred, no questions asked." Even in the U.S., she remembers feeling othered by diasporic elders discussing the war in her presence and making disparaging remarks, recalling, "It's almost like some people forget that you're Tamil, and then they say wild Tamil things. I'm just like, 'So then do my family deserve to die because we're Tamil?!'" However, being half-Tamil is something that Lakshmi can never forget, especially when she visited Sri Lanka during wartime:

> Even though I'm a U.S. citizen. I would get nervous when I was in Sri Lanka. When we would get pulled over by cops, which would inevitably happen [at checkpoints]… I [thought], "No, no, this is taking too long! I'm the only one with a Tamil last name. This isn't going to work out!"

During military checkpoints, Lakshmi felt that her Tamilness could override the power of her American citizenship.

This power of the U.S. passport was the central topic at SLxBLM-LA's "Passport Apartheid" event in August 2020, led by Indrajit Samarajiva, a writer and blogger in Sri Lanka who has lived in the U.S. and Canada. The month before, Samarajiva wrote a viral article on the website Medium called, "American Passports are Worthless Now," which the SLxBLM-LA flyer

claimed was "July's highest earning post on Medium." Samarajiva taught participants about the power of the U.S. passport versus other passports in being able to both physically and politically navigate spaces. Similarly, the "Being in Minority in Sri Lanka" event was led by a diasporic Sri Lankan, British Sri Lankan actress and activist Shalini Peiris. Peiris explained histories of inequality in Sri Lanka and brought up more recent issues such as Sinhala anger towards halal certification systems and the growth of the far-right extremist group Bodu Bala Sena, led by Sinhala Buddhist nationalist monks. In addition, she talked about Sinhala activists in Sri Lanka working against Sinhala nationalism as well as multiethnic groups that engaged in dialogue across differences. Inherent in the Social Justice 101 webinar series was a desire to learn, but more importantly, fill in the gaps where group members, who were diasporic Sri Lankans, lacked knowledge. Sri Lankans for Black Lives Matter Los Angeles, which started as a way for Sri Lankan Americans to support Black Lives Matter and learn more about antiblackness in the U.S., began to shift towards an examination of transnational issues and particularly about how ethnic hierarchies in Sri Lanka may affect diasporic experiences.

This shift in the group's priorities reflects a shift that respondents also discuss going through as they grew and learned more about Sri Lankan history and politics. SLxBLM-LA and respondents began to develop what I call a *transnational social justice orientation*. In clinical psychology, "social justice orientation" is used to develop in-depth understandings of the psychological impacts of oppression on patients, moving beyond superficial discussions and perfunctory incorporations of diversity initiatives. Education literatures builds upon the term's use in psychology, by using it to examine how student's experiences with and mindset towards issues of inequity affects learning outcomes.[280] Here, I use *transnational social justice orientation* to describe awareness of multiple racial and ethnic hierarchies in multiple locations and nation-states. That is, respondents are aware of the inequities they face in the U.S., while simultaneously being aware of their privileges as Sinhala people in Sri Lanka and in diaspora. Here, I turn to use Sara Ahmed's discussion of orientation, which describes how the ways in which bodies and institutions are oriented affect their composition. Ahmed argues using orientation conceptually "allows us to expose how life gets directed in some ways rather than others."[281] Ahmed explains:

> The lines we follow might also function as forms of ''alignment,'' or as ways of being in line with others. We might say that we are orientated when we are in line. We are ''in line'' when we face the direction that is already faced by others…We follow the line that is followed by others: the repetition of the act of following makes the line disappear from view as the point from which ''we'' emerge.[282]

Monica's experiences illustrate how she sees the different lines through which she has been directed to view her experiences as a Sinhala person:

[280] See E.J.R. David and Annie O. Derthick, *The Psychology of Oppression* (New York: Springer, 2018), especially Chapter 8, "Adopting a Social Justice Orientation: Addressing Oppression in the Clinical Context." See also Margaret R. Boyd, "Community-Based Research: A Grass-Roots and Social Justice Orientation to Inquiry," in Patricia Leavy, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, *Second Edition* (Oxford University Press, 2020).
[281] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology,* 21.
[282] Ibid., 15.

> It is kind of weird how geopolitical things [like the 2022 mass antigovernment protests in Sri Lanka] make me feel more separate from Sri Lanka. I've never voted in Sri Lanka, I don't know how to participate, really. When people don't know things about Sri Lanka [and its history], in a way, it's a bit of a relief. It means that I can keep my feelings about Sri Lanka to myself. But then if people start knowing things, they start asking me about the civil war, about different situations, and I have not studied my Sri Lankan history. I know some things about what my parents say about what's happened, I know what my sister says, I know what Western media says. I know that whatever truth would lie in the middle of that. I'm aware of all that and I feel like I don't have ownership of those things…I never really - I don't know what my place is.

Monica is uncomfortable with speaking about Sri Lankan political topics, whether it is the Sri Lankan civil war, or the 2022 antigovernment protests in Sri Lanka and its diaspora in response to Sri Lanka's economic crisis. She is aware of the lines that direct her, but is insecure in her knowledge to push back against those lines and so feels distance from Sri Lankan history. There are no opportunities for Sri Lankan Americans to examine ethnicity, power, and ethnolinguistic hierarchies in current social organizations, and leaving these issues unexamined can lead to issues and feelings of disconnection.

Despite the lack of discussion in their mainstream Sri Lankan American community, as respondents become older and have more direct experiences with Sri Lanka, they begin to develop this transnational social justice orientation. Cassie, Diane, and Nimali all did a one-year fellowship in Sri Lanka for Sri Lankan diasporic young people that exposed them to Sri Lankan history and allowed them to meet Sri Lankans of different ethnicities. The fellowship was a moment of disorientation for the Sri Lankan diasporic participants, who were from different ethnicities, religions, and came from different countries. It is in these very moments of disorientation, Ahmed argues, "that we might learn what it means to be orientated in the first place."[283] Cassie reflects on her moment of disorientation, saying,

> [My family] was the exposure I had to Sri Lanka for a long time. I was like, "Oh, Sri Lankans are like this." Then I went [to Sri Lanka] as part of a fellowship program and worked at a Tamil [organization] and I met other people who are not my family. I realized - it was kind of stupid - but I was like, "Oh, this is really more diverse!"

2009 was the first time Diane went to Sri Lanka, and it was the first time her parents had gone back to Sri Lanka since Black July in 1983. The house Diane's mother lived in and the company that Diane's father worked for were both burned down, since the buildings were Tamil-owned. Two months after witnessing Black July, her parents moved to the U.S. Going to Sri Lanka was a moment of disorientation for Diane, just like it was for Cassie. Diane recalls:

> I remember seeing my dad in a new way. He was so nervous about us telling people our last names. Depending on where we were, [he would say], "Don't tell them you're Sinhala! Don't tell them you're American!" Those kinds of dynamics and remembering and recognizing what they went through [changed my perspective].

[283] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 6.

Several years later, Diane went on the one-year fellowship, which allowed her to develop a transnational social justice orientation:

> Through [the fellowship's] coexistence and conflict project, I was able to travel all around the country to different communities, communities that I would never have been able to figure out how to coordinate a trip alone. We went up north to Jaffna, we went down south, and [met] different religious communities and ethnic communities. [We] discussed the ways [to relate] with one another across difference, and what was the state of things [in Sri Lanka]. It was really illuminating. I felt very humbled by it.

The fellowship did not just allow Diane to travel through different parts of Sri Lanka, but also brought people of different ethnic groups together from across the Sri Lankan diaspora to discuss issues of ethnolinguistic hierarchies. Meeting people from different ethnic groups, some of whom had never been to Sri Lanka before because of the war and seeing connections in diaspora despite the different identities and countries that affect them, was crucial for Diane in developing a transnational social justice orientation. Diane says, "We all [in that year's cohort] thought critically about race and gender and social justice issues, so to have that space to unpack with each other was really amazing…Having each other to workshop and think through [issues together] and be thought partners for each other was really amazing."

For some, encounters in Sri Lanka have led them to examine their privilege as Sinhala. Nimali, for example, refuses to use "Sri Lankan," and prefers to use "Lankan" when referring to people from the island.

> It was really when I went to Sri Lanka and met people outside of the Sinhala community in America…that I've really started to - I'm still learning - but starting to understand the actual political context of Sri Lanka. How Sinhala Buddhist nationalism has functioned in some ways parallel to the way that white supremacy functions here. I feel very politicized by both of those ways: experiencing marginalization in different ways in the U.S., but then realizing how much privilege and the type of position I occupy as a Sinhala person in Sri Lanka. It's an interesting dual way of experiencing identity and that's definitely also politicized me.

