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Publication Date

2019

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Trans-formations:
Projects of Resignification in Tamil Nadu's Transgender Rights Movement

By

Shakthi Nataraj

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Anthropology

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Charles L. Briggs, Co-chair

Professor Lawrence Cohen, Co-chair

Professor William F. Hanks

Professor Mel Y. Chen

Spring 2019

Abstract

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Professor Charles L. Briggs, Co- Chair

Professor Lawrence Cohen, Co-Chair

As the term “transgender” rapidly gains traction worldwide— becoming, for many, key to accessing state recognition and medical access— it maps in irregular and ambivalent ways onto other legal and cultural frameworks. In India, the Supreme Court has treated the categories of “LGBT” and “transgender” rights in starkly different ways, criminalizing homosexuality while still upholding transgender rights (2013), and then radically reversing its stance in 2018. Rather than assert the singularity of the “local” against the homogenizing impact of the “global,” as some research has done, my dissertation examines the reach and implications of these debates in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu by tracking “transgender imaginaries”: utopian visions that take the figure of the “transgender woman” as a point of departure to imagine how “changing sex” can allow subjects to speak powerful new kinds of radical “truth,” performatively inaugurating new ethical worlds. Transgender imaginaries imply competing “models of sex” (Plemons 2017): metapragmatic models held by social actors, of what constitutes “sex,” where it resides, how it is produced, how it is exposed, and what implications “sex” transformations have for the social body at large. I track how my interlocutors continually used the concept at different scales, indexing broad cultural anxieties, while paradoxically marking specific bodies.

Chapter I examines how narratives about *hijras*—India’s iconic transgender community of ritual specialists—were interpreted in radically different ways in Chennai by journalists, human rights activists, doctors, public health officials and transgender-identified subjects, indexing anxieties about changing practices of kinship in Chennai, the neoliberalization of healthcare, and the incursion of “foreign” NGOs. Chapter II examines the figure of the *thirunangai* (meaning “Respectable Woman” in Tamil). “Thirunangai imaginaries” combine models of sex drawn from (a) the pro-Tamil, anti-caste ideologies of the Dravidian movement; (2) transnational models of sex change; and (3) pan-Indian “exposure models of sex” where sexed body parts, kinship affiliation, ascetic practice, and verbal license are imagined together to produce an ethical subject. Chapter III examines how the term *koti*— meaning an effeminate male— has circulated between the 1990s and the present in human rights documents, autobiographical stories, and jokes in Chennai, indexing the contingency and boundaries of what constitutes “maleness. Together these reveal the instability and ethical horizons of what “sex” is.

For my mother, Shyamala Nataraj

Table of Contents

A note on translation and transliteration	iv
Glossary of terms *	v
List of abbreviations	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 The stock definition of the hijra	2
1.2 Models of sex	6
1.3 Transgender imaginaries	7
1.3.1 Transgender imaginaries in Tamil Nadu	9
1.3.2 My entry into the field.....	9
1.4 Summary of chapters and interventions in the existent literature.....	11
CHAPTER I: HIJRA IMAGINARIES.....	13
2.1 The “Fact-finding mission”	14
2.2 Ethnographic approaches to “kidnapping and castration”	16
2.3 The ambiguous referents of "kidnapping"	18
2.4 Butler's formulation of how sex and gender "matter" through discourse	20
2.5 Models of sex , language, and surgery	21
2.5.1 "Gay and Lesbian Language": Essentialist models of sex and language	23
2.5.2 "Queer linguistics": Performative models of sex and language	24
2.5.3 An "exposure model" of sex rather than a “hijra” model.....	25
2.5.4 Ethnographies of hijra performance	27
2.6 Deconstructing the hijra: a critical genealogy	31
2.6.1 The “colonial degeneration” argument.....	32
2.6.2 “Kidnapping” versus “adoption”	33
2.6.3 The hijra body as a discursive effect	34
2.6.4 Revisiting the exposure model.....	37
2.7 Six ways to tell a story about "kidnapping"	37
2.7.1 A scandalous crime.....	37
2.7.2 A dirty secret.....	40
2.7.3 A travesty of human rights	43
2.7.4 Surgery: restoration or mutilation?.....	48
2.7.5 The corrupting influence of Mumbai.....	50
2.7.6. An ethnographic misrepresentation.....	52
2.8 Conclusion.....	54

CHAPTER II: THIRUNANGAI IMAGINARIES.....	56
3.1 The Dravidian movement.....	59
3.1.1 Thirunangai literature and Tamil feminist writing circles	62
3.2 The “Dravidianist thirunangai imaginary”	62
3.2.1 Kuri Aruttēn	64
3.2.2 Writing in “pure Tamil”	71
3.2.3 Cutting off the kuri	71
3.2.4 Different actions performed by “cutting the kuri”	73
3.2.5 Cutting produces a new form of kinship.....	74
3.2.6 The women that cut.....	75
3.3 The “Daily Wire Thirunangai imaginary”	78
3.3.1 “Kalki the anglophile”	80
3.3.2 <i>The World of Thirunangais</i>	82
3.4 The “Thirunangai joke imaginary”	91
3.4.1 Thirunangai as a “cinema” depiction removed from reality	92
3.4.2 Koti as a “real” identity “underneath” thirunangai	93
3.4.3 The intersubjective recognition of koti identity	93
3.4.4 Naran-ness as a kind of hypocrisy	95
3.4.5 Kotis are not narans, they are only “like narans”	96
3.5 Conclusion.....	98
CHAPTER III: KOTI IMAGINARIES	99
4.1 The “Kothi Wars”	100
4.2 The lives of life-stories	103
4.2.1 The “usual” life story: evidence of injury.....	104
4.2.2 “Real stories, not bullshit stories”	106
4.2.3 “The usual” is a bore	108
4.3 <i>Ippadiyuma?</i> or “Is this [a type of person] too?”	109
4.4 The kotis that emerge from <i>Ippadiyuma</i>.....	113
4.4.1 Koti as research subject.....	113
4.4.2 Koti as fleeting youth.....	114
4.4.3 Koti as a refusal of naran (cisgender woman) abjection.....	115
4.4.4 Koti as gender ambiguity expressed through practice, not anatomy.....	116
4.4.5 The “posh koti” and the “BPO boy”	117
4.4.6 The pleasure and violence of the koti-panthi relationship	118
4.5 Conclusion.....	121
CONCLUSION	123
REFERENCES	127

A note on translation and transliteration

I have chosen not to use diacritics for the non-English words in the body of the dissertation as well as the references, using English spellings that seem closest to the Tamil pronunciation. This is to facilitate ease of reading. For readers that are keen to ascertain the way the word is spelled and pronounced in Tamil, transliterations of the most commonly-used non-English words with diacritics are provided next to each entry in the glossary of terms and abbreviations (p. iv). For consistency, the diacritics indicate how the word would be spelled *in Tamil*, even when the word is sourced from Hindi or Sanskrit.

For the majority of interviews, I offer English glosses. The only exception is in Chapter 2, where I provide a full transliteration of the poem *Kuri Aruttēn*, as well as a transliterated excerpt from the foreword. I do this so that the reader can follow my analysis and also judge my translation for themselves. Those familiar with Indic scripts will also be able to detect subtle nuances of meaning by checking the original Tamil spelling.

The diacritics guide that I use is based on the Library of Congress system of transliteration. This corresponds with the international standard ISO 15919 *Transliteration of Devanagari and related Indic scripts into Latin characters*.

Vowels and diphthongs				Consonants			
அ	a	எ	e	ஃ	ka	ம	ma
ஆ	ā	ஏ	ē	க	ka	ய	ya
இ	i	ஐ	ai	ங	ṅa	ர	ra
ஈ	ī	ஓ	o	ச	ca	ல	la
உ	u	ஔ	ō	ஞ	ña	வ	va
ஊ	ū	ஔள	au	ட	ṭa	ழ	ḷa
Sanskrit sounds				ண	ṇa	ள	ḷa
ஜ	ja	ஸ	sa	த	ta	ற	ra
ஸ	śa	ஹ	ha	ந	na	ன	ṇa
ஷ	ṣa			ப	pa		

Glossary of terms *

Aravani (<i>aravāni</i>):	A transgendered ritual specialist associated with the worship of the lord Aravan at the annual Kuthandavar festival in Koovakkam, Tamil Nadu.
Badhai (<i>patāi</i>)	A practice associated with hijra identity, of performing, offering blessings, and asking for alms at weddings and births
Centamil (<i>centamiḷ</i>)	“Pure Tamil,” a register associated with high-status speakers and political oratory, distinguished from the colloquial <i>koṭuntamiḷ</i>
Cela (<i>cēla</i>)	Disciple in a patronage-based kinship system such as the jamat
Dalit (<i>talit</i>)	A term popularized by Dalit activist B.R. Ambedkar in the 1930s and reclaimed in the 1970s as a term of self-identification for those formerly classified as “untouchable” castes
Devadasi (<i>tēvatāci</i>)	A courtesan community of women who are dedicated to the goddess Yellamma and associated with jamat-like matriarchal kinship systems
Dinathanthi (<i>tiṇatanti</i>)	A popular daily newspaper in Tamil Nadu, founded in 1942
Gosain (<i>kōsēn</i>)	A martial caste of male-identified “warrior ascetics” associated with patronage-based jamat systems of kinship, in 17-18c India
Guru (<i>kuru</i>)	The mentor or “mother” in a jamat family structure
Gurubai (<i>kurupāi</i>)	Celas of the same guru refer to one another as gurubais
Hijra (<i>hijrā</i>)	A transgendered ritual specialist associated with the worship of the goddess Bahuchara Mata and specific performance traditions in North India
Jamat (<i>jamāt</i>), also called gharana (<i>karāna</i>)	A kinship system built on patronage-based ties and adoption where a guru generally mentors or adopts celas
Jogappa (<i>jōkappa</i>)	A transgendered ritual specialist associated with ceremonial dedication and marriage to the goddess Yellamma in Karnataka
Kanni (<i>kaṇṇi</i>)	Tamil term meaning virgin
Kavdi (<i>kāvṭi</i>)	A term in koti-basha, meaning “false,” opposed to <i>sīs</i> , or “true”

Khwasarai (<i>kuvājāsarāi</i>)	A community of transgendered persons employed as courtly and military leaders by the Mughal kingdoms in seventeenth and eighteenth century India
Kinnar (<i>kin̄nar</i>)	A term increasingly reclaimed as an alternative to hijra
Koti (<i>kōti</i>)	A pan-Indian term referring to a male-born person that is “effeminate” in social practice but does not change their anatomy
Koti-basha (<i>kōti-pāṣai</i>)	A register and lexical code that mixes Hindi, Farsi and in Chennai, Tamil, overtly indexing a person’s belonging in a koti community (Reddy 2006, 65).
Naran (<i>nāraṇ</i>)	A category of person defined by possessing a womb and breasts, a “woman,” determined by anatomy
Panthi (<i>panti</i>)	A male-born person who is “masculine” in their gendered practice, often the lover of a koti
Tamilpatru (<i>tamilpaṛru</i>)	“Tamil devotion,” a trope that Sumathi Ramaswamy calls the “structure of affect and sentiment” that becomes an important basis for late nineteenth and early twentieth century Tamil politics (1997, 6).
Tamiltay (<i>tamilttāy</i>)	“Mother Tamil,” a trope that Ramaswamy 1997, 17-19) argues is the dominant trope through which Tamil is imagined in twentieth century Tamil Nadu.
Tayppal (<i>tāyppāl</i>)	Mother’s milk
Taymoli (<i>taymoli</i>)	“Mother language” or mother tongue
Tawaif (<i>tavāip</i>)	A courtesan community associated with the Muslim courts of 18c Lucknow
Thirunangai (<i>tirunāṅkai</i>)	A Tamil term meaning “Respectable woman” claimed by activists in Tamil Nadu in the mid-2000s as a progressive, “modern,” and “authentically Tamil” identity in contrast to hijra

* These definitions are provisional and I try to complicate them in the body of the dissertation

List of abbreviations

ADGP: Assistant Director General of Police
AIADMK: All-India Dravidian Progressive Party (*All-India Tirāviṭa Munṇērra Kalakam*)
ART: Anti-Retroviral Therapy
CB-CID: Crime Branch-Criminal Investigation Department
CBO: Community-Based Organization
CTA: Criminal Tribes Act (1871)
DMK: Dravidian Progressive Party (*Tirāviṭa Munṇērra Kalakam*)
FIR: First Information Report
FSW: Female Sex Workers
HIV/AIDS: Human Immuno-deficiency Virus/Acquired Immuno-deficiency Syndrome
HRG: High Risk Group
IDU: Injecting Drug Users
LABIA: Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action
LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
MSM: Men who have Sex with Men
NACO: National AIDS Control Organization
NALSA: National Legal Services Authority
NGO: Non Governmental Organization
PUCL-K: People's Union for Civil Liberties
SC: Supreme Court
TG: Transgender
TNPWAA: Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers and Artists Association
TNSACS: Tamil Nadu State AIDS Control Society

Acknowledgements

I thank my mother Shyamala Nataraj—my most critical reader, my inspiration and my rock. I thank Charles Briggs for his unwavering faith in my abilities and for pushing me to write at my limits. I thank Lawrence Cohen for always being sensitive not just to what I was arguing, but to why I cared. Lawrence was a kindred spirit who taught me that scholarship can be rigorous but also generous, even playful. William Hanks engaged my curiosity about linguistic theory with warmth and intellectual generosity, helping me develop a strong theoretical footing and technical vocabulary. Profs. Mel Chen and Blake Wentworth were kind and thoughtful interlocutors.

I thank the brilliant writers and friends that shared with me their artistic and political visions and allowed me to reprint their work: Sudha, Sankari TN, Kaavya, Sundari, Bhavana, Asma, Sana, Siva Kumar, Delfina, Priyababu, Jaya, Kalki Subramaniam, ‘Living Smile’ Vidya, Aiswarya, Vanitha, Roulin, Malini Jeevarathnam, Sairam Vishwa, Valan, Manisha, Berry, everyone at Sahodaran and Sangama, Mr. Selvaraj at Times of India, Mr. Paul Suyambu at Dinathanthi, Mr. Ravi at The Hindu, Mr. Pramodh at Voluntary Health Services, Chennai, and Dr. Sanjay Kalra. Mr. Aravindan and Mr. Paranthaman offered elegant translations and transcriptions.

I thank all the teachers that taught me to write, read, and listen: Amukta Mahapatra, Uma Shankar, Malynne Sternstein, William Mazzarella, Jean Comaroff, Saba Mahmood, David Shulman, Kira Hall, Gayatri Reddy, and Bernard Bate. I thank Matthew Hull, Sarah Pinto, Kareem Khubchandani, Sharika Thiranagama, Anjali Arondekar, David Valentine and Maura Finkelstein for their encouragement and comments on chapter drafts and paper presentations. Dr. Bharathy LakshmyPerumal offered critical insights on the Tamil texts and feedback on my translations. Prof. A.R. Venkatachalapathy kindly offered me an affiliation with the Madras Institute of Development Studies when I conducted fieldwork in Chennai.

Tina Matuchniak’s love and weekly coaching sessions supported me through every painful step of the writing process for my entire last year at Berkeley.

I thank my friends at Berkeley: Ned Garrett, Tabea Mastel, Frances Bright, Ruth Goldstein, Bharat Venkat, Hallie Wells, Aurora Feeney-Kleinfeldt, Sultan Doughan, Victoria Massie, Zahra Hayat, William Stafford, Bob Offer-Westort, Rachel Syka, Cameron Johnson, Amulya Mandava, Ishani Saraf, Ned Dostaler, Gabriel Coren, Anthony Wright, Estefana Ramos, Diana Gleason, and Gloria Rodriguez.

I thank my loved ones: Krishnaveni Ganesan, Rudra Nataraj, V.S. Nataraj, Sujatha Ganesan, Sharanya Kumar, Ramesh Kumar, Vishnu Kumar, Usha Ramachandran, Prem Chandrasekhar, Gayatri Shankar, Karuna Chandrasekhar, Neha Reddy, Anshu Kalyanaraman, Alpa Jain, Deborah Munro, Vasantha, Manimegalai, Kumar, Maniamma, Priya, Taejha Susheel, Aniruddhan Vasudevan, Asma, Jaya, Sankari TN, Kaavya, V. Sundar, Siva Kumar, Delfina, Sundari, Heena, Sana, Preethi Shekar, Srinidhi Sampathkumar, Alyssa Matuchniak and Azad.

This research was generously supported by the Diebold Research Grant, the American Institute for Indian Studies Junior Fellowship, The Hart Tamil Studies Fellowship, the Philip Brett LGBT Studies Fellowship, and the Institute for International Studies Dissertation Completion Fellowship. Thank you.

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the Indian Supreme Court and legislature passed a series of seemingly contradictory judgments, appearing to affirm “homosexual” rights while still criminalizing those of “transgender persons.” First, in July, the court struck down Section 377, a colonial-era law criminalizing “carnal intercourse against the order of nature.” The decriminalization of homosexuality came at the end of a lengthy legal battle spanning several decades where courts had vacillated wildly: the Delhi High Court had “read down” the law in 2009 only for the Supreme Court to re-introduce it in 2013, before finally repealing it in 2018.¹ Only six months later, in December 2018, the court passed a second judgment: the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill (henceforth TG Bill). Despite its name, the TG Bill increased police surveillance of persons deemed to be “transgender,” while also curtailing their right to self-identification.² The oppressive language of the TG Bill came as a surprise, since only a few years earlier, the Supreme Court had issued a directive that firmly upheld transgender rights citing the internationally recognized Yogyakarta Principles pertaining to sexuality and gender rights.³ When analyzing the inconsistencies in the Supreme Court’s reasoning, activists drew connections to two other judgments that might at first glance appear unrelated to LGBT rights: the Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection, and Rehabilitation) Bill that increased punitive punishment for sex workers, and the Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill which curtailed the freedom of surrogate mothers to control the terms of their contracts. It was evident from the ensuing protests that the above struggles were seen to be deeply interconnected. A Mumbai-based collective, Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action (LABIA), condemned this “spree of dangerous bills”: The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2018, The Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2018, and The Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill, 2018... display a complete lack of comprehension of the lived realities of the people for whom they are meant – transgender persons, sex workers, bonded laborers, contract workers, domestic workers, migrant workers, and surrogates.”⁴

Even without examining the above debates in greater detail, one thing is clear: global and relatively recent definitions of “transgender” and “sex work” map in irregular and ambivalent ways onto Indian legal categories and public discourse. As the language of transgender rights goes global, it prompts groupings that organize along diverse lines that challenge any universal definition of “sex,” “gender” or “sexual orientation”. In LABIA’s condemnation for example, “transgender persons” are grouped together with “sex workers, bonded laborers, contract

¹ For a timeline of the battle against Sec. 377 as well as a collection of resources, see Orinam, n.d. “Background of 377 case.” Accessed May 13, 2019. <http://orinam.net/377/background-of-sec-377/>

² For more on the Transgender Rights Bill and those that preceded it, see Orinam, n.d. “The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2018.” Resources for Law and Enforcement. Accessed May 13, 2019. <http://orinam.net/resources-for/law-and-enforcement/trans-persons-protection-rights-bill-2018/>

³ For specific references to the Yogyakarta Principles see National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India Writ Petition (Civil) No. 400 of 2012, pgs 5, 17-18, 28, 55-60, 78 (hereafter cited in text as NALSA vs Union of India 2012). Accessed May 13, 2019. https://www.ishr.ch/sites/default/files/article/files/india_sc_transgender_judgment.pdf

⁴ Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action, December 26, 2018. “Dear Lok Sabha, Stop Criminalising Our Bodies And Lives.” Feminism In India. Accessed on May 13, 2019. <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/12/26/lok-sabha-bill-statement/>

workers, domestic workers, migrant workers, and surrogates," rather than with a global community of "LGBTs." The language of "intersectionality" can only partially explain the co-occurrence of these debates. Arguing for example that transgender persons often do sex work, implicitly assumes and takes for granted the ontological distinctness and relevance of categories such as "transgender person" "sex work," or even "sex" and "gender" for that matter, while also uncritically reproducing the very terms used in the legal debates. The heterogeneity of these activist movements around gender actually offers a valuable opportunity to rethink what is historically specific about emerging axes along which subjects take sexed and gendered positions in contemporary India, in terms of legal categories, social practice, and material bodies, the very "matter" of sex.

1.1 The stock definition of the hijra

The figure of the hijra, India's iconic transgender community, has become a central symbolic resource in such debates, invoked by actors across the political spectrum as they navigate the perceived division between international human rights discourse on the one hand, and India's "ancient" traditions on the other. When the Supreme Court re-criminalized homosexuality in 2013, for example, the defense characterized homosexuality as a foreign import, stating that "LGBTs" were a "miniscule fraction" of the country's population, not representative of "Indian culture."⁵ In combating this argument, activists repeatedly invoked the figure of the hijra as an exemplary instance of how India's ancient traditions and religious myths had long sanctioned LGBT identities. The invocation of the hijra as a metonym of Indian culture is a sign and consequence of the rapid circulation of anthropological scholarship— and of anthropologists themselves— between the American academy and Indian activist circles over the past few decades. Hijras have long been a staple of twentieth century American scholarship in anthropology and South Asian Studies (Opler 1960; Preston 1987; Nanda 1990; Cohen 1995; Hall 1997; Goldman 1999; Lal 1999; Reddy 2006). Studies of hijras received a renewed impetus with the rise of feminist and queer anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s, and the simultaneous globalization of sexuality rights and HIV/AIDS prevention movements. For anthropologists such as Serena Nanda (1990), hijras were valorized as a "third sex" upon which America could model its own emancipatory future, and for HIV/AIDS prevention movements, both hijra and the closely linked koti identities were seen as instantiations of a global category of "Men who have Sex with Men". Subsequent anthropological scholarship in the American academy has strongly critiqued the essentializing tendencies of such third-sex scholarship and its impulse to create cross-cultural catalogues of sexual identity that reproduce Eurocentric categories (Cohen 1995, 277; Reddy 2006, 31-33).⁶ Yet as the transgender rights-related judgments of the past decade illustrate, anthropologists are not the only ones that assimilate hijras to a global conception of "third sex" to propose broader emancipatory visions. Consider the following definition, for example, taken from a report originally produced by the People's Union for Civil Liberties-

⁵ G.S. Singhvi, "Suresh Koushal v. Naz Foundation." *Outlook India*. Dec 18, 2013. Accessed May 15, 2019. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/suresh-kumar-kaushal-v-naz-foundation/288822>

⁶ "...though third gender is good to think with, its theorization is often exquisitely insensitive to the bodies with which it plays...[we must focus instead on] what it means to make sexual difference matter— through various surgical, sartorial, or discursive tactics— in terms of other forms of social difference: class-based, caste-based, metropolitan, an patriarchal" (1995, 277).

Karnataka (cited hereafter as PUCL-K) in 2003, on human rights violations against the transgender community:

Transgender/homosexual communities have existed in almost all parts of the world, with their own local identities, customs, and rituals. They have been variously known as 'baklas' in Philippines, 'berdaches' among American Indian tribes, 'xaniths' in Oman, 'serrers' in Africa, and 'hijras', 'jogappas', 'jogtas', 'shiv-shaktis' in South Asia...In various cultures, transgenders were seen as having special powers due to their assumed 'third-sex' dimension, and were allowed to take part in semi-religious ceremonies...Hindu legends show that hijras in India has a sanctioned role in Hindu society, especially through the practice of 'badhai'. ([2003] 2005, 23-25)

PUCL-K's report became an oft-cited resource for the activists organizing against Section 377 in the two decades that followed. From the early 2000s to the present, a stock definition has taken shape, steadily and repeatedly cited as a remarkably consistent piece of text that circulates amongst anthropologists, activists, judges, and lawyers alike. In 2005, the PUCL-K report was cited in a collection of essays by LGBT rights activists seeking to decriminalize homosexuality. Scholars and activists Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan cite PUCL-K's report when they write in their introduction:

The Hijras: As a community, they represent an existing Indian tradition which clearly contests any heteronormative understandings of gender, sexuality and the body. Hijras include men who go in for hormonal treatment, those who undergo sex-change operations and those who are born as hermaphrodites. The community has its own culture and ways of living, including its own festivals and gods and goddesses. Hijras divide themselves into gharanas or houses and the strength of the hijra community lies in its close-knit relationships, their sole source of support against the social ostracism they face in mainstream society (PUCL-K 2003, quoted in Narrain and Bhan 2005, 5).

The stock definition of hijras became increasingly entrenched in the documents of the central government in the years that followed. In 2007, the National AIDS Control Organization (cited hereafter as NACO), outlining a "Strategic Approach for Targeted Intervention among Transgender and Hijra," utilized an almost identical definition:

Hijras represent a socio-cultural identity, which renounces male sexuality, identifies with the creative power of the Mother Goddess Sakti and with Shiva. Hijras are given the option of castration and a castrated hijra commands higher status in the community... Their social structures are based on the Hindu Guru system and female-identified family structure. Hijras should be perceived as a different gender altogether— perhaps a "third gender". Each Hijra belongs to a house or lineage." (NACO 2011, 7)

Most recently, the writ petition submitted by NALSA, which led to the 2014 judgment passed by the Supreme Court in favor of transgender rights, cited anthropologist Gayatri Reddy's 2005 ethnography of the hijra community in Hyderabad. The hijra identity of the primary petitioner is validated by appealing to anthropology:

Laxmi Narayan Tripathy, claimed to be a Hijra... [pleads for the] recognition of their identity as a third gender, over and above male and female. Tripathy says that non-recognition of the identity

of Hijras, a TG community, as a third gender, denies them the right of equality before the law and equal protection of law guaranteed under Article 14 of the Constitution and violates the rights guaranteed to them under Article 21 of the Constitution of India.

[The transgender] community comprises of Hijras, eunuchs, Kothis, Aravanis, Jogappas, Shiv-Shakthis etc. and they, as a group, have got a strong historical presence in our country in the Hindu mythology and other religious texts...⁷

...Hijras also played a prominent role in the royal courts of the Islamic world, especially in the Ottoman empires and the Mughal rule in the Medieval India. A detailed analysis of the historical background of the same finds a place in the book of Gayatri Reddy, “With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India” – Yoda Press (2006).⁸

This stock definition of hijras has become ubiquitous in anthropological scholarship on LGBT rights movements in India.⁹ Countless nearly identical definitions— sometimes accompanied by an obligatory list of regional variants— have become commonplace in grant applications, public health documents, international policy briefs in the past decade.¹⁰

The pervasiveness of this stock definition of hijras is not due to any shortage of scholarly effort to deconstruct the idea of a monolithic hijra identity. Indeed, it is ironic that Gayatri Reddy's *With Respect to Sex* (2006) has become such a ubiquitous source in this chain of citations. Reddy's ethnography of hijras in Hyderabad was important precisely because of her *refusal* to reduce hijra identity to a simple "Indian" iteration of universalistic conceptions of sex and gender. Reddy takes her cue not from an ahistorical hijra ideal but focuses instead on the social practices by which her interlocutors assessed and contested one another's izzat (respect or authenticity), in terms not simply of anatomy but other historically-specific axes of value such as religious practice, kinship affiliations, sexual praxis, sartorial practice, language, and a commitment to asceticism. In her richly descriptive ethnography, hijra emerges as a contingent, socially achieved status, bracketed by other social identities such as koti (effeminate male), naran

⁷ Supplementing the term hijra with a list of regional variants— *aravani*, *jogappa*, *kinnar*, *shiv-shakti*—can crucially expand political representation and I do not wish to minimize its importance, nor the work of the activists that fought hard for representation. Nevertheless, I would argue that without any concerted effort to explain the political and ethical stakes of distinguishing between these categories, the gesture reproduces a monolithic category of “indigenous” transgender identity with the terms treated essentially as equivalents. For example, the Supreme Court judgment’s casual affixing of “etc.” to the end of the sentence suggests that these identities are not considered to be very distinct from one another.

⁸ (NALSA v Union of India 2012, 5)

⁹ In a critique of the way that HIV/AIDS interventions categorize of hijra identity, for example, Aniruddha Dutta cites Gayatri Reddy’s ethnography: “[Hijras] are a well-known socio-religious group of people who dress in women’s clothes and are organized into clans or gharanas. Though most members of hijra clans are assigned male at birth, hijras are commonly thought of as lacking male genitalia, many undergo voluntary castration and penectomy, and undertake ritualized occupations like badhai (blessing newborn children for money and gifts), although some hijras also perform sex work (Reddy 2005a, 2 cited in Dutta 2013, 495).

¹⁰ Indeed, the definitions I offer in the glossary of this thesis— particularly for the terms hijra, aravani, kinnar, and jogappa— reproduce much the kind of culturalist “stock definitions” that I critique here. I am still working through how to give an account of these terms that does not collapse them in an essentializing way, and how to navigate the overdetermined discursive terrain that facilitates such a collapse. I would welcome thoughts from scholars that are struggling with similar theoretical and methodological questions.

(biological woman), panthi (masculine lover), and assessed in terms of moral and aesthetic ideals such as that of the ascetic that renounces sexuality and lineage.

The fact that her text is so often condensed into a pat definition of hijras is neither a reflection upon Reddy's ethnography nor upon those that cite it. It speaks rather, to an overdetermined arena of discourse where the stakes around identifying as "transgender" have rapidly escalated, becoming a fraught site of promise, both ethical and material. Citations engender citations, and the rapid growth of the movement in the past two decades has produced a cascade of cut-and-pasted text. In order to be legible within the discourses around the LGBT rights movement in India, it appears as though this stock definition of hijra has become a kind of shorthand, a standard fixture in any glossary or preface the brackets work on the subject. Ironically, even as both "hijra" and "transgender" are made to carry increasingly heavy symbolic loads, their definitions have become endlessly detachable.

When a solid image of the hijra is spectacularly foregrounded in this way, the many bodies that are marked and unmarked in its circulation go unnoticed.¹¹ As researchers we remain unable to understand why such a variety of social actors — the "sex workers, bonded laborers, contract workers, domestic workers, migrant workers, and surrogates," to quote LABIA's list — are all engaged in constructing competing emancipatory visions built around an imagined "transgender identity." In this thesis, I treat the stock definition of hijras as an ethnographic object in its own right, in order to gain an analytical vantage point from which to examine how it coagulates, dissipates and circulates in India's transgender rights movement, producing material consequences as it does so. I argue that this stock definition of the hijra has become, in Tamil Nadu's transgender rights movement, a symbolic resource for what I call competing "transgender imaginaries": utopian visions offering competing ideas of what society should look like, how sexed bodies should be produced, and how acts of "sexing" or "gendering" can performatively produce new worlds and new ethical horizons.

To be clear, I am not arguing that the stock definition of the hijra I have traced above, is simply an instrumentalist "invention of tradition" geared towards inclusion within either an international or state-sponsored regime of benefits and rights. As a person that is not marked as "trans," and that is not directly impacted by the LGBT rights legislations, I do not possess the same stakes in the reclamation of the term "hijra," a central, irreplaceable, and empowering part of any social movement.¹² My interlocutors' "transgender imaginaries," moreover, were not crudely instrumental; they possessed stakes that were deeply ethical and bodily, both for oneself and the world. In constructing competing transgender imaginaries that had both ethical and bodily stakes, my interlocutors wove together different "models of sex": conceptual models of how sexed body parts, language use, kinship affiliation, potency/fertility, sexual practice, an ideal of ascetic renunciation, and an act of exposure came together to performatively produce an ethical subject that could make a social critique, speak a kind of "truth" and bring a different world into being.

¹¹ I borrow the term "spectacularized" from Anjali Arondekar and her discussion of the dangers of reifying the hijra body (2009, 90).

¹² I agree here with anthropologist Charles Briggs has made forcefully in his work with indigenous rights activists in Venezuela. Briggs argues that "invention of tradition" arguments, particularly when made by non-indigenous scholars, often falsely suggest that scholars occupying different subject-positions share the same stakes in debates about cultural identity, while also "deny[ing] by fiat the force of the acts that preoccupy narrators" (2007, 322, see also Briggs 1996).

1.2 Models of sex

In using the term “models of sex” I am inspired by Eric Plemons’ argument in *The Look of a Woman: Facial Feminization Surgery and the Aims of Trans-Medicine* (2017).¹³ Plemons argues that while in the mid-twentieth century, trans-medicine in the United States was dominated by an essentialist model that aimed at surgically transforming a person’s genitals, a new “performative model” of sex and gender has taken root since the 1980s (ibid., 10). In this newer model, sex is primarily a matter of intersubjective recognition, and “facial feminization surgery” (FFS) becomes more important than genital excision, the face being the primary site where intersubjective recognition takes place (ibid.). Plemons takes the term “performative” from Butler’s reworking of J. L. Austin’s concept of performativity¹⁴ in *Gender Trouble* (Butler [1990] 2006), arguing that FFS came into popularity as trans-medicine at a historical moment when a Butlerian reading of sex and gender was gaining popularity (ibid., 11). Rather than uncritically apply its premises, Plemons treats the “performative model” of sex-as-recognition as an ethnographic object in its own right, “a historically particular style of thought whose wide-reaching influence includes a framing and articulation of trans-therapeutics that way not possible before the 1990s” (ibid., 11). By historically particularizing the model itself, Plemons makes it possible to compare and contrast models of trans-therapeutics that belong to varied places and times, each of which might draw both on the performative model he describes and on other models of sex. Plemons’ uptake of Butler also offers a way to bridge the gap between theories that treat sex as a discursive effect and those that treat sex as a matter of embodiment, bringing matter and discourse into a dialogic rather than antagonistic relationship.

Some important “models of sex” that are at play in the transgender rights movement in Tamil Nadu have been described by previous ethnographers of hijra communities in India. These include the model of *izzat* (respect, or authenticity) described by Gayatri Reddy in her ethnography of hijra practice (2006), the assessments of *asli* and *naqli* (real/fake) observed by Lawrence Cohen amongst his interlocutors in Varanasi (1995), and the link between genital trace, verbal license, and fertility or potency observed by linguistic anthropologist Kira Hall in her ethnography of hijras and kotis in Delhi (1997). I would like to build on the careful work of these ethnographers to sketch the contours of what I call “exposure models of sex” where “justice” and

¹³ While I engage more deeply with Plemons’ concept of “trans-therapeutics” in Chapter 1, I offer here a quick description of how he conceptualizes “models of sex.”

¹⁴ In *How to do Things with Words*, J.L. Austin offers a theory of speech acts that is intended as a corrective for those theorists that regularly reduce all utterances to a “true/false” evaluation, thereby eliding the effects that accrue to language independent of sense or reference (1962: 100). First, Austin draws a preliminary distinction between *constatives*— statements that can be evaluated as true or false— and *performatives*— utterances that do not merely describe, but bring about, an effect in the world. For example, the utterance “I do” in the context of a marriage ceremony is a performative: it does not describe the act of marriage but performs it. Performatives are *felicitous* if they successfully invoke of an existing convention, they are accurately executed, and the performance is sincere. If one of these “felicity conditions” is not met, then they are *infelicitous* and do not bring about the intended effect. Next, Austin argues that there is no clear distinction between constatives and performatives: “every genuine speech act is both” (ibid., 147). Having rejected the performative/constative distinction, Austin proposes a new typology of speech acts in terms of the force they possess: *locutionary*, *illocutionary*, and *perlocutionary*. An utterance possesses locutionary force in so far as it may be taken as a referential statement. It accrues illocutionary force in so far as it invokes a convention and seeks to bring the world into being by enacting that convention. The perlocutionary effects of an utterance refer to non-conventional, non-intentional effects that may follow in its wake.

“truth” are imagined to be linked to regimes of bodily and linguistic practice, and it is not only a body that is “mattered” through practice but a vision of a world. The act of exposing incongruence between speech, an ethical commitment reflected in one’s lifestyle, and one’s body, is a way to “expose” truth. If hijras are associated with a performance where one “lifts one’s skirt” to show proof of a “committed body,” as Lawrence Cohen has suggested (1995, 299) it suggests a broader symbolic universe where to have a gender and to have a sex is to also have a purpose. In a “committed body,” history, material existence, and a type of moral striving are performatively instantiated— and exposed— at once. I call this an “exposure model” of sex because sex-marked genitals are repeatedly “exposed,” not literally, but through verbal performance genres that take a call-and-response form, making accusations and counter-accusations that demand material “proof” of one’s body, fertility, and adherence to an ethical lifestyle.

I am not arguing here that there is an essentialist and homogenous “Indian ontology” or model of sex that is opposed it, or incommensurable with, a “Western” conception of transgender identity. I am interested, rather, in examining how the logic of “exposure” was one amongst many elements in the models of sex proposed by my interlocutors as they wove together “transgender imaginaries.” In some ways these imaginaries drew upon the genital-focused “essentialist model” of Gender Dysphoria that Plemons associates with the mid-twentieth century in America, ensconced in the Harry Benjamin guidelines for sex-reassignment surgery. In other ways transgender imaginaries emphasized what Plemons has called the “performative model,” emphasizing an intersubjective “outside” feature as the locus of sex. Still other elements are drawn from the models of sex associated with practices of caste-oriented bodily discipline, asceticism and social critique that I described above, where the genitals are not, in principle, “private.” Transgender imaginaries draw also upon specific political movements or ideologies. For example, in Chapter 2 I examine the figure of the thirunangai or “Respectable Woman,” emerging in Tamil Nadu as a response to the hijra associated with North India. Thirunangai imaginaries draw upon ideals of the pro-Tamil, anti-Brahminical Dravidian movement and make claim upon Tamil womanhood. Bodily practices have radically underdetermined meanings, even as they draw upon existing motifs and symbolic resources in order to make claims upon gender and ethical commitments. As they circulated, these transgender imaginaries performatively produced heterogenous and contradictory kinds of sexed bodies, ethical subjectivities, and worlds.

1.3 Transgender imaginaries

The appropriation of transgender identity as a trope by which to imagine broader social movements is perhaps not new, dating back to Judith Butler’s suggestion in *Gender Trouble* that drag performances, more than anything else, “reveal[ed] the imitative structure of gender itself” ([1990] 2006, 187).¹⁵ Anthropologists and queer theorists in the late 1990s rightly warned against enlisting non-Western communities such as hijras— and transsexual persons more broadly— in cross-cultural deconstructionist projects of queerness. Despite all such critiques, however,

¹⁵ While Butler complicated her stance considerably in later writings, the “transsexual” nevertheless continued to hold a paradoxical place in the queer theory of the 1990s: either critiqued for re-inscribing gender binaries or else celebrated as the exemplary “border-crosser” that revealed the constructed quality of sex (Prosser 1998, 14-15).

"transgender identity" has in the past two decades become more and not less robust as a self-evident concept, increasingly circulated both as a basis for social movements and as an object of study for the social sciences. Anthropologists Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah, co-founders of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* eloquently describe the tension between the seemingly boundless conceptual capacities of the concept of "transgender" and the very particular embodied experiences of it:

[The category of] transgender [has been] press-ganged into an avatar of its age: an elastic, recategorizable body for an era of flexible accumulation; a border-crossing body with a globalizable identity; a fluid universal medium with the capacity to absorb and dissolve other categories of personhood,... a dematerializable and reconstitutable embodiment simultaneously everywhere and nowhere at once, like the Internet. That was in theory, of course, or perhaps in fantasy, though never in actual practice. Practically speaking, transgender bodies are always somewhere. They are never "the body," always particular bodies. Knowledges of them are likewise partial, situated, and concrete. They have particular physical addresses, metadata descriptors, storage media, search terms, indexing strategies, and collection guides. Even the cloud, after all, is made of silicon and wire (2015, 540).

Stryker and Currah's image suggests that the present moment demands a theoretical framework that can account both for the "fantasies" through which the concept of "transgender" has been made to serve as an "avatar of its age," while also paying attention to the way that the concept is mapped in "partial, situated, and concrete ways" onto specific bodies, with all the material stakes— the "silicone and wire"— that such embodiment entails. Their formulation is broader than earlier critiques of "third-sex" scholarship, because it allows us to take seriously the stakes in the fantasy and promise of "transgender identity," *as well as* the way it comes to be inscribed upon particular bodies in particular times and places. As they point out in another article, scholars should rightly be cautious about the way that globalized "transgender imaginaries" might falsely assume the universality of American conceptions of embodiment, desire, and subjectivity. At the same time, it is important to explore how "transgender imaginaries" become utopian spaces as they circulate across borders, going considerably beyond their supposed "American" origins:

...the [transgender] imaginary can function as an interstitial, oppositional space—a fecund, choric "enspacement" that actively holds, and thereby enables, different possibilities for movements ... [offering] new strategies for ethical and political engagement with others and environs (2014, 305).

The challenge for researchers in the current moment, then, is not to focus excessively on stock definitions of "local instantiations" of transgender identity — such as hijras — emphasizing their incommensurability with transnational languages of "transgender" or "third-sex". It is, rather, to examine how to analyze how the concept of "transgender," like hijra, jumps scale as it travels across different cultural contexts, leaving marks on specific bodies and catalyzing specific material consequences as it does so.

Stryker and Currah's emphasis on materiality and circulation brings me to the second part of my argument, which concerns method. Rather than relying primarily on elicited life-stories of persons that either themselves identified, or were interpellated, as "trans," I focus instead on the way such stories were produced, assessed, and circulated across genres and contexts. Rather than

assume a straightforward relationship between a narrative and its historical referent, an attention to circulation allowed me to find unexpected referents of “trans-ness” that at first glance lay quite far away from the stock definitions with which I began. By examining how my interlocutors constructed the relationship between terms such as transgender, hijra, thirunangai and koti to specific temporal plane and referent: within a single life course, within a larger historical frame, or a mythic time— I was able to gain a more layered sense of history as it is “mattered” into bodies, that goes beyond the presentism of the elicited life story. This method allowed me to approach the referent of “transgender” in an oblique way, observing how it fanned out into realms and communities of people that I would have assumed, at first glance, to have little at stake in the transgender rights movement.

1.3.1 Transgender imaginaries in Tamil Nadu

Transgender imaginaries have a rich history in Tamil Nadu and the state is often hailed as a pioneer when it comes to gender equality. This reputation is owed partly to the Dravidian movement of the early twentieth century that set the stage for current-day Tamil politics. The movement was based on positing an autonomous Dravidian identity linked to an ancient Tamil past, uncorrupted by what was seen as the hegemonic Aryan, Brahminical, Hindi-based politics of the rest of India. The movement drew heavily on the iconoclastic views of E.V. Ramasamy (also known as Periyar), an early twentieth century thinker and politician that envisioned a community of Tamils united not by religion or caste but by their “mother tongue” Tamil, and where women were free to be equal “self-respecting” members of the family.

The association of Tamil Nadu with gender equality was due also to developments in the field of public health and reproductive rights over the twentieth century. Tamil Nadu was a forerunner when it came to the population-control programs of the 1970s, and by 2009, when I was working, boasted a robust network of government hospitals with specialties in women’s reproductive health. It was perhaps overdetermined that it was in Chennai that the first HIV/AIDS cases in India were detected in 1989, amongst women that did sex work. The Tamil Nadu government’s move to imprison the women catalyzed a series of people’s movements demanding human rights and access to HIV/AIDS prevention resources as well as the decriminalization of sex work.

In the early 2000s, the development of Anti-Retroviral Treatment protocols in 1999 and the investment of millions of dollars by the Gates Foundation in India’s National AIDS Control Organization led to a boom on HIV/AIDS-related funding. Community-based organizations across the country were challenged to act as cultural brokers, offering to translate global categories such as “MSM,” “gay,” and “homosexual” into local “traditional” idioms such as hijra or koti. Many senior activists in Tamil Nadu’s transgender rights movement trace their political organizing to this early stage when they still called themselves “MSM”.

1.3.2 My entry into the field

I must acknowledge at this juncture that my own entry into the spectrum of transgender imaginaries in Tamil Nadu was overwhelmingly defined through the network of HIV/AIDS prevention organizations and development sector projects in the state. I grew up in and around these organizations. My mother, Shyamala Nataraj, was one of the earliest activists in Tamil

Nadu's HIV/AIDS prevention movement, and was instrumental in the public interest litigations that first critiqued the state government for its illegal detention of sex workers. The organization she subsequently founded, and other similar organizations oriented towards the sexual rights of persons marked as "target communities" by the National AIDS Control Organization— namely “Female Sex Workers,” “Injecting Drug Users” and “Men who have Sex with Men”— were some of the spaces where I spent much of my childhood. These were the networks where eventually, as a graduate student twenty years later, I returned to volunteer and do fieldwork.

My specific methodological focus on documents and their circulation arose from my work as a "documentation volunteer" in this world of non-profits and government agencies as a young adult. After graduating from college in 2008, I secured a job in Chennai as a "Research Executive" at an organization that worked as a consultant for development sector projects administered by government departments in partnership with private agencies or international aid organizations. I learned that “documentation” was primarily referring to my skill at quickly intuiting the genre in which a report needed to take shape, to conduct field research and produce documents in the appropriate style and language, and give agencies the sheen that they needed as they interfaced with the private partners such as the World Bank. The documents I produced included a bilingual newsletter for the Tamil Nadu AIDS Control Organization, "Best Practices" reports that advertised the success of the Tamil Nadu Health Systems Project, manuals and conference reports for a state-run poverty alleviation project, and, together with a research team, an evaluation of a HIV/AIDS prevention intervention at a major government hospital, implemented with the help of an HIV/AIDS prevention agency in Los Angeles. After 2009 my work expanded to include documents drafted specifically for activists involved in the LGBT rights scene. As a "documentation volunteer" for a Chennai-based organization sexuality rights organization, I helped draft reports of "crisis cases" where LGBT persons and sex workers might experience harm but be unable to approach police or courts directly because homosexuality and sex work were technically illegal.

