

home *sick*

Notes on diasporic melancholia

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Abstract

The primary focus of my research is to investigate and explore melancholia in diaspora using decolonial methods and a return to ancestral knowledge and practices. Through objects and memories that are both intimate and estranged, I wish to consider the effects of assimilation and fragmentation that migrant experiences hold. Using interdisciplinary artistic practices that mix realities and center performative film, oil paintings, installations, embroidery, digital collage, poetry and short stories, my work is a play on expectations and translations of racialized and migrant bodies. I aim to empower racialized bodies through ritual while celebrating symbols of beauty like the brown skin and the black braid that have been undermined by colonialism, wielding ancestral knowledges as a way of offering, of healing, and of sharing. My work makes note of oppressive structures and attempts to undo colonial damage by creating decolonized safe spaces of healing while privileging the examination of diaspora through multiple, diverse, and intersubjective lenses.

My thesis exhibition is a space that blatantly celebrates the differences in media and interdisciplinarity to “disrupt” the white cube through decoration while evoking a sense of feeling “at home” to honor the mother, the motherland, the mother tongue and rituals lost to the onslaught of overwhelming eurocentrism and patriarchal colonialism.

Acknowledgements

Land Acknowledgement- I wish to acknowledge the land that my feet touch as I do this work.

The ancestral homelands of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee and Huron-Wendat peoples. I'm grateful to the Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island for allowing me to call this land my home. Tongue acknowledgement- I want to acknowledge my first language Malayalam, a language I did not write this paper in. A language that moves with my body, my work and my actions. A language I learnt first, before we were told to speak in English in schools in India. I make this tongue acknowledgement because I'm aware that many Indigenous people here in Canada grew up being forced to learn the language of the colonizer first and many of them perhaps wish to return to the ancestral languages. It is my hope that acknowledging and practicing our mother tongues will keep us more grounded with our mother land and our mothers.

Much of the work I make is about my mother. I see my body of work as an unending letter of love and of frustration to my mother, to whom I owe everything. Thank you, dear amma for everything. You have been my muse from the day I laid eyes on you.

I want to thank my father who has spent countless hours advising me throughout the completion of this paper. You inspire me to write, to make and be better every day. Thank you, acha for keeping me grounded, showing me to prioritize love and care above all.

I wish to thank my grandmother who a performer and poet herself has artistically collaborated with me on multiple occasions propelling my work in directions I never imagined I would reach. Thank you, amamma for sharing your knowledge. Your voice inspires me daily. Your laugh fills me with immense joy. I'm grateful for the art we make together, the laughs and knowledges we share regularly.

I extend thanks to my granddad who taught me to write letters of care and wrote to my until we lost him two years ago. I'm thankful for your letters, your life, your words, that keep me going.

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Dedication

This paper is for other brown bodies like mine who have felt lost in their journeys of crossing borders, for Indians living in the diaspora.

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Introduction

I start this research as a diasporic subject having moved to Canada from India where I was born and lived for the first twenty years of my life. Using self-reflexivity and an art-based exploration of autoethnography, I investigate the double consciousness, vaulted shame, loss of culture and eventual melancholia felt in *my* story of migration. Let me begin by admitting that this study has been a deeply personal and transformative experience.

My creative practice, exhibition and written component all engage with the following research questions:

1. What does home and belonging mean in diasporic journeys and why are they immersed in longing and loss? What constitutes these feelings of lack and homesickness?
2. How do I examine and problematize assimilation through the work that I do and could this examination help combat feelings of inferiority, shame, confusion and loss of culture?
3. Can melancholia be a productive space that diaspora could inhabit, grieve, and heal in? Through my art practice, how can I offer decolonized safe spaces of habitation where diasporic stories of loss may be heard and shared?

Longing for a home is a feeling many can relate to, but longing for an imagined home, a hybrid home, a dual home leads to a peculiar kind of melancholia. The questions I ask myself in this work come from my personal and lived experiences as a person of color, a painter, a woman, a daughter, a performer, an immigrant, a diasporic subject, and a settler. What is home to a migrant and how do I belong if I am of two worlds? Does assimilating lead to confusion, double life, and loss of culture? How can my existence and experience of hybridity take up space? Is this

melancholy I sense one I share with others? Where do feelings of inferiority and shame come from? Is the journey of an immigrant one immersed in melancholy? And if so, can this melancholic state be one where migrants could live and grieve? My inevitable and eventual failure to pinpoint and offer concluding answers further illuminate the reason for my “home-sickness” and complex relationship to my idea of a home and belonging. I also want to consider a response to shame and loss that migrants feel through my art making; and ask: What gives me pride? What gives me a gain of culture? What breaks my binary of consciousness? How do I heal?

This paper will consider my arts-based research that centers performative film, embroidery, installation, oil painting and digital collage. My work aims at reserving safe decolonized spaces where honest and healing conversations may occur within and between communities. It makes note of oppressive structures and attempts to creatively present colonial damage through decolonized safe spaces of healing while privileging the examination of diaspora through multiple, diverse, and intersubjective lenses. I began this odd, yet revelatory academic journey with an intent to describe what home meant to me, and why I felt homesick in this diasporic body. This led me to extensively write and make work that first addressed my mother and then the mothers in motherland and mother tongue; through memories and practices that linked me to these “mothers”. It forced me to revisit intergenerational transmissions and trauma that I carry with me even as I move away from what I once called my home, and towards what I now call my home. It made me look at my hybrid existence as one of power rather than loss and helped me navigate through diasporic confusion and double life. I felt a sense of belonging by re-narrating and reframing loss and diasporic melancholia.

I use poetry and stories throughout my paper to decolonise the way ideas are presented in academia which has a long history of exclusivity. The presence of this intentional voice is marked through the use of different font and spacing to signify an unexpected break from these histories of exclusivity in academia. This inclusion, much like a collage and aphorism gives the writing a perpetually unfinished, inconclusive, and open-ended feel (White, 2010, p. 137). It is a resistance to academic style of writing and will perhaps invite the reader to re-read and mis-read while connecting with the reader's own pithy stories (2010, p. 137). Language may be used as a vehicle of colonial oppression, a way to build walls, to be exclusive, and much of my work and writing address this through the insertion of my mother tongue, Malayalam. My storytelling style intentionally repeats words to reflect on overwhelming expectations and patterns that are deemed normal in racialized journeys. Words such as, extra-ordinary, magic, ritual, mother, amma, and so on and their affect in migrant stories. I bring in multivocality to my presentation by weaving in these different diasporic voices. Much like my art practice, which fanned out from oil painting and exploded into many different mediums and voices of making, so does my paper. This paper follows a non-linear narrative as a way of decolonizing institutionalized narratives of research. Through this work, I wish to present my thinking and making as an uncontainable force, like a verbal and artistic magnification. It is a constructive refusal to be contained.

This is a diasporic body's encounters of feeling blue, brown, and sometimes whole.

my braids, tight with memory

my braids, loosen with desire

my braids, undone without an archive

“my braids”

my braids,
blue-black.

my braids,
tight with memory,
of my mother, of my mother's mother.

my braids,
a love language.

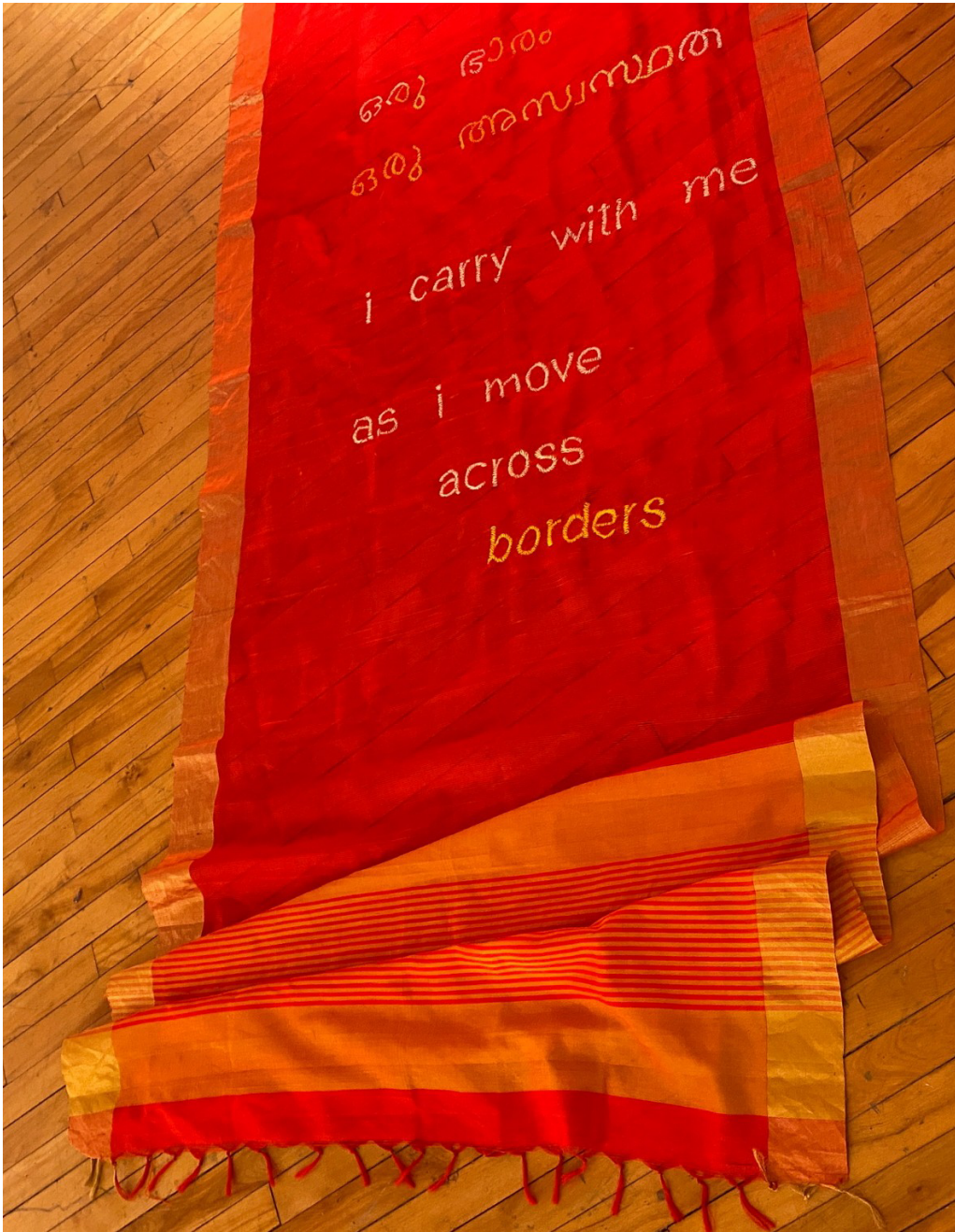
my braids,
a pattern,
a discipline

a weight,
a discomfort,

I carry with me as I move across borders.

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework

Figure 1
a touching, install view



Note: Embroidery on mother's saree, 2022, installed at Exhibition, "home sick". Photo Courtesy of the artist.

1. Literature Review Introduction

In this section I will discuss my research framework. Being a visual artist first, researcher second, I will examine theories and concepts through works of artists that have inspired me to a great degree. Some of these artists include Julius Manapul, Divya Mehra, Salmaan Toor, Panya Clark, Rajni Perera, Nep Sidhu, and Florence Yee. I will attempt to analyze diasporic melancholia through the writings of Brady and Haapala, Sigmund Freud, Anne Cheng and Eng and Han. The love object for a migrant is the idea of a home. However, this singular idealized notion of a home complicates the relationship. The dualities and double life that immigrants share and connect their ideas of home with lead to a fragmented self. This self-fragmented melancholy is not a hopeless state but a self-reflective one, one where hope and despair learn to live in harmony - a peculiar kind of melancholy. Short stories and poetry have been inserted throughout this section as a decolonial method in which theory may be processed and presented in academia.

For me, hair braiding and my blue-black braids act as a link to the land I was born on, to my mother and to her mother, to stories facilitated through braiding, and ultimately to my archive. In Julietta Singh's book, *No archive Will Restore You* (2018), Singh confesses to a desire of consciously producing an "inventory", an accrual of stories, experiences and knowledge deposited in her body, that moves with her across borders (Singh, 2018, p. 19). Singh's perspective on the body as archive and the desire for this archive is one that resonates with me and unveils to me a direction of cultural healing. The act of braiding and unbraiding is a way of reaching toward and away from my inventory and my archive. Consequently, the braid itself becomes an embodied idea and an impossible archive, that I can never stop desiring for myself and for the world (2018, p. 27).

It is a weight, a pattern, a discipline, and a discomfort I carry with me as I move across borders.

1.1 “a mediator”

I don't know who or what we are. Days I feel like a human being, while other days I feel more like a sound. I touch the world not as myself but as an echo of who I was. Can you hear me yet? Can you read me? ...Sometimes you are erased before you are given the choice of stating who you are. (Vuong, 2019, pp. 62-63)

Being their first born, the one thing my Indian parents, both young university students at the time were sure of was my name - Parvathy! I was named after the very popular Hindu Goddess that represents love, beauty, devotion, power and strength! However, growing up in India, my name was far from special. There were three other Parvathys in my middle school class. They had trouble grading our papers because I even shared my last name with one of these Parvathys! It was worse than being a Mike in Canada! I recall being frustrated and disappointed at being so ordinary. When I was old enough to read the Harry Potter series, to my surprise an Indian character named Parvathi Patel appeared in it! I felt special, seen even!

All of this would soon change with my move to Canada and my intentional shortening of my name to appear more... friendly? I'm not entirely sure, but I now insist that people call me “Par”. Sometimes I wonder how I got here. Was it that time on the first day of class, when I sensed the fear on my prof's face as he attempted to read out my name but instead went “I'm not even going to attempt to say this one” leaving me to save the day by apologizing for something that was not my fault? The times I heard my friends butcher its pronunciation even after several years of friendship? The helpless faces of my starbucks baristas when I reveal it? I mean, has no one read or watched Harry Potter?! I suppose the brown characters didn't leave an impression.

“Hi, My name is Par, nice to meet you too”

“Par?”