Nimali made connections across different parts of her experiences, considering the overlapping and pervasive nature and impacts of racism and inequity in the United States, but also inequity in Sri Lanka. In interrogating Sinhalaness, others see similarities between white supremacy and Sinhala supremacy. In discussing her own unease with talking about her own Sinhala privilege, Monica says, "I don't know if white people here know how to either. But I feel like there was a lot of discourse about fragility versus things that are actually helpful." Anoja also sees a connection between whiteness and Sinhala privilege when she says, "It's so easy for someone in a majority group, whether that's Sinhala, or white American to be like, 'Oh, well, I'm not racist.'" Her solution is for people with privilege to examine institutions and "look at the world and at the systems in place [instead of] just examining their own behaviors and actions." Dave sees white fragility and Sinhala fragility in similar ways, saying, "Here in America, the same way some people really appreciate the diversity and there's the people who don't, the hardline Sinhalese people are just like [that]."

Ahmed notes that once a line, or a previous way of thinking is unsettled, "it might be impossible to return, which of course means that we turn somewhere else, as a turning that might open up different horizons."[284] For Imesha, she can never go back to thinking of "Sri Lanka" as "Sinhala," and is actively working towards making "Sri Lankan American" more inclusive:

> I don't want the Sri Lankan community to just be a Sinhala community. Because that's kind of what it is. I feel like right now, especially in SoCal, because you don't really see a lot of people that identify as Tamil really meshing in with the Sinhala community here in in SoCal especially. That's a big priority of mine because I have a lot of friends that are feeling uncomfortable. It's just sad to think, imagining they're not part of that conversation of what it means to be Sri Lankan.

For Imesha, letting go of Sinhalaness as an identity is the way forward. In interrogating her Sinhalaness, she is trying to shift gears and identify in a different way that allows for more inclusivity. Instead, Imesha prefers the term "South Asian," claiming, "People feel comfortable saying that they're South Asian even though they might not feel comfortable with their nationality." As a result, "South Asian" is a useful umbrella term that allows ethnic, religious, sexual, and other minorities to, as Imesha puts it, "feel like they're a part of something."

One example of a person developing a transnational social justice orientation that also interrogates Sinhalaness is the "Speak in Sinhala" Instagram page, started and run by Gunindu Abeysekera. The page was started in early 2020 to find ways to connect different generations across the Sinhala diaspora. The page includes Sinhala terms for social justice issues, so that those born and/or raised in diaspora can use a common language to explain and discuss social justice issues with their elders. Abeysekera says, "I'm cautious about my wording about [using] something from Sri Lankan culture without making it seem like I'm centralizing an experience because it's only a Sinhala perspective." He sees the Instagram as "basically a guideline to talk to people within the [Sinhala] community about their prejudices." Abeysekera is making a move towards space-making actively using the lines he has been directed by – the Sinhala language – to open new epistemologies in new directions.

Conclusion: Diaspora as *Décalage*

As we have seen, Sri Lankan Americans born and/or raised in the U.S. are directed by many lines, such as colorism influenced by Sri Lankan ideologies, racialization and antiblackness influenced by white supremacy in the U.S., including experience of police violence and surveillance. As a result, they have also developed an understanding of Sinhala privilege in Sri Lanka and how these overlapping forces affect them as racialized diasporic bodies. For example, Nayana sees the importance of spaces where people can ask questions and unpack unfamiliar issues, saying:

> You need a space to discuss [these issues] because the real change happens when the doors are closed, when we're away from the protests, when it's just a few of us learning what's happening. That's long-term change. If me and you have a conversation, and I learned something really cool about Sri Lanka or BLM or anything, I'm going to take that

[284] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 155.

> on. I'm going to go tell someone else, and they're going to take that and tell someone else. That's where the real change is happening. It's people exchanging ideas and experiences.

In this concluding section, I examine one of these spaces where people are exchanging ideas and experiences, as Nayana puts it, which occurred in the comments of Weerasinghe's May 30, 2020 post. As the comment section of Weerasinghe's post veered widely out of control, with arguments, ad hominem attacks, and violent photographs shared in place of conversation, one 25-comment back and forth dialogue between three commenters reflects how diaspora's competing claims, tensions, and formations can be navigated. The conversation between Commenter 1 (an Australian man of Sri Lankan Tamil descent), Commenter 2 (an American man of Sinhala descent), and Commenter 3 (an American woman of Sinhala descent) is a microcosm of exchanges among conflicting Sri Lankan diasporas transnationally. Commenter 1 begins with "Will you accept a white person showing support to blacks holding a confederate flag? ...This flag represents Sinhala Buddhist nationalism." Commenter 2 responds dismissively, "you need to take this up with the person who made the flag. wrong context. good attempt." Commenters 1, 2, and 3 then debate the nature of being a diasporic Sri Lankan, specifically being Sri Lankan American considering the history of racialization in the U.S. Commenter 1 encourages the others to educate themselves about the war, and links to the British Channel 4 documentary on the final weeks of the war, *No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka*. By the end of the conversation, Commenter 2 writes, "message me, lets brainstorm on something…lets make this conversation the start of a new SL. let's us not go through this again." Commenter 3 writes, "Thank you, I love it! Let's do it. I'll also watch the documentary. Agree with 100% and we are with you. Please add us to any links or efforts you will be leading we will support equality!" Commenter 4 (an American woman of Sinhala descent) responded to Commenter 2, "NEED your support. He [Commenter 1] is in pain and voices his frustration. Respect to you for wiling to brainstorm some ideas [Commenter 2]." Commenter 1 replies, "looking forward to further discussion after you watch the documentary. I really appreciate you watching it. It means a lot." Unlike the other multi-comment threads on the post, all involved in this exchange were willing to listen despite all commenters' initial combative tone, learn despite their discomfort, and communicate openly and honestly despite the extreme emotions involved.

This conversation reflects a move towards a transnational social justice orientation that makes space for critical reflection of diasporic complexities, illustrated in Brent Hayes Edwards' examination of *décalage*. The *décalage,* or a gap or discrepancy, can be used to consider "the trace or the residue, perhaps, of what resists translation or what sometimes cannot help refusing translation."[285] Diaspora as *décalage* allows us to think of the gaps between different claims to Sri Lankan identity in a post-civil war context. The joint of *décalage* reflects the movement of joints in a body, as "both the point of separation…and the point of linkage."[286] Conceiving of the Sri Lankan diaspora in terms of *décalage* moves us towards a transnational social justice orientation that acknowledges the fissures that exist within the metaphorical diasporic body as a result of war, as Commenters 1, 2, and 3 did. Sri Lankan Americans' experiences of colorism, racialization, police violence, activism, and interrogation of Sinhala privilege all reflect the unsettled nature of diasporic experiences and articulations 11 years after the end of the Sri

[285] Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Uses of Diaspora," *Social Text* 66, Vol. 19, No. 1, Spring 2001, 64.
[286] Ibid., 66.

Lankan civil war. Diaspora as *décalage* can help provide a paradigm "for what escapes or resists translation [and] alludes to this strange two-ness of the joint."[287]

A transnational social justice orientation recognizes these gaps that respondents have inherited, such as antiblackness and Sinhala nationalism, ideologies that are pervasive, but can also be subtle. In the last chapter, we see the effects of actively working against such harmful discourses. After recognizing the forces that have influenced their identity formation, respondents redefine themselves as a different kind of diasporic subject: one that is no longer an inheritor but is instead an ancestor. In doing so, they complicate heteronormative understandings of diaspora while purposefully and actively naming themselves as diasporic elders, or aunties, committing themselves to passing down a more social justice-oriented version of Sri Lankan American identity.

[287] Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Uses of Diaspora," 66.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion: To *Be an Auntie, Queerly*: The Future of the Sri Lankan American Community

In this concluding chapter, I examine an icon and symbol of Sri Lankan diasporic life: the auntie. The auntie as a facilitator of diasporic togetherness and cultural, social, and religious community organizing moves throughout the preceding chapters. The introductory chapter described how aunties can define authenticity, particularly through determining the boundaries of proper Sri Lankan womanhood. Respondents have shared advice and messaging that they have internalized from aunties on tattooing, skin color, and racialization. Diasporic cultural productions feature the auntie as important characters, like Super Auntie in *To T, or not to T?*, and in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* aunties facilitate Yasodhara's marriage. The Sri Lankan American auntie born and/or raised in the U.S., however, is an example of the temporal diasporic embodiment of body + diaspora + time, illustrating how aging bodies formed in diaspora use the power of fictive kinship to redefine Sri Lankan America.

