

Two Movements in Diasporic Anthropophagy

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Approaching a Fragmentary Inheritance

“An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can consist only in the injunction to reaffirm by choosing...one must filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibles that inhabit the same injunction. And inhabit it in a contradictory fashion around a secret.” (Derrida 1994, 18)

So wrote the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in a treatise on Marxian debt, mourning and internationalisation in 1994. Roughly twenty years later, I encountered these words as part of my ongoing research into notions of contemporary diasporic inheritance. Invited by Cristiana Tejo, co-founder of the NowHere cultural association in Lisbon, to present my inquiry, I worked on a series of visual artefacts articulating the conflicted relationship I had with my own South Asian diasporic inheritance. Derrida’s assertion of inheritance as a disunified and fractious phenomena spoke to my own sense of divided subjectivity in relation to analysing my cultural background, and over the course of 2023 I created a set of visual and performative art works as a means to investigate this complexity and surface an alternate diasporic subjectivity; one that did not confine itself to common dogmas of ‘model minority’ (Petersen 1966)¹ or exotification of the ‘imaginary homeland’ (Rushdie 1992).² Two interventions undertaken as part of this inquiry are the subject of the discussion below.

¹ The concept of a model minority able to achieve economic, social and political success was first presented in 1966 (Petersen 1966) and has since been varyingly developed by scholars.

² Coined by Salman Rushdie in his book of essays *Imaginary Homelands* (Rushdie 1992), the term refers to the fragmented and fictionalised memories of migrants with regards to the idealisation of their homelands.

My inquiry took place in Lisbon, Portugal, under the guidance of Cristiana Tejo, through whom I was exposed to a canon of Brazilian and Portuguese artists and thinkers from the 1970s whose practices felt resonant with my own. Collectively referred to as artists of Neo-Concretism, they were pursuing a means to carve out a uniquely Brazilian identity against the backdrop of imperialist forces promoting a hegemonic Euro-Western cultural and artistic aesthetic and ideology. Their ideas were strongly influenced by a 1928 article known as the *Anthropophagic Manifesto*, by poet Oswald de Andrade and painter Tarsila do Amaral. The term ‘anthropophagy’ refers to the eating of human flesh and was used in the *Manifesto* as a nod to the ritual of the indigenous Tupi peoples of Brazil, who would cannibalise the strongest enemy as a means to incorporate the power of the enemy’s force and reconstitute it as an enrichment to their own capacity. For Andrade and Amaral, this act reflected a metaphor for the possibility of a cultural cannibalism, whereby the arts, philosophy and music could preserve or recreate a sincerely Brazilian identity by deconstructing and reconstructing the ‘enemy’ of Euro-Western colonial culture (Rolnik 1998).

Anthropophagic Subjectivity and the Hindu Pantheon

Contemporary scholarship on the *Anthropophagic Manifesto* by scholars such as Sueli Rolnik universalises the relevance of this concept, calling for a global, collective responsibility to define an ‘anthropophagic subjectivity’ as a means to resist the homogenising force of neoliberalism, which has left us all ‘homeless’ (Rolnik 1998).

Seeking a means to locate this concept within my own cultural context, I came upon the Hindu Tantric goddess of Chinnamasta. One of the Dasa Maha Vidyas or ‘Ten Great Mothers’ in Tantric sects of Hinduism, Chinnamasta is commonly depicted as having severed her own head, the streams of blood from the open wound of her neck entering the mouth of her own detached head, whilst also feeding her two disciples—Dakini and Varnini, representing Ida and Pingala or the solar and lunar channels in the body.³ She stands atop a copulating couple, signifying her conquering of mortal desires. Beneath them is an inverted triangle, commonly referred to as a yantra or mandala, representing Shakti or the divine feminine energy in Hinduism; a creative force and void-like expanse of pre-material becoming.

³ The solar and lunar channels of Ida and Pingala are complemented by the central channel of Sushumna, represented by Chinnamasta herself. Together they form kundalini or primal life-force energy. To find out more see Dr. Madhumita Saikia’s article *Tantra Yoga—The Beginning* (Saikia 2022).