“Yeah, Like golf”

“That’s a cool name!”

YES! Yes, *it is*, I would think to myself, but say nothing.

Golf is familiar; golf is relatable; golf is cool.

1.2 “an unknown”

Edward W. Said’s text *Orientalism* (1978) is one that catapults the field of post-colonial studies and tries to understand how colonized countries developed the way they did in a post-colonial era. Said reminds the reader that the most important task of all is to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism and to consider how one can study other cultures and peoples from a non-repressive and non-manipulative perspective. He confesses that these are tasks left embarrassingly incomplete within his very study because the complex problem of knowledge and power need to be rethought altogether (Said, 1978, p. 24). Through my research I hoped to further understand these extensive yet exhaustive concepts of Orient, Orientalism, Orientations and the Other, so I may be able to better investigate diasporic identity.

There is a reinforcement of stereotypes of the racialized in a post-modern world through film, media, television and more recently internet. In fact, this reinforcement has been intensified through standardization and cultural stereotyping. In a lecture I watched recently of Stuart Hall speaking on Representation and Media (1997), Hall questions “how” stereotypes are created and “who” creates them. He argues that much of society’s understanding of the world comes from the meaning produced by mainstream media who hold power (Hall et al., 1997, 07:55). This meaning making by the mainstream media has led to the creation of stereotypes and representations of the other that become normalized over time. In other words, identities of the other are created through misrepresentations (1997, 08:24). In *Orientalism*, Edward Said remembers his own lived experience as an Arab Palestinian in the West, “either as a nuisance or

as an oriental” (Said, 1978, p. 27). For Said, it is a unanimous consensus, a dehumanizing ideology but one that has become widely associated with an ‘Oriental’. Said identifies two principal elements that have influenced this relationship between the East and the West. The first element is the systematic knowledge of the Orient in Europe which has been intensified by colonialism, an interest in the alien, and the growing amount of literature produced on the subject. The second element of this relationship is its very nature, one of power- between a strong and a weak entity. Consequently, the Orient becomes something that the West identifies, creates, studies, disciplines, and depicts (1978, p. 40).

Sara Ahmed’s investigation of orientalism in her work, *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) which begins with the significance of the Orient in orientation or ‘oriental’, springs to mind. Ahmed suggests that to orientate oneself is to be a part of a long history where certain directions are given to certain places. The Orient is the object toward which we are directed which also means we are directed around the Occident. In other words, meaning is produced around the Occident, about the Orient. According to Ahmed, the West and the Orient take shape due to a repetition of this “orientated toward” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 115). In order to address the concern of how racism operates through orientation, Ahmed analyses spatial formations of orientalism and ways in which geographic space is “phenomenal or orientated” (Ahmed, p. 112). Ahmed rightfully claims that the Orient is orientated and made reachable as an object as the world is shaped around certain bodies. This is what Ahmed calls the politics of domestication, where the Orient is made submissive to the authority of the Occident.

The knowledge and power relations between the East and West, analysed by Ahmed and Said has been brought to the forefront in artist Divya Mehra’s installation at Mackenzie Art Gallery titled, “From India to Canada and Back to India (There is nothing I can possess which

you cannot take)” (Mattern, 2020). By displaying objects that have been reproduced misclassified, and stolen from other cultures, Mehra questions art history and colonial entitlement. The story behind this installation is a curious yet significant one where Mehra, during a research visit to MacKenzie Art Gallery uncovers a story about a stone sculpture which was apparently stolen by Norman Mackenzie from India in 1913 (Mattern, 2020). The sculpture was identified and catalogued by Norman MacKenzie as a stone sculpture of Lord Vishnu, a male Hindu deity but Mehra on her visit realizes that this sculpture is female and therefore not Vishnu. Not only was the sculpture stolen but it was also misidentified and misclassified until that very moment in 2019, a hundred and seven odd years later (Mattern, 2020)! Mehra responds to this through a sculpture that resembles a prop from the movie Indiana Jones. Mehra is referencing the scene where Jones replaces a bag of sand with an idol he steals from a temple. Mehra is playing with this idea of the sculpture of Vishnu as a prop that could be taken, critiquing colonial entitlement and problematizing art collections (Mehra, n.d.). Another part of the installation includes two inflatable artworks, one a fifteen-foot replica of the Taj Mahal and the other an eight-foot replica of Edward Said’s book *Orientalism*. The size and materiality of both these pieces speak to the exaggerations that occur in the process of misrepresenting the other. Their caricature-like presence speak to how the West defines identities and stories of the other, which may lead to formation of stereotypes. The dotted lines on the floor, which resemble a treasure map, further call to attention Said and Ahmed’s respective critiques of the West as viewing the East being a land of “treasures” and exotic things. Mehra uses self-stereotyping, humor, and absurdity as ways of revealing the problematic systems and institutions that racialized people operate under (Mehra, n.d.). Regarding Western cultural discourse and the goal of his analysis, Edward Said asserts, “My hope is to illustrate the formidable structure of cultural

domination and, specifically for formerly colonized peoples, the dangers and temptations of employing this structure upon themselves or upon others” (Said, 1978, p. 25).

In their installation from 2018 titled, *Selected Hauntings* (Fig. 2), Toronto based Cantonese artist Florence Yee incorporates scroll-like embroidered textiles. These works reflect sentiments that have haunted Yee regarding their failure in the fulfilment of gendered and racialized expectations as a queer Cantonese diasporic subject.

Figure 2
Selected Hauntings



Note: By Florence Yee, Embroidered organza, 2018. Photo Courtesy of the artist. Taken from artist’s website with permission (Yee, n.d.).

Through the incorporation of silk and the desaturated colors, they deny “oriental” fetishization and stereotypes. Their installation serves to bring vulnerability into daily conversations by revealing private insecurities that one may not reveal to “the other” (Yee, n.d.). One of the

embroidered texts read, “I learnt my family history through Wikipedia”. A powerful piece, that utilizes vulnerability, honesty, and personal voice to reveal difficult sentiments (Yee, n.d.). I connected with this installation on a personal level as many of these “sentiments” are conversations I myself have had and continue to have in my head. There is something very healing yet haunting about Yee’s work that I sensed I shared, a kind of melancholy, a certain longing and an overarching feeling of loss.

My interest and respect for Edward Said’s writing emerges from his own awareness of being an “oriental” in relation to western constructs, which he notes has persisted regardless of his Western education. A quote from Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* that Said refers to really resonated with me and instilled in me a greater need to take my own art practice and research in a direction I hadn’t previously considered. The quote states, “The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory” (Said, 1978, p. 25). Much like Edward Said, I felt the desire to complicate the archive and regain agency in the creation and usage of the archive. In her especially poetic book, *No Archive Will Restore You* (2018), Julietta Singh brings to the forefront notions of the body as archive and what it means when this body crosses borders. On archive, Singh writes “It felt as though the broken thing I was might be restored, and it felt like an embodied idea I would never stop desiring for myself and for the world” (Singh, 2018, p. 18). Like Said and Singh, I too share this intense desire to consciously produce an “inventory”, an accrual of stories, practices, experiences, and knowledges that move with me. Singh also addresses concepts of the other, the oriental and orientations through her powerful, lyrical, and relatable writing style which relies on personal experience, immediacy, and emotional honesty, something that I appreciate. I found

myself returning to many of her brilliantly structured sentences only to realize they could be misread and re-read in multiple ways. Singh's choice and placement of words like "exotic" and "perverse" flips the exhaustive narrative of the other and brings in a new perspective - one of the other, of the "exotic". A perspective of the outsider. Singh describes America as a two headed monster that she fears will devour her; an analysis similarly made by Said of the West's need to consume and exaggerate. Singh goes on to write that she had in fact grown to love monsters since her recognition of their social function as abject edges of the society – an important role indeed, a relational one – one that orientations play (Singh, 2018, p. 17).

The idea that monsters can be outsiders so that society can have a sense of being collectively bound and coherent further speaks to the relationship of the familiar and the unfamiliar. The very definition of the West relies on how it defines and identifies the East. Singh concludes, "No, America is not the monster, though it is very skilled at creating monstrous figures and exerting force against them" (Singh, 2018, p. 17). Pakistani born, New York based painter Salmaan Toor's small scale figurative oil paintings speak a language that I am all too familiar with, the language of art history and the western art canon, complicating these problematic histories through the insertion of thick black hair, brown male bodies, unibrows, curved noses, to name a few. Toor's paintings transport the viewer to imagined spaces where queer brown men can drink, eat, lay, live, and feel at home! Even the most banal of activities appear fantastical in Toor's emerald, green canvases. Toor is able to effortlessly encapsulate anxieties, melancholy and the wonders of queer diasporic experience (Cohen, 2020). He gives his brown figures a dignified safe space to occupy, a home to live in, while turning mundane activities into ceremonial healing rituals through his careful depictions. There is a sense of being anywhere and nowhere in his paintings! Armed with instruments of honesty and vulnerability,

Toor questions themes of belonging, orientations and stereotypes while complicating traditional stories through his repeated insertion of the skinny, hairy brown figure and use of the color green (Toor). Toor's work de-familiarizes stereotypes of strong eastern otherification by creating resonances that span the East-West binary. Toor's work therefore, de-monsters and de-myths.

Edward Said writes, "Ever since I can remember I have felt that I belonged to both worlds, without being completely of either one or the other" (Culture, 1978, p. 25). This is an exile's book, he insists by which Said doesn't mean something that is sad or derived but rather belonging to both sides he confesses, helps you understand and moderate them more easily! I find myself, my voice and my work taking on this role of moderating two sides. It is a feeling of belonging and not belonging on either side yet being able to navigate between them almost seamlessly.

1.3 "a stranger"

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... To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once. (Vuong, 2019, p. 13)

Unlike most young girls, growing up Disney princesses did not quite charm me as much as they did my friends. They just seemed so passive and helpless ... sleeping, trapped in towers, waiting to be rescued. But there was a character I liked. A curious one, an avid reader. One that falls in love with a Beast! The Beast is an unusual creature of many myths, a barbarian cast away, an untamed monster that is incapable of love; perhaps didn't even have any emotions. A stranger and an outsider. When Belle falls in love with this Beast something unusual unfolds - the story of the beast, of the strange, of the unfamiliar, the outsider. It is a narrative where the beast is humanized. He has emotions, he is smart, and he cares; and someone had finally crossed a border to

understand him! The ending of the story and his eventual transformation brought much disappointment and a bit of relief to my younger self. He was “normal” after all, I would think to myself – a blue-eyed beauty himself!

It is curious that as a little girl I liked the story not because I related to Belle, but to Belle’s tolerance and eventual love of what the Beast represented, an outsider and an “other”.

1.4 “a hybrid”

Like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha takes the position of the colonized in his writing focusing on things that colonialism birthed. If for Said, it was the importance of identifying the Orient and Orientalism as one that was invented by the West, For Bhabha it is its consequences which he theorizes through terms like hybridity, ambivalence, mimicry, and double consciousness. His text, *Location of Culture* (1994) examines the effects of colonial domination, as one that gives rise to another culture. Bhabha rejects simplicity! He refuses to simplify cultures; he complicates them and in doing so reveals that writing and theory can be an effective tool in exposing colonial practices and its affects. In his first chapter, “The Commitment to Theory”, Bhabha questions if language of theory is just another power tactic of the “culturally privileged Western elite” to produce narratives of the other that further reinforces its own power-knowledge equation (Bhabha, 1994, p. 31). Bhabha bases his inquiry of hybridity on colonial ambivalence as well as mimetic representation which he claims results from colonialism.

The art practice of Sri Lankan born Canadian painter and sculptor Rajni Perera, which incorporates hybrid bodies to decolonize is one of ridiculous beauty and packs a punch! I first came across Perera’s work at Art Toronto in 2019. What struck me was its unexpected presence,

its unforgiving aesthetic and its wild beauty amidst the sea of artworks that professed familiar narratives. Through her art practice, Rajni Perera aims at creating a subversive aesthetic that counteracts oppressive discourse, while acting as a restorative force toward reclaiming power (Perera, n.d.). Perera's work finds inspiration in South Asian art through the integration of patterns, historical clothing, rituals and traditional fashion. Therefore, there is a return to the traditional within her work that counteracts oppressive discourse, something I resonate strongly with. Perera offers space travel and "off worlding" as a metaphor for indigenous and immigrant resilience. Her "travellers" and "ancestors" embody not only a sense of survival but also one of power as represented through her use of rich color palette and otherworldly feel (Perera, n.d.). She tells stories of formerly displaced but now "hybrid" bodies who channel their past and present through the new safe spaces they have created.

Regarding culture and production, Bhabha writes about the "in between" within individuals and cultures as an ongoing process, one that does not rely on a singular position but is witnessed as a continual cultural exchange between "colonizer" and "colonized". He argues that this "in between" can be used to reveal contradictions within narratives of the West (Bhabha, p. 43). Through a collaborative show with artist Nep Sidhu titled, *(m)otherworld creates & Destroys Itself*, Perera and Sidhu highlight the myths, monsters and othering that accompany beings that exist outside of the colonial western narrative, "in between" two worlds (Perera, n.d.). Stories of other worlds! Stories that reject the concept of singular existence and celebrate the hybrid, the mythical, the monstrous and the unexpected other. Through this forced making of myths, Perera and Sidhu give displaced, Indigenous, and undervalued peoples power and strength while challenging modernist ideas of utopia. Through this extravagant display of beauty

and anxiety, the works demand for new knowledges to be presented, while acknowledging traditional knowledges that prompt notions of communal healing and learning (Perera, n.d.).