My experience demonstrated to me that the "life stories" and first-person accounts that were often a mainstay of anthropological scholarship on sexual minorities in India, were highly complex and mediated documents. They did not bear a straightforward relationship to a single historically-situated referent, whether it was the person narrating or the events being described. While doing "documentation" we routinely sought and collected life stories and interviews from the "beneficiaries" of development projects but these stories became the basis for a wide range of documents. An interview transcript might form the basis for a "case study" to be inserted into a Best Practices reporting, charting a tale of redemption where an abject or afflicted individual had their life restored with the help of a government intervention. It might be rewritten as a human rights violation, using vivid imagery that purposely brought into view the bodies and painful experiences of the "victims." It might be rewritten in the concise formal language of a First Information Report (FIR) drafted to submit to the local police station. It might be written in the leisurely, descriptive language of an interview or "thinkpiece" to be featured in the weekend supplement of a newspaper. At every level of the process, writers, readers, narrators and translators possessed their own sense of the appropriate genre and form, the stakes of circulation, and the configuration of social positions that resulted from its circulation. It became clear to me that "sexual identity" materialized at the intersection of such contestations and evaluations; its relationship to a person was contested, not guaranteed from the start. As material circulated between genres over time periods ranging from a single life course to decades, centuries, or even

mythic time, the "persons" and bodies projected by these narratives became multi-layered and complex, emergent between the world "inside" the text and its emergence in a historically-specific context.

1.4 Summary of chapters and interventions in the existent literature

Each of the three chapters of my dissertation examines the imaginaries that coalesce around a specific term that has become a site at which transgender identity is contested: hijra, thirunangai, and koti. Each chapter opens with an account of my own entry into the field of speaking, writing, reading and circulation of the term, and goes on to describe my interviews with journalists, authors, activists and readers, as well as my analysis of the texts and social worlds we produced together. Each chapter engages with a specific body of literature in anthropology, queer studies and South Asian Studies, cumulatively building a set of concepts that inform the chapters to come.

In the first chapter, entitled "Hijra Imaginaries," I examine the resurgence of a colonial-era narrative that "hijras kidnap and castrate children" amongst transgender rights activists in Chennai in 2010. While ethnographers have tended to address this narrative by issuing a verdict on its truth-value, I suggest that the gesture of delivering verdicts on hijra practices takes for granted the relationship between the narrative and its referent, further essentializing the "stock definition" of hijras. Instead of treating the narrative as a "mistaken representation" of hijras, I ask: how do broader cultural anxieties become written upon specific bodies by contesting the relationship between language and its referent? Instead I focus on the genres in which the narrative circulated — newspaper article, human rights report, and ethnography — examining both the poetics of its telling and the "truths" that my interlocutors posited as the referents of the narrative. I argue that the language of "kidnapping" became a way for my interlocutors to take stances on what constituted a proper family, and "castration" a way to debate what sex was, how it was made to "matter" through discourse and surgery, and what kind of ethical world was performatively instantiated in the process.

This chapter brings together three strands of scholarship. The first is anthropological and historical scholarship on South Asia, particularly those focusing on sexuality and gender (Preston 1987; Cohen 1995; Reddy 2006; Dutta 2013; Chatterjee 1999; Chatterjee and Guha 1999; Arondekar 2009; Dirks 2001; Freitag 1991; Pinch 2004). The second is linguistic anthropology, particularly work on poetics and circulation (Bakhtin [1928] 1991; Briggs 2007) and the subfield of "queer linguistics" arising from an engagement with Judith Butler's work, focusing on how sexual identities are made performatively to "matter" through discourse. The third body of literature I touch on, albeit briefly, is recent work in transgender studies on the historical contingency of what "sex" is, as expressed by the models underlying trans-medicine (Plemons 2017). I build a dialogue between these bodies of literature that de-essentializes the figure of the hijra, constructing in its place a conceptual framework I call an "exposure model of sex" where kinship, surgery, specific histories, and an ethical orientation to the world are performatively instantiated at once, constituting what "sex" is in the process. The latter portion of the chapter examines the way the narrative circulated amongst journalists, activists, public health professionals, activists and ethnographers, tracking how "sex" materialized at the intersection of both discursive genres and embodied practices.

Chapter 2, "Thirunangai Imaginaries," examines how the essentialist image emerging from the stock definition of the hijra has become a symbolic resource for contemporary claims to thirunangai identity in Tamil Nadu. The figure of the "thirunangai," which translates to "Respectable Woman" in Tamil, and has emerged as a regional challenge to what is seen as the hegemonic North Indian hijra identity. I examine how activists and authors in Tamil Nadu create transgender imaginaries around the figure the thirunangai, drawing upon models of sex drawn from the "exposure model" associated with hijra performances, an "essentialist model" that emanates from the internationally-recognized Harry Benjamin guidelines for sex-reassignment surgery, and conceptions of womanhood and virtue that emerge from Tamil Nadu's anti-caste pro-woman Dravidian movement. This chapter examines how thirunangai identity emerges and circulates in activist poetry, contrasting it to a column in the popular daily newspaper, *Dinathanthi* (The Daily Wire), combining an analysis of textual elements with an account of the interpretive frameworks invoked by writers and readers. The chapter engages primarily with scholarship within South Asian Studies and linguistic anthropology that focuses on Tamil genres. I argue that while these bodies of scholarship have often implicitly assumed a male-female binary when it comes to Tamil speakers, the categories of woman and man are themselves remade when Tamil is voiced through the figure of the thirunangai. A more expansive, heterogenous, and de-essentialist notion of what "woman" looks like, can help explain the intersectional alliances that are forged in the present, such as why activists across India are debating rights related to surrogacy, sex work, and domestic work at the same time that they debate "transgender rights."

In the last section of the chapter, entitled "The Thirunangai Joke," I examine how the figure of the thirunangai circulated in *Dinathanthi*'s newspaper column was contested and resignified by some of my interlocutors at an HIV/AIDS organization where I conducted fieldwork. In short, my interlocutors rejected the characterization of the story's protagonist as a properly-Tamil "Respectable Woman," instead characterizing her as a *koti*, an effeminate male that desires men. By re-reading solemn or dramatic sections of the *Dinathanthi* story as comical and raunchy, rendering them in a the distinctive register of *koti-basha* (*koti* language) marked by a combination of Tamil and Farsi, "koti imaginaries" denaturalize femaleness and invoke a universe comprised not of Tamil women but "men," or persons assigned male at birth.

This leads me into the last chapter, "Koti Imaginaries." This chapter examines in detail the term *koti* and its prominence in the world of HIV/AIDS organizations where it is often made to stand in as a "local" version of the public health category, "Men who have Sex with Men." My approach in this chapter is to illustrate how the history of the HIV/AIDS movement in Chennai is woven into other histories and "models of sex," producing varying characterizations of what "maleness" is in terms of sex. I critique ethnographic approaches that have overwhelmingly relied upon *koti* life stories as material to characterize *koti* subjectivity. Instead I observe the way that *koti* life story narratives have circulated in Chennai and abroad over the past two decades, coming to possess traces of multiple temporal planes of maleness: a single life course, the life promised by "male birth" more generally, the history of the HIV/AIDS movement, and thirunangais' memories of the time before their transition.

In my conclusion I revisit my argument that moving past a the spectacularization and stock definition of "hijras" allows us to capture the various ways that "sex" is "mattered" in Chennai can illuminate bodies and processes that at first glance we might assume have little to do with the transgender rights movement. I outline some of the avenues of research that arose in

the course of my research— the place of medicalization and surgery, changing dynamics of caste and kinship, legal struggles to redefine "women", and ontologies of how "sex" relates to ethical positions. I end by reflecting upon how my chosen methodology of tracking linguistic forms and texts as they circulate between speakers and audiences offers a way for ethnographers to reflect on their own practices of writing and citing, and the power of bringing different sets of imagined interlocutors into the same temporal frame.

CHAPTER I: HIJRA IMAGINARIES

In February 2010, I received a panicked phone call from Aki, one of the main activists at Saranam, an sexuality-rights organization in Chennai where I was a volunteer at the time. Saranam was faced with an awkward and unusual "crisis case." A few days earlier, Kanu, who identified as an aravani, had complained to the police that she had been kidnapped and castrated by other aravanis as a young boy, and then forced into sex work. Newspapers reported in lurid detail her descent into the "flesh trade" and her parent's heartbreak, provoking outrage amongst even their most LGBT-friendly readers. Aki's fear was that the unified "LGBT community" that Saranam worked so carefully to build and project at advocacy events, was here being ruptured in a sensational, and indeed, embarrassing way.

The "kidnapping" narrative was instantly recognizable to Aki and myself as a damaging stereotype about hijras. Indeed, it is a narrative with long roots in Indian history. Colonial officials in North India in the 1860s and 70s argued that "eunuchs" and female prostitutes kept their otherwise non-procreative communities alive by kidnapping children before training them as "professional sodomites" and child prostitutes (Hinchy 2014, 258). These arguments attained legal form in the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which characterized hijras as "eunuchs" given to child-kidnapping. Aravani activists in Tamil Nadu and their allies, such as Aki, worked consistently to dispel these harmful stereotypes, denouncing them as colonial legacies and middle-class fictions designed to vilify an already marginalized community.¹⁶ Aravani activists also distanced themselves from the stereotype by emphasizing their distinction from the North Indian hijras upon whom "Criminal Tribe" legislation was based, highlighting their connection to a different Tamil tradition of worshipping the lord Aravan. Cast as a police complaint however, and filed by an aravani-identified person herself, Kanu's allegation of "kidnapping" set legal, policing, activist and journalistic apparatuses into frighteningly rapid motion. Newspaper reports in Chennai portrayed Kanu as an emblem for all hapless children in India, tragically caught in a powerful nexus of begging, sex trafficking and corruption. News reports used the terms aravani, hijra and transgender interchangeably, evoking an image of an undifferentiated group of perverse criminals who threatened the nation's children. Police and doctors emerged in these reports as heroic characters linking victim and criminal, grimly determined to safeguard children by tracking down "transgender gangs."

To show that the aravani community would be held to the same standards as any "outsider," Saranam's leadership instituted a "Fact-finding mission" to discover whether or not Kanu's complain was true. Aki was calling to have me be a part of this mission. Being a "non-

¹⁶ Siddharth Narrain, "Karnataka's warped law-gic." My Law Blog, July 29, 2011. Accessed May 13, 2019. <http://blog.mylaw.net/karnatakas-warped-law-gic/>

community member," I was not tied to the jamat system but still sympathetic to Saranam's mission. "That means you will be unbiased," he said.

2.1 The "Fact-finding mission"

It was an uncomfortable and uncanny feeling to be on a seemingly earnest "Fact-finding mission" to investigate a complaint that human rights activists worldwide had decried as a "common folk myth".¹⁷ Still, Aki and I sent off to interview Kanu, who was staying in a safe house on the outskirts of the city. We introduced ourselves as "human rights workers," and asked her to describe her experience. She told us that she had always been a "koti," a male-born person that identified as effeminate and desired men. As a teenager, she met a group of older aravanis at a market and felt for the first time that she had finally met "people like herself." They convinced her to come with them to Chennai, but eventually betrayed her, taking her to Pune, a city near Mumbai, instead. She was sold to a brothel, and the following year, taken to a doctor to do the operation. She had finally managed to escape from the brothel and return to Chennai, but her kidnappers had found her again. So here she was, forced to go to the police, having nowhere else to turn.

The accused aravanis disputed Kanu's life story narrative, protesting that it was *kavdi*, a false case. They would have been teenagers themselves at the time of the alleged crime, so how could they have forced her? They produced certificates showing that they had been in various mainstream jobs at the time, bearing male names. They offered a counter narrative: that she was a phony and a thief— they had seen her steal money from sex work clients. And it was obvious that she was happy with her woman's body, they had seen her foolishly preening in front of the mirror dozens of times— so what did she have to complain about?

Thoroughly confused by the conflicting narratives, I struggled to write up the "crisis case" for Saranam's Annual Report, but then Aki told me it was not necessary. In Aki's opinion, Kanu's case was indeed *kavdi*, a front for a sex work conflict. Kanu was apparently filing the case to get back at a group of aravani persons that solicited clients for sex work in the same area as her. Kanu had agreed to withdraw the complaint if they stopped harassing her. Appending this note to the report, I added it to the compilation of cases that Aki and I were preparing for Saranam's Annual Report.

It might seem as though Aki, and our report, had laid the "facts" of the complaint to rest. However, the case continued to generate ripples of doubt, leading activists to posit some deeper truth that lay behind the sensationalist language of kidnapping. Using the trope of *kavdi* (lies) versus truth, surface versus depth, my interlocutors continually deferred the referent of "kidnapping," pointing to some broader more intangible concern. One psychiatrist advising patients about sex change, saw it as an indication of the archaic, patriarchal practices of the hijra community. "If they want their 'rights'," he sniffed, "they really need to stop doing this." Other activists suggested that the case was actually a sign that the jamat needed reform and that older gurus needed to be educated about modern languages of consent, coercion, and sex-change. My

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch. "India: Stop 'Social Cleansing' in Bangalore: Illegal Mass Evictions Against a Transgender Community". November 18, 2008. New York. Accessed May 16, 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/11/18/india-stop-social-cleansing-bangalore>

friend Veena reversed the object of kidnapping. Aravanis joined the jamat to seek a life free of violence, where they could experience their true gender identity. It was their birth parents that "kidnapped" them, forcing them to file such complaints. Whatever Kanu's issues were, she should have sorted out the matter internally instead of exposing the entire community to harm by going to the police and the press. Was the jamat system in need to reform? Was the traditional castration operation of the aravani community better than sex-change surgery offered by privatized hospitals? What constituted a legitimate family?

Evaluations of truth and lies clearly had alarming consequences, putting legal, police, activist, medical, and journalist apparatuses to work. Saranam had advised the accused aravanis to leave the city for a while, so that they could protect themselves from violence and abuse from the police. Allegations of "kidnapping" had been made before, with similarly damaging consequences for the aravani and hijra communities that were accused. Aki told me of a similar case from November 2007, in the Bangalore, the capital of the neighboring state of Karnataka. Following the complaint, Bangalore police had evicted about a hundred hijras from their homes in the low-income neighborhood of Dasarahalli where the accused were believed to have lived. Most lost their security deposits and belongings. Over forty landlords were sent notices to avoid renting their homes out to hijras involved in "immoral activities," and this led to further evictions.¹ Strikingly, the case had gained visibility in medical circles, because of current debates about sex-reassignment surgery. Newspaper reports highlighted the corrupt "quack doctors" that conducted such surgeries and the prestigious Apollo Hospital in Bangalore had performed a "reverse-sex-change surgery" free of cost, to restore the masculinity" of the victim.¹⁸ A few years later, in 2011, the Karnataka Police Act was amended to grant extraordinary powers to police to survey and detain "eunuchs." The proposed amendment quoted almost verbatim from the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, charging police with:

- (a) [the] preparation and maintenance of a register of the names and places of residence of all eunuchs residing in area who are reasonably suspected of kidnapping or emasculating boys or of committing unnatural offences or any other offences or abetting the commission of such offences;
- (b) filing objections by aggrieved eunuchs to the inclusion of his name in the register and for removal of his name from the register for reasons to be recorded in writing;¹⁹
- (c) prohibiting a registered eunuch from doing such activities as may be stated in the order; and
- (d) any other matter [the Commissioner] may consider necessary.²⁰

In addition, the Act empowered the Commissioner to "prevent or suppress or control undesirable activities of eunuchs, in the area under his charge," in any ways that might exceed the list given above.

¹⁸ "Teenager gets a new lease of life." *Deccan Herald*. Dec 21, 2008. Bangalore.

¹⁹ The way that police and legal documents deliberately misgender transwomen by calling them "eunuchs" or addressing them as "him" has recently become the topic of deeper debate amongst activists.

²⁰ Karnataka Police Act 1963, "Power to regulate eunuchs". Section 36A, 32. Accessed May 16, 2019. http://dpal.kar.nic.in/pdf_files/4%20of%201964%20%28E%29.pdf

How did the sensationalist language of "kidnapping" so quickly jump between scales, becoming an allegory for national or societal ills? How was its efficacy related to the evaluations of truth and lies that accompanied its circulation? And what might we make of the reappearance of colonial law in this instance?

2.2 Ethnographic approaches to "kidnapping and castration"

Ethnographers, when they have encountered the kidnapping narrative in the course of their fieldwork, have reacted to the narrative with squeamish ambivalence, treating it either as a malicious fiction to be debunked, or as a regrettable, painful reality. Such ambivalence about narratives of "kidnapping" were especially prominent amongst scholars in the 1990s, reflecting a broader preoccupation with "the question of coercion" amongst feminist and queer anthropologists studying hijras at the time. Ethnographers are, after all, often asked to deliver verdicts on the practices of the communities they study. Indeed, I found myself in this very position, invited to be on a "fact-finding mission" as an "unbiased" outsider. The problem with delivering such verdicts, however, is that they assume that the narrative motif of "kidnapping" bears an immanent connection to a violent and verifiable historical event, while also uncritically reproducing the very binary between truth and falsity that my own interlocutors utilized. Especially when encountering this motif in personal testimonies offered by interlocutors, ethnographers are placed in the sticky position of having to evaluate the "truth" of a personal testimony, producing problematic dichotomies between insincere and sincere usages of language, and between voluntariness and coercion.

Anthropologist Gayatri Reddy, for example, encounters the kidnapping narrative while conducting ethnographic fieldwork with hijras in Hyderabad in the 1990s. She mentions that shortly before she arrived, a case was registered against senior hijras in the old city, by a family claiming that their son had been abducted (2006, 3). Initially she debunks the narrative as a fabrication: "given that hijras themselves fabricate these accusations to perpetuate the myths associated with them and instill a fear amongst non-hijras, this abduction story may not be true and should not necessarily be read as such" (ibid., 236n6). She later hears the narrative, however, from one of her hijra informants, Madhavi:

Madhavi was born in a village near the Nizamabad District of Andhra Pradesh. Her name at birth was Madan. She used to "really like doing women's work," such as cooking, sweeping, cleaning, and playing with girls as a child. She also loved to dance, and, having "trained" herself in Bharatanatyam (a classical form of Indian dance), she used to work as a dance instructor in her local school. When she was eighteen or nineteen, one of her male friends brought her to Hyderabad and, for a measly sum of fifteen hundred rupees, "left" her in the care of senior hijras in the Sheharwala house in Hyderabad. She was imprisoned in this hijra house for five years, not being allowed out at all lest she run away. Her family, not knowing her whereabouts, presumed she was dead and hung a garland on her photograph at home. Two years after she came to Hyderabad, she had her nirvan (physical genital excision) operation. Following this radical surgery, she had no choice but to join the community forever, wear female attire, and engage in badhai work (singing and dancing at marriage/birth ceremonies). She underlined the fact that she was not involved in prostitution when she first joined the hijra community (ibid., 78).

Reddy's earlier dismissal of the narrative as a fabrication makes it difficult to analyze it in the personal narrative of her informant. She concludes that Madhavi's story turned out to be a fabrication concocted for the ethnographer's benefit and that for the most part hijra operations are conducted voluntarily.²¹ Ultimately Reddy's account inadvertently conveys ambivalence about whether "kidnappings" happen or not:

As the opening vignette of this chapter indicated, sometimes a boy or young man is forcibly kidnapped and made to undergo this procedure against his will. Popular magazines and especially tabloid newspapers love to report any instance of such "evil-doing."... That instances such as these occur is well known, though they are highly exaggerated in popular conceptions. In fact, hijras serve as the quintessential bogeymen of India; children are threatened with potential kidnapping by hijras if they do not behave themselves. However, forcible conversions appear to be less common than such articles suggest, especially in South India. By reporting only on this feature of hijras' "bizarre" or "evil" lives, the media both vilify hijras' current existence, and more important, reinforce the strictly corporeal basis of hijra identity and thereby perpetuate the stereotype and, subsequently, the very practice they condemn (ibid., 94).

Reddy makes a valuable point about how "kidnapping" is a harmful stereotype that reproduces hijras as the "quintessential bogeymen of India." Nevertheless, while making this assertion, she uses language that suggests that perhaps "it" does happen ("that instances such as this occur is well known..."), reproducing a problematic binary between truth and lies, voluntariness and coercion. Our own Fact-finding mission was put in a similar position: our dismissal of the narrative as *kavdi*, and as a "common folk myth" nevertheless left us powerless to prevent the police raids and oppressive legislative changes that were enacted in its wake.

Anthropologist Lawrence Cohen, also conducting fieldwork amongst hijras in Varanasi in the 1990s, notes with concern that allegations of "hijra kidnapping" had begun to proliferate in prestigious international medical journals such as *The Lancet*. In an effort to dispel the effects of such harmful scholarship, he reports, like Reddy, that the vast majority of his hijra interlocutors reported that they had joined the community voluntarily. Cohen suggests that the "coercion" implied by "kidnapping" narratives points actually to more concealed pervasive material inequities:

The sale, most frequently in impoverished rural sites of endemic famine, of boys as well as girls into the sex trade certainly occurs; with the increasing corporatization and dominance of international crime cartels in the control of sectors of the Mumbai sex trade it may well be growing, though this has not been documented. But as in the case of popular Indian literature on female prostitutes, stories of selling and kidnapping disguise other far more common but less palpable reasons for sexual difference: in the case of women, escape, and in the case of hijras, desire. Hijras themselves often construct a narrative of their abject origins, explicitly for the consumption of nosy outsiders (Cohen 1995, 284-5).

Cohen defuses the affective charge of "kidnapping," but his invocation of a trope of "concealment" inadvertently presupposes an underlying set of historical "material" conditions such as corporatization and the plight of impoverished children forced to leave home or sold. The sense is preserved that kidnapping narratives arise from an immanent connection to a un

²¹ Later in this chapter I address the difficulties of utilizing a binary of "voluntariness" and "coercion."

underlying material "reality." In adding that hijras conduct the operation voluntarily and construct these stories for outsiders, he switches scale, reverting to a truth-based assessment of the narrative, relocating the verifiable referent in the hijra speakers themselves, and in their personal experience of consent and coercion.

While Reddy and Cohen try to mitigate the damaging force of the "kidnapping" by circumventing it, historian Vinay Lal takes it at face value, even finding it seemingly credible. Dismissing third-wave feminists' celebration of hijras as "postmodern enchantment with multiple sexualities" (1999, 121), Lal argues that they have always been "a deviant subgroup," not representative of either India or Hinduism as a whole. He reminds us that

...the numerous and seemingly reliable reports of abduction of children to be recruited into the community of hijras, and their forcible castration, in obvious indifference to the strictures against mutilation in the Indian Penal Code, not to mention customary codes of ethical conduct, must not be overlooked. If indeed they are being drawn into the vortex of crime, their criminalization (and consequent elimination by the state) cannot be far away (1999, 132).

Despite acknowledging that "modernity has been inhospitable" to hijras, he nevertheless considers them a brutish marginal group, thoroughly unfit for modernity. Completely neglecting the power of discourse to fashion reality, Lal treats genres as diverse as newspapers, colonial archival materials, and Indian laws, as repositories of self-evident material facts.

2.3 The ambiguous referents of "kidnapping"

These ethnographic approaches offer valuable insights about how the kidnapping narrative might house broader cultural anxieties and moral panics. By flatly evaluating the narrative in terms of its truth-value, however, they foreclose an exploration of the dialogic process by which these broader anxieties are written onto specific bodies (such as Kanu's), and specific spaces and times (such as the Bangalore neighborhood of Dasarahalli), by interpellating them as belonging to hijras. I argue that we can gain an important clue to how this dialogic process worked by attending to how my interlocutors used the trope of *kavdi* (lies) versus truth, and surface versus depth, to invoke competing metapragmatic models of how kidnapping narratives relate to referents. In doing so, my interlocutors simultaneously pointed to broader cultural anxieties, even as they identified specific bodies and families as embodiments of those anxieties, marking them out for reverse-sex-change operations and police raids.

In exploring this process, I use the concept of "communicability," proposed by anthropologist Charles Briggs, to examine how broader cultural anxieties become written upon specific bodies by contesting the relationship between language and its referent. In an article entitled "Mediatizing Infanticide," Briggs argues that narratives of violence gain their efficacy from projecting a seemingly immanent relationship between a violent event and its representation. He calls this quality "communicability:" the process by which "discourse projects cartographies of its own production, circulation, and reception...[locating audiences] socially and politically" (2007, 332). His article examines how narratives of infanticide circulated in Venezuela in the early 2000s, casting indigenous women and barrio-residents as monstrous parents, and as synecdoches of the failure of the Venezuelan nation-state. As they were narrated between state actors, human rights activists, and newspapers, the narratives had powerful

material effects: indigenous women were further racialized and criminalized, forced to give damning testimonies, and indigenous men were violently lynched in prison.

Briggs suggests that we can see these effects as a result of competing communicability models coming into conflict as the narrative circulated, making the "violent" referent itself highly unstable and contested. For example, newspaper reports signified violence through a communicable model that appeared to mirror the temporality of the violent event itself. For example, news reports were "emplotted as tragedies," and structured in a way that mirrored the starting and ending of the supposed event, and incorporated reported speech such as the quotations of the "vox populi" to intensify the metaphysics of presence.²² Models of communicability also interpellated their readers and listeners into an overdetermined configuration of subject-positions. Briggs was himself cast in the overdetermined position of anthropologist-translator, for instance, assigned to interview Mrs. Gomez, a woman accused of infanticide. In their interview, Mrs. Gomez used a "politics of silence, doubt, and forgetting" thereby refusing to occupy her given slot in this state-sponsored communicable model. Briggs concludes that a totalizing model of discourse which just claims that some narratives are "erased" and others are "hegemonic" is problematic because it does not take into account the contestation between communicable models, and ultimately naturalizes and privileges one at the expense of the others. By examining how a narrative moves across competing communicability models, researchers can denaturalize the immanent relationship between narrative and referent without "deny[ing] by fiat the force of he acts that preoccupy narrators" (2007, 322).

The kidnapping narrative functioned in many ways similarly to the narratives of infanticide documented by Briggs. Drawing on longstanding colonial-era discourses about "Criminal Tribes," several newspaper reports depicted Kanu through negatively-charged motifs associated with the figure of the hijra: as a victim of an archaic feudal community marked by secrecy, as an artful liar, and as an abject and melancholic figure that stood for impoverished children across India. The "Fact-finding mission" initiated by a human rights organization such as Saranam's perspective, cast aravani and non-aravani identified persons in historically overdetermined roles as "victim," "culprits" and "fact-finders." Yet, as my interlocutors drew on the trope of kavdi versus truth, surface versus depth, their historical overdeterminations only enjoyed partial success. On the one hand, by deferring the narrative through the invocation of surface and depth, "kidnapping" was made to point to broader contemporary concerns, for example about human trafficking and privatized sex-reassignment surgery in the wake of neoliberalism. The very activists deferring the referent in this way, however, still pinned responsibility on specific persons and families identified as "hijra." Saranam's Fact Finding Mission interviewed explicitly hijra-identified persons, Kanu was examined for whether she had the "inner subjectivity" of a koti, as a consequence the accused had to flee to the neighboring state to escape arrest, and Lakshmi, in 2007, was subjected to a "reverse sex-change surgery" at Apollo Hospital. How can specific bodies come to seem like fleshy referents for much broader historical and cultural anxieties? How might social actors' *own* evaluations of truth and lies, surface and depth, enable such inscription? And if "bodies are mattered" or materialized with every use of language, in the sense suggested by Judith Butler ([1990] 2006,; [1993] 2011), how are different versions of history made to "matter" through specific uses of language and also through surgical interventions?

In the coming section I build a dialogue between two bodies of scholarship. The first, drawn from the fields of queer anthropology and queer linguistics, examines how sex is *discursively* "mattered" in the case of sexual identity more broadly and hijra identity specifically. The second offers some preliminary thoughts regarding how sex is *surgically* mattered in the process of the circulation of discourse. Together I utilize concepts from both of these lines of scholarship in order to build a tentative sketch of the different axes along which my interlocutors created and proposed different "models of sex."

2.4 Butler's formulation of how sex and gender "matter" through discourse

In her classic text, *Gender Trouble* ([1990] 2006), Judith Butler criticizes earlier "constructivist" feminist approaches that assumed "sex" to be prediscursive biological material upon which a culturally variable system of "gender" was inscribed. Following Foucault's argument that it was a historically specific discourse of sexuality that projected the materiality of sex as a priori biology (ibid., 125), Butler suggests that seemingly "biological" sex is an effect of discourse and citation. Butler's notion of "citation" here is informed by Derrida's critique of Austin's notion of performativity.²³ For Butler, "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame, that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (ibid., 45). In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler extends this argument to address not only gender but also the "bodily matter" of sex. Sex, for Butler, is produced through "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" ([1993] 2011, xviii). In true Derridean fashion, Butler radically refuses to concede that the body is a referent: "there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body ([1993] 2011: xix). Both gender and sex derive their seeming stability from a chain of performatives posing as constatives, the perfect example being "It's a girl!" It is through illocutionary acts and interpellations that subjects are granted social existence in the first place; thus the act of exclaiming when a baby is born, "It's a girl!" performatively creates the child's gender and sex, and indeed the child's very recognizability as a human being (ibid., 176-7). Both the psychic form and the very body of the subject are brought into being through iterations. In the case of "abjected beings that do not appear properly gendered, it is their very humanness that comes into question." These bodies fail to "matter" or materialize; they lurk at the borders of "discursive legitimacy" (ibid., 84).

It is here that Butler provides a reflection on the reappropriation of "queer" as a term for political mobilization. For Derrida, the *différance* between the norm and its fraught, contingent

²³ In "Signature, Event, Context" (1977 [1972]), Derrida characterizes Austin's theory of performativity as a prime example of a Eurocentric "logocentric" theory, where "communication" in all its forms— sign, speech, writing, signature— is imagined to be a transparent vehicle for the transmission of "unified meaning" (ibid., 1). The *written* sign in particular— the signature being the example *par excellence*— is understood to index the a singular, radically non-replicable context and subject. Derrida points out a paradox that lies at the heart of this "metaphysics of presence": although the signature indexes the singular person and context of its production, it can only be written in a conventional and infinitely replicable code (ibid., 20). This quality of citability— which he calls *iterability*— implies the always-imperfect identity between a sign and its signified; the *différance* or "non-present remainder" that is produced by the break between iteration and context (ibid.10). Writing arises from an impulse to supplement this absence, but it is bound to fail, since the very structure of experience is always constituted by *différance*: "there is no experience consisting of pure presence but only of chains of differential marks" (ibid.).

moment of instantiation, was a site for emancipatory potential. Similarly, for Butler, the hegemonic construction of sex and gender betrays its own instability with every iteration. This instability holds emancipatory potential:

As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, or as that which cannot be wholly fixed by that norm. ([1993] 2011, xix).

Butler suggests that it is precisely because terms such as "queer", "woman", and "lesbian" are deployed in deeply conventional ways by hegemonic discourses, that they become critical sites for politics through resignification. "Queer" in Butler's sense is equivalent to the "non-present remainder" theorized by Derrida as *différance*— the discursive residue that can destabilize the norm by exposing its fundamental infelicity. Butler's later work further develops this idea of the *différance* of queerness as a site of both violent exclusion and radical promise: a field inhabited by a form of life that "never will be [and] never was," a "site of pure resistance, un co-opted by normativity" (Butler 2004, 106).

2.5 Models of sex , language, and surgery

Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* ([1990] 2006) became a key point of departure for early works in the field of transgender studies, particularly her suggestion that "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the the imitative structure of gender itself— and its contingency" (ibid., 187). Some critiqued Butler's elision of the embodied experience of gender dysphoria and sex-reassignment surgery. Jay Prosser's *Second Skins* (1998), for example, critiqued the way Butler's overemphasis on discourse inadvertently minimizes the importance of the lived embodied experiences of transition that many undergo. In order to "recall theory to the residue of referentiality in the body" (ibid., 13), Prosser draws heavily on the first-person narratives of transsexual persons, describing their embodied experiences of transition.²⁴ In stark contrast to Prosser's deliberate literalization of the body, Sandy Stone's essay "The Empire Strikes Back" (1987) called precisely for transsexual persons to *refuse* medical discourses that had long pathologized and reductively characterized transsexuals as persons solely defined by a desire for surgery. Stone argued that transsexual autobiographies (such as those cited so heavily by Prosser), by placing such importance on the process of surgery, became complicit in the way

²⁴ Prosser takes issue specifically with Butler's heavily Lacanian reading of Freud's 1923 paper, *The Ego and the Id*, arguing that Butler collapses body and ego, gender and sex, thereby producing an airtight binary between "queers" and "heterosexuals," conflating transsexualism with homosexuality, and erasing the embodied experiences of transition. To "recall theory to the residue of referentiality in the body" (Prosser 1998, 13), Prosser rejects Butler's Lacanian interpretation of melancholia and turns instead to Freudian psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu. In direct opposition to Lacan's suggestion that the unconscious is structured like a language, Anzieu holds that it is structured like the body, therefore embracing the very literalism that Butler sought to deconstruct. Combining Anzieu's concept of the "skin ego" with first-person narratives of transsexual persons that have experienced transition, Prosser argues that there might be, for some, a powerful disconnect between the skin and the ego, in which case surgery is crucially important as a form of restoration (ibid., 88). Prosser concludes by asking transgender studies scholars to critically rethink their alliance with "the queer corporation" (ibid., 59).

medical discourses become gatekeepers of transsexual identity, reducing transsexualism to a purely bodily matter (summarized in Plemons and Straayer 2018, 164; see also Cohen 1995, 289).

More recent work in transgender studies has sought to return to issues of materiality albeit in way that brings together but also goes beyond, the early critiques of Butler such as Prosser's and Stone's. In a recent special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* devoted to the topic of surgery (2018), Eric Plemons and Chris Straayer call for scholars to bridge the gap between highly polarized approaches to "surgery" as an analytical object within transgender studies. Acknowledging that a hyperemphasis on surgery can quickly slide into essentialism, turning surgery — and the trans-bodies marked by it — into objects of "fascination and fetish", Plemons and Straayer nevertheless call for a critical framework to analyse surgery within transgender studies. In contrast to an essentialist approach that might locate the desire for surgery purely in the "private" psyche and body of the "trans" person, they propose a critical approach to how surgery — and by extension, sex — becomes an object for biomedical intervention. They propose the following list of questions that might guide such an exploration:

...while clinical discourses held a monopoly over both the definition and treatment of transsexuals for decades, inscribing and reinscribing desperate surgical demand as its defining characteristic, clinicians' voices are no longer the only ones heard on the matter. If surgery is used to treat, ameliorate, or cure, what kinds of treatment is it enacting, and for what kinds of affliction? Is surgery a strategy for accessing resources such as legal standing or sex-determined labor or kinship practices, or a means through which to make claim to them? (ibid., 169)

In *The Look of a Woman: Facial Feminization Surgery and the Aims of Trans-Medicine* (2017), Plemons furthers this research programme by offering two concepts that I have found especially useful: "trans-therapeutics" and "models of sex." Trans-therapeutics can be defined as "the logical frameworks within which various interventions come to make sense as "good trans-medicine" (2017, 7). The questions that can help an ethnographer decipher a trans-therapeutics are: what is the nature of the concern for which surgery is sought? What are the treatment regimes that are considered appropriate to that aim? How is the efficacy of the outcome measured? The answers to these questions must be discovered through empirical ethnographic research that can illuminate how, in a given time and place, "trans" becomes a clinical object upon which surgeons can act (ibid.).

The concept of trans-therapeutics is undergirded by a model of sex: a historically specific conception of how bodies come to matter (in the sense evoked by Butler), forming the basis for how a surgical intervention makes sense. Rather than simply take as a given Butler's claim that discourse performatively brings bodies into being through citation, Plemons suggests that the Butlerian "performative model" is only one amongst many possible models of sex, and implies only one of many possible regimes of trans-therapeutics. For example, the mid-twentieth century "essentialist model" of sex produced a trans-therapeutics that characterised surgery as "treatment" for a state labeled Gender Dysphoria, and took the genitals as the locus of sex. By contrast, since the 1980s, argues Plemons, a "performative model" has become more predominant. In this latter model, sex is constituted by intersubjective recognition: one is sexed as a woman by *looking like* a woman. It is in terms of this latter model of sex that Facial

Feminization Surgery becomes more predominant than genital surgery, argues Plemons, and the "face" becomes the new body through which sex is "mattered" through surgery (2017, 2).²⁵

For the purposes of my own argument, I find especially useful Plemons' decision to treat Butler's "performative model of sex" *itself* as a historical and ethnographic object, tracking its circulation amongst both scholars and medical professionals in the 1990s. With this deft move he creates a frame that is broad and flexible enough to both enter and apply a specific theoretical vocabulary — in this case, performativity — while also historically situating one's own act of theorization as a historical. In the coming section I repeat Plemons' move, not with respect to the trans-therapeutic models used by physicians, but with respect to different models within the studies of gay, lesbian and queer language in the twentieth century. I then move on to place these linguistic models of how sex "matters" through discourse, with others articulated in various ethnographic and historical studies of hijras

2.5.1 "Gay and Lesbian Language": Essentialist models of sex and language

Early twentieth-century American scholarship on language within "gay and lesbian" — and what would later be called "queer" — communities was similarly marked by "essentialist models" that located sexual identity within the subjectivity or psyche of speakers, positing an isomorphous connection between speaker subjectivities, a speech community, and a specific lexicon or register of speech. Between the 1920s and 1960s for example, linguistic studies often characterized "homosexuals" as a bounded and relatively homogenous community associated with arcane "in-group codes" that analysts sought to uncover.²⁶ While these homogenous conceptions of "homosexual language" came briefly under attack in the 1970s, following developments in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology that refuted the notion of homogenous speech communities that bore one-to-one correspondence to speech registers,²⁷ there was a resurgence of essentialism in the late 1980s and 1990s with the rise of gay and lesbian identity politics in the United States. Linguistic anthropologist William Leap's work is often cited as a typical example of this new "strategic essentialism." In his writing on "Gay Men's English," Leap argues in support of "distinctively constructed lesbian and gay languages"

²⁵ Plemons writes: "[in a performative model of sex,] sex/gender is not only a property of the face itself. The face is the primary site of our individuality and bodily identity, and the dynamism and ultimate effect of FFS is produced through interaction" (2017, 151).

²⁶ An overview of these eras of scholarship can be found in Kulick 2000.

²⁷ The concept of *register* that I use here is drawn from a concept first introduced by T.W. Reid (1956) and its subsequent elaboration by Asif Agha (2004). Agha defines a register as a "linguistic repertoire that is associated, culture-internally, with particular social practices and with persons who engage in such practices" (ibid., 24). As analysts, Agha emphasizes, we cannot assume a simplistic mapping of a register upon an actual or empirically-discoverable group of persons. A register is a "sociohistorical regularity" only in so far that certain metapragmatic models are shared by language users in any community: "a single individual's metapragmatic activity does not suffice to establish the social existence of a register unless confirmed in some way by the evaluative activities of others" (Agha 2004, 26). What is of importance, rather, is *enregisterment*: the process by which language users identify a portion of discourse as belonging to specific register and their overt descriptions of implicit nonlinguistic insinuations of the "metapragmatic models by which they evaluate the register" (ibid., 26). By mapping not only the features of a specific register, but also the competing metapragmatic models by which it is assessed and the social distribution of these metapragmatic models, the researcher can obtain a more holistic picture of the social processes underway in any moment of enregisterment.

that are not merely "secret argots" imitative of heterosexual speech but linguistic constructions in their own right, enabling social functions such as group solidarity.²⁸

2.5.2 "Queer linguistics": Performative models of sex and language

With the rise of queer theory and third-wave feminism in the 1990s, Leap's "strategic essentialism" gave way to models that are based on linguistic anthropological concepts of performativity, indexicality and practice theory. These performative models asked whether Butler's invocation of Austin's concept of performativity via Derrida, could be adapted to the needs of anthropological research in contexts where "gay," "lesbian" and "queer" may not be ontologically available categories. With the rise of queer theory and third-wave feminism in the 1990s, Leap's "strategic essentialism" quickly gave way to models based on linguistic anthropological concepts of performativity, indexicality and practice theory. Much scholarship in queer linguistics is aimed at examining the localized felicity conditions that undergird a context-specific emergence of sex, gender, or sexual desire. Rather than conceiving of speakers and linguistic registers as having a one-to-one correspondence, Hall and Bucholtz write, "language users draw on linguistic practices— "registers," "styles," "varieties," "dialects," or "languages"... [to index] conventionalized associations between linguistic form and social meaning to construct their own and others' identities" (2004, 478).

In a commentary entitled "It's a hijra!" (2013) Hall critiques the "universalizing tenor" of Butler's theory in order to point out that performative instantiations of sex and gender do not work in the same way across cultures. When hijras visit the home of a newborn, parents fear the utterance "It's a hijra," she writes, not because hijras are a "queer" community existing outside of linguistic representation (as per Butler's characterization of "queerness" as resistant to citation). On the contrary, the parents' fear arises precisely from the fact that hijras are associated with a historically and culturally elaborated identity that marks a removal from the procreative family.²⁹ In this example, Hall argues that queerness is not an ahistorical or universally applicable concept.

²⁸ Leap's "strategic essentialism" became an important point of departure for later debates within queer linguistics about the political ends of the discipline. Don Kulick, for example, in his own article on Gay and Lesbian Language (2000), offers a trenchant critique of Leap. Others such as Hall and Bucholtz (2004) characterize Leap's work more generously as a kind of "strategic essentialism" that was important in the movement to more firmly establish gay and lesbian studies as a discipline. The question of how "identity" should be theorized in language and sexuality research sparked a series of heated debates between these scholars (see Hall and Bucholtz 2004; Cameron and Kulick 2005). These debates demonstrate the heterogeneity within the discipline of "queer linguistics" and its historical situatedness with respect to third-wave feminist and queer movements in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

²⁹ Hall writes: "Since the early 1800s and perhaps long before that, people in a variety of Indian communities have believed that the hijra, by virtue of her own impotence, has the power to prevent the birth of male children; her curse has therefore been viewed as performative in the canonical Austinian sense, which, if uttered in the context of the birth celebration, serves to interrupt the family lineage" (Hall 1997, 438). Hall's point is that the performative instantiation of "potency" takes its cue from the social fact that "the family is, after all, what distinguishes hijras from most members of Indian society, who are intimately involved in the extended families so instrumental to social organization" (1997, 444) Gayatri Reddy has criticized Hall precisely on this point, however. Reddy argues that to state that hijras symbolize a removal from the procreative family is to confuse ideal and practice, while also ignoring the polysemic kinship links within the hijra/koti community and their ambivalent resonance with "mainstream" structures and sentiments (Reddy 2005, 184).

"Queerness," if we can call it that, is a historically-situated metapragmatic model by which sexual identities are performatively produced, and Butler's theory is only one such model.

Hall argues that the concept of "indexicality" and its reference to Austin's theory of performativity, is especially useful for the mission of queer linguistics. Indexicality refers to the way language does not simply passively denote its referent but actually creates it, either by presupposing or performatively producing various contextual variables. Indexicality, in the sense employed here, offers a useful way to examine how complex and layered histories are materialized by language in ways that are not reducible to the "naming" of sex categories in the sense described by Butler. Queerness, in a performative model of linguistic scholarship, is defined "not by sexual orientation but by sexual marginalization," mapped in relation to culturally-specific variables that must be empirically discovered by researchers (2004, 491)³⁰.

2.5.3 An "exposure model" of sex rather than a "hijra" model

As several anthropologists have documented, hijra identity is indexed by a distinctive performance repertoire. Linguistic anthropologist Kira Hall identifies the following features as hallmarks: high pitched voice, increased volume, elongated final vowels, nasalization, special exclamations, and the use of intimate second-person pronouns and verb forms, a distinctive register that utilizes a mixture of Farsi and Hindi, and a use of sexual innuendo and insult. The idealized hijra performance is also imagined or enregistered by distinctive nonlinguistic features: a flat-palmed clap, and a threat to lift one's skirt and "expose" the wound of castration (Hall 2005, 133-4). The performance takes the form of a confrontation between speaker and listener, where one is challenged to show "proof" of their potency or unless they want their own impotence revealed. The dynamics underlying the performativity of this performance repertoire have long been a source of fascination and debate for anthropologists researching hijras. What is performatively instantiated by the performance? What is the social exchange that takes place between performers and listeners? How does it transform our understanding of what sex is? These are some of the key questions that have guided their inquiries.

