

intimacy and excess: the aesthetics of asian diasporic queerness

by

sunil tohan

Thesis Advisor: Kevin Quashie

Second Reader: Leon Hilton

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

In the English Honors Program in the Department of English
At Brown University

26 March 2021

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis.

I authorize Brown University to lend this thesis to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I further authorize Brown University to reproduce this thesis by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized cursive letters, positioned above a horizontal line.

Signature

Brown University requires the signatures of all persons using or photocopying this thesis. Please sign below, and give address and date.

a few acknowledgments

Professor Quashie, thank you.

You taught me so much—more than you could know. I will forever be grateful for the time you shared with me over the last three years. I have never known kindness, warmth, and teaching like yours.

to Professors Hilton, Armstrong, Evdokimova, Rodriguez, and to so many of my teachers: I am so grateful for your believing in me and my thinking. Thank you for your dedication to the classroom and to the overwhelmingly positive energy you bring to your students.

I am lucky to have friends who continue to support and inspire me endlessly, so many of whom have benefitted this project: Joey, Keiko, Moe and Francesca, Salma, Morgan, Olivia ... Thank you.

to Daniel, Wylie, and David: In ways you might not be conscious of, you three have given me a family when I most needed one. Thank you for your constant affirmations and your wholehearted acceptance of me (and my foolishness) over the years. Thank you for allowing me to trust you with my ideas and my writing.

to Sara: There is too much to write here. This work is about intimacy and queerness and brownness and so of course you are a central figure in my thinking. And as much of this project is really my becoming into myself this past year, know that you have been my closest force, my rock, my muse, in myriad ways; I have overflowing love and friendship for you.

for sunita, and santosh

table of contents

prologue.....	7
introducing the mother-(queer) child form.....	21
complicating the form.....	43
epilogue.....	52

notes

- I purposefully utilise British English in the thesis; as a British, South Asian, diasporic subject, I opt for the Anglophone mode especially because it pays respect to my lineage and invokes a queer aesthetic
- My uncapitalised names and title headers are not aesthetic moves, but rather gestures towards the lack of capitalisation in written Punjabi, my family's mother tongue

prologue

We live in the face of historical and social conditions that produce an unjust distribution of death toward, and exploitation of, black and brown life and queer and trans bodies, actively shortening black, brown, Asian, indigenous, queer, and trans of color life with alarming and mundane regularity. This book argues that performance is a vital means through which the minoritarian subject demands and produces freedom... minoritarian performance is what Nina Simone described as the art of 'improvisation within a fixed framework,' working within limited coordinates to make the impossible possible.

Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, page 4

~

What could the performance of the queer diasporic subject show us? What is the use of scrutinising that performance if—as Chambers-Letson contends—performance is how the minoritarian subject “demands and produces freedom?”

In my exploration of queer diasporic performance, I owe my theoretical foundation to Audre Lorde’s “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” Her “erotic” was my entry point into a certain ethic of literary studies and way of being. Lorde argues for the “erotic” as a specific “depth of feeling,” an “internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire,” “a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (53-54). When I first encountered Lorde’s essay, I realised that the fullness of feeling that she describes was what I found compelling in so many works of literature. Lorde asserts that “erotic *knowledge*... [can be] a lens through which we scrutinise all aspects of our existence” (57 emphasis added). The epistemological aspect of the erotic inspires the question:

How can we orient our studying of literature around, or towards, that certain lushness, excessiveness, and acute feeling?

I examine the erotic aesthetic of the queer diasporic subject, as such is framed by theoretical readings by Gayatri Gopinath, Joshua Chambers-Letson, José Esteban Muñoz, and others. I seek to describe a queer of colour, “Third World,” Asian diasporic identity formation through the sense of intimacy that the

“erotic” describes. As Lyndon Gill and Keguro Macharia note, Lorde’s “The Uses of the Erotic” is rarely discussed alongside its historical context—but that context is useful.¹ In *Frottage*, Macharia argues that a turn to Lorde is *particularly* significant in works that address or contain diaspora; Lorde’s “work moves so purposefully against the U.S.-focus of much U.S. scholarship, always critiquing U.S. nation and empire” (Macharia 53). She models “how to read across geohistories, across difference, toward *freedom*” (Macharia 53 emphasis added). Macharia shows us that implicit in Lorde’s erotic are values of decolonisation and Third Worldism. And, indeed, Chambers-Letson’s aforementioned concern with freedom echoes Lorde’s.

The unique aesthetic of queer diaspora is encompassed by personal *lifewriting*: that genre of text that encompasses memoirs, autobiographies, and personal essays. This thesis defends the notion that the literary is a “place where the theoretical happens,” drawing from Barbara Christian’s *The Race for Theory*—that the literary is not *just* an exemplification of the theoretical (Barbara Christian & Kevin Quashie).² In literary study, lifewriting recalls the genre of the *bildungsroman*, the normative or typical category of stories of “straight” psychological growth of the young subject. Drawing from Pin-chia Feng and Lily Kip, I challenge or queer the *bildungsroman* type, dislocating it from its original definition as a “linear progression toward knowledge,” instead accounting for the nonlinearity of queer temporalities (Kip 3-4).³ Not *every* piece of

¹ Macharia cites Gill’s “In the Realm of Our Lorde.”

² In *The Race for Theory*, Christian writes, “for people of color have always theorized — but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic... often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in ...” (52).

And yet, also, there are so many works of theory I wish to pay homage to, like Mitzi Myers’s explanation that “linking pupil [child] and teacher [adult]... helps us to comprehend fictional pedagogy as relational and rehabilitative;” like Eve Sedgwick’s defence of the centring of youth, that deaths of queer youth are the “motive” for “everyone who does gay and lesbian studies;” like Mary Zaborskis’s support for the connection between abstract/actual youthhood and queer studies; like Robin Bernstein’s theory that the child is a site of racialised innocence that reproduces racial difference; like Gayle Salamon, Sara Ahmed, Joshua Chambers-Letson ... and so on.

³ Kip in turn cites Pin-chia Feng.

lifewriting falls into the category of typical *bildungsroman*, but maybe all *queer* narratives that invoke the first-person are “queer” *bildungsroman*.⁴

What I mean by the “diasporic subject” is how Sara Ahmed explains that term in *Queer Phenomenology*, another one of the foundational theoretical texts for this work. To her, for one to be “orientated” means one “feel[s] at home,” “know[s] where one stands, or [has] certain objects within reach” (Ahmed). To be *disorientated* then means to *not* feel at home, to instead feel “out of place;” *diaspora* continuously conjures up that concept of *disorientation*, of not knowing where home is. Ahmed writes about a “migrant orientation” in which diasporic subjects are orientated twofold: “toward a home that has been lost, *and* to a place that is not yet home” (emphasis added). This question of diasporic identity is integral to queerness for multiple reasons. Queerness also challenges notions of “the home,” by offering nonnormative familial structures and life pathways. Moreover, we see that Ahmed argues for a queer orientation that disrupts normative phenomenology, and thus understandings of spatial existence. Queer (of colour)ness can be conceptualised as a way of extension in the world, which relates to the significance of diasporic aesthetic practices. To Ahmed, the formation of diasporic identity is inherently “queer.”

Diaspora literally means a collective uprooting and dispersion of a people or community; personally, to me, diaspora means family members who were displaced from Punjab, India, Pakistan, shuttled to England, married in America. Ahmed’s book speaks to me because she shares my specific diasporic background; she locates a proximity to “whiteness” in her home, a certain *orientation* towards

⁴ Eve Sedgwick offers a compelling definition of what “queer” means. She writes that academic and scholarly work use queer to refer not just to same-sex sexual choice but also to, generally, vaguely, an “open mesh of possibilities.” Things like “gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”

As an aside: If we understand *the queer* to be located in places other than simply same-sex attraction, we risk invalidating the significance of that same-sex attraction. Sedgwick warns us that we cannot fall prey to displacing *queer* from the term’s original, “definitional” centre of true same-sex sexual desire—that doing so would “dematerialise” any possibility of queerness itself (from “Queer and Now”).

England, acknowledging that England was a “point beyond [her] dwelling and yet also a point *within* that dwelling” (Ahmed 147). I use this example to demonstrate that questions of diaspora are rich phenomenologically, epistemologically, and aesthetically—Ahmed shows us that objects in the diasporic home “make new identities possible,” to keep the “impressions of the past alive” (Ahmed 150).

A personally inflected iteration of diaspora can be mobilised to think expansively about the terms of diasporic (dis)orientation. The thesis engages artwork of the diaspora, drawing from Gayatri Gopinath’s queer of colour scholarship on the “aesthetic practices of queer diaspora.” In the introduction of her book *Unruly Visions*, Gopinath writes that her scholarship is “an act of queer curation that seeks to reveal not coevalness or sameness but rather the co-implication and radical relationality of seemingly disparate racial formations, geographies, temporalities, and colonial and postcolonial histories of displacement and dwelling” (Gopinath 4). This resonates with me. In sum, though my entryway into diasporic aesthetic practices is Punjabi, British, Sikh, South Asian, this thesis explores aesthetic practices (in other words, the lifewriting) of multiple Third World diasporas, in the way Gopinath’s book does.

I connect the queer and the diasporic via the temporal. Intuitively, theoretically, this connection holds; notions of the queer and notions of the diasporic both invoke nostalgia. In other words, a longing for a specific, disrupted connection to the past is the juncture between the critical notions of queer and diasporic. Generally, I read queer diasporic artwork as turns towards the past. The queer exists in the Third World past; the queer is *borne out of* the Third World past. As Ahmed shows us, queerness disrupts family genealogies and backwards orientations. Drawing from Elisabeth Windle’s dissertation, “queer nostalgia designates, on the one hand, specific kinds of nostalgic feeling for the queer past and, on the other hand, nostalgia’s own theoretical, temporal, and formal queerness” (Windle 7). Thus, the postcolonial diasporic subject might have a tendency for nostalgia towards an absent precolonial past. In sum, I view queer of colour identity formation through the terms of family and nation, examining the mutually contaminating aspects of these concepts.

Take, for example, the Sikh “scripture” *B40 Janamsakhi*, which literally translates as “birth story” from the original text in Punjabi.⁵ The text is an eighteenth-century manuscript (with accompanying illustrations—see following page) that describes Guru Nanak’s encounter with a queer, cross-dressing, perhaps non-binary or gender-non-conforming person.

⁵ From a Sikh website, sarbat.net, which itself draws from *The B40 Janamsakhi, an English Translation* edited by W. H. McLeod (1979).

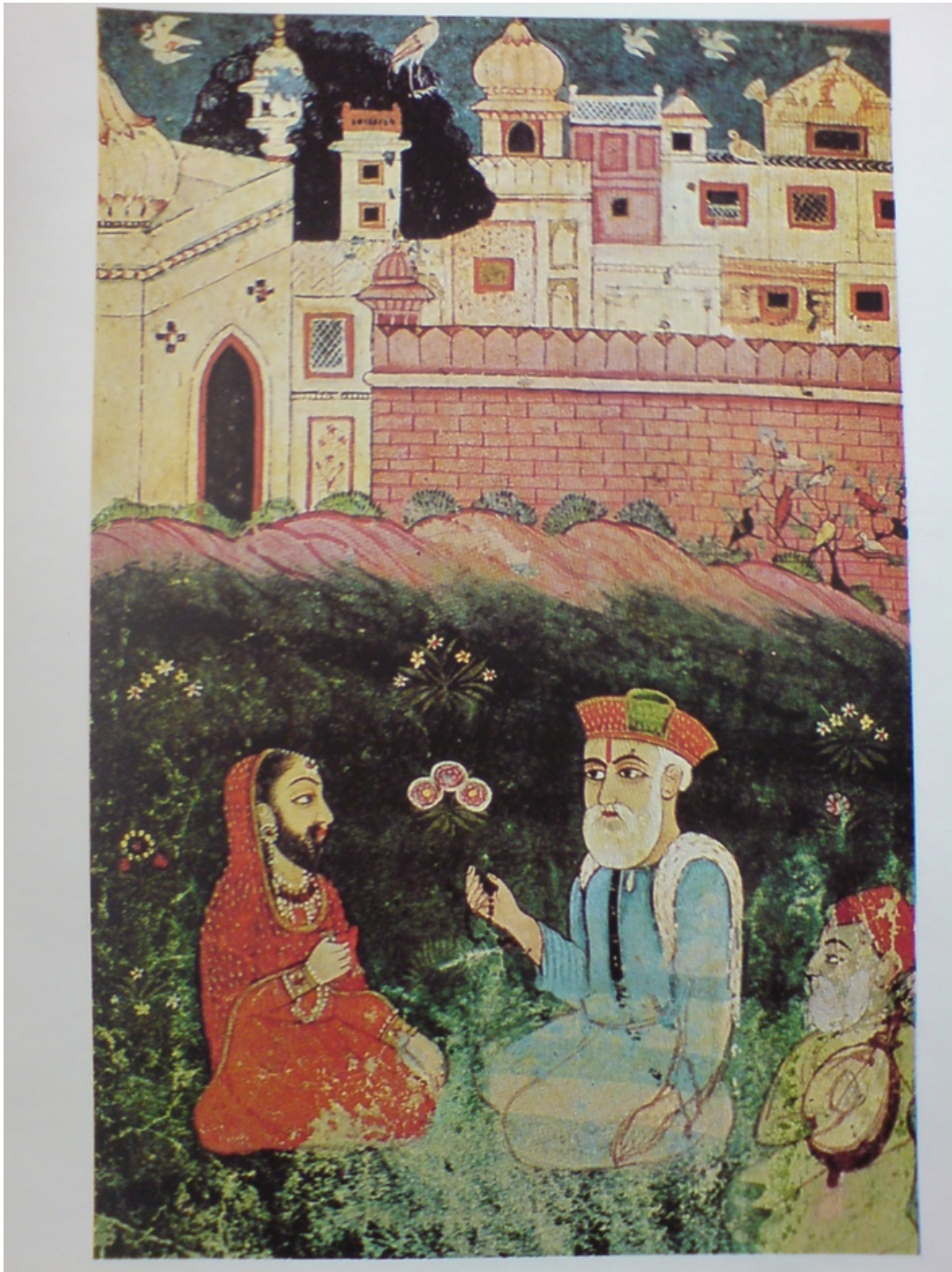


Figure 1.1 - Guru Nanak with the Sheikh⁵

Guru Nanak meets with Sheikh Sharaf, a person referred to as a man wearing “the sixteen adornments [that a woman traditionally applied to herself in order to attract her lover]... female garments and... all manner of jewellery.” The Janamsakhi continues to describe the distinctly feminine attributes of the man—“to his eyes he had applied black eye-shadow and his hands he had stained red with henna”—and also the literal feminine performance of the Sheikh, that “he sang ghazals in the bazaar and drew enormous crowds.” Within the scripture—itself a literary and visual work of art—the Sheikh’s genderplay is framed as performance. Setting aside any specificities in language that might be lost to translation, notice the vivid descriptions of the Sheikh applying his feminine body décor, and the feminine quality of his singing. Nanak as a character here repositions the genderplay as performance, and performance as uniquely divine. Nanak says, “It is Truth that [He, the Divine] seeks and adoring love that He desires... Whatever He desires, that He performs. But you sing ghazals—sing something for us.” Nanak’s pivot from religious language to an entreaty of performance is an acknowledgment that performance is inherent to the genderqueer subject’s humanity.

