Within the Imaginaries: Writings of Resistance

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Abstract

What change can emerge from within the margins? The possibilities can be both limited and endless. I explore the notion that political-imaginaries can foster change; what can be created with limitations can hold power unique to other circumstances.

This exegesis details my practice which engages images of ‘in-betweenness’, resistance, strategies of mediation and cultural navigation from the perspective of a person of South Asian descent in Aotearoa, New Zealand. It will cover various tensions, expectations, responsibilities and roles of the artist in the contemporary art context of Aotearoa. I will draw upon common perceptions of “everyday life” in ways that complicate social norms and engender new-political-imaginaries.

My intention is to examine the experience as a settler of the South Asian diaspora in the South Pacific. This is a reflection of how I move through the world, aligning with and/or contrasting world views with those around me of various standing points. Black cultural theorist Bell Hooks, identifies the potential for a position of strength within social and cultural margins. For Hooks, moments of intimacy, nuance, and the monotony of the everyday can foster spaces of autonomy and agency. By threading discussions by Hooks and the likes of Lana Iopesi and Moana Jackson, I will share my exploration and findings within my creative research practice.

Contents

Introduction

This creative practice research examines my experience of marginalisation and the everyday in Aotearoa as a third generation of people of South Asian descent. I use interpersonal narratives and shared histories to weave fragments of memory, archive, and reflections of the past into future imaginaries.

I work across a range of media including video and moving-image production, audio recording and production, as well as the use of diaristic methods and other archival strategies.

In-betweenness, is what I similarly term ‘otherness’, or marginality, which locates the South Asian diaspora amongst a quieter narrative within Aotearoa’s settler-colonial history.

It is an aspiration of mine to foster a community that can evolve and transform amongst the dominant narrative. I imagine this coming to be by creating visibility–to tell stories of my own, and stories that include me, through voices shared together. The intergenerational voices that shape my world provide insight that once put forth, may challenge a central hegemony and understanding of the wider community of Aotearoa.

I feel there is a resistance that comes with this action, challenging the histories that overshadow and overpower the lesser heard. I ponder reflections of my everyday life, thinking through memories and meaningful exchanges between those I hold dear to me.

Bell Hooks speaks of a refusal; of saying no to the coloniser so to speak. (341) It makes me consider my experience studying MFA - what I've learnt and why. By employing the same language of the coloniser I can be inclined to articulate a resistance through this exegesis. My journey through MFA has enabled the time and space to foster new imaginaries, with the paradoxical effect of dreaming and developing autonomy within the confines of an institution. I’ve found that marginality isn't a place of lack – but in Hooks’ words it can in fact be the opposite: “the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.” (341)

There is an in-betweenness of marginality that forms a space that can transform, bend and extend in and out of the dominant centre. In this exegesis I explore and detail methods I've used in my practice to weave through such a space as part of a South Asian diaspora in the settler colonial state of Aotearoa. From practising ways to see, evolving into ways to see myself, and further, imagining a future where South Asian people can be situated and represented in the fabric of Aotearoa's settler-colonial histories.

Chapter 1: The call for resistance

To understand the context of my own standing-place, I look back to the lineage of the South Asian diaspora in Aotearoa, New Zealand. South Asian, or Indian, people have been known to have first encountered Aotearoa when the first European ships, *Saint Jean-Baptiste* captained by Jean François Marie de Surville anchored offshore of Aotearoa in 1769. Indian lascars (seamen) were used for labour on the ships. Many lascars escaped and jumped ship to either be killed or marry and settle into iwi and hapū in the Bay of Islands, the South Island and Stewart Island (Leckie, 18).

> The pathways of Indian migration to Aotearoa were a consequence of British imperialism, formalised after 1857, on the exploitative foundations of the East India company, which profoundly restructured economy, society and politics on the Indian subcontinent. Landlessness, indebtedness and other economic pressures induced outwards migration that invariably followed the sea routes by which Britain operated its empire … The sustained waves from the two centres of the Indian diaspora in Punjab and Gujarat to New Zealand were also part of the massive transformations within rural India that pushed global emigration, including to the South Pacific (16-22).