In this section I argue that what is "mattered" in the course of this ideal performance, is not simply "intersubjective recognition" in the sense of the performers being "recognized" by viewers as hijras, or the viewers being "recognized" as potent or impotent. There is a kind of material power of fertility and potency at stake, imagined to affect both one's body and one's moral constitution. The question of potency and its exchange is crucial because it is here that we can determine what "sex" is in hijra performance and how "sex" is made to matter. The performative instantiation of "sex" or "potency" that is at stake in an idealized hijra performance does not stop simply at representation or signification. It is, rather, understood to be an exchange of substance, of potency, that possesses the ability to transform the beings of the persons

³⁰ From this perspective, queerness is not a pre-given but linguistically achieved status, and supposedly "heterosexual" speakers might also be "queered" by marking their distance from a presumed heteronormative center. Hall takes an example from Deborah Cameron's description of a fraternity brother that was characterized negatively by his peers as "that really gay guy" because he flirted with "the ugliest-ass bitch in the history of the world" (Cameron 1997: 52-53, cited in Hall and Bucholtz 2004, 482-3). Hall and Bucholtz argue that in this example, "gay" indexes precisely his *heterosexuality* and its deviation from a normative conception of male desire and female beauty, not his presumed homosexuality.

involved, both performers and audiences. In a challenge between performer and audience, where each is challenged either through gesture or language to "expose" the truth of their sex, there is a kind of ethical commitment that is "mattered" at the same time. What is evaluated and contested is the congruence between one's claimed ethics (shown in their commitment to "truth" in their life and their ethical vision for the world), and the embodied proof of this commitment (connected to the bodily matter of one's claimed genitals).

This potency that is thought to effect a moral transformation, I suggest, is a crucial and central "model of sex" in my field site, competing and sometimes combined with other models of sex such as what Plemons calls the "essentialist model" implied by the mid twentieth century American trans-medicine, expressed in the Harry Benjamin guidelines for sex change. For my interlocutors in Tamil Nadu's transgender rights movement, the process of sex change had the potential not only to transform the body of the person that underwent surgery but also the world that was witness to this transformation. Conversely, the vision that underlay one's desire for sex change could be a powerful moral diagnosis of what was wrong or right with the world, and surgery a means to address this affliction. I call this the "exposure model of sex": it "matters" both an ethical horizon and bodily "sex" through an implied act of exposure). It is, I claim, not a model unique to persons that are identified as hijras, but points to a symbolic and ontological universe that is more widespread in parts of South Asia, embodied in multiple performance traditions oriented around acts of genital exposure or "cutting," an ideal of renunciation or asceticism, and an imagined power to performatively inaugurate a new world.

To be clear, I am *not* arguing that there is a distinctive ontological universe possessed exclusively by "hijras," which is incommensurable with that of the "mainstream," nor that all persons in "South Asia" that desire or undergo sex-reassignment surgery (or identify on a trans-spectrum in any sense) are uniformly tied to an ideal oriented around renunciation and asceticism. To claim this would create an essentialist notion of "South Asia" as an incommensurable ontological universe in contrast to the "West," and it would also conflate ideal with a heterogenous set of social practices and persons. "Hijra," as I reiterated at the very beginning of this thesis, does not denote any self-evident group of persons, neither are the metapragmatic models through which hijra performance is interpreted, uncritically mappable onto bodies marked as hijras.³¹ There is a tremendous diversity of ways that people in my field site made sense of surgery, of bodies, and of the world that a social justice movement should fight for. In order to highlight the importance of this model while still freeing it from an essentialist and unhelpful connection to hijras, I describe it as an "exposure model of sex." I argue that the "exposure model" is *one model* amongst many that was variously invoked by my interlocutors as they made sense of what "kidnapping" and "castration" might mean and what they implied about the moral state of the world at large.

Various elements of this exposure model of sex have been carefully illuminated by anthropologists of hijra communities that have paid special attention to the pragmatics and metapragmatics underlying the distinctive registers of speech and genres of performance that index "hijra" identity. I offer an overview of these insights in this section. I conclude that the

³¹ By "metapragmatic model" I mean the cultural framework in reference to which language users interpret and draw meaning from one another's uses of linguistic tokens or registers— in this case the repertoire of elements constituting "hijra performance." As Asif Agha writes, metapragmatic models are not uniformly held by a community of language users. Such models are empirically discoverable by observing the explicit behavior of language users as they assess and classify linguistic tokens as belonging to a similar repertoire (2004, 26-27).

puzzles posed by the model cannot be answered if one continues to hold onto an essentialist stock definition of hijras as an idiosyncratic community that is distinct from "mainstream" society. In the section that follows, I offer a critical genealogy of the way that the culturalist "stock definition" of hijras took shape over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century. My goal in offering this genealogy is to deconstruct the "black box" of hijra identity and instead to identify different axes— related to kinship, fertility, bodily habituation, biological predisposition— through which my interlocutors debated what "sex" was, and what kind of ethical world was "mattered" through it.

I borrow the idea of "axes" from Gayatri Reddy's classic ethnography of hijras in Hyderabad. In order to de-essentialize anthropological depictions of hijras and to separate ideal from practice, Reddy focuses not on an ahistorical hijra ideal but instead on her interlocutors' assessments of *izzat* (respect or authenticity). *Izzat*, she argues, is materialized not simply through anatomy but other historically-specific axes of value such as religious practice, kinship affiliations, sexual praxis, sartorial practice, language, and commitment to asceticism (2006, 15-17). None of these variables, moreover, is can guarantee one's recognition of *izzat*. Rather, they co-constitute one another in social practice. My theorization of an "exposure model" of sex builds upon these "axes" but unlike Reddy, I turn my attention to the way the audience of the performance is "mattered" and recognized. It is not just hijra sex that is mattered but sex more generally. Only by appreciating this point is it possible to understand why the transgender rights movement in Tamil Nadu appears to speak so urgently to the concerns of so many different types of persons.

2.5.4 Ethnographies of hijra performance

In her classic study on how sexual innuendo and insult play a role in an idealized hijra performance, Kira Hall offers a comprehensive genealogy of the various ways that hijras have been associated with an excessive or obscene use of language in India's history, producing culturally hegemonic metapragmatic models through which hijra performance is recognized and evaluated (1997, 432-7). Hall's account gives an overview of some of the approaches that commentators from different historical periods have approached these questions. I divide these roughly into essentialist-functionalist models and performative models, in order to facilitate a comparison with the frameworks of sex that I outlined in the previous section.

Essentialist approaches of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries generally attribute hijra "insolence" either to a mixture of biology and a perverted "culture. As early as the eighteenth century, writes Hall, in European travelogues such as that of the venetian traveler Niccolao Manucci, the figure of the eunuch rendered abject after an unwanted emasculation was linked to a kind of verbal insolence (Hall 1997, 435). Over the course of the following century, colonial accounts of "eunuchs," increasingly conflated with hijras, increasingly posited a link between hijra performance and the "extortionism" and "obscenity" that they thought characterized the group more broadly (Preston 1987, 373). Explanations for hijras' "obscenity," as per the logic of nineteenth-century criminology, invoked a mixture of biology (racial predisposition) and habituation that produced distinctive racial "types." Such performances were also increasingly seen as the sole practice of hijras in opposition to "the common people" and "intelligent

Brahmins," reflecting the broader historical moment where hijras were defined by colonial law as a Criminal Tribe in opposition to the more "regular" castes and tribes of India.³²

Hall writes that the characterization of hijras as a "loose-tongued upstart" continues in postcolonial India, reflected in genres including government census documents, Hindi novels (ibid., 445), journalist accounts (ibid., 437), medical journals (ibid., 439), and popular psychology (ibid., 439-40). Many of these documents employed a model of sex that associated impotence and physical emasculation to a kind of verbal degeneration into obscene and hypersexualized speech.

Hall's own explanation of hijra performances can be characterized as a performative model. She takes the above essentialist approaches as historical and ethnographic objects in their own right, arguing that they produce a historically overdetermined and hegemonic metapragmatic model through which hijra performance is understood by "mainstream" communities in India more broadly. Hall argues that the curses or verbal insult so central to hijra performance is understood in this metapragmatic model to performatively produce impotence in the body of the observer and prevent the birth of male children, hence disrupting the family lineage.

Hall's approach is especially nuanced in that she goes on to analyze her hijra-identified interlocutors' own metalinguistic explanations of hijra performance and verbal insult. Rather than focus on the conferral or detection of literal impotency Her interlocutors use the Hindi term *sarāp* to describe these insults: a curse issued by a person from a socially disempowered position in order to challenge the social hierarchy (ibid., 447). One of her interlocutors, Sulekha, characterizes the function of the *sarāp*/curse as *kaṭnā* or cutting— it "cuts the listener down to size" (ibid.). Sulekha also characterized the speech employed in the performance as a kind of plainspeak or candor, distinguishing it from the politeness (*sarm* or shame) that indexes "women's speech": "We just speak from the mouth... [hijras] will just say what they have to say" (ibid., 445).

Hall brings her account to a close at this point, arguing that hijra curses are primarily an assertion of agency in the face of oppression: "[through] this verbal play then, the hijras, who have a precarious status in the Indian social matrix, are able to compensate for their own lack of social prestige by assuming linguistic control of the immediate interaction" (ibid., 452). Yet Hall's own rich analysis contains some details that could be explored in greater depth, namely the moral and ethical matter that is contested and exchanged in the process of performance. For example, she shows that many of the insults revolve around the resignification of the listener's male genitals and are oriented towards a male listener. As the invocation of social justice and "cutting down to size" suggest, the "impotency" produced by these insults is not merely an affront to patriarchy nor does it target a literal biological reproductive apparatus. It is, rather, a diagnosis, conferral or exchange of a kind of moral potency that takes as its object not the subjective "sexual identity" or the literal "body" of the performers and listeners, but the social world they inhabit together. It is a moral and ethical world that is performatively produced and

³² Preston cites H.E. Goldsmid, Assistant Collector of Pune, who, in 1836, writes to R. Mills, Collector: "[b]e it known to all, that in the course of enquiries in the Indapoor Purgunna, it came to light, that oppression has been exercised on shopkeepers and Ryots in the following instances. 1st. The Hijera on visiting the villages lifts up its Soogra, for the purposes of collecting its Hucs and extorts money from the impotent by the threat of publishing their want of virility . . . "Hijera is supposed not only by the common people, but even by intelligent Brahmins, to have the power of detecting impotency" (qtd. in Preston 1987, 378).

contested at the very time that one's genitals are, in principle, either linguistically or nonlinguistically (through the gesture of lifting the skirt) revealed.

While these questions are not explored in Hall's early articles, her later work focuses more on the issues of intersubjective recognition as well as matter of potency as it comes to matter in hijra performances. In an article from 2005, Hall examines a "live performance" of what she calls "hijra-acting," highlighting the dialogic and emergent nature of hijra identity. Rather than focus simply on how "hijra" speakers utilize the repertoire of verbal insult, Hall examines how non-hijras may nevertheless index hijra identity in performance. Conducting fieldwork at an HIV/AIDS prevention-based CBO in Delhi, Hall observes performances of "hijra-acting," where performers used crude Hindi to index hijra identity, and polite Hindi and English to index middle-class womanhood, performatively inserting themselves as "kotis", in between. In the skit that Hall describes, the koti performers pair linguistic indexes with material props, to create exaggerated caricatures of both middle-class women and hijras. Applying the concept of indexicality, Hall shows how koti identity, and the hijra and naran identities that bracket it, is produced at every level of linguistic structure, as speakers vary their syntax, pitch, register, as so forth, to materialize different contextual variables. For example, the middle-class woman remarks in coy Hindi, "I am pregnant!" while holding a pillow under her dress. Later in the skit, her speech grows increasingly rude and sexual, betraying the "niceties" of her position. Another performer uses nasalized, impolite second-person forms to index hijra identity. Hijra identity is further pierced and denaturalized when the performer produces a wooden penis from under their clothes, thus questioning the ultimate marker of hijra authenticity. Both hijra and middle-class female bodies, and modes of desire, are thus portrayed as inauthentic, while koti desire is asserted as raw and true (2005, 139). Hall makes the point that sexual identity and desire emerge as meaningful and felicitous only when they index other variables of class, kinship, and local gender constructs that are shared by the Hindi-speaking audience.

Hall's work in this latter article is especially nuanced because it draws a distinction between the register indexing hijra identity, and hijra speakers themselves. Rather than viewing the felicity of the performance to be guaranteed by a "pre-existing" hijra identity, her piece highlights competing metapragmatic models that are brought together in a performance. Still, her account appears to stop with the suggestion that "sexual identity" is the outcome that is made to "matter" in the performance, based on a single metapragmatic model shared by the performers and audience. For speakers that align themselves with respect to the voices in the performance, intersubjective recognition— of one another as kotis, hijras, or middle-class women— appears to be an end in itself. The question of potency remains unaddressed, however. For whom are "hijras" associated with "abjection," what kind of abjection? And how are these associations contested? How is the felicitous performance of hijra identity related for example to whether the performer has had the operation or not? Who are the listeners amongst whom "infertility" is thought to be produced and what are the ontological underpinnings of such a conferral? If "sex" is a matter of "intersubjective recognition," as Plemons' model of FFS suggests, then the recognition in hijra performance clearly goes both ways. It is not only the "hijra body" that is made to matter at the moment of lifting the skirt but also the body of the other. What is the counter-recognition that is implied in hijra performance?

An interesting clue to this puzzle might be offered by examining moments of *infelicity* and contingency in hijra performance. Gayatri Reddy offers an interesting account of a hijra performance where, while sitting in a public garden, one koti asks another if she has joined any

of the hijra families. The person responds, clapping aggressively, "Of course I have! What do you think I am?" The interesting point is that even though the kotis themselves did not identify as hijras, a policeman that happened to see them muttered to Reddy, "what are you doing with those hijre-log (hijra people)?" (2006, 137). In this example, the policeman, Reddy, and the performers came away with different evaluations of what had transpired in the performance. For the performers and for Reddy, the performers were not hijras but for the policeman they were. The genital trace was less significant in this vignette than the virtuosity of the performers. Reddy mentions an interesting contrasting example where one of her interlocutors, Surekha, returns ashamed after going to ask for money at the shops. Surekha engaged in a hijra performance but the shopkeeper held his ground, daring her to lift her skirt and prove that she "really" was a hijra. Surekha had not had her operation yet and so she was forced to concede defeat, she came home discouraged and determined to have the operation as soon as possible (ibid., 95-6). In this second case, the battle for potency revolved more explicitly around a genital trace. There is a multitude of competing axes that vied for importance in the constitution of sex and ethics in her informants' model. These included sexual practice, kinship affiliations, doing "women's work", an idea of asexuality ontologically prior to the operation (ibid., 40, 92-3), how much one enjoys sex, and whether sex lay in one's birth or habituation (ibid., 46-7). Reddy argues that anatomical "truth" materializes at the intersection of these other axes, being neither the decisive factor that confirms and guarantees the rest nor a simply belated and inconsequential act that is less important than a prior asexuality. Rather, the stakes of an idealized hijra performance are based in finding or disputing congruence along these axes, and it is this congruence that makes a powerful claim to a moral "truth" of some kind.

Both Lawrence Cohen and Gayatri Reddy have also explored in different ways the "mattering" that occurs in the moment of hijra performance, theorizing how it is not only signification of identity but also a "mattering" of moral and bodily material that occurs through the repertoire. An important marker of sex in this model, paradoxically located *not* on the body, is one's "ontologically prior asexuality" or commitment to a lifestyle of asceticism or renunciation of lineage.³³ The operation might be viewed as evidence of this commitment but it is not a guarantee of it: each time the "lifting of the skirt" is threatened, the congruence between body and moral commitment is brought into question and risked. One way to answer this broader, and I would argue, crucial question of potency and the intersubjectivity of sex (ie. the sex not only of the "trans" person but also of the person that is supposed to recognize them), it is helpful to let go of a narrow attachment to the stock definition of "hijra identity," and think in terms of a broader model of sex through which persons are made to matter as ethical beings (not simply as hijras or non-hijras but as sexed, ethically-oriented bodies more generally).

It is not a stretch to argue for an exposure model of sex that might encompass, but is not limited to, the performance repertoire associated with hijra identity. As Kira Hall herself writes, "hijras do not have the corner on the Indian obscenity market; a variety of communities are notorious for breaking expectations of linguistic purity" (Hall 1997, 448). Hall lists a number of performance traditions, including a performance associated with children in Western Uttar

³³ Cohen writes: "Hijras distinguish between true and false androgynes, between the pretense of claiming gender difference and the proof of being able to pull up your sari. Yet the absent phallus is an inadequate marker of authentic gender; hijras locate their difference processually, along a path of self-awareness" (Cohen 1995, 295). Later in the same article, he writes: "Hijra essentiality and constructedness— the ubiquitous poles of writing on sexuality— are united in the cultural figure which constitutes their recognition: the lifting of the sari..." (ibid., 297).

Pradesh who use language related to sex, shit, and sadism in the process of play (Vatuk 1969 cited in Hall 1997, 448); Oriya-speaking Male performers at the Bhubaneswar Chariot Festival that perform sexually-tinged obscene limericks and songs to devotees of Lord Lingaraj (Freeman 1978 cited in Hall 1997, 448); and a performance tradition associated with Rajastani village women who at special occasions such as festivals, sing songs detailing their sexual engagement with spouses and lovers (Raheja and Gold 1994 cited in Hall 1997, 448). Hall notes also that "hijra" is used more broadly as an insult or epithet in many parts of North India (Hall 1997, 443). Such examples could be multiplied if we were to survey the literature on sexually-marked performance repertoires in India. Many persons that might later, at different points in their lives identify as "hijras," might have complicated relationships to such ideals. The gesture of "skirt-lifting," similarly, is not unique only to the figure of the hijra. Lawrence Cohen makes an especially fascinating observation in Varanasi, that when narrating what was meant by pulling up the skirt, his interlocutors invoked two kinds of figures. The first is of the idealized hijra making her rounds at the shops, but the second, interestingly, is of an old woman who "challenges the... not-yet-castrated hijra's authenticity and thus her auspiciousness by pulling up her sari" (1995, 296). In this latter figuration, bodily sex and moral authority are "mattered" together by pulling up the skirt, but the old woman's genitalia, once productive of lineage but no longer, becomes the site from where to challenge the would-be-hijra's "true" moral convictions, and the degree of their commitment to asceticism and an act of genital excision.

In the coming section I offer further evidence to support my argument for a broader exposure model of sex rather than a narrow idea of how sex is mattered through hijra performance (the implication of the latter being that sex is mattered differently in *non*-hijra performance). Following this, I will return to the world of my interlocutors in 2010, tracking the different "models of sex" by which they made sense of the language of "kidnapping" and "castration."

2.6 Deconstructing the hijra: a critical genealogy

It is clear that "histories matter" through bodies, but to understand how an event like the kidnapping case unfolded, a one-dimensional understanding of "history" is not sufficient. It is necessary to have a conceptual framework that can take into account several temporal planes simultaneously: a single life-course, a text and its circulation, and specific events that are gathered to posit a genealogy— sometimes over the course of centuries— like Criminal Tribes legislation.

In the following section, I offer a genealogy of the image of the "hijra" as it was constructed over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and tracing the process by which the notion of "kidnapping" condenses longstanding debates about kinship, legitimate forms of wealth accumulation, and the relationship between social practice and the body. Whereas many contemporary accounts treat the hijras emerging from the colonial record as a literal reference to "real" hijra persons that are recoverable precursors to the present, I emphasize instead the ambivalence and shakiness of this notion of "the hijra," qualities that made it capacious enough to house a set of contemporary debates. In the Section 3 of the chapter I return to the present moment, analyzing the competing "cartographies of communicability" offered by newspaper accounts, crime beat journalists, public health professionals and transgender rights activists. I show that each element of the narrative— the supposed victim, the accused, the

reference to Mumbai, and the invocation of colonial-era Criminal Tribes rhetoric— is efficacious both within the conventions of each genre (human rights report, newspaper article, or testimony) and within the socio-historical milieu within which it circulates. The "referential meaning" of the narrative is historically-specific, based upon the expectations of the audience, and the ideological weight of the genre in which it is couched, and the way my interlocutors evaluated its truth-value and efficacy. The hijra, as I treat it here, encompasses both the history and circulation of the poetic form, as well as its efficacy and importance for interlocutors as an embodied element of social life.

2.6.1 The "colonial degeneration" argument

The history frequently invoked in legal and activist claims to hijra identity in contemporary identity is one of a precolonial glorious past followed by a colonial degeneration. Contemporary arguments by human rights activists as well as the recent judgments by the Indian Supreme Court generally cite this history to make a case for the legal recognition of hijras and transgender people more broadly. By invoking a precolonial past where hijras were in positions of power and attributing their downfall to the Victorian disgust at homosexuality, and consequent oppression by the British government, petitioners are able to argue for legal recognition as a righting of historical injustice and a reassertion of India's ancient tradition of "queerness" in the face of colonial influence. Some historical scholarship makes this argument as well (Preston 1987, Zwilling and Sweet 1993), positing an unbroken connection between precolonial "eunuch" communities and the hijra communities of the present.

It is important to trouble this argument however, even while acknowledging and even supporting its crucial importance and value in today's struggles around transgender rights. As I suggested in the introduction to this thesis, contemporary activist accounts frequently utilize a stock definition of hijras as an indigenous community of "queer persons" that were criminalized on the basis of their non-normative gendered practices (such as dressing in saris), and their desire for men. The "eunuchs" referred to in the Criminal Tribes Act, for one, cannot be seen as a straightforward reference to self-evident, historically recoverable "hijra" persons. As historian Jessica Hinchy warns, the term "eunuch" was used by the British, and by earlier European travelers, to designate a wide variety of Indian social roles that over different periods included people that were emasculated and non-emasculated, male- or female-identified, elite and non-elite persons (2014). The boundaries of the category shifted continually as colonial officials disagreed on how to characterize Indian social roles. although activists today claim an unbroken line of connection between precolonial "eunuchs" and the hijras of today, historical evidence points to the existence of many diverse communities that might have had little to do with one another. The khwajasarais that wielded considerable political influence in the 18 century Mughal courts, for example, probably bore little similarity with the peripetatic hijra street performers in the Maratha kingdom. Over the course of the 19 century, as these different communities came increasingly to be classified as "eunuchs" as also treated as such in official policy and law, many of these internal distinctions fell out of usage. As Kira Hall writes, these various groups came increasingly to be conflated with the hijra (spelled variously as hijera, hijada, hinjra, or hijda), while internal distinctions between khojas, khwajas and so forth increasingly fell out of usage (1997, 436).

2.6.2 "Kidnapping" versus "adoption"

The stock definition of hijras takes for granted a model of sex and gender that might not map on to seventeenth and eighteenth century social categories. In the early colonial period, however, there is evidence that kinship and inheritance practices, rather than a current-day conception of sexual desire, were the impetus for the characterization of certain communities as "eunuchs." The hijras documented by Preston (1987) were a peripatetic community of performers in the eighteenth century Maratha kingdom (near what would be today the coastal city of Mumbai). This community possessed revenue collection rights as well as claims to property that were passed on through relations of adoption and patronage between gurus and celas (*ibid.*, 381-2). Linked to the patronage-based structures of the Maratha courts, hijras possessed considerable political influence. Over the course of the nineteenth century, patronage-based models of kinship were increasingly supplanted by an ideal of a conjugal, biological family, and structures such as the *jamat* came to be seen as illegitimate forms of "deviant reproduction," associated with "unnatural sex" (sodomy). Guru-cela relationships were similarly claimed to be practices of "kidnapping" children. These debates were at the root of the Doctrine of Lapse passed in 1850 whereby lands without biological heirs would, on the death of the holder, pass into British possession. The Criminal Tribes Act enacted in 1871 defined "eunuchs" as "impotent persons" that were (1) practitioners of brutish traditions of kidnapping (2) given to kidnapping and castrating children, and (3) "habitual" practitioners of sodomy (Reddy 2006, 26-27).

The notion of "kidnapped children" as it emerged in colonial law was linked to sixteenth and seventeenth century European perceptions of "eunuchs" as "kinless slaves" made miserable by forced castration (Hall 1997, 435). Historians of medieval India agree that forms of slavery were a widespread institution (Pinch 2004; Chatterjee and Guha 1999) and it is entirely likely that some eunuchs in the royal courts were sold into slavery as part of a slave trade that linked the Indian subcontinent to Ethiopia, Egypt and the Sudan. As historians Chatterjee and Guha caution, however, the characterization of these practices as "slavery" must itself be approached critically. The statuses of waif, ward, slave, son and heir were continually negotiated as families sought to expand their lineages and accumulate social capital (1999). Patronage-based models of kinship tended to be the norm, binding kings, indigenous elites, peripatetic warrior castes, and burlesque performers such as hijras and courtesans (*tawaifs* and *devadasis*) in networks of exchange and obligation (*ibid.*). Several martial and courtesan castes were, like hijras, categorized as "deviant domesticities" (Hinchy 2014), associated with public space, primitive religion, kidnapping of children, and non-procreative sex. The characterization of the *jamat* as a den of "deviant domesticity" arose not simply from Victorian disgust at "unnatural sex," but from early colonial contestations over land, revenue, and modes of inheritance. To therefore take at face value the conception of hijras as the very embodiment of anti-kinship, and the *jamat* as the very opposite of the conjugal family, erases the reproductive capacities of these groups while, as Chatterjee writes, "the legitimate lineage [is] preserved to wives" (Chatterjee 1999, 51).

The identification of hijras with "kidnapping" and with self-contained *jamat* structures served to conceal practices of adoption and slavery amongst both colonial officials and Indian princely groups. Indrani Chatterjee describes how the language of "slavery" became key for British officials that sought to protect their property from their Indian concubines and wives, and their "half-caste" children. By "breeding orphans" and subscribing to the "orphans fund," officers

effectively destroyed any claims that "native" concubines and children could make upon them (ibid., 57). In constructing categories of orphanhood and slave, moreover, colonial practices drew both on the English judicial categories of bastardy and illegitimation as well as as well as the "guru-cela" model of indigenous armies and princely groups (ibid., 95).

The association between hijras and kidnapping was also ambiguous in the functioning of "collective crime" policing structures. Jessica Hinchy writes that although colonial discourse repeatedly centered on the importance of raiding jamats to rescue young boys from a "life of infamy," only fifteen children were actually "rescued" between 1865 and 1871 (2014, 270). Although the children that lived in jamats were quite diverse, many of them even marrying women rather than becoming celas, jamats were nevertheless characterized as perverse dens where boys were turned into "habitual sodomites" incapable of returning to "normal" families both because of their now-effeminate bodies, as well as their loss of caste (Hinchy 2014, 29). With the growing hegemony of "biological kinship ideals" there is evidence that hijra petitioners increasingly characterized themselves as "eunuchs by birth" (Hinchy 2017, 134) whose "sad lot" it was to not be able to bear children (Preston 1987, 383), but these discourses bore an ambiguous connection to social practice. The problem with treating "hijra" as a transparent reference to either a self-contained culture or a body is that the histories of capital that underlie the concept are, as Anjali Arondekar has written, both depoliticized and "sexualized out of view" (2009, 91).³⁴

2.6.3 The hijra body as a discursive effect

The reification of the "hijra" or "eunuch" as a specific body and culture was partly the consequence of anthropological scholarship in the colonial period, and the functioning of what historian Nicholas Dirks has famously called "the ethnographic state" (2001, 43). In his classic text, *Castes of Mind*, Dirks argues that after India officially became a possession of the British crown in 1850, the government functioned as an "ethnographic state," producing material in the genres of anthropology and criminology to convert fluid categories of persons into reified "castes" and "tribes." Anthropology formed the basis for the production of military handbooks, police manuals, geographic surveys, census documents, and encyclopedias. The emergence of the "ethnographic state" was part of a broader historical moment in Europe when genres such as Indology and philology were increasingly seen as antiquarian amateur practices, to be replaced by a new effort to produce "scientific" anthropology and history. Dirks argues that this process resulted in an essentialist tendency in twentieth century anthropology to characterize the caste system as the sole basis of Indian social organization while erasing the dynamism and political stakes involved in claims around caste.

The stock definition of hijras as a specific type of person and a homogenous "Criminal Tribe" was achieved, to some extent, by "caste"-ing them in genres of anthropology and criminology. Like other groups that were designated castes or "Criminal Tribes," the category of "eunuch" relied on an ambivalent relationship between the individual and the group. The law

³⁴ Arondekar's point is part of a broader critique exhorting queer postcolonial scholars to abandon their impulse to exuberantly "recover lost subjectivities" from the colonial archive as a way to legitimize the existence of queer persons in the present (2009, 7). It is difficult to recover the hijra as a subject but we must still take it seriously as a consequential social fact in the present.

built on nineteenth century criminology in Europe, where specific cultural traditions combined with racial features and predispositions were together to predict criminal behavior. In contrast to what historian Sandria Freitag calls the "overt" policing structures developed to manage "ordinary crime," Criminal Tribes were regulated by a second "covert" structure designed to regulate "collective" or "extraordinary crime" (1991, 229- 231). The latter was distinguished by the unique synecdochic logic of its evidentiary norms: "although a particular gang had to be proved to have committed a particular crime, it was then sufficient to prove that an accused man belonged to the gang, not that he committed a specific crime" (1991, 237). The figure of the "native informant" encapsulates these associations between anthropology, collective crime, and caste. Anjali Arondekar writes that although sodomy was characterized by colonial discourse as a commonplace occurrence in India, the official records showed barely any evidence of actual sodomy convictions. This "evidentiary paradox" was mediated by the figure of the native informant— the "native doctor" or the "native jury...convicted of the crime on his own confession" (2009, 11). Although there were numerous political reasons why certain convictions were not recorded in the official archives— practices of sodomy between British soldiers themselves, for one— the culturalist invocation of caste-based stereotypes such as the hijra came to supplement the official absence, becoming a foil for India's sexual perversity more generally.

Dirks' account at this point appears to assume an immanent relationship between anthropological writings and the "bodies" they describe. He notes that perhaps more than in the case of martial, agricultural, and merchant castes, "criminal castes and tribes were defined overwhelmingly in colonial anthropology in reference to the body." Even in the early colonial period before 1850, missionaries wrote "with the relish of a voyeur" about the "barbarous rites and exotic customs" such as hookswinging, infanticide and widow-burning (sati) amongst non-Brahmanic caste groups (2001, 174). While upper-castes such as Brahmins were assumed to be under the influence of classical ideals of Brahmanical Hinduism, criminal castes were seen as driven by genetic and racial criminal predispositions. The racial otherness of Criminal Tribes were expressed not only in reference to their supposed predilection for "unnatural sex" but also their marvelous ability to feel no pain or experience no bodily harm even when they engaged in practices such as hookswinging (2001, 156). Nevertheless, Dirks attributes the focus of such scholarship to a "displaced Victorian enthusiasm for the colonized body" (2001, 188), presupposing an immanent and seemingly natural relationship between "criminal castes," their supposed "bodies," and the "Victorian disgust" that they elicited. Even though he notes that ethnography dealt with "the social body" of caste— "manners and customs, knowledge of arts and industries, tradition, language, religion, etc."— while anthropology focused on man "from an animal point of view, the structure and functions of his body" (2001, 184-5)— he does not examine the dialogic relationship between the "social" and the "body" in this division. It is important to deliteralize the references to Criminal Tribes' "bodies," however, and to see them as discursive effects rather than unmediated references. Bodies were imagined as a complex outcome of social practice, as well as a predisposing factor— Criminal Tribes and their "traditions" were assumed to produce, through force of habit, permanent bodily changes, as suggested by the term "habitual sodomite." By conjuring an immanent relationship between narrative and the violent or mutilated body as referent, such writing effectively concealed the political context within which it was produced.

Anjali Arondekar, in her deconstructivist examination of colonial records describes a case that involved a person named Khairati, who was arrested under suspicion of being a "habitual

sodomite." Khairati was ultimately acquitted, and there was numerous other successful sodomy arrests, but the "Khairati case" nevertheless became the most cited example of "eunuch" or "hijra" identity in the archive. The official inconsistencies in the record were papered over by forensic reports about his "body": his "lusterless eyes," "sallow countenance" and "trumpet-shaped anus" all of which were invoked as evidence of "habitual sodomy" (2009, 88-89). Arondekar's point is that it is problematic to conceptualize hijras as primarily "sexual" beings, since this essentialist notion of "sex" erases their entanglement with material histories of capital such as the debates around revenue collection and kinship structures.

The emergence of the body or of sexual desire in a text does not simply reside in the content, but emerges as a result of the genres in which the material circulates and is read. Dirks notes for example the overlap between anthropology and pornography, citing an incident where Forbes, secretary to the Madras government, recommended that phrases such as pendulous testes" and "protuberant breasts" be removed from an ethnographic essay on torture for fear that it might be read as "titillating" by adolescents in the metropole. Dirks dismisses such concerns as an unfounded fear on the part of colonial officials, assuring us that there was "little danger that either scientists or ordinary citizens were going to sift through" Thurston's text (Dirks 2001, 192). Dirks' flustered reassurance, however, elides the way that the "plainspeak" of "scientific" writing is haunted always by the *différance* of the erotic, and the invocation of titillating genres such as fiction and erotica as its "other." As Kath Weston has pointed out, anthropological writings on sexuality always produce concomitantly the potential for titillating or non-scientific readings, often stigmatizing their readers and writers just by association (1998).

To deliteralize the "hijra body" as it emerges in colonial records does not mean an erasure of the persons that were indicated by such records. Rather, it leaves room open to consider other ways that bodies could be materialized through social practices and readings, that are not reducible to a binary between the "colonial" and the "colonized." There is evidence that in the fifteenth century, several martial and performer castes including hijras were associated with an ascetic ideal of renouncing not only sexual practice but also the wealth and heirs that came from biological lineage. Renouncing desire in these ways was "marked" upon the body by certain operations (the genital excision being one possible sign) but was part of a broader regime of bodily practice and lifestyle. In the case of several such castes, renunciation and dedication to a "goddess" was also thought to paradoxically produce more moral and creative power, even as it extinguished the ability to produce biological heirs. Wombs and genital markers became signs that were performatively productive of a new moral society, becoming "a source of universal fertility when [they] ceased to be a source of individual fertility." There was also considerable divergence between ascetic ideals and practice. Historian Vijay Pinch writes that "political sensitivity about ascetic sexuality, marriage, and religious legitimacy" had arisen as early as the fifteenth century when it came to gosains, a martial caste of ascetic warriors (2004, 578). Practices of wealth accumulation and sexual practice were increasingly seen as antithetical to an idea of ascetic renunciation in a way that they had not before. Gayatri Reddy has also written extensively about the way that her hijra and koti informants had complex and diverse relationships with the "hijra ideal," when it came to their families of birth, with sexual partners, and with the "operation" as well as other bodily and sartorial practices.

2.6.4 Revisiting the exposure model

In light of this genealogy, we can revisit the accounts of hijra performance that I traced in the previous section, seeing them not so much as idiosyncratic practices linked to an idealized ahistorical "hijra" identity, but as elements of what I have called an "exposure model" of sex that is more broadly recognized by persons in a variety of communities. Kira Hall's statement that "since the early 1800s, and perhaps long before that, people in a variety of Indian communities have believed that the [hijra curse] is performative in the canonical Austinian sense, [serving] to interrupt the family lineage" (1997, 438) must be seen in a more perceptual way. There is no cohesive or homogenous "Indian community" with a shared metapragmatic model, with respect to which the "hijra curse" is always guaranteed to be performative. Conversely, the "performativity" of the hijra draws equally upon "colonial" ideologies, such as the posited connection between racial characteristics and criminal habits, or the dichotomy between the conjugal family and the adoption or jamat-based family. We can instead outline certain axes along which the performativity of the "hijra" and perhaps invocations of gender, bodies, and families more broadly, can be reckoned. What is one's relationship to the family of birth, and are they entitled to caste and familial wealth? If wealth is involved, is it categorized as licit or illicit, as alms or revenue? What kind of reproduction or family is considered ethically superior? Is one's fertility linked merely to individual gain or to social upliftment? Are "families mattered" through ties of caste, biology, or patronage, and what are the gift exchanges involved? Is the body a product of an innate predilection or a habituated cultivation? And in what genre can these "truths" be written, spoken, and heard? These were the questions raised for my interlocutors by the invocation of the "kidnapping" narrative, and it was these questions that they brought to bear upon contemporary political anxieties.

2.7 Six ways to tell a story about "kidnapping"

2.7.1 A scandalous crime

The newspaper reports about the kidnapping cases in 2007 and 2009, like those about the infanticide narratives described by Briggs, conjured their referent through a language that promised immediate "live" contact with the scene of the crime. The reports included dates, times, places and the names and ages of specific individuals in order to intensify the metaphysics of presence. The following report from The Times of India newspaper offers a typical example:

Five held for kidnapping, castrating youth

CHENNAI: When 16-year-old Vinoth, a class 9 dropout, disappeared from his house in Kovalam in 2006, his parents searched long and hard, in vain. In March 2009, he surfaced as Trisha, a transgender. His parents Nagooran, a daily labourer, and Rani then approached two NGOs and through them the Tamil Nadu State Commission for Women. Their petition was then forwarded to the police and special teams were formed. On Friday, five persons, including three transgenders, were arrested for kidnapping Vinoth, castrating him and forcing him into sex trade. The five: S Arasu alias Arasi (25) of Kovalam, S Subbu alias Subakaran of Annai Sathya Nagar

in Kasimedu and transgenders D Radha alias Raja (52), S Shanthi (32) of Kellys and S Kuttima (31) of Kallarai were later remanded in judicial custody. "When he turned up at our house on March 11, my mother was shocked to see Vinoth wearing women's clothes, lipstick and nail-polish. He did not utter a word for a whole day," Rani said in her petition. According to the police, Vinoth, after dropping out of school, went back to his parents in Kovalam but didn't want to be a burden on them. He approached soothsayer Arasu, said to be an MSM (men who have sex with men). The latter allegedly had sex with him. Vinoth left his house on July 18, 2006. The petition said Arasu took Vinoth to Kasimedu and left him at Subbu alias Suba's house. A day later, Vinoth was taken to transgender Radha's house near the old central prison. Radha confined him there for more than a month and forced him to wear women's clothes. "Radha promised my son a job in Pune and sold him to another transgender Angalamma. Later, my son was given to Subalakshmi who forced Vinoth into begging. His signature was taken and he was taken to a hospital in Cuddapah in Andhra Pradesh where an operation' was performed to turn him into an eunuch. He was then forced into prostitution. Finally, he managed to flee and return to Chennai on March 11," said Radha. The five accused were booked under Sections 3 (1), 4 (1), 5 (1) and 6 of the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act and Sections 363 (A), 372, 373, 346, 326 of the Indian Penal Code read with Section 120 (B) of IPC [Indian Penal Code].³⁵

The report specifies the ages of Vinoth and the accused persons, lists dates and places to offer a chronological map of events ("Vinoth left his house on July 18, 2006", "Arasu took Vinoth to Kasimedu"), and ends by listing the laws under which the accused were booked, suggesting that the event attained closure with the intervention of the police. The insertion of reported speech also creates a sense of who is absent and who is present at the scene: the parents and the police are present to the journalist, but Vinoth, the doctor, and the accused aravanis have "fled the scene." Several motifs and elements within the report draw their force from the hijra emanating from the Criminal Tribes Act. Criminal tribes were associated with ideas of "primitive religion" and "unnatural sex," and in the newspaper report, we learn that Vinoth approached a "soothsayer" that had sex with him, and another that "forced him to wear women's clothes" before forcing him into "begging" and "prostitution."

The reference to the CB-CID (Crime Branch- Criminal Investigation Department) provides yet another link to colonial treatment of "collective crime." Established in 1906 "to tackle inter-district criminals, professional offenders, and tribes who were addicted to crime,"²² the CB-CID is a direct outcrop of what historian Sandria Freitag calls the "covert" legal structure that emerged to control Criminal Tribes and Castes (1991). In stark contrast to the way they depicted transgenders en masse, newspapers named CB-CID top officials individually, making glowing references to their cutting-edge methods, efficacy and expertise. Officials emerge as efficient, conscientious individuals, safeguarding the integrity of biological families. In one report, the Additional Director-General of Police praised the courage of the boy's mother: if not for her, they would have never come across this "organized begging network." She urged more courageous parents to speak up: "parents of children who are subjected to any form of cruelty should come forward and register complaints directly with the CB-CID or with the child helpline."²³ Especially striking is the way that police expertise manifests in the form of officials

³⁵ Selvaraj, A. "Five held for kidnapping, castrating youth". Times of India, Chennai, April 4, 2009. Accessed May 13, 2019. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/Five-held-for-kindnapping-castrating-youth/articleshow/4356973.cms>

providing anthropological insights into the criminal behavior of transgenders. Consider this excerpt from an article in the *Indian Express*:

Transgenders kidnap young boys, castrate them and induct them into their group just to keep their exclusive community life going. Since they need the community, which alone supports them in their old age, they need to nurture it by bringing in new persons, said Archana Ramasundaram, ADGP of CB-CID, which investigated the alleged forcible induction of a 16-year-old boy, Vinoth, of Kancheepuram into a transgender group. Unless efforts are made to bring transgenders into the mainstream, they would continue to make a living through begging and commercial sex and community life will remain an integral part of their existence, she pointed out.... Anti-Trafficking Cell DSP, C Balusamy, who visited the Dhamdere Halle, explained the life of transgenders there. He said they operated in groups, each following a particular avocation. Some made a living through commercial sex, while others begged and some others formed a group that was involved in dancing.³⁶

These anthropological vignettes, inserted as reported speech of top CB-CID officials, recall the historical legacy of “collective crime” policing, where the roles of police and anthropologist were intertwined. Unlike in criminal tribes rhetoric, however, there is an emphasis on the boy's distraught parents and the initiative taken by Non-Governmental Organizations and the Tamil Nadu State Commission for Women. The brutish operation and dangers of prostitution are located in places outside of Tamil Nadu, like Pune and Cuduppah, and Chennai is the site at which the boy is returned to family, and justice is restored by police. It is also striking that the illegal operation is characterized nonetheless as one that includes a consent form and a hospital (“his signature was taken and he was taken to a hospital...”). The emphasis on hospitals and the quality of surgical expertise was especially evident in the case from the neighboring city of Bangalore, where the “victim” was made to undergo a “reverse sex-change surgery”:

A journey from Mars to Venus and back. This was a forceful and torrid journey Chandrashekar alias Manju, a 17-year old SSLC dropout, had to take in the last six months.

... Chandrashekar was given a second life by the 31-member medical team led by Dr Naveen Rao. In a 17-hour long surgery by the Apollo Centre for Cosmetic and Reconstructive Surgery medical team, Chandrashekar had sex reassignment performed on him. The surgery took place in two stages.

“This kind of situation should never be faced by any child, it is the only thing I pray,” says a composed Venkatswamy along with his now returned son after one of the most gruelling surgeries ever performed in the history of medicine by Apollo hospitals last week. “It is the rarest of the rare cases where sex reassignment from female to male who has already been operated to become female from a male,” said Dr Naveen Rao, chief cosmetic surgeon of the Apollo Centre for Cosmetic and Reconstructive Surgery. Chandrashekar alias Manju can hope to live the natural life of a man...two of the eunuchs involved in this grotesque attack have been placed behind

³⁶ “Why Transgenders kidnap young boys?” *The New Indian Express*. 9, April 2009. Accessed May 16, 2019. <http://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/2009/apr/09/why-transgenders-kidnap-young-boys-39623.html>

bars, their offences including attempt to murder. The doctor who performed the illegal operation, Naganna is still absconding.³⁷

The references to Apollo Hospital, one of India's most expensive private healthcare providers, and the "grueling efforts" of a "31-member team" create an awe-inspiring image of hope. Doctors are worshipped as miracle-workers, capable of taking a child "from Mars to Venus and back," indexing India's growing economic dependence on private surgery and medical tourism as a source of foreign income. The character of the "heroic doctor" is juxtaposed with images of greedy, corrupt hospitals, incompetent surgeons, and failed surgeries. This image of incompetence is illustrated by newspapers' references to Naganna, the 75-year-old "quack" surgeon conducting illegal surgeries at the behest of transgender goons. In contrast to the sparkling Apollo doctors, Naganna is sordid and incompetent say the reports, leaving transgender surgeries unfinished, and causing painful "urinary complications."

The complex combination of colonial fragments with contemporary political concerns in these newspaper accounts, demonstrates that the "hijra" emerging from the newspaper reports works in contrasting, volatile ways, to negotiate contemporary anxieties around private healthcare, LGBT rights, HIV/AIDS, child-trafficking, and neoliberalization. As I will explore more in the coming sections, the circulation of the figure of the hijra left marks on the bodies of hijras in the form of surgery, as well as the characterization of the surgeons themselves.

2.7.2 A dirty secret

The fact that newspaper reports appeared to conjure an immanent and immediate relationship between the report and an event of kidnapping does not mean that all the producers and readers of newspapers understood the event in this way. To gain some more insights into how journalistic reports of "kidnapping" were produced, I met with Mr. Karunan, the crime beat journalist for The Times of India, author of the first news report cited in the above section. Mr. Karunan had originally trained as an engineer but but after college, had landed his job as a newspaper reporter through a source of luck. Starting in the Tamil press, he had gradually worked his way up to the crime beat section of the English newspaper The Times of India.