This concluding chapter considers generational shifts, particularly in how Gen X, millennial, and Gen Z respondents engage in auntiehood as praxis. As they acquire children, whether their own or nieces and nephews, respondents rethink diasporic lineages. Specifically, they begin to redefine themselves from inheritors of Sri Lankan culture to ancestors who must choose what ideologies to pass down to future generations. I begin with the figure of the Sri Lankan auntie and the importance of tea to her power, both as a drink and as a facilitator of gossip, illustrating how aunties are both home-makers and homing devices, orienting diasporic life towards multiple modes of belonging and exclusion. Conceiving of "auntie" as a gender-neutral term, with "auntiehood" referring to a practice instead of an identity, I then explore how interviewees have experienced the auntie in the past and how respondents currently wield "auntie power." Exploring how Gen X, millennial, and Gen Z respondents envision themselves not as inheritors of Sri Lankan culture, but as "good ancestors" that value their responsibility towards younger generations, I contend that auntying is a politics of care and that we can try to *be an auntie, queerly* as we create the future of the Sri Lankan American community. This chapter prioritizes respondents' voices in how they envision their own auntiehoods, their relationship to younger generations, and the future of the Sri Lankan American community.

What Is An Auntie?

The Auntie Body: What Does an Auntie Look Like?

First, let us consider the Auntie Body and what it entails. When we think of "auntie," is it an older woman in old fashioned clothes and outdated makeup? Is it a woman in a sari? Is an auntie necessary someone foreign? Is an auntie a FOB – i.e. "fresh off the boat" – an immigrant ignorant to the ways of the U.S.? Does an auntie necessarily have a foreign accent, or can an auntie have an American accent, a Valley Girl accent, or vocal fry? What does an Auntie Body look like? Is it thin, overweight, curvy, slim? Does the auntie have curves and folds, indicating her reproductive ability and history? Or is she straight as an arrow? Is she darker or lighter skinned? How does she wear her hair? Is it in a bun, a long braid, straightened, let down wild and free? Is an Auntie Body an anti-body – i.e. un-sexualized and therefore unnoticed and

unknown? Or is an Auntie Body fabulous in its fashion and attention to detail? Can an auntie be simultaneously all of the above *and* none of the above? Regardless of how we visualize the auntie, there are tangible markers of auntie-ness in the bodily residue the auntie leaves behind. When aunties kiss you hello or goodbye, they leave behind burgundy or fuchsia lipstick, the perfect auntie shades that frame wide smiles and affectionate laughs. The powder and makeup from their faces gets on your clothes and remains long after you get home. Being hugged by an auntie involves being completely absorbed in someone else's body, being held in someone's arms. The residue that aunties leave behind, in redness from pinched cheeks and lipstick prints that is left over on your face say, *An Auntie was here*. Such bodily practices not only leave behind these physical markers, but they also inscribe meaning on participants – both for the auntie and who she hugs. These are visible reminders that you are loved, which say, *you are welcome here, thank you, I love you, we're family, we're kin*. When Aunties are done greeting you, they leave behind a scent of powder and perfume in their wakes, as they march towards whatever task needs to be done next.

Tea and the Work of Auntie Gossip

An important Auntie Work is rooted in tea – in both making it and spilling it. Aunties are made in the kitchen: they ensure there is enough authentically homemade food for everyone to eat their fill, and enough "hot-hot" tea for everyone to drink. In 1972, the "Dominion of Ceylon" became the "Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka." While the country's name has changed, tea is still marketed under the colonial moniker "Ceylon Tea," reflecting the colonial practices that persist in the industry. Tea is grown, harvested, processed, and packed for export through the labor of Hill Country Tamils. They are marginalized due their Indian origins and because they "constitute a linguistic and ethnic community distinct from other Tamil-speaking communities on the island."[288] They are stateless, lack land, housing, and voting rights, and their legal, economic, and social exclusion are a pattern of "structural violence [that has] allowed the tea plantation industry to operate and thrive over the last 150 years."[289] Mythri Jegathesan urges a more equitable and decolonized tea industry, stating, "Sri Lanka's tea plantations can no longer remain exclusive and productive sites of imperial nostalgia for a heritage of coolie labor and dispossession."[290] Due to the unethical labor practices that allow the tea industry to flourish, Sri Lankan tea is consumed by many Sri Lankans of various backgrounds nationally and throughout diaspora, and is ubiquitous as something inherently Sri Lankan, instead of a marker of empire.

As a result, to "be Sri Lankan" is to drink tea. Tea is served to honored and casual guests, family, and laborers – it is the great equalizer. Tea is the place where casual conversations and business transactions happen, where long-lost friends catch up, and the first step to propose a marital union between two families. Most importantly, tea is served by aunties. The delicate decorum of a tea tray reveals the fastidiousness of an auntie who places a porcelain teapot, cups, saucers, sugar bowl, milk pitcher, teaspoons, and sweets onto the tray. This precision not only reflects the formality, strictness, and unyielding nature of the auntie, but also the classed element of making tea in the British High Tea style. Those aunties who adhere to high tea as an institution are those from the upper classes, who can trace their heritages back to

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[288] Mythri Jegathesan, *Tea and Solidarity: Tamil Women and Work in Postwar Sri Lanka* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 18.
[289] Ibid., 22
[290] Ibid., 208.

important Sri Lankan aristocrats, politicians, and business families, unlike my family, with its working class and village origins. There is a fundamental difference between the tea served on an impeccably made-up tea tray – with matching gold-rimmed cups, saucers, sugar bowls, and poured from a porcelain teapot – to the tea served in mugs with "Cat Dad" written on them, as my parents do. It may be the same tea, but it tastes different.

When we serve tea, it is an opportunity to connect and catch up, but also to move strategically and skillfully towards a type of conversation where gossip abounds. Here, aunties not only serve the tea, but engage in "spilling the tea," which serves multiple functions. "Spilling the tea," in one sense, can simply be spreading news of others and updates on people in the community. As the hub of the home, the kitchen serves as sanctuary as well as gathering space where different types of Auntie Networking occur – who can help who, who knows someone who knows someone, a friend of a friend who can aid in whatever personal, educational, or immigration problem needs solving.[291] While spilling the tea can allow for diasporic one-upmanship where one can crow about one's new homes, cars, and children's accomplishments, there is also a camaraderie in it.

Spilling the tea can also be an outlet and a stress reliever. The kitchen, as a respite from overbearing Sri Lankan men or the responsibilities of children, allows women to express negative emotions about their lives, which may not be an option at home. Going to a party allows women a reprieve from their potentially complicated and dissatisfying home lives. For people are in unhappy marriages, or who may be pressured and constricted in certain ways in rigid households, or who may not feel powerful as immigrants in the U.S., it allows women to share things that might not be socially acceptable to discuss in other venues. The opportunity to complain about the world is a bonding experience rooted in social transgression, allowing women to express themselves. There is power in such socially transgressive conversation, in expressing dissatisfaction with one's life to a sympathetic audience. Further, by saying things like *he's handsy* or *he's been known to do things… well, you know*, these spaces between what is *said* and what is *meant* allow aunties to provide protection for young women and give warnings about sexual predators in the community.[292] In this way, "spilling the tea" allows for vocalizing and naming cultural expectations and societal limitations, the boundaries of diasporic life.

When diasporic life is unbounded by place, artificial boundaries and societal limitations are necessary to define what it means to be Sri Lankan in the U.S. "Spilling the tea," in another sense, involves judgement and reification of cultural and societal norms. This type of spilling the tea requires slyness, double meanings, and *entendre*. It can be pointed and specific or ephemeral, implicit, or alluded to. This type of spilling the tea is not polite conversation – it has its own particular vernacular. This is a language of *she should*, *he must*, *why haven't they?* or *why don't they?*, the *it's such a shame*, the *oh, poor thing!,* the *how unlucky!* It is a joy in others' misfortunes and shock at others' perceived lack of adherence to cultural norms. These artificial laments, this feigned outrage, and this clutching of metaphorical pearls not only reinforce but *create* the cultural norms that make diasporic life bearable. This memory-making "relies on social frameworks to enable transmission" and is also part of "the behavioral practices that

[291] Anita Mannur, 'Perfection on a Plate: Readings in the South Asian Transnational Queer Kitchen', in Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan, and Anita Mannur (eds), *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader* (New York, USA: New York University Press, 2020, 393–408.
[292] LaWhore Vagistan/Kareem Khubchandani, 'How to be an Auntie', *TEDxTufts* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9IYJlC_VWY, accessed 1 Dec. 2021].

define ethnicity participate in that transmission."[293] Thus, memory-making is embedded both in social structures between individuals.

Since the Auntie is seen as the upholder of cultural values, "spilling the tea" can solidify conservative ideas of what it means to be Sri Lankan American. As such, Aunties are "home makers" in that they create diasporic life that synthesizes multiple meanings of home, literally producing home in diaspora. Spilling the tea thus also works as an embodied storytelling practice of exclusion and inclusion. As Sara Ahmed notes, the constitution of bodies requires a knowledge of the differences between some bodies versus others. She terms such an understanding '*inter-embodiment*, whereby the lived experience of embodiment is always already *the social experience of dwelling with other bodies'*.[294] With inter-embodiment, we define ourselves as who we *are* by delineating who we are *not*. Migration is not only necessary to define what home is, but who we are. In this creation of communities, "it is the very potential of the community to fail which is required for the constitution of the community," so the question of survival is paramount to the creation of the imagined community.[295] Since the imagined community "is a fantasy that *requires* its own negation," attention to the consequences of failure is evident in aunties' priorities.[296]

The question of inclusion is a question of embodiment. Those who are perceived as harming the nation are not included in the national body. Sri Lankan Americans' self-identity and self-definitions is based on their perceptions of who "counts" as Sri Lankan, and more importantly, who does not fit or exist in this definition. Aunties determine who belongs to the bodily community and can exclude those who transgress their expectations. In the disorienting moment of migration, gossip and such intraethnic communications reifies and the reorients the diasporic body towards behavior that is more socially accepted. We can call this cultural authenticity that supposedly upholds Sri Lankan norms "aunt-henticity" instead, or even "aunt ethnicity," that determines which ethnolinguistic groups are part of the category "Sri Lankan."