In the accompanying painting, too, I read a similar queer acceptance and love; surrounded by life and nature—foliage, flowers, birds—Nanak is depicted in the midst of a praying, accepting, motion. Notice his palm pointed inwards. This recalls communication commonly associated with the Punjabi phrase *qubool a*, translating literally to, “I accept.”

The fields of postcolonial studies and subaltern studies have taken an interest in the Indian Bhakti corpus, and I draw from that body of works to read alongside the Janamsakhi. The Bhakti works are medieval Hindu literatures—written in 10th-century South India, in a distinctly Hindu context. In one Bhakti poem from a collection entitled *Men Women and Saints*, Saint Devara Dasimayya writes,

If they see breasts and long hair coming,
they call it woman,
If beard and whiskers,
They call it man:

But, look, the self that hovers in between
Is neither man nor woman
O Ramanatha

(Saint Devara Dasimayya)⁶

Once again—while the specificity of the language might still be lost to translation—we can still read that similarly, a South Asian artist asserts gender-non-conformation as divine. The nonbinary subject is “neither man nor woman,” and Dasimayya associates that “self” with the divine “Ramanatha.” Ramanatha, or the Lord of Rama, is Shiva, a central god in Hinduism. The nonbinary subject is “the self that hovers in between.” In between what, though, exactly? Dasimayya does not specify; perhaps between “man and woman,” or masculinity and femininity, but perhaps too between material and immaterial, physical and spiritual, pornographic and erotic; we do not know. They are transitory, “coming” and going, “hover[ing];” *hovering* itself is amorphous, immaterial, shifty. The nonbinary subject is not on solid ground.

This poem invokes the visual, too, even if it lacks the illustration of the Sikh work. “If they see...But, look, ...” (emphasis added). We do not need an accompanying image to see that the nonbinary subject recalls Sheikh Sharaf’s genderqueer embodying. The poem does not describe the non-conforming’s attire, or henna, or jewellery, but we can read what we know about the nonbinary—their “hover”—as similar to the performance from B40 Janamsakhi. And subtly, the unnamed viewer in the poem is “they”—Dasimayya de-genders the world of generic viewers, much like the general “crowds” that come to listen to and see Sheikh Sharaf.

So, why cite and connect these two temporally and religiously disparate examples? Both promote—or relegate—the genderqueer to the highest caste in old South Asia: the divine. Yet we know that South Asian genderqueer communities like Indian Hindu and Muslim *hijras* and Pakistani *khusras* are marginalised now, socio-politically. They are “heckled, harassed, and assaulted” (Gettleman). While Indian *hijras* recall Sheikh Sharaf’s embodiment, Dasimayya’s poem was correct, too: *hijras* “hover,” in that they

⁶ Translation by A.K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Shiva*, page 110.

occupy a uniquely liminal space in India. They are still associated with the divine, the spiritual—“many Indians [today] believe hijras have the power to bless or curse”—but they simultaneously exist at the margins of Indian society (Gettleman).

Notably, the texts by Guru Nanak and Saint Devara Dasimayya suggest to us that (gender)queerness was folded into the fabric of *multiple* religious consciousnesses in premodern South Asia.⁷ I offer these examples to pay homage to premodern South Asia, even as I read contemporary, secular artwork later; the connections between aesthetics and social realities exemplify the type of work that I do in the thesis. Also, my readings could offer that perhaps South Asian diasporic, queer performance is always orientated back towards Nanak and Dasimayya.

This claim about orientation is legible in Shyam Selvadurai’s 1994 novel *Funny Boy*. The book is contemporary, queer, diasporic, first-person lifewriting. In the first chapter of the book—really, the first few pages—Selvadurai describes a scene that recalls the B40 Janamsakhi and the Saint Devara Dasimayya poem:

Of all our varied and fascinating games, bride-bride was my favorite... For me the culmination of this game, and my ultimate moment of joy, was when I put on the clothes of the bride. In the late afternoon, usually after tea, I, along with the older girl cousins, would enter Janaki’s room. From my sling-bag I would bring out my most prized possession, an old white sari, slightly yellow with age, its border torn and missing most of its sequins. The dressing of the bride would now begin, and then, by the transfiguration I saw taking place in Janaki’s cracked full-length mirror—by the sari being wrapped around my body, the veil being pinned to my head, the rouge put on my cheeks, lipstick on my lips, kohl around my eyes—I was able to leave the constraints of my self and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self, a self to whom this day was dedicated, and around whom the world, represented by my cousins putting flowers in my hair, draping the palu, seemed to revolve. It was a self magnified, like the goddesses of the Sinhalese and Tamil cinema, larger than life; and like them, like the Malini Fonsekas and the Geetha Kumarasinghes, I was an icon, a graceful, benevolent, perfect being upon whom the adoring eyes of the world rested.

(Selvadurai Ch. 1)⁸

⁷ This claim does not hinge on these two examples; for a robust discussion of queerness in medieval South Asia, see Ruth Vanita’s *Same-Sex Love in India* (2000).

⁸ I did not have access to a physical copy of *Funny Boy*, so citations here and throughout refer to chapter numbers.

The similarities are uncanny. Arjie, Selvadurai's man- or boy-identified speaker, dresses up as a typical South Asian bride, with those same black and red colours that Guru Nanak described. And he transcends boundaries of visual maleness and visual femaleness, just as Dasimayya's gender-neutral subject does. I say *transcends* because Selvadurai does, too: Arjie was "able to leave the constraints of [his] *self* and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful *self*..." Selvadurai seems to speak directly in response to Dasimayya. Just as they do on the hovering self of Dasimayya's poem, the "eyes of the world" rest on Arjie. And, finally, Arjie compares himself to the "goddesses of the Sinhalese." He does not merely *look like them*. He *himself*, in performance, in dress, "[is] an icon, a graceful, benevolent, perfect being:" he embodies the divine, in the same way that the nonbinary subjects of the Janamsakhi and the Dasimayya poem do, as well.

I do not know whether Selvadurai knew about the Janamsakhi or the poem by Saint Devara Dasimayya. I draw from this example, though, to provide one piece of evidence that our hypothesis about the temporal orientation of queer diasporic art might indeed be *backwards*, back towards a mystical, divine, Third World queer utopia. Another piece of evidence is personal—that my own genderqueerness has been marked by my reading about *hijras* and *khusras* and Guru Nanak and Saint Devara Dasimayya, that my own performance in gender is orientated towards the divine, the Third World past.

The descriptions of cross-dressing in these three works resonate with Jose Esteban Muñoz's glossing of gender performance in *Cruising Utopia*. Muñoz writes that "queer theory has made one lesson explicitly clear: the set of behaviours and codes of conduct that we refer to as feminine or masculine are not slaves to the biological" (Muñoz 76). Many contemporary drag performers, Muñoz notes, make no attempt to hide their "biological maleness," and instead opt to perform in ways that present "a unique cohabitation of traditional female and male traits" (Muñoz 76). To Muñoz, this gender-nonconformity is a performance of "hybrid gender" and works "not only to be queer but to defy troubling gender logics within gay space" (Muñoz 76). It is interesting that what Muñoz reads in present-day drag performers can be read in these

disparate pieces, the ancient ones especially; notice how the Sheikh's face is unshaven, how he wears that emblem of biological maleness *while* he adorns himself with markers of femininity.

The temporal—that connector between queer and diasporic—also does important work in these South Asian pieces.⁹ Queer speakers resist normative conceptions of temporality in their artwork, and the temporal connects to the notion of the natural. In Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen's "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?" the authors write that society "denaturalise[s] the kind of 'sex' that lies at the centre of deployments of sexuality" (Luciano & Chen 185). If we operate through that same "queer theoretical insistence," we can posit that artists utilise invocations of temporality to reject this denaturalisation of queer sexual encounters (Luciano & Chen 185). In that essay, the relationship between temporality and naturality is established through the image of the boulder. Luciano and Chen write that "stone's time ... is not our own," or in other words, that a material object like the "stone" might be presumed to exist in a temporally distinct space from an animal object, like the "body" (Luciano & Chen 185). However, they complicate this argument by positing that the boulder, just like the body, is actually "temporary," *even if* a boulder's duration "may be millions of years," or on a much larger scale than the body's (Luciano & Chen 185). Through this reference to materiality and animality, their essay demonstrates that ambiguities and multiplicities of temporality especially with respect to queerness obscure what we might normally think of as a "clear division between the natural world and the human body" (Luciano & Chen 185).

I encountered this phenomenon first in works by Essex Hemphill and Audre Lorde, wherein those authors recount queer sexual encounters in a way that resists linear, normative conceptions of time, instead embodying Luciano and Chen's multiple durations and temporalities. Through temporal moves, the authors exemplify the "brown commons" (Luciano & Chen 192). Hemphill's sexual teasing in *Ceremonies* and Lorde's interwoven scenes in *Zami* are multiplications of subjectivities across time that embrace an "impulse

⁹ I draw here from an essay I wrote for Professor Quashie's Readings in Black and Queer course.

to move beyond the singular and individualised subjectivities,” something that the essayists assert is “defiantly queer” (Luciano & Chen 192).¹⁰

Invoking Luciano and Chen would ask us to read the gestures of nature in these pieces as gestures towards temporality—again, because symbols of nature are dually timeless and temporary (Luciano & Chen 185). In *Funny Boy*, the “flowers in [Arjie’s] hair” invoke the natural, also recalling the nature present in Guru Nanak’s picture in the Janamsakhi, *as well as* the physical-spiritual liminality of Dasimayya’s poetry, too. In these works of art, naturality works alongside temporal shifts to establish queer subjectivity as operating outside normative, teleological conceptions of time.¹¹ And the complicatedness of the natural-temporal contributes to a queer lushness in the aesthetic of these pieces.

What I do not mean to do with this introduction is argue for a simplistic/reductionist nostalgia for a simpler, peaceful, utopian precolonial past. While it may be true that colonialism brought European homophobia to the subcontinent, that political truth is not the focus of this thesis. The West has a tendency to misread non-Western genders and sexualities as hyper-conservative or, alternately, hyper-primitive (Massad 361). Again, I do not mean to reup that misreading; rather, I wish to offer some examples of that queer, Third World diasporic aesthetic that Gopinath writes of. In sum, I draw from Nanak and Dasimayya

¹⁰ In *Ceremonies*, Hemphill utilises temporal shifts when his speaker describes his first sexual encounter. In *Zami*, Lorde uses temporal shifts triggered vis-à-vis a queer sexual encounter to enable access to the speaker’s feelings towards love.

