Journal of Culture and Values in Education

https://cultureandvalues.org

E-ISSN: 2590-342X

Volume: 7 Issue: 3 2024

pp. 147-160

The Stories of Us: Queer Tamils and Their Experiences Reclaiming Culture and Heritage in Canada

Manchari Paranthahan[a]

Email: mancharip@gmail.com
a. York University, Canada.

Article Info
Received: April 14, 2024
Accepted: July 15, 2024
Published: September 12, 2024

10.46303/jcve.2024.33

How to cite
Paranthahan, M. (2024). The Stories of Us: Queer Tamils and Their Experiences Reclaiming Culture and Heritage in Canada. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, 7(3), 147-160.
https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2024.33

ABSTRACT
"The Stories Of Us" considers the ways that culture, heritage, and rituals come together. This ethnographic study is guided by methodologies of narrative photovoice that speak to the lived experiences of how five 2nd Generation Queer Tamil Canadians living in Toronto/Scarborough reclaim their Tamil culture and heritage as Queer people living in the West. The intersectional marginalization Queer Tamil people face often ostracizes them from both their Tamil community as well as their Queer community. The participants of this study reflected on their identities growing up as well as how they've engaged with community at different stages of their Queer journey, speaking to their experiences reclaiming their cultural identity as Queer people. Based on the lived experiences of the participants, this data-based study looks at the creative ways that Queer Tamils take up space and reclaim their cultural heritage as a politically and historically silenced community.

KEYWORDS
Intergenerational Trauma; Queer Studies; Eelam Tamil; Genocide; Reclamation.

What is "The Stories of Us"?

The intersectional identities of Queer Tamil and Queer South Asian folx marginalizes them both within their Queer communities as well as their cultural communities, often resulting in experiences of intersectional marginalization and othering. It is still illegal in most South Asian countries to be Queer, preventing a lot of Queer folx in those countries from living healthy, fulfilled lives. Due to the limitations in services for Queer and Trans folx in South Asian countries, many members of this community end up isolating themselves from their biological families and friends in fear of being ostracized or physically harmed for being Queer or Trans. Having adequate Queer representation in these communities is an important tool for self-actualization,

> For me, representation is one of the main things that inspires people to be what they want to be". Thus, the mere visible presence of South Asian Queers was considered important to self-actualization - *seeing* one's self made it possible to *become* one's self (Kanji p.37).

The violence that Queer folx in South Asian countries experience often prevents them from engaging in community with other Queer South Asians while continuing to be silenced. Many Queer Tamils and South Asians, especially 2nd Generation Queer South Asian Canadians, experience bicultural lived experiences, meaning they live the realities of two cultures at the same time, navigating the complexity of having to juggle both identities in the Western world, which only favours assimilation.

Growing up as a 2nd Generation Eelam (Sri Lankan) Tamil person, I faced many barriers when trying to learn more about my Tamil identity and Sri Lankan heritage, ranging from language barriers (as most of our history is only available now in Tamil or Sanksrit) to institutional barriers (the Tamil population in Sri Lanka's fight for a separatist state meant political silencing for many Tamil's, resulting in a genocide that forced many to flee). Any historical texts and artefacts Eelam Tamils had or created were mostly destroyed during the colonization of Sri Lanka by the Portuguese (1597 - 1658), the Dutch (1658 - 1796) and the British (1815-1948) (Thiranagama, 2014). In addition to our lost histories, even talking about the genocide of Tamils in Sri Lanka from 1983 to 2009 in North America meant the possibility of being associated with the LTTE rebel group, often referred to as the Tamil Tigers who were classified as terrorists during the genocide, further silencing an already invisible community (Thiranagama, 2014). During the genocide, a social media blackout was put in place to ensure that anyone outside of Sri Lanka was left in the dark about the severity of the genocide. This made it even harder for Eelam Tamil's to get support outside of the country.