What Kind of Aunties Are We? The Changing Nature of Auntiehood

As a result of reproductive designations, I am currently "Schrodinger's Auntie," perpetually in a transitional phase where I am an "Akka"/older sister in some situations, and "Auntie" in others. This begs the question, how does one become an auntie? Do unmarried aunties and/or childfree aunties have the same legibility and status as married and reproductive aunties? My friends within the heterosexual reproductive relationship of marriage are more visible and viable as aunties than I am, someone who is single, unmarried, and has chosen not to have children. My friend whose sibling had a baby is technically an aunt, biologically, but in social situations, young people still call her "akka." The biological moment that guarantees the position an aunt does not necessarily mean that one retains the status of Auntie.

Liyoni speaks to the changing nature of the term "Auntie" for those born and/or raised in the U.S.:

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[293] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 88.
[294] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 47. Emphasis in original.
[295] Ibid., 26.
[296] Ibid.

> I [once]made the comment, "Oh, strong auntie energy happening here!" And [my friend said], "Dude, *we* are the aunties now!" I was like, holy shit, what happened?... But I'm looking at pictures of my parents in their thirties in the 1970s. They're much younger than I am now. I still refer to "auntie this" and "auntie energy" and "Don't be too auntie" and then I'm like, "Oh my god, is that- [*points to self*]? Am *I*? Have I achieved full auntiehood yet?"

Is there one central moment of auntiehood? Perhaps achieving "full auntiehood" or becoming a capital-A Auntie brings with it a certain level of status in diaspora, an ability to make judgments that are respected, to voice opinions that hold merit to the wider diasporic community. There are also generational changes to consider, reflected in the shift from Baby Boomer, to Gen X, to millennial, to Gen Z, as increasing and influential adult U.S. populations. As Gen Z Sri Lankan Americans born and raised in the U.S. get older and become aunties, things will change for the Sri Lankan community. How will the nature of aunties change in the Sri Lankan American community when the population of aunties begins to include those adult women born and raised in the U.S.? As millennials who are born and raised in the United States, can my friends and I be capital-A Aunties? How will the young women of Gen Z, whose oldest members are 26 years old, move into their auntiehood? Will it be the same for the next generation?

Towards the end of each interview, I asked my respondents about their future involvement in the Sri Lankan American community. The question of auntiehood continually came up in my initial 3-4 interviews, so I began to ask follow-up questions, such as "How do you wield auntie power?" "How do you do auntie work?" "What kind of auntie do you want to be?" Most loved thinking and talking about auntiehood, and some mentioned that they wanted to ask their own friends and family that same question. These aunties with American accents spoke about the intergenerational relationships that have nourished them but have also stifled them, and spoke thoughtfully about their own current or impending auntiehood.

Nimali says, "If there's a young person who can call me auntie, I *want* them to call me auntie." She also reflects on the auntie stereotype, saying, "There's a lot of smack about aunties, especially not just in Lankan culture. It's like a South Asian joke." As an undergrad, she did a final project for an Ethnic Studies course on representations of aunties in South Asian cinema, which helped her develop a more nuanced approach to aunties:

> Some of these representations of aunties and uncles are almost a way for [artists and filmmakers] to distance themselves from that identity while also trying to claim this dual identity… But I don't love it…It's a mis-constructed identity [or] representation that has taken off in our communities, in South Asian communities.
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> What we don't always see and talk about in Lankan diasporas is the way that aunties have been powerhouses in our communities and diaspora communities. Aunties have been the people who will really uplift our communities, take care of communities. And not to just assign care work to them, but it has been a role that they've played to carry our community.

Bhagya echoes the notion of aunties as community caretakers and she describes how her positive interactions with aunties has affected the kind of auntie she tries to be:

> One of my favorite things about aunties in general growing up is they're always trying to feed you. I guess I'm using the stereotype of cis[gendered] heteronormative [definition of auntie], but I like expanding that definition. That's one way of wielding auntie power. I'm always coming in hot with the snacks and trying to feed people. I feel like food is my love language. That's a big one.

Bhagya also feels that the "that unconditional 'You can come over whenever you want!' attitude" was something she wants to continue in her own auntiehood. Respondents allude to unconditionality as an important aspect of their own auntiehood. For instance, Diane says of her approach to auntiehood, "Be affectionate, but that's just who I am. Laughter. Warm food. Comfort. Tapping into what makes their eyes light up, and paying attention to that and encouraging that, even if it's something that perhaps I don't care for, in terms of interests." This unconditionality takes on different valences, as we will see in the next section, but here, Diane describes unconditional support, even with things that she herself may not personally support or understand.

Liyoni, who is childfree, finds joy in her auntiehood, saying "There's something really empowering about being a favorite, rather being than being a mom. I think about my nieces and nephews, and I get to be the person who only says 'yes.' I get to be the person to say, 'I don't want to deal with this!'" Sophie takes the duty of being an auntie seriously, even as she finds joy in it:

> With my nephew, I love being his aunt and [my sibling] is expecting another - I love it so much! I definitely think of my role a lot differently than as parent and I cherish that role a lot. When a bond is created outside of the parents, I love that a lot. I hope it will continue to develop and be strong. Whenever [my nephew] is like, "Loku Ammi! Loku Ammi!" I'm like, "Yes! He wants *me*!" I feel that responsibility and want to rise to its weight.

Cassie admits she sometimes does the Auntie Work of keeping tabs, though she sees this as a negative aspect of auntiehood, saying, **"**What I don't want to do, but find myself doing sometimes, is looking at Instagram posts and [thinking], 'Should that be on social media?' I don't want to be that, but I do that." Yuvani also discusses the normative and traditional auntie roles her peers play, and how differently she approaches Auntie Work:

> My sister-in-law, my husband's wife, she has a very different energy. She's much, *much* more maternal [than me]. I would think of her as a more robust auntie, [making] phone calls. My son spent the night and [she] calls my husband like, "I'm worried about [your son] and his eating!" I would have never. I'm just not maternal like that, I'm just like, "Let them be, they'll figure it out!"

In contrast, Sophie's auntiehood manifests in an explicitly gendered community caretaker role. As her family's oldest girl cousin, she says, **"**I try to be that matriarch in a lot of ways for [my cousins] so that they feel a sense of home and connected to us." Even though she now lives outside of Southern California, she tries to connect with her family members as well as provide opportunities for her family to connect to each other.

> Whenever I come home [to] Southern California, I always reach out to all of my cousins and try and have one-on-ones or get togethers. It's exhausting and sometimes not possible, but I make that a priority because I've chosen to live away from my family. I want to still feel so close to them and I want my children to be close to their children, by keeping us connected, which is for me, getting together [and] organizing. For a little while, after Thanksgiving, I was organizing a little hike or a little walk that we'd all go on together to move after eating so much.

(Un)Gendering and Queering Auntiehood

As Sophie alludes to, the work that Aunties do behind the scenes, offering organizational and financial support, is usually seen as "women's work," though some communities blur the lines of such gendered labor. Bhagya hints at the how auntiehood has a non-gendered connotation for her, when she describes traditional or mainstream auntiehood as "cis heteronormative." The emotional support roles that aunties play, however, can be done by anyone, regardless of gender. We must necessarily change how we think of aunties because aunties are currently changing and will continue to change. As we see with respondents, auntiehood has already changed.

The changing nature of aunties changes the words we use and require us to develop a new vernacular. Diasporic subjects' use of language is more than code-switching – language itself is changed by virtue of being diasporic. In effect, diasporic subjects create new diasporic languages. Language is how people "hear" diaspora, and the terms and definitions chosen to represent diaspora is significant. For the Gen X, millennial, and Gen Z generations, can "auntie" be a gender neutral term? Is auntieness a role that anyone can step into regardless of gender? The word "auntie" is already ambiguous to Sri Lankans within diaspora, where one may not have biological family to rely on, so immigrants create their own families, and non-biologically related people step into a familial role. If the category of "auntie," "uncle," "brother," "sister," etc. is so fluid anyway, why not a gender neutral auntie? If auntie is merely a role, then anyone, regardless of gender, can claim it. When I mention to Ajantha that I think of "auntie" as a gender-neutral term, he says, "I like hearing that. I embody [the idea] that it shouldn't be gendered. For me, when I hear that, [I think about] serving tea to every friend who comes to my house, making them feel warmth."

