Artmaking As Intervention in Oral History Methodology: Painting Portraits of Queer/Trans South Asian Chosen Family

Oral History Master of Arts Thesis

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Dedicated to the memory of Alix (Ponyboy) Meymarian Kolar (they/he/she; 1976-2024).

Introduction

This oral history project is a culmination of who I am in many regards. It is deeply personal, something I am doing for myself, and also for my people (my chosen family, my community) and broader communities of queer and trans South Asian people, and other queer and trans people of color. My project brings together my oral history practice, visual art practice, and family/community practice.

While there are projects about queer/trans South Asian people that may mention the importance of chosen family (I'm From Driftwood, 2024), I sought to do a project *centered* around the concept of chosen family within queer/trans South Asian contexts. Chosen family can look so many different ways. M. E. O'Brien states, "It is through the language of family that people often articulate their yearnings for care, for affection, for the long-term interweaving of our lives." (O'Brien, 2022, p. 6). She includes chosen family when she defines "family as private household, a unit of privatized care" (O'Brien, 2022, p. 12). In her book, *Family Abolition*, she advocates for the communization of care outside of these private households, rooted in capitalist domination and systems oppression, offering rich history and context for family as units in this way. For my work, I use the word "family" because I do not have a better word offered to me. When I think of chosen family, I do not think of it in terms of households or family units in this way, but rather much more expansive constellations of networks of communities committed to offering care for one another. I write and pursue this project from my lived experiences of building

intergenerational chosen family networks, primarily within queer and trans South Asian communities.

Initially, I set out to do this project on oral histories of my queer/trans South Asian chosen family members sharing stories about their experiences building chosen family as an intervention and departure from traditional family oral history projects. In these traditional genealogical projects, interviewers interview their family members, defined as people who are related to one another by blood. When I think about these traditional family oral history projects, what comes to mind are concepts of secret family recipes, of familial knowledge, histories of lineage, that are preserved through these projects. I set out to create a body of oral history interviews that preserves my family history: my robust intergenerational chosen family made up of elders, aunties, uncles, cousins, siblings, and nibblings, who are queer/trans and South Asian. A project showcasing chosen family networks in their unique expansiveness. I wanted my project to demonstrate the ways chosen families are ever evolving, expanding, and changing through time. How they are defined by the people who create them, based on agency, and not relying on obligation that comes from being born into relation.

Additionally, I set out to do this project because there are no formal ways chosen family histories are preserved in the way that blood lineages are. There is no genealogical research website where I can look up my chosen family members, no cheek swab that will connect me with distant chosen family members. I wanted to create a project that marked my chosen family as my family, in an official way. To preserve the ways my people are my people. I also wanted the opportunity to sit with my chosen family members and ask them questions, listen to their stories, and record

them. I treasure recordings of my loved ones' voices. Listening to them again and again as I prepare my collection to share with the public, I feel as though I struck gold when I hear the voices and stories I collected for this project.

What came next was the understanding that I wanted my project to not only be a record of my chosen family and personal community connections, but a larger project about how queer and trans South Asian people build chosen families. I set out to create a collection of oral histories that might offer a blueprint of how to build chosen family to future generations of queer and trans South Asians, what I needed as a young person. One of the narrators, my friend Leo puts it perfectly: "When I think about my future, so much of how I envision my future is having these relationships that might not be romantic partnerships or might not be me having kids or whatever, but building family around those really intimate, platonic relationships too. And [I feel] a little bit of fear [that] there's not really a script for this, but it's something I want" (1:09:08). Leo articulates what so many queer and trans South Asians experience, a lack of a formal model or representation of what chosen family, or structures of support outside of the nuclear blood family, can look like. My project seeks to address this gap in knowledge.

Through working on this project, I have learned that there is not one single blueprint one can easily follow or achieve. Instead, what I have gathered are many different people's experiences, approaches, longings, articulations, reflections, and desires of their chosen families. My aim is for future generations of queer and trans South Asians who come after me will encounter these oral histories and engage with my work and feel the possibility and expansiveness of what the framework of chosen family can offer, beyond the prescriptive nuclear patriarchal family

structures that serve capitalist interests that we are given models for. My project showcases the ways in which chosen family does not have one single form or way it can look. My project also showcases the ways chosen family is not perfect and not the one solution that will change systems of oppression. Instead, my project showcases the myriad of different formations of chosen family or desires for chosen my specific narrators have experienced.

My project is uniquely situated at the intersection of oral history and visual art, specifically using painting as an intervention into traditional oral history methodology. In my project, I explore oral history and chosen family through the process of painting a set of 100 oil portraits I completed during the month of March 2025. This visual art element is not simply an illustration project, but a methodological experiment and intervention in listening, seeing, and representing community histories. In my paintings, I bring myself into the work through my hand, through my paintbrush, through the choices I make with the colors I mix and the choices I make with regards to shadow and light. I bring in my chosen family: people, memory, material objects, through intimate vignettes that tell a story beyond what words can offer, through the collective of all 100 paintings. My approach to painting mirrors my approach to conducting oral history interviews, the processes joined in their shared goals of deep listening, reciprocity, and collaboration. The 100 portraits allowed me to represent members of my chosen family who were not able to be part of the oral history interview for a variety of factors. For example, I created portraits of the young children in my life, of people who have passed away, the people who logistically were not able to be interviewed, or those who could not participate for reasons of safety, privacy, or other forms of refusal. I also brought in self-portraiture, representing myself at different ages, as well as nonhuman animals into the collection. These paintings are also doing the work of subverting

traditional family portraits, which are often static, realistic, and whole portraits of peoples faces and/or bodies. My work experiments with fracture, focus, and close-looking, addressing and emphasizing the themes of chosen family: intimacy, care, and attention.

As I explore and investigate chosen family through this project, I want to underscore the importance of not putting forth a romanticized notion of chosen family. Chosen families can be wrought with tension, complexity, conflict, rupture, uneven care, and exclusion, narratives of which are present in the oral histories I have collected. Many of the narrators in this project speak to a sense of loneliness, even amid community and chosen kinship. My own experiences of chosen family, while transformative, have been imperfect. I put forth this project is a testament to chosen family in its complexity. While imperfect and not a solution to systemic oppression, the ways queer/trans South Asian people have been building chosen families is unique and worthy of documentation and exploration. Oral history does not claim to solve these issues, but rather, illuminate them. The family history is such a large part of the field of oral history, however, my project addresses the field's gap in highlighting and preserving chosen family histories.

This project has looked like asking a set of questions rather than arriving at definitive answers. My project asks: *What forms do chosen families take within queer/trans South Asian contexts? How are South Asian queer/trans chosen families unique from non-South Asian queer/trans chosen families? How are these chosen families built, sustained, and transformed over time? What political, cultural, and affective work do they perform? How do queer/trans South Asian chosen families navigate rupture, exclusion, or change? What are the imperfections of these chosen families?* The oral history interviews offer stories that illuminate offerings to address

these questions. They show there is not one definite answer to each question, but different paths that each narrator has taken to arrive at where they are now, and paths they are currently on with aims to arrive where they want to go.

Methods

I developed my oral history project using my training in the Oral History Master of Arts program at Columbia (OHMA), the Oral History Summer School, and my training in oral history during my undergraduate education under the guidance of Dr. Priti Ramamurthy at the University of Washington. I also drew from my knowledge and lived experience of conducting many oral history projects prior to joining the cohort of students at OHMA.

My methods are informed by a practice of speculative fiction and Sadiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation. Hartman makes use of the speculative to fill gaps in the archive of history created by structures of violence. In *Everything For Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052–2072*, co-authors M.E. O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi use the speculative to write the history of the future of New York City, and tell the story of the revolutionary movements yet to come for those reading the text. In their work, they make this future, marked by an absence of the systems of oppression currently in place, possible. The fictional book is a collection of oral history interviews with narrators who are living in New York City after the revolution. The interviews are about different pivotal moments during the revolution. I see this book as a blueprint: for what the world could look like. What I appreciate about the book is that it lays out a world where everyone can have what they need and shows the reader this world is possible, and that they can help build it. This book also lays a blueprint for many of the concepts

of what family can look like outside of current capitalist and patriarchal formations. In one speculative interview, a future narrator shares,“I’ve been realizing that family was usually blood, and that’s who you lived with. And who you lived with was really tied into what you got so, like, if your blood had food, you had food. If they had a nice house and heat, you did too. If they didn’t, well tough shit for you. You were fucked…Honestly, it’s hard to imagine making all your choices based on blood! Why would it matter so fucking much who gave birth to you? Or who you fell in love with or who happened to have the same parent. Like, what if those people were straight up assholes? Or just didn’t know how to take care of you? And people only had two parents? Who was expected to take care of everything? Like, why wouldn’t you collectivise things like childcare? It makes no goddamn sense!” (O'Brien et al., 2022 p. 180-181). In O’Brien and Abdelhadi’s future, family is not organized along lines of blood and obligation. This formation of family mirrors what my chosen family structure looks like. Sadiya Hartman articulates her concept of critical fabulation in her essay, “Venus In Two Acts,” in which she describes the process as “laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible. This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration” (Hartman, 2008). For my project, I aim to piece together narratives of queer/trans South Asian chosen family building both to make sense of the past and those who have come before me and are doing the work of chosen family in the present, but also to create a narrative for the future generations of queer and trans South Asians to learn from.

I am doing this project within my own community. The narrators are all people I have varying levels of closeness with, and some of whom are dear family members. My research practices are informed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith's words in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. She states,"What community research relies upon and validates is that the community itself makes its own definitions." (Smith, 1999 p. 127). Queer and trans South Asian chosen families are a specific subset of broader LGBTQ+ South Asian communities. And each individual may define and describe chosen family, kinship, community differently. The oral history interviews are doing the work of defining, for the narrators' selves, what community means to them, how they enact it, and how they envision community for their futures. I am also informed by Himika Bhattacharya, who in positioning herself as a feminist ethnographer states in her article "Performing Silence: Gender, Violence, and Resistance in Women's Narratives From Lahaul, India," "In all these things that I try to do, my story, my position as woman, class and caste elite, survivor, ethnographer—all creep in as I narrate and analyze years of conversations, friendships, one-time interviews, hours spent in the state departments, and theories learnt and unlearnt during my graduate education." (Bhattacharya, 2009 p. 360). I am approaching this project from my own positionality as a North Indian upper-caste cis lesbian woman who grew up in the United States in a middle-class immigrant household with domestic violence and now as an adult is estranged from blood family and living with a large extended chosen family network. My experiences and identities both of privilege and oppression are present (consciously and unconsciously) throughout this project, informing the ways I build community and who I built community and family with, and my approach to the oral history interview process. While my project is about queer and trans South Asian people, my project centers my community first and foremost. My project does not fully represent all of queer and trans South Asians. For example,

my project does not interview any cis men. This was not in the design of the project, but is instead a facet of who I tend to build community and connection with. As someone who grew up in the United States, the people I have access to build community with tend to be people who also grew up in the United States. This is not always the case, as is represented in my project, but it is a bias that comes with me being the interviewer and connection point for all of the narrators who share their stories. It is important to note that often the onus to fully represent a marginalized community often falls to marginalized researchers. This is not usually a possible expectation to place on marginalized researches, and in this case, it is an expectation that does not fit the project that I am doing, because by design, I am interviewing people within my community and not putting out a wide call for any queer/trans South Asian person to be part of this project.

In choosing narrators, I sought to interview people in my community, people I thought of as chosen family, or extended chosen family. While I invited people, who I did not have a community connection or personal relationship with, the people who I ended up interviewing were all people I had some sort of community connection with. By choosing people I knew outside of the purpose of interviewing them for this project, I was intentional in ensuring that the oral histories interviews would be shared publicly, and that they did not have to answer questions they did not want to. On top of the regular consent processes in oral history projects, I had to consider my positionality as a researcher and chosen family member and/or friend. There were many times during the interviews I had to reposition myself as an interviewer creating this work for a broader audience beyond the two of us, me and the narrator, sitting together. Additionally, there were times I allowed for silences and moments of refusal even when I had the knowledge

that may have filled the gaps left by narrators. For example, when my narrator Soniya began sharing stories about how they met their partner, I knew the individual Soniya was speaking about, but because Soniya never chose to name them, I ensured I followed Soniya's lead and allowed her partner's name to remain anonymous.