My relationship to the Tamil Diaspora has always been a complicated one. I was born in Scarborough, one of the largest Tamil ethnic clusters around the world. When I turned seven, our family moved to Milton, a fast-growing suburb and commuter town an hour or so away from Scarborough, away from my extended family and cultural community. In 2019, we moved back to Scarborough. I have since felt more in connection with my Tamil community and have met other Queer Tamils for the first time in my life. It wasn't until 2019 that I finally felt seen and

understood by others like me. In this way, Scarborough has acted as a place of acceptance and belonging for me, even when my biological family and members of my extended family could not understand my Queerness.

As I noticed the isolation and marginalization I was experiencing, I started to learn more about my history as an Eelam Tamil person during the height of the anti-Tamil pogroms or Tamil genocide in Sri Lanka.

The largest Tamil population outside of Sri Lanka is in Canada - around 200-300 000 individuals, most arriving from 1990 onward (Aruliah, 1994). Canada's generous immigration policies and its sympathy toward Tamils led to a high degree of asylum acceptance. Furthermore, Canada's practice of including those outside the nuclear family in family reunion policies meant that refugees could send for family very soon after being established. Many Tamils thus saw Canada as the ultimate desired location. Most of these Tamils live in Toronto (Thiranagama, 2014 p. 268).

This was my family's experience. My father and maternal uncles were the first to flee Sri Lanka, as they were safest to flee on their own as men. My father fled Sri Lanka at 19 years old in 1983 when the pogroms started, arriving in Canada in 1984, and then had an arranged marriage with my mother in 1993 to sponsor her to leave Sri Lanka. My mother was stuck in Sri Lanka for 10 years after the anti-Tamil pogroms started before arriving in Canada, with her parents remaining in unsafe conditions for an additional 5 years before my mother's brother sponsored them to come to Canada in 1998. When the pogroms first started, Tamil militant groups started to pop up throughout the 70s and 80s when the political climate was already tense, to fight for the freedom of Tamils.

State discrimination against Tamil minorities and the failure of Tamil parliamentary parties to address discrimination gave rise to multiple militant groups in the 1970s calling for a separate Tamil homeland, Tamil Eelam, that would encompass Tamil majority areas in the northern and eastern provinces (Tambiah 1986). Popular support for militancy increased as a series of anti-Tamil riots in 1956, 1958, 1971, 1977, and, most fatefully, in 1983 pushed Tamil minorities to an impasse (Tambiah 1986). The aftermath of the 1983 riots saw the first major flow of refugees out of Sri Lanka. As the civil war dramatically escalated, hundreds of thousands of Tamils continued to flee abroad. (Thiranagama, 2014:267).

Soon after, the Tamil Tigers quickly dissolved all the other militant groups to become the main body fighting for Tamil people's freedom in Sri Lanka. As the pogroms intensified, groups and governments who originally offered support pulled out, including the American government and the United Nations. With this came the categorization of the LTTE as a terrorist group, leading to the silencing of Tamils and their horrific experiences escaping.

The LTTE (the Tigers) began as a small militant organization amid many others (Thiranagama 2011:185-189). By 1985 the Tigers had emerged as the dominant Tamil militant combatant in the war by eliminating or absorbing other militant groups

(Krishna, 1999; Thiranagama, 2011:201-211). The LTTE's primary features were a pyramidal structure focused on their leader Prabhakaran; a disciplined and militarized cadre; the use of suicide bombings and cyanide capsules; an extensive intelligence network; and generally, a reliance on fear and intimidation to control Tamil politics.

The group had a conventional land army, navy, intelligence wing, and a rudimentary air force. These were divided into elite corps, female and male battalions, and the infamous child "baby brigades." These were buttressed by international shipping and smuggling networks (Thiranagama, 2014, p. 267).

Civilians were killed by both the Singhalese army and the Tamil Tigers, making the country unsafe to live in, especially in the northern regions of the country where the Tamil Tigers were fighting to claim as a separatist state. The violence continued until 2009, when the Tamil Tigers were considered defeated after the murder of their leader.