¹¹ There are many other works that contribute to my understanding of queer temporality. José Esteban Muñoz’s definition of *queer* in *Cruising Utopia* invokes the critical concept of temporality by using the aesthetic to make claims about “queer time.” He interprets the instances of queer, “deeper introspection” in the poem as moments of “queer relational bliss.” Muñoz interprets the blissfulness as a “stepping out of the linearity of straight time.” To him, straight time is a “self-naturalising temporality,” one with a phenomenology that “needs to be questioned” (Muñoz 25). For both Muñoz and Lorde, “moments of queer relational bliss are viewed as having the ability to *rewrite a larger map of everyday life*,” disrupting “straight” temporalities. Indeed, Muñoz goes on to assert that queer as utopian horizon is “a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold [i.e., straight time] is interrupted or stepped out of... [in other words,] during moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one’s past, present, or future” (Muñoz 32).

not to make political claims but to establish as an introduction that there might be an intimate lushness and excessiveness of queer, diasporic texts, one that extends back towards an Asia prior to today's.¹²

In this work, I draw from Gary Wilder's text *Freedom Time* about decolonial movements for a methodology of studying. In the introduction of that piece, Wilder writes that writing becomes "a space for thinking" or even a "form of thinking"—in other words, its own way of "know[ing]"—when we allow ourselves to research in an unstructured manner (Wilder 132). Specifically, his book articulates arguments that are "against-the-grain," and he posits that an unstructured research approach *facilitates* the uniqueness of his points. He "did not presuppose [his] object of study," nor did he "undertake systematic research on a defined topic;" instead, he connected works whose connections were themselves non-self-evident. Like the three examples I drew on, his examples are largely "between disparate times and places, and between texts and topics" (Wilder 133). I replicate that manner of thinking, to break loose or free from a mechanical approach to thinking, studying, working. Wilder goes on to note that he was not interested in "proving anything," only to "define new questions and offer reflections that might prove helpful to others interested in related topics, periods, and problems" (Wilder 133). He was using writing *as a way to discover what he was thinking*, and I think this free-spiritedness, this inclination to use writing as a way of knowing, is so reminiscent of the Lordean erotic. The sources I draw from in the pages that follow are similarly disparate and I attempt to draw connections that might be baseless or theoretically problematic—but offer reflections that prove helpful to the rest of my thesis or to others interested in similar ideas (Wilder 133). And, as mentioned, Wilder's piece is decolonial in theme; perhaps there is something about work that studies

¹² A turn towards the specific realities of South Asian queer diaspora and nation-formation might be appropriate here. Drawing from Jessica Hinchy's *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India*, we learn that while the logics of European colonialism and imperialism certainly did have a negative impact on queer life in the Third World—"historians Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai suggest that the colonial period [in South Asia] saw the importation of colonial 'homophobia' into Indian society"—not all Indian injustices can be blamed on the British (11). We know that there were "multidirectional interactions between the metropole and its colonies," that, for example, the anti-Hijra, anti-gender-queer campaign in India was shaped by both colonial officials and imperial preoccupations; in other words, not simply a "product of imported metropolitan sexual morality" (Hinchy 11). This is important to recognise because queer brown diaspora is thus not *just* a backwards orientation towards a nostalgia for pre-colonial life.

colonialism and question's colonialism's power that renders it particularly accommodating to against-the-grain methodology, too.

While this thesis covers the aforementioned broad critical terms of family, excess, queer, nation, diaspora, brownness, and Asianness, I focus in the body chapters on the specific literary motif of the relationship between the young diasporic queer subject and their mother. I think through that dynamic in queer of colour texts, examining three distinct scenes of the mother-son or mother-child relationship. There is something specific about the depiction of the queer boy-child and their relationship to their mother that I wish to scrutinise. First, I examine the opening of Hilton Als's *The Woman*, to suggest a certain excessiveness of queer of colour writing about the mother-child relationship. Next, I use two texts—*Funny Boy* and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*—to make claims about the concepts at stake in this mother-child dyad.

introducing the mother-(queer) child form

and other notes on national belonging from *Funny Boy*

Until the end, my mother never discussed her way of being. She avoided explaining the impetus behind her emigration from Barbados to Manhattan. She avoided explaining that she had not been motivated by the same desire for personal gain and opportunity that drove most female immigrants. She avoided recounting the fact that she had emigrated to America to follow the man who eventually became my father, and whom she had known in his previous incarnation... She avoided... She avoided mentioning that she saw and understood where my fascination with certain aspects of her narrative—her emigration, her love, her kindness—would take me, a boy of seven, or eight, or ten: to the dark crawl space behind her closet, where I put on her hosiery one leg at a time, my heart racing, and over those hose, my jeans and sneakers, so that I could have her—what I so admired and coveted—near me, always.

Hilton Als, *The Women*, pages 3-6¹³

~

My first introduction to the possibility of the *mother – (queer) child* form's unique aesthetic existence was Hilton Als's *The Women*. The first chapter of that book starts with a focus on the queer narrator's mother. Als's continued repetition of the sentence structure of "She avoided... She avoided... She avoided..." in that first section struck me; it begins to define the mother figure in the story in terms of negative space, the things she "avoided" doing. The narration emanates paradox, that the speaker should be now mature enough to understand his mother in terms of what she avoided explaining when he was a child. The multiplicity of temporalities here—the present-day speaker who speaks of the "boy of seven, or eight, or ten," keeping his mother close "always," the mother's "way of being" introduced as nonspecific, amorphously occurring "until the end"—recalls my discussion of queer temporalities employed by Lorde and Hemphill. Indeed, the lushness of those texts, those texts which figure on scenes of queer desire and sexual encounter, resonates with the excessiveness of the writing; but Als's speaker "so admired and coveted" his *mother*, not a sexual partner.

The description of the narrator's experience with crossdressing is significant—first, of course, for the basic way it duplicates the images of queer cross-dressing we encountered with the three examples I

¹³ This quote, stitched-together, spans a few pages in Als's text; I wish I could include the entire section. My intention is to preserve some of the aesthetic meaningfulness of the construction of those pages.

have already cited. Also, though, notice how the narrator uses his mother's hosiery to keep his mother close to him, close to his physical body. He dresses femininity for himself, only to re-dress masculinity "over those hose." The cross-dressing is not about presenting to the world but is instead an aspect of interpersonal encounter between the speaker and his mother—indeed, she "saw and understood." Again, there is an eroticism here; the covertness of the cross-dressing performance, its hiddenness (his mother "avoided mentioning" it), and the "racing" heart of the speaker all work to suggest this scene as an erotic encounter between mother and child.

When I encountered *The Women* I was compelled by that mother-(queer) child bond, by the stylishness through which it was depicted by Als, its meaningfulness in terms of aesthetics, performativity, and ideology. I understood Als's work through my own life, my own identification with my mother and the feminine adornments in her own closet, objects that I felt could keep me close to her. Also, I came to learn about Hortense Spillers's scholarship, and how one could read Als through Spillers—showing us that in the instance of transatlantic slavery, the child follows the conditions of the mother.¹⁴

The analysis that follows is informed by psychoanalytic theory and draws from other theoretical thought, like Gopinath, Ahmed, and others. In his chapter about artwork relating to (heterosexual mothers) mothering queer Black children and other queer children of colour, Chambers-Letson writes the following:

Take the famous example of the Moynihan report, where a black mother's relationship to her child is described as the root of blackness's inherent social pathology and lack of development. While this is particularly true for black mothers, this logic extends (in differential ways) toward brown, Asian, and indigenous mothers. And it is especially so for the racialised mother whose child turns out to be queer or trans. She is either blamed for making the child *like that* or blamed for not disavowing the child fast enough when the child is.

(Chambers-Letson 84)

Chambers-Letson makes clear two things. First, the mother's relationship to the queer child is a productive scene or concept of study. Second, drawing, cautiously, across queer of colour traditions in the way he does

¹⁴ See "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" by Hortense Spillers.

is a valid mode of analysis. Als invokes a specific mother - queer child aesthetic in *The Women* that is perhaps reflective of social-political realities.

To theorise about that mother-child dyad in this section, I contend that the relationship between a young queer subject and their mother is a specific literary “form,” drawing from Caroline Levine’s work on form-reading. To quickly summarise, Levine writes that *forms* call for a new account of “politics” and also a renewed understanding “of the relations between politics and literature” (Levine 2). In line with my goal of connecting readings of queer literature to social and political ideas, Levine shows us that forms are that connective tissue. I mean that the “form” of the *mother – (queer) child relationship* is more than just some Platonic immaterial idea; it is a *pattern of repetition* that travels across aesthetic and social worlds (Levine 5). Forms have “never belonged only to the discourse of aesthetics,” but we can locate forms within the aesthetic world (Levine 2).

One could argue that a reliance on form works *against* queer theory or scholarship on queerness. The idea of form, of a structure, seems an antithesis to queer, because “we have tended to assume that political forms are powerful, all-encompassing, and usually simple in themselves” (Levine 9). If we over-rely on “patterns of repetition” we might work against “key terms [such] as liminality... hybridity, and passing,” terms that might apply to queer theory (Levine 9). Queerness’s bent is, in some ways, a rejection of durable structures and binaries (Levine 9). But Levine argues that regardless, “it is impossible to imagine a society altogether free of organising principles” (Levine 9). Because literature “is not made of the material world it describes or invokes” but is instead constructed with language, literature always consists of its own forms (Levine 10). In sum, Levine’s new “formalism” is productive because it allows us to examine texts “beyond the practice of reading aesthetic forms as indexes of social life” (Levine 22). We do not have to presume that literary forms cause social forms; we also do not have to presume that social forms pre-exist

literary instantiations of them. Instead, we can examine the mutual affect that each world has on the other (Levine 22).

I argue for the existence of the *mother – (queer) child* form by investigating its appearance in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*. What are the component concepts of the mother-child idiom as a queer-forming or queer-alighting dyad? And, using Levine's formalism, how does the mother-child form assert itself in the text, even as it pushes up against the form of narrative?¹⁵

First, psychoanalysis is significant to our discussion of the mother-child dyad. Theories borne out of Freud and Lacan's work help to describe the "child's passage into subjectivity," a concept central to the mother-child relationship. Additionally, psychoanalysis allows us to establish a baseline, normative understanding of relationships between parents and their children—and therefore highlight the queer-alighting aspects of how those relationships are depicted in *Funny Boy*. Specifically, I wish to focus on Lacan's theory that "gender differentiations of the surrounding culture are actually instilled in the child, that they are culturally specific and conveyed rather than 'natural'" (Hall 105). The cultural specificity of gender differentiation resonates with my framing of genderqueerness in South Asian and postcolonial diaspora.¹⁶

I am interested in Gayatri Gopinath's conception of how postcolonial queer diaspora disrupts normative psychoanalytic descriptions of the parent-child dyad, from the introduction of *Impossible Desires*:

The oedipal relation between fathers and sons serves as a central and recurring feature within diasporic narratives and becomes a metaphor for the contradictions of sameness and difference that,

¹⁵ When Levine discusses the gender binary as a form, she uses Thomas Hughes's novel *Tom Brown's Schooldays* as an example of an instantiation of a social form in a work of art (Levine 14-15). She writes that the significance of this practice—of identifying social-political forms in literature—is that *the text shows us what happens when narrative form encounters the gender binary*, and, further, how the two "operate together" (Levine 16). At some level Levine rejects authorial agency; that is, author's intentions are not centred in Levine's mode of analysis. Instead, she is interested more in what happens when forms meet, how each strives to impose order on another.

¹⁶ I point to Dorothy Smith, who writes about the "SNAF" unit, or the "Standard North American Family," as the ideal against which many mother-child relationships are judged. The "SNAF" mother is "cisgender, middle-class, heterosexual, married, non-primary-breadwinner, traditional" (Smith 50). And, they are key to the reproduction of "patriarchal, capitalist society" (Smith 50).

as Stuart Hall has shown, characterize competing definitions of diasporic subjectivity. For Freud, the oedipal drama explains the consolidation of proper gender identification and heterosexual object choice in little boys, as masculine identification with the father is made while feminine identification with the mother is refused. In his 1952 work *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon resituates the oedipal scenario in the colonial context and shows how, for racialized male subjects, the process whereby the little boy learns to identify with the father and desire the mother is disrupted and disturbed by the (black) father's lack of access to social power. Fanon's analysis, which I engage with more fully in chapter 3, makes evident the inadequacy of the Oedipus complex in explaining the construction of gendered subjectivity within colonial and postcolonial regimes of power. While I am interested in identifying how queer diasporic texts follow Fanon in reworking the notion of oedipality in relation to racialized masculinities, I also ask what alternative narratives emerge when this story of oedipality is jettisoned altogether.

(Gopinath 5)

If the Oedipus complex is inadequate in “explaining the construction of gendered subjectivity within colonial and postcolonial regimes of power,” does this apply to *Funny Boy*? I ask whether Gopinath's framing of a queering of Oedipus—or an altogether “jettison” of oedipality—is a productive lens to read the novel. In other words, does Gopinath's insight make it possible to shift focus from father-son to mother-son?

In Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*—the 1994 queer coming-of-age lifewriting novel that won the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Fiction—we follow Arjie, a young boy who grows into his queerness and sense of national belonging from ages seven to fourteen. Arjie is a Tamilian living in Sri Lanka during the riots of the 1980s. He, ostensibly, is a queer boy (of both sexuality and gender); the novel does not name him as gender non-binary or identifiably genderqueer, but he plays with crossdressing and femininity, and goes on to engage in queer sex with another boy as the novel progresses. Selvadurai invokes the *mother – (queer) child* form throughout the story and he specifically uses the form to track Arjie's growing-into queer becoming. In other words, Selvadurai inextricably associates Arjie's queer identity with the unusually strong bond between him and his mother. Sandeep Bakshi notes that Arjie's close bond with his mother “highlights the identification of the queer subject with the subjects of patriarchal subordination” (Bakshi).