In another collaborative show put together by Perera and Sidhu at the MacKenzie Art Gallery (*Banners of Empire*, 2019), safe spaces of healing that hybridizes tradition with the colonial other, is imagined by the artists. According to the curator Tak Pham, Perera and Sidhu combine the languages of ancestral technology and science fiction to create a parallel visual universe where visitors can learn and heal through stories of “new empires” created by the artists (Mackenzie Art Gallery, 2019). The exhibition provides an introduction to other stories that exist in the past, the present and the future interweaving histories, cultures, and communities. By returning to traditions of empathy, a sense of collective healing is felt, something that I am interested in exploring through my practice. Perera’s and Sidhu’s works strive for new conversations and possibilities in the impossible colonial narrative for the non-European. Perera and Sidhu plainly and unapologetically celebrate their ancestral knowledges. I especially enjoy Perera’s work for it boldly reveals colonial damage. The hybridity and impossible settings in her work, resist exploitation while returning to stories of ancestors. We are reminded of Bhabha’s assertion that the notion of hybridity, mimicry and ambivalence are products of the colonized others rebelling against the colonizer. Bhabha notes, “The ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into grounds of intervention” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 160). The armor that Perera’s “travellers” wear act as protective battle gear as well as extravagant party wear alluding to being cautious of colonial gaze while celebrating tradition! They wear the invincible armor of possibilities! Perera’s mothers, travellers and ancestors teach us to be aware of the oppressive structures which has led them to imagine and create these spaces

where they might thrive, be whole and free! They remind that viewer that now is the time to imagine, to listen and tell the stories that seemed impossible yesterday, stories of great possibility!

1.5 “a ghost”

I feel full and empty, at once
Home and not home, at once

Tell me, how do I grieve for what I cannot see?

Tell me, how do I love when I'm a haunting?
A shadow of what I once was
Hiding in whispers
Probing, visiting.

Longing

I mimic your hues,
I learn your tales and tongues
Only to feel like a sham
A fraud, a ghost
Probing, visiting.

Longing

If you had asked me to write to you
I would write elaborate made-up stories of ego
Of cosmic balance

But you never ask.

I long to tell you how I feel,

How there is no shame in feeling this feeling
Of what I have lost to be here with you
A loss you will never know

But you never ask.

You never ask because we have never met

You never ask because I'm only a haunting
A visiting, a longing.

You never ask

And that swallows me whole
For I have given up everything I know to belong with you.

1.6 “a lesser”

In the nail salon, sorry is a tool one uses to pander until the word itself becomes a currency. It no longer merely apologizes, but insists, reminds: I'm here, beneath you. It is the lowering of oneself so that the client feels right, superior, and charitable. (Vuong, 2019, p. 91)

The relationships between colonizer and colonized are investigated in detail by philosopher and psychiatrist, Franz Fanon who writes from the perspective of the colonized subject. Fanon investigates the psychology of colonialism in his powerful work, *Black Skin White Masks* (1952). Fanon argues that colonialism is internalized by the colonized giving rise to inferiority complex as well as alienation within colonized peoples. Not only does colonialism oppress the culture of the colonized, according to Fanon it is oppressive to their very existence! Fanon's work stands as a powerful decolonizing text that exposes the erasure and problematizes

assimilation of black people. He writes, “I am a slave not of the “idea” that others have of me but of my own appearance” (Fanon, 1952, p. 88). On assimilating, Fanon declares with unapologetic honesty that for a black man there is only one destiny and it to be white (1952, p. 4). The colonized, long to be “whiter” and be in the position of their oppressors. For Fanon, such is the reality and affect of colonial domination.

The problematic aspect of white washing, assimilation, and heteronormativity, all born out of colonialism are recurring themes explored by Julius Manapul, a Filipino- born Toronto based artist. At first glance, Manapul’s work titled, *Decolonizing Antiques* (Fig. 3), looks like a fancy dinner party at someone’s home. The installation features a dinner table complete with fine china plates and cups. On closer examination however, writing on the antique plates become visible. Even more curious is the fact that the writing is done in basmati rice stained with soy sauce. “Kamayan na!” (Let’s eat with our hands now!) says one of the phrases while the other urges, “Hey naky, nasan ang kanin! (Geez, where is the rice?) Manapul has prepared a dinner specially curated for bodies that occupy the “in between” (Manapul, n.d.).

Figure 3
Decolonizing Antiques



Note: By Julius Manapul, Stained rice on china plate, 2019-20. Photo Courtesy of the artist. Taken from artist’s website with permission (Manapul, n.d.).

There is nothing subtle about Manapul's art practice. The work not only focuses on the hybrid nature of the Filipino culture after colonialism but also sternly reveals the experience of immigration and assimilation when confronted with a loss of culture and erasure. Manapul re-uses colonial antiques, as way of applying colonial aesthetics both to resist Western hegemony as well as to display its history of suppression, homophobia, and racism. In *A Cup of Rice* (Fig. 4), Manapul uses colonial symbolism of "high tea culture" to explore how diasporic people learn to whitewash through such rituals.

Figure 4
A cup of rice



Note: By Julius Manapul, Stained rice on china cup and saucer, 2019-20. Photo Courtesy of the artist. Taken from artist's website with permission (Manapul, n.d.).

The work asks, "How much cream does one need to whiten their tea?" (Manapul, n.d.). In their artist statement Manapul writes:

My research looks at the narratives for many diasporic queer bodies that create unattainable imagined space of lost countries and domestic belongings through colonial pedagogy of knowledge and globalized imperial power that begs the questions, what is sacred? What is worshiped or held up as perfect? What is masculine? Who decides? Who has the power (Manapul, n.d.)?

“In the heart of every assimilative gesture lies the haunting anxiety of social failure”, writes Anne Cheng in her elaborate investigation into the melancholic construction of race. Cheng is interested in how racial melancholia relates to the continual preoccupation with impossible and imagined perfection. This perfection being whiteness for racialized bodies. It is an intense internalization and bodily incorporation of an other (Cheng, 2000, p. 79). For Cheng, this preoccupation leads to both comparison and mimicry in racialized bodies both of which develops into a failed bodily ego. Cheng’s melancholic feels bodily failure because ego is a person’s ideal image of who they are. In this act of mimicking whiteness, the non-western self is lost for this racialized melancholic. Their body becomes a powerless melancholic in perpetual longing for a goal it can never reach for to get this goal would be to deny the racialized body’s entire existence!

1.7 “a discomfort”

The remarkably clean room filled with sunlight, which bounced off the empty white walls to fall directly on the white covers. It illuminated the bed covers giving every inch of it a burning white angelic glow. As I lay there appreciating the beauty of sunlight and the warmth of this particular dream, I realized this was no dream at all. I was suddenly aware of the color of my skin, which seemed exaggerated and highlighted in this blatant white setting. My body looked unusually small and freakishly brown against the vast whiteness of the bedsheets. This was not my room, for my room did not have empty white walls. I would never own white bedsheets! How incredibly foolish, I deliberated.

Everything about this room was exposing me. I felt like one of my own paintings awkwardly hanging on a white gallery wall, its flaws exposed by the florescent lights that did not complement it. The sunlight had betrayed me today. I lay still, cautious to not make a single sound as I pulled the white covers over my bare brown body which was starting to sweat profusely.

A relative had once told me with an incredible amount of honesty, which that I appreciated, "White is not your color, my dear. Dark skinned girls should wear darker colors" Her words that had left me only in a state of slight discomfort until that moment, was growing louder in my head. It played as though on repeat, fattening in size and volume with each re- play. I had to escape this mess of a situation I was in, I told myself.

My eyes scanned the unfamiliar items in the room, items I would never own, until they fell upon my clothes and my backpack on the floor, an eyesore in this starkly plain, clean room. I sighed in relief. In one swift motion I could grab my belongings and make my way to the exit. I studied the door handle. It was familiar. I could twist it without making much noise. My phone! I suddenly realized spotting it on the floor next to my clothes. I could only spot one of my shoes. These were my favorite pair of doc martens that had become extensions of myself since its purchase many years ago. My heart broke as I realized this would be the inevitable consequence and sacrifice I had to make for my recklessness the night before. I said a final goodbye to my doc martens in my head as I slowly pulled my body upwards, realizing that my brain was in agony and my mouth disgustingly dry.

As I started making these slow movements out of bed, to my horror I felt a cold hand on my hot burning skin.

"Oh you're up, wanna grab breakfast?"

1.8 “a translator”

An accent is a refusal to give up the mother or the mother tongue. (Eng & Han, 2019, p. 62)

The intentional distortion of an original writing to fit a narrative, leading to deformation and exclusion of narratives and histories of the other is analysed in theorist Gayatri Spivak’s essay, “The Politics of Translation” (1992). In this text, the reader is asked to confront ways in which European translators fully distort writings of non-European thinkers. A claim of censorship of the non-European and a call for decolonizing through re-invention is sensed in her work. Spivak’s work made me consider assimilation as a type of translation. It helped reveal to me how language may be used as a tool to exercise power, build walls, separate, and exclude!

Spivak opens “The Politics of Translation” by suggesting that language allows us to make sense of things and construct meanings. This “making sense” of ourselves is what essentially produces identity. Spivak’s essay made me wonder, what happens to say, a Bengali text when it is translated to English and presented to a Western audience? How much of its cultural context is edited out and skewed and how does the Bengali author benefit from such a translation? Yes, it becomes more accessible to a wider audience but at what and whose cost? Does it require changing and fine-tuning the various cultural references that are essential to its meaning-making? The power dynamics that are at play during the process of translation especially from a non-European woman’s perspective is analysed by Spivak. It is important not only to consider who is translating and why but also for whom. An even more imperative question is to consider who will suffer or benefit from such translations.

This tendency of European translators to view oriental texts as opportunities to bluntly edit so that they may be presented to European audience is not a translation at all. In fact, it is simply a reimagination of the source text by the translator solely for the pleasure of the audience

of the translator's choosing. It is a censoring of the over-imagined and under-imagined. Authors from the Global South are often victims of such betrayals. Spivak challenges these expectations of translations and the power that English as a language continues to exert. It is important for Spivak that translators consider how different European and non-European traditions are, which means that the translator must immerse themselves into both these cultures during the process of translation. (Spivak, 1992, p. 184).

When translating takes the form of rewriting, it will almost definitely deform the cultural and linguistic contexts of the original text. Spivak maintains that the job of the translator should be to communicate the source text in its own terms as much as possible instead of rewriting it to benefit a target text. She states, "... the translator must surrender to the text" (Spivak, p. 183).

Translating is a way of initiating conversation between cultures and across nations. It is important that we consider all languages as equal during the process of translation and truly understand the complexity of cultures and languages, within which we are immersed. Only through mutual offerings and unbiased learning will humans be able to co-exist in a world steeped in differences and histories that continually divide. If the demand for diasporic people to assimilate in the new home country is a form of translation of the self, we as diasporic subjects must ask: How much of ourselves do we translate to fit a narrative that was never built for us? How much of ourselves do we lose in assimilation when we become our own poor translations? How much rewriting can the mothers in our tongues take before they become complete reimaginings of our choosing?

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, scientist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer makes similar connections between land and language. She writes that to be truly home to a place and become

truly native to it we must learn the language of the land for it is the heart of a culture and a way of seeing the world (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 48).

What then is the true language of diaspora?

1.9 “a revelation”

My parents, both very educated in their respective fields of medicine and botany were keen on making sure their children had access to the best education possible. I was sent to a private, “English- medium”, Catholic school – the best one in our city. There was an unusual rule in my school. The students were only allowed to speak in English while on campus. If you spoke your mother tongue or any other local languages, you would be given a “red card”. The only thing you need to know about a red card was that it was bad news. But how unusual for a school in India, a country home to over twenty different languages to impose such a rule! A large population of Indians speak multiple languages and English is infact spoken by many. I suppose this was new knowledge to a lot of the people I encountered in Canada as I was met with in some cases, absolute shock when I spoke in a language I had grown to think as my own!

It was as though English words were not expected to belong in my mouth.

“Your English is impeccable! How extraordinary!”

“Thank you”

My people were colonized by the best in the biz, I would think to myself.

My appa (grandad) spent his early twenties fighting for India’s Independence, so I can wow folks with my impeccable English. It is indeed quite extra-ordinary.

1.10 “an invisible malady”

The article “Melancholy as an aesthetic emotion” by Emily Brady and Arto Haapala, maintains that melancholy’s dual character and its distinction from sadness and depression, makes it an aesthetic emotion. According to aesthetic philosophers, Emily Brady and Arto Haapala, melancholy that arises from a particular context, creates an aesthetic situation around itself that gives the context a new aesthetic dimension. It is a refined emotion with many qualities and might even be something we desire from time to time as it provides indulgent self-rejection (Brady & Haapala, 2009). Caused by people and places, their claim is that melancholy is not a debilitating mood; instead “involves the pleasure of reflection and contemplation of things we love and long for, so that the hope of having them adds a touch of sweetness that makes melancholy bearable” (Brady & Haapala, 2009). They assure that melancholy is reflective in that its objects are often indirectly experienced through memories and imaginings related to the absent object. “The result is that we are more in harmony with our past, and we can enjoy the feeling of melancholy rather than sink into sadness” (2009). Could diasporic melancholia act as a state or a non-physical place, a psychic place where diaspora can live and feel whole? By working with objects and memories from my past can I access a reflective and productive melancholy that is diasporic in nature?

I also want to draw from Sigmund Freud’s clinical description of melancholia as a pathological condition from 1914 essay, “Mourning and Melancholia”. Unlike Brady and Haapala’s mature, self-reflective, and productive melancholy, Freud’s is one that is self-tormenting, unaware, perpetual, ambivalent, narcissistic, regressive and leaves the “patient” morally bankrupt (Freud, 1914, p. 245). For Freud, both his mourner and his melancholic are responding to loss. While the mourner is able to recognize and let go of the love object, the

unaware and inherently narcissistic melancholic internalizes it into their ego, redirecting all of their libidinal energies into their ego, leaving them morally hollow (1914, p. 257). This leads Freud's melancholic to lose value in themselves and live in perpetual self-tormenting state and one that is not "mature". What interested me most in Freud's analysis of a melancholic was his view that melancholics are inherently narcissistic. He claims that a narcissistic person whose actions revolve around self-gratification, is perhaps more prone to melancholia. According to Freud, even the choice of love object is rooted in a narcissistic need. Furthermore, the melancholic establishes a relation of identification with this loved object. This is perhaps why some of their reactions include self-accusations and self-punishment stemming from the ambivalent relationship with their lost love object (p. 249).