To gain access to stories, Mr. Karunan arrived at the office of the Commissioner of Police every morning to gain a first look at the cases, and the First Information Reports filed that day. When I accompanied him one morning, he explained to me just how he went about preparing the reports. What appeared in the newspapers was only partially true, he said. As a crime journalist, it was his job to do due diligence, writing a report based on strictly documented evidence, namely the First Information Report and the report filed by the Non-Governmental Organization in the kidnapping case. He had also as a matter of due diligence, interviewed the police officials and the parents of the boy in question. Still, he said, not everything could be published on the record. For one, the degree of coverage that was given to any crime news was somewhat arbitrary. Police received forty to fifty complaints each day, and each unit received 4 or 5 petitions. The category under which a specific complaint was filed was dependent on the knowledge of police, who often found it difficult to keep up with the ever-growing list of crimes— trafficking related crimes and cyber-crime becoming increasingly salient categories.

³⁷ "Teenager gets a new lease of life." *Deccan Herald*. Dec 21, 2008. Bangalore.

The kidnapping case received attention not because it was innately any more important than another case, in his opinion, but because the recently appointed Assistant Director General of Police had taken a special interest in visibilizing "trafficking" cases as part of the operation of the newly-created "Crime Branch" of the Criminal Investigation Department, and its introduction of a childline. "Kidnapping," then, was a function of historically contingent police priorities and internal politics.

The second way in which the referent of the kidnapping case was ambiguous, in Mr. Karunan's opinion, was that official documents, while they were the basis for crime news, rarely reflected what had "really" happened. The "real" crime news was gotten through personal relationships and networks that he had built up with police over several years, in conversations over tea and snacks in the office canteen. In fact, he complained jokingly, crime beat journalists had to spend more money out of pocket than journalists covering other stories because they had to pay for the police officer's snacks! Although he ultimately had "limited purview to publish," he said, "real news" was actually obtained through trust-based relationships. Even in his interview with me, he said, "I have signed your consent form, but I am trusting you by telling you all this. If you break confidentiality, what can I do?"

So if "news" lay not in the realm of documented crime but in "off-the-record" conversations, what was the "real" referent behind the case of kidnapping? Mr. Karunan returned to his conversations with the boy's parents, and expressed doubt about whether the parents were really being honest. "I don't think what the parents are saying is 100% true," he said:

... but there are certain questions you just cannot ask. I don't know if they are really luring these kinds of children... but even when I was young [in my native town of Tirunelveli], my parents would advise me never to talk to them... and when I was working in Tiruchy from 1998 - 2000, there were some incidents that cropped up. The boy already had a habit of mingling with transgenders after school and so forth... that kind of habit will not just come to anybody.

In Mr. Karunan's expression, all crime news was a surface that concealed hidden referents, but when it came to news about "transgender kidnapping," the referent was buried even more deeply. This was because the "habits" that were indexed by the narrative of kidnapping, namely practices of "unnatural sex," were delicate matters about which "you just cannot ask" the parents. As he circled around the topic, Mr. Karunan stopped short of ever saying the words "homosexuality" or "anal sex," using euphemisms ("mingling after school", "certain incidents," and "that kind of habit"). The referent was itself resistant to representation and was not appropriate to decent speech.

Mr. Karunan's reluctance to write of "that kind of habit" in an official genre like news, or to speak of it in a documented interview, recalls what Arondekar calls an "evidentiary paradox" in the colonial archive, where "sodomy" became increasingly naturalized as a commonplace occurrence in India, not through the accumulation of "official" records but precisely the opposite— displaced into the realm of hearsay, rumor and the self-evident knowledge of the "natives" (2009, 10). Mr. Karunan's invocation of small-town Tamil Nadu and places outside of the metropolitan city of Chennai ("when I was young," "in Tirunelveli," "in Trichy"). The association between the image of aravanis and rural small-town folksy traditions is a common one in Tamil films and novels, but Mr. Karunan employed it here to point to a phenomenon that lay behind and before one embraced aravani identity, when it was still "the boy mingling after school" because of some innate desire that he had.

Mr. Karunan's ambivalent characterization of homosexual intercourse as the consequence of both habituation and an innate predilection ("that kind of habit will not just come to anybody") recalls colonial-era science that characterized "sodomy" as a practice to which boys became habituated after their entrance into a community of "eunuchs," becoming "habitual sodomites." The language of "habit draws also on conceptions of hijras as practitioners of distinctive bodily disciplines that are aimed at cultivating an ascetic disposition, although the language of "renunciation" is replaced here by an image of seduction and force. The boy does not renounce his connection to his biological family in search of a better life in the community; rather he is tricked and lured into it. Mr. Karunan compared the boy thus formed to Veerappan, a notorious and legendary ivory smuggler that lived in Tamil Nadu's forest areas:

I know a case where a woman, deaf and dumb, was tied up with cattle, and then over time, she started making sounds like a cow. Or the terrorist Veerappan, he lives in the forest, so he knows the languages of the birds and animals... there are techniques like that. If you keep hearing a message again and again, it will penetrate into your mind automatically. Like how advertisements brainwash you.

While Mr. Karunan compared the "habituation" of a boy to the way Veerappan had adapted to the life in the first, he drew upon the ambivalent conception of "transgender" identity being both a matter of an innate predisposition as well as a body produced by habit or imitation. But in his final line, "it is like how advertisements brainwash you," he switched scale, switching to a metaphor that was related not to word-of-mouth networks in small-town Tamil Nadu but to more global currents around the way advertisements and the neoliberal discourse of "LGBT rights" hooked innocent young boys from small-town Tamil Nadu. At this larger level, Mr. Karunan saw the "real" culprits behind "kidnapping" as the money-mindedness and hypocrisy of international development agencies and non-governmental organizations that "seduced" the boy by telling them about the abject plight of the transgender community:

[The transgender people will tell the boy] People did this [to us], they did that. [So the boy will think] "We should do something for the community. You need to become a transgender." By that time it will have reached the climax stage and then it will be too late. When he pees and so forth, he will feel very strange [in this new body]. Only then will he start to regret it and then there will be nobody to help him. At that point he will have no choice but to mingle with the community. But then I don't know about whether they are luring children, about all that I don't know.... [The transgender people will say] "He came [of his own accord]. We didn't do anything. He said 'I should work for your community' and 'I am your savior' and we tried to convince him not to become a transgender. But he insisted, and so we introduced him to it.

The simultaneous connections that Mr. Karunan makes here, between "transgender" as an index of the "dirty secrets" of small-town Tamil Nadu, and also an index of the global "corruption" of international agencies resonates with research by other anthropologists of sexuality in India. In his research in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, anthropologist Lawrence Cohen has argued that the figure of the "homosexual" becomes a signifier of corruption in Indian politics more generally. On the one hand, the "feudal" corrupt networks of caste and patriarchy in rural Bihar were represented in the popular imagination as homosexual relationships, where powerful men "did" younger, vulnerable boys, thwarting the enlightened reason of the central government's attempts

to "civilize" the hinterland.³⁸ On the other hand, homosexuality could also be used as an accusation against another kind of nexus, pointing towards the corrupting influence of Westernization and neoliberalism, where "fashionable" homosexuals in elite cities exploited innocent boys from the hinterland.³⁹ Mr. Karunan's account used the trope of surface and depth to articulate a similar vision through the image of "kidnapping." In Mr. Karunan's view, the "true" referent was the corrupt threats to young males, both from the rural archaic communities resistant to change, and from the international currents of LGBT rights that were penetrating Indian cities, portrayed by do-gooder NGOs. While his news report was peppered with reported speech and specific details to conjure an immanent relationship between kidnapping and its referent, in his conversation with me, Mr. Karunan pointed to a "deeper" referent by using euphemism and pregnant pauses, suggesting an "underneath reality" that was indexed by the narrative

2.7.3 A travesty of human rights

News reports were not the only genre that conjured a relationships of immediacy by using a chronological narrative filled with detail. The Fact-finding report that Aki and I wrote for Saranam had a similar structure.

Saranam was an organization committed to the human rights of sexual minorities and sex workers, and founded on Marxist principles. Their philosophy was one of inclusivity and intersectionality, where class, caste, and linguistic background were all axes determining a person's oppression. One of Aki's key responsibilities, in addition to conducting events raising awareness about LGBT rights and forging alliances with other organizations, was to intervene in "crisis cases" where LGBT persons and sex workers might experience harm but be unable to approach police because homosexuality and sex work were technically illegal. Aki handled these cases by drawing on a tight-knit network of human rights lawyers, fellow activists and volunteers, and relationships with police and community leaders.

Normally, such crisis cases involved a clear distinction between "victim" and "perpetrator" and usually the "perpetrator" of the crisis was a police person or a family member that was outside of Saranam's target community. Kanu's case had proven especially troublesome however, because it was an aravani-identified person that had made a complaint against other aravanis. Both the complainant and the accused qualified as "community members" that fell within Saranam's purview, and both had approached Saranam for help. The Fact-finding report was to be an "internal" report, shared just between the staff members at Saranam and used to document

³⁸ Analysing cartoons and poems lampooning political leaders, which circulated during the festival of Holi, Cohen writes: "...all kinds of political difference are assimilated to the sodomitical relation of 'doer' (*karnewala*) and 'done to' (*karwanewala*)" (2008, 39).

³⁹ Regarding the case of Bihar, Cohen writes: "Two positions are available to make sense of this divide between planned development and the struggle between contrastive fields of accusation... [first] the presumption that rule by politicians in the post-colony is deficient and that rule by experts is necessary to improve the lives and life-chances of inhabitants... [conversely] development is revealed as an elitist apparatus [marked by] the naïveté of planners lacking any understanding of rural power" (2008, 37). Another version of this divide emerges in his fieldwork in Delhi, where he writes of a journalist, Swapan Gupta, for whom homosexuality seemed to represent "an inauthentic and violent cosmopolitanism centered on the proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the place of a national order of culture and development...an affinity between global humanitarianism and the loss of a local moral world" (2007, 105).

the fact that they had done their due diligence as human rights advocates. The task was to prove to fellow activists that Saranam did not have double standards when it came to human rights: whether the person was an aravani or not, they would investigate all complaints.

The preoccupation of Aki and his colleagues was linked to the debates in Chennai and Bangalore at the time, regarding the growing demand for sex-reassignment surgery modeled upon that offered in the United States. As early as 2003, activists at Saranam and allied human rights organizations such as the People's Union for Civil Liberties and the Alternative Law Forum had called for the Indian government to take a stance regarding standards for sex reassignment surgery (PUCL-K [2003] 2005, 99). Just three years later, in 2006, the United Nations Human Rights Council had issued the Yogyakarta Principles: a set of global standards and guidelines regarding human rights of sexual minorities, signed by representatives of 54 countries. The Yogyakarta Principles called on member states to decriminalize homosexuality and also to recognize individuals that had undergone sex-change surgery in accordance with the Harry Benjamin guidelines drafted in the United States in 1979. Despite these international developments and human rights movements, however, the legal status of sex reassignment surgery in Indian law remained ambiguous. On the one hand, under Sections 320 and 325 of the Indian Penal Code, to "emasculate" a person was to cause them "grievous harm," and both doctors and patients engaged in such operations could be punished. On the other hand, Section 88 of the Indian Penal Code suggested that if such a medical action was undertaken "in good faith" and with the "consent" of the patient, an exception could be made (PUCL-K [2003] 2005, 69). With the increasing circulation of discourses centered on the concept of Gender Dysphoria, contained in the Harry Benjamin guidelines, new ambiguities arose regarding Indian law: was a "transsexual person," if they were considered to be suffering from a "disorder," capable of giving informed consent? (ibid., 70). Should sex-reassignment surgeries be subsidized by the government or should they be conducted by private hospitals? What would be the place of the "traditional" ritualized hijra operation conducted by a dayamma (midwife), and of the semi-legal medical operations conducted by doctors such as Naganna in the town of Kadapa (the person arrested because of Kanu's complaint)? Even if such semilegal operations were to continue, would police complaints be filed or would the operations continue with the tacit acceptance of police? These questions were actively being debated amongst activists in Chennai and Bangalore at the time of Kanu's complaint.

The status of guidelines and facilities was, moreover, fragmented and heterogeneous in its application across states. On the one hand, in 2008, the Tamil Nadu State Government had established an Aravani Welfare Board (now called the Transgender Welfare Board), and certain government hospitals had begun to offer subsidized sex-change surgery. While these developments certainly represented major gains for aravani activists and their allies, there continued to be criticism about the quality of care offered at government hospitals. Most of the people that had undergone male-to-female surgical transition that I met had gone to Dr. Naganna in Kadapa to have their operation done. In Kanu's complaint, however, Dr. Naganna was the very person that was being accused of conducting brutish and illegal "castration" operations. In a similar case filed a few years earlier, he had been placed under arrest.

In the absence of consensus regarding the procedure and form that surgery should take, the debates that proliferated in the wake of Kanu's case centered on the matter of "consent." The criteria to determine "violence," in terms of our "fact-finding" report, was to find a consent form, and to discover whether Kanu was happy with her transition. In previous such cases as well,

Saranam had used a consent form and the evidence of friends and acquaintances to determine the "inner subjectivity" of the individual and to decide whether they had experienced coercion or not. Since Kanu had apparently signed a consent form, it was determined that she had filed the case to resolve another conflict concerning her fellow sex workers.

While the report itself might have emphasized the "locatability" of consent and sexual identity within Kanu's own psyche and life history, in the conversations that followed the event the referent of kidnapping was constantly deferred, made to point not to Kanu but to deeper structural factors that underlay the state of the movement and the state of gender oppression in Tamil Nadu more broadly. In this "deeper" narrative, voiced especially by activists that did not belong to the aravani community, the jamat was seen as an archaic institution with regressive patriarchal practices that needed to be addressed by the enlightened language of human rights and queer rights.

At the time of Kanu's case, I was working as an activist in the field of LGBT rights in Chennai, volunteering with both Nandanam and another sexuality-rights NGO. For several human rights activists, especially those middle-class and English-speaking, the case was understood as evidence of Kanu's abjection, oppression, and lack of options. In the notes I made when helping compile Saranam's Annual Report in 2010, for example, I wrote this:

[We] resolved that it was necessary to sensitize jamats that surgery was only acceptable for boys above the age of 18, who had signed a consent form.

...an area for serious attention still seems to be the age of consent and the process of recruitment of kotis into the aravani community. Since kotis without family support are young, often abused and insecure, and need a form of livelihood, they are vulnerable to joining the community for lack of other options. Consent and coercion are terms that have no meaning unless people have a variety of options available to them. We need to work on producing more options for them and on empowering them to make their own decisions regarding their sexuality and surgery.

In this human rights version, Kanu was imagined as a vulnerable, impoverished young koti, kicked out of home with nowhere to go. Devoid of the education or money that would give her options, she was left with no choice but to join the archaic, feudal jamat. The jamat in this version of events, bore some similarities to colonial-era characterizations: gurus were portrayed as corrupt, ignorant of modern notions of human rights, and steeped in archaic, outdated customs. They could be modernized and enlightened by introducing them to modern notions of "consent" exemplified by the consent form.

The PUCL-K human rights report, in support of its demand for sex-reassignment surgery, offered grisly accounts of what it described as the semi-legal, "quack" operations conducted in either Kadapa (a small town in the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh) or Dindigul (a town in south-central Tamil Nadu). Inserting the descriptions in the reported speech of the Chennai-based doctor C. Venkatesan, the report reads as follows:

While educated and wealthy 'male-to-female' transsexuals may have access to surgeons and plastic surgeons, many hijras are from a low socio-economic status and hence may not be able to afford sex reassignment surgery... consequently many hijras go to unqualified medical practitioners ('quacks') who do castration." But the so-called simple castration that many hijras

undergo at the hands of 'quack doctors' or 'senior hijras' (called tayamma) has significant health risks ([2003] 2005, 68).

The report goes on to describe the experience of two persons that are forced to go to a 'quack doctor' in Dindigul:

The doctor's clinic was a tiny airless room with a toilet consisting of three benches which served as an operation table. The operation was so painful that Manorama wondered whether it was worth going through the pain in order to become a hijra. The operation turned out to be defective leading to a severe infection leading to a severe infection, loss of urine control and other painful complications (ibid.).

The descriptions spectacularize the bodies and experiences of the "hijra" protagonists, drawing links between their perceived abjection and non-modernity, and linking it to semi-urban parts of Andhra and Tamil Nadu. Chennai, in contrast, is implicitly portrayed in Dr. C. Venkatesan's voice as a space where well-trained and competent doctors are able to make measured evaluations of the state of sex-reassignment surgery and the needs of the hijra body. In a way that echoes colonial-era accounts of Criminal Tribes, the "hijra person" is seen as a victim of powerful and archaic traditions, incapable of giving individual consent and vulnerable to the coercion of tradition. The stock image of the hijra, in these discourses, is invoked as a token through which to debate the uneven economic development across and within states, and the rapid, if fragmented, flow of international surgeries and "luxury" private hospitals into India in the previous twenty years, replacing the government-offered health system or turning the latter into a "public-private partnership."

The "archaic jamat" narrative was not limited to the meanings of "castration" and its opposition to modern sex-reassignment surgery. It extended into a debate about the place of the jamat system more generally: was it a laudable example of India's "ancient" queer traditions and support systems? Or was it an archaic and brutish institution antithetical to "modern" notions of queer rights? A year earlier, a young aravani had committed suicide by self-immolation, citing abuse by her guru as a reason. This case caused ripples within the activist community, with many condemning the corruption and violence of jamat gurus. Two of my colleagues, Aniruddhan Vasudevan and Padma Govindan, saw the case as a symptom of a broader, national challenge, where aravani identity politics was increasingly at odds with radical "queer" politics. The Welfare Board's reluctance to address jamat-based violence seemed like further evidence of its problematic essentialist politics:

The jamaat system frequently fosters violent and coercive behavior between gurus and celas, in no small part due to the pressures to earn money and support community members in the context of a larger social stigma... The incident accentuated the existing tensions within the guru-cela system and emphasized its profoundly hierarchical and potentially repressive possibilities, while also highlighting the inability or unwillingness of the newly-constituted Aravani Welfare Board to publicly address issues of violence against and within the community (2008, 8-9).

The solution to this problem, the authors suggested, was to recast the jamat through the lens of human rights and subversive queer politics. The rituals of the Koovakkam festival, they suggested, though often treated as a quintessential example of aravani tradition, might be seen as

a radical, queer “re-authoring of heterosexist Indian traditions” (Vasudevan and Govindan 2008, 9). The authors conclude by reiterating the common struggle of LGBTs, feminists, and all those committed to combating “heteropatriarchy and sexism within the community” as well as outside (ibid., 21). The abject koti imagined by the human rights discourse suffered not only from a lack of money and livelihood options but also from the freedom and sexual liberation promised by the LGBT rights movement.

The "jamat" family system, like the "surgery," had become a heavily contested category between human rights activists partly because of developments within the public health infrastructure of India, particularly the HIV/AIDS prevention apparatus. Only the previous year, in 2009, the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) had for the first time included "hijra" as a distinct category in its target populations, distinct from both "Men who have Sex with Men" and "Transgender." The inclusion of "hijra" was a result of the advocacy on part of activists in Mumbai that had drawn upon a construction of hijras as an ancient and "authentic" Indian community in order to fight for the separate category. In Tamil Nadu, where Tamil activists had long defined themselves as thirunangais in opposition to the hijra, and where there was a long history of HIV/AIDS organizing, the introduction of the "hijra" category seemed like a regressive imposition of North Indian politics upon Tamil Nadu's autonomy. In this regard, the hijra jamat was made to occupy a paradoxical temporal space: on the one hand it indexed a regressive and colonial-era feudal form of organization associated with Mumbai, but on the other hand its intrusion into Tamil Nadu's politics was new, not old. It represented a broader attack upon Tamil Nadu, where the fundamentalism and regressiveness of North Indian Hindi-speaking cultures like that of Mumbai were making inroads into Tamil Nadu's otherwise modern and forward-thinking culture.

To gain a better sense of this process, I interviewed Mr. Madan, the director of the US-funded AIDS Prevention and Control project in Tamil Nadu. I chose to interview him not only because of his decades of experience working with the HIV/AIDS prevention movement in Tamil Nadu but also because he was especially invested in recognizing and reforming the kin-based networks amongst aravani communities in Chennai by awarding special "innovation grants" that educated older aravanis and jamat leaders about modern notions of consent and HIV/AIDS prevention. His concern was that "hijra" represented an archaic inflexible cultural construct that had a long history in Mumbai but did not belong in Tamil Nadu:

The reason this jamat system has caught hold in Chennai is the UNDP projects. They wanted to find some social structure to work with. But Tamil Nadu has traditionally been an accepting place for transgender people... it is not like the orthodox hijra system you see in North India... but now it is becoming more hierarchical and new gurus are cropping up, especially in the rural areas.

The main area of concern for Mr. Madan was that community members had started trying to solve all their conflicts within the jamat structure instead of appealing to the enlightened reason of public health and civil society projects. Like the human rights activists mentioned above, he saw the jamat as an archaic institution sorely in need of reform. His vision was of a Tamil Nadu where community members were reconciled with their biological families and had the opportunity for a good life promised by advancements in transgender rights and LGBT rights. The older gurus then would be role models for younger transgender women, but would not have control over their livelihood, residence, and bodies.

2.7.4 Surgery: restoration or mutilation?

In the process of these debates, "sex" emerged not simply as a result of an individual's wish or self-actualization but as material evidence of some deeper moral "truth" about the state of society at large. Even if a person wished to have surgery, in what mode would they choose to matter "sex" into their body and what was the ethical stance implied in such a decision? In what way could someone's body be proof of their ethical stance regarding the state of society?

The consequentiality of this "choice" and its reflection on the ethical make-up of the individual making it, was reflected in debates within the activist community about what was the "right" way to engage with sex-reassignment surgery. While the activists and public health representatives cited above appeared to denigrate the "traditional" operation in favor of sex-reassignment surgery, others expressed ambivalence regarding the rapidity of the shift. In this reversed characterization, the term "transgender" and its association with the "modern" operation was a sign of class privilege within the trans community and a way of refusing or denying one's solidarity with those positioned "lower" in the social hierarchy. In an article authored in 2005, for example, Ashwini Sukthankar questions whether United States-style sex reassignment surgery and its associated debates have a place within the Indian movement (2005, 164). She expresses her concern about the problematic politics that such demands might conceal: if insurance companies to recognize "gender dysphoria" as a basis for surgery coverage, will that help the international pharmaceutical industry to infiltrate and profit from Indian trans bodies? Does surgery reify a male-female binary? One of Sukthankar's colleagues, Famila, a young activist that had proudly "reclaimed" the term hijra as a site for radical politics, expressed the following sentiment:

For me, when I think of transgender or transsexual persons, what comes to my mind is people who have greater access to information and have a very different class privilege. For hijras, that's not the case— lots of us are not English-speaking. And, unlike many transsexuals who get expensive surgery and can pass as men or women, lots of hijras are very easily recognizable as hijras (quoted in Sukthankar 2005, 165).

For Famila, an unexamined aspirational desire for American-style sex-reassignment was a privilege of urban, English-educated "transsexuals" that had the luxury of debating a set of international options when it came to how they were going to modify their "sex." In this view, sex-reassignment surgery could be a way of disowning one's hijra roots and one's solidarity with the hijra community in order to assume a Westernized "transsexual" identity. Later in the essay, Famila emphasizes her rejection of normative beauty standards and beauty pageants, defending the way that a "hijra" body might not look like that prescribed by heteronormative society for "women." In Famila's politics, the desire to look more like a woman reflected one's internalization of istandardized beauty standards (ibid., 172).⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Plemons' argument speaks in an interesting way to the material here. In the case of the "performative model" described by Plemons as undergirding trans-therapeutics since the 1980s, it is the recognition of one's face as "female" that constitutes sex change. In the model of sex proposed by Famila, however, the question becomes: in whose eyes, and according to whose standards of "woman," is one's "face" to be recognized before its "sex" counts as "changed"? I will need to engage more closely with Plemons' text, as well as engage research on surgery and trans-medicine in India specifically, in order to develop this dialogue.

In the eyes of some other activists at Saranam, the sex-reassignment surgery offered by private hospitals was dangerous for another reason. Lacking the support and understanding of the broader hijra community, the person undergoing surgery was at the mercy of ignorant doctors, violent family members, and transphobic police. This made them vulnerable both to "kidnapping" and to "castration," albeit performed by private hospitals, not by the hijra community. Veena, one of the co-founders of Saranam, asserted strongly that Kanu had been an opportunist that had betrayed the community by going to the police with a false complaint. But in discussing an earlier case from two years before, the case of Lakshmi, her tone emphasized the horror and tragedy of the case:

When [Lakshmi] first went, she was happy in the jamat, she did the operation. One day she was asking the shops (for money) with her guru and gurubai and her parents saw her. The parents created a big scene in the street, hitting her, crying, took her to the police station. Then the parents filed a complaint that these two [other aravanis] had made her this way ... when she said no, they beat her and forced her to repeat it! Then they called all the media, newspapers, TV channels and said "you have to say that they kidnapped me and forced me to come with them." If that wasn't enough, the police took this koti to Apollo Hospital, took flesh from her hand and constructed a penis. [Shudders, voice lowers] Do you know just how much mental torture that koti experienced because of this? Forcing her to leave the life she wanted to live, disfiguring her arm, adding an organ that was unnecessary, an organ that she hated... forcing it upon her... [the "penis"] useless, it just hangs there like rubber!

Veena's version of Lakshmi's case reverses the binaries of the newspaper reports describing Lakshmi's case. In Veena's version, Lakshmi is living a happy life with her jamat, before being "kidnapped" by her parents. She is dragged from the safe privacy of the jamat into the spotlight of police and media channels, beaten and forced to speak in public. She undergoes a horrific surgery at a top hospital, and given a grotesque and disgusting organ she hates, one that just "hangs there like rubber." In Veena's narrative, it was not the glittering expertise of Apollo Hospital doctors but the quiet support of fellow kotis that eventually came to Lakshmi's aid. Indeed the most tragic aspect of the narrative for Veena seemed to be the breakdown of jamat relationships that could never be mended:

Finally she went to court, after 3 to 4 years had passed... all that time [her guru] had been in jail... in fact it was I that took her to Bangalore court, from here in Chennai... she said, I went of my own free will but the police hit me and forced me to say this... the case was won and then they removed [the new penis]. Then they released the guru... the community [in Bangalore] said that she can't be there any longer, so we brought her here... No, I don't know if she is in touch with her parents, I have to ask her... Of course she can't be in contact with [her guru! How is it possible? 4 years they have been inside [jail] because of her!

According to Veena, Lakshmi had eventually managed to make a life for herself in Chennai, changing her name, rebuilding her jamat-cela relationships. For Veena, the most painful part of Veena's experience was not the alienation from her father and mother, but the betrayal of her jamat family: she had put her own guru in jail for four years. This loss of kinship, in addition to the traumatic "reverse sex-change" surgery, made Lakshmi's case especially painful to think about. Ultimately, whatever the violence outsiders may perceive in the jamat, in Veena's view, the real horror was the media, police and parents dragging her into an unwanted spotlight.

2.7.5 The corrupting influence of Mumbai

It would be wrong, however, to assume that Veena completely denied the human rights narrative. As the founder of an organization dedicated not only to thirunangai rights but to LGBTs more broadly, Veena had her own commitments to human rights language. way of describing the jamat, with both its advantages and disadvantages, expressed her commitment to a certain vision of transnational human rights. She expressed this dual commitment by characterizing Mumbai as the home of a feudal, backward hijra nexus, and Chennai as a progressive alternative space that allowed thirunangais to grow independent and empowered.

Speculating about why Melissa might have filed the complaint, Veena guessed that she had grown weary of the regulations of jamat life. Sex work in the jamat was a “day-long job, starting from six in the morning.” Half the earnings had to be given to the guru, and celas were scolded harshly:

[Although one joins quite happily] it’s quite possible that one may later grow to dislike the jamat rules. You can’t take a man as husband, can’t go enjoy yourself with them or spend lots of money... you have to give money. You absolutely have to hand over [some fixed amount]. If you say you want to do nirvanam [operation] then for two years after that you have to earn for your gurus... and they speak quite harshly to you... so maybe she stopped liking it. Maybe she thought this case was a way to get back [at her guru].

As a human rights activist in her own right, and the founder of an LGBT rights NGO, Veena condemned some aspects of the hierarchy and inflexibility of the jamat. The extortion and hierarchy had to go, she said. Nevertheless, she refused to represent this inflexibility using sensationalist words like “violence” or “oppression,” as the “archaic jamat” narratives had done. Instead, she emphasized the ordinary, everyday nature of guru-cela hierarchies, using the words “like” and “dislike” and describing Melissa’s freedom to come and go as she pleased. “What if a koti joined the jamat happily and then stopped liking it?” I asked. If a koti agreed to something and regretted it later in her life, that was unfortunate, she reasoned, but not the kind of thing one could file a human rights intervention about. She did not want to eliminate the jamat, she concluded, for it was also a happy place that had supported transgender women for so long. She only wanted to reform it, relaxing the rigidity of guru-cela rules of behavior.

I mentioned earlier that in accounts given about the “kidnapping” narrative, when people defuse the charge of “kidnapping,” they are often forced to deflect its sense of nexus elsewhere. In Veena’s case, the “kidnapping nexus” existed not in Chennai but in Mumbai and Pune. The distinction between inflexible, corrupt jamats and happy, safe jamats was made to stand for the difference between “Mumbai-Pune” and Chennai. In contrast, to “Mumbai-Pune” where jamats and police were in a corrupt nexus, making kotis powerless, Chennai had a happy balance of power between jamats, NGO projects, job options, and police protection:

Anyway, there are no jamats in Chennai...! They’ve never been able to establish jamats, because everyone is empowered in Chennai... Because in Chennai there are many sources where you can go to earn, you can somehow survive... in Mumbai-Pune each area is in the control of certain aravanis, rowdies and police...My kotis can’t go there, those kotis can’t come here. But it has never been strong in Chennai... “Hijra” is their culture, it’s their jamat system. They pressure us

to use the term “hijra,” but we won’t. Here you don’t have to do the operation, you can be married [to a woman] and still be a part of the community.

Like the newspaper narrative, and the “human rights” narrative, Veena too made a distinction between violent tradition and progressive modernity, indexed by “Mumbai-Pune” and Chennai, respectively. In Chennai, kotis had opportunities for work, and they did not have to adhere to strict gender norms or do the operation compulsorily, they were— she used the English word— “empowered”. She refused the traditionality, violence and criminality associated with the term “hijra”, placing them firmly in “Mumbai-Pune”. She elected instead to use terms like koti and thirunagai, associated with progressive NGO and human rights spaces, rather than aravani, that would index traditional, religious customs. Both the “archaic jamat” narrative and Veena expressed commitments to the language of “empowerment”: while the former indexed it with references to transnational, English-language discourses of queer rights and economic development, Veena linked it to the vibrancy and cosmopolitanism of Chennai.

Interestingly, Veena suggested to me that the very readiness of Chennai police to file cases against aravanis, was a reason why kotis in Chennai were empowered. With the growth of initiatives like the Aravani Welfare Board, Veena said, Chennai aravanis increasingly fought back against their own gurus, threatening to file police complaints of “kidnapping” or “extortion.” Veena shared that when her own guru had once asked for a large sum of money, Veena had threatened to complain to the police about “extortion” and her guru had backed away. The combination of government and police attentiveness, NGO projects for employment, and the close friendship of “empowered”, confident kotis, made Chennai a safe, progressive space. In “Mumbai-Pune” the balance of power was unduly skewed in favor of gurus and police. There, a koti would have never get away with such defiance of her guru:

In Mumbai Pune everyone will know all the police stations... [gurus] will throw money at them, they have bundles and bundles of cash pa, sacks and sacks of it. Because these [kotis] are earning and they come and give it all to them only no?... and even if [the kotis] talk to the police, [gurus] will say that is my house granddaughter, ignore her, she is a little crazy, just send her to us, they will say...

Veena’s image of the shrewd aravani, threatening her guru by banking on the public outrage associated with “kidnapping,” presents a strong counter-narrative to the newspaper and “archaic jamat” images of hapless young boys entrapped by their circumstances. In this sense Kanu’s act of filing a complaint, whether it was successful or ethical, was itself a sign of Kanu’s empowerment.

Veena’s narrative reproduced some of the very same genres associated with both newspaper articles and colonial-era characterizations of the jamat. Her depiction of “Mumbai-Pune”, for instance, as a corrupt nexus of sex, hijras and money strongly resonated with some aspects of contemporary police characterizations of “sex rackets.” Her vision of Chennai as a happy balance between jamat, police, and NGOs might be read as reproducing a colonial-era construct of police continually surveying “eunuchs”. In this context, however, Veena was using it to critique the empathy proposed by sensationalist “human rights” narratives that used sensationalist language to pit the abject koti against the villainous police.

2.7.6. An ethnographic misrepresentation

Not everyone shared this view of the *jamat* as an archaic institution, however, or of biological To gain an idea of how the case was perceived by activists outside of Saranam, I interviewed Priyababu, one of the most senior and respected thirunangai activists in Tamil Nadu, credited with changing the opinion of thirunangais in the public. Priyababu had long been a part of Tamil Nadu's HIV/AIDS prevention scene, as an educator that conducting "sensitization workshops" to educate police about gender and sexuality.

What was significant, in Priyababu's opinion, was not the meaning but the instrumentalization of the narrative: the fact that Kanu had maliciously used this story to take revenge on her guru. She reframed the kidnapping narrative by replacing the term "kidnapping" with "adoption." There were longstanding practices, she said, of thirunangais adopting children and raising them as their own. In fact there were many thirunangais that did not only support their own adopted children, they also supported the wives and children of their male lovers. The emotional labor and financial support provided by thirunangais to these supposedly "mainstream" families, was completely erased by narratives such as the "kidnapping" story.

I know many thirunangais who have adopted children made them study and gotten them married. The thing is that there are no documents about this, because everyone only reads in English. I know someone else, who for eight years has financially supported her husband's entire family, she even pays the fees for her husband's child. The child even calls her Periamma (auntie).

The second document that Priyababu emphasized and contested the authority of, was the consent form. Recall that for many human rights activists in the wake of the kidnapping case, it seemed as though the existence of a written consent form would solve the problem, and remove the stigma of "coercion" that was being smeared on the case. Priyababu disputed the emphasis placed on the consent form by saying that it was not written consent but oral consent that should take moral precedence. The emergence of written consent as the standard of authority was described by her in a striking phrase in Hindi— "*sachhai mar gaya*," or "truth is dead."

...it is only now that we say we have to document everything but in those days if you said it orally it had value, it was respected. Nowadays they ask for a hundred documents because *sachhai mar gaya*, truth is dead. Documents can be easily duplicated, you can return it or sell it. but in those days you were asked three times and if you give your word that you would raise this child as your own, then you have adopted my child Now because we have lost all trust in one another we need written documents. For the many children raised by thirunangais there are no documents, but they have raised them sent them to school gotten them married and they've taken the place of a mother, and the place of a father.

In emphasizing the importance of oral, community-based agreements over the superficial manufactured consent demanded by human rights activists, Priyababu was also making a point about families. In her above description of adoption, the birth parents willingly entrust their child to the aravani family, and the agreement is made held in place by honor and respect, and the way each of them gives their word. More frequently however, the case was that the birth and *jamat* families entered into conflict and violence when a child passed from one into the other. Far from what the narrative of "kidnapping" would suggest, aravani community members were in reality,

extremely hesitant to take on any newcomers. The reason was that they didn't want any trouble from that person's birth family, and did not want to be held responsible for the child

Rather than agree with the superficial reliance on written consent, Priyababu emphasized that "consent" could only be understood by taking into account the often invisible relationships of care, kinship and economics that underlay aravani families, and their links with the families of their birth, their lovers and husbands, and the children they raised. In doing so, she denaturalized the link between "biology" and "happy families" and between "consent forms" and "truth." Documents could be *kavdi*, and the "true" location of coercion was located in relationships of care, trust, and networks of obligation and exchange.

The problem, in Priyababu's opinion, was that "outsiders" were producing all the documents for outsiders. She emphasized a different way of producing documents, not as instrumentalization but as self-actualization, and as art. She had first begun documenting the community as a folklorist, ethnographer and filmmaker. After returning to Chennai, she received a grant from the National Folklore Research Center to do research on the folklore of the thirunangai Community. She traveled the state documenting thirunangai folk life. Her research led her to make a documentary film with the support of the Folklife Institute in Chennai. One of the goals of her documentary was mainly to reach the general public, and to show them that "we are also like them." In this the two institutions or practices that she most wanted to demystify were the guru-cela system and the way the operation took place. She wanted to show the audience that these were not brutish, archaic practices, but embedded in cultural rules, customs and systems, sanctioned by religious traditions.

One reason for me understanding that project was that a lot of people have this image that all thirunangais do is beg and disturb people but they also have a family, they also have the guru-cela system, there are a lot of cultural customs within them. I needed to make this point to the public. We are also doing a lot of the very same things that you are all doing. We also as families, as groups, we also live this way.

In writing about the community, and in creating her film, Priyababu said that she modeled her writing on ethnographies and anthropology theses that she found in the library. In particular she was inspired by social historian Parasoor Padmavati's Ph.D. thesis about the peripatetic Narikuravar community in Chennai. She then used it as a model to write her own document for the folklife research project.

I read that book five times, and saw how an "ethnography" book must be, what are all the things it needs to include. I looked at the "Contents" page and we can then decide what comes under each sub-section, and then I made a decision about what were all the things I wanted to include about the aravani community. I marveled at the fact that it was an ordinary college student that had written it. But they had done a Ph.D. and I did not have that opportunity.

Although Priyababu was all too aware of the fact that access to institutional privilege and a PhD degree was one of the gateways to being able to write anthropological texts about aravanis. She received support from friends who were academics, that helped her mount obstacles to finishing her project. But one of the biggest things on her side, she emphasized, was the fact that she was an insider, a part of the community, and this gave her unique access. This enabled her to offer what she described as an unmediated, "real" experience in her documentary. Speaking about her

documentation of "the operation" and the ceremonies that followed it, she said (I have underlined the words she spoke in English):

There was no drama in this. I show a thirunangai before the operation, the rituals done in her house. It was all completely real. I followed one person for a whole year, as a folk. I was able to follow them.

Her experience with folklore and ethnography led her to appreciate auto-ethnography and creative non-fiction as genres by which to achieve social change. Based on the interviews she had conducted, she had written a semi-fictional autobiography based on a typical thirunangai life, called *Moondram Paalin Mugam* [The Face of the Third Sex] (2008). Priyababu had avoided writing in a straightforward autobiographical mode that would too closely resemble "the usual." Her book centered not only a fictional thirunangai character, but also the experience of the mother. "If it is just autobiographical, you only have one voice," she said. "This way I was able to also show the experience that a parent has when coming to accept their thirunangai child." By combining auto-ethnography and fiction, she was able to recreate "the usual" anthropological testimony, in a way that was creative and more expressive of herself as an artist and activist.

To honor the history of activism in Tamil Nadu, that had set the stage for the thirunangai movement, in 2012, with the support of the United Nations Development Program, she *The Social History of the Thirunangai Movement in Tamil Nadu* (2012). This book gave some historical idea about the early roots of the movement, and most importantly, rooted the Movement explicitly in a Tamil and Dravidian tradition of progressive thought around gender and sexuality, and ancient Tamil grammars and texts. Reframing the folksy religious figure of the "hijra" through community-authored ethnography and social science, and connecting it to a Tamil antiquity, produced a new figure that was Tamil Nadu's progressive answer to the archaic hijra of the North: the thirunangai.

2.8 Conclusion

I have tried to show in this chapter how the narrative that "hijras kidnap children" was, for my interlocutors in Chennai's transgender rights movement, neither a straightforward reference to a stock definition of "hijra" persons, to a concrete historical event of kidnapping, or to a specific surgical act. Using evaluations of kavdi (falsehood) and truth, surface and depth, they deferred the referents of the narrative, pointing to a variety of "deeper" concerns that contested the state of gender rights, economic justice and medical care in Tamil Nadu in the wake of neoliberalization and the globalization of transgender rights. These deeper concerns were expressed by combining models of sex that drew on multiple genealogies, ranging from the Harry Benjamin guidelines to colonial-era models of sodomy-as-habituation, to the "exposure model" of speech as a guarantor of truth. "Cutting off one's genitals" can have several meanings: it can indicate, as in the case of a hijra ideal, a practice of renunciation that confirms a prior commitment to an ascetic lifestyle; it can suggest, as in the case of the HIV/AIDS worker Mr. Madan's fears, a way for younger kotis to want to become more feminine; it can be framed as a violent mutilation; a fulfillment of desire long cherished. But my interest in this chapter is specifically about the way something about the world is made visible through this kind of exile

or break. It is a diagnosis and the affliction is not within oneself; it is equally an affliction of the world. In this process, it was not only "sex" that was mattered, but a kind of deeper idea of "truth" about the world, expressed as an urgent moral imperative. My interlocutors used the kidnapping narrative as a symptom through which to diagnose an affliction with the world and posit a way that it could be addressed through changes in kinship, surgical intervention, speech and other social practices.

While my research initially sought to explore the discursive construction of "kidnapping" and "hijra," I did not expect the way surgeries and biomedical interventions would be so closely intertwined with the circulation of the narrative. I have addressed primarily the competing representations of surgery in my interlocutors' texts and narratives, emphasizing the way that bodily practices such as a genital excision have radically underdetermined meanings and can be located by narrators in different temporal planes. Was a genital excision an act of violent mutilation or was it a fulfillment of a deep longing? Was it a way for young kotis to improve their earnings and partake in a glamorous, "cosmopolitan" lifestyle, like Mr. Madan and Mr. Karunan said? Was it material "proof" of one's prior commitment to an ascetic asexual life? Was it an act of restoration performed by the state or private hospitals upon deserving citizens? I have tried to trace the different models of sex and discourse that were implicit in my interlocutors' "transgender imaginaries." However, it is worth exploring in more depth how the narrative produced concrete effects upon specific bodies: Kanu's, those of the accused, the person subjected to a "reverse sex-change surgery," or the members of the Fact-finding report, it is necessary to conduct further fieldwork with psychiatrists, clinicians and those desiring surgery in order to understand both how the referent of the narrative was deferred, and how it paradoxically came to rest in very concrete and material ways, upon particular bodies, making them selectively visible in terms of caste, gender, sex, and perceived "modernity."

The final point I will make as I move into the next chapter is that the stock definition of hijras was itself a highly contested ethnographic object. It became, for my interlocutors in Chennai, a way to invoke an essentialist and culturalist notion of "Mumbai's hijras" against which they constructed Tamil Nadu's movement as a modern progressive iteration of transgender rights. The essentialist image of hijras that emanated from the Criminal Tribes literature was variously used as a symbolic resource for contemporary claims to thirunagai identity in Tamil Nadu. If I am to take seriously the claims my interlocutors made about the special case of the transgender rights movement in Tamil Nadu, and the resignification of transgender women in Chennai as *thirunagais*, then, I must also take seriously the force with which they asserted the feudal backwardness of the hijra.

In the following chapter I delve deeper into the way claims to thirunagai identity are made by activists in Tamil Nadu. While resignifying aspects of the "hijra" ideal are one aspect of thirunagai claims, these claims also locate themselves in a broader landscape of Tamil writing and linguistic activism. In the following chapter I examine some competing "thirunagai imaginaries," emphasizing the way they draw on hijra performance, international LGBT rights discourse, and Tamil conceptions of womanhood and virtue as constituted by language, in order to "matter" new kinds of bodies and subjects.

CHAPTER II: THIRUNANGAI IMAGINARIES

We are at a the "Transgender Well-Being" conference being held at Annamalai University, in Chidambaram, a town in central Tamil Nadu. Onstage, Laxmi Tripathi, the famous hijra activist from Mumbai, is speaking in a mix of English and Hindi.

"All of our people are hijras, not whatever that word is you use here... tiru-vankai? Tiru-makai? No, we are hijras. And all hijras understand Hindi."

Priyanka whispers to me in Tamil, "What did she say?" "Giggling, I tell her, "She is saying that you thirunangais only understand Hindi."

from my fieldnotes, October 2015

My first glimpse into the high stakes of separating hijra from thirunangai identity when, together with some of my colleagues and interlocutors, I attended a conference with the theme 'Transgender Well-Being' held by Annamalai University in Chidambaram, a town in central Tamil Nadu. The Central Government's University Grants Commission had, just the previous year, directed educational institutions across India to make their programs accessible to "third-gender" candidates, and Annamalai University had received a grant to open a Transgender Studies Center. The two chief guests at the conference was Laxmi Tripathi, the famous hijra activist from Mumbai, and Kalki Subramaniam, a thirunangai-identified activist from Tamil Nadu. Laxmi was famous for advocating for the inclusion of "hijra" as a distinct category both in the programs of the National AIDS Control Organization, as well as the Supreme Court directives from 2014 that affirmed transgender rights. Onstage at Annamalai University she spoke in English that slipped easily into Hindi. Addressing the professors and students at Annamalai University, she said that "hijra" was the correct word to use when addressing Tamil Nadu's transgender community, and "Hindi" was the correct language. Her assertion, and her deliberate mispronunciation of "thirunangai" (tiru- makai? Tiru vankai?) caused both confusion and anger amongst many of the thirunangai activists that I had come with, many of whom did not speak either English or Hindi. In their view, Laxmi's refusal to recognize or respect the autonomous claims of thirunangai identity was part of a broader tendency amongst North Indians to disregard the autonomy of Tamil culture as distinct from that of North India. Hindi was rarely spoken in Tamil Nadu and certainly not in connection with thirunangai identity politics, and this was what made me chuckle when Priyanka asked me to translate Laxmi's words. Priyanka, in Laxmi's eyes, would have been a "hijra that spoke Hindi," even though Priyanka herself lacked the fluency in Hindi to even understand Laxmi's assertion.