The ongoing subjugation of imperialism–which relied heavily of the exploitation of labour in its conquest, had transformed following the abolishment of slavery in the United States and Europe during the late 18th century (Odeen, 174). Indentured labour and subsequently a global South Asian diaspora had arisen for the benefit of various British colonies.

Although not all were explicitly indentured labourers, many early migrants sought relocation under the service of British Rule, or as colonised peoples. This allowed large waves of migrants to travel to other British colonies.

To bring this topic back to the context of Aotearoa, Jacqueline Leckie describes how this lesser-known history of the South Asian community has left many “unaware of their ancestors, who pioneered the diverse and large Indian communities in contemporary Aotearoa” (17). This statement is a reminder of the exact situation I found myself in during the MFA programme. Reading this text incited a burning impulse to focus on tracing my own ancestry as a key element of my research and practice.

On wondering why and how my own grandparents came to this country, I consider Leckie’s statement: “Ask Indians why their forefathers emigrated to New Zealand before World War II and they are likely to cite economic reasons, ranging from *garibi* (poverty) to seeking ‘a better life for future and family’” (28). As my grandfather came straight from Gujarat, and my grandmother from Cape Town, South Africa, the links became clearer in terms of the timeline of British Rule in both colonies in the early-to-mid 1900’s, which was the time my grandparents emigrated to Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Growing up in Aotearoa, even this abbreviated history was not one that is readily spoken about or shared in school and college. One of the first meaningful experiences I have had on this topic as an MFA student was a masterclass delivered by NZ curator, philosopher and friend, Balamohan Shingade. Shingade spoke about the difference between being called “Indian” versus “South Asian” (May 2020). In my understanding, the difference in terminology comes down to the homogenising of the many states and cultures in India. My ancestry is Gujarati; we speak a different language to other parts of India, and I find the term “South Asian” puts less emphasis on grouping all states together while, at the same time, it acknowledges the geography and location in its entirety. To expand on this and Shingade’s statement, Professor of Literature Edward Said discussed in his Orientalism discourse that the ideas of the East, or the Orient, reflect more about the West than what the actual East is perceived to be (Said, 21). He wrote:

> Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it a reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other (5).

And here also,

> The exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and faute de mieux, for the poor Orient (21).

This case of representation reveals more of the action of dominance of perception over the “other”. I relate this to the use of the term “Indian” for all South Asian identities; considering India has one of the largest and most linguistically and culturally diverse populations than many other countries around the globe (Ang).

Said, as does Shingade, refers to a homogenising of a culture that is designed to minimise the experience of the “other”, in which the methodology of cultural capital is enforced to filter through the “other” under the dominant lens and ways of being in the world (Said, 05). I find a parallel synergy with this “other” in my own life and recognise its likeness to what feminist philosopher Rosie Braidotti calls “the cosmopolitan ‘we’” in her posthumanist research which considers the extension of a patriarchal and imperial set of beliefs and the centralising of “man” within humanist discourse (00:5:12-00:5:38). These complex cultural notions prompted me to examine and imagine alternative ways of being in the world while reflecting on my own movements through life as a South Asian-New Zealander and noting the kinds of spaces I thrive in compared to those spaces in which I feel minimised or marginalised.

However, contrary to what many would think, I found solace and inspiration in educator and writer Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s call to inhabit the margin as a fruitful form of resistance:

> To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve what we were and remake ourselves. The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices—all may be spaces of marginalisation, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope … Research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a

> set of political and social conditions...Nor do they actively struggle as a society for the survival of indigenous languages, knowledges and cultures. Their linguistic and cultural homeland is somewhere else, their cultural loyalty is to some other place. Their power, their privilege, their history are all vested in their legacy as colonisers (1999, 5-7).