We are first introduced to the *mother – (queer) child* form in *Funny Boy* through depictions of the relationship Arjie and his mother have had throughout Arjie's growing life. Arjie's father blames Arjie's

development of “funniness”—a colloquial term for his queerness—on Amma. Arjie’s father says that Amma always “spoil[s] him and encourage[s] all his nonsense,” and points to the fact that Amma “allows [Arjie] to come in [to her bedroom] while [she is] dressing,” and lets him “play” with her jewellery (Selvadurai Ch.1). From these initial few interactions, norms about the relationship between a queer boy-child and their heterosexual parents are established. As Gopinath notes, “Arjie’s father reads Arjie’s cross-gender identification as unnatural and perverse” (Gopinath 171). In other words, Arjie’s father is convinced of the unnaturalness of Arjie’s “funniness.” Arjie’s father’s use of “nonsense” resonates with the negative connotation of the novel’s title, of Arjie as negatively “funny” or other (Selvadurai Ch.1). But Arjie’s mother is less sure of the perversion inherent in Arjie’s genderplay; it is *through* Amma that we see a glimpse of the illogical impossibility of gender-nonconformity. Amma allows the genderplay and is also unable to logically explain to Arjie why he should conform to gender roles. When Arjie asks Amma to “explain why he can no longer watch her dress or play with the girls,” Amma “resorts to a childhood nursery rhyme” (Gopinath 171). Amma says to Arjie, “Because the sky is so high and pigs can’t fly, that’s why” (Selvadurai Ch.1). So, we see that Amma—while unable to actually resist these roles—actually suggests there is something “nonsensical” about rigid gender roles (Gopinath 172). The juxtaposition of Arjie’s father’s seriousness of the “perversion” of genderplay with Arjie’s mother’s use of a rhyme to explain that perversion emphasises her own unconvinced stance towards the issue. Importantly, this first chapter of the novel is named “Pigs Can’t Fly,” and *Funny Boy* is dedicated to Selvadurai’s parents, “for believing that pigs can fly” (Selvadurai Dedication). With this repetition, Selvadurai nods not only to the illogical impossibility inherent in gender-nonconformity but also *centres* the relationship between Amma and Arjie as central to this nonconformity.

While I agree with Gopinath’s reading of Amma’s nursery rhyme, I am also interested in what Amma’s answer tells us about the mother-child dyad. We can glean from this particular example that there might be certain “rules” or logics to the mother-child relationship. That is, within the gaze of the patriarchy,

there exists a slightly acceptable version of the mother and queer son relationship—one that is acceptable *so long as* its performances do not pass a certain threshold. Arjie is allowed to watch Amma dress but only up until a certain point; the performance has to go unacknowledged. In this instance, it is Arjie’s father’s noticing of the “funniness” of Arjie and Amma’s relationship (of Arjie’s queer performance of identifying with his mother) that forces Amma to intervene and stop Arjie.¹⁷ Chambers-Letson’s explicit discussion of the role of “cis-heteropatriarchy” is helpful here:

When the mother has the responsibility to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it, her primary task is the reproduction of the dominant conditions of reproduction secured by cis-heteropatriarchy. She is supposed to reproduce children who will grow up to be productive workers, but above all else her children are supposed to grow up to be heterosexual mothers and fathers in their own stead.

(Chambers-Letson 111)

Using Chambers-Letson, we might posit that Arjie’s father’s anxiety around Arjie’s funniness is actually a fear that he will not grow up to be a heterosexual father and a “productive worker.”¹⁸

Another component concept of the *mother-(queer) child* form that is depicted in *Funny Boy* is heightened communication abilities between a queer child and their mother. Selvadurai associates exaggerated communication between Arjie and Amma with the supernatural, emphasising the uniqueness of their ability to understand one another.

In the beginning section of the story, we do not know exactly how old Arjie is, but he is certainly *very* young: he plays with children who are younger than ten years old. Arjie demonstrates an unspoken understanding of his mother’s intentions from this impossibly young age. In one instance, Arjie narrates that “from the tender expression on her face,” he could tell his mother was “really worried” (Selvadurai Ch.1).

¹⁷ Notice how the “lack of acknowledgment” of Arjie’s performance resonates with Als’s speaker’s mother. It is not that the mother did not see or understand the gender performativity and the boy-child’s identification with her; rather, it is that the mother has to “avoid mentioning” it (Als 5-6).

¹⁸ For further discussion of labour and work, see the “epilogue” section as well as works by Chambers-Letson and Muñoz.

This could be read as normal for a child, of course, though again, Arjie is quite young to be reading expressions in this complex way. One might argue also that an *older* Arjie, the speaker of the novel, is offering his insight into the details the younger Arjie gleans from the scene when it takes place.

What makes the communication between Arjie and Amma most relevant and striking is that Arjie does not “read” people *other than his mother*. For example, when Neliya Auntie and Amma are about to discuss the circumstances regarding Daryl’s disappearance, Arjie narrates that Neliya Auntie “glanced at Amma inquiringly, but Amma closed her eyes slowly to warn Neliya Auntie not to say anything, that she would tell her later” (Selvadurai Ch.4). The uniqueness of Arjie’s “reading” to Amma’s internal mental and emotional state—specifically, in tandem with the complexity with which he is able to understand that state—highlight the significance of this skill. Simply by watching her close “her eyes slowly,” Arjie understands the depth of Amma’s intentions. We learn not only that Amma would rather not speak about Daryl, but that she wanted Neliya to *not* speak, *and* “that she would tell [Neliya] later” (Selvadurai Ch.4).

The communication between Arjie and Amma is described further in an even more dramatic way; Selvadurai’s language associates the communicative aspects of their relationship with the supernatural. After Daryl’s death, when Arjie’s father returns home to Sri Lanka and Amma hosts a party, Selvadurai writes:

The night of the party, I stood on the verandah and watched as the guests came in. I glanced from time to time to where Amma stood at the bottom of the front steps, greeting them as they arrived. She wore a royal-blue silk sari, sprinkled with tiny crescent moons. She had been to the hairdresser’s in the afternoon and her hair was up, a crescent-moon clasp holding it in place. Outwardly, she seemed happy, almost gay. Yet once, when there was a lull in the flow of guests, I saw her raise her hand to her temple, a sudden tired expression on her face.

(Selvadurai Ch.3)

Once again, Arjie is depicted as able to read his mother to a *very* complex degree. There is little interjection from the older, more mature Arjie speaker; this scene is entirely situated in young Arjie’s narration, attentive to the actual happenings of the event. Still, though, as a child Arjie can glean his mother’s superficial façade: that she “*seemed* happy, almost gay” (Selvadurai Ch.3, emphasis added). The use of “seem” indicates Selvadurai’s gesturing towards a complex understanding of Amma from Arjie. His

observation of his mother cuts deeper than her superficial happiness; he notices too the “sudden tired expression on her face,” revealing her true affect in the moment. Arjie and his mother are able to “communicate” in *physical* manifestations of her emotions rather than typical verbal articulations. Amma’s physical move of raising “her hand to her temple” gestures towards a deeper, more true depiction of Amma’s emotional state. And, Arjie does not himself explicitly name Amma’s feelings in this scene. He is able to name her façade of happiness, but her *true* feeling—one that the speaker might infer would include feelings of grief at Daryl’s death and a mixture of love and disappointment at her husband’s return—is never named. Again, this centres young Arjie in the scene, and his young, supernatural ability to read Amma.

Selvadurai’s description can be read as invoking the supernatural, too. Arjie and Amma are physically separated: he stands gazing from above on the verandah while she stands “at the bottom of the front steps” (Selvadurai Ch.3). Arjie takes the place of the literally superior seer, subverting a typical mother’s watchful, perhaps towering gaze. The “supernatural” relates to another component concept of the *mother – (queer) child* form: adornment. In the aforementioned passage, Arjie prefaces his narration of his mother’s emotional state with a lush description of her outfit. She is likened to a goddess, or at least some type of cosmic being; Selvadurai adorns the narration with the repetition of the “crescent-moon” shape, mirroring Amma’s literal embodied, repeated crescent moons on her person. The “royal-blue” of her sari and the attention paid to her hair is notable as well—who do we see with pinned hair later in the story but Arjie’s love interest, Shehan—and also contribute to the supernatural quality of the relationship between Arjie and Amma. While Amma’s beauty is certainly centred in this passage, Selvadurai chooses to highlight specific *adornments* on Amma’s body *over* her “natural” bodily beauty. We might conclude that for Arjie, what matters most about his mother’s appearance are the ways she “dresses” femininity. This is significant because the achievement of femininity is *through* excessive dress and performance, whereas masculinity

poses as natural, or undressed.¹⁹ Arjie's ascertainment of the stylised nature of femininity is through his relationship with his mother.

Selvadurai's attention to Arjie's perception of Amma's bodily adornments harkens back towards the beginning of the book and the divine quality of Arjie's cross-dressing experience that I discussed in the introduction to this thesis. Recall that Arjie feels like a goddess when he puts on a sari at his grandparents' house; we see now that Arjie feels that way perhaps *because* of his relationship with his mother. In her analysis of that same scene, Gayatri Gopinath writes:

Indeed, Arjie's performance of what we can term "queer femininity" radically reconfigures hegemonic nationalist and diasporic logic, which depends on the figure of the "woman" as a stable signifier of "tradition." Within a queer diasporic imaginary, the "lost homeland" is represented not by the pure and self-sacrificing wife and mother, but rather by a queer boy in a sari. The project of reterritorializing national space, and the uses of drag in such a project, are explicitly articulated within South Asian queer activism and popular culture in various diasporic sites.

(Gopinath 27)²⁰

Gopinath helps to situate the scene of Arjie's cross-dressing into a postcolonial critique of nation. For her, the South Asian diaspora imagines "lost homeland" as represented by "the pure and self-sacrificing wife and mother" (Gopinath 27). This is significant because it helps to build on that framing of normative Standard North American Family motherhood. South Asian diasporic motherhood contains the added charge of nationalism; the "woman" as a signifier of "tradition," as Gopinath puts it (Gopinath 27).

Indeed, when he first describes the ritual of watching his mother dress herself, Arjie narrates that he "*alone* was allowed to enter Amma's bedroom and watch her get dressed" (Selvadurai Ch.1, emphasis added). Once again, Selvadurai uses exclusion of other characters to emphasise the unique oneness of the

¹⁹ I draw from a number of thinkers to make this point, particularly Muñoz's discussion of drag and biological maleness (see page 16) and Kortney Ziegler's "Black Sissy Masculinity and the Politics of Dis-respectability," pages 196-198, and others.

²⁰ From *Impossible Desires*.

Arjie and Amma dyad. Only Arjie is given this special privilege to watch his mother dress, *even while his sister is not*:

When I knew Amma was getting dressed for a special occasion, I always positioned myself outside her door. Once she had put on her underskirt and blouse, she would ring for our servant, Anula, to bring her sari, and then, while taking it from her, hold the door open so I could go in as well. Entering that room was, for me, a greater boon than that granted by any god to a mortal. There were two reasons for this. The first was the jewelry box which lay open on the dressing table. With a joy akin to ecstasy, I would lean over and gaze inside, the faint smell of perfume rising out of the box each time I picked up a piece of jewelry and held it against my nose or ears or throat.

(Selvadurai Ch.1)

South Asian dressing rituals—especially before special occasions—invoke scenes of *women and girls* packed into small bedrooms and closets, pinning hair and wrapping saris. The space is not meant for men or masculinity. My point of entry here is my own experience growing up as a non-female child and being similarly enchanted by my mother’s dressing,²¹ feeling similarly blessed to share that intimate space with her while my brother and father could not:

the raspy, bygone, almost tinny voice plays over your speaker,
chan kitha guzari oye...
standing at the mirror, you ask me to pin your chunni,
guzari oye, raat ve...
the twang of the sitar in the song rings out quietly,
*kothe te phir, kothra mahi...*²²
your eyes meet mine, holding up two earrings, eyebrows raised.

For South Asian diasporic children, then, the mother’s closet perhaps functions as a space of identity formation and gender-play. Arjie picking up jewelry and holding it “against” his body is a type of queer feminine adornment—one that goes perhaps unnoticed and is allowed by his mother.

²¹ Eve Sedgwick writes that “all it takes to make the description ‘queer’ a true one is the impulsion to use it in the first person.” I am, by no means, a poet—but I include this first-person interlude because the personality and relationality of *queer* is intrinsic to my studying.

²² “Chan Kitha Guzari Oye” rendered by Surinder Kaur, date unknown (20th-century Punjabi folk poem). The woman speaker asks *chan*, the moon, where they spent the prior night—resonating with Selvadurai’s celestial imagery.

In the scene of Amma's dressing, that same aforementioned verbal silence between Amma and Arjie is present, which adds to our framework of them being able to read each other in subtle ways. Amma silently carries out the sleight-of-hand of implicitly inviting Arjie inside while also typically collecting her sari. He enters the room, from her perspective, with the casualness of her bringing in her outfit. To Arjie, though, entering the room was "a greater boon than that granted by any god to a mortal:" Arjie makes the connection between his mother's dressing and a certain godliness or divinity explicit. He narrates that "it was an experience [he] considered almost religious"—why I chose to describe the *mother – (queer) child* form as "almost" supernatural—and that though he "adored the goddesses of the local cinema, Amma was the final statement in female beauty for [him]" (Selvadurai Ch.1). And Selvadurai's use of the word "ritual" is significant. Not only does ritual imply a repeated ceremonial action—we know that this is a common occurrence for Arjie and his mother—it also implies otherworldly *devotion*.

Amma is the object of that devotion for Arjie, as she is Arjie's visual manifestation of perfect beauty; or, rather, Arjie sees a queer utopian, euphoric future version of himself in his mother's physical being. Devotion is complicated in this scene: the gender dynamism where a boy—who is male—can be devoted to and seduced by his mother, who is female. The logic of the erotics or attraction works through what seems like a normative male/female dyad but, of course, also upends it, because the male is the child and the female is the mother. This moment is significant in terms of the non-normativity of the desire and the gendered exchanges happening.

When Arjie picks up Amma's jewelry and assesses how it would fit on his own person, he describes doing this "with a joy akin to ecstasy;" this genderplay is brings on a euphoric feeling for the young Arjie which is linked directly to his mother. Arjie goes on to write that the next "pleasure" was that of

watching Amma drape her sari, watching her shake open the yards of material, which like a Chinese banner caught by the wind, would linger in the air for a moment before drifting gently to the floor; watching her pick up one end of it, tuck it into the waistband of her skirt, make the pleats and tuck them into her waistband; and finally watching her drape the palu across her breasts and pin it into place with a brooch.