Kalki, who was the other chief guest at the conference, was quick to refute Laxmi's claims and to assert the autonomy of Tamil/thirunangais from Hindi/hijras. In an interview with me a couple of years later when she was visiting Berkeley, Kalki told me that thirunangai was a more modern word than either hijra or aravani, partly because it was secular and connected to a Tamil conception of womanhood, rather than a North Indian concept of "third-sex":

Aravani is a...religious word. Can a Christian or a Muslim use it? Thirunangai is more respectful and feminine. First, Narthaki's Tamil teacher coined it. Then Kalainar started using it, and then I started using it. Thirunangai has more of a ... gender thing to it... a nangai [young woman], a kanni [virgin], thiru [respected], it is like a kind of respectable woman, a woman that was respected. Not even third-sex but woman.

"Modern," in the sense Kalki used it, meant that it aligned both with contemporary "global" iterations of transgender identity, as well as with the pro-Tamil, secularist rationalist values of the Dravidian party that reigned in Tamil Nadu. Both hijra and aravani indexed Hindu ritual roles and festivals, and were at odds with Dravidian ideology (can a Christian or Muslim use it?) Kalki also objected to the way the terms hijra/aravani indexed a "third-sex" that was placed outside of male and female gender roles, rather than affirming thirunangais as a distinct kind of woman— a "nangai [young woman], a kanni [virgin]" addressed by the deferential term, "thiru [respected]" — altogether, in her words, "a kind of respectable woman."

As Kalki's description suggests, the "respectable womanhood" claimed by the thirunangai identity politics is constructed partly in terms of the ideology of the pro-Tamil, secular anti-caste Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu. Kalki emphasizes the Tamil roots of the word, connecting

it to her friend Narthaki's Tamil teacher and then to Kalainar, the Tamil poet and Chief Minister of the Dravidian Progressive Party (Dravida Munnetra Kazagam, or DMK), before saying that she herself uses it.

In this chapter I examine how activists in Tamil Nadu's transgender rights movement construct competing "thirunangai imaginaries" by drawing on multiple symbolic resources: (1) both Dravidianist and competing discourses that cast different visions of Tamil womanhood; (2) elements associated with the figure of the hijra that I described in the previous chapter, particularly the ideal of ascetic renunciation, the association between emasculation and verbal fluency, and embodiment through "exposing the wound"; and (3) the rhetoric of transnational movements in LGBT rights and transgender rights. I argue that "thirunangai" is not a "third-sex" that exists outside "mainstream" gender systems. Rather, the thirunangai movement offers one site at which to observe how different movements around caste, sex work, and reproductive labor construct "woman" in competing ways by invoking axes of body, fertility, language, caste, and kinship. As Kalki's says, all too clearly, thirunangai is "not third-sex" but a kind of woman. While scholarship on Tamil usage has all-too often presumed a gender binary, or else made the essentialist assumption that "woman" is the natural possession of cisgendered bodies, or of a single "Tamil woman," my chapter demonstrates that "woman" is not a singular entity, but is itself a highly contested construct and thirunangais are only one participant in this emerging debate.

I begin this chapter by offering an overview of the Dravidian movement, particularly focusing on how the movement's ideology invokes an ancient authentic Tamil identity by bringing together specific imaginaries around caste, gender, and what historian Sumathi Ramaswamy has called *tamilparru* or "Tamil devotion" (1997, 6). In the following sections I contrast three competing "thirunangai imaginaries." The first is from the political activism and poetry of Kalki Subramaniam, the thirunangai activist I quoted at the start. I argue that Kalki's poetry is an example of a "Dravidianist thirunangai imaginary" that combines genres from both Dravidian politics as well as elements associated with hijra practice to produce the thirunangai as a figure geared towards a Dravidian progressive intelligentsia and a global activist network. I focus especially on how Kalki resignifies elements iconically associated with hijra performance— the "cutting" of one's body, clapping and issuing verbal insults to shame the listener, and lifting one's skirt— in order to "matter" the body in a way that is somewhat different from the performative iteration that Butler describes in *Bodies that Matter* ([1993] 2011).

The second "thirunangai imaginary" is drawn from a column called "The World of Aravanis" that ran for a year in Dinathanthi (The Daily Wire), a newspaper that is, in a predominantly held stereotype, associated with a neoliterate working class public. In the "Dinathanthi imaginary," I argue, the thirunangai's ability to have "children without wombs" and "sex without procreation" produces a translocal type of "woman" that can knit together Tamil values with the cosmopolitan influences of "foreign countries."

The third "thirunangai imaginary" is called the "Thirunangai Joke." In this section, I describe how some of my colleagues at Mariyal, the HIV/AIDS prevention organization where I conducted my fieldwork, analyzed the Dinathanthi column. By characterizing the column as a "cinema story," recasting the protagonist not as a respectable thirunangai but a foolish koti, and retelling the story in a mix of Farsi and Tamil rather than "pure Tamil," participants offered an imaginary where the solemn gravity of "respectable womanhood" was denaturalized by exposing its artifice.

I conclude the chapter by suggesting that while academic debates have often viewed hijra and thirunangai practice as idiosyncratic, marginal and anomalous with respect to "normative" gender, "thirunangai imaginaries" actually demand that scholars have a more expansive, heterogenous, and de-essentialist notion of what "woman" looks like. It is only through such a broadened framework, I suggest, that one can understand the intersectional alliances that are forged in the present, such as why Dalit women's writing is often seen as belonging to the same genre as thirunangai writing, or why activists across India are debating rights related to surrogacy, sex work, and domestic work at the same time that they debate "transgender rights."

3.1 The Dravidian movement

In the opinion of Nicholas Dirks, the Dravidian movement had its roots in mid-19th century debates between Indologists and missionaries trying to characterize the religious and caste practices of Indians. Missionaries in India often had to contend with critics that asked why it was primarily people of "lower castes" that converted to Christianity, rather than the "high caste" Brahmins associated with classical Hinduism and Aryan identity. The critics expressed doubts about the sincerity of lower caste conversions: were they joining the church because they truly believed in Christ or just to escape their material oppression? In Dirks' account, the Dravidian movement had its roots in missionaries' responses to such critics. He places special emphasis on the missionary Robert Caldwell (1814-1891) who arrived in India in 1838 to work amongst the members of the Shanar community in Southern Tamil Nadu.⁴¹ Caldwell radically reversed the terms of the Indological argument, positing the "high antiquity" of a pure Tamil Dravidian culture untouched by the corrupting influence of Brahmins and Aryans from the North. Caldwell argued that Brahmins, possessing the mentality of conquerors and attached to inauthentic caste-bound practices of idolatry, could never be "honest believers." The Shanar's "primitive religion," by contrast made them "peculiarly free of prejudice and peculiarly accessible," making them more likely to be true followers of Christ than the hypocritical Brahmin invaders (2001, 139).

⁴¹ Dirks account in *Castes of Mind* has been criticized for according undue importance to the role of the colonial government, and for seeing the Dravidian movement merely as an "ironic reversal" of colonial categories (Dirks 2001, 144). Historian Thomas Trautmann, for example, showed that the "Dravidian proof" was made some three decades earlier by the scholars of the "Madras School of Orientalism" at the College of Fort St. George in Madras (qtd. in Bate 2009, 191 n9). Historian Sumathi Ramaswamy has also pointed out that Caldwell was in active competition with "native" philologists and grammarians writing on Tamil, such as Suryanarayan Sastri (1903), Seshagiri Sastri (1884) and Savaririyani (1900). Several of these latter scholars drew inspiration from German Romantic Nationalism as well as Muller's Indology to produce what Ramaswamy calls a heterogeneous "network of competing projects" rather than a singular Dravidian ideology (Ramaswamy 1997, 15). It is also fair to say that Dirks' account of the Dravidian movement is somewhat perfunctory: he devotes only a paragraph to the anti-caste, secularist, rationalist views of influential Dravidianist leader E.V.R Ramasamy, before dismissing Dravidianism itself as a "progressive [but] xenophobic" movement that substituted "Brahmans for Britons, Aryanism for modernity, Sanskrit and Hindi for English, and northern India for Europe" (Dirks 2001, 144-5). Nevertheless, for the purposes of my argument here, Dirks' account is sufficiently comprehensive in its account of the secular anti-Hindu, anti-caste ideological currents that are a defining feature of the Dravidian movement. Perhaps Dirks' characterization of Caldwell's grammar as "the most influential of all European constructions of South Indian culture and civilization" (ibid.) is an overstatement, but it is nonetheless the case that Caldwell is accorded a great deal of importance in Tamil Nadu today. Indeed, anthropologist Bernard Bate conducting fieldwork in Madurai in the 1990s writes that he met several "politicians from local to state levels speaking on street-corner stages" that would praise the work of "Kaldvel Durai (Caldwell Sahib)" (Bate 2009, 191n9).

Caldwell's intervention was couched in debates in the fields of historical linguistics and philology, and turned crucially on studies of Tamil and Sanskrit. In the 1840s and 50s, influential Indologists such as William Jones and Max Muller posited racial and genealogical links between Hindu Brahmins and the "Aryan" races of Europe and Persia. The "Aryan Invasion Theory" posited that Brahmins from North India had colonized the primitive Dravidian races of the South. Caldwell reversed the terms of this narrative, positing that Dravidian and Tamil culture possessed an antiquity and authenticity that made it resilient to the corrupting influence of Sanskrit. In his *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian and South Indian Family of Languages* (1856) he made his argument through a comparison of Tamil and Sanskrit words. While Sanskrit words had penetrated the language pertaining to higher learning, religion and government, Tamil remained the authentic language of the "folk," containing the "ordinary facts of life, the face of nature, [and] the wants, feelings, and duties of a rude and almost savage people" (ibid., 138).

By the early twentieth century, various strands of pro-Tamil activism had come together to produce what has been variously called a movement for "Tamil devotion" (Ramaswamy 1997, 6), Dravidian neoclassicism (Bate 2009, 183), and Tamil Revivalism (Irschick 1986). As Sumathi Ramaswamy notes, "Tamil devotion" was not a singular "Dravidian movement" but encompassed multiple competing and overlapping ideological projects (1997, 23-4). These included Neo-Saivite currents that invoked Tamil's ability to address the gods; the "rediscovery" of Tamil "Sangam literature" from the early centuries BCE to dispute the antiquity of Sanskrit; a budding nationalist movement that endorsed the integration of Tamil Nadu into the family of "Mother India," as well as the Dravidian projects (ibid., 25-78). These heterogeneous projects underlay the formation of the Justice Party (1917) founded by the anti-caste, secular, rationalist and pro-women ideas of the iconoclastic leader E.V. Ramasamy (1879 - 1973). The two most prominent political parties in Tamil Nadu today, the Dravida Munnetra Kazagam or Dravidian Progressive Party (hereafter cited as DMK), and its breakaway, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazagam or All India Anna Dravidian Progressive Party (hereafter cited as AIADMK), are both outcrops of E.V. Ramasamy's pioneering Dravidian ideology.

The emphasis laid by thirunangai activists upon the "pure Tamil roots" of the term, its distinction from Hindi-speaking hijra culture, and its connection to the progressive secular ideologies of the DMK, draw upon ideological currents within the Dravidian movement. By making the claim that the thirunangai is a type of woman, and a Tamil-speaking woman in particular, the thirunangai movement involves efforts to resignify the way Tamil usage is imagined in relation to gender. The example of thirunangai activism forces us to complicate existing work on the relationship between Tamil usage and gender, making room for a multiplicity of gendered positions rather than a singular imagining of a Tamil "woman" or "man." Historian Sumathi Ramaswamy has argued that the "Tamil devotion" movements from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century primarily represented Tamil through tropes related to motherhood: as *Tamilttay* (mother Tamil), *taymoli* (mother tongue), *tayppal* (mother's milk), or simply *tay* (mother) (1997, 125). Examining the writings of pro-Tamil activists and poets in the early twentieth century, particularly in the context of protests against the institutionalization of Hindi in Madras colleges, Ramaswamy argues that "mother Tamil" emerges in three ways: as a benevolent goddess that must be saved by the Tamil male devotee (ibid., 87-90); as a pure, virginal and benevolent mother whose womb and breasts produce courageous Tamil sons (ibid., 97); and as a *kanni* (virgin) Tamil, a chaste maiden with lush beauty that captivates the Tamil male devotee (ibid., 114).

Ramaswamy argues that these competing representations create a "triangle of desire" where the Tamil man is split between his longing for Tamil as a beautiful chaste maiden and his devotion to Tamil as a desexualized mother. Since it is impossible to imagine the mother as erotic, Ramaswamy argues, the problem is solved by the figuration of Tamil wives as "surrogates" or proxies for mother Tamil. Ramaswamy argues that possessing the sanctity of mothers but still being sexually available to the Tamil man, these surrogate Mother Tamils are entrusted with the reproduction of Tamil sons, language, and civilization (ibid., 118). Ultimately, depictions of Tamil as goddess and maiden are both subsumed to a hegemonic representation of "mother Tamil" as either a "despiritualized, desexualized" mother (ibid., 121) or as a conventional Tamil wife, making "mother Tamil" "very much a figment of the patriarchal imaginations in colonial and postcolonial India" (ibid., 80).

Ramaswamy's argument is a valuable corrective to accounts that either ignore the role of gender in Tamil revivalist movements, or subsume their heterogeneity under the singular term "Dravidian movement." Her choice to use the term "Tamil devotion" and to characterize its discourses as "competing projects" rather than a singular hegemonic "Dravidian" model is likewise useful because it allows for a multiplicity of contested imaginings. Her characterization of Mother Tamil has been especially productive in generating scholarship that examines how speakers of Tamil position themselves with respect to a Dravidian ideal. As Ramaswamy writes, despite attempts to impose an ideal of a Dravidian land filled with Tamil speakers, the DMK had to contend with practical difficulties, for example the fact that the Dravidian nation so imagined comprised many non-Tamil speakers, such as those that spoke Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam, and, conversely, that not all Tamil speakers did not imagine themselves as part of a Dravidian polity (ibid., 64).

In the past decade, historians and anthropologists of Tamil have further explored how fraught and heterogenous is the actual space of practice of Tamil speaking and writing. Anthropologist Bernard Bate has argued that new forms of Dravidian political oratory, despite their populist claims, presupposed audiences and performers that belonged to a progressive Dravidianist intelligentsia. He shows, moreover, that these norms were navigated in diverse ways by different orators, where the gendered ideal did not always map onto practice. For example, he shows that despite political oratory being ideally associated with a male speaker, one of his female interlocutors, Kavitha, uses a trope of "frenzied love" when praising the chief minister "almost as if she were talking of a lover or a god," thus using the register in a way that her male counterparts could not do (2009, 155). Anthropologist Francis Cody studies the literacy projects advanced by the Arivoli Iyakkam, a group with Dravidianist and Marxist underpinnings. He shows how their script-based language ideology was continually confronted with competing registers such as the Cutchery Tamil based on oral praise genres (2013, 192), producing "novel forms in the course of activism" (ibid., 110). In some of his recent work, anthropologist Constantine Nakassis' has specifically focused on how "womanhood" and Tamil usage are mutually constituted. His article "A Tamil-speaking Heroine" argues that while male television hosts speaking in a high Dravidian registers continually mock Tamil film heroines for their comical ineptitude while speaking Tamil, the latter's "stigmatic exteriority" serves as a crucial other to the chaste "putatively authentic Tamil woman who refuses to appear on the screen" (2015, 170). These examples suggest not only the diversity of Tamil registers that are continually contesting the supposed centrality of Dravidian Tamil, but also the variety of gendered positions that can be asserted by combining Dravidian "pure Tamil" (centamil) with other registers and

social practices. It is true, as Ramaswamy writes, that Tamil attracts "multiple, even contrary, imaginings" (1997, 22), and these imaginings are not oriented solely around the expression of Tamil devotion or the reproduction of the "mother Tamil." Contestations over how thirunangais use— and should use— Tamil belong in the realm of these broader contestations of gendered, caste-based, and linguistic stances that make claims upon how, and in whose wombs, Tamil is reproduced. Thirunangai identity politics and the feminist activist circles within which it is located demonstrate that Tamil womanhood is not tied conclusively to one singular idea of a goddess, a caste-bound family, an eroticized virgin, or a benevolent mother, although these might be the axes along which claims are advanced and contested.

3.1.1 Thirunangai literature and Tamil feminist writing circles

In 2012, when I was conducting fieldwork in Chennai, I received an invitation to an "LGBT Writing Workshop" organized by Priyababu, a writer and ethnographer within the thirunangai community. The workshop aimed at promoting the rights of sexual minorities through creative writing and literary production. The workshop featured speakers and writers from the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers and Artists Association and other leftist circles in Chennai. Participants were given writing exercises, samples of work by other thirunangais, and opportunities to share their own writing for feedback.

Priyababu's workshop was my first introduction to how thirunangais writers have become part of what historian Venkatachalapathy has called the boom in Tamil publishing that occurred during the 1990s with the introduction of offset printing, digital typesetting, and the emergence of publishing houses and media houses all over Tamil Nadu. With the emergence of an international Tamil diaspora after the Sri Lankan War, an unprecedented amount of capital was infused into Tamil publishing, prompting the emergence of several experimental publishing houses and an "unleashing of fresh talent from hitherto marginal groups" (Venkatachalapathy 2012, 253). Many thirunangai writers began writing as part of feminist dalit writers' circles and Tamil progressive literary workshops in the 1990s, and thirunangai-based writing is contained within a broader genre of progressive Tamil literature oriented towards a left-leaning intelligentsia.

The broadness of this "thirunangai imaginary" was made clear to me when I went to a bookstore to purchase the books that Priyababu had recommended to workshop participants. After handing me the books I had listed, all of which were by thirunangai authors, the shop owner said he could give me some more books "like this." To my pile he added three feminist autobiographies by women writing from various "marginal" locations: Nalini Jameela's *Autobiography of a Sex Worker* ([2005] 2007), Sister Jesme's *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun* (2009), and Vinaya's *Autobiography of a female police officer* (2010). The "thirunangai" inhabits a broader imaginary where Tamil womanhood is contested. Thirunangai Kalki's book of poems, *Kuri Aruttēn* (2014) belongs to this broader literary movement.

3.2 The "Dravidianist thirunangai imaginary"

Kalki grew up in Pollachi, a town in central Tamil Nadu, located close to Coimbatore. She described herself to me as having grown up in a middle-class family that was relatively accepting of her gender identity. She attended a boarding school in the hill station of Kodaikanal, after

which she completed a Masters degree in journalism. Although she had been introduced to the thirunangai community at the age of 13 and had a guru whom she cared for very much, she did not identify with "hijra" culture and considered the orthodox jamaat to be an archaic institution that fit better with the culture of Mumbai than the progressiveness of Tamil Nadu. "I did not want to be influenced by the hijra community," she told me. "With the begging and sex work and the way gurus and celas treat each other, it is like organized crime." While she had a guru and was close to her gurubais (sisters), she refused to take on celas of her own.

Kalki had begun her activist work in the mid to late 2000s and therefore represented a new generation of activists, relatively independent of the HIV/AIDS prevention organizations that had been the training ground for an older generation of activists such as Priyababu. While Kalki acknowledged the "immense" impact of the HIV/AIDS movement as a forerunner of Tamil Nadu's thirunangai movement, it was time now to address issues beyond just sexual health, such as family acceptance, discrimination and employment. Like Priyababu, she felt that literature, art, and films could make a huge difference in the movement. While HIV/AIDS work was about seeking money from international agencies, art was "a universal language that [is] not about earning money... it's about my voice." She considered it a point of pride that her organization, Sahodari Foundation, refused to take funds from public health organizations, relying instead on private funders both from the United States and from within India.

Kalki's book, *Kuri Aruttēn* (Thirunangai Kalki Subramaniam 2014). was a collection of poetry written in "pure Tamil" or centamil, the formal register associated with Dravidian political oratory and literature. Her choice to use this register reflected her alignment with the ideals of E.V. Ramasamy, the founder of the DMK party. Unlike the term "hijra" which drew upon the idea of a "third-sex" and drew a connection to Hindu epics, she favored the secular connotations of the term thirunangai.

The was split into three parts. The poems in Part 1 drew the most on Dravidian political imaginary, combining it with elements associated with the hijra ideral, specifically the connection between "cutting" and the renunciation of worldly matters, and the paradoxical way that "cutting off the mark" enabled a kind of linguistic freedom that resulted in new and creative uses of Tamil. In doing so, she invoked a distinct model of how language constituted bodies and ethical horizons, and offered a specific mode of thirunangai activism. Here I reproduce my translation of her title poem, followed by an analysis of the elements within the poem, as well as some analysis of how Kalki herself explained her linguistic choices and how those were interpreted by Palanibarathi, a Tamil lyricist that authored the foreword.

3.2.1 Kuri Aruttēn

<p>It is no great penance I performed By cutting off the kuri Being drenched in blood Transcending death itself I became a woman</p>	<p><i>Mātavam etum</i> Penance any</p> <p><i>Seyyavillai nān</i> Did.not.do I</p> <p><i>Kuri aruttu</i> Mark/symbol/genitals/grammatical object having.cut</p> <p><i>Kurutiyil nanaintu</i> In.blood having.been.drenched</p> <p><i>Maraṇam kaṭantu</i> Death having.transcended</p> <p><i>Mangaiyānēn.</i> Woman.I.became</p>	<p>1</p> <p>2</p> <p>3</p> <p>4</p> <p>5</p> <p>6</p>
<p>You don't have a womb You are not a woman You said. Good.</p>	<p><i>Karuvarai unakillai</i> Womb you.don't.have</p> <p><i>Nī peṇṇillai</i> You woman.are.not</p> <p><i>Enṛkaḷ</i> You said.</p> <p><i>Nallatu.</i> Good.</p>	<p>7</p> <p>8</p> <p>9</p> <p>10</p>

By cutting off your maleness You have killed your lineage. You are a solitary tree With no roots. The earth will hold Only so much of you. You said. Good.	<i>Āṇmayai</i> Maleness	11
	<i>Arutterintatāl</i> Because.of.having.cut	12
	<i>Santikku</i> For.heirs	13
	<i>Samāti kattiya</i> Renunciate/ascetic bound/tied	15
	<i>Pattuppōṇa</i> Affected.by	16
	<i>Orrai maram nī,</i> Solitary tree you	17
	<i>viḷutukaḷ illai</i> Roots are.not.there	18
	<i>Unakku</i> For.you	19
	<i>Vērkaḷ</i> Roots	20
	<i>Uḷḷavarai maṭṭumē</i> Are.there.inside - only	21
	<i>Pūmi unṇai tānkum</i> Earth you will.bear	22
	<i>Enrīrkaḷ.</i> You.said	23
	<i>Nallatu.</i> Good.	24

But the tree you have sown With your waste Your fanaticism about caste	<i>Nīnkaḷ kaḷikkum</i> You excrete	25
Your fanaticism about religion, Your waste Has made her womb a wasteland I don't want it.	<i>Eccaṅkaḷai,</i> The remainders.wastes.participles	26
	<i>Cāti veriyum</i> Caste fanaticism.and	27
	<i>Mataveriyum</i> Religious.fanaticism.and	28
	<i>Koṅṭu nīnkaḷ</i> Having you	29
	<i>Viruṭṭcamākka</i> A.tree.making	30
	<i>Vitaiṭṭōṭṭa</i> Seed.sown	31
	<i>Unkaḷ miccankaḷai</i> Your leftovers	32
	<i>Cicuvāka cumakkaṟa</i> Fetus bearing	33
	<i>Karuvaṟai</i> Womb	34
	<i>Eṇakku vēṇṭām.</i> I don't.want	35

<p>Having borne the waste of your oppressive society her womb has become a wasteland. Poor thing.</p>	<p><i>Uñkaḷ</i> Your</p>	36
	<p><i>Ēruttālyu</i> Inequality</p>	37
	<p><i>Eccañkaḷai</i> The.wastes/remainers/grammatical participles</p>	38
	<p><i>Sumantatāl</i> Having.borne.because.of</p>	39
	<p><i>Pāvam</i> Pity</p>	40
	<p><i>Avaḷ karuvarai</i> Her womb</p>	41
	<p><i>Kaḷivarai āṇatu</i> Bathroom has.become</p>	42

<p>Thank goodness I am not a woman by birth. Your refusal to recognize me Is precisely what Has set me free.</p>	<p><i>Nallavēlai</i> Good.fortune</p> <p><i>Pirappāl</i> By.birth</p> <p><i>Nān peṇṇillai</i> I woman.am.not</p> <p><i>Ennai peṇṇāka</i> Me as.a.woman</p> <p><i>Nīṅkaḷ</i> You</p> <p><i>Ērka maruttatē</i> Accept having.refused</p> <p><i>Enakkukkiṭaitta viṭutalai</i> For.me.have.gotten freedom</p>	<p>43</p> <p>44</p> <p>45</p> <p>46</p> <p>47</p> <p>48</p> <p>49</p>
<p>I do not speak The grammar you have allotted For womanhood.</p>	<p><i>Peṇṇmaikku</i> For.womanhood</p> <p><i>Nīṅkaḷ vakuttuḷḷa</i> You have.circumscribed</p> <p><i>Aṭimai ilakkaṇaṅkaḷai</i> Oppressive those.grammars</p> <p><i>Nān vācippatillai</i> I read.aloud.do.not</p>	<p>50</p> <p>51</p> <p>52</p> <p>53</p>

<p>You call me a mistake of nature. By all means, do so. Only I know who I am.</p>	<p><i>Ennai iyarkayin piḷai</i> Me.as nature's mistake</p> <p><i>Enru tārālamāi</i> That freely</p> <p><i>Collikkoḷḷuṅkaḷ</i> Say.you</p> <p><i>Nān yār enpatai</i> I who that.is</p> <p><i>Nāné arivēn</i> I.only know</p>	<p>54</p> <p>55</p> <p>56</p> <p>57</p> <p>58</p>
<p>Can you be like those of us That have forgotten religion, Renounced caste, To live together?</p>	<p><i>Matam marantu</i> Religion having.forgotten</p> <p><i>Cāti turantu</i> Caste having.renounced</p> <p><i>Marukkappaṭṭavarkaḷ</i> Having.renounced.those.that.have</p> <p><i>Onru kūṭi</i> As.one gather</p> <p><i>Vāḷum vāḷkkayai</i> Living those.lives</p> <p><i>Vāḷa muṭiyumā</i> Live is.possible</p> <p><i>Uṅkaḷāḷ?</i> By.you?</p>	<p>59</p> <p>60</p> <p>61</p> <p>62</p> <p>63</p> <p>64</p> <p>65</p>

Can you be a mother Without bearing children?	<i>Karuvil</i> In.fetus	66
	<i>Cumakkāmalēyē</i> Having.been.borne.without	67
	<i>Tāyāka muṭiyumā</i> Mother.become is.possible	68
	<i>Uñkaḷāḷ?</i> By.you?	69
Can you become a daughter, Without a breast That gave you nourishment? I can.	<i>Mārmuṭṭi paciyārāmalēyē</i> Breast.suckle hunger.satisfy.without	70
	<i>Makaḷāka muṭiyumā</i> Daughter.become is.possible	71
	<i>Uñkaḷāḷ?</i> By.you?	72
	<i>Ennāl muṭiyum</i> By.me is.possible	73
Cut off the kuri Of your patriarchy. Only then Will you know who you are.	<i>Uñkaḷin āṇattikka</i> Your patriarchal	74
	<i>Kuṛiyai aruttukoḷḷuñkaḷ</i> Mark/symbol/genital/grammatical object cut.your	75
	<i>Nīñkaḷ yār enpatai</i> You who that.is	76
	<i>Appōtu</i> Then	77
	<i>Nīñkaḷ arivīrkaḷ</i> You will.know	78

Go on. Tell me now That I am not a woman.	<i>Piraku colluṅkaḷ</i> Then say.you <i>Nān peṅṅillai enru.</i> I woman.am.not that	79 80
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3.2.2 Writing in "pure Tamil"

Kalki's poem is written in the register of "stage Tamil" (medaitamil) or "pure Tamil" (centamil), both forms of what anthropologist Bernard Bate has called the "Dravidian oratory" or "Dravidian neoclassicism" that arose in the second half of the twentieth century (2009, 183). Bate characterizes Dravidian oratory as a "bricolage" that combines forms of praise poetry associated with precolonial cultures of kingly worship and patronage; archaized phrasings drawn from ancient Tamil literature; and a Western model of "rhetoric" based upon British and American parliamentary speech, Christian sermons, and classical orators such as Cicero (ibid., 44). The "modernity" of Dravidian oratory, Bates writes, is evinced by the way it reverses the directionality of older praise genres. Unlike older forms where it is typically a devotee singing the praises of a king or god, Dravidian oratory typically takes the form of a leader addressing their people, while explicitly claiming their own authorship by using the first-person (ibid., 39-41). Kalki's poem is "modern" in the sense described by Bate, containing explicit self-reference and framed as an exhortation to a community of peers.

But unlike the prototypical Dravidian speeches which feature politicians addressing their subjects as "siblings" drawn together in their joint worship of Tamil, Kalki's poem is framed as a hostile confrontation between a thirunangai speaker and a community of male listeners. Her exhortation does not unite them in a joint purpose, such as the worship of Tamil or a call to war. It is issued as a challenge and the challenge revolves around a sacrifice that Kalki has made, that she dares her male listener to make: namely, the cutting of the kuri, the cutting of the mark.

3.2.3 Cutting off the kuri

The very title of Kalki's book: *Kuri Aruttēn*, brings together multiple meanings of "kuri" into a relationship of contiguity or metonymy. The phrase is what in Tamil grammar is called *ākupeyar*: when one thing takes on the name of another by virtue of a historical relationship that is transformed into an immanent quality. Anthropologist Bernard Bate describes akupeyar as "a tropology that favours contiguity or indexicality," transferring the qualities of one object to another by sharing its name" (2009, 98). In the case of Kalki's title, there are four meanings of "kuri" that are combined. Kuri can mean a physical mark, such as a scuff mark or a mark made with a pencil. The quality of a "mark" is transferred to the genital organs of a person, in this case the penis, which becomes a physical mark of maleness. Kuri can also mean a symbol, such as a signet of a king, thus the physical/genital marks becomes combined with the sense of patriarchal power, and the power to produce lineage. Lastly, in Tamil grammar, a phrase can be split into the "kuri" and the "eccam" where the kuri is the noun or object that is modified by the "eccam" or participle. To remove the kuri is also to remove the point of something, or the object of

something, leaving only a useless remainder in its place. Kalki draws upon all these meanings when she says "kuri aruttēn": "I cut off the kuri" (line 3). Later in the poem she further invokes the grammatical meaning of kuri when she says "I don't want/the *eccam* (residue) you produce" (lines 25-35). "Eccam" is a grammatical category indicating the participial portion of a phrase, as opposed to the "kuri" or the object. Derivative meanings of *eccam* are bodily waste or saliva. By characterising herself as the possessor of the "kuri" and characterising the male listener's families as inconsequential participial residuum, linked metonymically to "saliva" "waste" and "excrement," the poem performs the exchange of potency and impotency that Reddy has described as a defining element of the idealized hijra performance. Kalki's "kuri" becomes a source of universal fertility by her act of "cutting," and her male listener is characterized as an "eccam" a mere participle or bodily residue, useless without the object, or "point" of the sentence.

Kalki's title offers a provocative way to think about how an immanent relationship between body and person is claimed through language. Bate and philologist A.K. Ramanujam's characterize "akupeyar" or metonymy as a "master trope" in Tamil grammar (Bate 2009, 98). Akupeyar— literally, a "transformed word" (ibid., 102)— where the name of one thing becomes the name of another thing by virtue of historical contact that becomes an immanent quality. Bate gives the example of the sentence "pavai vanthal": my "beloved comes." "Pavai" means the pupil of one's eye, but since the pupil of one's eye tends to rest on one's beloved, pavai has "become" the name of "beloved." The relationship between the pupil of one's eye, and "beloved" in this instance, Bate suggests, is not metaphorical but something more akin to contiguity or metonymy, where an immanent relationship between the pupil and the beloved has been created in the creation of the aku-peyar (ibid., 105-7). Bate argues that aku-peyar points to a special onotological universe where language materializes social relationships in a different way than "Western rhetoric." In devotional models of kingly praise found in ancient Tamil oral praise poetry, for example, Bate argues that "to speak is real material action," and that "unlike Western conceptions of rhetoric, Tamil does not separate speaking from doing" (ibid., 52). Over the twentieth century, Bate suggests, these older genres of praise poetry were combined with "Western" models that separate rhetoric from action to produce Dravidian political oratory: "a Western model of discursive interaction with a decidedly Indian soul" (ibid., 48). Bate's description might at first glance seem somewhat essentialist, positing an absolute distinction between "Western" and "Indian" ontologies of language, for example, or suggesting that Tamil speakers cannot distinguish between symbolic and material connections. But Bate is careful to qualify his claims: "without slipping into a "naive Whorfianism," he says, it is still productive to explore the category of akupeyar (ibid., 98). Tamil grammarians, moreover, clearly distinguish akupeyar from similie (alankaram, or adornment). In so far as akupeyar suggests a mode of signification that is both historical and immanent, where historical usage slides into or "becomes" and immanent quality, it offers some insights into what performativity might mean, and how "bodies are mattered" through a process of metonymy rather than metaphor, in a Tamil context.

3.2.4 Different actions performed by “cutting the kuṛi”

English	Tamil	Lines
Cutting the kuri	<i>Kuṛi aruttu</i>	3
Cutting the mark of patriarchy	<i>Āṇātikka kuṛiyai aruttu</i>	74-75
Cutting and flinging away maleness	<i>Āṇmayai arutteṛintu</i>	11-12
Transcending death	<i>Maraṇam kaṭantu</i>	5
Bathing in blood	<i>Kurutiyil nanaintu</i>	4
Binding to an ascetic life	<i>Samāti katti</i>	15
Forgetting religion	<i>Matam maṛantu</i>	59
Renouncing caste	<i>Cāti tuṛantu</i>	60
Living as one	<i>Oṇṇu kūṭi vāṇtu</i>	62-63
Becoming a mother without bearing children	<i>Karuvil cumakkāmalēyē tāyāki</i>	66-68
Becoming a daughter without having suckled on a breast	<i>Mārmuṭṭi paciyaṛāmalēyē makaḷāki</i>	70-71
Not speaking your oppressive “women’s grammar”	<i>Peṇmayin aṭimai ilakkaṇaṅkaḷai vāsikkātatu</i>	50-53

Kalki frames the "cutting" in two ways. On the one hand, the cutting involves physical pain and emotional courage: "Being soaked in blood/transcending death itself/I became a woman (mangai)" (lines 1-6). Yet, although the operation inaugurated a new birth, it is important to note that her moral fortitude and courage preceded the operation, and was not conferred by it. Thus she describes the ease with which this experience was undertaken by her, it "was not great penance," in her words, she already possessed the courage and moral fortitude required to undergo such an excision, unlike the male readers that cannot bear to "cut off the mark of their patriarchy."

The oscillation between a prior state of moral fortitude, and a new moral life inaugurated by the operation, has been documented by anthropologists of hijra communities. Gayatri Reddy notes in her research with hijra communities in Hyderabad that many senior hijras explained that "the excision of [the penis] merely underscores an ontologically prior asexuality" where one possessed the disposition of a renouncer, even before undergoing the physical operation (2006, 40). The pain and near-death experience of the operation does not confer moral strength but confirms it.

Kalki's poem draws upon this ambivalent relationship between moral fortitude and the operation, maintaining an ambiguity about whether the operation is a physical act that must be undertaken or whether it is a signifier of another prior sacrifice, like cutting oneself off from the impulse to reproduce lineage. The trope of renunciation however, is reframed to fit both the

ideals of the Dravidian philosophies as well as the tropes associated with the international discourse of transgender rights and identity. The act of renunciation is associated not directly with an idea of committing to a goddess or to a group ascetic ideal but to a radical insight about oneself: "Only I/ know who I am" (lines 57-58). The reference to the "self" recalls the language of the "Self-Respect Movement" that preceded the establishment of the Dravidian party, and its ideology of "stripping" away casteism to reveal a "true" Tamil self. The trope also recalls the language of transgender rights more globally, which envisions "transgender identity" not as a renunciation that commits one to an idealized ascetic lifestyle associated with a distinct culture (like that of hijras), but as a private "inner" psychic subjectivity known only to the individual and its consequent affirmation by a surgical act.

3.2.5 Cutting produces a new form of kinship

The next theme running through Kalki's poem is a contestation between different kinds of families, articulated explicitly as "caste-bound" and "casteless." As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the association of "hijras" with "impotence" was a precipitate of several historical currents and discourses. Especially influential amongst these was the ideology underpinning the Criminal Tribes Act, and its dichotomy between deviant families based on "kidnapping" and those based on legitimate "biological" kinship. Kalki's figuration of families opposes this "kidnapping" narrative, saying the biological family is a caste-bound prison and that freedom is promised by joining the *jamat*.

Kalki's imagined "freedom," however, is not oriented around devotion to a goddess but around a secular and anti-caste ideal that aligns with the philosophies of the Dravidian movement: "Can you be like those of us/that have forgotten religion/ renounced caste/ to live together?" (lines 59-65). Kalki's choice of family, as portrayed in the poem, moreover, is not just a fulfillment of her personal happiness or identity. It is an act that has performative power, both exposing the infertility of the conventional male-dominated family, and also creatively inaugurating a new kind of society, free of caste and religion.

The performative power of Kalki's choice recalls the iconic gesture associated with hijra identity: that of "lifting one's skirts" to expose the proof of one's own impotence, thereby paradoxically conferring impotence upon the listener. Gayatri Reddy shares that many of her informants explained this transformation of asexuality/impotence to procreative potential by invoking religious myths, for example a myth where Lord Shiva, the renouncer, cuts off his male organ throws it on the ground, producing rain. The organ "becomes a source of universal fertility as soon as it has ceased to be a source of individual fertility" (O Flaherty 1973, 135, cited in Reddy 2006, 97). In Kalki's poem, similarly, the gesture of cutting leads not to an abject state of kinlessness where an kidnapped boy is made abject by castration. The gesture of cutting becomes a source of promise that can produce a new world. The utopian features of this world align with the ideals of the Dravidian movement, specifically the philosophies of E.V. Ramasamy, where families can be without caste, and where women are no longer oppressed. The idea that an individual act of will can inaugurate a world of social justice arguably also aligns with international discourses of LGBT rights, where social justice is considered to be an outcome of virtuous individuals making better choices to be more civil to one another.

Kalki's choice to write the poem in "pure Tamil" as well as her explicit reference to a "women's grammar" that she "refuses to speak," reflect her attempts to create an alternate

relationship between Tamil use and gender. The highly-valued stylized Dravidian register of Tamil is associated primarily with male speakers. Kalki reappropriates the Dravidian register by drawing upon a longstanding associations of hijras with a kind of verbal license and freedom.

As anthropologists Kira Hall and Gayatri Reddy have shown, the idealized hijra identity is indexed by a distinctive performance repertoire, featuring high pitched voice, increased volume, elongated final vowels, nasalization, special exclamations, and the use of intimate second-person pronouns and verb forms (Hall 2005, 133-4). The idealized performance also frequently features sexual insult and innuendo, a mixture of Farsi and Hindi words, and a flat-palmed clap, all of which suggest a confrontation between speaker and listener, where one is challenged to show "proof" of their potency or unless they want their own impotence revealed.

Hall writes that a key aspect of why hijra performances are effective is because they are "linguistically troubling," utilizing insult and innuendo to question the maleness of the listener (438). One of Hall's interlocutors Sulekha also characterizes hijra curses and insults as a kind of "cutting" or *kaṭnā*— to "cut someone down to size" (ibid., 447). In light of these metapragmatic frameworks, Kalki's invocation in *Kuri Aruttēn* of "cutting" has multilayered meanings: by cutting her own body, and then citing the cut through an act of verbal exposure, Kalki "cuts" the male listener down to size, exposing their hypocrisy in the process. Kalki is addressing a male reader that we presume is capable of response, and framed as a set of questions and answers: "I am a mistake of nature/you say./By all means, do so." The question-and-answer format replicates the form of an idealized hijra performance, where the male audience must respond, either by paying up or by being shamed into silence.

3.2.6 The women that cut

The last theme, and perhaps the most important for my argument, is Kalki's assertion that the thirunangai is not a "third sex" but a kind of *woman*. Womanhood is framed through tropes pertaining to flesh and blood, breasts and uterus, in a way that fits nicely with Sumathi Ramaswamy's observation that discourses of "mother Tamil" often focus on the "somatic indexing" of the Tamil mother's fertile body (1997, 97). But whereas in Ramaswamy's argument, the Tamil wives become "surrogate mother Tamils" entrusted with reproducing the Tamil family and culture, Kalki reimagine the Tamil mother's womb as a space of death and decay, where Tamil goes not to live but to die. It is Tamil men that are to blame for the degeneration of their wives' wombs, she writes: "the child born/ of your filthy excess/has made her sanctum/a wateleand/I don't want it." It is not the "mother Tamils" Ramaswamy writes about, lushly beautiful with breasts and wombs, that hold the future promise of a new society. In Kalki's vision it is the adoptive families created by "mothers" that don't bear children, and "women" that don't have breasts, women born not to typically patriarchal families, women created through a painful act of physical and spiritual renunciation, the thirunangai— that holds the promise of this future.

Kalki's "cut" expresses one claim to womanhood amongst many circulating within Tamil feminist literary circles. Her "thirunangai imaginary" is as example of a site where the "mother Tamil" ideal described by Ramaswamy turns out to be splintered, contingent, and highly contested. In the introduction to Kalki's collection, Palanibarathi, a writer and lyricist, compares Kalki to female saints and rebels both within Tamil Nadu and outside. These include Kannagi, protagonist of the Tamil epic *Silappathigaram* (100-300 AD), the 8th century Vaishnavite poet and devotee Andal; Isaipriya, a Sri Lankan Tamil activist murdered by the Sinhalese army; and

From Sharmila, the activist fighting for the secession of India's Northeastern states from the union of India. These women have in common the way their struggle and renunciation left marks on their body. I offer below my translation of this section from Palanibarathi's introduction:

<i>Āṇṭaḷ</i>	<i>taṅ</i>	<i>mulaikaḷai</i>	<i>vēr-ōṭu</i>	<i>piṭuṅkiyerintu</i>	
Andal	her	breasts	root.with	grab.flung.and	1
<i>Kaṇṇaṇiṭam</i>		<i>kātal</i>	<i>vēṇṭiyatai</i>	<i>pōla</i>	
Kannan.towards		love	requested	like.that	2
Like Andal who ripped her breasts out and flung them at Kannan, demanding his love.					
<i>Kaṇṇaki</i>	<i>taṅ</i>	<i>mulaiyai</i>	<i>tirukiyerintu</i>		
Kannagi	her	breasts	wrench.flung.and		3
<i>Maturaiyai</i>	<i>nirmūlamākkiyatai</i>	<i>pōla</i>			
Madurai	destruction.made	like.that			4
Like Kannagi who wrenched her breasts out and flung them at the king, before laying waste to Madurai,					
<i>Kalki</i>	<i>inta</i>	<i>samūkattin</i>	<i>mukattil</i>		
Kalki	this	society's	face.in		5
<i>tanatu kuṛiyai</i>				<i>aṛutteṛintu</i>	
their	mark/symbol/genitals/grammatical	object		cut.flings.and	6
<i>sila</i>	<i>nyāyaṅkaḷai</i>	<i>kēḷvikaḷai</i>	<i>kēṭkiṛār</i>		
Some/certain	justices	questions	they.ask		7
<i>Inṭa</i>	<i>kēḷvikaḷukku</i>	<i>pinṇāl</i>			
These	questions.for	after			8
Kalki cuts their mark and hurls it in the face of society, asking for answers and demanding certain justices.					
<i>Avarkaḷ</i>	<i>ōṅki</i>	<i>ōṅki</i>	<i>kaittaṭṭum</i>	<i>ōsai</i>	<i>enakku</i>
They	loudly	loudly	hands.clap	sound	to.me
					<i>kēṭkiṛatu</i>
					hearing
					9
<i>'Peru</i>	<i>maḷayinpōtu</i>	<i>olikkiṛa</i>	<i>pēraṭi</i>	<i>pōla!</i>	
Big	rain.during	makes.noise	thunder	like.that!	10
I can hear the resounding sound of their claps demanding these answers, Like the thunder that sounds during a great storm!					