I chose early on that I wanted to record the oral history interviews in person. Though virtual interviewing offers convenience and flexibility, I wanted these interviews to be marked with deep intentionality. All of the interviews took place in a home, whether my own or the narrator's. The interviews always included the sharing of a meal or something else, a drink, a place to stay, in addition to the sharing of stories. When I hosted narrators in my own home, it was important to me that I cook them a meal as a practice of reciprocity. Not only in the ways that narrators and interviewers share reciprocity during the oral history interview and conversation itself, but in all that surrounds the oral history encounter. The moments before and after the recorder is turned on are just as important and must be handled with care in the same way as navigating listening to stories shared generously. This process of reciprocity was not only hospitality but an ethical commitment to care in my relationships in their many contexts both outside and within the research context. The care and thoughtfulness I offered my narrators mirrored the themes of the stories they shared regarding care, family, and what it means to be a part of a community of people who look out for each other.

Chosen Family Portraits

I have always considered my oral history practice as connected to an extension of my creative practice. As I developed this project, it grew from a traditional oral history interview project into

a creative visual art project. Through re-connecting with my creative visual art practice with the support of coursework and professors within the Visual Arts department at Columbia, I decided to create portraits as part of my oral history project.

The visual art portion of my oral history project is not just illustrations of my narrators, but a methodological intervention into the practice of oral history that creates space for a deeper examination of concepts and constellations of queer/trans South Asian chosen families. I draw upon Kip Jones and Patricia Leavy's thinking on Arts-Based Research (ABR) and Performative Social Science (PSS). In a conversation between the two of them, Leavy states "arts-based research (or what you understand as performative social science) as any social research or human inquiry that adapts the tenets of the creative arts as a part of the methodology. So, the arts may be used during data collection, analysis, interpretation and/or dissemination" (Jones & Leavy, 2014). Experimenting through painting my 100 paintings was a process of inquiry similar to that of oral history and other qualitative research.

When I set out to do the paintings for this project, I had a very narrow idea of portraiture. I imagined they would be seated or standing portraits of each individual narrator, representing their stories through their portraits. It was my painting professor Kenny Rivero's 100 paintings assignment that helped unlock a different approach to painting my chosen family portraits. I was tasked with creating 100 paintings in under one month. At first I attempted these full scale portraits, but I was spending too much time on each piece. If I had kept on that track, I would have never completed the full set of 100. More significantly, I was overthinking each portrait, trying to find meaningful source material that signaled "family." I spent hours on each painting,

trying to capture every detail, but these early paintings often lacked focus. They did not allow me to paint the details that mattered most in each image. It was through conversations with Professor Rivero that I developed my method of zooming in and painting cropped versions of each image. I told Kenny I was struggling with painting eyes, so he told me to focus on eyes. He encouraged me to play with light and shadow. What resulted was a collection of paintings that capture intimacy and attention in a way that resembles the nature of my oral history practice.

For me, painting was another form of doing oral history of my chosen family.

My paintings were about the process of looking, noticing, seeing, and being with narrators. Teaching art is often the practice of teaching a student how to look. “Notice how the muscle of the thigh bunches at the knee,” my figure drawing professor David Antonio Cruz said to me once during a live model drawing session. He was not just telling me to draw the knee, the muscle, the leg, or even the model’s whole form, but he was teaching me to understand how to look better, so I can see in a truer sense what I am drawing, and not what my brain’s preconceived understanding of what I am supposed to be drawing. Teaching oral history is about teaching a student how to listen. In oral history, we are taught to listen using our whole bodies, allowing the conversation to wander where it needs to go, and not just extract whatever story we interviewers expect to hear.

What I expected to hear in my oral history interviews: Here are the people in my chosen family. Let me tell you about each of them individually, how I met them, what place in my life they have, etc. Here is how I built those relationships and here is how I maintain them. What I received was

lush, complicated, stories of full lives in which people had relationships that felt familial in one season of their life and not another. Narrators who subverted my own expectations of what they might share with me in regards to their families of origin. Narratives of longing, of not having yet found what the narrator is looking for. A common theme of loneliness, and wanting intimacy outside of romance.

Painting my chosen family was a much more emotional process than I expected. My paintings include some of my narrators. But they also include many people who I did not conduct formal recorded oral history interviews with. Painting allowed me to include the children in my life, who are too young to be interviewed in the way I conducted interviews for this project. Painting allowed me to include the other chosen family members I did not have a chance to interview. All of the people represented in my 100 paintings are people I am or have been in active conversation with about the significance of chosen family in our lives.

My visual work on chosen family was informed by David Antonio Cruz's work on chosen family. I met David through taking his course in the Visual Arts Department at Columbia. I intentionally chose to take David's figure drawing course because his work is based on the topics of chosen family as well. Encountering his work allowed my work to feel possible, and opened up the ways this project was working within a lineage of visual art projects.

I got to see David's solo show, "When The Children Come Home," at the Sugar Hill Children's Museum. David's process for creating this work includes asking subjects to choose a small group of people they want to be painted alongside. David then has the group visit his studio where he

photographs them posing and sitting together in various and unconventional ways. He paints them together, often laying upon one another, seated upside down and in ways that defy the laws of physics.

As part of this exhibit, David hosted "Family Photo Day," in which he invited members of the public to their families, however they defined them, for family portrait sessions. Instead of stiff, traditional portraits, David collaborates with photographer Marcus Branch and imbues play and whimsy into the photos. I got to take my chosen family for one of these sessions and it was more meaningful to me than I realized it would be. I brought my chosen family, my uncle/aunty, uncle, their two children, my partner, and I. We were all given a buffet of props and accessories to look extra fabulous. My sometimes shy 3-year-old kiddo chose the extravagant set of pearls that covered their whole body because they are so small. My boisterous 7-year-old kiddo wanted a feather boa, fans, and her stuffed owl front and center, she was (and always is) the star of the show. My uncle chose to hold a wooden parasol, my uncle/aunty chose lace gloves. I held flowers and smiled so wide. The photoshoot took place at a children's museum, a place designed for children to explore and play and naturally engage with the art in ways that made sense to them. David and Marcus offered me and my family so much care throughout the short shoot. They directed our posing and posture but along an axis of consent, ensuring we were all comfortable first and foremost. I cherish these photos and this labor David offered families chosen and blood alike. David's work on chosen family, both his paintings, and his offerings of family photo sessions are part of my artistic lineage.

I am inspired by the work of queer Pakistani artist Salman Toor, and his paintings depicting queer South Asians in fantasy, dreamlike settings. Toor is able to capture the vibrancy and care that queers have for one another, alongside the isolation and loneliness that occurs as queer brown subjects. His painting *Afterparty*, which captures the intimacy and often delirious connectedness of people who do not want to go home yet, so they keep hanging out and dancing long after the party has ended. How this is a precious liminal space that cannot quite have words put to it. The vibrant greens of these scenes of queer exuberance is starkly contrasted with the drab beige hues of paintings like *Immigration Men*, in which Toor captures the subtle hazing of TSA and the surveillance of brown men at airports. In this work, the two men do not touch, do not look at one another, do not close their eyes with pleasure, but instead look downcast with the shame put upon them.

Through my intervention of painting 100 oil portraits, I was able to portray my chosen family in its deep complexity. Through vignettes that focused on closeness, moments of touch, care, and fractured memory and chosen familial atmosphere through visuality, something not always possible to portray through orality and words. As I stated in the introduction, the paintings allowed me to bring in members of my chosen family who could not be part of the project through the process of the traditional seated oral history interview. But more than having a chance to represent my chosen family in its entirety, creating my paintings was a form of worldbuilding. Paintings, unlike photos, show slanted versions of their subjects, human, object, or memory. Even when I painted using a reference image, my hand inherently influenced and interpreted the image through my own embodied memory and knowledge. Painting, therefore, is an interpretation of memory, in the way oral history is. Oral history is not concerned with

statements of facts of what happened, but instead of how narrators remembered, were influenced by, and made meaning of what happened. My paintings are a form of meaning-making. The meaning is the felt sense of family that cannot be represented through words. The embodied feelings of care, intention, attention, and the impact the memories of these feelings within chosen family has had on the subjects of the paintings, and myself, the artist.

My paintings also allowed space for playing with temporality. In my artistic practice outside of this project, including visual art and creative writing, a theme I engage with is childhood. I painted portraits of people through time, younger versions of them, including younger versions of myself. I do not have access to some memories from childhood, and so painting had to replace oral history as a form of memory work in this case. For some of the portraits, I painted versions of the subjects before I knew them, as a way to bring in who they were before they knew me, honoring the many selves and the embodied memory of those selves that may not come through in oral history interviews, or that I may not know how to interview effectively to allow those selves to come through in the format of a traditional seated oral history interview.

My paintings were also a way to have images of my chosen family, some of whom are also narrators of the project, without sharing actual photographs of their faces. Many of the paintings are only recognizable to the subjects of the paintings, or only to me, the artist. I brought in the subjects of my paintings into my painting process when possible. In some cases, I asked the people I intended to paint to send me images to use as reference material. I regularly sent photos of my work in progress, and finished pieces. In some cases, this was not possible. For example, for my uncle Ponyboy/Alix, who passed away last summer. I shared the portrait I made of him

with his partner, who I did not have a chance to interview for my project, and with many of his chosen family and community, who I had the chance to connect with through the process of collective mourning and shared grief we underwent together.

The visual decisions I made mirrored the nature of oral history. By choosing to create 100 vignettes, zoomed in, cropped, isolating sections of the face, eyes, hands, experimenting light and shadow, the visible and invisible, I mirror the way memory is fragmented in oral history. As an interviewer, one does not know ahead of time which story a narrator shares will end up being the most profound or until the stories are being told and the narrator is actively making meaning through the telling itself. It was the process of looking at each image and painting it in which the meaning was made of the people, memories and stories they were attached to.

On The Birds

By the end of the painting process, I wanted to expand my subject matter beyond the human. I started painting birthday cakes, my dog, and birds. Birds as a subject come into my art in different ways. I am an avid birdwatcher, and during the months of Spring migration, I take any opportunity to take my binoculars to Prospect Park, or another park to see what I can see. People are often surprised to hear that birdwatching is a practice that I started doing after I moved to NYC, and not in my hometown in the Pacific Northwest, a place known for its outdoorsy people and hobbies. Birdwatching has transformed the way I move through the world. Since starting birdwatching, I cannot ignore the birds the way I did before I was a birdwatcher. My eyes and ears have become attuned to this layer of life that is everywhere, not just in parks and green spaces. Becoming a birdwater has changed the way I move through the world in similar ways

that oral history has changed the ways I approach conversations with people and the way I ask questions. Birdwatching is inherently a process of attentiveness, care, slowing down, and looking, very similar to the intimacy, care, and attention I explore about chosen family through my paintings. I like to look at the birds on my own and with my loved ones. For my birthday, I lead bird walks to share and bring others into my joy of birds. I see birds as an extension of my community, and getting to know the different species, the distinct sounds of their calls, as getting to know my neighbors, and getting a better understanding of my home.