Diane is currently reading the anthology *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, which is helping her think about the nature of family, both as a mother and as an aunt:

> [I think of] mothering as a concept that's not necessarily biologically connected. Concepts of mothering are not just our family units, but in our communities and in our social justice movements. [I think] about what it means to do that, what it means to care for others in a way that doesn't necessarily… [*pauses*] I don't know. It's a lot. I think I'm figuring it out, too, and trying to make sense of it.

Within diaspora, it can be a matter of survival to look beyond biological family networks. Diane's thoughts reflect how immigrants must "figure it out," especially when transnational connections to the homeland are unavailable, turning to others who are not only outside of their familiar biological connections, but also may be a different ethnicity or religion. Diaspora unmakes kinship networks within the homeland and blurs the lines between biological and

nonbiological family. Aunties, as community caretakers and leaders that reside outside of the nuclear family unit but also within extended family networks, facilitate connections between biological family networks and nonbiological networks. If the nature of family in diaspora is messy with no hard boundaries, and if Auntie can be a gender-neutral role, then queering family and queering familial roles is not so difficult. Aunties' flexibility lies not only in moving across and between biological and nonbiological networks.[297] Aunties are flexible in the different roles they play in family networks, as leaders and members of organizations and religious institutions, in their changing relationships to other Aunties, and in their relationship to the Sri Lankan nation-state. Their flexibility in affiliation and allegiance, however, can also be transgressive, and makes the Auntie a dangerous figure. While Aunties can be detrimental to young people's freedom in their enforcement of social and culturally appropriate behavior, they can also work as bouncers, moving into protect and defend young people from other Aunties, uncles, and even their own parents. As meditators between children and their parents, and if they support younger generations in navigating conflicts and parental control, Aunties can complicate and even threaten nuclear family dynamics.

As a mother, Diane finds these non-nuclear connections vital for her own children, while she also notes the importance of being a non-nuclear adult figure in other young people's lives:

> I hope to be someone that the younger ones can feel they can talk to and confide in. It's really important to me, that my children, as well as the children in my life, like my sister's, my friends' and family's, that they develop bonds that are outside of me. I want my kids to have special connections with other people that don't have to involve me. That's really important, and I'd love to be that [person] for others. Be someone that they can confide in, that they can process with, that they can unpack with. I just hope that that generation feels seen by me and not *not* seen.

Doing Auntie Work Differently: The Auntie as Ally

Respondents told stories about their own interactions with younger generations, where like Diane, they are hyperaware of the effect their words and actions have on younger people. In this section, we see what respondents consider vital to their current and future roles as aunties: the importance of proper and open communication, respect in word choice in order to not perpetuate harm (e.g. acknowledging pronouns and refusing to use colorist language), and allowing younger people to express themselves. There is a freedom in speaking with an auntie - a freedom to comfortably express yourself knowing it is a private and intimate conversation. Auntie conversations can be a safe space, when one can still get motherly advice. However, the difference is that an auntie is not one's parent, so the advice that the auntie gives is fundamentally different than parental advice. Seeking out the auntie for advice is therefore intentional. While an auntie may be parental adjacent, ultimately they are a person with life experience, who will be honest (sometimes brutally so), and who can say things that a parent would not or cannot. Parental advice is what parents want their child to do an ideal world, but auntie advice is grounded in the real world, the advice from the trenches, the "real shit." For example, Auntie Advice can encompass serious conversations about mental health, dealing with peer pressure, underage drinking, drugs, and safe sex. Anjali says, "I would hope if they were

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[297] See Patricia J. Sotirin and Laura L. Ellingson, *Where the Aunts Are: Family, Feminism, and Kinship in Popular Culture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013).

caught in a situation where they don't feel safe, they can look to me. They won't have to worry about punishments and stuff. Obviously, I don't want to be taken advantage of, but I still want to provide a safe space for anyone that is younger than me." Bhagya sees this type of relationship as counter to the types of auntying she has experienced:

> One thing I didn't love so much about [aunties growing up] - I mean, uncles did this, too so I guess this is more like a gender neutral "Auntie" term that I'm using - to gossip about us and talking about other kids. Just the drama I don't love, and the guilt and shame and all of that came with like, "Oh, aunties are talking about this!" I would love the opposite where, I want to be the kind of Auntie that's hyping you up, especially if you're different, especially if you're going through something, to be an Auntie Ally. I like that. Especially kids who are feeling they're not there, they don't want to be in this place, or they're feeling [like] outsiders. I want to be a good auntie to *those* kids especially.

In this role as Auntie Ally, an auntie has more power and influence that biological family and parents, and simply speaking, can get away with a lot. I am thrilled about transitioning from Akki to Auntie, and how this new Auntie status will provide me with a lot of power. My friends, other women in their mid to late thirties, and I have discussed at length the types of aunties we want to be and how we want to wield our auntie power. There is a joy in wielding auntie power, especially for women who have been subject to and limited by some aunties' narrow and conservative views of being Sri Lankan American, so the anticipation of getting to expand and redefine Sri Lankanness in diaspora is exhilarating. Liyoni says, "I've been wanting for years to design a line of T-shirts to say 'Decolonize Beautiful,' because it's a struggle. Or 'Brown With Impunity!' 'Auntie Power' would be the greatest shirt of all time!"

Many spoke about how the aunties they want to and strive to be are the aunties that they did not get when they really needed them. In wielding her auntie power, Lakshmi pushes back against the messages she grew up hearing, saying, "Sadly, we've allowed society to tell us that there are rules. But now as I've grown up, I realized there are actually no rules. Your rules are what you make. I tell my nieces, 'Hey, there's no rules!'" Similarly, Thomas also pushes back against how he was told to live life by helping the next generation choose their own paths:

> I got told a lot of what to do but no one told me how to do it. No one taught me the skills I just heard a lot about, the life skills that I need to succeed. No one ever showed me the way, or took the time to guide me, and I feel like I lost like a lot of time not knowing what to do.
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> Going to school, for example, [hearing from older generations], "You need to be a doctor!" Well, none of *you* are doctors! So how are you going to tell me how to be a doctor? *You* know? Like, *I* don't know! How am I supposed to know? I'm the oldest grandchild, so I don't have *anyone* to tell me how to become a doctor.
>
> [Now], I try to do that with the skills I have. If you have an idea of what you want to do, I will help guide you to that… If you want to go down that path and maybe achieve more than me, I will help you go down this path….Because my parents never showed me and so let me teach you…I want you to win.

Lakshmi and Thomas illustrate the new approaches those born and raised in the U.S. have towards younger generations, one that instead of being prescriptive is supportive.

Further, to accept the mantle of Auntiehood is to be given a certain cultural and societal legitimacy. What we say being "Sri Lankan" in diaspora is, becomes the defining narrative of what "Sri Lankan America" is. We can name the cultural priorities, the organizing principles, and the motivating interests of the community, illustrating how "authenticity can also be employed to build alternative cultures."[298] Lakshmi describes her wielding of Auntie Power as:

> I do it in the way that I needed that. What I needed, that's what I give my girls, I give my nieces. I didn't have this and this is what I would need somebody to tell me at your age, those key things. We're told you have to get married. What does that mean? Are you born with tools to make relationships? I'm not saying any other culture does either. I've talked to all my friends, [both Sri Lankan American and not]. Nobody's got the tools. We're all still floundering around, figuring this thing out. Yeah, I've become *that* auntie!

Another important aspect of redefining "Sri Lankan America" for respondents lies in actively breaking cycles of harm, especially in refusing to perpetuate harms that was done to them or that they saw being done to others. Ashley hopes, "I really hope that it [changes], and I hope that it continues where we establish [that] 'Hey, this is why we shouldn't say these things to five-year-old girls [about] their skin color!' That's wrong, so you shouldn't be perpetuating that type of self-hatred." Imesha was also committed to not using colorist language, saying, "First and foremost, I would never refer to a baby or a child or even like an older child in a loving way by saying 'Sudhu Baba'[White Baby] and stuff like that. I just would completely erase that." She goes on to discuss what she would change as an auntie:

> I grew up with aunties being "concerned." And their number one "concern" is that I was so skinny that I wouldn't be able to have kids. That's just such an awful mindset to have! I want to especially normalize with my kids [the] things that aren't normalized in Sri Lankan culture, like women being divorced, saying no to a relationship, to leaving an abusive relationship, stuff like that.

Clearly, respondents are thinking critically about their current and future roles as adult role model to young people, taking this role incredibly seriously and seeing it as a vital responsibility.