The narration here is distinctly poetic; the sentence is laden with wandering phrases, clauses, semicolons, simile, repetition... it *lingers*, just as the yards of Amma's sari. Selvadurai's description conveys Arjie's fascination with his mother's beauty and the ritual of her dressing. Moreover, Arjie narrates that he would compliment Amma "with the contented sigh of an artist who has finally captured the exact effect he wants" (Selvadurai Ch.1). Arjie had no actual role in Amma's dressing, so him likening himself to an artist in this scene emphasises that Amma truly is his muse, his inspiration as he grows into a queer identity. And genderplay continues to be associated with Amma in the story, even when it occurs when she is not present. When Arjie paints his nails with Radha, he invokes an image of his mother, figuratively calling her into the scene; he narrates that he "waved [his] hand and blew on it the same way Amma did when she wanted her nails to dry." Judith Butler writes that "gender is fundamentally imitative in structure, and it is in the miming of an ideal—an attempt to replicate it—that we expose its very impossibility" (Butler, Bell).²³ With Arjie's experiences of cross-dressing and genderplay, we see Butler's theories enacted: that there is an "impossibility" inherent in the replication of an ideal. Importantly, though, for Arjie, his *mother* is the source of that imitation (Bell).

Gopinath also connects the genderplay in *Funny Boy* to a discussion of political forms of South Asian queer diaspora. Citing the follow flyer (see following page), she writes:²⁴

²³ I cite Katherine Bell's article "Breaking the narrative ties that bind in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*," which in turn cites Judith Butler's 1990 book *Gender Trouble*.

²⁴ The flyer is also from Gopinath's work.



Figure 2.1 – SALGA Flyer

For instance, at the 1995 India Day Parade, where SALGA was literally positioned at the sidelines of the official spectacle of national reconstitution, one cross-dressed SALGA member held up a banner that read, “Long Live Queer India.” The banner, alongside the SALGA member’s gender presentation, references not an utopic future space of national belonging but rather an already existing queer diasporic space of insurgent sexualities and gender identities. In another example of queer diasporic popular cultural reconfigurations of the nation, a SALGA flyer for a party celebrating the publication of Selvadurai’s novel depicts a sari-clad figure exclaiming, “Shyam was right! I look better in Mummy ki sari!” (See figure 1.) On the one hand, the flyer makes apparent the ways in which popular cultural practices (parties and drag performances) and literary texts such as *Funny Boy* inform and produce each other, and by so doing, call into existence a queer South Asian diaspora. The flyer also replaces the woman-in-sari figure that typically stands for “India” with a gay male performance of queer femininity that references and remembers nonheteronormative childhoods in other national sites.

(Gopinath 27)

I agree that the flyer’s replacement of the “woman-in-sari figure” with a drag performance of “queer femininity” is significant for its reference to nonheteronormative childhood in “other national sites.”

Additionally, though, Gopinath’s framing leaves out the significance of the focus on the mother figure here.

The exclamation of “Mummy ki sari” affirms the universality of the mother-as-muse concept for the queer boy-child, especially for the boy-child’s experimentation with feminine adornment. The figure’s copy of

Funny Boy rests on the floor beside them, conveying the novel’s invocation of socio-political forms; as

Gopinath writes, literary texts often “call into existence a queer South Asian diaspora” (Gopinath 27). The mother-child dyad is a key aspect of that queer diaspora.

The descriptors that Selvadurai employs when describing the *mother – (queer) child* form invoke Audre Lorde’s conception of “the erotic.” As I have described as the driving force of this thesis, Lorde’s essay on the erotic contends that the erotic is a specific “depth of feeling,” one that is located in a uniquely “female” plane that has epistemological power (Lorde 53-57). In other words, the erotic is a way of knowing and a lens through which one can experience the world. In *Funny Boy*, Selvadurai employs the erotic to further the queer bent of the relationship between Arjie and Amma; or, rather, viewing their relationship through the lens of the erotic allows us to see its queer quality. Arjie’s description of “joy akin to ecstasy” suggests an overwhelming, dramatic feeling of happiness or feeling that resonates with the erotic. Lorde’s essay repeats the word “joy” countless times (Lorde). I would contend too that the entire phenomenon of unspoken communication between Arjie and Amma—and their ability to wordlessly read each others’ emotional state—is an invocation of the Lordean erotic. Lorde writes, “the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis of understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (Lorde 56). In *Funny Boy*, Arjie and his mother are those erotic sharers. But there is a complicatedness to the sharing between them, especially as it relates to gender and sexuality. In some ways, gender/sexuality is not shared between them, yet it paradoxically also *is*—in the way that their gender/sexuality difference is a site of tension and difference and adhesion. The boundary between them is trespassed, and the trespassing iterates the boundary as much as it also tries to surpass it; Arjie’s eventual feeling of dislocation from his family exemplifies this later on in this chapter.

Gayatri Gopinath’s study of matrilineal society in Kerala helps us expand the inquiry of the *mother – (queer) child* form into its collision (to borrow Levine’s term) with South Asian diaspora. In her book *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*, Gopinath writes that the Nair community in Kerala previously operated under a matrilineal system, with a mother-centred family structure. (As Gopinath describes, she invokes the example of the Kerala matriliney *not* “to romanticise Kerala’s matrilineal past as an idyllic

protofeminist or queer site,” but rather to complicate notions of South Asian gender and sexuality becoming.) In the film *Sancharram* that Gopinath analyses in this chapter, the men are routinely sidelined while the protagonists tend to have more complicated relationships with the women (Gopinath 38). This mirrors the family structure we see at play in *Funny Boy*: Arjie’s father exists at the periphery of the family, subverting the norm of patrilineal, patriarchal Sri Lankan society (Selvadurai). When Arjie’s father leaves for his trip to Europe, Arjie experiences “little emotion.” Selvadurai writes in one section:

I watched my father as he walked away down the hall. Unlike Amma, he was a distant figure who had very little effect on our everyday reality. We dealt with him mainly through avoidance. The family squabbles that took place, the secrets, were kept from him by an unspoken understanding. He was a figure we held in awe, and his presence represented an authority my sister and brother and I would seldom defy.

(Selvadurai Ch.4)

In this excerpt, Arjie describes how his father occupies a “distant” space in his life, and even invokes the “unspoken” communication amongst the other family members that we know to be unique to Arjie and Amma.

Arjie’s brother is also sidelined, though he is closer in age to Arjie than Sonali, his younger sister. Although Sonali is too young to have many dialogic contributions to the story, Selvadurai is sure to include her constantly at Arjie’s side; the two are coupled together constantly. On the other hand, Diggy is almost personality-less, absent for much of the story. When he appears, he is a flat character who serves as a stand-in for typical societal views of masculinity and queerness. Diggy is described as having previously “excluded and humiliated” Arjie, presumably for his “funniness” (or queerness) (Selvadurai Ch.4). Also, Diggy is the one who warns Arjie to stay away from Shehan *precisely because of* Soyza’s queerness. Selvadurai uses Diggy as a reminder of the value of heteronormativity in Sri Lankan society, recalling the role Arjie’s father’s role also plays.

So, *Funny Boy*’s male family members are sidelined while Amma is centred, and this matches Gopinath’s description of *Sancharram*. Gopinath understands *Sancharram*’s women-centrism as an “oblique”

reference to Kerala's precolonial matrilineal past (Gopinath 38). Recall that Selvadurai, too, seemed to have been orientating *back towards* a precolonial South Asian past when he described the divine quality of Arjie's crossdressing, colliding with the godliness associated with the hijra community. Perhaps we might also read Selvadurai's centring of women in the family, then, as a new orientation in the way Gopinath does; a "disorientation" or disidentification with the normative patrilineal Sri Lankan society, and a vision for a present or future matrilineal temporality. However, Gopinath goes on to describe that the interactions between Kiran, the protagonist of *Sancharram*, and her mother serve to caution against "recuperating this matrilineal past as an idyllic or utopian protolesbian [/queer] space" (Gopinath 38).

Another queer dimension to Amma and Arjie is that their relationship subverts the normative mother-child dynamic. For example, we see Amma in a typical caregiver role, watching over Arjie when he is ill. Amma sits on the side of his bed, holding a compress of ice to his forehead and expressing concern. Even this *typical* mother-child scene is rendered strange: Arjie goes on to narrate that he pretends to go to sleep "so that [Amma] would think [he] was feeling better and go to bed herself" (Selvadurai Ch.3) Again, Arjie shows understanding for and of his mother from an impossibly young age. This reversal of the mother-child relationship is taken much further as the story progresses. When Amma herself falls ill, *Arjie* is the one who cares for her, not any of the other adults present. He sits "by her side" in the same way she did for him, and candidly shares her grief over Daryl's death with Arjie. Amma here transcends the boundaries of a typical mother-child relationship and treats Arjie more as a peer or confidante rather than her young child. And, later, there are whole episodes of the novel where Amma and Arjie venture out to learn about Daryl's death, again depicted as peers or partners in crime. At times, Arjie assumes the role of the responsible adult or maternal figure, reminding his mother when something seems "dangerous" and accompanying her when he is worried for her (Selvadurai Ch.3).

Importantly, Arjie's inhabitation of the "adult" role in these sections is not precisely "queer." The parent-child relationship is typically one of play, where the child gets to perform or pretend adulthood—

with the relative safety of also being the one who is cared *for*.²⁵ To complicate these ideas, an acknowledgment of national belonging is significant. In an article published in *The Atlantic*, Kat Chow writes about the uniqueness of the “immigrant” parent and child relationship. (She references Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, which I cite later.) While Arjie’s family are not immigrants to the West (yet), their status as the Tamilian minority in Sri Lanka and their interrogating national identity and conflict make this quote particularly relevant:

That type of relationship with a parent seems so familiar to us immigrant kids and kids of immigrants. You’re taught, culturally, to respect and care for your elders, yes; but something about seeing your parents displaced in this country makes you feel more protective of their sacrifices, more tender despite their complications and the ways they might have hurt you, and more prone to parenting them, in addition to yourself.

(Chow)

While it is true that the parent-child relationship is typically playful, the racialised bend to this relationship as Chow describes helps to elucidate key aspects of Arjie and Amma’s relationship. Selvadurai might be invoking this diasporic condition of children being “more prone to parenting” their parents. What heightens the “playfulness” of the relationship between Arjie and Amma is the extent to which their roles are reversed—namely, the way Arjie sees Amma in her entirety as a child, including those aspects of her which depict her embodying the mother role in a non-normative or even “queer” way. What I mean is that Amma actually departs from typical ideals of South Asian motherhood and we see this *through* Arjie’s relationship with her. When Daryl and Amma are chatting, Arjie narrates that he “felt as if they were no longer aware of [his] presence,” and we then see his young self begin to piece together Daryl’s role as paramour (Selvadurai Ch.3). Amma and Daryl see each other illicitly while Arjie’s father is away; readers can infer their affair from those interactions earlier. But Selvadurai allows us to follow Arjie’s *own* childhood realisation of the true nature of Amma and Daryl’s relationship. He first notices the erotic strength of their

²⁵ I draw here from Donald Hall’s chapter “Psychoanalytic Analysis.”

connection—that together they lose awareness of him—and Arjie then “couldn’t help comparing [Daryl] to [his] father” (Selvadurai Ch.3).

The eroticism of Arjie’s narration here is significant, too. We see him “observing” physical aspects of Daryl’s person, things like “glints of gold in his brown beard” and a risqué glance at Daryl’s tan at “the edge of his shorts” (Selvadurai Ch.3). Daryl’s warmth in both colour and character—particularly his “gold” hue invoking an image of the sun—matches perfectly with Amma’s coolness, her deep blues and the moon-adorned outfits Arjie so admired earlier in the story. In one sense this furthers the aforementioned complicated devotion of the queer mother-child dyad, as well as a reworking of the mother-father-queer child psychoanalytic form; Arjie, a male subject, is able to identify with Amma as well as acknowledge his own sexual appreciation for her lover.

All of this is important because the scenes between Amma and Daryl depict Amma as not conforming to ideals of typical South Asian motherhood. As Gopinath writes, the South Asian mother is normatively “pure,” “self-sacrificing,” and “traditional” (Gopinath). Amma’s affair breaks these norms and situate her as a subject transgressing the bounds of typical motherhood. Neliya Auntie is a barometer of this non-normativity—she herself is “unmarried,” which Arjie notes is atypical for a woman of her age. Neliya says to Amma that Daryl’s visits to the house are “most improper;” Amma “laughs” back at her (Selvadurai Ch.3). Amma’s laughter recalls the rhyme that answered Arjie’s questions about gender roles: in both scenes there is a quick acknowledgment of the illogicity inherent in gender norms. Not only does Arjie notice these acknowledgments, they are part of his relationship with Amma. Additionally, Sandeep Bakshi notes that these scenes “attest to the centrality of Arjie’s observations as a privileged witness of the constraints of a patriarchal structure whereby romantic affection and love outside marriage for women systematically appear subservient to the demands of the family” (Bakshi). So, another component concept of the *mother-(queer) child* form, then, is the queer child’s awareness of the mother’s *own* sort of queerness; or a revealing from the mother of a certain non-normative intimacy and non-subservience to the queer child.