I draw upon Jesse McLaughlin's thinking on the shared ecologies of queer communities and birds. Jesse formerly worked for the NYC Bird Alliance, and now studies as a CUNY PhD student. He leads bird walks of the Vale of Cashmere in Prospect Park, to share this history with people. I attended one of these walks in which he shared the book *In the Vale of Cashmere*, a collection of Thomas Roma's photography of the queer Black men who used The Vale of Cashmere as a cruising spot. The secluded nature of this area of the park also allows space for birds to seek refuge during their long journeys during Spring and Fall migration. The Vale of Cashmere is an important part of the park for me and my friends, where we can joyously gather with the birds and with each other. This living archive of human and non-human histories intersect lives through me and the friends and chosen family I bring with me birdwatching. We shape the space and are shaped by it. I also draw upon Catriona Sandilands's scholarship on queer ecologies. In her chapter "Mulberry Intimacies and the Sweetness of Kinship" she writes: "Understanding our relationships with mulberries as intimacies invites us both to think carefully about how they have "come to us," and to relate to them in ways that are based in practices of respect and mutual flourishing rather than eradication and control. As I have explored in this

chapter, mulberries have a lot to tell us about histories, relations, desires and futurities: ours, theirs and all together. In addition, they invite possibilities for a concrete practice of close and loving cohabitation: becoming intimate with mulberries demands that we ask how they invite us to join into their webs of family and memory at the same time as we come to value them as our generous kin." (Sandilands, 2022 p.29). Like Sandilands, I am claiming the birds as my kin through my visual art project and honoring the ways they have facilitated chosen family building for me and my community, and those who have come before me.

Birdwatching has connotations of wealth, whiteness, and access. Birding is only accessible to those who have free time, the ability to acquire the appropriate gear and tools, and who are physically able. The reason I stayed away from birdwatching for so long is because of these associations, the general demographic of birdwatchers being old white retired people, and the tradition of birdwatching being connected to hunting, power, and colonization. Most of the friends I have taken birdwatching had never done it before I took them, and had never thought to go outside and intentionally look at the birds. While all of this is true, I also want to expand what birdwatching can be defined as and push back on essentializing this practice to only those with access. Since becoming a birder, I have learned about many different ways birding can be done. For example, blind birders will discover birds using primarily sound identification. Disabled birders can birdwatch seated in one place. Often, birdwatching is easier when you stay in one place for a long time, because it allows the birds to become used to human presence. Birdwatching does not need to require binoculars or special equipment. And I remind myself, using Thomas Roma's photography as an example, that marginalized people and birds have carved out shared spaces for themselves. This does not change the fact that birding has been

defined by its lack of access. However, birds have always been examples of the nonsense of borders. The birds are more aligned with oppressed than those in power.

The Interviews

This oral history project collects oral history interviews with 8 narrators: Vega Subramaniam, Mala Nagarajan, Uma Rao, Bhav Nancherla, Leo Hegde, Rani Som, Sri Sreedhara, and Soniya Munshi. I chose these narrators because I wanted to interview people who were part of my chosen family and/or extended community network. Each of the people I interviewed were people I had some sort of existing community connection before the time of the interview. It was important to me to include a range of ages especially, as I wanted this project to reflect intergenerational community, as well as the differences and similarities of chosen family and community building in different generations of queer and trans communities.

In my interviews with each of the narrators, I entered with expectations not to extract complete life histories in the traditional sense of oral history, but to learn more about each narrator's approach, thoughts, feelings, and desires around chosen family. Additionally, as I had personal connections of varying levels with each of the narrators, my interview methodology was informed by the relationship, the space (physical and created), and trust shaped the stories that emerged within the interview setting.

Vega and Mala

Vega and Mala are the oldest Indian lesbians I know. They are now in their 60s, which as I grow older myself, I am realizing is not even that old as I once thought when I first met them in

undergrad at the University of Washington. Vega came to the university to speak at a conference for queer people of color. At this point, I had met queer people of color, and more specifically queer South Asians my own age, but I had not met queer South Asians older than me. For me, and so many of my peers, Vega (and her partner Mala who was present at the conference as well) was a first look at what a future, or even the possibility of a future, as a queer South Asian could look like. Vega and Mala are known across queer/trans South Asian communities in the U.S. as queer elders due to the work they have put into community building and advocacy. As shared within the Outwords Archive: "They were one of eight plaintiff couples in Washington State's landmark 2004 marriage equality case Andersen v. Sims. After being initially denied a marriage license under the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), the court ruled the act was unconstitutional, but the WA Superior Court overturned the judgment on appeal. Mala and Vega were then legally married after Washington voters approved same sex marriage in 2012" (theoutwordsarchive.org). Since meeting Vega and Mala I have considered them part of my extended community/family. Even though we do not keep up to date with each other's lives, we know each other and are happy to see each other when we run into each other at various community events and gatherings.

When I reached out to interview them both about my project, I was worried they might not remember me since it had been a while since we had spoken. But they replied to my email with warmth and excitement about the project. When I entered their home I immediately noticed their bird posters and binoculars and we connected over our shared love of birdwatching. It felt special, connecting about something that had nothing to do with our queer South Asianness. I felt like I was feeling my future in a new, mundane way that felt special. I could picture myself at

their age, sharing my passion for birdwatching with someone in my shoes. To me it felt as though the blueprint I was seeking to showcase with my project was being laid out for me. A blueprint for how to be an older queer South Asian person and connect with intergenerational community in this moment through this specific interest in birdwatching.

I interviewed Vega first, then Mala. In between, we shared a meal Mala cooked for us. It was familiar homey food, and it was perfect.

Vega

What I remember most from my interview with Vega was a mixture of grief that after so many years later, her experience reflected so much of how I felt growing up. That not much had changed between our generations. And of feeling a kinship with Vega's story. The power that feeling known by knowing someone else's story can bring.

Vega offered me such a generous interview, it made me feel energized and hopeful for the rest of the interviews to come for my project. She shared stories of her coming out process, falling for a girl in college, and the ways she did not have context for queerness nor of a model for the future. "I also did not imagine ever coming out to my parents. I didn't know anybody else who was Indian and gay, didn't know, didn't have vocabulary even if the thought crossed my mind that I would come out to my parents, what words would I use?" (35:33)

Vega spoke of the power of connecting with Mala in 1996 in Bellingham, the first out, queer Indian person she ever met. She describes the strength this gave her to come out to her own parents:

“Oh my God, Oh my God, you're queer too. So am I. And we kind of came out to each other. She was the first person that I'd ever met in my life who was Indian and queer…and she was out to her parents. And her parents were my parents, I mean, in the sense we came from the exact same community in South India. So I'm like, she is out to her parents and she is right here living to tell the tale. She is alive and well. And, and... The next time I went to visit my parents, I came out to them. Meeting Mala was what precipitated me coming out to my folks” (54:48).

Vega and Mala not only shared identities, but also in shared love for community building, and speaks of how they founded Trikone Northwest (59:35) She describes learning community building from witnessing the ways her immigrant parents found South Asian community: “They made friends with any other person who was from the South Asian subcontinent that they could find. Whether they were Muslim, or Sikh, or Sri Lankan, or Punjabi, or, you know, whatever. Oh, you're from South Asia? You are my people. Let's get together” (1:05:16).

She shared how early on, when she, Mala, and their friends founded Trikone NW the group was marked by its diversity across age, gender, sexuality, class, etc. However, as the group evolved through the early-2000s to a more cis, gay, male, wealthy, unpoliticized crowd. Vega shared how she became aware the only thing holding the group together was a shared queer and South Asian

identity. This is such an important reflection. I do not want my project to assume the idea that a shared identity equals immediate community or family among queer/trans South Asians.

Vega shared some of her favorite memories from her days of Trikone Northwest and this one always brings a smile to my face: "One is that we participated in Pride, the Pride Parade, for the first time in 2004, I think it was while Pride was still on Capitol Hill, went up Broadway.

It was the best time ever. A friend of ours, a white lesbian friend of ours, had a pick up truck that she lent...She was like, I will give you my truck and I will drive the truck. So the rest of you could just dance and be on the streets. And we, a whole bunch of us… we all went over and we decorated. It was so janky, but we had so much fun. We decorated the truck. It was so fun, just decorating the truck and then we drove and there were…maybe 25 or so, maybe 25, 30 people on our float, in our contingent.

And it was a beautiful day and we were all dressed to the nines. Of course, the gay boys, you can imagine how gorgeous they were. And we were all dressed in desi outfits. And spangled out and we were blaring Bollywood [music]...We were dancing down the streets. What we lacked in high fashion, we made up for in enthusiasm. And, we won a thousand dollars for 'most enthusiastic contingent.'

And it was just such a moment of pure joy and community and people in the…audience, the spectators, any time there was a person who was brown, they would run out and like, give us big hugs and then run back in and we'd be like, 'come march with us!'...They saw us and they were

like, oh my God, I, we, exist, you know, and TNW and, our membership increased because we got visibility. Yeah, it was just joyous celebration" (1:09:02).

She goes on to share about the people she is still connected with, the ways she and her community maintain friendships across distance. For Vega, these friendships are familial. She shares how friends have stayed with her and Mala after breakups or when they needed places to land. Traveling to see people. And how an important part of many of her friendships has been living together or sharing home spaces in some way and some point. How when she visits from out of town, it is a given that she will stay with her friends, in the way that she would stay with her cousins in India if she were to visit, even if it had been years since she had seen them. This, I think, speaks volumes to the sense of chosen family Vega has cultivated within her community across the U.S. and around the world. Since the pandemic, Vega and Mala maintain a regular call with their friends/chosen family, speaking about everything from the mundane, politics, books, and more.

The conversation concluded with Vega sharing her and Mala's dreams for building an intentional living community for queer BIPOC to come together and care for each other. She speaks about thinking about the care she and Mala will need as they age, having no children of their own, and how the chosen family she spoke of before agreed to take care of them both.

Something I learned from this conversation with Vega is that care, the need of it, in so many ways, is what keeps chosen families together.

Mala

I interviewed Mala next. Mala begins her interview speaking about not having much of a connection to her family of origin, nor India, where her family was from, and so choosing to save her money, quit high school, and travel to India to learn more about where she was from and meet her family there. She shared that it helped her understand her family and culture better, and that it inspired her to learn her family's language.

When we talked about Mala's experience growing up in a predominantly white suburban context, she describes coming to understandings of race in the U.S. with Blackness and whiteness. She shares some of the first instances of chosen family she experienced were when playing sports in school. "I remember in ninth grade, one of my teammates on my basketball team, Mary and I got to be good friends and we'd write in a notebook and exchange it and we always signed it L Y L A S, which was 'love you like a sister.' That sense of familiness, or having friends be like family, felt very natural to me" (17:57).

She speaks of the strictness of her family, the ways she witnessed her older sisters' freedom limited by her strict father, and the ways she was able to create space for her own freedom in spite of it all. She found a way to start making money, save to travel, and plan her trip to the point where her father was not able to say no, because she was not asking for permission, she was just leaving.

When Mala returned from her trip, she was inspired to learn Tamil and other South Asian languages. She started taking intensive language courses, and she finally felt excited by

academics and pursued linguistics at the University of Maryland, eventually transferring to the University of Washington to specifically learn Tamil. Through learning languages, Mala found connections with extended family.

Seattle opened up a new world to Mala: she was a part of a diverse academic community, living independently, attending live music shows. She also finally started meeting other queer people and specifically lesbians, and finding familial-feeling friendships. Eventually this led to Mala realizing she was a lesbian and the fear and pain that came with this realization and sharing it with her parents and sisters.

Mala shared how going to India and pursuing learning South Asian languages led her to feel more connected to her South Asianness, but after coming out, she felt less connected to that part of her identity. She shared attending a film festival of queer South Asian films and seeing Urvashi Vaid be the grand marshall at the Seattle pride parade, and slowly finding other queer South Asians, and eventually starting Trikone Northwest. With the help of listservs like SAWNET and KushDC.

She shares her side of the story of meeting Vega, which was similar to what Vega shared with me, however Mala shared the story of their wedding. How their queer South Asian friends were all involved, helping make the garlands, centerpieces.

“It felt like a community wedding. Talk about, chosen family, like all the folks from Trikone, Northwest, and I mean, I was open to inviting anybody and everybody. And it was like, eh, this is our wedding. It's really a community affair. It's a community party” (1:27:14).