Queer Auntiehood as a Politics of Care: The Future of the Sri Lankan American Community

Auntiehood as a practice means "Auntie" hood is something that you do, not something that you are. So how can we do Auntiehood in a queer way? How do we deploy queerness in Auntiehood? These new narratives and definitions of what Auntiehood is require not only changing and queering language itself but also changing and queering ways of being. Using queerness allows us to look at how diasporic communities rewrite and re-inscribe kinship within their localities, how kinship networks are transnationally created, and provides a useful umbrella

[298] Monisha Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 61.

for expanding and changing notions of diaspora. The potential for queer auntiehood requires not only expanding the definition of "auntie" to include any gender, but also engaging in the act of queer auntiehood. Here, when I discuss the potential for a queer auntiehood, I do not describe how to be a queer auntie, or an auntie who identifies as queer.

Instead, I contend that a queer auntiehood involves critically examining how to *be an auntie, queerly*. The act of being an auntie, but queerly, is expansive and allows for multiple modes of being and belonging. More so than identifying as queer, *being an auntie, queerly* is something that anyone can do, regardless of self-identification or how one is read externally by others. To *be an auntie, queerly* is to focus on the actions that aunties, regardless of gender identification or sexuality, can do to encourage and support younger generations. It is not a noun, but a verb, and it is not a state of being, but instead a set of actions. An active queer auntying requires a commitment to sitting with the tangles and messiness of diasporic life, acknowledging its complexities, and not trying to flatten the experiences of Sri Lankans in the U.S. To be an auntie, queerly is to support younger generations in finding the parts of Sri Lankan culture fits for them and excise what is not relevant to their lives. When I mentioned practicing auntiehood in queer ways to Nimali, she supported it, saying:

> I love the idea of the queer auntie… I see it in terms of how aunties had been available to me, but beyond that, I now think about being the representation that I didn't get. I also want to be a representation that others didn't see. It's really important to be really vocal about my politics, because I have that capacity to be so, [for example, in] an emotional capacity. I want to be forward with that because that's the type of representation I didn't see. I didn't find community in that way, for a long time.

To *be an auntie, queerly* reflects Sara Ahmed's conception of a queer genealogy that instead of being based on reproductive designations of ancestors and descendants, like in a family tree, opens connections in many directions simultaneously:

> A queer genealogy would take the very "affects" of mixing, or coming into contact with things that reside on different lines, as opening up new kinds of connection. As we know, things are kept apart by such lines: they make some proximities not impossible, but dangerous. And yet, mixing does happen, and lines do not always direct us. A queer genealogy would be full of such ordinary proximities.[299]

Unlike Ahmed's queer genealogy, however, to *be an auntie queerly* works both within and outside of descent-defined genealogies to offer new ways diasporic epistemologies and how auntiehood is changed in diaspora. That is, while being queer and identifying as queer facilitates doing things queerly, *to be an auntie, queerly* is something that heterosexual and cisgendered people can also practice. For example, Diane, who is married to a man, wants to be the type of auntie "that is affirming of who the younger generation, of who they are with [and] who they [are and] how they wish to be. Calling them the names they wish to be called, the pronouns." This is important to her not only as an auntie but as a mother as well:

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[299] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 154-155.

> Something that is really, really important to me is not reinforcing a gender normative dynamic in our household. That's really, really important to me. Right now, I'm placing this identity of "son" onto my child, and I'm also very cognizant and aware that that could shift. I decided for both [of my children] not finding out their sex before birth. Because the world does that already. They do it when the baby's born. Personally, I don't want to do that before. That plays a role into the kind of human that I'm hoping to cultivate, but at the same time with full knowledge that that they will be who they decide to be and how they grow.

<u>The Power to Redefine Sri Lankan America</u>

As we can see, being an auntie queerly involves redefining normative ways of being in diaspora. It also involves rethinking Sri Lankan America, since the diasporic institutions that currently exist do not sufficiently capture the complexities of life in the U.S. or in Sri Lanka. As a result, the Sri Lankan America that respondents have experienced requires much-needed, and sometimes, drastic changes. For example, Dave feels existing Sri Lankan American organizations do not meet his needs as a person born and raised in the U.S., and espouses the value and the necessity of spaces by Sri Lankan American organizations run by those with experience growing up in the U.S. For instance, while Dave is a part of a national Sri Lankan American organization for professionals, he says, "I don't really have a lot in common with a lot of them." When a family friend became president of a regional chapter he asked Dave to join, and Dave even led certain committees in the organization. However, Dave says, "But [my friend] is not president anymore, so I'm not doing it anymore. I have no real attachment." Dave wants to use this and other experiences of feeling alienated from immigrant-led organizations to support organizations by and for Sri Lankan Americans born and raised in the U.S. He says, "Finding a way to have an avenue to create these attachments that are lasting is super important," and that "We're at a unique time for Sri Lankan Americans where it could go one direction or another." Similarly, Ashley claims those born and raised in the U.S. have an opportunity to not only unpack important community issues, but also can define what it means to be Sri Lankan American:

> Because we're such a young [community], we don't have a lot of depth in terms of [multiple generations of] our grandparents and parents are [born] here. We, as a whole, as a community, have not had the space to tackle some of those issues. [To say], "Hey, this is something that need to change about this culture!", because we haven't had time to get to that point. It's only our generation that is really coming to hopefully step up to change a lot of that…Correcting those actions and those behaviors as a culture is really important for us to keep our culture alive, but also keep it healthy.

Here, Ashley speaks to a powerful reframing of producing Sri Lankan America, in which those born and raised in the U.S. create new epistemologies and can claim those new ways of being as "our culture." This opportunity that Dave alludes to, which "could go one direction or another," is the opportunity to rework and at times outright reject the normative, and most importantly redefining and normalizing the nonnormative in diaspora.

Ahmed claims that such unsettling of the normative ideologies "allows that which has been received to be noticeable."[300] Similarly, being in diaspora forces us to question our inheritances, metaphorically and literally, and makes entrenched ideologies visible. Ahmed argues:

> We don't always know what might be unsettling; what might make the lines that direct us more noticeable as lines in one moment or another. But once unsettled it might be impossible to return, which of course means that we turn somewhere else, a turning that might open up different horizons. Oddly enough, it is the backward glance that confirms the impossibility of this return, as we face what is behind us. You go back, to move on.[301]

Redefining "Sri Lankan" and "Sri Lankan American" requires recognizing what ideologies and practices work and do not work in the social, cultural, political, historical context of the U.S. Looking back "to move on" allows Sri Lankan Americans to not only redo the practices, rhetoric, and beliefs that are divisive, harmful, or dysfunctional, but also facilitates acceptance of the nonnormative, creating new ways of being, and accepting those new, nonnormative epistemologies into a specifically Sri Lankan American culture.

These new generations of Aunties can wield our Auntie Power to redefine a Sri Lankan American culture in framing who is excluded and included in this community. And we say, being Sri Lankan in America is whatever we want it to be. Let us expand "Sri Lankan America" to mean more than Sinhala, more than Buddhist, and let us include and listen to people who do not want to call themselves Sri Lankan because they have been subject to marginalization and violence. Imesha reflects on this how she tries to expand these definitions:

> I struggle a lot with my Sinhala identity, because I see the way that a lot of the Sinhala community treats or says things about the Tamil community [and] the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. It's very degrading. I want to make sure that the generation going forward, we really work to be inclusive of our culture and that when we say "Sri Lanka," we don't just mean "Sinhala." I've noticed that even within organizations that I've volunteered [in] and even [my university's Sri Lankan student group], it takes some time for people to realize that they need to be inclusive. And [with] how we decide to represent our culture also in Sri Lanka, especially here in the U.S., I'd like to see people if they're going to share something in Sinhala, [to] share it in Tamil as well, just so people feel like they're brought into the table. I don't see a lot of people doing that. That's where I want to be able to [use auntie power], *because* I have that understanding, and that's a big priority for me.

Nimali sees being a *Sinhala* auntie specifically, as an additional responsibility to her auntiehood, saying, "When I think about aunties, I think [about] being a Sinhala auntie. I think about what it means to be an antinationalist, and specifically, anti-Sinhala [nationalism]." She began reframing her thinking during her fellowship in Sri Lanka, saying:

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[300] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 155.
[301] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 155.

> That's something I think about, [that] I really, really wanted when I came back from the island. I thought I could start some kind of Sinhala space that is antinationalist and centering a different type of politics than what was available in a lot of spaces. I didn't have the capacity and didn't really have a Sinhala community [then]. It's [still] something I think about.

Imesha and Nimali, who are in the Sinhala majority when in Sri Lanka and in Sri Lankan American spaces, both want to diversify thinking about what "Sri Lankan" means. These redefinitions coming from aunties already have power, but anti-Sinhala nationalist thoughts from Sinhala aunties, as Nimali notes, gives this reframing additional weight. To *be and auntie, queerly*, then, is to also encourage others towards self-exploration, instead of being married to or beholden to official versions of what being Sri Lankan in America is. Instead of uncritically accepting cultural organizations or Sri Lankan governmental narratives of what Sri Lankans in America are, should be, and should do, being an auntie queerly encourages the next generations to think through their identities for themselves, encourages young people to explore Sri Lankan culture and history on their own terms and make their own decisions on how certain cultural, religious, and social traditions fit into their increasingly complicated lives in diaspora.