The women brought together in this description belong to vastly different time periods (300 AD to the present), physical locations (Sri Lanka to India's Northeast), and temporal planes (Kannagi is a literary character). What they have in common, according to Palanibarathi, is that they all renounced a conventional trajectory of respectable womanhood in order to devote themselves to justice for their people.

In this expanded notion of womanhood, Kalki's "kuri" does not gender her as male; rather, her gesture of "cutting" draws her into the company of female ascetics. The way Palanibarathi compares the cutting of breasts to the cutting of the kuri pulls Kalki into a chronotope of persons (of ambiguous gender), where spiritual renunciation and an act of physical cutting, specifically the "cutting off" of gender, can together be powerful gestures that renounce gender at the same time that they demand justice. Kannagi, for example, the example cited by Palanibarathi, is the protagonist in the Tamil epic *Silapathigaram*, one of the texts reclaimed by the Dravidian party in the second half of the twentieth century as an icon of Tamil culture. Kannagi's husband Kovalan is put to death by the king of Madurai for stealing an anklet belonging to the queen, supposedly filled with pearls. Angry at the wrongful death of her husband, Kannagi marches to the king's court and performs her own act of exposure: she flings the anklet upon the floor and it shatters, revealing rubies and not pearls. Kannagi cuts her breasts off and flings them upon the king before setting Madurai itself in flames.

So what is at stake in the performative invocation of sex and gender, through the hijra performance repertoire? In Kalki's poem, justice is enacted by cutting off one's connection to a patriarchal caste-bound family, and in Palanibarathi's words, Kalki's gesture is the same kind of justice demanded by Kannagi cutting off her breasts and hurling them at the king of Madurai. To clap, cut, declare, diagnose impotence, and demand payment is to claim a kind of justice, whether in a token instance where money is exchanged, at a global level, demanding justice for Tamils in Sri Lanka, or even cosmic justice for husbands wrongly killed by cruel kings.

Exploring how Kalki's "thirunangai imaginary" circulates amongst readers and writers in Tamil Nadu allows us to think differently about how bodies are "mattered" by bringing different histories into view. Rather than see the hijra performance through its relation to "male" impotence, we are challenged to see it in connection to "female" fertility. The act of "cutting" in both Kalki's text and in the examples of Dravidian imagery offered by Ramaswamy, is placed alongside other ritual acts where disrobing, burning, and cutting a non-male body has the power to "expose" the impotence and moral failure of a "male" one. "Woman" is itself constructed as an ethical ideal in a much broader sense than simply the middle-class "despiritualized, desexualized" motherhood that Ramaswamy describes (1997, 121). If the gesture of lifting the skirt is geared towards showing proof of a "committed body," as Cohen has suggested (1995, 299) it is not an idiosyncratic practice of hijras alone.⁴² It suggests a broader symbolic universe where to have a gender and to have a sex is to also have a purpose. In a "committed body," history, material existence, and a type of moral striving are performatively instantiated at once.

The character of hijra performance and the way it is expressed in Kalki's title with the poetic form of akupeyar (indexicality, contiguity, or metonymy), offers a suggestive way to revisit Butler's argument. On the one hand, as Hall has detailed, the distinctive features of hijra

⁴² "For hijras," writes Cohen, the non-castrated zenanas and jankhas "are not sisters in abjection: when they pull up their saris, there is nothing at stake. They lack gender: they lack a committed body" (1995, 299).

performance are not tied in some essentialist way to specific bodies. Even koti speakers can employ the repertoire in order to performatively index hijra identity, given the right felicity conditions (2005). Nevertheless, the physical act of pointing to one's genitals, the emphasis placed on the pain of "cutting", and the claim to an "ontologically prior" asexuality are all features that claim a "natural" and "non-discursive" link between the hijra body and the license to speak freely and without shame. What is interesting is that one can claim an immanent and seamless relationship between body, life, and speech but such a claim is always contestable and is vulnerable to failure or infelicity. In various examples Gayatri Reddy offers, for example, both speaker and listener can question the "natural" correspondence between the other's body, ethical commitment, and speech. While claiming an ontologically prior ethical disposition, the performer must nevertheless offer fleshy proof in the form of the wound, or the resounding clap. And even once they strip or clap, the contest can go on, the listener and speaker can each reveal the incongruence of the other's bodies with their speech, "exposing" them as being hypocrites that claim both a body and an ethical commitment that is not really "true."

While Kalki's poem offers an example of what I have called a "Dravidian thirunangai imaginary," this is hardly the only vision of "thirunangai" in circulation. Kalki herself produces in a number of media and formats that are not "pure Tamil." She has acted in two films, exhibited her artwork, and has an active youtube channel on which a few of her poems have been adapted into videos. The "formal Tamil" that she used in the poetry book is by no means the only register in which she expresses herself. Traveling abroad as a representative of Tamil Nadu's thirunangai community and also offering interviews to a range of media outlets, she was skilled at switching between formal and informal registers depending upon the occasion. Her facility with using the rigid form of "pure Tamil" was a sign of her ability to speak fluently across different registers.

3.3 The "Daily Wire Thirunangai imaginary"

In this section I contrast the Dravidianist thirunangai imaginary with a second imaginary authored by Mr. Paul Suyambu, one of the editors at the popular newspaper Dinathanthi (The Daily Wire). I first encountered Mr. Paul Suyambu's work at the inaugural event for Chennai's LGBT Pride celebrations in 2010. The Chennai Rainbow Coalition, a collective of several organizations working together to put on the Pride events, gave him an award for his role in creating positive images of aravani women, in the Tamil press. He had introduced a weekly column entitled "The World of Aravanis," published in the Sunday supplement, *Gnayirumalar*. The column ran for a year, and featured weekly interviews with an aravani woman in Chennai. At the time that I conducted fieldwork, the columns had been collected into an anthology called *The World of Thirunangais* (Suyambu 2009; hereafter cited as TWOT). I analyze Suyambu's column at three levels: (1) the registers that he incorporates into the plot and structure of the story, (2) his own, and Kalki's, metapragmatic models of the social personae associated with the story and its circulation, and (3) the metapragmatic models and re-voicing performed by my interlocutors within Mariyal's office as they re-read the story.

Kalki, being a prominent personality in Chennai, had been one of the first interviewees for Suyambu's column. When I spoke her her, she expressed frustration with how "non-literary" the Tamil in Dinathanthi was:

My Tamil is a bit more of a literary Tamil. But [the author of the column] wrote it in layman's Tamil along with some kind of fantasy story... But Dinathanthi is the most widely-read paper. Even laymen read it. And sometimes to get a layman to understand certain things you have to speak in their own language.

Kalki's characterization of Dinathanthi as a "laymen's paper" points to the diversity of ways that Tamil speakers position themselves with respect to both the Dravidian "pure Tamil" ideal and the populist ideal of affiliation with the "working class." Historian Venkatachalapathy writes that the rise of Dravidian oratory and its association with a middle-class intelligentsia coincided also with the rise of the Tamil novel, a genre initially modeled upon English literature. Dravidian nationalist intellectuals in the early twentieth century largely denigrated novels as being titillating and mindless, meant for women that were "lying idle at home, menstruating" (A. Subramania Bharati 1972, quoted in Venkatachalapathy 1997, 61). Venkatachalapathy argues that the initial subversive potential of the novel was eventually domesticated by the middle-class by incorporating reformist and nationalist themes. A fascinating part of Chalapathy's argument, however, is his observation that even later novels authored by middle-class intellectuals retained "saucy" traces of the genre. For example, a 1938 novel by Muvaloor Ramamirtham critiquing the Devadasi (courtesan) system had the somewhat titillating title "The vile net of the Devadasis" or "A Playboy turned Wise" (quoted in Chalapathy 1994, 65). In other words, the social evaluation of novels as "mindless titillation" went from being a sociohistorical fact to a generic convention of the form itself, a historical trace that would mark future uptakes of the form. Rather than map onto any single or unified reading public, the "titillating language" associated with the novel became itself a kind of voice with respect to which readers and writers could take stances.

The newspaper Dinathanthi (the Daily Wire), where Suyambu's column on thirunangais appeared, was another crucial site of political contestation since its founding in 1942. Chalapathy writes that even when nationalist novels were at their peak, the flourishing production and circulation of chapbooks and collections of ballads represented the incomplete nature of middle-class hegemony. As in the case of the novel, however, the socio-historical milieu associated with the chapbook was incorporated into other competing genres, including the newspaper Dinathanthi (the Daily Wire). Chalapathy writes that Dinathanthi's "coarse and rustic style, and its choice of topical and catchy news" cemented its characterization as "popular literature" that was "loathed by the elite" (1994, 166-168). Targeting a "neo-literate or even non-literate audience," writes Chalapathy, "Dinathanthi is a standard presence in every teashop and saloon, even in urban areas, and is often read out and the news discussed" (1994, 242).

More recently, anthropologist Francis Cody has documented the multiple hybrid genres and registers that have proliferated between the 1990s and the present in relation to Dinathanthi (2011). Cody agrees with Venkatachalapathy that Dinathanthi (Daily Wire) was envisioned from the start to as addressing a public that is male, variably literate, working-class and situated in rural or semi-rural areas. Interestingly, however, rather than assume an empirically existent "neoliterate," "teashop" persona to whom Dinathanthi's "coarse and rustic style" is addressed, Cody illustrates how the very association between the teashop and Dinathanthi is produced by a broader cultural metapragmatic model. In his fascinating study, Cody conducts participant observation of how Dinathanthi is read at a teashop in Pudukottai, while also tracking the way a competing newspaper Dinamalar (the Daily Blossom), represents the "teashop" and its associated personae in a daily cartoon entitled "voices from the teashop." Dinamalar's column paradoxically

incorporates registers associated with stereotyped personae associated with the “teashop,” drawn from different religious and caste backgrounds, creating for a middle-class reader an experience of both intimacy and distance from the “teashop,” allowing them to cement their own upwardly-mobile class status while nurturing an imagined connection to a rural working-class past (ibid., 253). Cody's article offers a nuanced look at how an enregisterment unfolds in the process of reading and circulating *Dinamalar* and *Dinathanthi*, interpellating a multitude of social actors that are not immediately obvious — in this case, the middle-class reader who is not directly voiced in the *Dinamalar* cartoon but nevertheless presupposed and performatively instantiated by it.

Both Kalki and Suyambu's characterization of *Dinathanthi* as a “layperson's newspaper” must be seen in a similarly multi-layered way. The voicing structure and registers used in Suyambu's column and his interview with Kalki cannot be assumed to map onto any pre-given empirical social group. What is important, however, is to assess how Kalki, Suyambu, and readers of his column drew connections between the registers and voices in the text and specific social personae, taking stances with respect to this projected social structure.⁴³ As I will demonstrate in this chapter, Kalki, Suyambu, and the koti and thirunangai colleagues at *Sahodaran* where we together read and analysed his story, each possessed quite different ideas of the social personae indexed by the protagonist of the tale, and of what kind of “real life referent” corresponded to the “Wondrous World of Thirunangais” that he wrote about.

3.3.1 “Kalki the anglophile”

Certainly Suyambu's portrayal of Kalki offers a markedly different “thirunangai imaginary” than that emerging from Kalki's poem. His interview is written in colloquial Tamil sprinkled with English words, in a smooth monoregister where the disembodied narrator narrates the events of Kalki's life, offers his sympathetic and admiring observations, and voices Kalki's own inner thoughts in a similar register. Far from emphasizing Kalki's Tamil identity or her connections to Tamil civilisation, the interview focuses almost entirely on her connections abroad, her facility with English, her ability to be an ambassador of thirunangai femininity both across India and globally, and the translocality of transgender identity. For example, the interview begins with these four bullet points about Kalki:

Kalki...

- Has taught American students about Indian culture
- Has trained a scholar from Austria in village folk music
- Has acted in English plays with foreigners
- Has conducted software training for multinational corporations (Suyambu 2009, 123).

Suyambu's column does not make the populist claims of Dravidian oratory, linking her to the Tamil heartland or the poor masses of rural Tamil Nadu. Rather, he emphasizes her aspirational,

⁴³ By voice, I mean a linguistic register encountered within a text that, in the words of Michael Silverstein, “indexically summons to discursive-interactional occasions a consistent and socially-locatable identity, with interests and perspectival outlook relative to a differentiated social formation, as intuitively understood by language users' model of enregisterment” (2018: 32).

middle-class upbringing, the fact that she attended a coed English-medium school, and her position as a representative of thirunangais to a global audience.

In Suyambu's interview, Kalki's life is written in a format that recalls "coming out" stories that are circulated in international LGBT rights discourse. Kalki recalls her first childhood memories of "being different," being painfully ostracized by her family, being bullied at school, and experiencing discrimination in college and at the multi-national software company at which she worked (ibid., 126). Her gender dysphoria is an inner psychic experience that must be corrected by surgery. Rather than speak of the decision to embrace her identity and undergo surgery as a painful "cut" that is prompted by an inner spiritual impulse, she meets a friend that puts her in touch with counselors that eventually help her get sex change surgery at a reputed private hospital. His interview also emphasizes her connection to more globally-relevant issues in the English LGBT rights movement, such as the need for gender-neutral toilets, bullying in school, and the way India's LGBT rights compare to those of other countries.

In Suyambu's vision, the jamat structure is framed neither as an archaic or feudal structure (as in the case of the "kidnapping" narrative) nor is it an emancipatory institution aimed to promote a caste-free and religion-free Tamil Nadu (as in Kalki's poem). The jamat, rather, is India's answer to the global issue of "family acceptance" in the field of transgender rights, and an example of an authentic Indian institution that is uncorrupted by Western norms and yet quite up to the task of meeting them. In his interview, he includes the following quote attributed to Kalki where she talks about her friendship with Gary, an American transgender activist:

Gary told me, "in foreign countries aravanis live with their parents...[and then] with their lovers... but it is only in India that I have seen such jamat family structures where the amma adopts them and that's really amazing!" [Having worked] at a Multi National Corporation... I knew about the gender rights situation in over 178 countries..." Kalki is knowledgeable about such matters, having traveled abroad several times (ibid., 130).

The snippet I have reproduced above demonstrates how the disembodied narrator of Suyambu's column switches between reported speech and a voicing of Kalki's inner thoughts. The speech of the narrator, Kalki, and Gary are all in agreement with one another and they are quoted within one another as nested snippets of reported speech. Rather than give the sense of a hostile confrontation or challenge to the reader, this technique of quotes-within-quotes serves to create a sense of smooth agreement and consensus, impressing the presumably unenlightened reader with a sense of a progressive national and global movement that encompasses both Tamil-speaking neo-literate persons and the people of "178 countries", mediated through the figure of Kalki, the cosmopolitan thirunangai, and the jamat. Strikingly, at the end of the interview, Kalki is quoted not in terms of her commitment to the cause of Tamils, but her connections to a broader Indian polity, and her desire to be a representative of India at the United Nations.

The interview with Kalki was a good example of the essays that comprised Mr. Suyambu's column. The protagonists of Suyambu's weekly column were beautiful, cosmopolitan, articulate, and worked in a range of professions from modeling to psychology. Far from impressing the reader with invocations of Tamil antiquity or the wombs of Tamil mothers, his interviews were peppered with English words, emphasizing each protagonist's across India and abroad. Written in a chatty, intimate style, the interviews described the rocky road to success that each person had experienced, while also including teasing references to their love life, or details of their beauty routines. The thirunangai women in his column were not seeking acceptance from the female

readers of Dinanthanthi. In fact, they could teach women a thing or two about how to be more beautiful and feminine. Like the "saucy" titles of novels that nationalist middle-class writers so often criticized, each column was titled with a catchy alliterative phrase way that emphasized the cosmopolitanism and femininity of the protagonist.

Foreign-returned Kalki
The Beautiful Dancer Lakshya
The Marvelous Malaika
Sridevi, the Model from Bangalore
"Miss Koovakkam" Sandhya (ibid. 6-7).

When I conducted my fieldwork in 2015, Mr. Suyambu's columns had been collected into an anthology. At this stage, the word of choice had become "thirunangai" and not "aravanis" and so his book was titled not "The World of Aravanis" but "The World of Thirunangais". Before going through the list of interviews as a preface to the interviews in the book, the first chapter was a fictional story of an idealized thirunangai life that he had created as a composite of all the interviews in the book. The story was what Kalki described as a "sweet synopsis" or "fantasy version" of aravani life. I analyse some of the motifs and plot elements of Mr. Suyambu's story that offer a markedly different vision of thirunangai identity than Kalki's poem "Kuri Aruttēn" while nevertheless drawing on some of the same elements symbolically associated with hijra practice. In Mr. Suyambu's "Dinanthanthi imaginary," the ability to have sex without procreation and children without wombs promises not the caste-free progressive Tamil society that Kalki writes about, but a global city where the translocality of the thirunangai can knit together Tamil values with the cosmopolitan influences of "foreign countries."

3.3.2 *The World of Thirunangais*

In her conversation with me, Kalki described her frustration with the "fantasy" language of the column. Being directed at "laymen" and their families, Kalki complained, the column had abandoned both "pure Tamil" and realism, instead treating aravani lives as a kind of fantasy.

When it first came in Dinanthanthi I didn't like the title "The Wondrous World of Aravanis". What wonder world? There is nothing wondrous about being an aravani... [we are]as ordinary as anyone else, we are not goddesses, we are not special people, we are like you... just give us our space and respect us as we are. [His story is] a concise sweet synopsis biography of transgender people. That's all.

While Kalki acknowledged the need for such "fantasy writing" in so far as it helped combat stereotypes about the aravani community, she nevertheless distinguished it from the "literary Tamil" that she herself chose to write in. In justifying the difference, she drew on the image of the "layperson" imagined to be Dinanthanthi's average reader.

Like Kalki, Mr. Suyambu also explained his style of writing by alluding to the "laypeople" that read his column. They could not handle the brutal truths about thirunangai life and so he had begun the book with a sweet story that made it more palatable:

There is a gap between the story and reality, yes. It is the first time we are talking about a subject like this... so it is like how we have to mix honey to make the medicine more palatable...only then can they handle the other interviews.

The World of Thirunangais," as both Kalki and Mr. Suyambu characterized it, is indeed a sweet fantasy tale centering on a protagonist Alagappan. Alagappan is born as the third child of a family in an unnamed rural location in Tamil Nadu. When the children attain puberty, it becomes clear that Alagappan does not fit into the community of rowdy teenage boys: he doesn't develop facial hair, he remains shy in disposition, and he begins desiring men. In the words of the story, he is "a female trapped in a male body." Ostracized by his family, he meets a compassionate friend and experiences a sense of recognition. "We are aravanis," says his friend:

This world will gossip about us, abuse us, chase us out. There is another world waiting for us... You will have another mother who will honor you as a woman. Your body will also turn female..." He invited him into the fantastic world of aravanis. And Alagappan set out towards that wondrous world! (ibid., 11).

Alagappan travels to Chennai with his new friend and is introduced to a group of old aravanis. They are engaged in the hard labour of cooking all day for a living and live in a wretched hovel. Yet this "women's work" has made them less feminine than ever. Their faces are visibly aged, their voices are coarse, and they sleep with their legs splayed out in a decidedly unladylike fashion. They try to warn Alagappan not to leave the bourgeois comforts that he currently enjoys in order for a life of poverty and hard labor:

The oldest aravani turned to Alagappan. Have you even looked in a kitchen before?

How long he had dreamed of cooking various dishes in the kitchen, serving them to the family, impressing his father! The very father that threatened to burn him if he even went near the kitchen?

"See, you are a boy from a well-off family. If you become like us, you'll have to come for cooking jobs. You'll struggle for food and wilt in the heat. Just go back to your amma" (ibid. 11-12).

In the case of the "hijra imaginary," the sacrifice of the hijra person is imagined as a painful break from the family of birth and a renunciation of the wealth that accompanies lineage. Similarly, in "The World of Thirunangais," the questions asked by the old aravanis evoke bittersweet memories of his bourgeois home and the pleasures of cooking for one's father and husband. Unlike in the hijra ideal, however, this renunciation does not locate Alagappan outside the male/female gender system or the procreative home. Rather, the text emphasizes his innate quality of *kanimai* (virginity) or chaste maidenhood. At night, Alagappan unwittingly changes his pants for a skirt, sleeping on his side like a woman. When a man glances at him, his hand moves involuntarily to cover his chest, despite the fact that he doesn't have breasts yet. The "operation" when he undertakes it, is not a painful break or a confirmation of his asexuality. It is, rather, a formality that removes an organ that never had a place in his perfectly "female" body.

On the advice of the old aravanis of Chennai, Alagappan leaves for Mumbai to join the "Wondrous World" of the *jamat*. In the "kidnapping narratives" that I discussed in Chapter 1, Mumbai is positioned as a dangerous regressive space away from the safety and progressiveness

of Tamil Nadu. In this text however, the "World of Aravanis" in Mumbai emerges as a symmetrical and complementary equal of the world of the mother that he left behind in rural Tamil Nadu. The aravani mother and the biological mother are continuously brought into alignment with one another. His friends on the train tell him:

You are going to have two mothers. The mother who birthed you will stay in the village. In Mumbai you will get a second mother. From now until your death she is the mother who will be with you. There will be a big ceremony when she takes you as her daughter... You cannot even count the number of sisters you are going to have.

Alagappan listened in wonder. Thoughts of his new mother washed over him but her face remained unclear in his mind. He fell asleep.

At that very moment, in a remote corner of Mumbai, an old aravani was preparing for the "reet" ceremony where she would take Alagappan on as her daughter (ibid., 13-14).

The two mothers are not at war for the control of Alagappan. Rather, each does for him what the other cannot do. He travels to Mumbai and is adopted into the jamat and newly given the name Alagammai and referred to as a female pronoun. Under the care of the jamat, he becomes not a renouncer but a chaste woman, ready to re-enter the procreative family as a wife and mother.

In "The World of Thirunangais" the political challenge posed by the hijra performance through clapping and exposure is not weaponized as in the case of Kalki's poem, but domesticated and depoliticized by portraying it as a simple practical gesture undertaken to make a noise that attracts people. When Alagammai goes to the shops with her new aravani sisters, the shop owners happily pay money to aravanis, without even needing to be asked. A vegetable owner gives them free vegetables and fruits, in exchange for their blessings. Portraying this as a simple transaction of paying for aravani blessings or as a practice geared towards garnering attention (ibid., 20-23), rather than being forced to demonstrate potency or integrity, as in Kalki's poem, erases the moral claim of the demand by hijra performance practice by turning it into a purely cultural idiosyncrasy. It is described not as a performance that invites a response from the listener (ie, they must "clap back" by paying up, or else risk revealing their impotency or insolvency), but as a literal way to make noise and capture the attention of the shop owners. By presenting a seamless and harmonious fit between the needs of the aravani petitioners (for money) and the needs of the shop owners (for blessings), the interaction is presented as a win-win for both parties, rather than a contest where one must pay and the other must be paid.

The hyperfeminization of Alagammai helps the story achieve this seamless fit between her identity and the "mainstream" society that she inhabits. In the case of both the "hijra ideal" described by Gayatri Reddy and the "Criminal Tribes" ideal described by Nicholas Dirks, a tension between an innate predeliction and a cultivated disposition is central. The hijra, for example, in the words of some of Reddy's senior Nayak interlocutors, is imagined to have an ontologically prior asexuality that is subsequently confirmed (rather than conferred) by the operation (Reddy 2006, 40). In the case of Alagammai, however, it is an ontologically prior *femaleness*, rather than asexuality, that must be cultivated by her new family. Before she engages in her first hijra performance where they "ask at the shops" to demand alms, we see an extended scene showing how she applies makeup and dresses herself as a "woman." From the application

of rouge on her cheeks, to placing water-filled balloons in her bra, we see in brazen detail how her female body is put together (Suyambu 2009, 20-21). This hypervisibility of the feminized body resonates with the column itself, where the emphasis on the respectable and chaste "innate femaleness" of the interviewees is brought into tension by the elaborate beauty rituals they undertake in order to cultivate an "exterior femaleness".

In the case of the Tamil wives in Ramaswamy's argument, the erotic appeal of Tamilttay is extinguished and domesticated by the "motherly" responsibility to produce Tamil sons. Alagappan, however, does not yet possess either a womb or breasts and this promises to make him into a different type of Tamil woman, one that can have sex but be free of the imperative to reproduce. This creates an aspirational form of woman that was superior to the regular chaste womanhood offered by the Tamil wives that Ramaswamy describes. We catch one glimpse of such a thirunangai when Alagammai is returning home after "asking the shops".

Alagammai's eyes were drawn to a beautiful woman on the train. The woman self-consciously adjusted her sari and frowned at Alagammai.

Please don't misunderstand me. I am an aravani. God has given you all the beauty that is due to a woman. That's why I looked at you.

I did not doubt you. Shall I tell you the truth? I am also an aravani. But I keep it a secret. I am a famous official in this town.

How did you become even more beautiful than a woman?¹

Very simple. I, who was born a man, had an operation to rid myself of the organ that I so despised. I took hormone injections. Now everyone sees me as a woman. I have even gotten married. My husband looks like a film actor. You should also do the operation! Become a woman like me (Suyambu 2009, 24-25).

The posh aravani on the train contrasts strikingly with the traditional, abject poverty of the Chennai aravanis that Alagammai met when she first left home, and is an interesting mixture of the "mother Tamil" as well as the sexy "foreign-returned" woman. On the one hand she possesses innate instincts towards female chastity, evidenced by her instinctive motion to cover her chest when she feels someone is watching her. On the other hand, she speaks English ("very simple"), she has married a man that looks like a film actor, she takes hormone injections rather than have a "traditional" operation associated with a ritual goddess ritual. Unlike in the case of Kalki's poem, the operation does not bring the thirunangai closer to Tamil antiquity, makes her into a cosmopolitan woman that is "more beautiful than a woman herself," allowing lower-class aravanis to become modern integrated thirunangais that can land bureaucratic jobs and handsome husbands.

The figure of the posh aravani on the train offers a very interesting vantage point from which to consider the diversity of "woman" positions that are defined in terms of their proximity to, or distance from, the ideal of tamilttay or Mother Tamil that Sumathi Ramaswamy describes. Ramaswamy argues in the symbolic scheme governing "Tamil devotion," the "erotic" component of the Tamil male's devotion to Mother Tamil, being is displaced onto the figure of the Tamil wife. In this sense, Tamil wives are figured as proxies or "surrogate Tamilttays,"

entrusted with the responsibility of reproducing Tamil culture and language by producing Tamil sons (1997, 118). More recently, linguistic anthropologist Constantine Nakassis offers an interesting application of the concept of the “proxy” when it comes to imaginings of Tamil womanhood (2015). Nakassis examines a reality television show from 2012 entitled *Tamil Pesum Katanayaki* (Tamil-speaking heroine). The show takes its cue from the well-established stereotype that Tamil film heroines, often cast as light-skinned, fair, North Indian women, generally speak heavily English-inflected or non-standard Tamil. The show features a male host as he traverses malls and college campuses, approaching women that are rich and posh-looking, and that speak English but are unable to speak Tamil. The women’s comical ineptitude is juxtaposed against the male host’s own impeccable high-register “Pure” Tamil. Nakassis argues that although the show appears to bemoan the lack of Tamil speaking heroines, the linguistic “outsideness” of the heroine is in fact a crucial foil against which the figure of the “pure Tamil woman” is constructed. While the heroine appears to be defined by her *inability* to stand in as a “proxy for the ethnopolity,” she is “in fact, a proxy for a particular kind of identity politics; she mutely appears as the disavowed proxy of the putatively authentic Tamil woman who refuses to appear on the screen” (2015, 170).

Nakassis offers a genealogy of “the Tamil woman who refuses to appear on the screen” by describing how the Tamil woman has been figured as antithetical to cinema culture, particularly since the mid-twentieth century. Historically, the idea of the “actress” has long been tied to that of the “courtesan,” indicating a blurring between representations and embodiment of sexual acts. If the actress performs sexual acts on screen, the logic goes, she has, technically, performed them off-screen as well— thus cinema itself has the ability to “loosen” women’s morals (2015, 172). If, in Ramaswamy’s theorization, the erotic aspects of Tamilittay are projected upon the figure of the Tamil wife, Nakassis’ formulation takes it one step further: the erotic elements of Tamil devotion, being incompatible with the image of the chaste Tamil wife, are displaced onto the figure of the sexy, non-Tamil actress that can serve *both* as an object of desire for the Tamil male, *as well as* a site where he can re-enact his own linguistic virtuosity. Moreover, her imagined willingness to engage in sexual acts before the camera, “matters” both her one- and off-screen body.

Nakassis also makes an interesting argument regarding the way kinship ties are imagined through the gaze of the putatively male filmgoer. One of his male interlocutors explains: it is enjoyable to *sight-aṭi* (make eyes at) girls so long as they are not “sister or mothers.” The mention of “sight” is especially important, Nakassis says, because with the widespread introduction of home television in the 1980s, the focus of directors shifted increasingly away from “family” audiences to single young males imagined to dominate the public space of the city. The term *sight-aṭi*, he says, produces a “scopic regime,” or a shifting “kinship chronotope” where to *sight-aṭi* someone is to figure them as non-kin. In this chronotope, the scope of “our kin” is always shifting as it re-establishes the boundaries between “our” Tamil women (consaguineally related, married), and the non-Tamil heroine (unrelated, sexually available, unmarried).

Nakassis’ theorization offers a productive way to think about the figure of the posh thirunangai on the train. The posh thirunangai might be read as yet another interesting “proxy” figure for the Tamil wife/mother. Her seeming chastity (the instinctive movement to cover her chest) belies her beauty, cosmopolitanism, and sexiness (her ability to intersperse her language with English words and her reference to a “movie-star” husband). Her difference from the Tamil

wife/mother is marked explicitly: as Alagammai says, she is “beautiful than even a woman.” We might imagine that the posh thirunangai becomes sexually available for the Tamil male gaze in a way that the typical Tamil mother/wife does not. Yet the gaze that fixates upon the posh thirunangai, and the gaze that hypervisibilizes her non-Tamilness, comes not from an imagined Tamil male but from Alagammai, a fellow aravani. Alagammai’s gaze is not erotic but admiring, even devotional: she does want the posh thirunangai’s body, rather, she wants a body (and a life) like hers. Alagammai desires the heroine glamour that can be found in Mumbai, a city that, in many ways, indexes both the promise and danger of cinema. Yet although the posh aravani initially thinks that Alagammai’s sexual, she then lowers her defenses, responding with warmth and vulnerability — “I am also an aravani like you” — becoming a mentor and confidante. The desire experienced by Alagammai does not *sever* kinship, as in the case of the Tamil men desiring non-Tamil actresses both on-screen and off; Alagammai’s gaze *produces* kinship and mutual recognition. The womanhood for which Alagammai seems destined combines both the sexual cosmopolitanism and promise of the non-Tamil heroine, *and* the chastity and virtue of the Tamil wife (as evinced by Alagammai’s marriage at the end).

The question of linguistic fluency, foregrounded by Nakassis’ article, also arises in an interesting way in the case of the posh thirunangai.⁴⁴ Almost two years after first coming across *The World of Thirunangais*, I had the opportunity to meet Mr. Suyambu at the Dinathanthi headquarters ask him about his column. In describing the progressiveness of the “posh thirunangai,” he drew on the idea of hijras possessing a special verbal license that freed them from the linguistic constraints imposed on “real women.” Recalling the words of Sulekha, Kira Hall’s interlocutor, that hijras “speak from the mouth” (Hall 1997, 445), Suyambu described the *nēрмаi* (candor, directness) of their speech, especially about sex.

They are very... open about things...they have a certain daring to talk about all the things that are uncomfortable. Well, there are things also that one cannot ask about... they still do *that*, where a man goes with a woman, you know, but you can't write that in the newspaper. To be seen as a woman, they let themselves be taken at a young age... They are used by men and they get used to it. Like X, she goes for that, she enjoys it openly. She looks even more beautiful than a real woman. When she came into the office, it caused quite a splash...

By “they still do that,” Mr. Suyambu meant sex work. Both willing to talk about sex and engage in it, the thirunangai woman is seen to be wealthy and worldly. The worldliness of this “future woman” placed a demand on Tamil men, too, to be more masculine than they were. Thirunangais he suggested, had a taste for only the best male specimens, taller and more macho than the average man.

[Y] is a beautiful woman, from a good family, grew up with her parents, and everything. Still, they have different needs, though. Her husband he is the head of the Kerala Tall Men's

⁴⁴ There are several more important writings on the way “Tamil womanhood” is voiced both on screen and on stage that I have not had the space to engage in this dissertation, but I am keen to integrate in the future. These include Amanda Weidman’s work on playback singers and public representations of “womanhood” (2014) and Susan Seizer’s classic *Stigmas of the Tamil stage: an ethnography of special drama artists in South India* (2005) as well as her writings on dirty jokes and “discursive distance” on the Tamil stage (1997).

Association⁴⁵... Still, the marriage only lasted 6 months... [often, their marriages fail.] That's why they offer different sexual practices [from the norm], in order to keep their husbands interested.

The Kerala Tall Men's Association is a group that fashions itself as a men's solidarity group, offering "tall men" opportunities to act as extras in movies, or serve as security guards at celebrity events, lending their hypermasculine good looks to increase the profile of the event. We might imagine that the Tamil male viewer, imagined through Mr. Suyambu's invocation of the KTMA, now possesses a gaze more like that of Alagammai. Gazing at the thirunangai makes him aware not of his own sexual desire but inadequacy— he wishes he could be "like" the film actor husbands and "tall men" that the thirunangai desires. Would she ever look at him the same way? On the other hand we are led to imagine that Alagammai and her hypermasculine husband might not only enjoy the conventionality and respectability afforded by a chaste marriage, but also the pleasures of "excessive sex" that a "regular woman" cannot provide. This promise however, undermined the very concept of marriage, producing for him an ambivalence about whether their marriages would work or not.

The ambivalence about the future of marriage makes itself clear in the final scene of the story, where Alagammai meets her biological family, and is eventually married to her paternal cousin, in accordance with conventions of cross-cousin marriage. In the story, Mr. Suyambu emphasizes the adherence to convention at every stage. After her operation, her aravani amma keeps her secluded for 40 days until her "milk ceremony" can take place, where she is accepted as a woman by receiving the "milk" of her guru. In this time period, she is not permitted to look at any men. Her pious adherence to this convention further validates her chastity. At the end of the period, when asked who she wants most to see, Alagammai bursts into tears:

'You cannot show me the people that I want to see.'

'Why not? Bedhraj mata has already wrought so many changes in your life- she can manage this one too. Tell me, who are those three people?'

'No god can make it happen. I want to see my mother, father, and my father's sister's son who cares deeply for me.'

'Is that all? Okay, pray to mata,' her mother said, and Alagammai closed her eyes and prayed to mata with an earnestness that nearly melted her heart.

... When her mother, father, and cousin took the sari pallu off her head, she was completely lost and bewildered with astonishment. She stood there astounded, unable to believe her eyes...

(When Alagammai first came to her, her aravani mother had found out who her birth mother was, with the help of aravanis living in her town. As soon as [Alagammai's birth family] was ready to accept her, [her aravani mother] knew. Since the operation had already been conducted by that point, she had them wait forty days. She had secretly made all the necessary arrangements for her parents to see her as soon as the milk ceremony was over, and take her home with them.) "Your

⁴⁵ Kerala Tall Men Executive Force. n.d. "About Us." Accessed May 16, 2019. <https://www.keralatallmen.com/>

daughter came to me as a man. I have made her a woman and I return her to you," she said, and Alagammai fell at her feet.

Alagammai's parents took the money that they had brought with them and gave it to the aravani mother. She refused to accept it.

Tears running down their cheeks, her parents expressed their thanks to her aravani mother and said, 'From today we will accept you as a woman,' and took her home. Alagammai took her leave of the aravanis.

Now Alagammai has married her father's sister's son and lives in Bangalore. They have adopted a female child. Alagammai has no urge to seek publicity or to parade her identity about, she lives quietly enjoying the pleasures of domestic life (Suyambu 2009, 45)

The ending of the story, where Alagammai is returned home as a chaste woman was, in Mr. Suyambu's opinion, not simply a way that thirunangais could be "included" in existing family structures. Rather, he saw them as models and guides for the family structures of the future. Freed of the imperative to reproduce biologically, frank and candid in their speech about sex, and well-traveled across rural Tamil Nadu and Mumbai, in Mr. Suyambu's eyes, they offered a kind of wifeliness that was superior to that offered by the "Tamil wives" that Sumathi Ramaswamy writes were associated with "mother Tamil." Marriages such as Alagammai's, based on the open-minded acceptance of transgender women and the emphasis on adoption practices, represented the future of marriage:

It is already happening. Nowadays [many thirunangais] are returning to their mothers, brothers, sisters, and so forth... and the inability to bear a child is not really such an issue [for Alagammai]. Now [even in the mainstream population], there are 10% couples that cannot bear children and at the rate we are going, we are going to have something like 20-30% couples like this. Once people get used to this, they will adopt children and get married, and slowly those "kidnapping" type of stories will reduce, and people will be able to just raise children in peace.

In Mr. Suyambu's "thirunangai imaginary", articulated in "The World of Thirunangais," the thirunangai is claimed as a type of woman and not as a third-sex. Unlike the female ascetics and renouncers invoked by Kalki's poem, such as the hijra ideal, or the figure of Kannagi, the "operation" is not a painful cut that is "shown" as a gesture of defiance to an unjust society. It is, rather, a quiet formality that removes an organ that never had a place in her body to begin with, since she has always been decidedly female. Alagammai's "femaleness" makes her a "Tamil wife," but not in the sense that Sumathi Ramaswamy has characterized as "mother Tamil." In Ramaswamy's text, the erotic aspects of Tamil are subsumed under a maternal image through the procreative womb of the "Tamil wife." In the case of Alagammai, however, since she does not possess a womb and has left the caste-bound family of her birth, her erotic appeal remains latent. In his interview with me as well, Suyambu hints that thirunangais retain the ability to engage in sex for pure pleasure and not for reproduction, making them good wives that are at the same time worldly and progressive, preferring to adopt children and move across cities and countries.

Mr. Suyambu's explicit reference to "kidnapping" harks back to the material that I discussed in Chapter 1. Just as my interlocutors in that section did, Mr. Suyambu also used the figure of "kidnapping" to articulate a utopian vision for the future of Tamil families. In this

version too, "sex" mattered not just for Alagammai but for all the families that she was linked to: that of her biological parents, her aravani family in Mumbai, and the family she would raise with her husband. Mr. Suyambu widened this imaginary to include all families in Tamil Nadu, as a way to address what he saw as the growing infertility of women across Tamil Nadu. Even as the wombs of "Tamil women" grew infertile, the figure of the thirunangai became a site of promise, a new space where Tamil children could be born and flourish. There are multiple "models of sex" that come together to build Mr. Suyambu's utopian vision. As in the "essentialist" model of sex described by Plemons, Alagammai is indeed a "woman trapped in a male body" whose affliction must be healed by surgery. As in the "performative model," it is the intersubjective recognition— of her aravani mentors, of her "posh thirunangai" friend on the train, and of her parents— that make her a "woman." And in the "exposure model" of sex I described in Chapter 1, here the "sex" of the thirunangai body, deliberately not exposed by lifting the sari but kept private by the modest bride and her family (she lives in Bangalore without seeking any publicity) "matters" not only for Alagammai but for society at large. The renunciation of one's own fertility does indeed become a source of fertility for society— but in Suyambu's version, society responds in kind by embracing Alagammai and supporting her in her desire to have children of her own.

The special quality of the thirunangai in Mr. Suyambu's imaginary, is produced by incorporating elements associated with the hijra ideal and the "exposure model" of sex. The thirunangai emerges as a figure that can promise a kind of Tamil rebirth and revival, whereas the Tamil heroine is a figure that does just the opposite. This is why thirunangais in Tamil Nadu are embraced by so many pro-Tamil, male-dominated groups (such as the Dravidian party and the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers and Artists Association). I would argue that the Tamil productivity of the thirunangai arises from the fact that she is kin to the Tamil male viewer— after all, Alagammai literally began her life as a "male" in small-town Tamil Nadu— in a way that the non-Tamil actress can never be. This shared point of maleness promises a kind of intimacy that cannot be achieved by the non-Tamil heroine.

To be clear, my intention in making this point is *not to* reproduce a familiar (cisgender) feminist critique of transgender women as being complicit in patriarchal structures by "sharing" a kind of male privilege with cisgender males. Indeed my aim in this chapter is quite the opposite: I am keen to expand the category of "woman," conceptually, in a way that does not limit it to cisgender women that can, in a paternalistic way, "include" transgender women in a feminist movement. The idea that male-born persons are imagined to share a kinship chronotope, moreover, to use Nakassis' term, has been well-documented by anthropologists of sexuality in India. Gayatri Reddy, for example, notes that the term *manollu*, or "our people" was a "shifting signifier in the demarcation of an outside/insider boundary." "Our people" sometimes denoted only hijras or kotis but at other times expanded to include *all* male-born persons, since one might start their life as a panti or koti, eventually deciding to become a hijra. This shifting quality derived from the fact that kotis, pantis and hijras were "sexed" not simply by anatomy but also by gendered practice and "lifestyle" (such as whether one was "passive" or "active" during intercourse), and anatomy and practice co-constituted one another (2006, 44, 60). The only persons that were consistently excluded from the male-born universe of "our people," Reddy continues, were narans— cisgender women— defined not by gendered practice but by anatomy

and the ability to reproduce, thus "kotis are not narans, they are only "like narans" (ibid., 50).⁴⁶ The "womb" of the naran, then, was to some extent, the fixed referent against which other sexual identities were articulated. While Suyambu minimizes this aspect in his representation, I would argue that the posh thirunangai, Alagammai, and the putatively male viewer, share a kind of kinship borne of cruising together in public spaces like movie theaters and train stations, back when Alagammai was still Alagappan. As I demonstrate in my concluding section, "The Thirunangai Joke," many of my interlocutors at Sahodaran foregrounded this world of male-male kinship and contested the kind of femaleness foregrounded by Suyambu's thirunangai, precisely by resignifying Alagammai as a koti .

3.4 The "Thirunangai joke imaginary"

We are at Loyola College, at a book launch for a novel featuring a thirunangai heroine. It is authored by a member of the reputed leftist Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers and Artists Association. Sudha is there to introduce the book, and I have tagged along.

The banner behind the stage reads "Vīti Virutu Vizha": Awards Ceremony.

Sudha leans close and whispers, "If you replace the vīti with kūti ['cunt'], then the kotis would have come."

— *from my fieldnotes, January 2016*

A few days after interviewing Mr. Suyambu, I conducted a reading circle at Mariyal, the HIV/AIDS prevention organization where I worked, where a group of staff and community members discussed the story. Some participants in my group had fully transitioned from male to female and sometimes claimed the term thirunangai in public settings. Within the office however, all of them identified often addressed one another as koti, playfully switching between male, female, and indeterminate pronouns as they expressed intimate recognition of one another's gender ambiguity.

Amongst the community at Sahodaran, "koti" indexed a kind of youthful play, and a cheeky, irreverent relationship to the institutionalized seniority, and the overt femininity of "thirunangai." Sudha's sly whispered comment in my opening vignette suggests that kotis would avoid a ceremony described by the sober term "vīti," but attend one marked by the crude epithet "kūti" (cunt). Sudha, herself a prolific writer, had been invited to the ceremony as a thirunangai, in order to introduce a novel about a thirunangai protagonist. She was soon to go up on stage and deliver a lofty political address celebrating the achievements of her leftist comrades. But her sly comment pierced through the entire respectable performance, hinting at the dirty, sexual

⁴⁶ Reddy notes that interactions between hijras and narans was quite common when it came to shopping for vegetables, childcare, and even having celas, and hijras were extremely protective of narans. Nevertheless, she notes that in daily practice, these overlaps produced not shared identity but distinction. For example, when a naran was present, one was not supposed to engage in abusive speech (Reddy 2005, 52). In Reddy's account, hijras did not aspire to be narans; rather, hijra izzat (respect) was enhanced by the protection one gave to narans.

undertones that might mark the event. Koti indexed a position that had a winking, between-the-lines, satirical relationship to the gravity, dignity, and femaleness of thirunangai, and to the portentousness of award ceremonies in general.

When I mentioned to teachers or scholars that I was studying thirunangai and koti writings, I was told repeatedly that "those people don't speak Tamil." This was repeated to me both by Tamil teachers in Chennai and in Berkeley, amongst schoolteachers, professors and writers. Part of the way that thirunangais are marginalized from Tamil public spheres is by pointing to their association with North Indian hijra culture, associated with a mix of Farsi and Tamil phrases. Thirunangai activists contested these depictions by emphasizing their distance from Mumbai's hijras and demonstrating their Tamil virtuosity. When adopting koti identity, however, most of my interlocutors broke away from the public pressure to speak "pure Tamil," switching instead to crude Tamil slang (the word *kūti* or cunt, mentioned by Sudha) and to koti-basha, a register that incorporates Farsi terms associated with koti and hijra communities across India (Reddy 2006, 65). By characterizing Alagammai as a koti, and reframing her speech through koti basha, the participants in my group launched a counter-demand to Mr. Suyambu's "thirunangai imaginary," seeing Alagammai not as a female, but as a koti belonging to a broader network of persons that had been born "male" but then renounced their male identity to different degrees. By enacting a kind of recognition based on shared maleness and refusing the ideal of Tamil "womanhood," the participants in the group offered a distant and ironic relationship to both the "Respectable Womanhood" and the "pure Tamil" claimed by thirunangai activists.