She shares similar details of the group of friends Mala and Vega still stay in touch with through regular calls. She talks about the dream Mala and Vega have for creating a community to create a place for queer people of color to live together in a communal way.

She shares the complexity of being her and other people in her community in elder care roles, finding themselves caring for people who have not always offered them grace and care and the ways it is emotionally complicated. How the experience of providing care to her elderly mother has led Mala to have a more positive relationship with her mom. She also speaks about hoping that once this part of her life is over, she can prioritize spending time with her friends and chosen family. I am struck that even as an elder, she is weighed down by obligations to blood family. And at the same time, she finds ways to be connected to her chosen family, and stay true to who she is and her relationships with her wife and friends.

Methodological Reflection

My methodological reflections on interviewing both Vega and Mala are on how intergenerational exchange shaped the interview dynamic and how shared identity accelerated trust, both in the space of the interview and in the stories the both of them shared.

The way Vega and Mala found one another facilitated community building for the two of them because of their shared identities, and it was out of this space of connection that allowed the two of them to work together to create space for more community building across shared identity through Trikone NW. Of course, Vega also speaks to how identity-based community building has/had its limitations.

During the interview, I had the sense that Vega and Mala have shared some of these stories before. It is true, they have! They have shared their stories for different projects, and often the stories highlighted are connected to their wedding, as they are a part of the historic moment of marriage equality in Washington State.

Vega and Mala are very generous, especially with their stories, and especially for younger generations of queer/trans South Asians. I do feel like my relationship with them allowed for this space of the interview to be possible. As soon as I was finished with both interviews, the three of us debriefed the experience, they both shared more stories that they said they would be happy to share in follow up interviews, and they happily offered suggestions for more people I could include in this project. Their enthusiasm bolstered my work, and it was clear their participation was not only out of care for me as an individual, but for care of this type of work as a whole.

Completing these two interviews, the first of my project, solidified the importance of doing oral history interviews in person. The care and connection we built together through sharing food, debriefing, even chatting about birds at the very beginning, would not have been possible in the same way through a virtual interview.

Bhav

Bhav is someone I consider part of my chosen family. My partner and I see them, along with their partner and two children once a week. My partner and I support with childcare duties like picking the children up from school, helping with homework, dinner, bath, and bedtime. This weekly practice has become an important part of my partner's and my weekly routine. Bhav is someone I talk about chosen family with a lot, because it is something they value integrating with their blood family. They have shared that it is important to them for their children to have many safe and trusted adults in their lives for support.

For my interview with Bhav, I invited them over to my apartment in Brooklyn. We sat on cushions and blankets on the floor with my dog, Juniper, sitting between us.

They begin their interview jumping into a story about coming out to their mother. When their mother did not know what to do, she called upon a work colleague, who happened to be queer to talk with young Bhav. When sharing this story, they describe the chosen family they felt with the friends and work colleagues of their parents. How this friend their mother called, Brooke, was like a parent. They describe being grateful that in that moment, they were offered a queer elder.

This leads to a conversation around care. That this chosen family that was around them when they were growing up showed them ways to offer care in small ways, and that is what has stuck with Bhav. They end up offering an apt definition for chosen family as "the family you pick up

along the way or something. The people who actually are the ones showing up, whether it's ever really explicitly declared" (16:24).

The conversation moves to what queerness means to Bhav, and I think they offer a response that speaks to the fluidity of queerness. They say that it is something they feel like they do not have the space to think about, that they feel like they need to focus on the needs of the everyday moments and needs of parenting. And also the complexity of navigating these things while parenting a trans child. They go on to connect these conversations to their reflections on their mother's reactions and relationships to their own queerness.

This leads to a conversation about the importance of chosen family, and the importance of having chosen family in order to help raise their children. And how they cannot imagine parenting without the support of their chosen family. Their thoughts wander, and ultimately end up at the reflection that maybe they are not acting upon their queerness in terms of romance or more dominant notions of what queerness is supposed to look like, but the way they are raising their kids, with an entire community of queer and trans chosen family at their side, feels like a way of embodying and acting upon their queerness.

What I hear in Bhav's reflections and answers in this interview is that queerness is so much bigger than what the mainstream makes it out to be. Queerness is a politic, it is a way we orient and assemble our entire ways of being, the day to day boring bits and the big picture dreaming bits.

The conversation comes back to their identity, but this time they discuss their Americanness and their Indianness. How when they travelled to India when they were younger and felt the need to prove their Indianness, when they realized their Americanness.

Bhav speaks to a loneliness that their parents experienced raising them and their sister that they feel very shaped by. And how different it is now, witnessing their children surrounded by their community. They talk about growing up feeling very alone, and how they do not want that for their children. And it sounds like their children are not alone, Bhav speaks to it, saying if they died tomorrow, their children would be okay.

The reflections on loneliness continue as Bhav shares about their experiences postpartum. However, they speak to the "miracle watch[ing] two people grow into the world." And the ways this miracle includes the highs and the lows of witnessing the mirrors of what's inherited generationally, and seeing things in their kids that remind them of moments and feelings from being young themself. They speak eventually how at the end of the day, they just really like their kids. And they're in such awe of the little ways they are growing and committing to being alive. (1:06:51).

I so deeply appreciate Bhav's reflections on care, loneliness, and parenthood. It is so clear how deeply they are thinking about every day in the small ways and big ways, and that is not lost on me. This oral history interview feels like active meaning making. Like they are working out ideas and thoughts and feelings in real-time. That is the work of oral history that is sometimes

forgotten. That the process of oral history can create new ideas, reflections, thoughts. That it is not just the regurgitation of stories that only have one way of being told.

Methodological Reflection

Interviewing Bhav was interesting and complicated as they are someone who is part of my chosen family and they are someone I see with regularity as my partner and I are actively involved with their children's lives. As an interviewer, I noticed in myself a desire to ask questions that fed my personal curiosities around parenthood and Bhav's children, as their children are a large part of my life. While these questions are relevant to Bhav's stories and have deeply impacted their life, I did leave our interview considering whether I would have asked a different narrator who I did not have this type of relationship with the same questions around their children.

While care in this interview certainly showed up in ways similar to other interviews in which I hosted narrators in my home, it looked and felt different with Bhav. So much of our relationship is defined by care, as a major role I have in their life is offering care to their children. And in return, they offer me care as an elder. This interview felt like an extension of the reciprocal relationship we have built, and a way for them to show up for me in something I was asking of them.

Leo

Leo is the youngest narrator in my project. I met him during the summer of 2018 when I was living in the Bay Area. We are not very close, but I feel a kinship with him as a queer South

Asian. After re-connecting with him during a visit to the Bay Area, I was excited to invite him to the project, without knowing anything about his relationship to the concept of chosen family. What I did know going into the interview, was that his mother, Aruna Rao is the founder of Desi Rainbow Parents and Allies, a group that supports South Asian families in showing up better for their LGBTQ+ children. Leo is originally from Edison, New Jersey, and so I got lucky and had the chance to invite him for an interview while he was visiting family during the holiday season.

We started our conversation speaking about Leo's relationship with music. The conversation focused a lot on his experience playing tabla, first growing up as a girl, and then once he transitioned. Tabla is a very gendered instrument, and I was interested to hear Leo's reflections on tabla, gender, and queerness. What a gift it was to hear him speak about not only his experience learning how to play tabla, but also teaching the instrument to other trans/queer South Asians.

Growing up, Leo shares that being a "girl" tabla player was a sensationalised identity put onto him, however, he shares, "I liked that feeling of having relationship with boys in that way. Like, being another tabla player holding my own…existing in that space that was probably affirming in some way. (17:26)

He shares the gendered nature of both the trumpet (his first instrument) and tabla. The way trumpet has a feeling of athleticism and competition around it, the way percussion is seen as strong, powerful, fast, and these associations with traditional masculinity. However, when Leo describes tabla, he describes it as "actually somewhat of a mild percussion instrument," "muted"

and “melodic” (19:05). It is clear Leo possesses a deep relationship with and understanding of the instrument, but what I hear in this is also the way his queerness/transness influences the lens with which he has this relationship and understanding of the instrument, and it opens up more possibility in his practice, ultimately leading him to be able to be a teacher to other trans/queer South Asians.

Leo speaks to the balance of wanting to make the tabla accessible to those who want to learn with wanting to honor the lineage of the instrument, and wanting to ensure he does it justice with his teaching. I appreciate how deeply he thinks about this through his teaching. He spends time sharing some of the history and lineage with me. He shares that the tabla has “both Muslim and Hindu teachers,” and how the instrument “spans both religions.” There is political significance here, “In this moment that we're seeing [the] rise of like Hindutva, or Hindu fascism, I think there's something really beautiful in this tradition that feels important to learn from, to highlight to people who, love this music or see it as this traditional art form, that it came from this merging of different communities, you know?

This is something I wanna learn more about…It feels like a sacred thing. It feels like a history that can interrupt some of the Islamophobia and things that are so rampant in a lot of Indian communities right now” (27:59).

For Leo, teaching tabla is a practice that brings together his politics, trans and queer identities, and his South Asianness.

When Zara, Leo's first student asked him to teach them tabla, Leo said no. Leo speaks to how he did not see himself as an expert, and in a way was gatekeeping the role of teacher from himself. Once he realized he had enough knowledge to be able to teach beginner tabla, he agreed, and shares a bit about Zara's experience learning the instrument: "they were just so happy and so excited and [saw] this as a great way to connect to their roots and connect to a tradition that like they had found really hard to access in the past."

Leo shares: "I think I am reaching people in my community who don't feel like they can be in those classical music spaces, but want that knowledge and want to build these skills and wanna be connected in that way." (32:35) Leo is creating space for queer and trans South Asianness to thrive. He might not be using the words of chosen family, but in my eyes, he is doing the same thing I feel like I am doing with my chosen family. He is creating spaces (worlds) where queerness and South Asianness are working together, alchemizing something completely new and wholly different from what non-South-Asian queer spaces and non-queer South Asian spaces can offer.

After Zara started learning tabla from Leo, he got connected with more trans and queer South Asians interested in learning tabla. After 2 years of Leo and Zara working together, they hosted a community recital in which Zara played a 15 minute solo piece, and other trans and queer South Asians played pieces as well. Leo reflects, "I was like, wow, this is who I want to play for and this is who I want to teach" (33:45).

Leo is unique in that his mother runs Desi Rainbow Parents and Allies, a nonprofit organization that supports South Asian families in being better allies to their LGBTQ+ kids, their website states: “Our mission is to foster understanding and acceptance among families, with the goal of affirming and celebrating our LGBTQIA+ loved ones.” Leo shares the complexity of how it was his mother’s difficulty accepting his queerness that led her to seek other South Asian parents of queer children, for that affinity group-type of support that did not exist elsewhere, and how eventually it turned into a 501c3 nonprofit. Leo offers that he has learned a lot from his mother about community building, and at the same time has had to work through feelings of resentment. However, as he has built his own queer/trans South Asian community outside of his mother’s connections, and learned to advocate for his own boundaries, Leo has found acceptance and appreciation for his mother’s work.

Leo then shares his own experiences working in LGBTQ+ organizing spaces. As an organizer for the organization Lavender Phoenix, and LGBTQ+ API group, he was able to find community and purpose, doing the work he felt called to do. Leo tells me about Yuen, the Executive Director of Lavender Phoenix, who brought him into this work and has become a mentor and close friend. I asked Leo to share a story of something he did at Lavender Phoenix that he felt proud of. He tells me about connecting with the parents of Jackson Salas, a 20 year old Asian American queer person who was found dead in a 40 year old white man’s apartment. The police immediately ruled it a suicide and were not willing to look into it. Leo describes connecting with Jackson’s parents, hearing their story, what they wanted and needed, and ultimately working to put on a vigil in front of City Hall.