Tuhiwai Smith speaks of settlers in Aotearoa. I reflect on how her words speak to my positioning as a descendant of Indian Settlers– or tauiwi, in this land. The fact that I consider this country my home—all my family ties are here—signals a difference. I'm disconnected by time and distance from my homeland, my culture, and languages. As a settler, and yet also part of a marginalised diaspora, I feel responsible for making positive changes between settler-colonial and indigenous relations. This is an aspiration I'd like to see in Aotearoa's future.

In the sections to follow, I introduce and critically reflect on this aim and responsibility in the context of three creative works created during my MFA study.

Chapter 2: While in isolation

The first creative work I developed in the masters' programme was prompted by a brief that asked each student to respond to a few artworks. I chose to respond to The Mata Aho Collective and their work *Te Whare Pora* (2013), a work that I'd seen installed at CoCA Centre of Contemporary Art Toi Moroki in Christchurch in 2017, (Coca Centre of Contemporary Art Toi Moroki) and again at the Adam Art Gallery in 2019 (Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi at Twenty). I loved this work. The journey began with a survey of *Te Whare Pora* (2012) which prompted the development of *Seclusion* (2020) (see figure 1), a video work I made during Aotearoa's first nationwide COVID-19 lockdown between March-April 2020.

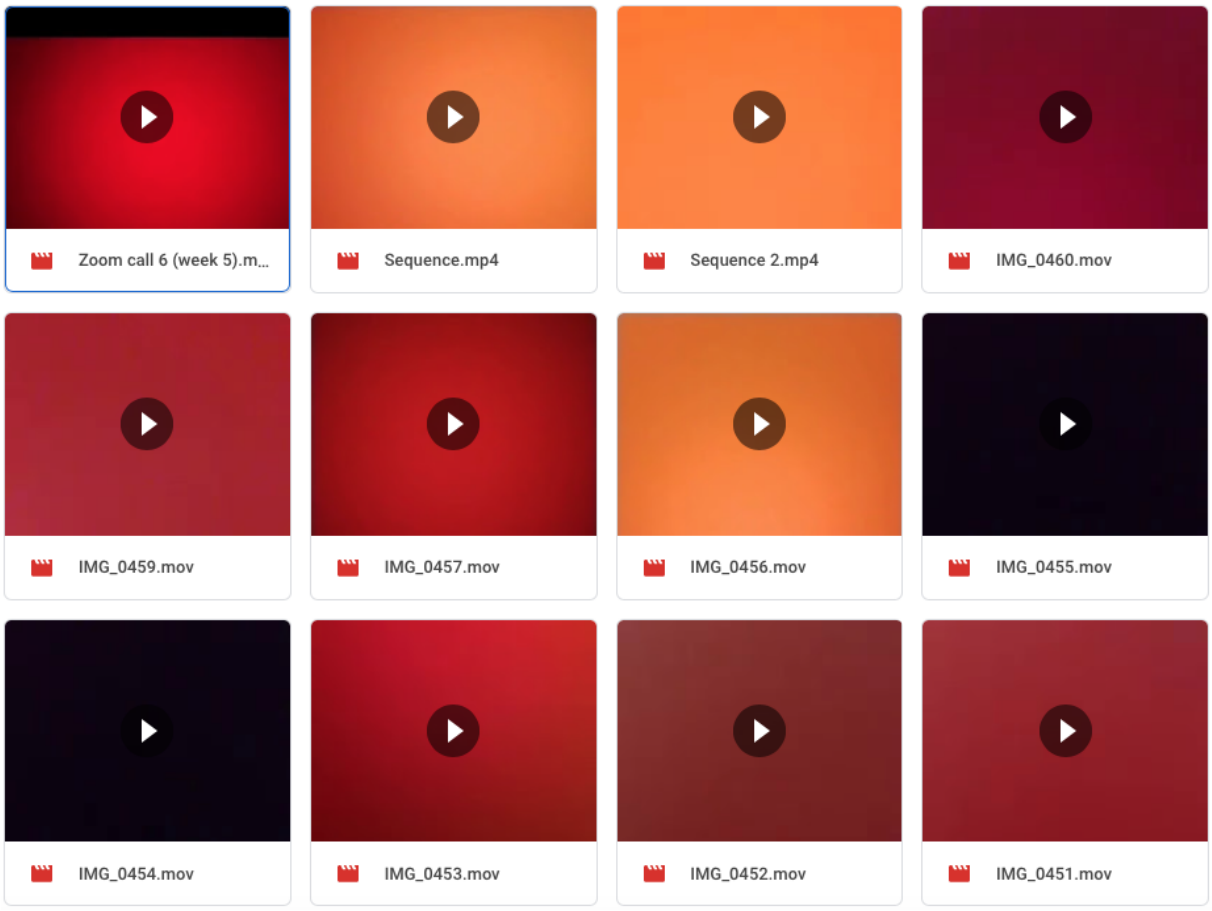

Figure 1: *Seclusion* (2020). Digital video, sound 01:54, Ilish Thomas 2020.

While I consider it a loose response to *Te Whare Pora*, *Seclusion* was also a reaction to the solitude of doing lockdown on my own.

Te Whare Pora is a work created by the Mata Aho collective using methods of collaboration, reconstituting and weaving together black synthetic mink fabric into a large tactile work.

The title of this work *Te Whare Pora* refers to a Māori house of learning, particularly for customary practice of weaving and fibre arts (Te Whare Pora: Enjoy Contemporary Art Space). Like many of Mata Aho's works, *Te Whare Pora* evolved in the collaborative and relational context of wānanga and a collective exchange of ideas.