Although Chinnamasta does not eat her own flesh, her consumption of her own blood construes both a form of self-cannibalism and—importantly for my inquiry—a willingness to interrogate and ‘digest’ her own blood lineage. In this portrayal, I observed an allegory of the challenge that confronts diasporic identities, namely: to ‘digest’ their own conflicting dictates of homelands, adopted lands and competing nationalistic, colonial and patriarchal agendas as inherited through the directives of both predecessors and social norms. Inspired by Chinnamasta as a figurative instruction for self-inquiry, I adopted the concept of ‘self-anthropophagy’ within the intention of my inquiry, seeking a metaphorical deconstruction and reconstruction of South Indian symbols, gestures and stories to articulate my own diasporic subjectivity.

A Methodological Convergence—Between Arts-based Research and Experiential Knowledge

The inquiry represents the merging of two methodological approaches. The first, an approach of arts-based research, in which creative and artistic processes are undertaken in pursuit of outcomes that explore and present qualitative aspects of the subject matter. In this way, the process of arts-making is itself a generative site through which subjective knowledge emerges (Leavy 2015), allowing for holistic experiences to conjoin the logics of mind and body (McNiff 2015).

This approach was complemented with a phenomenological method, whereby experiential and emergent phenomena that occurred during the process of art-making were attended to as potent access points to unforeseen information about the subject matter (MIECAT 2022). In this approach, the researcher should sustain a mode of awareness that recognises experiential encounters—including errors, improvisations or surprises—as meaningful expressions occurring via the interrelationship of human and non-human subjects through a shared strata or intersubjective field of consciousness; in place of an objective truth to be uncovered, or a final outcome to be constructed definitely, an evolving subjectivity is shaped vis-a-vis relational and dialogic encounters that determine the final material expression (Merleau-Ponty 1945).



Figure 1: Artist unknown, Chinnamasta Wreaking Havoc and Destruction, 19th Century, hand coloured lithograph, British Museum, London. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1993-1008-0-2

First Movement—Labouring Hands Augment Through History

The first movement I will discuss regards mudras, or hand gestures, in the dance form of Bharatanatyam—one of the five forms denoted under the title of ‘Indian classical dance.’⁴ Bharatanatyam has a contentious socio-historical entanglement with caste-based, cultural and political agendas in place during the formation of the modern Indian nation state (Pillai 2022). Numerous scholars highlight the appropriation of the dance form from hereditary caste practitioners into the practices of ‘high art’ by privileged castes in the early 20th century.⁵ As a consequence, the practice of the form in subsequent diasporic generations implicitly preserves caste- and nation-based agendas, particularly through modifications made to the form to limit portrayals of sexual and gender-based agency and centre religious piety.⁶

Having trained for twelve years in Bharatanatyam whilst growing up in Australia, my deep and persistent affection for the aesthetics and semiotics of the form has been disquieted by my affiliation with the ‘high-caste’ whose predecessors contributed to the conservative, patriarchal and religious augmentation of the form. As such, Bharatanatyam and its mudras comprised an ideal intervention point to venture an exploration of diasporic alterity.

My intention in *Kai Vēlai*—meaning ‘hand work’ or ‘work done manually’ in Tamil—was to cast my own hands in new or lesser known formations of mudras to depict connections and dissonances between inheritance and feminist agency.

I created a set of mudras that together comprised ten hands, mirroring the ten arms of the Hindu warrior goddess Durga. Each mudra was intended to symbolise a weapon or tool with which to confront the dissonant relationship of body to ancestry.

I set to work on the casts in my studio late one night and, having mixed the fast-acting solution, submerged my hands into its thickening

⁴ The other four being Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi and Odissi.

⁵ Amrit Srinivasan, Saskia Kersenboom, Avanthi Meduri, Yashoda Thakore, Daves Soneji and Nrithya Pillai are notable scholars in this field.

⁶ The term ‘caste’ refers to an institutionalised and systematised hierarchy imposed upon people based on historical, religious and cultural discriminations regarding purity, piety and social roles (Goghari and Kusi 2023).



Figures 2 and 3: Nithya Iyer, *Yoni* and *Vazhi* from *Kai Vēlai* series, 2023, hand casts, installation view from NowHere exhibition *Of Her I Know Only*. Photographed by Alfredo Brant.