The claim I want to make in bringing these two very different perspectives on melancholy is to analyse them in terms of the melancholy felt by diaspora. The love object for a diasporic subject is perhaps the idea of a home. However, this imagined ideal singular home is what complicates this relationship. Dualities and "double lives" are feelings that migrant journeys share and hold. These feelings and their imagined possibility for a singular ideal home may lead to a fragmented self. It is a state where hope and despair learn to live in harmony, a peculiar kind of melancholy, loss and longing. Through my art practice I examine this grief as a way of redefining and exploring possibilities of what melancholia might offer to diaspora.

Scholar and cultural theorist Anne Cheng in her seminal work, *The Melancholy of Race* (2000) speaks of a similar examination of racial mourning. Her goal unlike Freud's is not to resolve the grief but to redefine a profoundly different notion of mourning altogether (Cheng, 2000, p. 65). According to Cheng, understanding racial melancholia must extend beyond just affective description of individual sadness as it is a kind of despair that constitutes the identity

and shapes the subjectivity of racialized people (Cheng, 2000, p. 79). In this way a racial subject and a diasporic subject are similar in that their melancholia is linked to their cultural and collective identity formation. This formed identity does not fit the imagined and impossible norms of perfection they are often assimilating to and trying to make a home in. The racialized and diasporic subjects become preoccupied by this idea of assimilation to feel at home so much that they begin to bodily incorporate these imagined ideals to feel whole through mimicry and comparison. This bodily incorporation leads to a failed bodily ego that is full of loss and longing. The ego is left to grieve as it constantly tries to balance rejection and incorporation. In its journey to feel at home, the bodily ego instead is left feeling unseen, like a ghost, with haunting melancholy, her stories left unheard. Therefore, is it not important to grieve this loss that diasporic subjects so profoundly feel yet never speak of?

In their collaborative book, *Racial Melancholia and Racial Dissociation* (2019), literary critic David Eng and psychotherapist Shinhee Han write about how the experience of immigration itself is based on the structure of mourning. According to them when a person leaves their country of origin either voluntarily or involuntarily, they must grieve and mourn for the love objects they are leaving behind. These love objects may be their families, their land, their identity, culture, status in community, and so on. According to Freud, the way a mourner can heal is through finding new love objects to which the ego can attach. However according to Eng and Han, the western social structure denies a new potential love object for the migrant (Eng & Han, 2019, p. 48). Furthermore, they assert that the losses that the first-generation immigrants fail to resolve may be traumatically passed down to the second generation (2019, p. 48). Eng and Han like Cheng, propose a reframing of how melancholia has been understood. Instead of

thinking of it as a self-absorbed, inhibiting “mood” it could act as a productive mechanism to help diasporic subjects resurrect their identity (p. 61).

Could my work offer this space for diasporic experiences? How do I prioritize care and healing in these spaces of mourning?

“I’ve read that it takes two to three generations to overcome trauma, often more”, poet and writer C.E Gatchalian observes in his work, *Double Melancholy* (2019). He goes on to admit, “Systemic trauma is in my DNA. I can bleach my skin, refuse to speak Tagalog, but I cannot wish away my people’s oppression. It’s lodged inside me, manifesting itself in the anxiety, obsessiveness, paranoia, and feelings of worthlessness I confront every day”

(Gatchalian, 2019, p. 124). I suppose the ultimate question that I wish to ask myself, is if I’m looking to feel liberated from colonial trauma through this study? From the trauma I carry across borders, of my ancestors? I agree with Gatchalian that the colonial meaning and conceptualization of individual liberation is not the answer (2019, p. 127). Perhaps the study of melancholic processes in my journey is simply to feel visible and heard as a complicated brown body in continual journey of home keeping, in grief. By navigating the “in-between” of white and Indian binary and exploring what it may have to offer me, I want to tell myself and others like me that it’s okay to feel this way. Let’s mourn, so we might heal. Let’s grieve so our children don’t carry our loss! Let’s wash away our losses in the river of melancholia so we may emerge as whole.

1.11 “an eavesdropper”

“You’re so well adjusted, I’m impressed,” the lady at the cash register said to me. Nodding and laughing nervously, I blurted, “thanks!”

It had been a particularly long day but I was almost home, “Thanks?” Why am I thanking her?” I thought to myself as I stepped onto the subway from a very green St Patrick Station. Forty-five minutes of this followed by a forty-minute bus ride and I would be in the comforts of my home impressing absolutely nobody with my well-adjusted ways. I attempted to remember the contents of my fridge to envision what I might cook when I was home. Maybe I could whip up a quick channa curry I thought, recalling my mother’s stunning display of cooking skills awaiting my arrival from high school each day. “You make us all proud” she would say everyday almost obsessively, as she served me a plate and took a seat beside me, watching me finish my entire meal.

On the connecting ttc bus ride home, a boy had taken the seat next to mine. He was a brown boy, the color of his skin a shade darker than my own. As I sat there wondering which part of India he might be from, his phone went off. A bollywood song! I smiled. “Ah, ammae”¹ he answered! And proceeded to explain his first day at work to his mother, in a language that was familiar. It was in Malayalam, my mother tongue! I quietly rejoiced! I hadn’t heard Malayalam in some time and was instantly reminded of its complexity, its roundedness, and the weight each word carried. It made your tongue twist and turn in peculiar ways. I often took pleasure in the appalling looks I would receive from my white friends when I spoke it. This is my superpower, I would think to myself, to taunt my friends with Malayalam words that they could never hope to pronounce. Written Malayalam was equally mesmerizing, a treat to sore eyes. All our alphabets are treated equal; we did not capitalize or prioritize, so if you looked at a Malayalam sentence you would see words existing simply, as equals; holding each other in harmonious collaboration.

¹ Amma means mother in Malayalam, Ammae is a way of calling out to the mother. It has more emotion.

I could tell from the boy's accent and the conversation he was sharing with his amma that he had not been here long but intended to stay long. He sounded full of hope, reassuring her about their financial situation. He told her he missed her cooking. He missed his sister, his father and grandmother. He missed the smells of home. It smells far too clean here, he complained. The volume on my airpods were all the way down at this point, as I shamelessly listened in on this intimate exchange between mother and son. He must not know I speak the language, I considered. I imagined the sacrifices this boy's family might have made so he could move to Canada for a "better life", the conversations they will now share only over Whatsapp calls. He will adapt, he will assimilate, just as I have. He will cut his name short so his coworkers might feel less intimidated by him. He will try mac n cheese for the first time and have deep regrets. He will learn new traditions, celebrate holidays that mean very little to him and befriend people with wonderous plain names. He will learn to mimic accents and etiquettes to look less Indian. He will spend hours trying to replicate his mother's cooking and save every penny, every sick day so he can make a trip back to India at least once a year. I debated on if I should perhaps after his phone call, tell him how similar our stories are, tell him how I have an amma just like his with exceptional cooking and worrying abilities, and how in fact life as he knew it would eventually, completely change. But I did not. I quietly exited the bus saying a soundless farewell in my head to the boy who sat next to me on a ttc bus, on a Tuesday evening.

കാണാം²

² Translates to "see you around" in English but with a hopeful emotion attached to it and therefore to "will definitely see you around".

Chapter Two: Methodology

Figure 5

Detail of “feeling feelings”



Note: Detail of Installation with braided hair and painted frames, 2022. Photo Courtesy of the artist.

2. Introduction

We are always taking in and refusing, incorporating, and setting limits, on what we allow into our bodies. The same can be said for other bodily practices, for how we grow into our desires, for how we select what parts of the world we will and will not take in, for how the world passes through us. (Singh, 2018, p. 55)

In this chapter, I will discuss the methods that helped me navigate through my investigation. The format of this section, much like the rest of my paper will prioritize stories and poems which themselves act a powerful and significant decolonising method throughout my work. It is a creative and constructive response to the literature on diaspora and melancholia. I think through each method with the help of this personal voice.

2.1 Research Creation and Braiding as Method

In the concluding chapter of her book, *How to make Art at the end of the world: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (2019), cultural theorist and art scholar, Natalie Loveless presents a careful investigation into knowledge creation through arts-based research and teaching known as Research-Creation. Loveless argues why this type of research is important and imagines what the university could offer through these new modes of thinking and learning. As the title of the text suggests, Loveless is interested in how new researchers might situate themselves and “inhabit” spaces in the academy. If the university’s goal is to uplift and inspire, Loveless claims that new modes of thinking are required to question the world differently (Loveless, 2019, p. 101). For Loveless, these practices and methods are consequential because they nurture and encourage to act and intervene, while working to reorient scholars as well as their daily practices (2019, p. 101).

By challenging the normative research methods prevalent in the academy, arts-based research makes us ask what form might best fit the research. Loveless questions if writing and publication are always the best and only way to render research. She insists on this crucial

importance of form and a need to denaturalize research norms. Loveless propounds, “Research-creation mobilizes the artistic as a sensibility and approach attentive to how *form* makes *worlds*, and does so specifically within the university-as-site” (Loveless, 2019, p. 102). For Loveless, arts-based research is a reshaping of knowledge-making spaces within the academy (p. 102)!

Loveless reminds researchers to ask: How can I care? and confesses that this type of research can impact social and material conditions through aesthetic encounters that show us how to care and to care differently. It is a knowledge creation that assures that artist-researchers are care filled and capable of caring, all the while opening us to new avenues of nurturing. It is driven by curiosity, commitment to the ethical, intervention of decolonial, queer and feminist practices and a burning desire to transform in order to ask differently so that we can tell differently (Loveless, 2019, p. 105).

The question of, “Who are you making art for and what role will it play in the story of the world?” has never been more important than right now. I want to consider a response for internalized racism and racialized envy in migrant experiences and ask myself, how can I shift the narrative? How I can tell stories that don’t rob me and make me feel shame, but instead address and acknowledge these sometimes-uncomfortable feelings?

2.2 “a cliché”

“So, he has golden hair?” my mom inquired over the phone.

“It’s called blonde hair, mom” I announced, irritated.

“It looks like gold” she responded simply, with immediate honesty.

I quickly glanced at my partner and for a brief second, I was filled with intolerable jealousy. Pfft... Goldilocks, I scoffed under my breath almost unconsciously feeling my own hair and being nervously aware of how especially coarse it was that particular day.

A memory I keep close to my heart is one of routine hair braiding. I still remember the feeling of the edge of the comb hitting the very top of my forehead and then making its way swiftly down the back of my head, carefully parting my unnecessarily thick and curly black hair in two. This was a practice that occurred daily before school and its sole practitioner was my mother, the only person I trusted my hair with. After the partitioning, came the braiding itself which was an act that involved a succession of quick hair tugging and hair pulling. I felt a comfort in its discomfort. At this point the sensorial and enchanting aroma of coconut oil would kick in. And before I could thoroughly take the entire performance in and enjoy its intricacy, I'd notice she was on the other side mirroring the activity in perfect symmetry. I would marvel at her quickness and watch her fingers turn the mess of my hair into perfection, rich with pattern. I would run my fingers across these flawless symmetrical shapes that was now a part of me but somehow felt alien and beautiful. She had done it again, she had disciplined my unruly, stubborn hair.

"Now you are ready to take over the world," she would whisper, and I would be off to school.

How cliché and reckless of my mother to be stunned by the obvious beauty of my partner's hair. I felt betrayed.

I felt my braids being undone.

2.3 Personal Voice as Method

Who will be lost in the story we tell ourselves? Who will be lost in ourselves? A story, after all, is a kind of swallowing. To open a mouth, in speech, is to leave only the bones, which remain untold. (Vuong, 2019, p. 43)

My poetry and writing do what my hands are incapable of making into a physical object. My poems are intentionally naïve, romanticize longing and envy and is in acceptance of trauma, both diasporic and racial in nature. Writing has helped me navigate through a lot of my research questions, pushing them further, making connections and considering conclusions. In a way, words have acted as a driving force in helping me think through my ideas, think through the theories that I'm investigating, assembling them, and coming up with revelatory moments for myself. These words have given me space to think, move, breathe.

2.4 "a blue"

Something in your eyes
Something in the blue of your eyes
That evoked a lack in me

Something about that very shade of blue
That reminded me
Of the hottest part of a flame that I'm told I could not touch
Of oceans that I'm told could drown
Of skies that I'm told could devour
Of days that I'm told could devastate

As though you held precious stones in your eyes
That were on fire and could shatter at any moment
Exploding into bright blue flames
So exquisitely threatening
So abnormally forgiving

In complete contrast to my earthly hues of black and brown
Something peculiar about your shades

Of white and blue
That revealed a risk
A warning

Something other worldly about how you held so much
But said so little
Something so blue about you
That reminded me of all the things I could never touch

2.5 Return to Ritual and Mother as Method

In *The disappearance of rituals* (2020), cultural philosopher and theorist, Byung-Chul Han describes rituals as a symbolic technique of making oneself at home in the world. For Han, rituals function to transform one from being in the world to being “at home” in the world (Han, 2020, p. 2). Rituals offer stability through their self-sameness and their repetitiveness, he asserts (2020, p. 3). Furthermore, rituals prioritize deep attention attained through intense repetition in which past and present are brought together as a form of completion where order and values of a community are experienced and solidified. In my art practice, I reference returning to rituals and incorporating ritualistic qualities as a way of becoming at home in academia. The story presented below demonstrate how the ritual of naming one’s home could be an immensely transformative experience offering stability and a sense of belonging. In the poem that follows, I also start to draw connections between ritual and mother. Robin Kimmerer echoes this idea of ritual in her writing by noting that the power of ceremony lies in the fact that it marries the mundane with the sacred. “The water turns to wine, the coffee to a prayer”, she writes (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 37).

2.6 “a homemaker”

One of the first things I noticed after my move to Canada was that the homes here did not have names. How odd I would think to myself to not give your home a name; but later was told that in fact naming your home was the odd thing to do. I considered this for a moment and recalled all the homes my family had moved through in India over the years, I remembered them, through their names. Each name attached to memories from different stages of my life –

“Visakh”, where I was born, my only memories being ones from photographs and stories my mother shared with me. “Shiva Shakthi”, where I had a plethora of neighbor friends and an extravagant swing set. I also remember I was allowed to draw on my bedroom walls in this home. “Parvathy Palace”, where I had far too many memories to put down in two sentences. And finally, “Akashdeep”, where I would say my goodbyes to my family to move to Canada to study, unaware that this short-term move would extend over ten years, unaware that this would be the last home in India I would live in.