We do not explicitly start talking about chosen family until towards the end of the interview. Leo shared, “In the past five years or so since I've come out as trans, I think there's been a different kind of closeness that I've had to, especially other trans people and especially other trans Asian Pacific Islander people. And a level of intimacy in my friendships and a level of asking for and receiving support that feel different than what we are taught friendships are about, you know. I was thinking about like my close friends in the Bay and like the ways that we've show[n] up for each other and how…they feel like friendships and how they also feel like something more than that” (1:07:04).

I so deeply appreciate Leo sharing the ways he is thinking about chosen family, even if they are incomplete thoughts and intentions rather than systems that have already been set up. “When I think about my future, so much of how I envision my future is having these relationships that might not be romantic partnerships or might not be me having kids or whatever, but building family around those really intimate, platonic relationships too. And [I feel] a little bit of fear [that] there's not really a script for this, but it's something I want.” (1:09:08) I think my project is for Leo, and people similar to him. It is not a project that necessarily answers all the questions, but offers a myriad of possibilities and constellations around some options of how different people approach chosen family within their queer South Asian contexts.

While Leo might not feel like his chosen family structure is completely set up yet, he has people in his life he sees as chosen family, and a clear vision for what he wants for his future. “The thing that comes to mind to me is, I really want to be cared for. I really wanna be cared for. And I know that everyone else feels that way too. And there's so many ways that right now we are not

cared for and we…There's this breakdown of people not taking care of each other and not being accountable to each other. And so to me, I think if this is something that we all deeply want, we have to choose it, not just in theory, but as a practice and as a committed practice." (1:18:34).

When he says this, I think of my chosen family, and how beautifully he has articulated my experience. Chosen family is a practice, and it's an ongoing commitment, something I choose to show up for every day, not a stagnant entity.

Methodological Reflection

As soon as Leo and I finished our formal interview, he asked me many questions about my own experiences building and being an active participant in my intergenerational queer/trans South Asian chosen family. My takeaways from my interview with him was his hunger for spaces of care and kinship outside of blood family and romantic/sexual relationships, and his curiosity shined in our post-interview debrief conversation, shared over a meal I had cooked ahead of time.

I also resonated with Leo's stories as he shared the importance of the role of mentorship, shared cultural practice, and political resonances in shaping rapport in mentorship, both in his experience of being a mentee in political organizing spaces, and in his experience of being a mentor as a tabla teacher. Leo spoke to some of the important issues that impact queer and trans South Asian people, and I especially appreciate that he brings in conversations around Islamophobia and Hindutva and Hindu fascism. For Leo, bringing this analysis was central to his practice as a tabla player and teacher, and therefore in his formation of queer/trans South Asian community and chosen family building.

Rani

Rani is a relatively new friend, made through different community connections. She is a graphic novelist who grew up in New York, and I was excited to invite her to be part of this project.

She begins the interview by telling me some basic information about being born in Ethiopia and moving to New York when she was young. She shares her identity as a trans femme, one that she came to only after she met a trans woman who assumed she was a trans woman, before she had language for transness for herself.

Rani tells me about living in Manhattan, right next to her UN school. She shares she enjoyed school, and found it to be a place where she did not experience the misogyny, racism, hierarchy of the homogeneous white Cornell University where she attended for her undergraduate education. She attributes the harmony of her school partially to the fact that students were attending from all over the world, and partially to it being a time before technology and social media. Rani shares that she actually went back to her high school recently as a guest, invited by her French teacher to speak about her graphic novels.

“I'm not sure that she ever thought about it, but for me she was very influential. Not only in terms of instilling some sense of culture into me, but also as a model for being a strong woman. I always aspired to be like her in terms of her strength and her confidence in the world. So seeing her again and then coming back to her as a trans woman, it all felt very emotional and, it felt like

a moment of reckoning, but, and I think she recognized that too. So it was very, it felt sort of monumental to me, going back there" (19:57).

Rani shares being influenced by punk music as a young person. The music and the culture surrounding it influenced the clothes she wore, how she spent her time, and money. She shares she started learning guitar and played in bands in college and afterwards. While she did not feel she could make it as a musician, Rani was interested in a career as an artist. She shares she drew comics from a young age. "My pals and I would draw comics because this is the language we understood. And I think all children kind of understood it, 'cause we all children know how to draw or at least like to draw. And we just turned that up a notch with words and turned them into little stories. My friends stopped drawing comics once we got to sixth grade, but I kept doing it because I loved it" (29:19).

Rani's parents expected her to have a sensible career, and when pre-med did not work out, she found her way into a compromise with architecture, eventually attending Harvard for her master's degree. She worked in the field of architecture for a while, though she did not enjoy it, but one day decided to quit her awful job and take a big leap to take a year off of working in architecture to work on a book proposal, using money she received from her aunt who had recently passed away. She spent a year at her desk drawing comics, which eventually became her first book, *Apsara Engine*, a collection of short stories. Rani's second book, *Spellbound*, was a diary comic style fictionalized graphic memoir documenting the process of becoming an artist, writing her first book, and coming out as trans. Rani shares that the process of coming out as an

artist and coming out as trans felt like they occurred in parallel. Partially, they both happened after her parents died, and so without the burden of parental expectations.

She shares the memory of helping her parents move back to India when her mother's health declined, and how her father passed away 3 years after her mother. She shares how in the years after her parents died, Rani started spending more time with her aunt in Long Island, making weekend trips that consisted of cooking large meals. She shares her appreciation for this time with her aunt in adulthood, an experience she was not able to appreciate as a child. She shares that once her aunt died, she had no more family in the U.S., and while she had cousins in India, once there were no more immediate family members to see there, she stopped visiting.

She shares a sweet story about a cousin she was always close with who would refer to her as "little brother" when they were growing up, and how when this cousin found out through the internet that Rani is trans, was very understanding and ended her note to her by calling her "little sister" (52:51).

Rani speaks to a specificity of what family felt like to her growing up within a South Asian context and visiting India as a child: "I do miss that sense of, it's almost a bodily closeness that I miss in terms of family. And I think it's particularly kind of evocative, thinking back about just being in India and the kind of shared spaces that I occupied as a kid…I think there is a really, I do miss the sense of tactility and closeness that I remember from back then that I think is sort of absent in my life now" (55:00).

As we move the conversation to her life in the present and her people now, Rani shares "I don't think up until I came out that I understood that I had a community." (56:47) For Rani, it was coming into herself in this way that allowed her to recognize community. While her group of friends were quite close and hung out regularly, she explains that over time, people went in their different directions. The theme I hear ringing over and over again in Rani's interview is a sense of longing, and knowing there is intimacy outside of the sexual or romantic possible in relationships.

"And I think I'd always been looking for, like I mentioned, that kind of like intimacy that's not sexual or sensual, but is more, has to do with like bodies that are close to each other. I don't know exactly how to put it, but there's this kind of like, I think I found that to some degree when I came out as a trans person, I think there was much more, a bigger space in which to be close to people. And I think there's a kind of bodily intimacy amongst trans women that I thought was really sweet…[However] the community, if you wanna call it that, of trans women in New York is just as fraught with problems as any other community." (57:57) What I hear in Rani's narrative is not so different from what I hear in Leo's: A longing for chosen family. Their reflections mirror each other, in their yearning for relationships that are marked by this intimacy outside of romantic or sexual relationships, but are more familial and close. She shares her exploring this in her upcoming third book, which is about trans utopia and its shortcomings.

Rani reflects that because she came out as trans later in life, she feels as though she does not have a cohort of other trans people with shared experiences of coming out. She also shares she is in

community with many trans comics artists and how she is grateful to “be part of that world” (1:01:31).

“But at the same time, I'm still looking for the thing that is somehow a bridge between the, like I was mentioning, the sort of physical intimacy of a certain kind of South Asian family experience and also the sweetness that like femmes can have with each other. Trans femmes, specifically. And there's some kind of overlap, that is a sort of magical, never space that has a sort of like hazy filter over it that I just can't seem to get at, but is something that I can only point out through my comics and my, and my drawings and my, and the texts involved in my work. But again, who knows if that space actually exists or if it's something that we all kind of, not we, that I, imagine other people have, but maybe they don't…I sometimes imagine what it would've been like to grow up in India and whether I would've appreciated that kind of closeness or like having that much family around you all the time would've been something I would've taken for granted, or would I, would I have thought that that was like comforting and supportive? Or would I have been frustrated by it? Or how would I have come out as trans in the middle of that? So many questions and not too many answers” (1:01:34).

What I hear Rani point to here is the specificity she is searching for of a trans and South Asian context coming together to create something that is neither only South Asian nor only trans, which are two spaces she has experienced, but instead the alchemy of the two.

She shares she is ultimately grateful that the twists and turns of life brought her to where she is now, even if it might have felt like a convoluted path at the time.

Rani tells me about how she is bringing in cultural touchstones into her current book project to communicate a sense of home, drawing from her experiences visiting India, and how she imagines them as being part of her daily upbringing if she had grown up there. How these are connected to that intimacy she speaks about. Rani has a lot of questions about these cultural markers, politicization, and nationalism that she is still wrestling with.

“These things are very specific to a geography and to a setting, but to what degree are they allied with a kind of nationalism? I guess it's a question. And it's something I'm trying to excavate for myself and I don't know, I don't know the answer to it, but I would, I would like to know from other people who share the same kind of experience as South Asian Americans, trans or queer or not, how many of those things we sometimes do pantomimes of or play at in order to establish a kind of common understanding or culture. Like so many, you know, I have many, quite a few South Asian friends who, if they're hosting a party, will have South Asian food there. Like to what degree is that politicized, right? Like can you have samosas at your party?

And is that also not trying to like, capture something that is nostalgic? Like how, why is my experience like drawing these things somehow? Um, grasping at a lost world or a sense of nostalgia, whereas having samosas at your party is like just food at a party, right? Watching a Bollywood movie or dressing a certain way 'cause you enjoy dressing a certain way, like wearing a kurta or something.

At what point you could accuse me of that, that is also trying to recapture, um, something that I could never have, but it is also who I am. So what, at which point do you make those divisions? Right? I'm not interested in making those divisions really, because I think it only be, make it the. The idea that this could be politicized is a fairly recent idea to me once I'd been called out on it. so I don't know. I'm interested to know what other, uh, people think. And again, it may be a generational thing" (1:15:07).

Rani is being generous with sharing the questions she is genuinely wrestling with as she works on her next book. She speaks to the fact that she is approaching these questions from the perspective of being of an older generation, and how the queer south asian students she encounters through teaching often call her out and share different perspectives. What I appreciate about Rani is that she is just thinking through these ideas without there needing to be a correct answer or solution, and also allowing the questions to play out through her art. As younger generations of queer and trans south asians encounter her interview, I want to know what they think of her questions. What the generations yet to be born will think of these questions.

Methodological Reflection

I realized only after the interview, that Rani, too, in ways much different from Vega and Mala, had familiarity with sharing her life story. I read Rani's fictionalized memoir *Spellbound*, after my interview with her and understood the ways she had already made meaning of many of her life stories, and that the way she makes meaning is through her comics. Towards the end of the interview, she speaks to the tangible closeness of South Asian community that she is craving in a trans femme context, and how this is something she is exploring in her next book, which explores

trans utopias and their pitfalls. It was interesting to interview her, as I listened to her stories it was clear to me that she had concretely shaped ideas about certain things, and newer ideas that she is actively in the process of exploring and trying to understand now. Oral history is a unique space that allows for this exploration and for meaning to be made in real time, or for the allowance that meaning might come after, with some time and space. My interview with Rani illustrated that for me in this project, in which ideas of community building and chosen family structures are perhaps not solidified or understood for Rani.

One of the things Rani and I connected over when we first met was our love of cooking. It felt especially important to me that I prepare a meal for her as part of my practice of gratitude and reciprocity in this oral history project. After the interview, we ate together debriefing the conversation and also spent time chatting, continuing getting to know each other outside of the formality of the oral history interview and in a 1:1 context. I am grateful for the ways that this project has in itself facilitated space for connection and community building.