After the approximately 30-year anti-Tamil pogroms were declared over by the Singhalese government in Sri Lanka in 2009 after the death of the LTTE leader, I witnessed more stories coming out about Tamil Sri Lankans and their experiences surviving the genocide. The pogroms displaced most of my family and even resulted in the murder of one of my maternal uncles and other family members. The pogroms not only silenced and displaced over 800,000 Sri Lankan Tamils, but also created gaps in knowledge about the lived experiences and traumas of Sri Lankan Tamils (Thiranagama, 2014).

Given the heavy history of the war and the traditions within the culture that were maintained here in Canada, there was pressure to choose between being Queer or Tamil, but not both. Being a Queer Trans person, I often faced barriers when trying to engage with Queer communities, as most of these spaces doubled as white spaces. Growing up I felt forced to choose one of my identifiers/communities over the other (Queer or Tamil, not both). The more I learned about and met other Queer Tamils/Queer South Asians and witnessed the unapologetic ways that they reclaimed their cultural identity while being steadfast and proud of their queerness left me awestruck - I had never known there was a third space for us to inhabit, where all parts of us were allowed to exist.

This paper will attempt to understand what Queerness means for this cultural community, primarily focusing on gender identity, gender roles and sexuality in Tamil communities through the methodology of narrative photovoice and ethnography and theoretical frameworks of Critical Race and Queer theories. The research will focus on the different ways this demographic connects to their heritage and culture through their Queerness, while also navigating the dual realities of their bicultural identities. The lack of space and dialogue surrounding this community's struggle is one that is often overlooked. By doing this research, I hope to offer other Queer 2nd-Generation Tamil's an opportunity to tell their story their way, by offering a space where their voices can be elevated and amplified. By engaging in dialogue with this community through 1:1 interviews, I will explore how Queer 2nd-Generation Tamil folx navigate their intersectional identities through the following research questions: How

do 2nd Generation Queer Tamil Canadians practise or reclaim their cultural heritage? What barriers exist for 2nd Generation Queer Tamil's when accessing their cultural identities? How do 2nd Generation Queer Tamil Canadians use Queer presentation to practise or reclaim their cultural heritage?

LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand the nuanced experiences of the participants of this research study, we first need to acknowledge the history of Eelam Tamils, the historical treatment of Queer South Asian/Tamil bodies, the assimilation associated with queerness in the West, and the lack of visibility and acceptance surrounding Queer Tamil communities in Canada. There have been very few studies done on Queer South Asian's worldwide, with even fewer studies representing Queer South Asian Diasporas. To date, there has never been a study done on the Queer Tamil Youth diaspora in North America or around the world. Any research that has been done on the Queer South Asian community is broad with very minimal ties to Eelam Tamil people or the Tamil community. Research that has been done on the Sri Lankan Tamil Diasporic community so far focuses on the traumatic impacts of living through a war, being a diasporic person in Western society, or dodging associations with the Tamil Tigers - all important research, but with zero Queer representation.

Queer South Asian Histories

Queerness has been prevalent in South Asian mythology and ancient religious texts, however the impacts of colonization on the interpretations of these texts have skewed the initial intentions behind Queer Faith wisdom. Hindu theology was only ever introduced to me through a heteronormative lens, despite the number of shapeshifting, trans and genderqueer deities present in the ancient texts. As I started to do more research into my cultural and religious background, I started to learn about the ways Queerness was portrayed within Hindu mythology, language that my parents didn't have and hardly learned growing up in Sri Lanka. As a trans, nonbinary Queer Tamil Hindu, it became important for me to find community with other trans Tamil folx and amplify their voices.

While Queer South Asians could face discrimination and marginalization everywhere, Queer South Asians in the West have had an easier time finding acceptance within their chosen communities and Queer communities, even if their cultural community or family doesn't accept them. Queer South Asians in the West have also been able to form communities and hold demonstrations, run grassroots organizations and do advocacy work for their unique struggles since the 80s. Thinking of Toronto specifically, in the early 90s, Queer and Trans South Asians organized a Queer South Asian festival called *Desh Pardesh.* While it only lasted 13 years from 1988 - 2001, the impacts of that level of organizing at that time can be seen through the evolution of Queer South Asian advocacy today.