I was mesmerised and lost in the void of the black, synthetic, light-swallowing form that draped from the wall to the floor. Subtle lines in the work caught the light and led my eye to zig-zag in and out of the piece. Kowhaiwhai patterns emerged holding the piece together like hands and fingers interlaced. The sense of collaboration and shared experience could be felt in this work, which is something I took as inspiration for *Seclusion* (2020) (Figure 1 & 2). The tactility and sensory feel of *Te Whare Pora* spoke to wānanga, shared knowledge and collective experiences of wāhine on the marae. In parallel to this context for *Te Whare Pora*, I thought of the collective experience in Lockdown and what that looked, felt, and sounded like. I attempted to weave together conversation and moving images into something that embodied a sensory experience of moments exchanged between my peers during this time.

During this and subsequent lockdown periods, everything was new in terms of how daily life was conducted. I found myself shunted into isolation while my flat mates fled to their partners and family homes elsewhere. Coming out of a long-term relationship and simultaneously starting my master's degree, I tried to make sense of a fearful new virus ripping through our communities; it felt as though the world was entering a whole new era.

I found communication with others became an essential duty rather than what was a natural occurrence of pre-COVID-19 everyday life. The contact I had with my peers was mostly online and what I once perceived as a clinical way of connecting with others became the new normal. It led me to consider what it meant to exchange intimacies across distances in a new way. What intimacy could share with others in the way of

touch or hugging? Laughing and warmth was now filtered through a cold hard surface—a screen.

I conducted a simple exercise with the people I talked to the most during this time—friends and family. During our conversations I asked each person to briefly discuss what lockdown had meant for them while holding their thumb over the selfie-camera to conceal the view of their faces. This was a simple test that resulted in a collection of clips in red with voices in the backdrop (see figure 1). With the collation of these clips, I noticed how the body interacted with and connected to the technology by an ominous red-orange hue, the result of light passing through the flesh of thumbs. I recalled how the thumb and its print are key identifiers of identity. To me, this situation and phenomenon bore out an anthropocentric atmosphere that I feel underlies the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The words I heard in these conversations reflected trends of repetition, sarcasm, monotony, and a sense of apathy, mixed with messages of hope and optimism.