I also recall each naming being a more compelling task than the last! “Akashdeep” in particular was a tremendous task and called for much thought and consideration as this was the home my dad designed for years in his head before seeing his vision come to life. “This will be our forever home, our dream home!” he insisted and announced regularly before the construction of the house had even begun!

He would name his dream home after two very important people in his life, my brother and my mother; “Akashdeep” which combined both their names, Akash and Deepa, would translate in English to “Lights in the Sky”. This was my father’s special place, where he would watch his parents grow old, watch his children grow old and witness himself growing old with my mother. However, for me it was the home we had lived in before our move into Akashdeep which was most memorable. A smaller home and one where I had spent most of my childhood in, that had a special place in my heart. My parents and grandparents had kept the name of this home a secret from me, and it was my grandad’s idea to reveal it on my 6th birthday. I remember taking my grandad’s hand as he guided me to the very front of the house and through its gates to a side wall which

had a sheet of paper covering a small section of it. “Are u ready for the grand reveal?” he said, motioning to me to rip the paper off the wall. In shiny black granite, it read “Parvathy Palace” in muted gold lettering. *They had named our home after me?* I looked at my grandad confused, my cheeks burning up. “This is your home, your castle; my princess, my ammu” he assured.

Perhaps naming your home is an odd thing to do, but what a wonderful, odd ritual it is to transform a house to a home, breathing life into its inanimate features by naming it after what you hold dear, after what gives life meaning. Afterall, isn't a home already alive with people, memory, and love?

Figure 6
Photograph



Note: Photo credit: amma

2.6 “a ritual”

Dear amma, what is ritual to you?

What is ritual if not continual commitment.

What is ritual if not continual endurance.

What is ritual to you?

Love's re-telling,

Stories of home, stories of survival; told on repeat?

Love's re-singing,

Songs of etiquette, songs of routine; sung on repeat?

What is ritual to you?

What is ritual if not continual care.

What is ritual if not continual collaboration.

Ammae, what is ritual to you?

What is ritual if not your mother's truth,

Her knowledges, her tongues,

Her memory,

Her colours, her travels.

What is ritual if not your mother's wounds,

Her inventory,

Her hair, her body, her magic

That she leaves with you,

to grow into, to nourish, to fill.

So that one day you may have a color of your own.
It may be a shade different from your mother's,
But her color will haunt you in your dreams.

Ammae, what is ritual if not you?
Ritual is magic, as are you.

2.7 Touching and arts-based research as Method

In her text *Politics of Touch* (2006) phenomenologist and aesthetic philosopher, Erin Manning illuminates the profound qualities and power of touch which she associates with “engendering”. For Manning, engendering is to make, to produce and to potentialize. Touch is a form of engendering because it is a movement that never ends. Much like the present, it is constantly fleeting because with each touch, a new present presence is made. Manning writes, “When we reach toward to touch, we reach toward that which is in-formation or trans-formation. This reaching-toward is an engendering that qualitatively alters the relation between being and be-coming, alerting us to the potential variables that combine to give us a clue as to “what a body can do” (Manning, 2006, p. 85).

In the article, “Speaking in Tongues: The Uncommon Ground of Arts Based Research”, researchers John Howell White, Charles R. Garoian and Elizabeth Garber assert the importance of seeing craft as a way of exploring the ethics of the visual arts and art education. They stress that arts-based research requires the practitioner to move outside of oneself to address the changing conditions of the outside world (White et al., 2010, p. 141). Trained in oil painting, my practice has moved from a traditional fine art technique to embroidery work, which brings craft and labour to the forefront. It is a way in which I have been able to connect with matrilineal

memory like never before. The story presented below investigates the transformative potential of touching and not touching our mothers and grandmothers.

2.8 “a touching”

A few months ago, my mother announced over the phone that she was going to send me two of her sarees from India as a gift. The pandemic had put a stopper on my yearly visits to India and I suppose my mother sensed that I needed a big hug in the form of two very long sarees. The sarees took about two weeks to arrive by mail, but the wait felt like two years. When the package finally arrived, I maniacally ripped through the coarse textured cardboard box to reach two carefully packaged silk and cotton sarees, delicate and airy to the touch. The sarees had been worn and they looked and felt worn. As I inspected them further, I noticed a little rip on one and a tiny stain on the other. I couldn't help but picture when my mother wore these sarees. I thought about the food she perhaps cooked and ate with it draped over her body, the things she touched, the people she was with. I felt a profound urge to respond to this piece through embroidery, an intense need to touch this saree that was so frequently touched by my mother whose touch I deeply craved for. I wanted to touch my mother's saree repeatedly with a needle, and thread my stories with her's. Stories that yearned to reach her, to touch her. This led me to begin the labour-intensive process of hand embroidering into my mother's red saree which would demand from me all my time and much of my body for several weeks.

The saree is passed down as an object of nurture, yet it is stained, tired and worn out and these stains are in turn touched, embraced, and loved; accepted almost as an implication, and eventually repeated as a pattern.

2.9 Decolonial melancholy as Method

In her book, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations and Contexts* (2009), Margaret Kovach, an Indigenous scholar and writer highlights the importance of Indigenous methodologies. Within her writing, Margaret Kovach illuminates the importance of applying a decolonial lens by proclaiming, “Much of what the dominant society perceives as legitimate knowledge is generated by a rather small, homogenous group of people on formal institutions of higher learning” (Kovach, 2009, p. 79). These have been our story-makers and tellers. Multi-media artist Panya Clark’s research creation relies on Indigenous knowledges and storytelling as research. Clark’s multiplicitous approach and vocabularies leave room for “other stories” while building new public memory. Much of Indigenous knowledges are passed down through stories and their retelling, which is a major theme in Clark’s research. When we treat stories as living entities, it becomes crucial to feed and nurture them in order to keep them alive (Clark, n.d.)!

Panya Clark’s research urges that art has the potential to start to build bridges especially in the cultural realm; and move against the grain of cultural differences. For Clark, it is important to be able to see through each other’s lenses. Clark’s work acknowledges multiple vocabularies and the significance of leaving space for other voices to be heard. For Clark, having a dialogue means being able to speak each other’s language (Clark, n.d.). This process involves the relearning of social skills that might have been lost over the years while employing practices that are needed in the world, that go against the white cube museum rhetoric. In her chapter “Going Forward Means Looking Back”, Kovach illustrates how Indigenous knowledges were not only excluded from Western thought but also was seen as “inferior” and superstitious leading to exploitation of Indigenous culture (Kovach, 2009, p. 77).

On engaging in a decolonial methodology Kovach claims, “The decolonizing embodiment is a holistically layered process where the theoretical positioning intersects profoundly with the personal conflicts of navigating two distinctive worlds” (Kovach, 2009, p. 83). When I ask myself “why decolonial”, a single image unfalteringly makes an appearance in my brain. The image of my grandfather in his early twenties locked up in jail somewhere in Northern India for standing up and wanting independence from the British, a story I grew up hearing from him. I often wondered how this event affected him, affected me. The trauma he carried from being colonized for being Indian in India. His trauma and his stories which I now carry with me. “I wish I was there with you, appa.”³ I used to tell him when he told me his stories “don’t be silly” he’d say to me, “it was a fight, not a choice.” What do you do with this trauma? Do you mourn? What does this mourning do to you for this is a peculiar type of mourning, one that destabilizes you in your core. It changes you, it changes the way you see the world.

Colonial trauma is a type of rewiring. It is a baggage that has made space in your home and in your story. It grows in size like an unwanted tumour. It feeds off your very existence and your core. It tells you your stories don’t matter. It robs you of your tongue, your culture, your skin. The task of decolonizing therefore launches within and projects outward. I take on this task of telling stories of brown travel, of brown loss, of brown mothers. Armed with ritual and a return to ancestral practices, I wish to shatter colonial narratives and racist patterns that plague our communities. I wish to feel whole. I wish to feel empowered in the brown skin that my mother gave me. In the brown skin that my grandfather proudly walked in. Decolonial melancholy therefore is a method that allows me to make space for lived experiences of diaspora

³ I called my grandfather “appa”

and excluded voices to mourn their cultural losses and colonial trauma. I want to mourn elaborately so I may heal elaborately!

2.10 “a rogue”

“I know about the boy”, my grandad declared.

I was stunned at my grandad’s ability to retain information like this after his unfortunate encounter with alzheimer’s which had taken a stern and determined hold over him, guarding his memories day and night. These revelations would come randomly to him and the moments he chose to blurt them out were cherished by my family. I struggled to find the right words while keeping eye contact. I suddenly found myself distracted by his eyes that had taken a lighter gray color in complete contrast to his dark brown skin, complementing his hair that was white as paper.

As I marvelled and questioned if there was a white whiter than this, he blurted out, “you know... I don’t care much about politics anymore”

“Oh?” is the best I could come up with.

My grandad was in his early twenties when India won their Independence from the British. He was a marxist at the time. Growing up my favorite bedtime story was simply listening to him talk about the days he “fought the british”, his rogue days. He had even famously dropped out of school for this. I would marvel at the surreal life he lived while cooking up elaborate images of a younger leaner version of him breaking laws with exquisite style. The stories would evolve and change with each re telling, ageing and growing as I did. But I loved them no less. As I grew older and busier, these stories stopped frequenting my life and new ones took their place.

But in that moment a multitude of memories rushed at me like a tsunami.

You know...I was a spy for the communist party in India
You know...I was put in jail, in my own country for wanting freedom and basic rights
You know...They broke my arm simply because I raised it against them
You know...I fought them for my family, for us, for you
My voice broke as I was flooded with overwhelming images of staggering sacrifice and shattering strength.

"I never thought my granddaughter would be the one who would help me truly reconcile with the British, heh", he said abruptly, placing his hand over mine. It took me a second to fully tune back into reality, leaving these fragments of a life I had never lived but desired; memories that weren't mine but his, to realize what he had meant.

"But he's not British!" I shrieked in terror.

2.11 "a melancholia"

The thing is, I don't want my sadness to be othered from me just as I don't want my happiness to be othered. They're both mine. I made them, dammit.
What if my sadness is actually my most brutal teacher? (Vuong, 2019, p. 181)

"You are always so happy" someone once said to me.
I'm actually very sad, I thought to myself, but fake laughed very loudly to acknowledge and confirm the remark.

Maybe not *very* sad but the right amount of sad. If that makes sense.

Alone, I cried often.

With people, I laughed in excess.

All my life I have done this - Laughed very loudly even when the situation did not call for it. I think perhaps it was my way of screaming, of being less soundless.

To hear myself, remind myself if not anyone else that I'm here, full of sound, full of words that refuse to spill out of my mouth. Full of thoughts that crowd and cloud my brain. Full of me.

Why am I so ashamed of my voice, my thoughts, my story? Why am I so scared of being misread when all I do is read?

"I heard her voice, and it turned my world upside down", someone said about their daughter's birth, tears in their eyes. Is this *really* how a mother feels? How is that even possible, I considered while longing for such an intense feeling. A feeling so indescribable, so unimaginably hypnotic that your life itself did not matter to you anymore, not as much. It will never be the same again. It is flipped, it is made upside down; an angle I had never seen. A perspective I longed to feel. I wondered if every mother felt this way even if briefly, even if for a quarter of a second?

"I heard her voice and it turned my world upside down"
I obsessed over this for weeks after it crossed my mind.

Did my mother feel this way?

Does my mother feel this way now? Because then, it meant that I was heard after all. Even if it was when I was most helpless and small.

My mother heard me.

Right after they severed the cord that held me braided within her for months as she made me human.

Did she cry when she heard me cry my first cry?

What does it mean to mother?

What does the "mother" in mother tongue mother?

What does the "mother" in motherland mother?

These mothers birth
a beginning in each of us, a belonging
a return to our roots.
Of abstracted memory, of elusive hope.

It began here
Your journey and mine
A warm place,
the birthplace,
the place I return to.

It started here
Your language and mine
A twisted anchor of a tongue,
the mother tongue
the tongue I return to

My mother, my first home
All my stories
Of tenacious hair braiding,
Of incessant home making, of inaudible home sickness
lead to you.

Dear amma, what is home if not you?

My world was decentered the day I left your body to become whole
As our bodies untouched, a new journey began

One where I move away from you,
One where I start to resemble you,

One where I search for what you gave me
Everywhere, in everyone

Mother, how I long to surrender my body to you as you did to me at my birth.
Mother, how I long to love you the way you have loved me.

Mother, what is home if not you?

Chapter 3: Studio Work & Exhibition

Figure 7

Detail of “a touching”



Note: Hand Embroidery on mother's saree, 2021. Photo courtesy of the artist.

3. Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss my studio explorations and my interdisciplinary practice that center, oil paintings, digital collage work, performative film work, embroidery, writing and installation. I will also briefly talk about my thesis exhibition, “home sick” (2022) at the Graduate Gallery (Fig. 8). I started this graduate school journey as an oil painter. In my first year, I explored new materials like turmeric and black hair. I then became very interested in braiding hair and in making culturally hybrid objects and imagery. It was a way my lived reality could move toward my mother, my archive. Around this time, I was preparing to marry my fiancé, so I started to research marriage rituals in both Euro-Western and Indian weddings which compelled me to explore contrasting visual elements and consider creating objects that combined both cultures. Embroidery made its way into my practice soon after, which changed everything for me.

Figure 8
Home sick



Note: Exhibition view at Graduate Gallery, 2022. Photo credit: Gabriel George.

The final work I did towards this research was embroidering into my mother's sarees which she sent me from India (Fig. 9). Sarees that themselves had crossed borders to reach me. This work for me, held most meaning as its making felt like a reaching toward and instilled in me a sense of completion and healing. All this reaching toward to finally touch something that *she* had touched.

Figure 9
A touching, installed at home sick.



Note: Hand Embroidery on saree. Installed at exhibition, “home sick”, 2022. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

3.1 Blue-black Braid and Braiding

The act of braiding black hair and the image of the blue-black braid has been the focus of my fascination and subject of much of my research work. Every time I envisioned a thick black braid, I saw my mother at the other end of it. This led me to explore the memories of hair braiding and the value of the blue-black braid. I found myself painting and drawing braids, writing about braids, performing with braids, telling stories about braids, photographing braids and even recreating braids in Augmented Reality.