Finally, though queerness is, by definition, what makes the *mother – (queer) child* form possible, it is also what disrupts the relationship between mother and queer child. As Greg Mullins writes in “Seeking Asylum: Literary Reflections on Sexuality, Ethnicity, and Human Rights,” Arjie faces multiple versions or instances of exile in *Funny Boy*. First, of course, he is literally exiled with his family “on account of his ethnicity,” spun into the Sri Lankan diaspora as he flees the ethnic conflict in the country (Mullins 162). Additionally, though, he is forced into a “metaphorical exile from his family on account of his sexual orientation” (Mullins 162). These *overlapping persecutions* are what make *Funny Boy* a story of queer diaspora. Mullins explains:

Arjie, his mother, his aunt Radha, and several other characters would prefer to refashion their kinship ties through friendship and love with Sinhalese and European people. The constant threat of ethnic violence, however, constrains their ability to move in these directions, and forces them back into an ethnic family hold... The Chelvaratnam family is in this sense fashioned by the forces of persecution. So also are communities of sexual minorities who band together in the face of human rights violations, including both discrimination and persecution.

(Mullins 167)

This commentary by Mullins is significant because it contributes to our definition of queer diaspora. Perhaps the defining characteristic of Arjie’s story is his sense of belonging with respect to national and sexual identity and family.²⁶

Gopinath’s description of queer diaspora resonates with Arjie’s experiences, too; in *Unruly Visions*, she writes that “for queer people, the relation to the region can be a fraught one” because it is the place where “one’s queerness is both formed and nurtured but also disciplined and repudiated” (Gopinath 27-28).

²⁶ Muñoz’s discussion of racialised queer subjects in *Cruising Utopia* is useful here. He writes that the “theories of queer temporality that fail to factor in the relational relevance of race or class merely reproduce a crypto-universal white gay subject that is weirdly atemporal” (Muñoz 95). That atemporal white gay subject feels no *need* for the “challenge of imagining a futurity that exists beyond the self or the here and now” (Muñoz 95). Relating to Arjie, we see how he serves as a significant example of Muñoz’s point. “Queer of colour”-ness is marked by the multiple persecutions that Arjie faces. While his queerness might lead him to spurn his nuclear family, or branch off from them, he is also forced closer to them due to the regional ethnic conflicts that he faces in Sri Lanka as Mullins writes. In Muñoz’s words, Arjie *has* to imagine a futurity that “exists beyond the self or the here and now” because of his unique positionality as a racialised, diasporic queer subject.

This recalls *Funny Boy*'s moments of utopian bliss and queer sex between Arjie and Shehan simultaneously overlaid with the disgust and hatred that Arjie faces from his father and brother for his queerness.

While this wide-angled view of Arjie's position within family and nation matches Gopinath, Muñoz, and Mullins, I am interested in how these frameworks collide with a close-up look at the *mother – (queer) child* form. The conflicts or disruptions between Amma and Arjie are due specifically to physical, explicit surfacing of Arjie's queerness. After Arjie's crossdressing is discovered by the family—and Amma is reprimanded by Arjie's father—Amma stops allowing Arjie into her dressing room. Arjie's specifically narrates that, upon hearing Amma talk to their housekeeper, the "sound of [Amma's] voice" signalled to him that "something had changed forever" between him and his mother (Selvadurai Ch.1). Selvadurai underscores the tenacity of Arjie and Amma's "erotic" communicative connection. Even in this time of conflict, Arjie is able to glean bountiful information from cryptic, subtle cues from his mother. Yet, Arjie's ritual of observing his mother dressing is still halted, and Arjie is able to understand that the halting of the ritual symbolises a "forever" change in his relationship with his mother. Furthermore, at the end of the novel, Arjie's narration names the *mother – (queer) child* form explicitly and emphasises the role of queerness in his relationship to his mother. Arjie narrates:

My eyes came to rest on my parents. As I gazed at Amma, I felt a sudden sadness. What had happened between Shehan and me over the last few days had changed my relationship with her forever. I was no longer a part of my family in the same way. I now inhabited a world they didn't understand and into which they couldn't follow me.

(Selvadurai Ch.5)

Selvadurai repeats the words from the immediate beginning of the novel: something had "changed [Arjie's] relationship with [Amma] forever." Arjie seems to grasp now, after the years over which the novel takes place, that his queer identity is at the core of the disruption of his relationship with his mother. The tone is matter of fact; Selvadurai writes simply that "what had happened" changed the relationship. Arjie minimises his own agency in his relationship with Shehan and narrates as if it were an inevitable happening—as inevitable as the ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka displacing Arjie's family. Significantly, Arjie's

phrasing in narration is just as theoretical as the literal works of theory I draw from; just as Gopinath describes an ambivalence towards the diasporic region, Arjie describes that his queer relationship means he is “no longer a part of [his] family,” that, further, he “now inhabited a world they didn’t understand and into which they couldn’t follow.” But, as Mullins points out, his ethnic identity means that Arjie has no choice but to literally follow his family away from Sri Lanka into safety. In the end, Arjie articulates an understanding of his multiple persecutions and the exiled position he holds with respect to his nuclear family.

While Arjie becomes conscious of a separation from his mother and of entering into a world entirely distinct from hers, he still tends to follow her emotionally at the end of the novel, rounding out the *mother – (queer) child* form. In the epilogue, Arjie notes that Amma “crie[s] a lot” when the loss of their house begins to hit her, and she attempts to cry in solitude, fleeing to the bathroom. Shortly thereafter, Arjie mirrors his mother’s emotional experience. He ventures *alone* to the site of his destroyed house and begins “to cry for” it in the way that Amma did. His grief is exaggerated, like hers was; he cries until he can “not cry anymore,” while Amma too cried “a lot.” The pair’s shared grief at the end of the novel is a last gesture towards the perpetuity of the Amma and Arjie’s relationship. I might add that the *mother – (queer) child* form accounts for this experience; that is, the “death” of the *typical* mother-child relationship that Arjie notes above—that “forever” change between them—is *part of* the *mother – (queer) child* form but does not signify the death of their relationship as a whole.

Overall, as Bakshi notes, *Funny Boy* is an important artefact of South Asian queer diaspora; it “signals an inclusion of queerness in South Asian fiction in English,” and is “an important political intervention” (Bakshi). The aspects of the mother-child dyad in the novel are queer-alighting, particularly the focuses on feminine adornment and erotic communication; they contribute to our understanding of the *mother-queer(child)* form to help further articulate a queer South Asian diasporic aesthetic.

complicating the form

in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

The essay is a letter to a mother—my mother [who] is illiterate. It was an attempt to see if language can really be a bridge as it is often aspired to be and ultimately that it could fail, right, and that was exhilarating to me, to be a writer endeavouring in a... a work, an essay that should fail from the get-go. Writing a letter in English to an illiterate mother—it's an impossibility, and, ultimately, it's about how far away we are as a country and as individuals, and how sometimes it could take a whole lifetime to get an inch closer but even that inch could be enough, could be so large, so powerful, that it... it could seem like an achievement of victory for two people. You know, a mother and a son, struggling side-by-side, and yet not really knowing how each other feels.

Ocean Vuong, interview²⁷

~

If *Funny Boy* sets up these component concepts of the mother-queer relationship, Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* materialises those concepts and emphasises their performative nature. The novel was published in 2019 and tells the story of a queer Vietnamese-American boy named Little Dog and his coming-of-age. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is written in the epistolary style, as a letter from the speaker to his mother. By definition, then, the work invokes the *mother-queer(child)* form; also, its formal organisation allows us to further question,

How does the excessive performance inherent in the epistolary form impact reflections on the mother-child dyad?

I argue that the novel helps to affirm what has been discussed of the queer-alighting aspects of the mother-child dyad, and also to extend my analysis from a queer South Asian diaspora focus to a queer Asian or Third World and postcolonial diaspora. As Patrick Garlinger writes on his work about queer epistolary fiction, letter-writing has typically been associated with women, to the “exploration of gender, desire, and women's subjectivity” (Garlinger ix).²⁸ Garlinger further notes that uniquely feminine aspects of letter-

²⁷ This quote is a transcription from Vuong's 2019 interview “Inside the Book” by Penguin Random House; a few repetitions of words in the speech have been removed.

²⁸ See the introduction of Garlinger's *Confessions of the Letter Closet: Epistolary Fiction and Queer Desire in Modern Spain*.

writing in turn make the letter particularly well-suited to articulating issues of queerness; he writes that “epistolary fiction shapes and gives voice to queer desire” (Garlinger xi). I am particularly interested in how his language around the “shaping” of desire matches that of Levine’s around the physical, spatial arrangement of forms. There is a complicatedness inherent in the epistolary, as we are invited into a pseudo-private exchange between writer and receiver. Garlinger asserts that “epistolary fiction plunders the tension between social norms and psychic desires, dramatizing at the level of plot the conflicts that arise between historically contingent concepts of sexuality and the private desires and psychic dilemmas that are often the content of and motivation for writing letters” (Garlinger xii). Again, I wish to home in on the complexity, here: epistolary fiction is more than just reading others’ letters, it is a “dramatization” and intense performance of the internal desires of the letter-writer.

The epistolary form of *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* does *more* theoretical work than Garlinger’s introduction offers, though; I point to Vuong’s interview with Penguin Random House to support this claim. The letter that the book is predicated on is literally illegible to its intended receiver, Vuong’s illiterate mother. This is significant because it *also* re-exaggerates the performative aspects of the text; it is an “achievement” for the speaker/author on full display for an audience.

I say “speaker/author” to gesture to Vuong’s interview that itself muddles the line between speaker and author. He switches from “a mother” to “my mother” when speaking, which also re-orientes our queer analysis and blurs the lines between lifewriting and fiction writing. And, finally, Vuong’s discussion of how his work is an “impossibility,” something that “should fail from the get-go,” his focus on “feeling” and the largeness and powerfulness of “an inch” all recall my framing of *mother-(queer) child* as excessive, lush, and intimate.

First, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* invokes the same concept of cross-dressing through feminine adornment with respect to the queer boy-child and the mother. As a young boy, when Little Dog’s mother

is at work, he puts on her dress. The speaker narrates explicitly that he “had put it on thinking [he] would look more like [his mother],” recalling that same devotion that we saw in *Funny Boy* as well as *The Women*. Once again, the queer boy holds sacred his mother’s tools of adornment. This repetition is significant because of Levine’s idea that forms are patterns of *repetition*. But Vuong’s invocation of the adornment and devotion conceptual pieces not only mirrors but extends Selvadurai’s. Vuong writes that his speaker wanted to look “more like you” (to address the speaker’s mother), and the second-person mode accentuates the performative aspects of this cross-dressing (Vuong 14).

Sara Ahmed’s work in *Queer Phenomenology* on the mixed-race child’s identification with and orientation towards whiteness is useful here. She also employs the first- and second-person to theorise about identification. Ahmed writes:

Wanting to be white for the mixed race child is about the lived experience of not being white even when whiteness is ‘at home.’ ... One has already failed the ideal that one wishes to approximate because of what is at home... The desire to be white for the mixed race child is melancholic; it involves a murderous impulse turned against oneself, as the body that has received an inheritance that it does not wish to possess... Mixed raceness becomes, in this dynamic, about a failed inheritance, or even a failed orientation, where the body inhabits a category that does not extend its reach.

(Ahmed 146)

I thought of Ahmed’s writing first because of the ways in which Little Dog envies and admires his mother’s light skin—resonating with Ahmed because of that “inheritance” that Little Dog “does not wish to possess” of darker skin (Vuong 27, 51-52). Putting the racial dynamics at play aside (specifically because Vuong’s lightness is not Ahmed’s whiteness), Ahmed still helps us think about the things that interrupt our capacity to identify with. The unease of identification and “failed orientation” that Ahmed writes about resonates with our formulation of gender/sexuality as the site upon which the mother and queer child come together, but also the difference that keeps them apart. Reading Vuong through Ahmed demonstrates the limits to cross-identification across identity difference; one cannot identify *as* another person.

Additionally, Vuong's use of second-person in this scene questions and perhaps ruptures our framing of the queer mother-child dyad as one of experimentation and performance to a certain threshold. The book starts with "Dear Ma, I am writing to reach you..." (Vuong 3). We learn that though the book is written to the speaker's mother, she is illiterate. There is a tenuous impossibility that the speaker's mother will actually read the work—yet the book still starts with a call to "reach" her. In writing this impossible communiqué, Vuong in one sense conveys the importance of directed performance for the speaker themselves, rather than the speaker's audience. This itself recalls Joshua Chambers-Letson's idea that performance is the means through which the minoritarian performer demands freedom (Chambers-Letson). We see Vuong make this sense of "freedom" explicit later in the text, when the speaker narrates, "the very impossibility of your reading this is all that makes my telling it possible" (Vuong 113). He is sharp and clear, here; the impossibility of his mother's reading does not merely *help* the speaker tell his story, but rather, that impossibility is *all* that makes the telling "possible." Vuong nods to the ways that some performances from queer children often need to be hidden from their mothers, mirroring Selvadurai—but makes clear that performing for the mother is, paradoxically, significant to the speaker's queer identity, too.

Vuong also invokes the concept of unspoken communication and closeness between the queer child and their mother. In the final section of the novel, he writes that Little Dog could "remember looking at you for a long time and, because I was six, I thought I could simply *transmit* my thoughts into your head if I stared hard enough" (Vuong 229). Once again, there is a mirroring but also extending of Selvadurai's employment of our form. This resonates with Arjie's actual, literal ability to transmit thoughts to Amma, as well as his capacity to understand her internal affect when she hides it from the rest of the world. However, Vuong's narrative style helps us to situate this seemingly impossible idea as one that is a product of narration, age, and distance. What I mean is that the speaker in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is much more explicit about his growth from the happenings of the story, presumably because of the epistolary mode. He

is clear as to when he felt that communication ability with his mother: precisely when he was six.²⁹

Regardless, Vuong shows us that the young queer speaker's heightened perception of their mother is part of this formal arrangement.