"Queer and trans 'south asian' community organizing has shifted and changed in the years since the early 1990s when *Desh Pardesh* was in its infancy; since then

governments have changed, norms in broader Queer and trans communities have shifted, there is additional legislation and policy, and an increasing public dialogue on issues of sexuality and gender. The range of community organizing since then includes parties (Funk Asia, Besharam, Rangeela), publications with (Rungh, thought it was not based in Toronto), support groups in-person and online (Dosti, Snehithan, Mirchi), stages at Pride Toronto (Funk Asia, brOWN//out, Bend it like Bombay), community arts programs (Asian Arts Freedom School, Q? Y Art?) and most recently, the launch of an online Queer and trans 'south asian' community space (a colour deep). Activist organizations like the members of the 'Chillin' in your Brown Skin collective' worked to intervene at mainstream 'south asian' spaces like 'Masala! Mehndi! Masti!' Festival; more recent examples of intervening with a changing 'south asian' mainstream cultural representation including Daniel Pillai who works as a journalist at Anokhi Media, and mybindi.com recognizing Vivek Shraya for her contributions to the broader 'south asian' community" (Verma 68).

Holding space for this community by running events like this offers Queer South Asians in surrounding areas more visibility and representation, creating a sense of community and safety for an intersectionally marginalized community. This kind of representation offers permission for Queer South Asians to exist.

Whiteness in Queer Spaces

Many Queer South Asians/Queer Tamils struggle to find Queer and Trans kin as most Queer spaces often double as white spaces. A lot of Queer coding is also based on western norms, often excluding QTBIPOC folx even further. Many of my participants expressed how their relationship to Queerness was complex because of how Queer spaces have always doubled as primarily white spaces. Many racialized Queer folx feel pressure to choose one of their multiple polarizing identities in order to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. All of my participants expressed being familiar with this experience, either isolating themselves from Queer folx to be in touch with their Tamil community or vice versa. In order to understand the experiences of racialized Queer folx, Queerness needs to be viewed and understood in a decolonized lens, one that acknowledges the rich histories of Queerness that existed around the world pre-colonization. Decolonizing Queerness for my participants and myself in particular looked like analyzing the impacts of heteronormativity, cisnormativity, capitalism, racism, sexism, on our community. Decolonizing Queerness requires us to look at what assimilating to Queerness and therefore to whiteness negatively impacts Queer South Asians.

Lack of Visibility for Queer South Asians

While South Asian Diasporic communities make up a large portion of the North American population, there is little to no visibility for Queer South Asians, specifically Queer Tamils, living in the West. The lack of representation in the media, the entertainment industry, artist communities, academia and in high-paying, high-status jobs all contribute to the silencing and invisibility of Queer Tamil's.

"Research that has included the voices of Queer racialized individuals have noted that lack of belonging is a common experience. Ayisha Al-Sayyad's work with Arab and South Asian Queer Muslim women living in the West, for example, found that participants experienced a "double pressure… [to be both an]... ideal Muslim daughter…[and a]... liberated Queer" (p. 378). The perception that it was impossible to simultaneously do both was held within both mainstream Queer communities, as well as participants' religious/ethnic ones…Thus, a fundamental incompatibility may exist between how we are encouraged to subjectify ourselves in mainstream Western spaces versus in our racial/ethnic diasporic sub-spaces - making our own self-identification conflicted," (Kanji 17).

The othering that Queer South Asians face paired with the colonial histories of erasure of Queerness from many cultures contribute to the assimilation many of us feel forced to face. With more visibility and representation comes permission to exist, understanding of marginalized experiences, and hopefully, acceptance and change between two polarizing communities.