Soniya

I met Soniya through the chosen family web of Uma. Soniya grew up in NYC and was involved with political organizing during the post 9/11 moment of heightened violence and surveillance against South Asian communities. I especially wanted to learn about her experience organizing during this critical moment in NYC queer/trans South Asian communities. Especially after conversations with my thesis adviser, Suchitra Vijayan, in which she encouraged me to look into the post-9/11 moment as a time of queer/trans South Asian political organizing and community building.

Soniya begins by talking about growing up in Queens in the 80s, going to public school, and living in a predominantly immigrant community. Growing up, Soniya's relationships were most important to her, her relationships with her friends and her siblings. She shares how she was able to integrate into her friends' families and vice versa - hinting at early formations of the ideas of chosen family, while also spending time with these friends both in their homes and around different places in the city as an escape from her family and their struggles. As Soniya's father was undergoing a career transition and going to law school, he had a heart attack that impacted the rest of his life and therefore, Soniya and her family as his caretakers.

She shares that her parents owned a business, a small card and gift store, and this allowed their family to move from an apartment building in Queens to a house in the suburbs. While this allowed her younger siblings to attend better schools and alleviated some of the family's financial struggles, it negatively impacted her father, leading him to feel isolated from his community. Soniya felt isolated as well, and struggled with commuting into the city for school. She shares this time was when she stayed at her friend's house more often, and this allowed for that enmeshment within her friend Sabina's family. She shares at this time, she was distracted by logistics and was not able to focus on school as much. When she was living in Queens and commuting to Manhattan for middle and high school, Soniya shared that her friends were people who would also commute from Queens. She met her friend Irene because the two of them would ride the bus together:

“We met at the bus stop and realized we lived near each other. 'cause she lived in Woodside. and I think that us, like, so she was kind of like my first friend at that school who grew up near where I grew up. And so that I think bonded us. And also I was able to see her on the weekends in a way that I couldn't when I was much younger. Like I wasn't allowed to go exploring as much in the city. I would say she had a significant relationship because we kind of understood more about each other, because we went to a school where people came from so many different neighborhoods. It was meaningful to have some sort of shared understanding of where we were growing up. There were probably shared things around class, shared things around immigrant parents” (14:43).

Soniya shares that transition from her life predominantly being in Queens, in this immigrant community that shared a similar working class background, to then going to school in Manhattan where there were more wealthy white students, it was a jarring transition that she struggled with. At the same time, as Soniya grew older, she felt a sense of freedom that allowed the city to open up to her. She shares memories of spending time in “neighborhoods that kind of lend themselves to like being able to wander around without a lot of money,” (23:04) and in public parks with friends.

Soniya left home to attend college in Minnesota, where she experienced “intense culture shock” (24:14). Soniya shares she experienced a lot of microaggressions in Minnesota, many people mistook her for an Indigenous person because people there had never met South Asian people before. She shares she found a lot of community and shared experiences from people from the coasts, both the west and east coasts. At the same time, she got close with her roommate, who

was from Minnesota, and they are still in touch. Ultimately, Minnesota was marked by a sense of freedom and she chose to stay for a few years after graduating: “It was hard actually. I mean, in some ways I think I felt, again, a lot of freedom. I really appreciated the autonomy of not having to check in with my parents or make up a story about what I was doing so that I could go somewhere. But I think I felt a lot of guilt about leaving and there was a lot of pull because of hard things that were happening with my dad's health and other family things. I think I felt this sort of conflict of having left. And so I think I sometimes felt guilty about my feeling freedom” (27:32). Soniya shares her concerns for her siblings, understanding the unstable mood of her father determined the mood of their household. Eventually, she chose to move back to NYC for her younger brother, who was moving into his teenage years at the time. She moved back to NYC with her friend Meg, her first Minnesotan year college roommate.

Soniya ended up moving to Brooklyn, her friends were all moving at the time. Eventually, once commuting from Queens and Brooklyn became too much, she decided to move back to Queens. “It was amazing. I moved to Sunnyside at first, which is where I grew up. And, but I lived in a different part of the neighborhood. And I lived by myself for the first time and it was a really hard time of life because that was like when my dad was really sick and there was a lot of hospitalization and care work involved.

But, I felt nice that I could have my own place. At that time I had a really solid friend group, and I felt like some of the friends who were part of that friend group were people who had, they were all people who had gone through similar family experiences. There was a lot of like, understanding of one another. And yeah, I felt like I had a lot of good social support while I was

going through hard times. And so I really enjoyed living there…I feel like that friend group was probably like the group of friends, if I think about who I've thought in my life was chosen family, I think that group was the first time I really felt that" (36:00).

Soniya tells me about the organizations she was involved with during this time, when she came back to NYC as an adult. "I had come out before I moved to New York, but it was like when I was living with Meg in Brooklyn that I started to get more connected to different community spaces or community organizing and queer people of color communities in New York.

So that was a period where, let's see, I was working at Manavi, which is a South Asian women's organization and I was volunteering or a part of different organizations like DRUM and SALGA, the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association and the Audre Lorde Project. And it was just a period where I would say a lot of my life was, my social life and political life were really intertwined and a lot of my time was spent doing things like going to meetings or events and then going to the bar after and, or going out after. And just kind of like being in this sort of continuous relationship with like a broader queer and trans people of color community" (39:48).

Here, I see Soniya's narrative mirror Leo's. Her political organizing and the accompanying community went hand-in-hand with her sense of chosen family and queerness. Soniya shares how she was already plugged into these communities, and so in the post-9/11 moment, she was within all of the organizing. She witnessed the coalitional work taking place across different organizations, in an inherently intersectional way.

Soniya speaks about her experiences organizing with SALGA, the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association. “a lot of conversation about what was going on in the membership and different people. 'Cause something like SALGA is so wide 'cause it's so identity, you know, it's just an identity-based group. So it's like people's experiences were everything from people who were vulnerable to deportation and needing a lot of legal support to people whose lives looked exactly the same” (46:58). This story reminds me of Vega’s stories of the evolutions of Trikone Northwest and how it started as a diverse space for queer South Asians across many differences and backgrounds to come together, but evolved into a group of predominantly wealthy gay men who did not have politics at their center. It feels so important to share these instances in which queer South Asian groups are imperfect, or even uphold systems of power. Community building is not an apolitical thing. In my experiences of chosen family, the people I have come together to have intimate familial relationships with have been around shared values. That is the beautiful thing about chosen family. We are not bound to each other by obligations and blood, but by choice.

I asked Soniya to paint a picture of what this post-9/11 South Asian organizing looked like, and she shared: “time, just unfolded in a way where it was like the start would be something that we were doing together for a purpose, but then there was so much cushion around the organizing for it and then the debriefing and spending time together after relationship building that, I think that's why maybe like, it was such a critical time for community building and relationship building because there was so much that needed attention” (49:33). She goes on to share that since this was a time before cell phones and more immediate digital communication, spending time

together in physical space with each other was so important in feeling connected to community and not isolated.

On reflecting on this, Soniya shared: “Just like how I really didn't feel alone because I felt like I was part of like doing things with people, in so many different forms…And there was like that feeling of accountability or responsibility to one another, but also like so much care and connection 'cause you were like in constant touch with each other and it was so much harder to be in touch at that time.” (55:46) In this, I hear Leo’s longing for care, Rani’s longing for touch, even if Soniya might be speaking about being in touch with people in terms of being in communication with them and not necessarily physical touch, her description of community at this time sound very interdependent and constant. That isolation was not an option because everybody needed each other and wanted to be with one another.

As the conversation shifts, Soniya tells me about another instance where she experienced chosen family. “I was living with a couple, it was a three bedroom apartment and they…each had their own rooms. And then I had the third bedroom. And I remember one of them coming home one day…you know, like kind of calling out to us, being like, ‘family, I'm home.’ And I was like, oh, that's right. We're family. And it's like, we live like a household and I felt really like a lot of, I don't know, like I felt really like this kind of flood of emotion and I still remember that feeling even though that was like 20 years ago of like, feeling acknowledged like, oh, like that is like what we're doing here. Like this is our family” (1:00:00). This is what queer people do. They create households that are family units, unrecognized by nonqueer eyes.

Soniya continues and shares that eventually, the couple broke up, and one of them moved out. Soniya had a falling out with one of the friends, and as she reflects, she shares “I would say she was, at that time someone I thought of as like my best friend, emergency contact. I never thought there would be a time where we weren't talking,” (1:03:12) The thing about chosen family is that it is not a guaranteed thing. It moves and changes with time, as people change and grow. I resonated deeply with what Soniya shared, and I appreciated her sharing the role rupture plays in chosen family.

Soniya also shares how her sense of community has changed as she has gotten older, “So I think that, like when I was in my twenties, I felt more part of like a regular chosen community…And then I think as I have gotten older, partly because I moved and then my life has changed, a lot of those shared spaces, like I'm not in them anymore and neither are those people.

It's like we've all kind of moved into different things that we're doing or like what takes up our time or what we're interested in, and so now…I don't feel as part of a regular connected community. Maybe it's like there's like lots of them, like there's like different ones, like something in different spaces and different things that I'm part of, or groups that I'm part of, but the people who I would say are like, my people kind of like are in different ones of those. Like, it's almost like more like a, like a rhizome, you know? Like where it's more like spread out. and I think that feels different than when it's like everybody kind of knew each other” (1:03:26).

The conversation comes full circle, as Soniya shares how her community now reflects how it looked when she was younger, the ways that chosen family feels integrated with her blood

family. “I think about it more like a hybrid where like my, because my mom and I are also like neighbors and like we're in each other's everyday life. It's like she, there's more overlap of things, even my political community, like my mom and I are gonna be phone banking for Zohran Mamdani on Tuesday, or like, you know, she's canvased with me and like other things.

And so, things that I didn't think were gonna happen when I was younger, like to have that kind of everyday, my real life and my mom are more connected. but then also just like socially, like there's more overlap of people who are my close friend family and then also like my family of origin or more in relationship with one another. And some of the people who become closer to me are people who are grappling with the same kinds of things. So like, you know, friends who also are dealing with elder care, but are also living in non-normative family structures, either because they also are queer, or they might not be queer identified, but their lives are structured in non-normative ways.” (1:06:14) Soniya shares the way she has negotiated boundaries within the physical proximity her relationship with her mother has in her current life, and how it has allowed them to have this closer relationship.

Our conversation concludes with Soniya telling me about meeting her partner, initially through community organizing work, and how they are aligned in the way Soniya thinks about her family:

“And I think that we both like to share values around like neither one of us ever wanted to be in a relationship where like our partner is kind of the center of our life and we both kind of want a family structure that's like this sort of hybrid…all their family lives here, so we both…have to

engage with family of origin questions as part of our life every day. And so I think just having multiple kinds of ways to interact with different family feels good to both of us" (1:18:04).

Methodological Reflection

Soniya is another narrator who I did not have a close relationship with before entering the oral history interview space. While I had hosted most of my prior narrators in my home, Soniya preferred I meet her at her place in Jackson Heights, Queens. In this way, the hospitality, care, and reciprocity was reflected in my willingness to commute from Brooklyn to Queens, a journey that takes over an hour by subway and that not many Brooklyn residents are willing to make.

There are so many resonances in Soniya's stories with other narrators of this project, and I am grateful to my project for allowing me to have this conversation with Soniya. After I turned the recorder off, we continued talking, debriefing the conversation. Soniya was excited to ask my thoughts on what she shared, and some of the questions we explored, and she wanted my perspective as someone of a younger generation of queer South Asians. This intergenerational connection has been present in so many of my interviews, and it feels reassuring to know that the knowledge sharing feels like it is going in both directions, and that the narrators who are older than me in this project feel like they are walking away with something new as well. Soniya shared that she had already been in a moment of reflection before our interview, and so it came at a good time when she was already thinking about her relationship with community.