For me, hair braiding and my blue-black braids act as a link to the land I was born on, to my mother and her mother, to stories facilitated through braiding, and ultimately to my archive. The act of braiding and unbraiding for me, is a way of reaching toward and away from my inventory and my archive. A way of feeling full and empty. Consequently, the braid itself becomes an embodied idea and an archive that I can never stop desiring for myself.

The slowness in braiding, in painting, in performance, in storytelling, in embroidery and in most decorative arts and mark making prioritize care and obligation.

to weave,

to braid,

to paint,

to texture,

to write,

to perform,

to care.

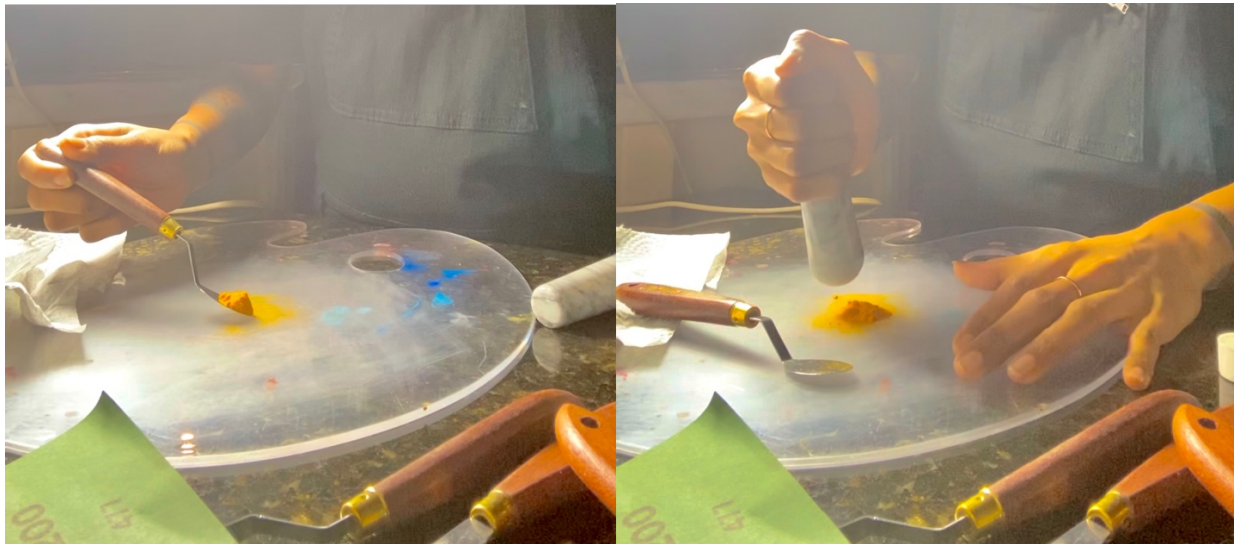
This is the type of art making that I aim to practice. One of care.

3.2 New Material Explorations and Oil Painting

One of the first works I made during my MFA was a five-minute performative film titled, *Paint making with my Ammamma*⁴ (2020). At the center of my research was turmeric (Fig. 10). The film features a phone conversation with my grandmother as well my performance of making oil-based paint using powdered turmeric. The conversation between my grandmother and me in my mother tongue, Malayalam is intentionally left untranslated to emphasize the exclusivity and inclusivity of language. My grandmother tells me about the innumerable qualities of turmeric; the traditional Hindu ceremonies that revolve around it, its medicinal properties, and its significance in the kitchen of Indian homes!

Figure 10

Paint making with my Ammamma, stills



Note: Stills from performative film. Artist performs with turmeric, walnut oil, glass palette, spice grinder on her kitchen counter, 2020. Photo Courtesy of the artist.

Every year my mother sends me a giant Ziploc bag of bright yellow home-ground turmeric, all the way from India! My intention was to incorporate a spice that has primarily

⁴ Ammamma means grandmother

found its place in a kitchen, within my art practice, changing its functionality. The video is shot on my kitchen counter to reference this. In the film, I am seen adding walnut oil to small amounts of turmeric while vigorously grinding it to bind the oil base and powdered turmeric together, utilizing a method similar to making actual oil paints from dyes. A spice grinder from my kitchen and a glass palette from my studio were used in the process (Fig. 11).

Figure 11
Experiments with homemade turmeric paint



Note: Turmeric powder ground with walnut oil in spice grinder and applied on canvas, on kitchen counter, 2020. Photo Courtesy of the artist.

Many things became clear at the end of my new material exploration but the most important one was the realization that turmeric could not be substituted for oil paint which had been my initial goal. It was also impossible to use it as a background to paint on top of as its brightness was unmatched. The process really revealed the material complexity and its demand to be treated as such! What became clear to me towards the end of my experimentation was how vibrant the

color of turmeric was when applied on canvas! It was like a highlighter had exploded all over the canvas! It was magical! And yes, everything that it touched turned yellow! Literally Magic!

Figure 12
second thoughts



Note: Painting, oil on canvas, 36" x 48", 2021. Photo Courtesy of the artist.

My experiments with actual turmeric ended there, but it led me to create a series of portraits that were inspired by its materiality, texture, color and functionality. This exploration revealed to me a path that could decolonize my painting practice. I became especially interested in the Hindu rituals that turmeric is used in! The paintings, *hair etiquette* (2021), *second thoughts* (2021) (Fig. 12) and *undone, undone* (2021) reference the Hindu practice of applying turmeric

paste to various parts of the body (Fig. 13). These paintings tell stories about ritual, hair braiding, symmetry, pattern, and discipline. I used a peculiar technique of layering paints, reminiscent of pointillism for the face and hands of my figures in complete contrast to the background, clothing, etc., which intentionally remains simplified and flattened. This process of repetition in paint application and the persistence of painting to be slow and meditative, I found especially healing. I like to think of my figures as wearing an armor of turmeric, an adornment of ceremony and being empowered by traditional practices. This for me is a way to honor my skin and my roots.

Figure 13

Paintings installed at home sick



Note: *hair etiquette* (2021), *second thoughts* (2022) and *sitting proper* (2020) installed at exhibition (2022), oil on canvas. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

The diptych titled, *Sitting Proper* (2020) is a reference to marriage portraits commissioned during the Renaissance that signified a union between husband and wife; male and female; masculine and feminine. Through the insertion of the same brown figure taking on both roles, I am critiquing these marriage and gender norms through gaze and body language.

Framed in symmetry, the arched pattern, reminiscent of South Asian Art, denies fetishism and the white gaze through the use of desaturated and muted colors. The paintings push notions of self-stereotyping, calling attention to beauty norms. I aim to empower racialized bodies through representations of ritual while celebrating symbols of beauty like the brown skin and the black braid, which have been undermined in my experiential knowledge by eurocentrism. I wield ancestral knowledges and practices as a way of offering, of healing, and of sharing.

Figure 14
feeling feelings ,detail



Note: Turmeric powder from the motherland, displayed on white plinth, 2022. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

The short film collaboration led me to have more frequent conversations with my grandmother over the phone. These were very effective and something I now look forward to on a regular basis. A whole new way of research through storytelling. Who knew research could be fun!? Her stories have led me to look into South Asian art, the many patterns and especially use of symmetry, the architecture of Hindu temples, the sculptures and ornamentation, the fashion and clothing. My grandmother and I have since collaborated on many projects together. Her

voice and trust pushed me to explore directions in my work that at one point was unimaginable to reach.

Figure 15
feeling feelings



Note: Installation with powdered turmeric, painted frames, braided hair, red string, performative film projected on wall, 2022. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

It would have been remiss of me not to include the aforementioned turmeric-magic (Fig. 14) at my thesis exhibition, “home sick”. The installation, *feeling feelings* (2022) (Fig. 15) is a deconstruction of the most crucial elements that make my art practice. At the center on a white plinth is powdered turmeric, straight from the mother land, its glow hard to miss. “It looks like gold”, a viewer said about the turmeric which strangely, is how my mother described my

partner's blonde hair.⁵ Red frames are hung low on the walls around the turmeric. The frames also appear to disrupt the rhetoric of white cube gallery as some are placed on the floor. Some of these frames are empty, some are full, and some have artificial braided hair coming out of them. This sense of feeling full and empty is echoed in this installation and throughout the exhibition as a reference to double consciousness in diasporic journeys. The braided hair is a reaching toward and the installation is an attempt to decolonize white cube narratives. Additionally, on the wall is a projection of a performative film titled *embroidering amma* (2021), which documents the process of embroidering the words "amma" in Malayalam on a white veil.⁶ The artificiality in the braided hair and other objects in my exhibition, "home sick" (2022) speak to the fact that these are in fact memories and not reality.

3.3 Digital Collage and Hybrid Experiments

In my digital photo collage works, I find myself photographing black braids using various light mixing techniques and digital projections. Colonial ideology projects fixed meaning onto the other. To challenge this, I juxtapose and braid in colonial imagery, the all-encompassing white gaze, from renaissance paintings with objects and memories of loss and longing. Having started as an oil painter, it was important to me to address the power and exclusivity exercised by the history of painting in my photo series, *strictly braids* (2021) (Fig. 16). Having taken an Italian Renaissance course in my undergrad studies, it was crucial for me to see my black braid next to digital reproductions of renaissance paintings.

⁵ I write about this in one of my short stories. This is also part of a performative film that plays on the opposite walls at the exhibition

⁶ Explained in detail in chapter "Practicing Care"

Figure 16
strictly braids



Note: Digital prints on paper, framed, 2021. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

I intended on investigating how my braids, which often represents myself and my embodied inventory and archive, re-orient and re-position themselves with regard to overwhelming whiteness in art educational structures. The process of digitally projecting these colonial images helped me decolonize through manipulation, distortion and mirroring while critiquing eurocentric aesthetic values and its continual prevalence. The blue-black braids are intentionally framed in the foreground while these exaggerated colonial images occupy the background. We are reminded of Bhabha's assertion that the notion of hybridity, mimicry and ambivalence are products of the colonized others rebelling against the colonizer. Bhabha notes, "The ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into grounds of intervention" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 160).

The photo series *pallu, pattu* (2021) is a photo collage with my mother's saree, braided hair, and white shoelace (Fig. 17). This work celebrates different cultural objects reaching toward each other to become and take space as a hybrid object which may speak to experiences of diaspora. Themes of duality, mirroring, repetition, and symmetry are also explored. At my

thesis exhibition, *pallu, pattu* was hung by the title wall as an introductory piece to my show as I felt this series conveyed the “painterly” approach to my practice. “These are so precious, jewel-like, very intimate... tender, almost!”, a viewer said to me about the series. The jewel-like and precious quality of the piece may speak to the personal and emotional narratives that are explored in my show and practice.

Figure 17
pallu, pattu



Note: Digital photo collage printed on canvas, framed, 2021. Photo Courtesy of the artist.

3.4 Performing with Memories

My performative film seeks out lost memories that reveal intimacy as well as estrangement. By performing with sounds, cherished objects, and memories from my past I wish to investigate loss, longing and displaced melancholia. Five performative films were projected onto a wall and played on loop at my show, “home *sick*”. In these films, I am seen performing

with objects that carry memory like bindis,⁷ braided hair, a rug, turmeric, kumkumam⁸ and letters from my grandfather. The rug which makes an appearance in one of the films was placed in front of this looped projection at the exhibition (Fig. 18). This rug was a gift from my mother and has traveled with me for many years. For me, its placement at my show was a type of grounding. It helped me make myself at home in this very new and very white gallery space. My guests who came into the space were invited to do the same. The artist statement by the main door to the gallery read, “Please make yourselves at home”. I should have included “if you can...” (Fig. 19).

Figure 18

Performative films, installed at homesick



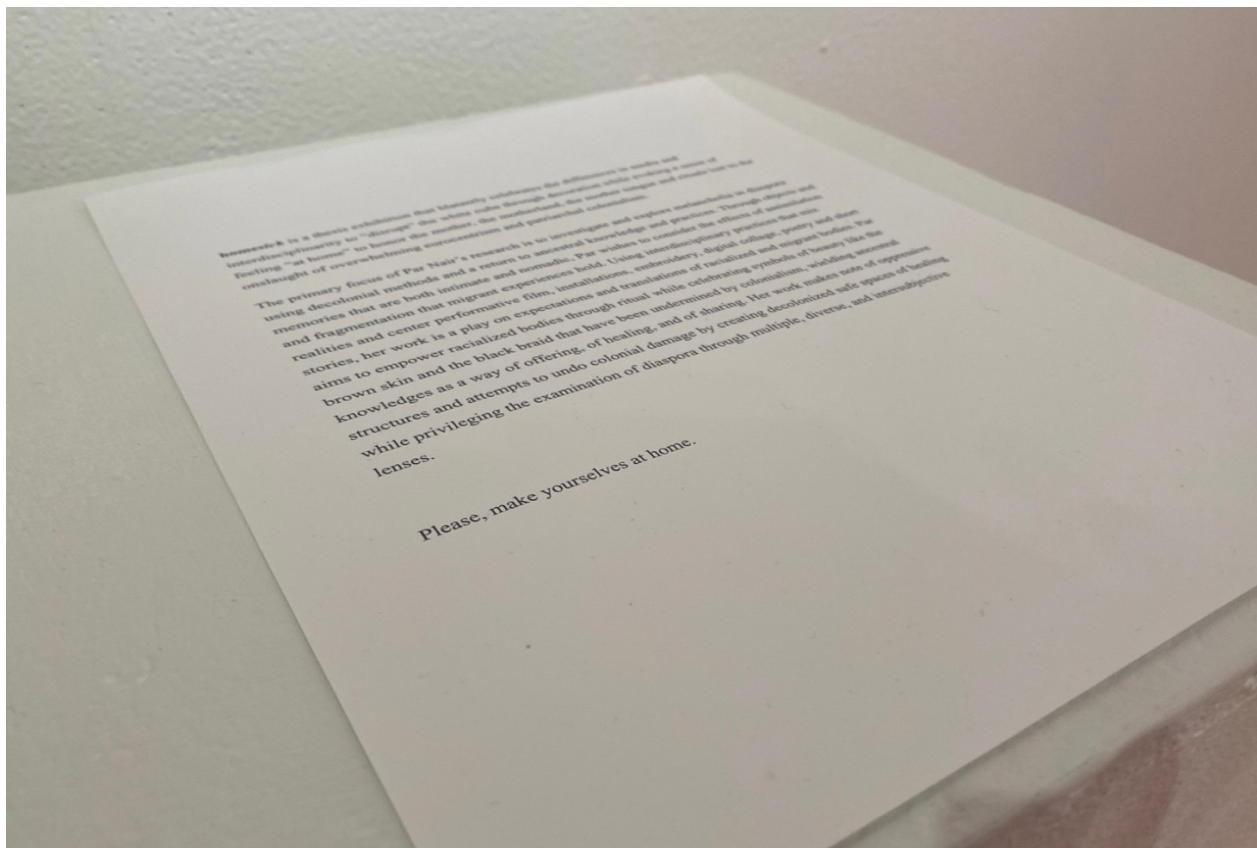
Note: Performative films projected on wall, installed with rug and books, 2022. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

⁷ Colored decorative ornamentation applied to forehead

⁸ Red powder used for mark making on bodies, usually women's bodies.