METHODOLOGY

This research paper is guided by theoretical frameworks and methodologies of narrative photovoice and ethnographic storytelling. Participants were asked to come to their interview with a photo of themselves that they thought best represented their identity, using the methodology of Narrative Photovoice to facilitate our conversation. The rest of the interviews focused more on ethnographic storytelling, encouraging participants to share stories about their experiences being Queer Tamil's, finding acceptance in community, and the ways in which they reclaim their Tamil heritage as Queer diasporic bodies.

Narrative Photovoice

Narrative Photovoice is a grounded in, "Freire's (1970) approach to education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and a community-based approach to documentary photography and health promotion principles (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, et al ., 2004)" (Baker & Wang 1406). Narrative Photovoice was a methodology I used in this study to put power back into the hands of my participants. The photos acted as a catalyst for storytelling and sharing challenges and perspectives, while also allowing for space for Queer diasporic visibility.

Ethnographic Storytelling

Grounded in Critical Feminist/Race/Queer theories, this research study uses the narrative approach of Ethnographic Storytelling to make connections between the participants' lived experiences and the ways they reclaim their cultural identities. To protect the safety of the participants, their photos were blurred and pseudonyms were used to represent their experiences anonymously.

Ethics and Risks

Participants were provided with a list of support services in the event that our conversations were triggering and they required third party support. The participants were encouraged to only

share what they felt comfortable sharing. I reminded the participants of the importance of their safety throughout this study by blurring their photos and using pseudonyms. Despite being a Queer Tamil person myself, I recognized that as a researcher I held many privileges and responsibilities, the most important being the safety of my participants. While I identified in similar ways to them and shared lived experiences with them, my position as a researcher still meant that my participants were vulnerable to the study and the research. Whenever possible, I tried to put the power back into the hands of my participants by letting them choose what stories they wanted to share. The participants of this study were all members of my chosen community that I've gotten to know over the past few years, allowing for a deeper level of conversation and connection.

FINDINGS

Table 1.

Research Participants and Demographic Data

Name	Age	Sexual Identity	Gender identity	Religious identity
Thanga	25	Pansexual	AFAB Nonbinary (they/them)	Spiritual
Akna	30	Queer	AFAB Nonbinary (they/them)	Hindu (Shaivism)
Deepika	22	Queer	AFAB Femme (they/she/any)	Hindu
Grace	24	Lesbian	Cisgender Woman (she/her)	Christian
Shaalini	23	Lesbian	AFAB Nonbinary (they/she/any)	Formerly Hindu, Currently Spiritual

Demographic Summary

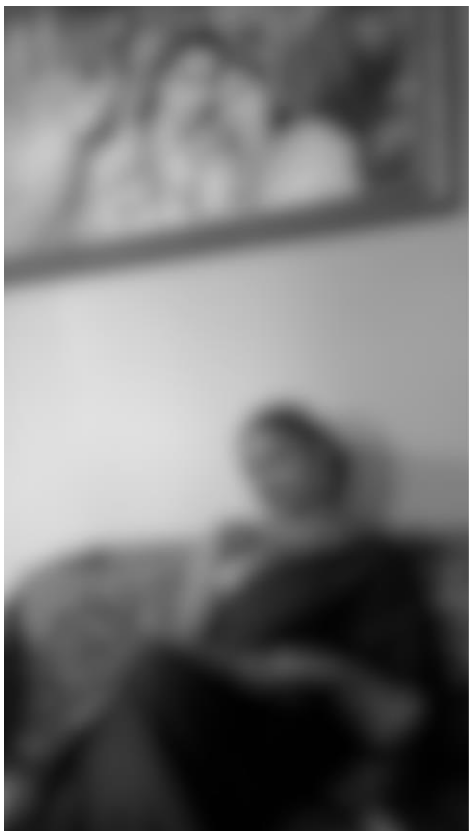
- All the participants were AFAB (Assigned Female at Birth)
- All the participants identified as Queer and 2nd Generation Canadian
- ⅘ participants identified as Eelam Tamil/Sri Lankan Tamil, ⅕ as Indian Tamil
- ⅘ participants identified as non-binary or trans, ⅕ participants identified as a cis-woman
- All the participants were between the ages of 22-30 at the time of the interview
- All the participants were raised with Hinduism or Christianity, some still identifying with the religion they were raised with

Table 2.