With her obvious American accent and mannerisms, Lakshmi has noticed how more recent immigrants look down on her at Sri Lankan American events. She recalls one incident earlier this year when she brought a Sri Lankan dessert to her Buddhist temple. A newer immigrant lay member questioned her knowledge of not only Sri Lankan customs, but also the temple's specific procedures. In past moments, she says her mother or other aunties would inform such individuals: "'You might not know her, but she's an old school one. Don't discount her, she was here before *everybody*.' That's how I feel." In that moment at the temple, Lakshmi informed the person questioning her that she had been a member of the temple's congregation since she immigrated forty-five years ago, so she knew what she was doing. Clearly, Lakshmi has the confidence of not only being in the U.S. for over four decades, but also intimate knowledge of her Sri Lankan American community and the experience of being a diasporic Sri Lankan her entire life. Similarly, Gen X and millennials have been in the U.S. for decades, so these generations have the legitimacy of time that recent immigrants do not, a legitimacy which can facilitate these generations' ability to be heard as stakeholders in this community. Ashley considers this legitimacy as vital to reframing harmful practices, saying "Realizing what this [influence] is gives us a powerful tool to grasp and get a hold of what is going on, and to nip it in the bud and say, 'No, this is going to stop here.'"

While elder millennials and Gen X Sri Lankan Americans have this temporal legitimacy of being in the U.S. longer than more recent immigrants, respondents describe having more in common with younger millennials, Gen Z, and even older Gen Alpha people who have been born or raised in the U.S. For example, Liyoni, is the oldest respondent in this study at 52 years old and a member of Gen X, while Anjali and Nuwan are the youngest respondents at 20 years old and members of Gen Z. However, despite the over three decades that separate them, they share similar experiences of being racialized diasporic bodies in the U.S. At 48 years old, Yuvani describes her camaraderie with younger people despite being similar in age or even older than their immigrant parents raised in Sri Lanka. When talking to younger generations, Yuvani says, "I'm in my forties in my mind, [but] I'm sixteen when I hang out with them. I feel like I'm just at the same level as them."

A Politics of Care: Auntying as Activist Project

In the process of going through the interview transcripts about how respondents see their future involvement in the Sri Lankan American community, I was inspired. One day I was frustrated and angry after advising a teenager whose parents were not supportive of their choices. Returning to this chapter later that day, however, I realized while that specific situation was awful, overall, the next generation's future looks much brighter. The new generations of Aunties born and raised in diaspora have necessarily developed a both intimate and expansive view of what it means to be Sri Lankan in the U.S. My friends and I have made a promise to each other and ourselves that we will be supportive of Gen Z, Gen Alpha, and whoever else may come after us. We want to be understanding and kind to generations born into multiple periods of societal, political, and environmental upheaval. We want to emulate the kinds of aunties who have truly listened and supported us. Some of us have tattoos and hate saris, some of us have tattoos and love wearing saris, some of us do not have tattoos at all, but all of us are unapologetically ourselves and refuse to let others dictate how we choose to live our lives. We are still interested in learning more about Sri Lanka, but we are committed to thinking critically about our cultural, societal, and religious heritages. We truly want our current and future children to learn about Sri Lanka and will support Sri Lankan American cultural endeavors. We plan to do the organizing our aunties have done, just on our terms.

Throughout this study, we have seen how respondents consider their roles as current and future community elders with gravity. They genuinely regard younger generations with a sense of responsibility and are not only invested in engaging with their children and young people in their lives with grace and understanding, but many are desperately working towards making the experience of being Sri Lankan American in the U.S. better for later generations. In doing so, they are oriented towards the future of Sri Lankans in America. I have used Sara Ahmed concept of orientation repeatedly throughout this study to examine how ideological and sociological forces affect Sri Lankan Americans in the past and present. In addition, Ahmed claims that orientation also points us to possible futures:

> Even when orientations seem to be about which way we are facing in the present, they also point us toward the future. The hope of changing directions is that we don't always know where some paths may take us: risking departure from the straight and narrow makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer…"[302]

For respondents, this "hope of changing directions" is not a dream they merely wish for, but an active process that comes from remembering their pasts and the support they did not get from family and other community elders, visualizing possible futures, and then altering their behaviors and ideologies to tangibly produce that future, a process rooted in a commitment to what Layla F. Saad calls "become a good ancestor."[303] Considering ourselves as ancestors changes our relationship to time more generally, but for Sri Lankan Americans born and raised in the U.S., who are labeled as inheritors of homeland beliefs and practices, this is a vital reframing of

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[302] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 21.

[303] See Layla F. Saad, *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor*, Sourcebooks, 2020. See also Layla F. Saad, *Good Ancestor Podcast*, http://laylafsaad.com/good-ancestor-podcast. Accessed 4 October 2022.

temporality for embodied diasporic subjects. Taking on the mantle of Auntie, then, is to actively disengage with the role of "descendent."

In undertaking this duty to be a good ancestor, respondents envision their own auntiehood as a politics of care, which involves not only perceiving the world through the lens of care but also organizing their lives to maximize care. Auntiehood as a politics of care opposes the fallacy of mandatory struggle, a mentality that says, *Life was difficult for me, so it must be difficult for you, too.* For example, Thomas sees reciprocal care as vital to intergenerational, friend, and family relationships:

> I expect every one of us to take care of each other. When I'm down, you should help me because I've been down and people have helped. Now that I'm up, I like to help those same people. It doesn't have to be financially, it could be with my time it could be whatever way I can. If I have to help with their kids, I help with their kids, but [ultimately] I want people to be there for each other.

While they may not define it as such, respondents are engaged in a politics of care, manifesting in different practices. Respondents take on the duty of care in small and large ways within their personal circles, their careers, and the organizations they are a part of. Many, like Bhagya, Diane, Sophie, Cassie, and Nimali, wish to be auntie allies for young queer people. Thomas uses his experiences as a tattooed man of color to mentor younger people in the business norms he was forced to learn on his own. Others engage in care work through being trusted adults and confidants to those who may not have adults they can talk to about their feelings and struggles, like Sophie and Diane, who both emphasize the need for young people to have adults "outside of their parents" who they can turn to. Manu teaches young people about citizenship, leadership, community through his role as scoutmaster in The Boy Scouts of America, which he began when his child joined the organization. Even those who are childfree are invested in the happiness and success of younger generations: Lakshmi gives her nieces advice she wishes she had received and Liyoni enjoys being a fun outlet for her nieces and nephews as they move from teenagers to young adults.

Further, as a politics of care, auntying is an activist project. Respondents have empathy for younger generations because they have gone through the uncertainties of being racialized diasporic bodies in the U.S. Further, even those who do not identify as queer can sympathize with young queer people's experiences and are ready and willing to support them, even though they may not have faced those particular struggles. When Gen X, millennial, and Gen Z aunties help younger generations navigate the complexity of being temporally misaligned and racialized diasporic subjects, we see that Auntie Work is care work, community work, and activist work simultaneously.[304] Throughout this chapter, respondents have discussed not perpetuating harmful ideologies, being allies and confidants, and supporting nonnormative ways of being, and in doing so, complicating and embracing auntie stereotypes.

For example, Yuvani's auntying involves pushing against narrowminded ideas that young people may have internalized:

> I love to talk to and find out how they're thinking, what they're thinking about, and challenge that thinking and try to push boundaries, [if] I feel that their world has been a

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[304] See Mai-Linh K. Hong, Mai-Linh K. Hong, Preeti Sharma, and Chrissy Yee Lau*, The Auntie Sewing Squad Guide to Mask Making, Radical Care, and Racial Justice* (University of California Press, 2021).

> little small, just try to gently push those. I want to be that force, if I have that opportunity.

Similarly, Imesha's auntying involves expanding definitions of "Sri Lankan" from "Sinhala." After her experience in her undergraduate Sri Lankan student group, she wants to continue advocating for comprehensive understandings of the Sri Lankan experience in Sri Lankan American spaces, saying, "It's important to switch into that mindset where you're checking yourself and [asking], 'Well, am I being inclusive?'"

Diane's approach to auntying is connected to her approach to motherhood and shaping her children's experiences of privilege and power:

> I hope to be able to shape and influence with my husband…how we talk about who we are and where our background and our family [is from] and being proud of that distinction. And naming and identifying privilege and marginalized identities within ourselves, and how that shapeshifts depending on the space that you're in. If you're in an all-white space versus an all-brown space, you are going to have a certain amount of privileges and a certain amount of marginalized identities that are at play given the context. Understanding that dynamic and being aware about [those] dynamics [is key].