At my exhibition, sounds from a shruti box, which is a tiny black box used in Indian classical music to keep pitch, played on loop throughout the course of the showing. Having taken classical music lessons for over five years during my childhood, this is a sound that I find both beautiful and haunting. I accessed the shruti box sounds through various youtube videos and remixed them manually by pausing, playing, and overlapping different pitches to initiate a reaching toward of this sound that haunt the memories of my past. It is a way of examining how feeling at home may evoke a certain smell or a certain sound. The overlapping braided sounds set the tone of meditative repetition and ceremonial collaboration at my show.

Figure 19
Welcome Statement



Note: Printed Artist Statement placed on white plinth at the entrance of exhibition, 2022. Photo Courtesy of the artist.

3.5 Reflections on Exploring Diasporic Melancholia

3.5.1 Practicing Care

In “Textility of Making” (2009), cultural anthropologist and writer, Tim Ingold seeks to understand what it means to make things while arguing that making is interweaving of force and currents of material. For Ingold, practitioners bring together diverse materials while combining and redirecting their flow in the anticipation of what might emerge. He contends, “If persons can act on objects in their vicinity...can objects ‘act back’ causing persons to do what they otherwise would not” (Ingold, 2009, p. 94). Ingold’s suggestion that materials possess agency, made me consider my work, “amma”, a text-based work, one where I embroidered on a white veil the words “amma” meaning mother in Malayalam (Fig. 20). The work on the white veil started with my getting married to my fiancé who is Canadian Danish heritage. I wanted to foster care and love for this cultural object that had appeared in my life and consequently in my work. I decided to care for this object by living with it, examining it, caring for it until it called on me to embroider into it. As it was my first time embroidering and on a material I had never worked with before (a wedding veil), I was keen on letting the veil and the thread dictate the technique of embroidery I would utilize. To my surprise, the “floating” technique, something I had never attempted before came to me almost naturally (“to follow the materials”) I imagine this was a combination of the veil dictating its materiality to me and my lack of knowledge in embroidery. The translucent and delicate structure of the veil, I believe played a major role.

It was my intention not to “disrupt” and take away from its stunning qualities but rather weave into its flow, to reach toward its flow, to follow its flow. The thread and process of embroidery also called for a peculiar type of following/flowing- one of care, of love, of patience

and of obligation. Therefore, hybridity can be an outcome of careful interweaving of cultures, rather than only an outcome of colonization which is what Bhabha suggests.

Figure 20
amma



Note: Hand embroidery on white wedding veil, 2021. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

The results of such a care filled encounter was an absolute surprise and unveiled parallels in my painting process of responding to and following the materiality, color, and process. The role of the artist, Ingold writes is not give effect to a preconceived idea but to join with and follow the forces and flows of material that bring the form of work into being (Ingold, 2009, p. 97). At my exhibition, the veil was hung above a low plinth that was covered in over thirty artificial marigold flower garlands to evoke the feeling of ceremony (Fig. 21). These flower garlands remind me of Indian weddings and its artificiality speaks to my attempts at reaching these memories of ceremony.

Figure 21
“amma” and “her touch”, install view



Note: Hand embroidery on white wedding veil and tulle gloves, installed with artificial marigold flowers on a low white plinth, 2022. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

Figure 22
her touch



Note: Hand embroidery tulle gloves, installed with artificial marigold flowers on a low white plinth, 2022.
Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

My work *her touch* (2022), an embroidery piece on white tulle gloves was placed on top of the artificial garlands. The embroidered pattern on the gloves resembles the practice of applying *alta*⁹ which is a red liquid dye applied to hands and feet of Indian women in preparation for festivals and ceremonies (Fig. 22).

3.5.2 Practicing Touch

The embroidery work on two sarees that belonged to my mother, is my most recent work. If language allows us to make sense of things and construct meanings then, the use of both my mother tongue and english on these sarees, is a way in which I am able to make sense of my diasporic self. The work responds to intergenerational knowledge transmissions and translations.

⁹ Significant in Bengali culture and stands as a tribute to my grandmother who is Bengali.

The presence of the hand in the labour-intensive process of hand embroidery implies how we may touch or not touch our mothers and grandmothers.

On the first saree, I decided to embroider a poem that was a collaborative effort between my grandmother, mother, and myself. Each letter was hand embroidered with yellow and white thread in varying shades. A floating embroidery technique was incorporated so that the piece may be viewed from both sides. When viewed from the front, the letters are full and from the back they are dotted, empty and knotted up (Fig. 24).

Figure 23
Making of “a touching”



Note: Embroidery on mother’s saree, 2021. Photo Courtesy of the artist.

The hand embroidered text which brought together my grandmother, mother, and me, started with my grandmother translating a poem I wrote in english to our mother tongue,

malayalam. My grandmother's translated poem was translated again by my mother. The three of us would later come together over a zoom call to collaborate on the final piece which took from all three of our versions of the same poem.

Figure 24

Back detail of "a touching"



Note: Hand Embroidery on mother's red saree, 2021. Photo Courtesy of the artist.

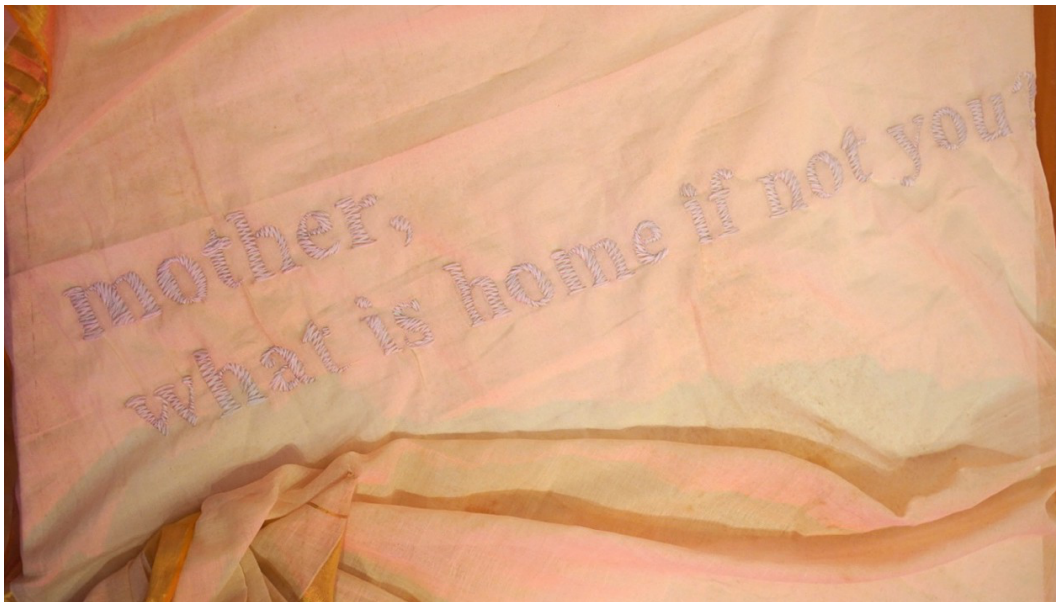
This final poem accommodated both malayalam words as well as english words, but the malayalam words seemed to dominate. There were some english words that could not be translated to malayalam simply because they were too simplified, too uncomplicated which made them all the more stubborn to translate. The piece refuses to give english language power over my mother tongue and at the same time its continual presence in my work and my life reflects the power and pressure it carries and holds over me. By braiding together languages of two worlds, this piece titled "a touching" is witness to how language is not a neutral tool. "I code

switched. I took off our language and wore my english, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours”¹⁰ (Vuong, 2019, p. 32).

The finished saree piece was made to be installed with lights set up to cast a shadow of both the embroidered letters and the inherent patterns in the fabric of the saree. In its shadow, the piece is whole with its embroidered words and worn-out fabric living together, touching and casting shadows together as one. The work’s formal qualities may refer to themes of hybridity, double consciousness, fragmentation, longing and intergenerational translations and knowledge transmissions.

Figure 25

mother, what is home if not you?



Note: Hand embroidery on mother’s kasavu saree, 2022. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

The white embroidery work on my mother’s kasavu¹¹saree that reads, “mother, what is home if not you?” stands as a work that sums up the essence of my thesis show, the longing for the mother, the mother tongue and the motherland (Fig. 25).

¹⁰ Vuong is addressing his mother here.

¹¹ Off white cotton saree with gold threaded borders worn by South Indian women.

Figure 26

mother, what is home if not you?, install view



Note: Hand embroidery on mother's kasavu saree, 2022. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

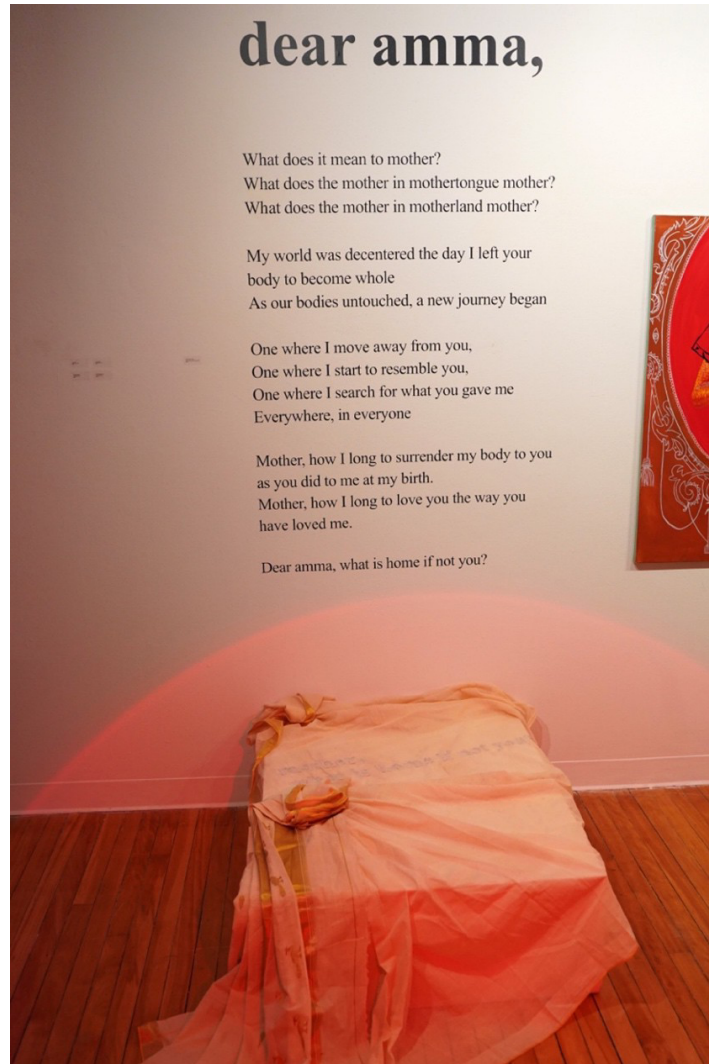
This piece was placed on a low plinth, below my poem, “dear amma” which was printed in cut-vinyl on the wall (Fig. 26). White thread was used on my mother's white kasavu saree to emphasize how invisible and mute these stories of reaching may be. This particular saree of my mother's which appeared worn-out, called for this type of a subtle, gentle touch. At first glance, the embroidered words on the saree is almost invisible. It was as if the words only revealed themselves to viewers who were really looking for it. In a way, the embroidered writing felt like a faint whisper of sorts. The saree was draped and positioned on the white plinth in a way that is reminiscent of my mother's saree drape, with the pleats secured with golden safety pins.¹² Additionally, a red spotlight was placed directly on this saree to emphasize the warmth of this piece and to convey the care and love I felt of my mother when I was touching it repeatedly with

¹² This is a prominent memory I have of my mother tying and pleating her sarees with golden safety pins

my needle (Fig. 27). These interweavings of matrilineal memory reflected in both the saree pieces, reveal the weight and labour of such a touching.

Figure 27

“mother, what is home if not you?”, installed with poem



Note: Hand embroidery on mother’s kasavu saree installed on low plinth with poem in cut vinyl on wall and red spotlight, 2022. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

3.5.3 Practicing Love

At my exhibition, placed on the rug, were several books that I made titled *a handful of stories, poems and pictures*, a collection of select poems, pictures, and stories that I worked through the past two years. This book was very special to me as it was home to much of the work I made over the course of the program. I also had the great honour of gifting some of these

books to visitors who I felt connected with my work and my words. The books in a way were also a kind of reaching and touching. Red bookmarks that were made by hand and tied with love adorn each book. I hoped these would signify gift giving and reference ceremonial tying of red string in Hindu culture, another prominent memory I have (Fig. 28).