Uma

Uma is the first older queer South Asian person I became family with. She was the director of Yoni Ki Baat, a South Asian version of the Vagina Monologues, a performance for women to share stories. The show had been running for over a decade, but had primarily featured cisgender, heterosexual women and only a handful of queer or trans performers over the many years of the show's running. The year Uma directed it, she decided she wanted to showcase a queer/trans cast. This is how we got connected initially, but we connected over many shared interests. She and I have a lot of similarities in our backgrounds as community builders, nonprofit workers, etc.

After introducing herself, Uma shares how she got to Seattle. "I would say I got to Seattle mostly to get away from my bio family," she shares honestly (4:02).

Uma is someone I have conversations about chosen family with, and so she was ready for our oral history interview to jump into some of her thoughts. "I know that one of the things I want to talk about, and you want to talk about, is chosen family. And I feel like, actually, that concept first started, not when I was queer, but like, just growing up as an immigrant." (6:34) She shares being born in the 70s and growing up in the 80s and 90s, she did not have access to a large South Asian community. " it always felt like we created family from the friends that we had, you know. And some of those friends…they're still my friends. And they're still my family" (7:08).

Uma shares how she carried this foundation of building connections with her when she went to Seattle, this foundation paired with the fact that she was doing anti-violence work as a survivor with other survivors, the community and chosen family established itself quickly. She tells me

about meeting her friend Gita, working within this space and how the two started hanging out regularly, talking about the heavy things in life as well as having lighter cheerful hangouts.

She tells me about Bhav, who I also interviewed for this project and am family with. Bhav is someone Uma grew up with, and she shares the experience of knowing their biological family and them knowing hers. She shares how they would visit each other regularly, and how they were also working in the same sector of anti-violence work. She tells me about how they both bonded when they both realized they were queer, and connected over the experience of being the only queer people in their biological families.

She tells me about her friend Natasha, how they connected over similar things, working in anti-violence work, being on healing journeys, and also specifically spiritual journeys.

And finally, Uma mentions me as an example of chosen family, who is also on a healing journey.

Across all four of the examples she offered of chosen family people, the themes of healing were present. “Maybe I guess another way I would describe myself is a lifelong learner and there's something about finding chosen family who are continuing to teach me also, you know, something, I'm not sure what, but like whatever it is, I feel like I'm being, I'm learning, I'm actively learning something from the relationship” (29:13).

She also tells me, “a value I have around building space or creating space, creating community, in ways that make people feel like they, yeah, whatever they're bringing their full selves are

welcome," (30:02) And this takes us into chatting about Yoni Ki Baat, the show we we were a part of together, and the way we were initially connected. She describes the process and obstacles of the show, but shares that ultimately "what came from it are some really deep, close relationships for sure" (34:11).

Uma compares YKB to the Remix party she hosts, which happens during the time of Diwali, but aims to "remix" the holiday out of its harmful histories and traditions and into something new. "It became a very queer party. And I was like, oh yeah, it's a space for queers in our community to be together, you know, along with other queers that are not Desi, but, and then I think I realized over time that it had such an impact on others that they were telling me like, Oh, when's this? Like, I have those beautiful memories at your Diwali party and yeah, I think there's something that helped me realize that part of my, one of my superpowers is creating space. And I want to lean into that more, you know," (37:18) As Uma tells me about hosting this party, which was really a vital community space for people to gather, I hear her refrain from before, when she described herself as a "lifelong learner" in the ways she changed and adapted the party away from the traditions of Diwali and into something new. In this, I also hear the ways community is built along shared values and politics, echos from my interviews with other narrators.

The conversation shifts as I ask Uma about what she was like as a young person. She tells me about always feeling like she was good at making friends and being a community builder. She also tells me more about growing up in a volatile home, witnessing the power her father wielded over her mother, and living in constant anxiety. Uma tells me about her sister, who "start[ed] her

healing journey," (50:39) and her nieces who are growing up with Uma as their aunty and still learning who they are.

Uma also tells me about Sri, another person I interviewed for this project. Uma describes Sri as "basically a sibling that I can rely on that loves me and that I love them." (1:03:31) Uma talks about her dog, Leila, who was present during our interview. "She saved my life" (1:05:33).

Her reflections on chosen family close with, "at the end of the day I do feel like chosen family gets to have that magic element of like you get to create the dynamic and choose it. You choose them, you know, versus these are the people you're stuck with and then whether they change or they heal or they do their work or not. You're just obligated to them, but Chosen Family is people that you get to choose, you know, and the people that stick around for a while are the people that are doing their work too, you know, and you're doing it together. Somehow you're able to support each other in it. Yeah. And that is a whole magic" (1:11:11).

Methodological Reflection

My interview with Uma, similar to my interview with Bhav, was informed and influenced by the fact that we are chosen family to one another and have known each other for a long time. Some of the stories Uma shared were stories I had heard before, and some were new. And some were stories I was a part of. Uma shaped much of my understanding of chosen family and therefore is someone I have had similar conversations with prior to this formal recorded conversation. The way care showed up here was Uma's clear forethought going into the interview space, knowing who and what she wanted to share stories about. The care also comes across in the recording

itself, our comfort with one another, the way she invited me to add my thoughts when she was speaking about our shared memories, and my ability to share without interrupting her storytelling, this ease that comes with years of having conversations with care.

This conversation also took place right after a major community event, Uma's Remix party, which brings together many queer/trans South Asians, and so the topics of community building and chosen family were top of mind. I was visiting her in Seattle and staying in her home, an act of familial care that Vega speaks to in her oral history interview when describing chosen family.

Refusal comes into this interview right at the end. Uma speaks about her fear and sadness around how she does not want her friends to die. This is not a general anxiety but a specific dread of our chosen family member who was sick at the time and has passed away since the recording of this interview. I knew who she was talking about, but also I respected Uma's refusal in speaking more specifically about it. As an interviewer, I was not going to poke at a wound I knew was actively being created and deepened. This collaborative refusal was another way of how care showed up in my interview with Uma.

Sri

Sri is a chosen family member I met through Uma and her partner and through Yoni Ki Baat. Sri has always felt like a part of my extended chosen family, my caring, sweet, and fun aunty who I always have a good time with. Sri is often present in queer/trans South Asian chosen family spaces in Seattle, and since they were also involved with YKB, feel part of that specific moment of community building and chosen family creation in my life. I was excited to interview them and have the chance to go more in depth into their stories of their unique life circumstances and

of their life and how it has been transformed as a relatively more recent immigrant to the United States.

Sri begins their interview telling me about where and who they come from. They tell me about growing up in Hyderabad, India with their sister and single mom. They tell me about the complexity of the community they grew up in. ”Being the single mother, low income, we lived in a single room with no running water and community toilets like that, kind of like really not very well to do, a place. And so while there was community that always watched out for us, there was always community that looked down on us” (3:54).

Their narrative is one that goes against western assumptions of queerness. ”When I came out to my family, there was no dismissal. There was curiosity and apprehension, but there was not dismissal or I don't think I was reprimanded for it or like in any, there was nothing negative about it…I had a very anticlimactic coming out the first time around” (8:04).

Sri describes their relationship with their mother as seeking to understand them, and their sister as being very protective. They share the story of coming out to their sister as a trans girl as a child, and the way their sister responded with feeling apologetic for the times that she treated them as a boy. With their mother, they describe there was no negativity, “It was much more curiosity. The more she lived through life, more she encountered more people. She just asked more questions to understand...she is deeply loved by a lot of my queer friends as well, just because [of] that, because she'll just show up and she'll, and you'll tell her like, you know, this is what it is” (18:51).

Sri shares powerful reflection on how their mother's support has informed her sense of self and the way they move through the world: "I may have felt fear and nervousness and anxiety. I don't know if I ever have known shame. Which informs how I have walked…I think being so fundamentally affirmed at home makes you not care for people who can't deal with you" (23:01).

They talk about how it was only when they became older that they met queer people who were out as queer, but before that, Sri's queer encounters were more in the realm of unsafe behavior and marked by more secrecy and closeted individuals. They said that it was once they had the opportunity to do undergrad and grad school and move to Bombay that they had the chance to meet other queer people and actually date.

Sri talks about the ever evolving nature of their identity "For example, like if I use they/them pronouns now, because that's again, the most approximate concept in this moment that talks to my sense of self. And I consider myself non-binary. I wouldn't consider myself non-binary eight years ago because I don't think that concept existed in my head" (33:51).

Sri tells me the story of meeting their husband through an online dating site, and the first time they spoke, Sri offered to help prepare a meal for a gathering their future husband was hosting for his colleagues. Though he was only in India for work, originally from the U.S., he ended up staying in India for 7 years because of Sri. Eventually, the idea of moving to the U.S. was brought up and Sri made the choice to move to the U.S.

Sri described how moving to the U.S. “disrupted my sense of self” (48:16) and the early days and first year being lonely, marked by Sri trying to find community. They tell me the story of how they met Uma, who I also interviewed for this project, by performing their poetry at Subcontinental Drift, a South Asian open mic series. By meeting Uma, a natural community builder, Sri had the opportunity to connect with more queer South Asians in Seattle.

They talk about the ways they witness people co-opting traditions and turning them into something for themselves and their communities, citing Uma’s Remix party as an example. They tell me about how they keep their traditions with their community now, “Like, last weekend was Ugadi, which is Telegu New Year …because I'm Telegu I was like, you know, oh, let's get some, get a few Telegu queer people together. Uma [is] definitely in mind here. And then…I'm like, you know, yeah, come over. I'm cooking and I'll feed you” (55:56). Sri describes learning how to be a person by watching the aunties they grew up with. How they show love and care and feel a part of community by cooking for others and sharing food with people. They showed this to me, after our interview together they cooked me delicious dosas. “But I prize the people in my life here…so much more because this is not incidental, this is intention and showing up and consistency and a lot more, and so I prize them also because it is not easy to come by” (58:13).

Sri reflects, as they are getting older they feel as though they are “growing into my old auntie…I come from a family of very affectionate and very fierce matriarchs. I don't know if I have the ferocity or aspire to it, but I definitely want to aspire to the affection and the joy, the presence brought and the kindness that they brought to the world” (1:03:16).

Methodological Reflection

I feel very grateful for the stories Sri shared with me during our oral history interview. It took place during a visit I made to Seattle for an unrelated reason, and it felt important to see Sri during my short weekend trip. Sri and their husband live in West Seattle, which is difficult to get to from where I was staying (which was with Uma) and so reciprocity looked like, similar to travelling to Queens from Brooklyn for Soniya, travelling to West Seattle for Sri. Additionally, Sri does not drive, so it would have been much harder for them to meet me where I was staying.

Sri was bubbling with stories. As soon as I arrived they dove into storytelling and I had to interrupt them to turn the microphone on and do the logistics of having them sign release forms. When our formal interview came to an end, our conversation did not. Sri, similar to other narrators, turned the questions in my direction, wanting to know my thoughts on many of the topics we discussed. We ended up spending the whole day together, chatting, then resting, and then sharing a meal together. Sri was excited to cook for me, something they talked about a lot during our conversation. We ate together with Sri's husband, and I felt as though I was simply visiting my aunty and uncle in Seattle and that there was not much more to it than that. The two of them caught me up on their lives and the care and kinship was a thread through it all.

<u>Reflection on Chosen Family Interviews</u>

The questions I posed at the beginning of this project were as follows: *What forms do chosen families take within queer/trans South Asian contexts? How are South Asian queer/trans chosen families unique from non-South Asian queer/trans chosen families? How are these chosen*

families built, sustained, and transformed over time? What political, cultural, and affective work do they perform? How do queer/trans South Asian chosen families navigate rupture, exclusion, or change? What are the imperfections of these chosen families?