With limited access to university studios and facilities, my flat in Wellington became my primary place of living and studying. I was drawn to the immediacy of the camera and screen. I sought reflexive ways of apprehending the changing everyday situation around me.

Figure 2: *Seclusion* (2020). Digital video, sound 01:54, Ilish Thomas 2020.

Contemporary artist Hito Steyerl's essay, *In Defense of The Poor Image* (2009) impacted the making of *Seclusion*. I found that generating imagery during this lockdown time heavily reflected the state of digital communication processes and methods of "visual bonds" (Steyerl, 43). Steyerl discusses how a "poor image" speaks more about its ability to reflect real-life such that with the lack of definition, originality, and quality a poor image enables itself to traverse multiple networks, to transform and circulate like Chinese whispers (39). I relate this fluidity as a way for the image to survive in margins and slip past extensive online surveyed and controlled filtering systems in the connected world. In this way, Steyerl relates the condition, status, economy, and hierarchy of images to "real-life" socio-political situations, culture and their archives (38). I relate her discussion to my methods of recording, collecting, cutting up, cropping and stitching together digital imagery in *Seclusion* (See figures 1 & 2). This video was a product of its own time, the make-do aspect of isolation and the impulse to continue to make work at the same time as the world at large and my small world was in crisis.

Steyerl discusses Soviet pioneer documentary film director Dziga Vertov's manifesto *For an Imperfect Cinema*: "In a sense his dream has come true, if mostly under the rule of a global information capitalism whose audiences are linked almost in a physical sense by mutual excitement, affective attunement, and anxiety" (43). Her discussion helped me recognise that the digital/information network we engage with bonds us together through the stimulation of mass information circulation. *Seclusion* was my effort to practice an economy of poor images such that, as Steyerl states, "… imperfect cinema diminishes the distinctions between author and audience and merges life and art" (39-40).

A 2020 studio critique of the video *Seclusion* drew out a discussion of new political-imaginaries which included understandings of works made during a crisis, as well as the currency of diaristic and subjective work during lockdown. What stood out to me was my apparent desire to imagine and apprehend a new-everyday life and the potential of what it could be. The video *Seclusion* enabled me to actively change in my

circumstances during isolation; I was able to feel less alone. It made me part of a movement that predicts “… that the development of video technology will jeopardise the elitist position of traditional filmmakers and enable some sort of mass film production: an art of the people" (Steyerl, 39).

Further, Enwezor mentions philosopher Walter Benjamin’s 1930’s essay, Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: “… he was concerned with how the shift from the hand-fashioned image to the mechanically produced and infinitely reproducible image manifests a wholly new mode of pictorial distribution, a shift not only indexical but temporal” (12).

In my diaristic practice there is an impulse that can be likened to an anthropological space to study and understand mine and my loved ones’ relationships to the society we live in (Enwezor, 13). Enwezor further discusses the documentation of events in personal lives such as birthdays, holidays, and events as motivations to capture images as well as a “burning desire for the archival, it also wields a formidable ethnographic meaning” (13). Although I consider ethnography far from the purpose of my practice, the subjective exploration through means of recording, archive and the diary have proven effective in generating works.

A statement by Professor and social activist Bell Hooks draws links to Linda Tuhiwai Smiths’ discussion too, where she speaks of new political imaginaries and imagining resistance for I think about the coronavirus outbreak, the Black Lives Matter movements, the wars in Palestine and Ukraine, ongoing colonisation of Pūtiki Bay, Waiheke Island, and Shelly Bay, Pōneke, as well as the problematic ‘Freedom’ protests nationwide. I feel tones of hostility and anxiety have shadowed our daily lives. I think about how we connect, relate, and create support networks to survive. Solidarity with our peers becomes the encouragement for a hopeful outlook. *Seclusion* was a video that sought intimacy when being intimate was not possible.