3.4.1 Thirunangai as a "cinema" depiction removed from reality

We began our discussion with the marriage scene of Suyambu's story that everyone agreed was quite unrealistic. One of my interlocutors compared it to an unrealistic "cinema story" that did not fit with the experience commonly described by those that had gone to Mumbai to join a jamat. To highlight the way my interlocutors rapidly switched between the terms koti, aravani, and thirunangai, I have rendered those words in bold text:

Sundari: That last scene was like a cinema story... [chuckles] I hope no aravani takes this the wrong way... but I can't believe that any guru would do that, especially not in Mumbai. I've only heard Chennai kotis tell me about how they were treated so poorly [by their gurus] in Mumbai they had to escape by train... Maybe in Chennai, a thirunangai might introduce their parents, but not in Mumbai.

Sankari, one of the participants, went on to explain why she thought thirunangais were depicted in such a "rosy" way:

Sankari: In my opinion, the depiction of **thirunangai** and **aravanis**...

Shakthi: Oooh, look at us being researchers [Affecting highly formal Tamil] "In my humble opinion, the mode of depiction of **aravanis** and **thirunangais**..."

Sankari: Di idiot, I'm saying this for real. I think that in order to improve the image of **aravanis** and **thirunangais** for the general public he has just tried to paint everything in this positive light.

While Sankari speaks of aravanis and thirunangais as depictions intended for the public, she refers to Alagammai as "that koti," a specific koti in time and place that has been recruited to Suyambu's larger project of representation and redemption. My own joking comment, where I repeat Sankari's words in highly formal Tamil that befits the tone adopted by "researchers" similarly reiterates the fact that thirunangai and aravani are terms used when representing the community in the abstract, for outside researchers such as myself, not while talking casually about persons that are known intimately.

3.4.2 Koti as a "real" identity "underneath" thirunangai

The "innate femaleness" of the character of Alagammai was pierced and denaturalized by pointing to the "male" koti body that she possessed before the operation. In Suyambu's story, we never get a sense of Alagammai's life outside of her "female" identity. In our group discussion, Bhavana describes a friend that like Alagammai, experienced a happy marriage to a man. In Bhavana's words, however, her friend remains a koti, even though she later has the operation and is living "like a wife":

Bhavana: I know one **koti** that is similar to this... She went [to Mumbai] to work in an office **as an MSM**, then she did the operation and wanted to live **like a naran [woman]**, so she got married to her maama's [maternal uncle] son, and is settled in Bangalore.

Kavya: They got divorced. The **koti** you're talking about is Vimala, **that Nagercoil koti**... that **koti** Saravanan's older brother...

Sankari: They are not together anymore. Just last week I met **that koti** at [an HIV/AIDS counselor] training workshop and she was moaning to me about it, **that koti**.

Jaya: That's not all Shakthi, it's even more interesting... Saravanan now **calls himself an MSM** and he married a **penn [woman]**.

Vimala went to Mumbai to work in an HIV/AIDS NGO as an "MSM." The term MSM indexes her participation in the representational structures of HIV/AIDS funding. She wants to live "like a naran [woman]," and this meant marrying a man and settling down in Bangalore. Saravanan has had the opposite trajectory: he began as more feminine and then went on to take on the more male identity of "MSM" and marry a woman. Note however, that they are described as "that koti" even as they perform other identities depending on context. The group participants recognize their kotiness, and assert that it remains consistent across concrete times and places, ranging from their native Nagercoil, to Mumbai, to the HIV/AIDS training workshop that Sankari attended the previous week. By calling them kotis, the group participants pierce and denaturalize Vimala and Saravanan's other lives, be it their "naran" life or their "MSM" life, reducing them to kotis in disguise. By referring to them with the Farsi term "naran" instead of the Tamil term, the "respectable" thirunangai imaginary is further denaturalized.

3.4.3 The intersubjective recognition of koti identity

In Suyambu's text, the moments of recognition that matter most consist of being recognized as a latent woman with chastity. Alagammai declares to the Chennai aravanis that she wants her femaleness recognized, and it is based on this recognition that they send her to Mumbai. Her aravani mother goes so far as to tell her that she should never remember her life as a male. The fashionable thirunangai she meets on the train looks to her like a real woman. When Alagammai tells her this, the fashionable aravani does not take offense at being misrecognized. Rather, she feels good about being recognized as a woman, and tells Alagammai how she can achieve recognition as a woman too.

In our discussion, by casting Alagammai as a koti rather than as a woman, the "chaste femininity" she encounters on the train was seen as a moment of comical misrecognition rather than a long-awaited recognition.

Bhavana, chuckling: So then on the train, she sees this **naran-body koti [woman-bodied koti]** that looks like [the actress] Shalini, and [the koti on the train] says why are you staring at my daaman [slang word for breasts] and **that pinju koti [young koti]** tells her 'Oh you have been granted all the beauty of a real woman' [everyone laughs] and [the koti on the train] says oh no I am also a **koti** just like you, I am just living like a **naran [woman]**.

By calling her a "naran body koti" or a "koti living like a naran," and using Farsi-inflected koti language rather than Tamil, the group participants pierced and denaturalized the chastity and femininity of posh thirunangai. This is done partly by strongly asserting that her underlying identity is a koti, regardless of the feminine posturing that she adopts. By cheekily referring to her breasts as "daaman" in Farsi-inflected koti language, rather than "marbagam," the standard Tamil term for breasts she rejects the language used to characterize female beauty itself. This enables the sarcasm of her following comment, "You have been granted all the beauty of a woman," turning the supposed "natural" beauty of chaste women into a joke rather than something awe-inspiring or dumbfounding, like the character in the story. In the story, Alagammai appears struck dumb by the beauty and poise of this woman on the train. In Bhavana's telling, however, the woman on the train is just a dressed-up koti trying to look like Shalini, the film actress, and Alagammai is a naive young pinju koti for actually believing that she is a woman. The "chaste femininity" that Suyambu places at the heart of the encounter, is rendered here as a kind of comical earnestness. Koti surpasses the pretensions to femaleness, and connects the two characters in a deeper way that binds, making reference to their common "non-male" past by speaking in a form of Tamil that is neither male nor female.

The encounter with the posh thirunangai, in Suyambu's story, prompts Alagammai to desire surgery, so that she too can pass as woman, potentially becoming "more beautiful than even a woman." Alagammai's underdeveloped femaleness is cast into relief against the fully developed femaleness of the posh thirunangai. In this sense, a distance is created between the two characters, representing the path Alagammai must travel before realizing her full femininity and chastity. In the group discussion held in the office, however, the term koti brought the two characters closer together, not further apart. Rather than emphasize the way Alagammai stared at the posh thirunangai, group participants speculated about the reverse gaze: how did the posh thirunangai see Alagammai?

Kaavya: When she sees **that pinju koti** [young koti], she says "what is he looking at" and covers [her breasts] so does she think this **koti** is a **payyan [boy]**?

Me: [Are you asking whether] she knows it is a **koti** [watching her]?

Kaavya: Yes... because **that [fashionable] koti** is staring at **this pinju [young] koti** Alagammai and adjusts her sari, and [Alagammai] thinks why is this **pombale [woman]** staring at me like this and stares back, and says "Oh I'm sorry, I didn't mean to stare at you in an indecent way," and she says oh no **I'm also an aravani**, to which this one says oh you don't look like an **aravani** at all you look like a **pombale** ... and [the fashionable koti] says I took hormones and did the operation, that's why I look like this, but I don't tell people I am an **aravani**..."

As Kaavya hurriedly recaps the encounter on the train, the terms "this koti" and "that koti" become increasingly conflated, making the glance more intersubjective. Do the two kotis, the fashionable one on the train, and the Alagammai, recognize one another as kotis? The concern is not that the posh thirunangai will be seen as a woman. Rather, the truly tragic misrecognition would be if the posh thirunangai were to see Alagammai as a payyan, or boy. For a koti to recognize another koti as such, is crucial. Thinking that another koti is either a payyan [boy] or naran [woman] show a tragic alienation one has from their own koti identity and from the "kinship chronotope," to use Nakassis' term, that links male-born persons to one another. The word aravani, throughout, refers to the way the outside world sees them, but the word koti mediates the secret shared recognition they have of each other.

3.4.4 Naran-ness as a kind of hypocrisy

As the discussion progressed, participants began discussing their sexual encounters on trains and train platforms, further revealing the kind of homosocial recognition that was at stake here. When describing the vast difference between encounters with women, and those with men, it became clear that koti-ness took shape through and against maleness, not the femaleness attributed to narans or "real" women.

Bhavana: The only people that really support us are **narans [women]**... on the train, it is only **narans** that will sit next to us, **aangal [men]** will jump and run away.

Samantha: Yes, **aangal [men]** will only seek us out at night!

[Chuckles]

Kumari: One **panthi [male partner]** came to me at the train platform to do dandha [have sex]. After [he climaxed], he just stayed standing next to me [in an abandoned spot behind the platform]. I told him why don't you wait on the platform and he says I don't want people on the platform thinking that I came to [have sex with] you... so they want to have sex with us but they don't want to be seen with us.

Me: They feel more comfortable being seen with a woman.

Bhavana: Yes, they like it when you wear a sari. Even back when I was in **panthi satla** (men's clothes), they wanted me to wear a sari for having sex.

The male lovers they discuss, are too fearful of being seen as homosexuals if they are caught with a koti. This is seen as hypocrisy because it denies the kotiness within themselves. While the relationship between "men" and "women" was symbolically fit to be seen in the daylight, the relationship between koti and panthi was too close, making even the panthi worry that he might be seen as a koti, or non-male. In the context of Alagammai and the posh thirunangai, this line of conversation reconfigures the two not as two women, but as panthi and koti, or as two kotis, that give or withhold a form of homosocial recognition to one another. Note that although panthi and koti are often positioned as masculine lover- effeminate partner, in this account the two appear as equal partners in sex. This is evidenced by Bhavana referring to her days when she wore "panthi satla" or "man's clothes". The artificiality of affecting chaste femaleness by wearing a sari was hypocritical then and it is hypocritical now too.

3.4.5 Kotis are not narans, they are only "like narans"

By recasting the characters in "The World of Thirunangais" as kotis, the last scene where Alagammai is reunited with her family, becomes silly, sentimental, and even pretentious. Bhavana, a member of our group, performed a comedic reading of this section, mocking the piety and virtue of Alagammai and the aravani amma:

Bhavana: So [at the end of this story] **this koti** starts crying, she cries, cries, cries, cries, cries cries

[Everyone laughs and Bhavana's exaggerated impression of Alagammai's sobs. Bhavana continues]

cries, cries, cries, cries, cries, cries...and says [affects a whiny high-pitched voice] I want to see my amma, my appa, my athai payyan [paternal aunt's son] and wow! There they are!

Me: Then the parents also give the guru money, no? What is that?

Bhavana: [sarcastic] Oh, maybe this guru was so affected by mercy and love for this **koti** that she doesn't want to accept the money. But no Shakthi, maybe the [deeper meaning] is that everyone wants to be reunited with parents and so they [really are] happy at the end... like in the film *Mahanadi* where that father comes to rescue her from the prostitutes and the [brothel owner] throws all that money at her [chuckles]

While Bhavana allows for the fact that the reunion might be genuinely sentimental — everybody wants to be reunited with their families— she nevertheless mocks the piousness with which it is rendered in the story. This ambivalence between the pious pretentiousness of Alagammai cast as a chaste female, the frank pragmatism of the koti Alagammai, is further highlighted by Bhavana's reference to the 1993 Tamil film *Mahanadi*. The film is centered around the struggle of a poor but honest single father, struggling to keep his family together. Though poor he is from an upper-caste, chaste background and becomes caught in a nexus of corrupt child traffickers and frauds that ultimately send him to prison. Both children fall prey to a seamy underworld of the city, both represented through "criminal tribes" motifs. His son is adopted by Narikuravar street performers, a community formerly classified as Criminal Tribes, and his daughter has been sold to a brothel in Sonagachi, the famous red-light area of Calcutta. When the father is released from prison, he is faced with the task of rescuing his children from

the nexus of criminal kinship into which they have fallen, and to restore the chaste family of origin.

Bhavana was referring to a climactic scene in *Mahanadi* where the father finds his daughter in a brothel in Sonagachi. In a maze-like back-alley building filled with sleazy men and underage girls, he finds his daughter lounging shamelessly in a room, wearing skimpy clothes and reading a fashion magazine. Seeing her father, she is overcome with shame and covers herself with a sheet. Her father, devastated, carries her out of the brothel and begs the owners to let her go. Although the male pimps demand Rs. 5000 for the girl, the matriarch, or "madam" of the brothel is moved by the father's plight. She appeals to the girls under her care, "Look, we were all sold here by our families, Kaveri is fortunate, for her father has come to rescue her. She is blessed, let us be happy for her." The women in the brothel shower the girl with rupee-notes, paying for her to return to the chastity of her biological family, and their criminality and sleaziness are redeemed by this gesture. Kaveri's chastity is lost, but the "madam" is redeemed by surrendering the girl to her father. In other words, her redemption is predicated upon prioritizing the biological chaste family and restoring the "wifeliness" and chastity of the girl.

Bhavana and Sankari expressed skepticism and humor at the earnest piety of the scene. "The guru is moved by love!" she said in a mocking tone, implicitly pointing out that the guru has economic and political investments in Alagammai that are erased by the overt sentimentality of the scene. Sankari emphasized this point:

Sankari: The guru will never take such good care of her... unless there are some benefits for the guru. She won't even consent to the operation... And then to say [sarcastically] fly away with your family ma, there is no longer any relationship between you and me, go and live a happy life **as a pombale** [woman], ma... it will never happen.

[She begins shrieking in mock-Bengali, imitating the brothel-owner in Mahanadi, and pretending to throw money on the ground. Everyone shrieks with laughter.

Sankari: [Sarcastic] 5000 rupees for a day's payment she says! And all those girls they have 5000 rupees to give, right on the spot!

On the surface Sankari and Bhavana might be seen as cynics, reiterating the violence of the *jamat*, but their sarcasm is making a deeper critique of how family relationships are themselves depoliticized through such sentimental and pious depictions. Sankari says that the guru's claim upon Alagammai is partly legitimate and justified. She has invested in having her operated, and in her joining the aravani family. The guru is unlikely to hand her over so easily to the parents, relinquishing all ties to the aravani family. The hypocrisy of the scene in *Mahanadi* comes from pretending that familial relationships guarantee one's entry into a chaste "female" life, or that such femaleness is untainted by the parents' economic or instrumental interests.

Sankari herself had learned this lesson in a painful way, being ostracized entirely by her own biological family. Although they lived only a few kilometers away, she had not seen them for fifteen years, not since she had "had the operation" and left her male body. They refused even to see her. Biological families, she said, were all too quick to disown male children that proved non-productive, of wealth or lineage. Her *koti* family, she often told me, was the one that would ultimately care for her.

In the light of this discussion, the gift at the end of Suyambu's text takes on multiple, ambiguous meanings. Is it, as he said, a "thank you" from the parents to the guru? Is it a payment that implicitly tells the guru to stay out of Alagammai's life hereon? Is the guru's gesture of refusal indeed a way to affirm the superior claim of the father, and of chaste upper-caste, as in the case of Mahanadi? Or is it a way for the guru to retain a claim on Alagammai, refusing to accept a single-installment repayment for the girl? What are the kinship ties that will matter in Alagammai's life in the future? All of these possibilities were at stake in these competing characterizations of Alagammai as a thirunangai, and Alagammai as a koti.

3.5 Conclusion

The competing "thirunangai imaginaries" I have offered in the chapter, demonstrate that "thirunangai" identity is not articulated in simple opposition to a flattened hegemonic image of "Tamil womanhood," but is one of *many* contesting imaginaries of what Tamil womanhood is. Such contestations are not limited to persons that are thirunangais or transgender, but are more widespread across all Tamil speakers. The fact that the thirunangai imaginaries that I encountered were set in a variety of genres ranging from Tamil feminist and writing to "popular" newspaper columns and novels, suggests that the "thirunangai imaginary" are part of a broader set of imaginaries of Tamil womanhood itself. If we are to see how sexual difference is "made to matter" through other kinds of historically-relevant axes, then it is important to see that it is not only "thirunangai" or "transgender" identity but sex itself that is "mattered" in this contingent way, through a mixture of cuts, births, writing, and speech acts. Rather than characterize the "thirunangai" as one single figure that is produced against a single ideal of the "Tamil woman," we might focus on the axes along which "woman"hood is performatively constructed. Does she speak Tamil or English and what kind of Tamil? Does she possess breasts and a womb and if so, what do they produce? How is she positioned in relation to caste and kinship networks? Has she performed acts of renunciation such as electing not to marry or not to have "female" beauty, or is she on a worldly path towards marriage and family? How experienced is she sexually and what sexually is she willing to do? How is her "femaleness" produced through a mixture of innate predisposition and habituation? These may be the axes along which different sorts of woman are "mattered" in ways that implicate other axes of social difference such as caste, language, class and bodily practice.

In the following chapter I further elaborate the question of koti identity that emerged in the "thirunangai joke." I examine the way that koti identity is made to hold those aspects of personhood that match neither the ideal of hijra or thirunangai personhood, nor the Tamil womanhood or manhood prescribed by the Dravidianist model. Koti is an encompassing term that indicates a community of persons that are born male but have renounced maleness to different degrees. Unlike "thirunangai" which participates in a set of contestations about "womanhood," koti imaginaries point towards contestations of what proper maleness entails and who possesses it.

CHAPTER III: KOTI IMAGINARIES

Siddarth Narrain, eunuch, highlights [their] feelings, as follows:

"Ever since I can remember, I have always identified myself as a woman. I lived in Namakkal, a small town in Tamil Nadu. When I was in the tenth standard I realized that the only way for me to be comfortable was to join the hijra community. It was then that my family found out that I frequently met hijras who lived in the city. One day, when my father was away, my brother, encouraged by my mother, started beating me with a cricket bat. I locked myself in a room to escape from the beatings. My mother and brother then tried to break into the room to beat me up further. Some of my relatives intervened and brought me out of the room. I related my ordeal to an uncle of mine who gave me Rs.50 and asked me to go home. Instead, I took the money and went to live with a group of hijras in Erode."

National Legal Services Authority vs Union of India (2015), p 9

"Romy, would you still be interested in being interviewed? I can meet you at a park, wherever is convenient."

(Irritated) "And what do you want to hear? The usual "I grew up here, I liked playing with little girls' toys, I always felt like a woman..."?"

"Yes... Just the usual is fine, though you can also share anything else."

"I'll think about it Shakthi. I'm not sure."

from my field notes, November 2015

I began this thesis with a critique of how a stock definition of hijras had become ubiquitously cited in ethnographies, legal documents and activist texts in the past two decades. I have argued that directing attention to the spectacle of a seemingly stable, self-evident iconic "hijra" identity can help us notice the disparate variety of bodies and places that are, at various times, marked as "hijra" and the material consequences of such marking. In this chapter I examine an important mode by which the seeming stability of hijra identity is constructed: the circulation of life stories. The excerpt with which I open is drawn from the preliminary section of the petition filed by NALSA in 2012, to which the court eventually responded with a positive ruling (*NALSA vs Union of India* 2012, 8-9). In explaining what "transgender" identity is, and justify the trauma experienced by the petitioners, the judgment cites three short "hijra" life stories. The interesting thing about the life story cited here is that the text is lifted directly from a human rights report published by Saranam and the People's Union of Civil Liberties in 2003, although the name of the supposed narrator is changed. In the PUCL-K report, the narrator is "Roopa, a 30-year old hijra" (*ibid.*, 54). Twelve years later, the story has circulated through multiple documents between Bangalore and Delhi, until it appears in 2012 in the petition filed by NALSA in the Supreme Court, now attributed to "Siddharth Narrain, eunuch."⁴⁷ The various bodies indexed by its circulation might have transitioned in terms of sex or age or left the hijra community altogether, but the story remains fixed. Indeed, the fixity of the story paradoxically makes the narrator almost incidental to its telling. It was just this quality that led Romy, cited in my second opening vignette, to respond to my request for an interview somewhat cynically: "what do you want to hear? The usual "I grew up here, I liked playing with little girls' toys, always felt like a woman...?"

4.1 The "Kothi Wars"

The process of circulation described here might sound familiar to anthropologists of HIV/AIDS prevention movements, and more recently, transgender rights movements, that have expressed concern about the reductionism performed by international categories when they are applied to "local" realities, pointing out the reification that emerges from such processes of circulation and translation (Khanna 2009, Dutta and Roy 2014).⁴⁸ For example Akshay Khanna (2009) criticizes the way that while koti is typically portrayed as the "traditional" authentic pan-Indian MSM identity, it is an identity that is often embraced only "after interaction with the HIV/AIDS industry," implicating subjects in a violent process by which they must interpellate themselves through epidemiological categories before being eligible for rights and benefits (78). He characterizes the translations performed by HIV/AIDS health workers as a "leap across an

⁴⁷ There is much more that could be said about this recirculation, even regarding this specific story. For example, in the PUCL-K report of 2003, the life stories are part of a much longer narrative, that deliberately focuses on the violence experienced by the protagonist. This was due in part to their belonging in a report that was explicitly geared towards pressuring government agencies to draft policies that would promote transgender rights and curb police violence. A pertinent question to pursue would be: what determined the pieces of the story that are circulated in each genre? A second point of interest is that the person cited here— Siddharth Narrain— is in fact one of the human rights lawyers that was instrumental in drafting the PUCL-K report of 2003. What is the process of citational contagion that leads to him becoming the purported narrator in the 2015 version?

⁴⁸ More recently, in an article entitled "Decolonizing Transgender," Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy (2014) have pointed out the "epistemic violence" that might be engendered by the uncritical mapping of the term "transgender" onto a diversity of sexual identities in India.

ontological disjuncture" where they must disavow their own embodied experience to frame their identities in epidemiological terms until "every erotic gaze is brought into the service of the industry" (72). While Khanna's argument certainly acknowledges the fragmented and incomplete nature of the "HIV/AIDS industry," his writing nevertheless enacts a metaphysics of presence by invoking the "local" koti body and its "erotic gaze" as a foil against which the violent disembodied public health category is framed. Utilizing either the bodies or the individual life stories of one's interlocutors to deconstruct a reified category, however, as I try to demonstrate below, is a gesture that backfires on itself, reproducing the very metaphysics of presence that one is trying to critique.⁴⁹

While essentializing life stories is problematic, flatly proclaiming their constructedness can be equally unhelpful. Rather than emphasize incommensurability we might look instead at what anthropologist Stacy Pigg has called the "social production of commensurability" (2001, 482), treating translation not as violent misrecognition so much as a fragmented and open-ended social practice that has heterogeneous implications in each context. Pigg examines the translation practices of health workers in Nepal in the late 1990s, particularly the way they evaluated English and Nepali as appropriate languages for talking about AIDS and sex. In making linguistic choices, her interlocutors characterized English as a "precise, sanitized, and technical" medium that offered a transparent window onto AIDS-related technoscientific terms (*ibid.*, 516). By contrast, even when they translated these terms into Nepali for training workshops and publicity materials, they characterized their translations as folksy, awkward neologisms (505), or used complex and literate forms that were not standard Nepali (*ibid.*, 507). A somewhat puzzling aspect of their characterizations, Pigg writes, is that talking about sex in Nepali was not as new as health workers made it seem. Terms relating to "sexuality" had arguably been an object of Nepali health discourse as part of the Family Planning programmes of the 1960s. Still, while these earlier discourses tended to talk about sex through concepts such as population control and environmental degradation, AIDS-related content rendered in English seemed to offer a kind of raciness or linguistic license to talk about sexual practices (*ibid.*, 494). Pigg argues that while the seeming "fit" between technoscience and English was described as a natural feature of the languages, it was in fact a result of a complex confluence between the international prestige indexed by the technoscientific vocabulary of AIDS and the social privilege indexed by English in Nepal. Maintaining the English-ness of technoscience enabled workers to bracket off sexual relations from social relations more generally (*ibid.*, 517) while also allowing "Nepalis variously positioned along a steep grade of inequality [to] rappel themselves up this cliff face to stand... on the flat plains of internationally established truth and fact" (*ibid.*, 510). Rather than evaluate translations in terms of their fidelity with respect to "local" categories of subjectivity, Pigg's approach allows us to ask: how are people interpellated by international vocabularies such as technoscience, or in the case of my project, "MSM" and transgender? How do they contest the way that they are interpellated?

Mariyal, the MSM-run HIV/AIDS prevention organization where I conducted fieldwork in 2015, had emerged at the very historical moment that Pigg describes, when, after a somewhat overdetermined upswing in HIV/AIDS related funding in South Asia, sanctioned by the Bill and

Melinda Gates Foundation in the late 1990s, there was a boom in the HIV/AIDS industry.⁵⁰ This period was marked by what Lawrence Cohen has called "The Kothi Wars", when HIV/AIDS prevention organizations across India were challenged to play cultural broker as they vied for international funds, claiming to have the best translation between "MSM" and "local" sexual categories. Staff members at Mariyal were certainly engaged in the HIV/AIDS related education and translation that both Cohen and Pigg's interlocutors performed. For example, Mariyal staff's responsibilities included distributing condoms at "hot spots" in the city where men picked up sex partners, conducting sex education classes at the office "drop-in center," offering confidential testing services and linkage with Anti-Retroviral Therapy dispensaries. Mariyal staff also ran a 24-hour hotline to help tackle "crisis cases" relating to sex work, police harassment, healthcare, family, or discrimination experienced by community members. At the office there would be between ten and twenty "drop-ins" or regulars that came to eat lunch, gossip, or take a nap before going out to do sex work in the evening.

Despite these similarities, however, the situation of staff members and beneficiaries at Mariyal was different in important ways. For one, Mariyal was a Community-Based Organization that was run by and for, Men who had Sex with Men. This meant that staff members at Mariyal were identified not only as "health workers" but as members of the very "high-risk groups" that were considered vulnerable to the disease and marked by the stigma that came with this spectacularized vulnerability. It was, therefore, not only "AIDS" as a technoscientific object that was constructed by discourse but the representation and visibility of one's own subjectivity. It was this burden of representation that led Romy to impatiently dismiss life stories as "the usual." After all, life stories were indeed business as usual at Mariyal. The office manager, Kanaga, was an expert at offering a comprehensive typology of "local" sexual identities that corresponded to the global identities of "MSM": *pantis*: active partners in sex; "double-deckers" that were "versatile" in their sexual practice, *kotis* that were identified as passive partners in sex, and TGs, marked by their physical operation. This typology was a standard part of presentations made to donors, and each sexual identity was explained by way of a testimony from a member of that community. A typical "koti" or a typical "TG" story could be easily produced for any occasion. For sensitization workshops or donor visits, one office member might be quickly recruited to tell the "life story" appropriate to each identity, wearing the corresponding clothing ("kotis" wore pants and shirts and "TGs" wore saris). Mariyal's cupboards were filled with old publicity materials and pamphlets, containing "the usual" koti life stories that had, over the years, been entextualized in human rights reports, sexuality training modules, publicity materials, news articles, and legal documents. Over the years these had come to possess a range of other meanings, becoming tokens of nostalgia for kotis that had since transitioned to being hijras, thirunangais, or "TGs", indexing the days of their youth, and the early days of the epidemic.

⁵⁰ Pigg writes that in the case of South Asia, there was already a consolidated body of technoscience as well as an international infrastructure poised to take *before* the "onset" of the epidemic. In that sense, "AIDS has been experienced in Nepal mostly as an *expected* epidemic" (2001, 481, original italics).

4.2 The lives of life-stories

In this chapter, I focus on the lives *of* life stories as they circulated, indexing many time periods and many lives. I demonstrate that autobiographical narratives and life stories are not transparent windows into lived experience, *nor* are they hackneyed instrumental fabrications created to navigate a political landscape such as the "HIV/AIDS industry." Rather, I demonstrate the way the referents of the life stories— the persons, places, and times that were woven together to create a powerful metaphysics of presence— were contested and evaluated by my interlocutors, implicating many bodies and lives that spanned time periods ranging from a single life course, to an entire era, to a mythic time. My interest is not in recovering the "real persons" that are the subjects of these narratives. Rather, it is to see the way that the figure of a coherent "person" is itself co-produced by performers and audiences, coalescing and dissipating across contexts and mapping onto many different bodies as it moves. As I will demonstrate, even when the text of a life story appears to be fixed, the referents— its supposed narrator and the characters voiced— are radically mobile and indeterminate.

To denaturalize the relationship between the *koti* life story and its referents, while still taking seriously the "realness" of each, I draw on the concept of the ideologeme from the work of literary theorist M.M. Bakhtin. The ideologeme, for Bakhtin, is a poetic device, motif or element found within a text that mediates between the compositional unity of the work and the socio-historical realities and literary genres within which the element circulates. The concept finds its place in Bakhtin's argument for a "sociological poetics" that can bridge the divide between Marxist and rigidly formalist schools of literary criticism. Even the formal compositional unity of a work, Bakhtin points out, arises not from a force immanent to motif or poetic device, but the social evaluations that have accrued to them: "When the poet selects words, their combination, and their compositional arrangement, he [must] select, combine, and arrange the evaluations lodged in them as well" ([1928] 1991, 123). Literary and poetic elements such as the ideologeme draw their efficacy from "social evaluations," but by offering interpretive frameworks for how discourse is experienced and understood, they also constitute social reality.⁵¹

The concept of ideologeme is useful when describing the historically dense construct of the "*koti*" because it can operate at multiple scales— both as a specific element in a specific texts and a precipitate of much broader historical periods and communicability models. The *koti* life story considered from this perspective is not a direct unmediated reference to an empirically findable person or underlying material-historical reality, nor is it a pure plot motif that is reduced to the instrumental efficacy it possesses for narrators. Each element of the narrative is efficacious both within the conventions of each genre (human rights report, newspaper article, or testimony) and within the socio-historical milieu within which it circulates. The "referential meaning" of the narrative is historically-specific, based upon the expectations of the audience, and the ideological weight of the genre in which it is couched, and the way my interlocutors evaluated its truth-value and efficacy. The ideologemes emanating from a story encompass the

history and circulation of the poetic form, as well as its efficacy and importance for my interlocutors as an embodied element of social life.⁵²

I begin the chapter with a brief account of how two hijra life stories were framed in the human rights report published by PUCL-K in 2003, comparing this framing to the way they were inserted into the NALSA petition as windows into "TG identity." In the second section I examine some of the criteria by which such life stories were evaluated by some of my interlocutors at Mariyal. My method in the second section is to analyze a specific short story entitled "Ippadiyuma?" — a rough translation would be "Is there [a person] like this too?" — deliberately crafted to be *not* a typical life story but a cheeky take on the genre. The story was part of a corpus of almost forty stories written for a Ph.D. student researching HIV/AIDS in 2001. Eventually not used in his dissertation, the stories had lain unused in Kanaga's house until she produced it in our reading circle in 2015. I examine how the characters and plot within Ippadiyuma circulated as ideologemes in Bakhtin's sense, entering into a polyvalent, multitemporal relationship with participants in our reading circle in 2015, when we read and discussed the story aloud. I conclude by pointing out some of the newly emergent genres in which life stories are circulating, such as thirunangai activist autobiographies, pointing out the changing criteria by which the cohesion of the "person" projected by these stories is evaluated.

4.2.1 The "usual" life story: evidence of injury

A major impetus for the current-day transgender rights movement and particularly for the gains that it has made at the national level, is a report authored in 2003 by the People's Union for Civil Liberties- Karnataka with the help of Saranam (the human rights organization where Aki, the colleague I described in Chapter 1, worked). Entitled "Human Rights Violation Against the Transgender Community," the report was one of the first to use the word "transgender" to bring together an umbrella of persons that worked at Saranam or approached the organization for support. Prepared by a team of human rights lawyers and sexuality rights activists in Bangalore, the report drew upon the personal narratives of 30 hijra persons and sex workers to illustrate the extent of violence they had experienced, and make recommendations for how to reform the law, police structures, and medical establishments. First published in 2003, the report became a key instrument in the battle to decriminalize homosexuality and continues to be a ubiquitous citation in works that reflect on the status of LGBT rights persons in India.

The language of the report reflects the combination of Marxist principles at the heart of Saranam's mission, as well as the radical queer politics that was influential amongst Indian legal scholars at the time. In the preface to the report, legal scholar Prof. Upendra Baxi describes the gesture performed by the report as an act of exposure, revealing "the absolute human

⁵² As an example of an ideologeme, Bakhtin gives the example of Bazarov, a character in Russian novelist Turgenev's 1862 novel *Fathers and Sons*. Bazarov is a member of the *raznochinty* (urban working class) of the mid-nineteenth century in Russia, representing the emerging urban working class and its critique of the old order. As Bakhtin points out, however, Bazarov is not an unmediated reflection of the historical *raznochinty*, nor is he simply a plot-driven element. Bazarov's role in *Fathers and Sons* is driven both by the plot as well as by the social world in which the novel circulates. He is an "oblique document of [the author Turgenev's] ideological horizon" and that of the liberal nobility to which Turgenev belonged (Bakhtin [1928] 1991, 22). Eventually, writes Bakhtin, the artistic ideologeme rejoins reality precisely as a work of art, and Bazarov becomes just as tightly woven into social life as a "real, live *raznochinets*" (ibid., 25).

rightlessness of transgender communities" and the "microfascism of the local police state" (PUCL-K [2003] 2005, 13).⁵³ In pursuing these goals, the authors cite the power of personal narratives, and their ability to move one directly to the scene of the crime. As a preface to one of the narratives, for example, the writers offer the following caveat:

We would like to warn readers that some of the following testimonies might be shocking and crude in terms of the graphic language with which the sexual abuse and degradation is described. Our intention is not to titillate or merely to produce disgust but to convey in some small measure the horror and violence, both physical and psychological, that hijras and kothis face on the street (ibid., 33).

The report writers promise an immanent connection between the violent event and its narration and subsequent insertion into the text, promising that by encountering the text, the reader will be transformed in some measure. The writers disparage the "prurient curiosity and violence" that can characterize "anthropology and medicine," offering in its place, unmediated access to the "real" experience of those giving testimony and a "myth-busting" tone:

The institution called the family is usually seen as a safe shelter free from violence... in which the individual finds fulfillment, love, and peace... However, for the hijra and koti communities, the experience of family is frighteningly different" (ibid., 53).

The stories of Sachin and Roopa are much longer in the PUCL-K report than in the NALSA vs Union of India petition, and much richer in detail when it comes to violence and sexual practice.⁵⁴ For example, the story of Roopa goes considerably further than that cited by the NALSA petition, describing the way Roopa's parents beat her violently, forcibly shaved her head, threatened to break her legs and work as a cleaner (PUCL-K [2003] 2005, 54-55). The story of Sachin, also cited in the NALSA petition, goes on to describe the way she grows suicidal

⁵³ The historical narrative in PUCL-K's report is one that I have described before as the "colonial degeneration" argument: that hijras held a place of pride in ancient and precolonial India, but were subsequently oppressed by the British government's intolerance of sexual difference. Following their criminalization under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, the report continues, "the eunuchs never found a voice in national or subaltern history" (PUCL-K [2003] 2005, 60).

⁵⁴ While I don't analyze Sachin's story here in detail, I offer it below as an illustration of how it possesses the same generic form:

Sachin, a TG, expressed his experiences as follows:

"My name is Sachin and I am 23 years old. As a child I always enjoyed putting make-up like 'vibhuti' or 'kum kum' and my parents always saw me as a girl. I am male but I only have female feelings. I used to help my mother in all the housework like cooking, washing and cleaning. Over the years, I started assuming more of the domestic responsibilities at home. The neighbours started teasing me. They would call out to me and ask: 'Why don't you go out and work like a man?' or 'Why are you staying at home like a girl?' But I liked being a girl. I felt shy about going out and working. Relatives would also mock and scold me on this score. Every day I would go out of the house to bring water. And as I walked back with the water I would always be teased. I felt very ashamed. I even felt suicidal. How could I live like that? But my parents never protested. They were helpless." (PUCL-K [2003] 2005, 34 cited in NALSA vs Union of India 2012, 8).

at home, makes friends with other hijras and begins to do sex work, was violently forced to perform sexual acts without payment, and experience unwarranted violence from police (ibid., 34- 38). In short, the stories are made to seem immanently connected to specific times and places, conjuring a powerful metaphysics of presence.

Cited in the NALSA petition in 2012, however, these stories are considerably shortened and there is no date given. Rather, they are made to seem timeless by placing them in a much broader frame of time and place. Bracketed by a history of hijra identity as an ancient tradition that has long existed within India, the testimonies are placed alongside an account of the Khairati case from nineteenth century colonial legal records, when a supposed "hijra" named Khairati was detained by British police. They are followed by a description of the Yogyakarta Principles pertaining to gender and sexual identity, ratified by the United Nations in 2006. Placed in a chronotope that stretches from "ancient myths and religious traditions" to the nineteenth century colonial law, to recent developments in international human rights in 2006, Sachin and Siddharth/Roopa are made to stand in for an eternally-present hijra identity that maps seamlessly onto the "international" discourse of transgender identity expressed at Yogyakarta.

It is perhaps possible to draw some preliminary conclusions from this comparison. For example, it is clear that while the human rights report places far more emphasis on the singularity of each narrator, it nevertheless assimilates all of them to a seemingly homogenous group. In this sense, it is as homogenizing as the Supreme Court judgment on NALSA.⁵⁵ Yet, as I hope to demonstrate in the coming section, to describe one of these versions of the stories as more "real" or more "true" than the other would be to impose a singular criterion of "realness" upon essentially underdetermined narratives. Without ethnographic research on how the life story acquires meaning amongst a particular group of people at a *particular* time and place, it is impossible to make generalizations or conclusions about its meaning or the persons it references. Yet, to describe one of these versions of the stories as more "real" or more "true" than the other would be to impose a singular criterion of "realness" upon essentially underdetermined narratives, while also erasing the choices, historical context, and constraints of the persons that wrote and circulated them. As my own brief time performing "documentation" of human rights violations had taught me, such elisions, additions and edits were a part of the day-to-day work of persons engaged in the transgender rights movement.⁵⁶

4.2.2 "Real stories, not bullshit stories"

Determined to avoid uncritically collecting such firsthand life stories, I had, by 2015, amassed a considerable collection of novels, short stories and poetry authored by and about thirunangai protagonists. I had expected that I would easily find a community of fellow readers with whom to discuss these stories but when I shared the texts with people I met at LGBT activists events and meetings, I found very few takers. Assailed with doubts about whether I was on the right track and frustrated with my agonizingly slow progress when it came to reading and translating the Tamil, I asked Kanaga if she would be willing to read some of the stories with me. I wanted to organize two "reading sessions" where I could circulate amongst a group of

⁵⁶ I would be interested in further exploring these points with people well-versed in the practices of writing legal and human rights documents.

participants at Mariyal some selected excerpts from the texts I had been reading. My hope was that the group would unfold seminar-style, and that participants would offer critiques of the text.

In my first meeting, described in the last chapter, we discussed the story of Alagammai. While group participants kindly humored me, knowing that this was important to my Ph.D. Research, it was clear that the material I had chosen was not very engaging. About halfway through the first reading circle, Kanaga burst out: “Shakthi, these texts you have collected are terribly boring. I have almost 50 short stories written by the community, much more interesting. Why don't we read those? We wrote the stories in 2001 for a foreign researcher named Eric. He paid us Rs. 200 for each story. I think now he is in some senior position at the World Health Organization in New York.”

At first I was speechless. All this time I had spent trying to collect texts, and Kanaga had never once mentioned this archive! My mind leaped to an immediate, predictable analysis. “Here was an example of a wily American researcher,” I thought, “that had profited by collecting koti life stories. Another instance of how foreign researchers exploited the community.” But as we read the stories the following week, I realized that the meanings of the stories was not so obvious. The koti life stories had aged, as had their narrators and Eric that had collected them. The persons that emerged condensed multiple temporal planes and life trajectories.

The first matter of interest was that Kanaga described Eric, the person that had collected the stories in 2001, as unique amongst other researchers. Eric was unique because instead of conducting one-on-one interviews and documenting life stories, he had announced a competition, where each story would “win” a small sum and the person with the most stories would win a larger sum. Eric's decision to pay money for stories was not seen as an extractive process by which foreign researchers exploited kotis. On the contrary, Kanaga saw it as an incentive that promoted creativity and artistic freedom, allowing the “voice of the community” to be heard.

Eric, moreover, did not fit the profile of the stereotypical money-laden American researcher. When Kanaga and the founder of Mariyal kindly put me in touch with Eric in 2017, I discovered that his own journey to Mariyal was unusual, demonstrating the difference between the public health field in Chennai in the 1990s and today. He had grown up in Georgia, in the former Soviet Union. He was originally trained as a doctor but grew interested in public health. He moved to Nepal in 1999, in the heyday of the “Kothi Wars,” to pursue a Masters in Public Health, focusing on ‘Poverty, Migration and HIV in Nepal’. After publishing his research as a book, he moved to Chennai (then called Madras) to pursue a Ph.D. in Public Health and Anthropology at Madras University. At a time when writing about MSM and homosexuality was still taboo, Eric was something of a forerunner— his original plan was to write a thesis on how migration patterns amongst MSM and IDUs affected their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. In addition to collecting data from over 1700 respondents, he had also collected stories that would “put flesh in numbers,” distinguishing his research from the stale writings generally produced in the discipline. “I wanted real stories, not bullshit stories,” he told me, not the hackneyed tales routinely entextualized in public health documents to demonstrate abjection, but original work that was, in his view, unique to each narrator. His brainwave had been to tell his interlocutors that they should write whatever they want— fiction, semi-fiction, poetry— and remain anonymous if they so chose. Looking back, Eric wondered in his conversation with me, if his research might have been too forward-thinking for the time. To his chagrin, because of the stigma associated with MSM at the time, his Ph.D. advisor told him to change topics and work with slum dwellers

instead of with MSM. The stories had never been published, and for almost fifteen years they had lain unused under Kanaga's bed.

There were about 45 stories in Kanaga's collection, but she, together with Mythili and Kamala, two other senior activists at Mariyal, selected ten stories for our group to read. The stories she had collected ranged from comedic fiction to sobering semi-fictional autobiographies, dealing with topics ranging from the pleasures of doing sex work to the pain of losing loved ones from AIDS, from the joys of *jamat* life to the tragedy of seeing a lover marry a woman.

4.2.3 "The usual" is a bore

I was curious to circulate the typical, "usual" life stories in the group to see what participants thought, but Kanaga had purposely left such stories out. I wondered if she shared my own tentatively formed critique of the stories, a cynical speculation about how foreign researchers became rich by profiting off the abjection of *koti* subjects. But Kanaga's critique was quite different: she characterized such stories as a lack of creativity and a poor performance. "You know those [*kotis*] that take every ordinary thing in their life and make a story out of it?" she said.

Remember that drop-in that used to come to the office in 1999 or 2000? [She would go like this]:

I woke up this morning, then I switched off the A/C and put on the fan, then I got up and put Colgate toothpaste on a toothbrush, a brand-new new toothbrush, then I saw that all the clothes I hung out had still not dried, then I took the clothes that had dried and put them in a bag to give for ironing, and then I left the bag next to a box and saw there were a few more clothes in the washing machine— ayyo!

[It's the same when a *koti* says] "...as a child I played house. I liked boys. My older brother would hit me. I went to Mumbai. I escaped. I came back. We have all heard it a thousand times... look, just because that's what happened in my personal life, doesn't mean it makes for an interesting story!"

It's only because that doctor asked us to write autobiographies that these were written...

Kanaga's quotation already reveals a subtle disjuncture between her own assessment of the autobiographies and that of Eric. While Eric evaluated the stories (for good or bad) in terms of their correspondence to life events, Kanaga emphasized the artistic virtuosity of the teller and writer, pointing out that fidelity to the events of one's life did not in and of itself constitute a story. Kanaga characterized the relationship with doctors precisely as a context where such "stock" takes emerged, even with unusual doctors like Eric. And interestingly, Kanaga invoked an example of a verbal performance rather than a written one, highlighting the oral and enacted qualities of *koti* performance traditions that were a regular feature in the office, rather than the writing of stories.

The story I describe here is called *Ippadiyuma?* (Is this [a type of person] too?) The story follows Raji, a *satla koti* (*sari*-wearing *koti*) as she cruises one night at one of the most iconic hot spots in Chennai, the famous Marina Beach. She is approached by a naïve young man unfamiliar with sex work, and masturbates him to climax. The humor in the story derives from Raji's ability

to switch between the chaste, demure voice of a naran (cisgender woman) and a sarcastic, playful koti voice, easily deceiving the naïve inexperienced boy. The story peaks when he reaches out to touch her, leading her to panic: what if he discovers that she is not a naran but a koti after all? She brings him to climax in the nick of time and returns home relieved, removing her uncomfortable "female" accoutrements and slumping comfortably into her unadorned body. The story follows Raji from her most "female" state to her most "male" state, emphasizing the pleasures— and perils— of the quintessential koti ability to straddle both worlds.