Figure 4: Nithya Iyer, Process photograph of Yoni in Kai Vēlai series, 2023, hand cast

texture and drew my fingers into the taut formation of the mudra. But before long, my posture—having been still for several minutes—caused a strain in my lower back and my palms cramped from the awkward angle of my wrists in the bucket. I endured these physical inconveniences, rigidly determined to forge the ideal cast, whilst simultaneously reflecting on how this simple act aptly mirrored the physical toll that the dance form itself demands. Countless practitioners incur injury and insult in striving to achieve the Vitruvian ideal of the Bharatanatyam danseuse, a form in which failure is tantamount to a fundamental incompetence of one's body as a woman or as a dancer. The cast hardened as my strains deepened, and later, set with the stone mixture, the final mudra emerged both misshapen and partially missing - a testament to the 'failed' efforts of my aching body.

I recognised here what Warren Lett terms content-in-process, where the art-making process itself reveals significant content regarding the qualities of the subject being explored (Lett 2011).

The mudra I had cast depicted a yoni or vagina. Although shown to me by my teacher, Dr. Chandrabhanu, of the Chandrabhanu Bharatalaya Academy, it is largely absent from mainstream performance due to what is considered the 'unsuitability' of its erotic nature for

young, largely female dance students. A literal editing-out of a symbol of feminine desire through the form, this intervention is one of several said to be made by elite classes in an effort to 'civilise' and 'sanitise' the form of erotic and sexual aspects of female agency. As such, the deformation of the cast, which included an amputation of the parts of my fingers representing the clitoris, appeared as an ironic homage to the female identity that had been distorted by such socio-historical interventions.

Simultaneously, the misshapenness of this particular mudra incited a felt sense—or a bodily awareness preceding conscious interpretation (Gendlin 1962)—of seeming grief that went beyond disappointment with the 'malformation' in the object. I came to understand that the mudra viscerally represented where my own expression of sexuality and womanhood had been curtailed or imposed upon by the dictates of the form. Simultaneously, my inner reflexivity - my internal conversation about the experience whilst being in experience (Allen 2004, 7)—questioned my position as a descendant of Brahmin or 'high caste' lineage, in relation the appropriation this mudra from presumably hereditary caste practitioners, leading to me to wonder if perhaps the deformation of the yoni mudra I had created was also a form of restitution.

Ultimately, I present the Yoni mudra in its misshapen form and discuss these ethical quandaries within the exhibition text and a later talk. The title of the series, Kai Vēlai or 'hand work' becomes a nod to the uneven privilege and power between castes, genders and generations, whilst also highlighting itself as an acknowledgment of the collective intellectual labour required of all practitioners of the form to confront our place in this share history.

Second Movement—Agentic Bodies Linger in Borders Across Time

The second movement I present from the inquiry regards the figure of Sita, most well known for her role as Rama's wife in the Hindu epic, The Ramayana.

Numerous poems, illustrations, television series, songs and dances are created about the Ramayana and Rama and Sita's exemplary love. In the Indian diasporic discourse regarding the Ramayana, Sita is commonly revered for her loyalty and willing martyrdom for the sake of her husband's moral reputation. Somewhat morbidly, a scene reiterated across Indian culture is one in which Sita immolates herself and emerges

unscathed, proving her ‘moral purity’ to her husband after being kidnapped and presumably assaulted by an enemy king. Yet fewer conversations regard the significance of an act she undertakes many years later: After being exiled again under suspicion of moral impurity, Sita is called back to the kingdom by her husband, but rather than return, she prays to the goddess Bhumi that the Earth should open up and swallow her whole. Which it does.⁷

This story and this act rattled in my memory as an unreconciled narrative, incongruous to popular rhetoric, to which I sought to inter-subjectively respond – that is, to open up a relational dialogue between Sita’s story and the themes of my own inquiry (MIECAT 2022). A desire emerged in me to bury my own body as a performative homage to Sita and as a means of connecting my affectivity to larger questions of the latent political activism I observed within this act (Finley 2018).