Narrative Photovoice Highlights

Photo	Quote
 A photo of Thanga in an orange sari, using paint to decorate their clay pot during their Thai Pongal (Tamil Harvest Festival) celebration	*"Yeah, so I picked a photo of me during my pongal shoot, I drew on this clay pot, and used that as decoration in the shoot. And it's me in my favourite sari. And you can kind of see, part of the rolls on my body. And then, you can also see my workspace, which I think is cool, because I guess you can't see some of the mess, but it's very, everything is happening at the same time. And I have a bunch of reminders on my wall and posters and stuff. So I feel this expresses my neurodiversity and my artistic side. And in the back, you can also see a bunch of these journals. And it's literally from 2018 to now. So everything that I've ever written or drawn from that point till now is on that shelf. So I just kind of revisit those things and yeah, I just feel like writing and drawing is such a big part of my life. So I'm glad that it's captured in that photo."*
 A photo of Akna on vacation	*"I'm in the Dominican in this photo. It was our first ever family trip that we took. It was after I came out to my parents and my aunt and there was so much tension on the trip. It was hard, but we still were trying to enjoy the trip, there were almost like 20 of us. It was challenging but also sweet. The trip itself was really healing, but also having to show up as I am with my parents and my aunt and having the support at least from my cousins. And still feeling lots of love from my niece and nephew and brother… I was sitting with all the good and the bad. I think maybe a month before the trip, I felt like my parents and my aunt always knew, but we had a sit down and I was like… this is who I am. I think in some ways, my mom doesn't believe me, like she's in*

	denial about it. But my dad's response was super painful. He was like, do I commit suicide, or do you? And my aunt's response was like, no one is going to respect your parents anymore, you're going to bring shame on the family. It was so painful."
 A photo of Deepika as a young child	*"I like this photo because I just had really short hair at the time. Like the Diana cut.. So affirming of my being. Thank you Diana. I'm wearing this baseball cap with two braids on it, because I think I always wanted to have long hair… nothing to do with gender. And then I chopped off my hair and then heavily, heavily grieved it. For me, it represents the fact that I grew up being the centre of attention, so good at pleasing people, so good at giving people what they wanted, just this adorable little child. I don't know if it represents me now, but it definitely represents a part of my journey."*
 A photo of Grace kneeling next to and pointing to a poster that says, "I Am a Queer Christian"	"*It's actually a mural, right when you get out of Wellesley station and you're walking towards Church Street. This is from the first time I ever went to the village in Toronto, and right after realizing I was gay. And I cried. I saw this, and then my partner who's been to the village a few times took me to a couple spots, took me to Glad Day, and I just burst out in tears. Seeing that sign that says 'I'm a Gay Christian' was so incredibly affirming to me to see that there are other people like me. That photo is kind of like… I feel like it's the most all encompassing of who I am*."



A photo of Shalini in a sari, sitting on a couch in front of a photo of Hindu deities Kanna and Radha

"I see this strong independent woman in this photo. It's my mom's favourite couch in her favourite room in the house. I can see myself living for myself in this photo, but also living for the version of Amma that had to give up a lot of things when she chose her family and had traditional values imposed on her as a Tamil woman. Also, the photo behind me… the Tamil's love this picture, and I love how it's filled with these non-binary queens and kings… you know Kanna, you can't even tell if this is supposed to be a male identifying person or not. Even the picture itself was something that stood out to me, there's so many Queer aspects and themes in Hinduism and in Tamil Culture. My dad does Ayyappan thevasams and things like that, and I recently learned that Ayyappan was born from two male dads… I wonder if he knows that."