I offer below my translation of the story (in bold text), along with my transcriptions of our group discussion (in italics). The participants in the discussion are: Kanaga, the group leader that read the story aloud (she identified as koti), Bhavana and Kumari, both of whom identified as transgender women; Kamala and Trisha that identified as kotis, and myself. I then offer an analysis of both the story and its social lives, past and present.

4.3 *Ippadiyuma?* or "Is this [a type of person] too?"

Bhavana: This story is super comedy.

Kumari: At the beach.

Everyone claps in anticipation as Kanaga begins to read.

If a woman stands on the beach like a statue, what man will pass her by? Look at him slavering over there, that jeans-pant boy. Ready to swallow me whole. Let's see what he is willing to pay, he's my first customer after all.

Kanaga, gesturing with her hands, explains: "She says this and walks towards him."

Moving towards him, I raised my eyebrows: what? He had been waiting for my signal. He hurried over.

"What's your name?" (*Polite man's voice*)

What a pain this is. What is he going to do knowing my name? Let it go, he's my first customer after all. (*Rough, local accent*).

"Kavitha, Sir." (*High, timid woman's voice*)

Barely hearing me, his eyes bored into my chest. And why wouldn't they? Breasts carved like firm globes on a temple statue.

"What is it, sir?"

He averted his eyes quickly.

"Nothing," he said, gazing at my face.

He gazed, kept gazing, and gazed some more for good measure.

And why wouldn't he? Freshly bathed, skin smoothed with turmeric, eyebrows carefully penciled in, a perfect bindi to match my sari, mouth plump and oily with lipstick, and a little mole above my upper lip! Three "disco" and one "peacock" earring dangling from each ear, and if that wasn't enough, a "disco-and-peacock-earring-two-in-one"...

Now he's gazing at my hair.

And why wouldn't he? Rich and black, falling thickly to my hip, with a whiff of jasmine and shiakai... it would have stopped George Bush himself in his tracks! You think this average jeans-pant boy is going to pass it by?

(Bhavana and Kumari shriek with laughter)

"What is it sir, are you going to keep staring at me?" *(High pitched, timid woman's voice)*
"Oh no madam, it's nothing." *(Polite man's voice)*

Nothing indeed! He blushed, staring at the sand. I, the one that should have been the one blushing, looked up at him instead.

Kumari cackles, clapping her hands

"Shall we sit?"

He was seated before I even finished my sentence. Eager little boy, probably has no experience.

More laughter

"Nobody will come here, no?" (Him)

"Nobody will come." (This is me)¹

"It's not what you think," he explained hastily, "Im from Coimbatore but had some business in Chennai. Just finished with my work and came to the beach for no reason. Then I saw you and my brain stopped working altogether. Is this a safe space?"

"Don't be afraid. We look like a man and wife, nobody will suspect anything. There are so many couples here, we are just like one of them. Okay?"

More laughter.

He drew close, and leaned on my shoulder. By the way he was panting and slobbering in my ear, I figured he was aroused.

"What do I need to pay?"

"Oh no sir, I'm not that kind of woman, I come here very occasionally. If I meet someone like you, from a good family, I stay a little while and leave. What can I do, my family is struggling, if my children eat at night it is because of decent men like you."

Bhavana: "Not that type of woman," it seems!

He looked at me with pity, fished in his pocket, and produced a five hundred rupee note.

“Thank you very much sir.” I moved to tuck it into my blouse. (High, polite woman's voice.)

“Don’t put it in your blouse now, keep it in your hand.”

Everyone bursts into laughter. This moment is instantly recognized as typical, predictable male behavior.

Oh god. This rascal seems to think of everything.

“Someone is going to see us!”, I whispered, “Now sit freely with your legs apart, yes, like that,” I placed my hand on his zipper.

The word "freely" is said in English.

“But Kavitha, you said nobody would come!”

Paying no attention, I started to move my hand up and down. He tried to halt my movements, and began stroking my hair.

“Stop it!” I snapped.

He darted forward to kiss my cheek.

I jerked my head away. “My god, you can’t do these things here!”

My wrist was beginning to hurt. Again, he stopped my hand, and tried to lay his head in my lap. I shoved him away. Undeterred, he reached for my chest.

“Hey, did you hear what I said? Stop it! Look at all those people staring! Finish quickly now, before the police find us. You look like my little brother! Won’t people get the wrong idea?”

More loud laughter.

Kanaga: Just a second ago she said "we look like a married couple"!

Kumari: Look how she's changed [her stance]!

His face crumpled and he made some pleading noises. I ignored him. Now my wrist was a blur, it looked like the Shatabdi Express. He lurched towards me once more, reaching now for that place.

I smacked his hand away. “Dey dey dey, what do you think this is, your bedroom? This is a public place, it’s because of fellows like you that we aren’t able to come more often!”

(Rough, local male voice.)

Kanaga: She can't come more often, she says! Just a moment ago she said how she hardly comes to the beach! Now she says "It's because of you we can't come more often!"

“What are you saying, ma,” he whined, “I am about to climax, and still you won’t let me touch? I didn’t give you five hundred rupees just to do what I can do at home! I’ll give you another hundred, two hundred, but keep me “company” properly!”

The word “climax” is said in English.

I accepted his two hundred. “Okay, you can stroke a little bit.” Lifting one leg slightly, I moved my sari to the side...

Kanaga interjects: I moved my sari to the side... and adjusted my bommai (dick).⁵⁷

...He reached inside eagerly. He was almost about to press it- aah!-

Trisha: Oh god! Ayyo!

Kanaga: It was in her hand, and now he has his hand on it!

Bhavana, explaining: It's her boobs.

Kumari and Trisha: No, no, it's lower down, its lower down, it's the bommai (dick)!

Kanaga, explains: Look, she adjusted her dick moved it out of the side. He reaches his hand inside, but his hand doesn't go in!

Kamala: The hand doesn't go in because it's not a vagina!

Kanaga: She is afraid he'll find it so she makes him come as soon as possible and leaves the scene.

Me: So his hand was on her... thigh?

...I dodged his hand, just in time! He shuddered, I attained victory. Thank goodness! Shrugging him off, I quickly left to find the next one.

Back at home...

“What Raji, you are home early,” said my guru. (Kanaga uses a rough, authoritative voice for the guru.)

“No ma, the police were being a nuisance.” (Plaintive, young voice).

“Is that so? Did you get anything?” This was my guru (guru = jamat Amma).

Kanaga skips over the annotation intended for unfamiliar readers: (guru=jamat Amma).

“I made two hundred rupees Amma,” I said, handing it over.

I pull the wig off my itching scalp and scratched with both hands. The relief!

I toss the wilted jasmine out on the street.

⁵⁷ The literal meaning of *bomma* is a “toy” or “plaything,” but at Mariyal it was used as a slang word referring to a penis.

These wretched clip-on earrings, they pinch my ears! Next month I really need to replace them. I pry them from my earlobes and put them away for the next day.

Everyone cackles; this section evokes the loudest laughter yet.

Peeling off my blouse, I chuck the water-filled nirodh (condom) to the side. I lift my skirt and mop the sweaty hair on my chest.

Bhavana and Kumari shriek with laughter at the reference to his chest hair.

That wretch, the scratches he left in just two seconds! Another second, and tuk!- I'd have been caught!

My skin is burning from shaving twice daily. I peer in the mirror: on top of all this, a mole, too— hah! Just what this stubbly face needs!

Arms and legs stretched out- Aaaaahhhhhhh!- she slumped against the wall in relief, that satla koti.

Cheers and applause.

4.4 The kotis that emerge from Ippadiyuma

4.4.1 Koti as research subject

Raji, the koti in the story, might be seen as an ideologeme that was generative of multiple worlds that marked many different persons as koti. The first of these was the sexuality rights movement of the 1990s and early 2000s, which was explicitly marked by Kanaga as a time distant from the present. Before starting, Kanaga took a moment to explicitly establish the context of our reading. “We are doing this to help Shakthi in her research,” she said. “Shakthi, like Eric all those years ago, is interested in koti stories.” With this comment, Kanaga brought Eric and myself into a single temporal plane as two of the countless researchers that had passed through Mariyal over the years. She implicitly pointed also to how the current event was of a familiar type: the research discussion intended to help foreign researchers understand the term koti.

Several elements embedded within the printed text also pointed to the way koti had emerged as an HIV/AIDS-related term in the 1990s. The very title of the story, “Ippadiyuma?”, or “What is this [type of person]?” presents the koti as a curious liminal form that must be explained to an “outside” reader. The name of the story marks the author’s deliberate refusal to produce the kind of hijra life stories cited by the PUCL-K report and the Supreme Court judgment in favour of NALSA. In terms of the culturally-relevant axes of identity, “satla koti” identity is marked by every kind of ambiguity: indeterminate surgical status, an ability to be both passive and active in sexual intercourse, an ambivalent relationship to the guru, and the power of makeup and performance to transform the way one is seen. The fact that the term “satla koti” emerges only in the very last line of the story is itself a cheeky refusal to the foreign

researcher's desire to "pin down" koti identity, and it offers a purposely liminal experience that tests the limits of any fixed conception of identity.

An interesting observation at this juncture is that the story describes satla koti identity not through the standard Tamil that would be a part of government-issued public health discourse, but deliberately by incorporating both English terms and koti-basha or koti language, a register that mixes Tamil and Farsi. At several points in the text there are explicit annotations that translate terms such as "guru" and "jamat" into the standardized Tamil that would be understood by an outside reader. When reading the story out loud, however, Kanaga skipped over these annotations. While she had begun the reading by marking my distance from the kotis in the group, by bringing me into connection with Eric, in this case she implicitly marked me as a person that understood koti-basha rather than create an outsider/insider dichotomy.

4.4.2 Koti as fleeting youth

In other ways however, the significance of koti life stories had changed between 2001 and 2015. Kanaga performed the story in her characteristically brilliant comic style, but she prefaced her performance with a sobering reminder to the young kotis and TGs in our group. However funny we may find them, she said, these stories were written by "our elders", the first generation of TG and koti activists in the 1990s that made it possible for Bhavana, Kumari, Trisha and Kamala to have the safe spaces and rights that they enjoyed.

This collection contains stories written by every one of us elders]- Noori Amma, Sumayya Amma, myself...even Noori Amma was a drop-in at the office back then! There was no medication [for HIV], no human rights, no chance of survival... and Rs. 200 was a lot of money! There were no CDs... all the stories were stored on floppy disks.

Some of the "elders," like Sumaya, the story's author, had grown out of being koti, becoming senior thirunangai women activists. Others had tragically succumbed to the disease and its stigma. As a gesture of respect for these elders, Kanaga had whited out their names, because for younger kotis to know the "male names" of their elders would be disrespectful. Reading the stories together today, emphasized Kanaga, was an act of reverence and respect.

The only person whose identity Kanaga would reveal was Sumaya, the author of the story. Ippadiyuma is a special story, said Kanaga,

... because it was written by Sumaya all those years ago, it was written by an ordinary person. She now might be famous and great and a big name and everything but when she wrote it she was not a film star, not a writer, not an academic, not an artist, but just an ordinary person... you need to highlight that, how much she has overcome to get where she is today... [so she can be] a role model for other young TGs. Shakthi, you must emphasize this in your writing.

In this second sense, "koti" indexed a stage of youth, innocence, and precarity that was succeeded by the relatively stable and public identity of being thirunangai.

4.4.3 Koti as a refusal of naran (cisgender woman) abjection

A third way koti emerges is via Raji's successful mimicry of a chaste naran (cisgender woman) sex worker, and from the contrast between the demure naran's voice ("Oh no sir, I'm not that kind of woman!"), and the sarcastic, knowing koti voice. This performance of abject femininity is belied also by the koti's haughty confidence in her sexiness, and her worldly cosmopolitanism (her references to "George Bush", and her use of English words like "climax" and "freely"). Kanaga exaggerated the distinction between koti and naran as she read aloud, using a high-pitched voice to index Raji's external appearance, and a lower tone peppered with local slang, to voice the character's inner monologue. As the story unfolded, participants in the group applauded the koti's skill and virtuosity at mimicking a naran, even as they playfully disparaged her for being a hypocrite.

Raji's playful mockery of Kavitha's position and the man's sentimentality in response is also a subtle comment about how class and gender work together to produce different kinds of naran and koti identities. As queer linguist Kira Hall (2005) has emphasized, any identity category is meaningful only in relation to locally-relevant axes of class, caste, language and gender. In her analysis of koti performances in a Delhi NGO, Hall has demonstrated how koti identity was performed through a playful parody of both hijra identity as well as middle-class naran identity. Hall analyses the language and intonation used by performers, showing how performers used crude Hindi insults delivered in a nasalized tone to index hijra identity, and polite Hindi forms used to index middle-class women's prudery, inserting their own identity as the ideal in-between (2005).

In our story and reading group, by contrast, Kavitha was voiced not as a privileged middle-class naran, but as an impoverished naran sex worker. In voicing Kavitha's character, Kanaga did not adopt haughty polite forms but a demure, timid tone, expressing a chaste, virtuous relationship to sex rather than one of pleasure. "Oh no sir, I'm not that kind of woman," says Raji, imitating the naran Kavitha. "If my children eat at night it is because of decent men like you." The qualities of loyalty, care, and moral fortitude are gendered female. This type of chaste feminine virtue is instantly intelligible to the male client in the story, demonstrating how virtue itself is often associated with female victimhood in heteronormative relationships. Raji mocks this type of sentimentality, implicitly critiquing the way that patriarchal society empathizes with naran abjection much more easily than it does with the suffering and violence experienced by koti sex workers.

The joyfulness and humor of Raji's internal monologue however, and the laughter it generated in our group, points to the pleasures of refusing a naran position of victimhood. Indeed, koti gender performance in many ways indexes exactly the raunchy, winking stance taken at moments when other institutionalized gender roles must perform gravity and solemnity. It pierces and denaturalizes that gravity. This sense of koti-as-play was contained in the term *ādal-pādal*: dance and song. Mariyal's office was often described as a space where people could shed the "male" selves they donned in the outside world and engage in *ādal-pādal*: joking, performing, trying on makeup, and discussing male lovers. The term *ādal-pādal*, combined into the word *arpāttam* bears reference to courtesan and burlesque performance traditions such as those of tawaifs and devadasis. The word can also mean foppishness, and a foolish display of

adornment. Here these senses combine to cast Raji as a thoughtful social critic but also a savvy cosmopolitan woman, possessing the moral ambiguity of a laughing performer.

4.4.4 Koti as gender ambiguity expressed through practice, not anatomy

As the story unfolds, Raji quickly drops her pretense of being a naran, switching to a rougher voice, using local slang such as “Dey!”, and addressing her client as her thambi (younger brother), forms generally reserved for interactions between male peers. This slippage suggests that Raji moves further into “maleness” as the story proceeds, becoming closer in both gender and status, to her client. At the end of the story this movement into maleness would seem to have reached its peak: Raji experiences deep, visceral pleasure as she peels away her female costume and relaxes into her male body. Yet it is important to note that while her chest hair, lack of breasts, and facial stubble come into view in the text, her penis does not. In fact, the “absent penis” is at the very heart of the story- when Kanaga read the line aloud where the client reaches into Raji’s sari, the group exploded with speculations about what he might find there: Breasts? An absent vagina? A penis? The story achieves and maintains a careful balance between hairy maleness and high-pitched femaleness, without allowing us, as readers, to see what “really” lies between Raji’s legs, that would allow us to sex her one way or the other. What is at stake in maintaining so carefully this ambiguous in-betweenness?

As anthropologists Gayatri Reddy (2006), Lawrence Cohen (1995) and others have shown, the quintessential gesture signaling hijra authenticity is to lift one’s skirts, showing conclusive “evidence” of one’s castration wound, and at the way one has sacrificed their sexual desires. To cast doubt upon the operation status of another TG, or to make reference to her pre-operative genitals, is a sign of disrespect because it questions a central marker of her authenticity. Kanaga, however, reversed this logic and celebrated the fact that she had chosen to remain a koti: refusing surgery while identifying as female. As the manager of one of the most successful Community Based Organizations in the city working for MSM, the ability to switch roles between koti and TG was politically expedient when it came to dealing with donor agencies, and the government, enabling her to access funds reserved both for TGs and kotis. This ultimately helped her assist the community in ways that the government failed or refused to do:

I don’t call myself a [TG] anywhere. I only name myself a koti. But— if some benefits are awarded [by the government] to “transgenders” then I can put this (picks up her scarf and draws it over her shoulder like a sari)— like this also. I [want] to do something good for our people so I can [pretend to be a TG]. Ok? This is one type of [political] stand.

In addition to making a certain political and ethical stance possible, Kanaga identified as a koti because she didn’t want to give up her bommai (penis), or her sexual desires for that matter. TGs, she reminded us, might have given up their physical organs but this did not mean they had truly given up sexual desire in the spiritual, moral sense. This made them hypocrites:

A [koti] might be 90 years old but when she sees a young boy, and her mouth will water...so sexy! I want to suck him dry. But then my celas [disciples] will not respect me. When you’re older, you lose that ability to have sex and play... I have to conduct myself a certain way once I become a mentor.

Using the term *koti* to refer to a 90-year old TG is a sign of disrespect: Kanaga not only refuses to recognize the validity of the TG identity, but also brings the TG closer to herself in terms of age and seniority. Like the 90-year old TG, Kanaga too cannot indulge her desire to sleep with young men, but at least she is honest about it. Kanaga continued her sly digs at older TGs, suggesting that some of them avoided undergoing the operation, because they didn't want to give up the street life:

Once you do the operation, an “insecurity feeling” comes up. If I [get in a] fight and he kicks me [there between my legs], it hurts! ... And some “rowdy TGs” in Chennai— I won't say who— avoid hormones because it impairs their ability to fight... it also means they can't drink alcohol anymore. They avoid silicone too, because some [men] grab it in a fight and it rips out.

Kanaga implies that many senior TGs still do sex work, and engaged in all the indignities and roughness of street life, fighting with rowdies and police when necessary. The specific TG she refers to, Kanaga implies, is a hypocrite because she pretends to have undergone the operation and had silicone implants, but secretly retains her penis and hasn't really undergone surgery. The operation scar— that ultimate marker of anatomical/moral authenticity— is here turned into a site of shame because it makes one extra-vulnerable in a street fight. Together, these markers of maleness: *bomma* (penis), alcohol, fights and the street— produced a contrast with the decorum and *naran* dignity that TGs supposedly upheld.

4.4.5 The “posh *koti*” and the “BPO boy”

Our last, unexpected conversation arose from the portion of the story where the *koti* comes home. When her guru asks why she is back so soon, Raji lies nonchalantly, saying that she had only earned Rs. 200, when we know she had Rs. 700. I was curious about this scene: how could a *koti* behave so cheekily to her mentor? I was surprised when members of the groups explained this not in reference to the norms governing the relationship with one's guru, but by elaborating on the kinds of “boys” in Chennai that came to *kotis* for sex:

Me: So wait, why does the *koti* not give money to the guru?

Bhavana: She got home too soon [to have made more than Rs. 200].

Kumari: Look, she can't say she made Rs. 700 in an hour— the guru will be suspicious.

Me: I don't understand.

Kanaga: See, on average how much will a *koti* earn? 100 or 200. Now imagine if a *koti* like that meets a man that doesn't have any experience and gives her Rs. 700. Will she say no? Now, I'll tell you when all this started— it was when BPO came to Chennai. What did I say? B-P-O (smacking the floor for emphasis).

By “BPO”, Kanaga meant “Business Process Outsourcing”— the growing sector of Chennai's tech industry that provided long-distance support services to customers in the United States. Phone operators for Dell computers, for example, were hired by BPO companies to resolve the complaints of American customers, often trained to speak in American accents as a part of their work. Kanaga was drawing attention to how BPO companies had created a new influx of money in Chennai, with lots of “BPO boys” becoming wealthy overnight. She continued:

...When these BPO boys are suddenly earning 20,000, 30,000... they don't know what to do with it. So they come to T. Nagar and Marina Beach (where sex workers solicit). You ask them how much they will give and they are willing to pay 1000, 2000. These are kotis that were earlier earning only 200 or 300.

The figure of the naïve “BPO boy” produced two concomitant figures: the “posh koti” and the abject “local boy”. Kanaga went on to explain who these characters were:

So now (after the rise of BPO) we have kotis that don't use flip phones, only iPhone. This wretched koti (she gestures to Kumari, who collapses into giggles) that used to buy chicken on the street, roll it in oil and spices, fry it on the stove... now what does she do?

(Kanaga pauses for dramatic effect. Everybody laughs nervously in anticipation.)

...K-F-C. She wants KFC. (Kanaga assumes a high-pitched English accent, and puts her hand up to her ear like a phone.) Hello? Is that KFC? Yes. One order please, chicken wings. (Kanaga mimics another phone call, to a male client, in English) Hello sir? I charge Rs. 5000 not including hotel costs.

Everybody shrieked with laughter at the way Kanaga juxtaposed the voice of a rough, local koti (not unlike Raji, in our story), to this new posh koti who had grown rich by feeding on “BPO boys”. The posh koti spoke only English, used iPhones, ordered Kentucky Fried Chicken instead of cooking her own food, and only met her clients in air-conditioned hotel rooms, not the open air of Marina Beach.

4.4.6 The pleasure and violence of the koti-panthi relationship

With the emergence of this poshness, however, Kanaga said, a trace of sympathy in her voice, the “local boys” naturally felt left out:

Our local boys might become quite jealous. They feel sexually frustrated and emasculated. Can't you understand? (She turns to me).

Me, snorting: What? Are you asking me to feel bad for them because they don't get enough sex?

Kanaga, sympathetically: No, no— but we can understand their position. They will want to force kotis [to have sex for free]. So then that just leads to more violence. There are lots of problematic effects of this BPO industry [for us activists].

I was initially taken aback by Kanaga's tone, which seemed to imply that rape by “local boys” was an understandable consequence of the situation, even one that we should empathize with. In the context of the entire conversation and the story, however, this reference to rape indexed something complex and ambivalent. Raji, the koti in the story emerges as more cosmopolitan and in-control than either the woman she imitates, or the hapless, naïve man that she masturbates. Raji might have a future as a “posh koti”, far removed from the abject existence of the chaste, abject biological woman she once impersonated (desperate to feed her family, coerced into sex work).

The position of Raji's client is more ambiguous, however. After all, we don't see his penis either in the story— we only see Raji's wrist as she masturbates him. How “male” is he? Is he a “local boy” or a “BPO boy”? Both types of “boys” were, in Kanaga's reading, vulnerable in

different ways. The “BPO boy” had more money than he knew what to do with, and, like the client in the story, was easily deceived by Raji. Like a “local boy”, however, he had grown up in small-town Coimbatore, and cruised at Marina Beach, not at fancy hotels. This made him far less cosmopolitan than the koti, who was familiar with English terms and could have seduced George Bush himself! As we continued talking, the figures of the local and BPO boys collapsed into one another, creating a single image of vulnerable masculinity. While Kanaga complained about TGs that lied about having the operation, Bhavana made a quiet, snarky comment:

There is someone (I won't say who), and she is on the beach looking like a woman... [but if you look more closely] she has a man under her skirts! Sometimes a koti looks like a woman, but then the man is the one kneeling over [for her].

Bhavana jokes that some kotis that are inauthentic— they claim to be female, passive recipients of anal sex from virile male clients, but are secretly more masculine than they seem, actually having their male clients bend over, or perform oral sex. The power dynamic between the koti and the male client is reversed, and they become equal partners in sex, both willing to penetrate and be penetrated. In the context of Kanaga's comments about “BPO boys” and “local boys”, Bhavana's koti here emerges as a figure of both economic and sexual dominance— wealthier and more cosmopolitan than both BPO and local boys, and dominating them sexually besides. This image resonates with the story itself, where, as Raji becomes increasingly aggressive, her male client grows meeker: he is forced to ejaculate in a hurry, doesn't get to touch her body at all, and, to add insult to injury, pays an additional 200 rupees.

The gender-fluidity of Raji's relationship to her client at this moment was often erased in the overt definitions of koti and panthi usually provided by Mariyal staff or in Mariyal's usual publicity materials. In these overt definitions, koti and panthi were described as “female” and “male” positions respectively, with kotis being “receivers” and panthis being “penetrators” in the act of sex. As the above snippet of conversation shows, however, in daily talk and practice koti gender was more contested, and not simply reducible to an imitation of naran (cisgender woman) identity. When speaking as, or to, a koti, speakers switched between male, female, and neuter pronouns, with each usage making a distinct, context-specific claim about someone's moral authority and authenticity. By demonstrating an ability to correctly assess someone's natural identity, speakers demonstrated their own authenticity. At other times, casting doubt upon one's natural koti proclivities, or casting malicious aspersions by addressing them by the male pronoun “da,” was a way to express anger or seniority. As we walked down the street, Kanaga would sometimes haughtily run her eyes over the men we passed, making digs at their secret koti-ness. Any “man” was subject to such an assessment of koti-ness, and to the extent that this was true, the status of “man” was always negotiable, because they might secretly be an MSM: a man that had sex with men. Maleness is not a stable position, and is continually threatened by a slide into koti-ness, and this is why daily politics took the form of pronoun-play. One could assume no guaranteed correspondence between sexual desire, sexual practice, surgical status, and gender expression, and this ambiguity was the site of everyday politics, violence, and playfulness.

The way “homosexual relationships” are figured here as a site of both violence and pleasure resonates with anthropological research in Central and North India. Lawrence Cohen, conducting fieldwork in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, argues that there are two primary ways that homosexuality is configured in the popular imagination. The first is as a form of youthful play

("masti"), in contrast to the solemnity, social convention, honor, and reproductive responsibilities associated with marital sex between man and woman. In what is referred to as the "chhoti line" (small line) of homosexual play, men take turns "doing" and being "done to," as they battle for honor and power. A second way that homosexuality emerges, he argues, is as an illicit, off-the-record, violent battle for power that underlies official politics. Unlike official, conventionally sanctioned relationships with narans conducted in the daylight, male-male sex was marked as furtive and duplicitous, and as the "real" site where power play took place (Cohen 2008, 40).

The themes described by Cohen arose in a somewhat modified way in our group discussion about Raji and her client's relationship. If maleness indexed a sense of homosexual intimacy and play, however, it also pointed to a hypocritical violent impulse, arising from the shame of the hypermasculine panthis trying to snuff out the koti in themselves. As participants described the vast difference between their encounters with narans, and those with panthis, it became clear that koti-ness inhabited a very different relationship to maleness than did a naran position. Maleness, as indicated by Raji's use of the slang term, "Dey!," was not a literal desire to penetrate, just as koti was not a literal desire to be penetrated. Penetration was a metaphor for a gendered moral stance in this context, where maleness indexed an opportunistic, extractive preoccupation with sex and money, rather than a decorous female one. Narans such as Kavitha, the sex worker, while granted a conventionally sanctioned relationship to social maleness through marriage, are excluded from the homosocial politics of play and violence that characterizes koti-panthi relationships. Kotiness presumes the ability to shift from "she" to "he" to "it," thereby enjoying a privileged relationship with maleness, that narans cannot enjoy. Kotis like Raji can weaponize the male pronoun (addressing her client first as "Sir," and then as "Dey!"), but the naran Kavitha is portrayed as politically ineffective in this koti "kinship chronotope," to borrow Nakassis' term.

The mixture of pleasure and violence characterizing the relationship between Raji and her client, and my interlocutors and their lovers more generally, was less intelligible by the scripts used by the HIV/AIDS prevention work that Mariyal was "officially" engaged in. This was made explicit to me when we wrapped up our group discussion of the ten stories in Kanaga's collection. Participants agreed that Ippadiyuma was a standout amongst the stories we had read. For one, it was the only one that was comic and raunchy. Almost all the other stories we had read foregrounded painful experiences of loss: the pain of being diagnosed with HIV and ostracized by family, the pain of watching a lover marry a woman, and the struggles of coming to Chennai as a young koti and growing into a thirunangai.

However, when I asked participants whether Ippadiyuma would be a good story to use when advocating for sexual rights, the overwhelming response was "no." Kanaga said that a more tragic story, such as one where a koti died of HIV/AIDS would be more likely to elicit the sympathy of mainstream audiences. Ippadiyuma was best enjoyed, added Kumari, within the community, by people that understood the pathos underlying the humor. The fear was that by mainstream audiences, Raji's playful mockery of the naran Kavitha, or her nonchalant cheekiness towards her guru, would be interpreted literally (and incorrectly), as signs of kotis being petty or selfish. The issue of virtue, participants pointed out, is structural. For the imagined reader or audience of an advocacy document (typically an "outsider"), socially-sanctioned maleness and femaleness are afforded the privilege of inhabiting morally virtuous and laudable symbolic positions. By contrast, kotiness indexes an ambiguously gendered position caught between warring family loyalties (to kotis, jamat, wife, CBO, home), creating ambivalence about what

counts as correct or laudable moral conduct. In some ways this is why koti-ness is portrayed as a temporary time of youth, inevitably lost with the onset of age, time, and adult responsibilities.

4.5 Conclusion

There is far more that can be said about the points raised in this short description of *Ippadiyuma?*, and I have offered only a fraction of the material we read and the discussion that followed. We read over ten stories and the entire collection comprises almost forty, and treating them more comprehensively is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this thesis. My primary point in this chapter, however, has been about method— the value of tracking the circulation of an element of a story across different genres and iterations rather than fixing or issuing a verdict on its referent. In addition to avoiding the kind of culturalism and ahistorical description that can result from assuming a straightforward relationship between the narrative and person. When discovering a new iteration of a life story, the question is not to jump to morally-laden conclusions about its fidelity to the “real,” but rather to remain curious about what is made visible in this specific iteration, to whom it is visible, and what is at stake in the citation.

One of the most recent such “updates” in the circulation of life stories is the proliferation, in the past decade, of autobiographies and anthologies of writing that feature thirunangais and other female-identified and Dalit-identified subjects articulating powerful social critiques and making critiques and claims regarding the position of “woman.” While I engaged two such publications in Chapter 2, they are only a small fragment of a much larger literary movement. Some of the most influential autobiographical texts published by transwomen in the past decade are A. Revathi’s collection of hijra life stories *Unarvum Uruvamum* (2005, published in English as *Our Lives, Our Words* (2011); her autobiography *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010); Nalini Jameela’s *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* published originally in Malayalam and then translated into Tamil and English; Living Smile Vidya’s *I am Saravanan Vidya* (2007) simultaneously published in Tamil, Malayalam and English; Priyababu’s *Moondram Paalin Mugam* [Face of the Third Sex] (2007), and Kalki’s *Kuri Aruttēn* [I cut off the mark] (2014). Autobiographies have also formed the basis for collections of essays in genres of history and social science, including Priyababu’s *Social History of Thirunangai Community in Tamil Nadu* (2012) and a collection entitled *Aravanigal: Udaliyal, Ulaviyal, Valviyal*. [Aravanis: Bodies, Psychology, Lifestyle] edited by Maharasan. Life stories have also been inspiring for journalists and novelists, such as Mr. Paul Suyambu (2009) and a more recent romance novel, *Maalaigal*, authored by P. Kanagasundaram (2016), a writer affiliated with the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers and Artists Association. Older novels such as Su. Samuthiram’s *Vadamalli* [The Amaranth Flower] ([1994] 2010) have also been reclaimed as part of the corpus and seen more recent reprintings. Lastly, similar feminist/progressive life stories have emerged in Malayalam and circulated between Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala as part of a budding cross-sectional movement of feminist, dalit, and transgender activists. These include the two titles that the owner at Discovery Bookshop handed to me: Sister Jesme’s *The Autobiography of a Nun* (2009) published in Malayalam, Tamil and English, and Vinaya’s *Oru Penn Kavalarin Kadhai* [Story of a Female Police Officer] (2010), published in Malayalam and Tamil. I have offered a short list of some of these titles in the list of references but there are many more that are still being published at a rapid rate.

One important historical connection that is often erased or obscured in the emergent thirunangai activist autobiographies is their connection to the koti life stories of the late 1990s, housed in cupboards such as those at Mariyal. Written in broken Tamil and offering fragmented, fleeting, and ambivalent narratives of a life, koti life stories are not often seen as fitting a narrative of a powerful agentive Tamil-speaking self like the thirunangai. Nevertheless, in their circulation they offer a powerful set of contestations about the cohesion of panthi (masculine man), naran (woman) and thirunangai identity, pointing to the liminality and switching that can occur within those lifetimes. Narrating voices and projected audiences increasingly expand and grow ever-more mobile, comprising Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada and English speakers, as well as the new audiences produced by being translated to English by publishing houses in Delhi. At the same time, the subjects and struggles interpellated by the texts grow to comprise ever broader intersectional alliances forged along the lines of gender and caste. To pursue this line of research would be a productive way to engage how questions of publishing and circulation are being made to “matter” sexed and caste-ed bodies in ways that further disturb the idea of a “Tamil” polity or of a homogenous group of subjects that are separate from “men.”

CONCLUSION

A few months after I had concluded my fieldwork and returned to Berkeley, I was invited to present a paper at a symposium at Harvard University, hosted by the Committee on Folklore and Mythology. Still disoriented, I cobbled together an abstract. The paper asked how senior thirunangais navigated competing kinship and mentorship obligations, being both leaders of community-based human rights organizations and gurus with a responsibility to their *celas*. Were they ever accused of being nepotistic if they mixed *jamat* and CBO politics? As I rummaged frantically through my giant pile of fieldwork notebooks searching for a little vignette to present, I realized I was in over my head. Just as I had resigned myself to presenting some older work, I received a phone call from Veena. “I heard that you are presenting at a conference!” she said. “Are you defending the way *jamats* are combined with CBOs?” Veena’s concern was that I was arguing that combining *jamat* and CBO politics was a *good* thing, whereas she saw it as a surefire road to corruption of both institutions. Flustered and a little defensive, I said that I wasn’t issuing a value judgment about combining *jamat* and CBO politics, I was only interested in how people took a stand on the issue. Though our conversation then shifted to other topics, Veena’s call made me aware of the rapidity with which my own research circulated. It turned out that an announcement about the Harvard conference had been sent out to a mailing list of folklore scholars, making its way to the inbox of an alumnus of a folklore Ph.D. program that lived in Chennai. His wife was a psychotherapist that worked closely with the LGBT activist movement in Chennai and she had mentioned it to Veena.

Veena’s phone call is only one of countless moments that I have been asked to explain what my argument is and what I plan to do with it, both during my fieldwork and during my writing. While amongst anthropologists I often proclaimed my ethical commitment to circulating my academic writing amongst my interlocutors, some of my efforts felt crude and bumbling in practice. They made me painfully aware not only of my difficulty in translating my Berkeley-honed English theoretical vocabulary into Tamil, but also of the generic conventions of academic writing that seemed perversely designed precisely to prevent such sharing.

One of my primary intentions in this dissertation has been to write about writing, and to create a narrative frame that can encompass both my argument as well as the contingent, often circuitous paths by which I come to it. As I build on this preliminary work to create a larger project, I hope to write in a way that can both make a compelling argument as well as acknowledge the messy business of constructing it— the interview transcripts I misplaced, the interviewee I didn’t get along with, the novel that took maddeningly long to read— making visible not only the written argument, but also the cut-and-pasted material strewn on my writing table. In Veena’s eyes, after all, these messy elements were already visible. She addressed her critique not obliquely to my writing but to me at my writing table, awaiting a phone call.

I share this vignette about Veena’s phone call not to make a perhaps hackneyed point about the moral imperative to share one’s research with one’s interlocutors, but rather to offer a critical vantage point from which to examine this moral impulse and the facile way one might claim it. One’s interlocutors, after all, are hardly a homogenous group. Abandoning a stock definition of *hijras*, and instead following the chains of citation that lay behind them, I was led to unexpected referents and persons that at first glance might appear to have nothing to do with the term “transgender”: the post-Soviet world that led Eric to Nepal and India to pursue his Ph.D. in the

mid-1990s, the BPO boys in Chennai that had more money than they knew what to do with, the character of Kannagi in the Tamil epic Silapathigaram who cuts off her breasts as a challenge to an unjust king. Each of these interlocutors (yes, even Kannagi) might suggest a different conception of what constitutes reciprocity and ethics. It is striking that ethics review boards have no requirement that, when explaining “risks and benefits,” we ask our interlocutors what *they* perceive to be the risks and benefits of engaging in our research project, and that we are not required to share with them the research outcomes. To give a thoughtful account of oneself need not take the hackneyed and sentimental form of a “confession” of one’s subject-position, but can instead be a process of exploration about how one is co-produced as a subject in dialogue with one’s interlocutors: how we make each other “matter.”

The advantage of focusing on circulation and form, rather than assuming that narratives are purely referential content, is that it can open up new avenues for research. One such avenue is the medicalization of transgender bodies, and contestations over what kinds of surgery and trans-medicine are employed to produce “sex.” While I began my research with the intention of focusing on how bodies were discursively “mattered,” it became increasingly clear that discourse and surgery were closely linked. While I have offered some tentative and preliminary thoughts on the changing landscape of trans-medicine in Tamil Nadu, it is clear that far more situated fieldwork is necessary to discover just what constitutes “sex” in India’s emerging surgical marketplace. The narrative of “kidnapping and castration” that I discuss in Chapter 1 has, in the past decade or so, seen an enormous resurgence in journals of urology (Patwardhan et. al. 2007), forensic medicine (Dalal et. al. 2004) and endocrinology (Kalra 2012). In many of these articles, distinct “Criminal Tribes” motifs of the hijra are used as a foil against which to demonstrate the benefits and promise of “modern” medical technologies. While it would be easy to jump to the conclusion that this simply reflects an attempt on the part of private doctors to capitalize on the globalization of transgender identity, a circulation-based lens reveals a more complex story. For example, conducting some preliminary research on the growing interest of endocrinology specialists in the figure of the hijra, I was intrigued to find that in many cases, hijras were seen not as candidates for sex-change but diabetes treatment. The “imaginary” into which the hijra figure was woven, moreover, was not purely instrumentalist but invoked a utopian image where marginalized groups were integrated into the Indian family through the practice of an “ethical diabetology.”⁵⁸ The diversity within the medical community is also growing— for example, in Pondicherry, located close to Chennai, there is a thirunangai-run clinic and research unit where patients are counseled about sex-change. These developments can offer fascinating insights into changing dynamics of sex and medicine, provided one is not limited by a stock definition of hijra and thinks about sex much more broadly.

The growing importance of surgery, as well as the valuable efforts by scholars in transgender studies to combine theories of how discourse “matters” sex with theorizations of how medicine “matters” sex, suggest that it would be especially valuable to study alternative ontologies of language in order to examine what performativity might mean in a Tamil context. I am inspired in this regard especially by the work of Bernard Bate (2009), and his ability to weave together theoretical categories and concepts such as *ākupeyar*, used in Tamil grammars, with categories such as indexicality, making carefully qualified yet provocative claims about

⁵⁸ I intend to publish a separate article on this research thread, entitled “The ethical endocrinologist: Reimagining Indian diabetology through the figure of the “transgender” person”

alternative ontologies of language. Since the “exposure model of sex” brings together a number of elements in order to felicitously “matter” the world as well as the sex of a person: it possesses a material/essentialist (epitomized by lifting the skirt) element, a temporal plane that assesses a person’s lifestyle and predisposition to asceticism, as well as an idea of verbal license that possesses the ontological power to confer and diagnose fertility. To examine these material dimensions, both Plemons and Bate employ a deft but powerful gesture of turning theory into an ethnographic object and treating it as a historical particularity. By turning the performative models of sex that are utilized in linguistic anthropological theory on sexual identity, it might be possible to place these models in dialogue with work by philologists of Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam, such as David Shulman, who have carefully theorized the ontological specificity of utterances in these South Indian languages and the specific ways that performance and speech can “matter” a world (2012, 2016).

A third fruitful avenue for research is the intersection of transgender imaginaries with emergent imaginaries of caste and reframings of kinship. I have tentatively explored issues of caste and kinship as they arose in the circulation of the kidnapping narrative in Chapter 1, inspired by the work of historians such as Indrani Chatterjee (1999) and Jessica Hinchy (2014) that critiques the uncritical separation of “hijras” and other figures that were characterized as practicing “deviant reproduction” such as concubines, courtesans, slaves and wards, from the “biological” family. This tendency continues in research on gender rights in India, where “transgender” identity remains separated from that on “women,” aided by the predominance of the stock definition of the hijra and naturalizing a hegemonic conception of cisgendered womanhood. These insights can be further developed by engaging recent work on emerging activist movements that claim both dalit and queer identity, creating new imaginaries that span different time periods within Indian history as well as connect a number of locations from across the world. Classic work by historians of Tamil Nadu on the intersection of dalit and feminist movements with Dravidian ideology (Geetha 2003) as well as recent work by South Asian feminist anthropologists on the intersections of caste and labor with gender and class has been especially influential on my work in this regard (Subramaniam 2015, Thiranagama 2018, Arondekar 2016, Viswanath 2014, Dutta 2018). Building on the contestations between adoption and kidnapping, and the utopian families and wombs envisioned by hijra and thirunangai imaginaries, I hope also to engage with debates on transnational practices of “kinning” rather than “kinship,” in order to denaturalize biological ties and break down an adoption/biology dichotomy (Yngvesson 2010, Howell 2006).

The salience of legal scholarship and developments in the field of transgender studies as it relates to India is a crucial third site of research that emerges from my work. As current debates about the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, The Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill, and The Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill, all drafted and presented to parliament in 2018 demonstrate, it is critical to expand the conception of “sex” and “woman” and to undo a trans/cis divide. An important move towards such a deconstructionist project has come from feminist legal scholarship. Legal scholar Prabha Kotiswaran, for instance, has recently argued that the legal regimes governing sex work, surrogacy, erotic dancing and domestic work be considered together in order to create a more comprehensive idea of “woman” as it is defined as a legal category, by not emphasizing women “within” the family as Indian feminists have often done, but to analyze how women perform considerable reproductive labor “outside” the family (2011, 2013). This project is related also to

work done by scholars at the intersection of Science and Technology Studies and postcolonial feminist scholarship, such as Kalindi Vora's inspiring work on emerging commercial surrogacy markets on South Asia (2015). My immediate future project joins the work being conducted by Kotiswaran to go one step further in deconstructing the category of "women" by pointing out how the persons affected by recent legislations about LGBT and transgender rights have historical and material connections to those categorized as "women."

Even while highlighting these avenues of scholarship, however, I want to maintain attention on the processes by which scholarly objects of study are constructed, brought to life through writing, and made to circulate. While outlining future fields of scholarship, I am conducting not only an intellectual exercise but a pragmatic one, discursively conjuring an image both of my immanent connection to these research projects as well as the imminence and urgency of my research. This discursive strategy is all-too-familiar to scholars seeking employment in the academy. We are called upon continuously to generate ever-new work for our own professional development, concealing the fragmented and incomplete nature of our proposed objects of study with carefully-chosen words. I make this point not simply to characterize our academic work as an instrumentalist misrepresentation of "real" life, geared towards careerism rather than intellectual collaboration. I want to make a simpler point about how simply changing the way we write and cite can perform powerful interventions that bring multiple bodies and worlds of theory into the same temporal frame. In an inspiring critique of the citation practices of the academy, indigenous feminist anthropologist Zoe Todd has recently made a case for how conscious and intentional practices of citation can decolonize the academy. Her essay too begins as an ethnography of the academy, locating her in the frame. She describes her disillusionment after going to a talk by Latour, noticing in a lengthy lecture on Inuit cosmological thought, he did not cite any indigenous thinkers at all. "For every time you want to cite a Great Thinker who is on the public speaking circuit these days," suggests Todd, "consider digging around for others who are discussing the same topics in other ways." Todd's article ends with a valuable list of indigenous thinkers that young scholars can cite both in their work and use in their teaching.⁵⁹ Todd makes a complex point in an elegant and clear way: to turn a theory into an ethnographic object, or vice versa, is a deft and deceptively powerful move.⁶⁰ By historicizing and provincializing "Great Thinker" theory one can denaturalize its claim upon "reality," and conversely, by citing what is often dismissed as "ethnographic fieldwork" as theory, one can bring it into dialogue with other writers, publishers, and readers rather than treat it as a mere "regional" token illustration of a universal theory built elsewhere. Rather than fit all of these commitments in this written piece, making it as masterful and comprehensive as possible, I have tried to write in a way that can trail off the page and into spaces where scholarship takes other forms and possesses other stakes.

⁵⁹ Zoe Todd. "An Indigenous Feminist's take on the Ontological Turn: 'ontology' is just another word for colonialism (Urbane Adventurer: Amiskwacî)." *Uma (in)certa antropologia* (blog), Oct. 24, 2014. Accessed May 13, 2019. <https://umaincertaantropologia.org/2014/10/26/an-indigenous-feminists-take-on-the-ontological-turn-ontology-is-just-another-word-for-colonialism-urbane-adventurer-amiskwaci/>

⁶⁰ The way Plemons deftly turns the theory of performativity into an ethnographic object, tracking its circulation, and historicizing its claims, is a powerful example of this kind of move.

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