I'm reminded of the diary I kept during lockdown and the processes employed in my practice that coincided. In his book *The Critique of Everyday Life*, Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre stated, “… daily life can be understood only if one

considers the various activities in the totality encompassing them, that is to say, the mode of production" (11).
Lefebvre speaks of production as the way in which we produce the essentials in our daily lives, be that of the social, the material/capitalistic, the domestic, physical, and spiritual needs.
Extending this notion, the value of the diaristic as a method also lends to how the archive, and processes of archiving, inform and imbue my practice. The diaristic, to me, is an informal way of recording my everyday life. By processing with archival strategies, it becomes a means to apprehend and commentate on my environment and circumstances, as well as to imagine a situation beyond. Curator, critic, and writer Okwui Enwezor details this method and its practices in his text *Archive Fever* (2008), which "explores the ways in which artists have appropriated, interpreted, reconfigured and interrogated archival structures and archival materials" (11). Enwezor chooses the medium "because the camera is literally an archiving machine, every photograph, every film is *a priori* an archival object" (12). Here, his understanding of the tools that mechanically reproduce information, by rule, tend to be archival by nature. This method became a prerequisite in terms of my own use of lens-based media, such that the decisions I've made by employing a camera, audio recording or any form of image recording implied an archival impulse. With contemporary technology, tools, and processes, the commodification of images; the publics' perception is widely shaped by the mechanisms we use to archive (22).

This is true social change; "I was working in these statements to identify marginality as much more than a site of deprivation. In fact, I was saying just the opposite: that it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance" (Hooks, 341). Hooks poses the thought of how lived experience can "imagine alternatives, new worlds" (341). Relating further to the modes of production and everyday life here with discussing, "It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in works but in habits of being and the way one lives" (341). These habits and ways of living can be observed through diaristic methods, which I became drawn to under the circumstances of lockdown.

This, I feel, relates again back to subjective, wherein the introduction to Hito Steyerls' *The Wretched of the Screen*, Franco Bifo Berardi states, "What happened to subjectivity,

to sensibility and the ability to imagine, to create and to invent?" (10). I ponder: Does the archival, or diaristic impulse stem from my sensibility to imagine what more could be of the everyday I live in now? Might this penchant to make an archive of the everyday be the place of my practice as an alternative or counter-narrative? Is archiving memories a social act of reimagining what could be?

The "… inscription of private memory onto the space of a collective public culture" (26) suggests that the making of, i.e., the capturing of subjective moments in time, shapes a collective culture. I consider this to be a link to "diasporic publics" (Lopesi, 104) as further mentioned by Lana Lopesi and in relation to my own development of private memories as a South Asian settler.

The iterations of *Untitled (Letter sequence)* (2020) (see figure 3) through to *NAMASKAR & Merry Xmas* (2021) (see figure 4, 6 & 7) enlist the archive as a way of monumentalization, memorialisation and commemoration (Enwezor, 28) compared to *Indira's Birthday (*ઇન્દિરાનો જન્મદિવસ*)* (2021) (see figure 8 & 9), which employs the archive as a portrait and of a memory. The currents running beneath both works ebb and flow between the connection of archive and trauma, and in my case, intergenerational trauma. This collective experience is explained by Jacqueline Leckie in "Indian Settlers" And "Invisible" of the South Asian diaspora/settlers in Aotearoa. For example: Clearly there were huge discrepancies between South Asians' status as British subjects and their treatment within the white dominions (Leckie, 31). While most historians' revisionism focused on Māori-Pākehā relations, differing assessments of a white New Zealand can shed light on the blemishes in New Zealand's history of race relations and treatment of Indians (Leckie, 32).

Scholars of white racism outside New Zealand have located anti-Asian discourse and practices within transnational and post-colonial responses within white-settler colonies as 'part of a common strategy for maintaining white supremacy in the aftermath of empire' (34). Leckie explains that "hostility towards Indians intensified in New Zealand after World War 1, as they were a scapegoat for economic problems, such as unemployment, housing shortages and low agricultural prices" (77).