We also see that the mother in Vuong's work queers the Asian mother role in a way that becomes significant for the young queer speaker's identity—or, at least, that the mother inhabits the traditional mother role in an untraditional, nonnormative way, especially as that role relates to diasporic cultural values. Where Amma was having an affair with Daryl, we see that Vuong's speaker is similarly exposed to his mother's sexuality. There are "times, so many times, I would call the Victoria's Secret catalog, ordering you bras, underwear, leggings" (Vuong 32). Little Dog's mother's inability to speak English forces Little Dog to have to order for her—marking a crossing of boundaries into his mother's most intimate space, "so many times." This recalls another point made by Chambers-Letson, who writes:

When the mother faces negation due to her inability to speak or understand the major language, the child's act of translation becomes the means for reproducing and sustaining her mother's presence against the forces of social erasure... the child may become the parent's translator, which is often a fragmenting and injurious experience for the children of working-class immigrants of color and their parents... children and parents play with the act of translation in creative ways in order to negotiate and contest the majoritarian sphere by opening up conditions of possibility where there do not seem to be any.

(Chambers-Letson 110)

Vuong's invocation of the child-as-translator builds upon my earlier point about the "play" between children and parents, play that is exaggerated through the child's queer identity. Once again, a part of the relationship between the queer of colour child and their mother is the child's work to sustain the mother, in ways that reflect the racialised nature of the dyad.

Moreover, the retelling of the speaker's grandmother's childhood story alights reveals Little Dog's mother's non-normativity. When Lan returns home after leaving her husband, *her* mother (Little Dog's

²⁹ Perhaps Selvadurai's speaker would also chalk up some of his childhood ability to read his mother to an impossible childish dream. As mentioned, Selvadurai's speaker makes far fewer explicit references to his speaker's age, forcing the reader to surmise from the narration.

great-grandmother) reminds her, “A girl who leaves her husband is the rot of a harvest. You know this. How can you not know?” (Vuong 39). These words come from ancestors in Vietnam; they serve to establish a Vietnamese standard of womanhood as loyal wifehood.³⁰ And while this story is historical, a retelling of a story from generations’ past, Little Dog’s framing of the narrative brings it closer to his own life and his relationship with his mother. Just before the interlude of this story, Vuong writes, “A mother and a daughter. A me and a you. It’s an old story” (Vuong 39). The use of the indefinite article here establishes Lan’s story as more of a widely applicable norm than a personal, specific occurrence. And the coupling of “mother” with “me” and “daughter” with “you” in the repetitive construction of the sentences renders inconsequential the different vantage points of the characters in the story (Vuong 39). Little Dog could easily be Lan, or his mother could be him, he could occupy the role of “daughter” when, in fact, he is describing his mother as his grandmother’s daughter. All of these details emphasise Little Dog’s mother’s own inheritance of being “the rot of a harvest;” like her mother, she is no longer with her first husband, and is literally removed from Vietnamese cultural norms. Little Dog’s mother’s displacement from normative cultural practices of motherhood resonate with Arjie’s mother’s. And, similarly, we see that displacement become significant to the identity formation of the young queer child; Little Dog’s identification with his mother as a “daughter” happens *because* of his mother’s tenuous cultural identity.

The resonances between gender, sexuality, and national belonging vis-à-vis the *mother-(queer) child* form are extended in *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* through depictions of Little Dog’s abuse. The first few pages of the novel are rife with descriptions of Little Dog’s mother physically hitting him—presented as scattered impressions of events, without much commentary from the narrator. Then, though, on page 13, Vuong writes:

³⁰ The language likening wives to “harvests” also reminds us of the ever-present sexist cultural value of women as loyal caregivers, nourishers; if they leave, they are the “rot,” with negative implications for the rest of the group if not cut out quickly enough.

The time, while pruning a basket of green beans over the sink, you said, out of nowhere, ‘I’m not a monster. I’m a mother.’ ...

I put down the book. The heads of the green beans went on snapping. They thunked in the steel sink like fingers. ‘You’re not a monster,’ I said.

But I lied.

What I really wanted to say was that a monster is not such a terrible thing to be. From the Latin root *monstrum*, a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once.

(Vuong 13)

Notice first how Vuong references the Latin root of “*monstrum*” to further comment on the word “monster.” Presumably, Little Dog’s mother is speaking in Vietnamese in this scene, as she continues to do for most of the book—so the Latin root does not apply to her use of the word. Indeed, the language is another kind of disorientation; this fact, along with the poetry-esque line breaks in the prose, emphasise the performative aspects of this scene, and the incompatibility of the performative language act. Vuong reminds us constantly that we are in Little Dog’s perspective here, that this is a retelling of events marked by Little Dog’s voice that *perhaps* is intended to be read by his mother. For Vuong’s speaker, his mother is a “divine messenger”³¹ of *catastrophe*. Little Dog appreciates the monstrosity of his mother because he knows that there is a complicated reclamation of monstrosity that has some non-negative use: “shelter and warning at once.” Later, Little Dog realises “much later” that the homophobic names he is called—names like “freak, fairy, fag”—are “iterations of *monster*” (Vuong 14). Once again, “much later” emphasises the distance Vuong’s narrator has from the young Little Dog.

Introducing the concept of monstrosity here is relevant to the queer mother-child dyad, especially as Vuong ascribes monstrosity to both Little Dog’s mother and Little Dog himself. As Stacy Holman Jones and Anne Harris write in “Monsters, desire and the creative queer body,” the “monstrous” has had a certain “queer potential,” especially because of the ways queer people have been depicted as monstrous historically and have reclaimed that monstrosity (Jones and Harris 518). In the queer-as-monstrous, there is a certain

³¹ Once again, resonating with Selvadurai’s descriptions of Amma as divine or celestial.

“power of being seen but not understood, of passing unnoticed, of subverting sexual and gender fixities” (Jones and Harris 518). Jones also writes that “the monstrous is both a construction, a figure who signifies selves and ways of living the world cannot ‘bear to see,’ and a narrative ‘form of unleashing,’ a way of writing ourselves out of the ‘bind’ of gender binaries, heteronormative desires, and traditional forms of kinship” (Jones and Harris 518). Vuong purposefully invokes the monstrous when describing Little Dog’s relationship with his mother *to* demonstrate the overlapping junctures between the two characters; Little Dog’s mother’s capacity for violence marks her as “monstrous” to some in the way that Little Dog’s queerness does. But importantly, Little Dog’s mentioning of the “hybrid” aspect of monstrosity resonates with Jones’s. A rewriting of “traditional forms of kinship” matches our framing of the unique conceptual components of the *mother-(queer) child* form.

Finally, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* is significant to our discussion because of the way it further queers the coming-of-age novel, resolving some of what was left unsaid in *Funny Boy*. In Selvadurai’s work, we never see Arjie carry out some of the trajectories initially set forth. We do not see his family’s question of national belonging resolved, for example, or glimpses of their life as diasporic subjects once emigrated from Sri Lanka. Moreover, we never see an explicit mention of his queerness to his family; recall that we are simply assured by Arjie that his queer encounters place him into a world that his family will never follow him into. Arjie is still a child by the end of the novel. But Vuong allows us to witness Little Dog’s growth into a teenager and adult. First, this begs the question of the relevance of the mother-child dyad later in life, or whether component concepts of the queer form are still relevant to an older child subject.

Significantly, Vuong includes Little Dog’s coming-out scene, an event that is depicted as impossible in the setting of *Funny Boy*. When Little Dog reveals his sexuality to his mother, he offers to “leave;” there is no explicitly tragic result, because his mother responds that Little Dog does not “have to go anywhere” because she does not “have anyone else” (Vuong 131). Certainly, though, this conversation seems to move

Little Dog past the boundaries of “childhood.” His mother asserts that people will “kill” him for being queer—the language is far from the “play” inherent in childhood, but rather about survival (Vuong 130). This loss of innocence—typically at the climax or resolution of a *bildungsroman*—is placed in the middle of the book; after this scene, we return to an earlier memory (Vuong 132). Through depictions of the trajectory of Little Dog’s relationship with his mother, Vuong subverts the typical *bildungsroman* and invokes atypical temporalities.

In sum, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* further establishes the form of the mother-(queer) child dyad, primarily through repetition of its component concepts in *Funny Boy* but also through exemplification of new component concepts. The terms of identification, inheritance, translation, and monstrosity are particularly made relevant in the text. And, as discussed, Vuong’s direction of the narration—from speaker to mother—deploys a complex line of address that helps to emphasise the performative nature of the form.

epilogue

It would seem, then, that the still-pertinent refusal of the annihilating wish that queer and trans people of color not exist rests not on a repudiation of the mother of color's role in reproducing black, brown, Asian, indigenous, queer, and trans life, but instead on an enthusiastic embrace and defense of it. The prohibition that renders silent most discussions about the positive role women of color may play in making their kids queer or trans...by teaching their kids how to stay alive... is made palpable less by a proliferating discourse of their pathology than by a lack of discourse at all.

Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, page 112

~

This thesis about excess and “impossibility” is, itself, an impossibility. My thinking with these texts and ideas is a part of my grappling with South Asian diasporic being, and how that being resonates with queerness. In the past year, I have come into nonbinary gender identification and expression in ways I felt, and still feel, are impossible.

I have discussed how *Funny Boy* and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* offer glimpses of how art can offer queer perspectives to the mother-child form. In sum, the mother figure in these texts becomes central to the coming-of-age of the queer boy-child. Each text reveals specific component concepts of this form: the mother as a muse for the boy's feminine adornment and gender performance, the problematics and impossibilities of cross-gender identification, the mother's occupation of queer and normative roles, the erotic, unspoken communication, the seduction and divinity, the critiques of nation and cis-heteropatriarchy, ... All of these thematically and theoretically rich concepts are uncovered through approaching reading narratives via the form of *mother-(queer) child*.

Significantly, though there is an intimate, excessive exhilaration or beauty within the queer diasporic mother-child relationship, there is a limit to the performance of the relationship. Chambers-Letson shows us that any explicit rejection of the child's eventual heterosexual life stops the exhilarative aspect of their queer genderplay. I wonder whether we might conclude that the artwork we read here is what “passes” that limit. In other words, I have attempted to gesture towards the work artwork and other life-giving performance can do for the minoritarian subject. The rubrics of *mother-(queer) child* I have

discussed are not rigid, of course. If artwork reflects a social-political reality, perhaps artwork can create queerer futures, too. Though Vuong's mother might never read his letter to her, the beauty of that letter—of that letter's queer performance, made legible to readers both queer and not—does important political work in, at the very least, espousing a beautiful, queer, Asian aesthetic. Recall Sandeep Bakshi's idea that *Funny Boy* is an "important political intervention," and Vuong's own interview about the connections between *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and political individuals and nations. In her essay *Queer and Now*, Eve Sedgwick posits that childhood means attachment to a "few cultural objects," ones "whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique," and that this attachment is a "resource for survival" for the child (*Queer and Now*). This is intuitive, I think, or at least it is a theoretical move that is compelling; many of us have childhood books that we hold dear to us. Sedgwick argues that a childhood fascination with cultural objects *colours* our adult relation to cultural texts and objects. Scholars of queer literature might analyse texts because of their connection to the way cultural objects with queer affinities or sensibilities helped them survive as children. In other words, those cultural objects had a certain "resistant power;" this power is the connection between the social-political "queer" and the aesthetic "queer." Echoing what Chambers-Letson writes about the work mothers of colour do for their children, I feel queer lifewriting also works to teach queer kids "how to stay alive" (112).

I became interested in this work at the most basic level because I saw myself in Hilton Als's speaker, that boy-child who saw *himself* in his mother. As I have noted, these are impossible identifications. But I wish to highlight the world-making, life-giving aspects of those queer encounters and this writing. Another way to think through this project, then, is to think of the practice of queer being, of the practice of writing about one's queer self, and the beauty and power inherent in that doing.

~

This work is, really, just a glimpse or overture of the magical quality of the aesthetics of queer diaspora. There are a few points that I wish to have covered here that I would have explored more had this thesis been longer, had it not been written and produced during the upheaval of the pandemic, . . . , and so on:

First, I offer a short meditation on the productivities and the problematics of work in the queer of colour tradition. In Anne Anlin Cheng's "Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman," she theorises Asiatic femininity through the "yellow woman," the woman who is "simultaneously consecrated and desecrated as an inherently aesthetic object" (Cheng). To her, "ornament becomes—*is*—flesh for Asian American female personhood" (Cheng). Cheng draws from East Asian examples to make her claim about the animate/inanimate mix that entangles the yellow woman. I wonder how we might read both Little Dog's mother and Arjie's mother as also fused with inorganic matter, especially as this relates to our discussion of dressed femininity and the objects that make up the diasporic home. Cheng herself applies ornamentalism to Black women in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Clearly, a "coloured," generally racialised theory of feminism is useful.