Figure 28
a handful of stories, poems & pictures



Note: Book with handmade red bookmark, 2022. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

Unfortunately, my own mother could only experience my show over video call from India. However, I was deeply privileged to have been able to share this work (and gift my book) with other mothers who happened to stumble upon my show, in some cases entirely unintentionally. Through my work and through their reflection of my work, I felt a deep

connection with these mothers. One of them wrote to me a very generous, thoughtful and love-filled email a few days after my show which I will cherish forever. It said, "... the lines brought fresh tears to my eyes... My own body carries a very similar meaning which you so beautifully convey through your poems...". I wrote back to her that the words that brought tears to her eyes had brought tears to mine as I wrote it. I felt a sense of nurture and deep connection with this mother, in how vulnerable we chose to be with each other even though we had only met very briefly at my show. It occurred to me that in my attempts to reach my own mother, I had reached many other mothers and for me in that moment I felt proud of the work I had made, a sense of fulfilment. It was rare feeling (and perhaps to many diasporic people¹³) to allow myself to feel but I think it was an important one. I decided to include it in this section so I may remember this feeling forever.

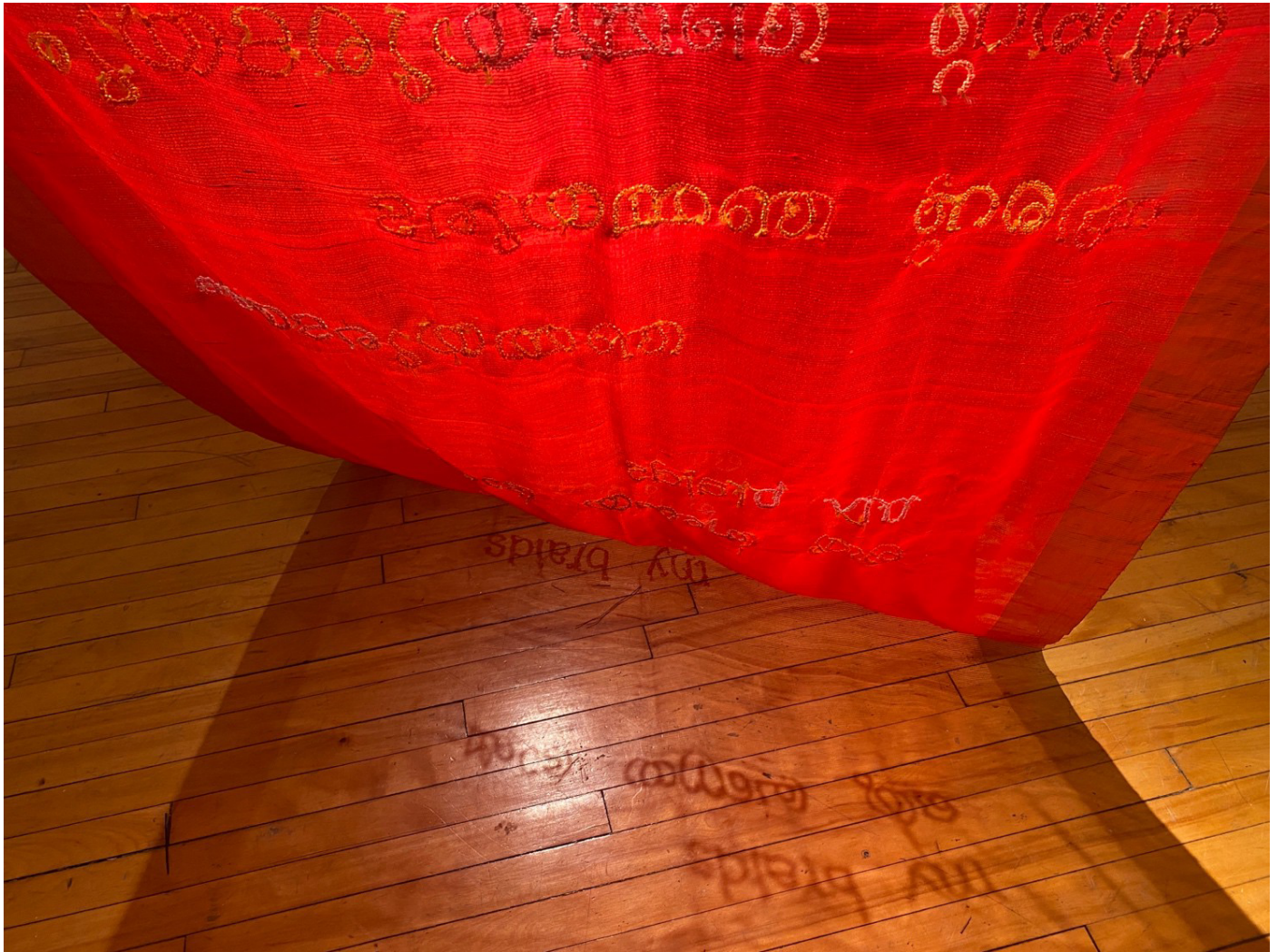
3.5.4 Practicing Reach

The space between things was an important aspect that was taken into consideration when I was designing my exhibition, "*home sick*". I wanted the gallery space to tell a story and for that I needed my works to flow in a way that stories flow. I was careful to pause where I needed to; make painful edits where I needed to. It was a braiding together of many different types of voices to tell the same story over and over again. The shadows cast by several works throughout the exhibition was another important aspect and is echoed back to the viewer in my poem, "a ghost" at the end of the show. This final work, I felt tied the exhibition together, bringing it full circle; highlighting the feelings of full-ness and empty-ness; feelings of what it means to be in the shadows, to be a shadow (Fig. 29).

¹³ I think it's a shared feeling that we don't allow ourselves to feel proud of ourselves. Perhaps our parents never taught us how to handle such a feeling.

Figure 29

Shadow detail of “a touching”



Note: Detail of embroidery on mother’s red saree, installed with lights in front so shadows are cast on floor, 2022. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

In *Location of Culture*, Bhabha writes:

Produced through the strategy of disavowal, the reference of discrimination is always to a process of splitting as the condition of subjection: a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and the doubles, where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something different – a mutation, a hybrid (Bhabha, 1994, p. 159).

Through my work I also reference the limitations of artistically exploring the concept of hybridity in diaspora. It is never a complete breaking away from the colonizer and is in fact a confined freedom of sorts. My work also recognizes a continual preoccupation with whiteness for the colonized, which often leads to bodily incorporation of an other. An idea reflected in Cheng's racialized melancholic. It is my hope that my installations act as a form of other worlding where the world itself transforms the self., through interactions and conversations it evokes. By working with objects from my past and initiating a reaching toward of memories associated with them, my work accesses a melancholia that is both reflective, productive, and perhaps even habitable. Through my work I realize that by decolonizing relationships between my mother and me, my partner and me and so on, I am able to productively re-narrate and reframe feelings of shame and loss in my diasporic journey.

3.5.5 Practicing Melancholy as (temporary) Home

I feel strongly that my show reached many viewers who connected with my work on a deeply emotional and personal level. I never imagined how similar stories in diaspora could be. I never imagined how far my reaching could be. The way we reveal ourselves and become vulnerable about our losses with others can be a deeply nurturing and healing experience. My show revealed this to me that perhaps this mourning and melancholy could in fact be a home, even if temporarily. I believe my show unveiled a space to diaspora who visited, to stay awhile, to share stories of longing with me, feel belonging in their longings and leave with a feeling of being at home through stories of synonymous melancholy. I do not think this type of melancholy was a debilitating kind of grieving but instead a hopeful one. My work echoes ideas of reframing melancholia that Anne Cheng and Eng and Han propose. When my show ended and it was time to pack up my work and leave, I told my friend, Vridhhi, "I wish I could stay longer... in many ways this felt like a home". I don't think it was the space that felt like a home to me, but

rather the experience and the exchange of stories that took place in it. I will carry these exchanges with me as my body and my work move through spaces and time. It is my hope that other diasporic people find their losses mirrored in the work I do and through that mirroring feel at home. When I look back at where I started, I'm in awe at how far my practice has come. Having started as an oil painter my practice had evolved into something perhaps inconceivable for me at the start of this journey. I wish to call my interdisciplinary practice "painterly" as my paintings have affected the way I photograph, film, collage, mix sounds and lights and sometimes even the way I write! Painting is a rewiring of your core; you are not the same again! I did not expect my MFA work to have a transformational effect on me. But I think it has changed me entirely. Expressing through different media has revealed to me how differently my voice may sound with each exploration as well as their varied potentials. It has made me consider what kind of voice and language I want my work to have. This "painterly" interdisciplinary work and exploration, I realize has done far more reaching toward than I could have ever envisioned. And in this reaching toward, in this mourning and touching, I feel at home.

Figure 30
home sick, exhibition view



Note: Exhibition view of home sick, 2022. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

Figure 31
Detail of exhibition, home sick



Note: Detail of exhibition homesick, Installation of books on rug, 2022. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

Figure 32

Detail of “mother, what is home if not you?”



Note: Detail of hand embroidery on mother's kasavu saree, 2022. Photo Credit: Gabriel George.

There is such tenderness in braiding the hair of someone you love. Kindness and something more flow between the braider and the braided, the two connected by the cord of the plait. (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 5)

My research question which started with “why do I feel homesick?” has transformed to “how might I use melancholy of homesickness to feel at home?”. My investigation, which led me to go beyond the canvas and discover the possibilities in performance, embroidery, film, and digital work, is one that is driven by relationships. My relationships to my home, my mother, my voice and my constantly changing relationships to the land beneath my feet. Looking back, I feel that it has expanded my understanding of what constitutes artmaking. Having learned new skills such as embroidery techniques, filming, light mixing, AR explorations, I have come to appreciate how different mediums can affect and nurture my practice. Poetry and short story writing is also a new method of expression for me which has helped immensely in terms of using words and writing as a way of research and thinking.

In the diaspora, you never stop mourning
For the three mothers that made you.
The mother in your mother tongue gave you your voice
The mother in your motherland gave you your place
The mother you are born to gave you everything else

My work about homesickness has led me here – to the mother that gave me my tongue, the mother that gave me my place and the mother that gave me my life. My work not only addresses this perpetual longing to be united with the three mothers but also acknowledges the melancholy felt when one is severed from the mothers, and the melancholy one feels when the relationship with these mothers become strained in the diaspora. It is a feeling of almost being robbed of these mothers, the mothers that make you whole and home-filled. Homesickness is

perhaps a type of motherless-ness, a feeling or rather a fear that you will never belong like you did when you are with the mother, a feeling of brimming wholeness, of extensive fullness. In my work I identify this sickness as a type of diasporic melancholia. I believe that my art practice holds space to redefine this melancholic process as a productive one where diasporic bodies can find place, live and home-make on a psychic realm. It might mean rethinking the idea of home and of melancholia altogether. I offer spaces within my work where these thoughts may be considered.

My body of work and research therefore does not end with a concluding statement, because the melancholic journey continues, grows, and changes with my lived experiences. I do not have answers but rather more questions. In fact, the questions have multiplied with each revelation! I also hope for my work in the future to make connections and reparations with the land my body is currently on. I wish to connect with diasporic stories of loss felt by the Indigenous peoples of Canada which in many ways are similar to mine. Weaving and sharing stories that acknowledge our wholeness and our traumas may lead us in a direction where we might begin to build bridges within and between communities. This wholeness may lead to joy which I someday expect to celebrate within my work.

For now, I simply hope that the questions that I considered and explored through my interdisciplinary art practice might lead other brown bodies including my future self in a direction and toward decolonized safe spaces where we may someday feel less sick, more whole, and fuller in our sometimes exhaustive, stories of home-loss.

“What language do you think in? English or Malayalam?”, my friend Dave asked.
“Malayalam, duh” I announced proudly and paused only to realize it was English.

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Appendix A

This appendix consists of a story that helped me think through my relationships with my mother and with motherhood.

“a disorient”

The day my brother was born is an odd disorienting fragment of a memory. I remember being guided into a bright labor room by my father, my hand in his. The smile on my mother’s face worried me as she motioned toward a tiny incubator that stood beside her. My heart raced as my eyes fell upon the tiniest creature I had ever seen. It was unusually still. Naturally, I reached out curious to probe it and examine what it was made out of, but I was rushed out of the room by my father and my preoccupation with it grew as I wondered if it had hurt my mother.

Later that day I was led into another room. To my complete and utter shock, my mom had her arms carefully wrapped around it as she held it precariously close to her heart. “This is your brother, Akash” my mom reassured acknowledging the evident confusion and terror that had taken over my face. Suddenly, his presence seemed forced and my mother’s compassion for this stranger, frightening.

“Is he going to come home with us?” I asked alarmed. My parents laughed at me, quickly turning their gazes back to the fragile bundle that would grow to consume almost all of their time. I immediately realized that this seemingly motionless trace of a human had started as a little bump on my mother’s body, growing and stretching her slender figure into an unrecognizable size, disorienting her, stripping her of her beauty and her grace. As I watched her belly grow, I noticed her pace had slowed, her breathing more evident.

I lay in bed plotting ways to outdo him but they were fruitless. The elaborate heroic tales of lavish playground adventures I would bring home from school to present before my mother would be swiftly upstaged by his effortless and silly noises. Family and friends of

my parents travelled great distances to see him. My grandparents took turns holding him, arguing over who gets to go first. As he grew, his talents to awe inspire evolved. He left my mom in tears with a simple “ammeh”
“He didn’t even say it right” I contested. But it didn’t matter. He grew more powerful by the day and my parents had fallen under his elaborate spell.

A text from my best friend wakes me up on a Saturday morning. I had stayed up the previous night working on my final thesis paper which had left me drained and snoozing my alarm for over an hour; fearful of waking up only to realize it was unreadable. I sighed in relief as I swiped to read her text which read,

“I have to tell you something... Its big!”

The words rolled out of my tongue almost instantly as I gasped, “She’s pregnant”

“It’s going to change mine and mike’s life forever” she declared sensing I had understood. My body went limp with heat and sweat as my brain conjured up images of her unborn child altering her flawless beauty and being sole witness to the new life, she will share with it. I grew envious of the songs she will sing to it, the stories she will read to it, the knowleges and laughs they will share. It will hold her in a state of infinite hypnotic trance, rich with happiness that I could never fathom. And in return she will love it, unconditionally.

I texted back, “you are magic”

Appendix B

These are YouTube links to my performative film works that played at my exhibition.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nekqTVi7RQ4>.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulSjRQyqhYw>.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90CMM0CZKxM>.

This is a YouTube link to walk through of exhibition

https://youtu.be/voX2c_-eQiw