Intersectional Marginalization

Thanga and I both experienced the feeling of being too Queer for our brown communities while simultaneously being too brown for Queer communities. Thanga and I both grew up in predominantly white towns which impacted the ways we interpreted Queerness in our youth, specifically the proximity to whiteness that Queerness was introduced to us through. We both felt true acceptance for the first time after moving back to Scarborough and meeting other QTBIPOC people. Other participants shared a similar experience - they felt that their intersectional marginalization prevented them from building community with other Queer folx.

Chosen Family/Community

Participants like Thanga and Grace both expressed they had no support from their family when coming out to them. When Grace came out to her family, she was met with a lot of hateful comments. Thanga, knowing that they don't have a lot of family support to begin with, hasn't bothered to come out to their parents because of the complex relationship they have with them. Akna, Deepika and Shalini expressed how necessary it was for them to have chosen family/community while coming out to their families for affirmation and validation. These three participants expressed that, while their parents didn't entirely accept their Queerness, they still had a decent relationship with their family where conversations could be had about Queerness.

All the participants expressed a need for safety that they only found in the presence of other racialized Queers and Queer elders.

Queer Magic/Queer Divinity

Most of my participant's relationships to their faith are what brought them comfort when making sense of their Queer identities. Most of them were raised Hindu, except for Grace who was raised Christian. Grace, Akna and myself still identify with the religions we were raised with, however, Thanga, Deepika and Shaalini's faith perspective shifted to one that centred on spirituality and intuitive awareness. Akna, Deepika and Shaalini talked a little bit about what being raised Hindu was like, and the pieces of it that they still connect to. For Akna, reclaiming Shaivism, a denomination of Hinduism, was important for their individual growth. The more they reclaimed and learned about Hinduism, whether from their parents and family members or other sources, the more they started to notice the innate Queerness present in Hinduism through ancient myths and folklore. This brought Akna and myself comfort in our Queer identities. Deepika referred to their Tamil identity being tied to their ancestry and the roles their ancestors played, such as that of warriors and protectors of the land. While they were raised Hindu, the teachings they practise are mainly those rooted in nature and its offerings.

Chapter 5: Research as Activism

Reclaiming Culture through Visual Artefacts

In the same way that Queer people often "Queer code" (making themselves visible to other Queer people), my participants did a lot of "Tamil coding," to reclaim visual aspects of their culture. This included wearing Sari's to non-traditional events, experimenting with indo-western fashion, wearing bindhis, South Asian jewelry, and using henna and face makeup to make ourselves visible to another Queer Tamil's. By coincidence, many of my participants are visual artists who took this visual reclamation a step further and created visual artefacts of themselves performing ancient rituals and reclaiming their Tamil identity by making short films and taking photoshoots. Many of the participants mentioned that they try to immerse themselves in Tamil culture as much as they can by eating Tamil food, listening to Tamil musicians, reading Tamil authors' work, etc. Through this constant search for cultural belonging, the act of reclamation is the reclamation itself, where the definition of reclamation is in the practice of immersing oneself in the culture.

Reclaiming Language

Many of my participants mentioned they grew up speaking Tamil at home but had lost their ability to speak the language because of the pressure they felt to assimilate and hide their Tamil identity growing up. All of my participants are now in the process of relearning how to speak Tamil, practising with each other in safe spaces that we've created through community organizations such as Queer Tamil Collective and Queer South Asians. Many of them expressed that this was a rare experience, to first have a space that was safe to exist in, and then be able to practise the language regardless of how fluent they were without feeling judged or mocked, something many of them experienced at home. In this act of reclamation, language was both a

barrier and an aspect of belonging. My participants were able to get to a place where language stopped being a barrier to cultural belonging by being in community with one another and practising the language in a safe space.