Similarly, Cassie's auntying is directly related to not only her medical career, but also as a person in a queer relationship:

> I want to be an auntie [that] they can talk to about something that they couldn't [with their parents.] As you may have gathered, my partner uses they/them pronouns. We're going to be a slightly different older couple to them. Maybe they would feel comfortable talking to us about their own gender identity or sexuality or something, which currently is a lot harder for people. A lot of the work I did in Sri Lanka was around reproductive health. The education here [in the U.S.] sucks, our education system doesn't teach anyone. I plan to do a lot of that work in the future and with abortion care and all that. I want to be one of those [aunties], somebody who can come talk to you about [those issues]. I don't know if I had an auntie like that, but it seems a nice role to play.

Nimali's auntying involves unpacking generational trauma and being open about her humanity in all its imperfections:

> There's also a lot of trauma in our communities that we don't really talk about, and it's really passed down. I think about being an auntie as somebody who shows that they're learning, but also is unlearning, and can show that processes of unlearning can happen. That's also being emotionally available [and] being open about things like mental health and abuse. I've made that very kind of forefront to how I present myself [as an auntie] because it's not what I saw.

Instead of a top-down unyielding relationship between ancestor and descendent, Nimali's willingness to show vulnerability horizontalizes the bond between auntie and younger generations. Similarly, to embody queer auntiehood as praxis means to strategically use the power of fictive kinship, tapping into already established networks to work towards change.

When we reframe our role ancestors instead of descendants, we acknowledge the complexity of our own identities as Sinhala Sri Lankan Americans, and move it forward to include others. To be an auntie queerly means utilizing the power of the majority to advocate for minority Sri Lankan communities in the homeland and in diaspora. It means expanding the tent of Sri Lankan America to bring in all ethnicities, religions, languages, sexualities, abilities, and legal statuses.

Already, we see that the Gen X, millennial, and Gen Z respondents in this study have not and do not intend to establish a relationship with the Sri Lankan government, as immigrant-focused organizations do, and in fact, many respondents are critical of Sinhala nationalist rhetoric. As we look at the future generations of the Sri Lankan American community, we can wonder what this community's relation to nationalism will be, and how these generations will construct community when they are not held by the homeland. That is, in the absence of the homeland, how do we create a community in which the Sri Lankan nation-state is not necessary for an imagined community to flourish? Perhaps we can use multigenerational Asian American communities to consider the possibilities for the Sri Lankan American community moving forward, such as the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean American communities. We can also look to South Asian diasporas in the Caribbean and in Africa as examples of long-term diasporic communities that have been shaped by their locations while still asserting their South Asian identities.

Ultimately, being an auntie queerly is more than an ideology: it is a tactic, a strategy with which to deal with the intricacies of embodied diasporic life. It is a commitment to a conception of diaspora that recognizes complexity. Let us rethink the image of aunties serving tea and spilling tea: when we literally spill something like tea, there is too much liquid that overwhelms the cup and cannot be contained. Diaspora, like tea, cannot be contained: it is complicated, intricate, messy, multivocal and multilayered, tangled, and non-teleological. With spilling, there is excess, an excess of information and feeling that cannot be properly expressed. Likewise, being an auntie queerly reimagines and expands family in diaspora, revealing the folly in trying to ensure a specific, rooted, and monolithic definition of "Sri Lankan American." Being an auntie queerly recognizes that neat categories do not exist, that there are spaces and silences that may (or may not) need filling. Being an auntie queerly acknowledges that the "doing" of diaspora is made up of many small actions and decisions, both big and small, subject to the many multilayered forces we navigate. Being an auntie queerly recognizes that the work of diaspora is not in preserving, but in persevering and pursuing new practices, possibilities and epistemologies. In doing so, we can find ways to embody that excess together.

Conclusion

Throughout this study, we have seen how Sri Lankan Americans navigate the intersections of body, diaspora, and time at the heart of temporal diasporic embodiment. The Sri Lankan Americans featured here are changing Sri Lankan and American cultures in dynamic ways, reflecting the diversity of their complex identities. We have seen how Sri Lankan American bodies formed in diaspora develop different epistemologies from those formed in the homeland, engaging with the homeland and conceiving of time in varied and sometimes contradictory ways. They perceive and acknowledge what immigrant-focused institutions, which concentrate primarily on survival, cultural continuity, and legitimacy to the American

mainstream, do not and cannot. Sri Lankan Americans born and/or raised in the U.S. grapple with the multiplicities of identity, power, and war through cultural productions like tattoos, novels, and performance. They rethink their status quo, reframing their identities through the lenses of power and activism, redefining auntiehood and themselves as ancestors who have a responsibility to future generations of Sri Lankan Americans. Whether they are tattooed or untattooed, creators and artists, racialized subjects in the U.S., engaged in social justice work, or are wielding auntie power, Sri Lankan Americans born and/or raised in the United States are shaping new ways of being as they live colorful, complex, and embodied lives in diaspora.

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Appendix: Tattoo Pictures

Image 1: Dave's Sinhala script tattoo reading "Wickramasingha."

Image 2: Manu’s Sinhala script tattoo reading “Kumarawaththage” under a tiki mask.

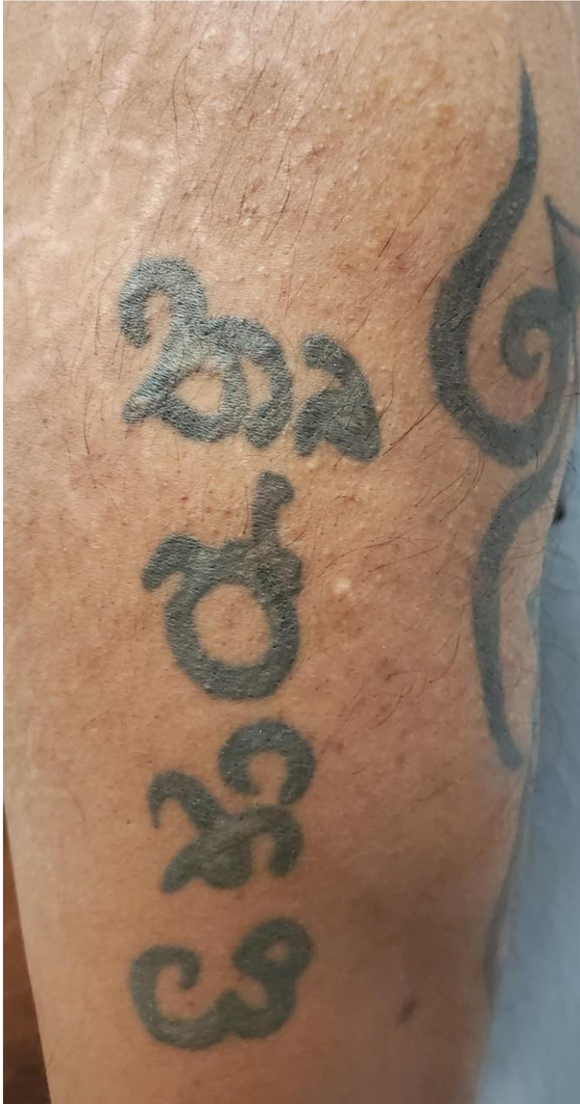

Image 3 (left): Thomas' Sinhala script tattoo reading "*thrupthiya*"; literally, "satisfaction."

Image 4 (right): Thomas' Sinhala script tattoo reading "*ridhenawa*"; literally, "it hurts."

Image 5: Cassie's Sinhala script tattoos reading "*anithya*" and "*upeksha*" the Sinhala terms for the Buddhist concepts of "impermanence" and "equanimity," respectively.

Image 6: Manu's full tattooed back with the lion from the Sri Lankan flag done in a Polynesian style on the left side.

Image 7: Nihal's tattoo of the Sri Lankan flag lion superimposed on an image of Sri Lanka.

Image 8: Nimali’s tattoo of the lion from the Sri Lankan flag.

Image 9: Liyoni’s tattoo of the lion from the Sri Lankan flag.

Image 10: Nimali’s tattoo of a Sri Lankan *yakka* mask.

Image 11: Cassie's tattoo of a *sandhakadapahana,* or moonstone Buddhist temple carving.

Image 12: Thomas' tattoo of a Buddhist dhamma wheel emerging from a lotus.

Image 13: Ajantha's Sanskrit tattoo in Devanagiri script of a phrase from the Kariniyametta Sutta, or the Buddha's Discourse on Loving Kindness, meaning "May all beings be well."

Image 14: Liyoni's Sanskrit script tattoo reading "*aham Prema*," meaning "divine love," with "Prema" also representing Liyoni's grandmother's name.

Image 15: Sophie's tattoo of a hummingbird.

Image 16: Bhagya’s tattoo of an Asian elephant family and crescent moon.

Image 17: Yuvani’s monkey tattoo.

Image 18: Monica’s tattoo of a sun with the UC Berkeley logo, “fiat lux,” in her sister’s handwriting.