I bring up Cheng's "yellow" to also comment on the terms of racial difference queer of colour authors employ. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz uses the term "brown" often applied primarily to Latinx people and art. Chambers-Letson differentially seems to use the term "brown" interchangeably with "person of color," yet then alongside "Asian" and "indigenous" (111-112). In other contexts, "brown" is used to explicitly include people of South Asian (including Southwest Asian and Southeast Asian) origin. "Brown" for brown Asians is, at times, used to emphasise the lived experience of Islamophobia that disproportionately affects brown- and dark-skinned people. The "brown" subject has also been theorised as

the typical, nonspecific “postcolonial and indigenous” subject.³² In her work on diaspora broadly, Gopinath relies on “Third World,” or South-South relationality to talk about racialised subjects.³³ I bring up these disparate accounts to gesture to the inconclusiveness of racial differentiation under the Western gaze—to acknowledge that these categorisations have use in queer of colour work but also have limits. In this thesis, I draw primarily from literatures of the Sri Lankan and Vietnamese diasporas; I wonder what term applies best to this work. Also, though, common to all of these works (mine included) is an invocation of Black theory, specifically the work of Hortense Spillers. What are the problematics of a queer of colour tradition that is borne out of Black queer studies? How can queer of colour thinkers—ones who do not theorise Blackness but instead think about colouredness in opposition to whiteness—honour the work of Black thinkers who came before them?

Next, I wonder how the terms of queer become inflected or expanded by thinking through diasporic formations. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz writes that queerness is “essentially about the rejection of a *here and now* and an instance on *potentiality or concrete possibility for another world*” (Muñoz 1, emphasis added). As Muñoz writes, “doing, performing, engaging the performative as force of and for futurity is queerness’s bent” (Muñoz 32). The language here does the work of the theoretical; queer has a “bent,” it is not “straight,” and it is located distinctly in performance, in the performative (and we might read literary and visual aesthetic as performance). Gopinath (more politically) renders concrete Muñoz’s implicit rejection of the nation-state by offering “the region” as a modality or zone of queer affiliation (Gopinath 27-28). She writes the following, again also using artwork to make her theoretical claim:

The region is clearly an affect-laden category, and the intimate connection between the personal and the regional can have both productive and reactionary effects. Claims to regional belonging,

³² See various internet sources like NPR’s 2017 special series “Ask Code Switch” and the website for The Center for Black, Brown, and Queer Studies (<https://www.bbqplus.org>).

³³ See the introduction of Gopinath’s *Unruly Visions*.

particularly when they originate from the diaspora, are often bound up in nostalgia for lost origins and class/caste privilege, a deeply felt sense of rootedness, a fierce identification with (or, conversely, a rejection of) place...

For many diasporic queers, the region as the 'place where you're from' is an ambivalent site, where one's queerness is both formed and nurtured but also disciplined and repudiated. For queer people, the relation to the region can be a fraught one, where nostalgia for a place 'left behind' is invariably tempered by a recognition of why it was left in the first place, and vice versa.

(Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, pages 27-28)

Here, Gopinath has arrived at a rejection of the "nation" using the term "queer diaspora" explicitly.

To her, queer diaspora is "both a spatial and temporal category: spatial in that it challenges the heteronormative and patrilineal underpinnings of conventional articulations of diaspora and nation, and temporal in that it reorients the traditionally backward glance of conventional articulations of diaspora, often predicated on a desire for a return to lost origins" (Gopinath 6). Gopinath's book collects an archive of Third World queer art to work against "dominant Euro-American articulations of queerness," important because we know the brown racialised Third World to be significant to contemporary queer theory (Gopinath 6). What fascinates me most is her conception of the region, and how it resonates with my identity as Punjabi—more Punjabi Sikh than Indian Hindu or Pakistani Muslim—and how that identity exists in a liminal space in the way that "the region" does. To Gopinath, "the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora... disrupt the normative ways of seeing and knowing that have been so central to the production, containment, and disciplining of sexual, racial, and gendered bodies; they do so, crucially, through a particular deployment of queer desire."

Returning to the question of "the nation," Gopinath uses regional South Asian art to suggest that the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora become the site where these ambivalent relations to the region are expressed and reworked; that, from the vantage point of diaspora, we can "decouple the diaspora from its usual referent, the nation, and think instead in terms of diaspora-region, or region-to-region connectivities" (Gopinath 28). This is distinctly *queer*: avoiding the temporally "straight" imperial nation and focusing instead on regional affiliations moves against the grain and *queers* our normative conception of diaspora.

In his book *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy Across the Black Diaspora*, Keguro Macharia also argues for the importance of racialised diaspora in theories of queerness. He writes that “quotidian moments of exclusion captured by ‘No Fats, No Femmes, No Blacks, No Asians’ on hook-up apps,” for example, result in part from the violences of “gentrification..., exile, and immigration” (Macharia 7). He writes about “critical and historical desire to name the black diaspora as a singular formation, the desire of that definite article ‘the.’” The Asian diaspora, the South Asian diaspora, and others too long for the definite article “the;” this even recalls my discussion of racial categorisation terms and the desire to articulate a definite “queer of colour” experience.

Macharia’s queering of the diaspora suggests that we might meet this desire for communal articulation with moments of queer erotic bliss that Gopinath’s region-region affiliation offer. As Macharia writes, we “yearn for something more” through queer diaspora, because “within colonial modernity, authentic love is impossible” (59). Once again, common to these works of queer diaspora is a rejection of the modern nation and a turn towards feelings of life-giving and love.

Third, I cite trans theory, because so much of the aforementioned queer of colour critique conflates the “queer” experience with the transgender experience. Eve Sedgwick writes,

One of the most interesting aspects—and by interesting I mean cautionary—of the new psychoanalytic developments [in gender studies, queer theory, etc.] is that they are based on precisely the theoretical move of *distinguishing gender from sexuality*. This is how it happens that the *depathologization of an atypical sexual object-choice* can be yoked to the *new pathologization of an atypical gender identification*.

(Eve Sedgwick, “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys,” emphasis added)

I wonder if Sedgwick would, then, argue for a conflation of gender-queerness with sexual-queerness in literary studies. I find this to be an interesting slippage or “fracture” in queer theory. If we take to be “true” the large, expansive, forceful definitions of “queer” from Sedgwick and Muñoz, both gender-queerness and sexual-queerness might fall under the “queer” umbrella (I certainly have coupled the two in literary

analysis). But, if transgender people and cisgender queer people have *vastly different* lived experiences, and have Muñoz, Gopinath, Macharia, Lorde, etc. not taught us that queer studies is entangled with the lived experiences of the people it studies? How can we reconcile this difference?

Gayle Salamon writes about this distinct transgender lived experience:

We are never told what it might mean to ‘feel like or be’ a woman—is this a bodily feeling? A psychic one? Is it constant or variable? Is it conceptual? Erotic? Do all women ‘feel like’ women? ... whether they are MTFs or FTMs, whether they identify as men, as women, or as some other term, it is the persistence and strength of *feeling* that creates their sense of identity... the sudden appearance of “feeling” in the text would seem to frustrate [other scholars’ historical] attempt[s] to ground sexual identity in morphology and materiality.

(Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, page 154)

Once again, we are referred to Lorde and Ahmed; Salamon’s text locates the transgender experience as one that is uniquely *phenomenological* and also borne out of the plane of *feeling*, which feels like Lordean erotic territory. I include this to pay homage to the realities of transgender experience and to suggest that overreliance on gender-as-performance might dismiss transgender life.

Finally, I ask, what happens to the *body* in theory?³⁴

So many of the “examples” I draw from address embodiment. Queer of colour lives, as Chambers-Letson contends, have been deemed expendable; thus, perhaps *any* close look at queer of colour narratives invokes embodiment or the body. In theoretical work, especially postcolonial theory, “examples” can be actions in people’s lives, or cultural practices, political structures, laws, historical events, novels: any of those concrete happenings that distinguish themselves from abstract, non-happenings, like ideas or theories. In one sense, the concept of the “example” then recalls Edward Said’s conception of “to secularise,” as explicated by Dr Gandhi. To those postcolonial theorists, to secularise is to give discourse *world*, to take it out of the *a priori* or the abstract or the universal and put it *back into* grounded, earthed time (Said and

³⁴ This draws directly from an essay I wrote for Professor Gandhi’s Postcolonial Theory course.

Gandhi). With Said we can posit some truths and problems about examples: first, *the example itself is never theoretical*. By definition, the moment we use an example, we are rendering it *non-theoretical*. This splits the inquiry, illustrating that the theory is happening somewhere else, thereby creating a disciplinary *hierarchy*. The example, then, is epistemologically lesser than the theory. Separately, though related, *to be an example to someone* is more complicated: you are to become something others will *follow*. There is a contradiction inherent in the example. On the one hand, it cannot be theoretical; on the other hand, it is universal, in the way theory can purport to be. What I mean to say is: is it problematic to use the “body” and the individual as examples to do the academic work of the theoretical?

These questions resonate with the work of this thesis, shifting constantly from lived realities of queer authors, other queer people in the world, queer and non-queer characters in texts, and my own experiences as a queer subject. Theory has limits, then, as does the use of examples to theorise about the social world. *Mother-(queer) child* is, first, an acknowledgment of the lives of mothers of colour and their queer children, and their working towards “staying alive.”

~

once again,
for sunita and santosh
(my mother, and hers too)

works cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology*. Duke University Press, 2006.
- Als, Hilton. *The Women*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.
- Bakshi, Sandeep. "The Crisis of Postcolonial Modernity: Queer Adolescence In Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy And P. Parivaraj's." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, vol 42, no. 1. *Openedition*, 2019. doi:10.4000/ces.776.
- Bell, Katherine. "Breaking the narrative ties that bind in Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy." *The Free Library*. Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English, 2012.
- Chambers-Letson, Joshua. *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*. New York University Press, 2018.
- Cheng, Anne Anlin. "Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for The Yellow Woman." *Critical Inquiry*, vol 44, no. 3, pp. 415-446. *University of Chicago Press*, 2018. doi:10.1086/696921.
- Chow, Kat. "Going Home with Ocean Vuong." *The Atlantic*, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/06/going-home-ocean-vuong-on-earth-were-briefly-gorgeous/590938/>.
- Christian, Barbara. "The Race for Theory." *Cultural Critique No. 6, The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse (Spring, 1987)*, pp.51-63. *University of Minnesota Press*
- Garlinger, Patrick Paul. *Confessions of the Letter Closet*. University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Gopinath, Gayatri. *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*. Duke University Press, 2018.
- . *Impossible Desires*. Duke University Press, 2005.
- Hall, Donald E. "Psychoanalytic Analysis." *Literary and Cultural Theory: From Basic Principles to Advanced Applications*, by Hall, Houghton Mifflin Company, pp. 103-111.
- Hemphill, Essex. *Ceremonies: Poetry and Prose* [excerpt], Cleis Press, 2000, pp. xi-21, 88-100, 105-115.
- Hinchy, Jessica. *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Jones, S. H., & Harris, A. "Monsters, desire and the creative queer body." *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 2016. pp. 518-530. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2016.1210748>
- Kip, Lily. "De-Centering the Bildungsroman: Identification, Trauma, and the Female Double in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar and Toni Morrison's Sula" (2019). Honors Theses. 303.
- Levine, Caroline. "Introduction." *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: On the Erotic as Power." *Sister Outsider*, by Lorde, The Crossing Press, 1984, pp. 53-59.

---. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. The Crossing Press, 1982.

Luciano, Dana and Mel Y. Chen. "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* vol. 21, no. 2-3, 2015, pp. 183–207.

Macharia, Keguro. *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy Across the Black Diaspora*. New York University Press, 2019.

Massad, Joseph Andoni. "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World." *Public Culture*, vol. 14 no. 2, 2002, p. 361-385. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/article/26284.

McLeod, W. H. *The B40 Janamsakhi: An English Translation*. Guru Nanak Dev. University, 1982.

Mullins, Greg A. "Seeking Asylum: Literary Reflections on Sexuality, Ethnicity, And Human Rights". *MELUS*, vol 28, no. 1, 2003, p. 145. doi:10.2307/3595250.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, 2009.

Myers, Mitzi. "The Erotics of Pedagogy: Historical Intervention, Literary Representation, the "Gift of Education," and the Agency of Children." *Children's Literature*, vol. 23, 1995, p. 1-30. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/chl.0.0644. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/246315/pdf>

Said, Edward. "Secular Criticism", from *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, pp. 1-30

Salamon, Gayle. *Assuming a Body*. Columbia University Press, 2010.

Sedgwick, Eve K. "Queer and Now" and "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys." *Tendencies*, by Sedgwick, Duke University Press, 1993.

Selvadurai, Shyam. *Funny Boy*. William Morrow Publication, 1994.

Smith, Dorothy E. "The Standard North American Family: SNAF as an Ideological Code." *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 14, no. 1, Mar. 1993, pp. 50–65, doi:10.1177/0192513X93014001005.

Speaking of Shiva, translation by A.K. Ramanujan. Penguin Books, 1973, p. 110

Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 64-81.

"The Peculiar Position of India's Third Gender." *The New York Times*. 2018.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/17/style/india-third-gender-hijras-transgender.html>.

Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Penguin Press, 2019.

---. "Inside the Book." 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nNlo8E1ZKPM>

Wilder, Gary. "Making Freedom Time." *History of the Present*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring 2017), pp. 122-137

Windle, Elisabeth, "Pleasure in the Past: Queer Nostalgia in the Gay American Century." Arts & Sciences Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2016.

https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds/1013

Zaborskis, Mary, "Erotics Of Education: Queering Children in Nineteenth- And Twentieth-Century Boarding Schools. Publicly Accessible Penn Dissertations, 2017.

<https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/2660>

Ziegler, Kortney. "Black Sissy Masculinity and the Politics of Dis-respectability." *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*, edited by E. Patrick Johnson, Duke University Press, 2016, pp. 196-215.

~

And I am indebted to the thinking of Professors Quashie, Hilton, Armstrong, and Gandhi—in class and through in-person, Zoom, and phone conversations.