Overcoming Gendered/Cultural Expectations at Home

All of my participants, as AFAB people, were raised with the expectation to marry Tamil or brown men and have children as adults, the same way the generations before them were expected to do. Intergenerational trauma came up as a primary feeling around these expectations for my participants, who often experienced emotional and verbal abuse from family members when they came out as Queer or Trans. As a result, my participants sought out chosen communities/families when their biological family was not able to support them. Here, their reclamation of their Queer identities are present through the safe spaces that they've carved out and created for themselves, often with other Queer Tamil or Queer South Asian people.

One of my participants' families engaged in a lot of Care Work for their community, often supporting immigrating family members and therefore living with 2-3 other families throughout their whole life at some point. This participant mentioned that the only time they thought about their Queer identity was when they left home for the first time for their undergraduate education. Even then, as they were exploring their Queer identity, they gaslit themselves often into thinking otherwise, mainly to avoid the pressures at home that they knew would come if they came out to them. Their reclamation of their Queer identity here was tied to their reclamation of their Tamil identity, a complex thing to navigate for many years before coming out to their family and feeling secure in their Queerness.

Queer Faith as Reclamation

A key connection to their Tamil identity for all of my participants was their connection to faith, and the ways that their faith offered visibility, representation and acceptance when their families wouldn't. My participants were raised with Hinduism and Christianity, many still identifying with these religions, reinterpreting the colonized texts to find representations of Queerness. My Hindu participants talked about their feminist interpretations of ancient texts, finding comfort in the Queer and Trans deities present in Hinduism. My Christian participant had a harder time finding that visibility but proudly identifies as a Queer Christian and hopes to help create a safe Queer Faith community for themselves and others. By decolonizing their understanding of religion, my participants were able to connect to theology in a way that affirmed their identities.

CONCLUSION

As the participants of this study were seeking cultural belonging, their decolonization of their understandings of their cultural identity was an act of reclamation, a crucial step in how they chose to reclaim their cultural identity. These acts of reclamation help to bring visibility to a historically silenced community, contributing to cultural understandings of Queer Tamil people while also carving out a safe space for them.

As a researcher, this project was very dear to my heart, as I spent most of my life searching for other Queer Tamils to share my experiences with to feel that acceptance and belonging that other Queer folx felt in their chosen families. I have been fortunate to get to know these five participants over the past few years and create community with them. Growing up as an Eelam Tamil Canadian, I often did not have the language to speak to the complexity of my parents sacrifices or my role in their new life. To be able to grow and learn alongside my Queer cultural community and make sense of my lived experiences is a privilege I hope all QTBIPOC folx get to experience, as acceptance and belonging is our birthright. My hope is that this research contributes to increased visibility for Tamil's, Queer Tamil's, and racialized Queer folx. While the experiences of Queer Tamil's may vary and differ, creating space to have these conversations are needed in order to create safe spaces for QTBIPOC people everywhere.

REFERENCES

Aruliah, A. S. (1994). Accepted on Compassionate Grounds: An Admission Profile of Tamil Immigrants in Canada. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, *14*(4), 10–14. https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.21823

Baker, T. A., & Wang, C. C. (2006). Photovoice: Use of a participatory action research method to explore the chronic pain experience in older adults. *Qualitative Health Research*, *16*(10), 1405–1413. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732306294118

Hossain, A. (2018). De-Indianizing Hijra. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *5*(3), 321–331. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-6900710

Kanji, K. (n.d.). The Gays Aren't All White, The Desis Aren't All Straight: Exploring Queer Subjectivity in the Toronto South Asian Diaspora, 1–85.

Patel, S. (2019). "Brown girls can't be gay": Racism experienced by Queer South Asian women in the Toronto LGBTQ community. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, *23*(3), 410–423. https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2019.1585174

Thiranagama, S. (2014). Making Tigers from Tamils: Long-distance nationalism and Sri Lankan tamils in Toronto. *American Anthropologist*, *116*(2), 265–278. https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12099

Verma, A. R. (2015). Remembering and Forgetting: Archiving Queer and Trans "South Asian" Organizing in Toronto. *Major Portfolio, Master in Environmental Studies*, 1–103.