Ultimately, the oral history interviews I completed for this project illuminated a lot about chosen family in queer and trans South Asian contexts. Each narrator shared their experiences building chosen family structures, or at least longing for some form of chosen community or family, different from their current circumstances. Each of these questions were addressed in different ways by one or more of the narrators through the stories they chose to share with me.

Vega talked about early formations of chosen family when she shared about her experiences building Trikone NW, a community organization for LGBTQ+ South Asians in Seattle. Trikone NW had many iterations, moving from its diverse origins to attracting a more homogenous and hegemonic population with time. Towards the end of the interview she told me about the friends she considers family that she regularly stays in touch with, even with distance. Vega's longing for chosen family shows up as she thinks about what her elder care needs will look like as she grows older, while she is in an elder care role in her current moment.

Mala shares stories of growing up and feeling a sense of familiarity and ease with the concept of thinking of her friends as family. When speaking of her adult life, she shares similar stories to Vega's, and specifically shares the story of their wedding, which was a culmination of chosen family and community in the way that their queer South Asian friends and chosen family came together to put on their wedding ceremony in a way that honored both their South Asian and

queer identities and communities. Mala speaks to the queer elder care living community she and Vega are dreaming about that might support them in their specific needs as queer elders.

Uma speaks very specifically about the chosen family she has cultivated for herself through her years living in Seattle, and how her community building and chosen family building process is informed by witnessing the ways her immigrant community built connections with one another in the United States. She reflects on the spaces she creates to facilitate connections like her Remix party that have evolved over time as her political analysis has sharpened through her community.

Bhav speaks at length about the way they value chosen family being a part of their as a parent with two young children, and how important it is to them that their children have people outside of their immediate family to be able to rely on. They also reflect on how they live in their queerness not through their romantic relationship but through this alternative and expansive approach to family.

Leo shares his experiences community building through political organizing spaces and through teaching tabla to queer and trans South Asians. He specifically articulates his longing for chosen family and care, being able to picture what it would look like, and knowing that others want it to, but not quite having it yet.

Similarly, Rani speaks to her experiences moving through different communities and friend groups, but wishing for the specificity of South Asian trans femme chosen family, having

experienced community and family in those identities separately, but not at the intersections of both of them.

Sri shares their strong relationship with their mother and sister, and how their life has been informed by both these relationships as well as the chosen familial relationships of the aunties they grew up around, and the queer and trans South Asians they have met in Seattle as an adult since moving to the United States with their husband. They share the ways they connect and build community with queer and trans South Asians through different cultural festivals and holidays, through prioritizing connection.

Soniya shares stories, similar to Leo, of finding chosen family and community through political organizing, especially in the post 9/11 moment in NYC. She also speaks to the ways chosen family can be impermanent, and is a space of rupture, when she shares a story of living with people she once considered chosen family, and the ways those relationships ended or changed with time. Soniya shares she now lives in a space of mixing chosen family with her blood family, living across the hall from her mother, and the ways political organizing and community building across lines of shared politics continues to impact these chosen family and blood family relationships.

Each narrator's story is different, yet each has resonances with the others in this collection. The stories illuminate the ways that each person has some relationship to the concept of chosen family, whether it is a lived experience or a longing that lives within their body.

Conclusions

Key Insights

When I set out to do this project, it started on a very personal level, and slowly expanded into something larger. At first, I intended to only interview people who I considered my chosen family, though it expanded into interviewing people who I had varying levels of community connection with. However, doing work in which I was inherently embedded as an insider within the communities I interviewed deeply shaped the stories that emerged within the oral histories. My relationship with each narrator impacted each interview. For narrators with whom I had deep relationships with, our shared histories and stories became part of the oral history interview. This came forward most clearly in my interview with Uma, when she invites me to share my perspective on the story she shares. However, this came up in subtler ways as well. With Leo, our similar age allowed space for a mutual understanding of our different life circumstances and experiences across a similar timeline. Across all of the interviews there was a shared identity of being queer and South Asian, even if the nuances of the queer and South Asian identities were different. The oral history interviews would have looked very different if the interviewer had not been queer or South Asian.

Recurring Themes

Care

Across each interview there was a common thread of a longing for care.

Leo's remarks feel central to this project. His articulation of wanting care and knowing it is what everyone ultimately wants too. Vega and Mala each speak to their desire for care when they share their anticipation of needing elder care for themselves as they continue to grow older, while

being in elder care roles in their current moments. Rani ends her interview with a longing for the care and tangible closeness she has felt within her South Asian family and within trans femme communities, and how she is longing for a space that brings these two parts of herself together, because she can picture what it might look like.

Loneliness

Each narrator spoke to experiencing loneliness in one way or another. Many shared it as an experience they grew up with, learned through their family of origin, and many feel it in their present lives as well. Vega and Mala both speak to growing up with a sense of loneliness. Vega shares how she grew up feeling alienated. Mala shares how she grew up feeling she lacked a connection with her family who lived in India. They both articulated a loneliness before they knew of other queer South Asians and had their larger community they built together. In my interview with Bhav, they spoke to the loneliness they felt within their family growing up. Rani, in wanting longing for the specificity and tangible closeness of South Asian trans femme community speaks to a loneliness in still looking for her community.

Intergenerational connection

A theme of my project as a whole, though it also came through in the stories narrators shared. Bhav shares their gratitude for being gifted with a queer elder to help them get through the moment of coming out to their mother. Rani shares how her French teacher gave her an example of what a strong woman looks like, and how deeply she impacted Rani in her own relationship to her trans femme identity. Similarly, Sri describes the fierce aunties she grew up around, who she wishes to embody.

Shared politics and the importance of political analysis

Shared politics and the pitfalls of identity-based community without a shared political analysis came through in many of my interviews. Vega shares about the formation of of Trikone NW, how it began as a group of truly diverse queer/trans South Asian people, and through different iterations at one point became a group of relatively privileged apolitical hegemonic cisgender gay men, ultimately alienating the people who started the organization. Soniya illustrated vividly how her community was formed and centered around shared politics, especially in the post-9/11 moment, and how that moment of heightened need highlighted the ways groups that were based solely on shared identity fell short. While Soniya is not as involved with political organizing as when she was younger, shared politics and political action continue to be at the center of her relationships. She describes how it carries through with her relationship with her mother now, as they canvass and organize their communities together. Leo describes much of his community and identity formation taking place through political organizing at Lavender Phoenix, and the impact his mentor, who had shared identities and shared politics, had on him as an individual and as a political organizer. Even outside of explicitly political spaces, Leo carries his political analysis, for example in his tabla practice, Leo centers wanting to learn more about the shared history of tabla as an instrument in Hindu and Muslim communities to use to combat narratives of Islamophobia and Hindutva. Uma describes the ongoing commitment to learning and sharpening her political analysis through her Remix party, in which she seeks to de-center Diwali and its traditions in casteist practices, and to instead center connection and community celebration.

Expanding Modes of Listening with Visual Art

Completing this project illuminated to me that my visual arts practice is an expanded mode of listening that runs parallel to my practice as an oral historian. Specifically for this project on queer/trans South Asian chosen families, creating 100 oil portraits was another form of doing oral history of my chosen family, by attuning to the care, attention, touch, and memories held within each of the bodies, memories, and objects I represented. Moving beyond simply illustration, my visual work does meaning making and memory work in the way that the oral history encounter does. This intervention in traditional methods of oral history interviewing allows for a deeper, more robust analysis of chosen family, moving beyond the limitations of verbal language and into the liminal space and intimacy of light, shadow, and expression.

Takeaways

Ultimately, this project illuminated a lot about queer/trans South Asian chosen family. The narrators of my project, and the 100 paintings I completed each share the rich, complex chosen narratives of queer and trans South Asian chosen family. The project had many goals. I feel that I accomplished what I set out to do in terms of collecting stories of queer and trans South Asians in my community/chosen family speaking about their relationships with building chosen family within queer and trans South Asian contexts. In painting my 100 portraits, I was able to create a fuller portrait of my chosen family which was not possible through the medium of oral history, capturing the care, intimacy, and attention through exploring fragmentation, memory, and close-looking. Creating the paintings as an intervention to oral history methodology feels necessary to this project, as the oral histories themselves were not able to capture all of the people who I consider chosen family. Additionally, I interviewed people who I do not consider

chosen family, in order to understand larger implications of queer and trans South Asian chosen family formations outside of my immediate chosen family.

Reciprocity

Central to this project was a practice of reciprocity. Mirroring the reciprocity of chosen family and enacting care within these relationships, I actively wove care, hospitality, intentionally creating space, and shared cultural practice into the oral history interview process. This reciprocity went beyond the standard ethics of oral history. While I centered shared authority, consent, and allowing narrators to lead the conversation, my practice was marked by an ongoing practice of care and community connection. Many of the narrators I worked with were people I was in close community and/or chosen family with, and so had practice and precedent for what care and reciprocity looked like. However, regardless of the depth of my relationship with each narrator, I operated prioritizing care because it is so central to the work, and these actions shaped the space of the oral history encounter, and therefore the stories that narrators were able to share with me.

Next Steps

Completing this oral history project taught me a lot about this work, my own oral history practice. It was through working on this project that I was able to hone and solidify my ethical approaches to oral history. This project was deeply personal, even as it expanded beyond my most intimate chosen family connections. The care present in each relationship regardless of closeness, and being situated as an “insider” interviewer meant that I led each oral history encounter with a practice of reciprocity, which ended up being central to the project. Oral history

project designs look different depending on the details of each project, and it is not always the case that projects will necessitate the same levels of reciprocity and attention as mine did. However, arriving at the end of this project I am left wondering what the field of oral history may look like, how it might be transformed, if reciprocity in interviewing went beyond the standards of consent, shared authority, and allowing narrators to lead the conversation. What might be disrupted, and what might emerge if each oral history encounter was shaped by embodied care, tangible labor, and lasting connection beyond the oral history interview itself.

As I reflect on what tensions, ethical dilemmas, or surprises emerged in this work, I think of the ways my insider status and existing community connection to varying levels impacted each interview. As I move towards completing more interviews for this project, I continue to center the community connection beyond and as an extension of the oral history encounter. My conversation with Uma was strengthened in the moment in which she invited me to share my perspective on our shared experience of doing the Yoni Ki Baat show together. However, this is something that went against my training as an oral historian, in which I was taught to limit the amount I spoke in order to privilege and center the narrator's voice. This leaves me with questions of what shapes oral history may take when done in community. These questions will continue to shape my work as I complete future interviews to build upon this project.

I am excited to share that my oral history interview recordings and images of my paintings will be housed within the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) collections. When I set out to complete this project, I knew I wanted the work to live outside of academic institutions in order to be accessible to the communities it concerns. I respect SAADA's work in preserving

material relating to so many different aspects of South Asian experiences, and can't think of a better home for my work. By being housed in SAADA's archive, my project will be accessible to South Asian people who make up SAADA's audience. I hope that future generations of queer and trans South Asians will find the work and know that chosen family is possible. I hope that my work can contribute to understanding family as outside of only blood.

As I complete this thesis project for OHMA, the larger project will continue. I aim to conduct more oral history interviews with people I did not have a chance to interview because of time, location, logistic constraints to continue to add to the project on an ongoing basis. Additionally, I plan to continue my series of Chosen Family Portraits. Once I finished my initial 100 paintings, I immediately began dreaming up the next 100. I aim to continue my practice of using painting, and visual art in general, as an expanded method of listening, as part of my oral history practice. I look forward to expanding my chosen family portraits into new artistic mediums. Specifically, I aim to employ techniques such as drawing, printmaking, experimental audio, film and more.

Connected to my project and also outside of it, I plan to continue living as part of my chosen family. I plan to continue building connections within queer/trans South Asian communities and working collaboratively to build a world that is just and free for us all. It is through the site of my queer and trans South Asian chosen family that I collaborate with my family members in enacting our imaginations with our daily actions, through the way we treat one another, and show up for each other through reciprocity that we are building these more just worlds.

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