In organising the practical logistics of the act, which effectively required the digging of a grave upon someone’s land, I encountered a felt sense of imposition. There is a quality of violence required to deliberately disrupt a settled terrain belonging to another. But who can claim ownership over what occurs beneath the surface of the earth? What are the socio-historical tensions of performing burial within another’s territory, and how do these acts relate to the politics of border-making?

Thomas Nail, the author of *Theory of the Border* (2016), notes that ‘cutting into the earth,’ as in the creation of a pit or a grave, construes a practice of bordering due to its effect of redirecting the movement of people above the ground. He describes burial sites as the final limit junction of the territory of man, comprising the “...the limit junction beyond which one enters another world of pure undivided flows: the frontier of the spirit world” (Nail 2016, 49). Through this framing, I interpret Sita’s request to be swallowed by the Earth as a deliberate enactment of bordering practice, challenging the boundaries and rules of her husband’s territory through the marking of a new limit junction. Sita, whose name translates to furrow, or trench in Sanskrit, cuts into the physical territory and opens the primordial gateway—the ‘undivided flows’—of the grave, imposing her own body as the border-maker; the limit junction between life and death.

⁷ The Ramayana is attributed to a sage poet named Valmiki and written around 300 BCE (Sultana 2022). Retold and rewritten over many generations, versions differ in terms of the details surrounding key events. The versions discussed here regard the popular oral retellings amidst the Indian diaspora to which I was exposed.



Figure 5: Nithya Iyer, *Sita Means Furrow*, 2023. Still from audio-visual projection.

In light of this framing, my approach to the intervention of self-burial transformed into a ritual of greater significance, transcending the temporal dimensions of living and non-living beings; I approach this a means of what Byung Chul-Han (2020) calls ‘contemplative lingering’ undertaken as a means to bring closure within a community; a means to create connection despite what has been severed between myself and these women of my ancestry.

I began by marking the soil with my menstrual blood as an offering to the goddesses of the Hindu pantheon whose stories are interwoven with this act: Bhumi, goddess of the Earth who swallows Sita, Chinnamasta, goddess of Tantra who ingests her own blood as transcendent sacrifice, and Kali, goddess of death, rebirth and the void. Perhaps most importantly the marking of my blood signified my own ancestral lineage, the cells of my foremothers upon the ground in symbolic intention for communion.

As I dug into the soil, the spade caught a thick root growing across the forming pit. The habitual tendency to cut the root as an encumbrance to the creation of the grave was disrupted by my felt sense of hesitation. In recording the intervention, I am noted as saying “...but I don’t want to cut the root,” eventually carving around it to maintain its form (Iyer 2023). This was a poignant moment of content-in-process, the root itself connecting a tree I couldn’t see, to a greater system beyond my awareness, but which I recognised as vital. The preservation

of this ‘root’ as a link to an otherwise invisible belonging mirrored my own desire for connection to what had come before me, even as I wished to carve out a space of my own.

The intervention became an experiential disruption to the subject-object, fact-fiction, material-spiritual, past-present dualisms of traditional research epistemology, instead framing cultural identity as a living process of engagement with symbols, stories and practices that occurred with and through the embodied process of exchange (Papastergiadis 2010). As the drying soil of the grave crumbled about my body, so too did I understand myself as an identity itself slipping and transforming, residues from the year of inquiry layering upon me as a material consolidation of histories, symbols, and stories that otherwise



Figure 6: Nithya Iyer, *Sita Means Furrow*, 2023. Audio-visual projection..

vacillated between conflict and coherence, right and wrong.

The diasporic subjectivity I have arrived at and seek to continue to explore is best described by the scholar Gayatri Gopinath, who asserts the presence of a “queer diasporic subjectivity” that offers “radically expansive visions of ‘home’ and belonging, kinship and community that are not beholden to heteronormative and patrilineal logics” (Gopinath 2021, 159). Through the deconstruction and reconstruction of these symbols and narratives—the metaphorical cannibalisation of my own cultural inheritance—my subjectivity redefines itself, folding interior resonances with exterior phenomena to forge an altered territory of new spatial and temporal relations.



Figure 6: Nithya Iyer, *Sita Means Furrow*, 2023. Audio-visual projection.

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"With my respect and reverence to Ma Chinnamasta and my gratitude for the teachings she bestows."

—Nithya Vaidheeswaran Iyer, 2025"

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