I think back to the dawn raids of the 70s-80s. The events during this time evolved into a negative response toward migrants from the Pacific community who settled in NZ with promise of better opportunities, only to be targeted by police and the government as ‘overstayers’ following an economic slump. Lana Lopesi refers to this event here; “New Zealand's ongoing labour needs from the 1970s meant that mass waves of ‘commuting’ have occurred from Sāmoa to Aotearoa.” (Lopesi, 67)

Leckie provides an example of the evasion of discrimmination by South Asian settlers here; “In fact the practice of trading under different names was not confined to Asian traders; as, Indians sometimes adopted European names to avoid racism” (118).
My own name is an example. At birth, I was given the name Lakshmi, and my maiden name is Chhiba. My parents are unmarried, although my mum has told me she chose 'Ilish Thomas' over ‘Lakshmi Chhiba’ as it was easier to pronounce, and identifiable for the English-speaking society we grew up in.

In the first preface and introduction of *False Divides* (2018), Lana Lopesi discusses connectivity for people of Te Moana-Nui-A-Kiwa. She has outlined the book to cover ground of the imperial histories of the Pacific, the decolonisation practices, the formation of Moana communities and global Moana diaspora and how the use of the internet aids to connect all these aspects while posing questions of new imaginaries and potentials for the future of Oceania. “We can be both in the past and in the future. After all, colonised peoples are perhaps the most adept at utilising imperial technologies to their own benefit” (Lopesi, 103). I understand this point first-hand.

Lopesi states, “We were right in front of each other yet were kept distant by false divides” (13). She describes attending an event where there were linguistic and cultural barriers between two different Indigenous peoples both colonised by different powers. This notion of barriers can be applied as well to the distances and space implemented by COVID-19 protocols to keep us all safe. On Zoom, Facetime and over the internet, my peers and I were right in front of each other. And yet, our ability to connect on a human and haptic level was distant; the technology connected and divided us from one another.

Lopesi writes of how the internet enables a collective:

> I look to interrogate the barriers which historically divided and still currently divide Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, to offer a perspective toward a collective Moana in which new technologies play a key role (18) … I would argue that the early adoption of online technologies was less about a fear of being left behind, but more about recognising the benefits of these spaces as inexpensive ways to keep 'commuting cultures' alive (72) … If air travel enabled people to become mobile once again, then the use of chat rooms and now social-media sites enabled collective peoples separated through various processes of mobility to become collective again (80).

My creative work was a response to wondering: How could I connect to my immediate bubble of peers and family during this time, as well as how could I reach out to connect to peoples and things that reflect my cultural identity beyond this period and the confines of the pandemic space?

These questions led me to think about how my cultural identity plays a part in my everyday life. It tints the lens through which I see and perceive my surroundings and experiences. It is something that keeps me on my toes every minute and something I navigate, balance and contend with every moment. I am constantly reimagining myself. What can I be as a South Asian New Zealander? What spaces can I navigate safely, and what spaces are dangerous or harmful?

In the book Imagining Decolonisation, writer and lawyer Moana Jackson states, "stories for and about transformation rely on honesty about the misremembered stories and the foresight to see where different stories might lead. That is the ethic of restoration." (Jackson, 154) Jackson speaks to systemic change in the context of Aotearoa and the process of decolonisation here as restoration. I consider these words in terms of how and where I locate myself as tauiwi–as a settler of South Asian descent. I consider the exploration of my standing place and my family's intergenerational narrative to be a part of this work. Lana Lopesi reiterates these notions here when she says, "As people move around the world and consume mass media, the 'social imagination' enables individuals and communities to picture and work toward new possibilities for how they want to live."

(Lopesi, 81-83) Linking back to the possibilities of online and digital media and connectivity as a space to generate diasporic publics for social change.

Chapter 3: Letters left unopened, then opened

In an online conversation with Balamohan Shingade and Taarati Taiaroa, Professor Mohan J. Dutta raised questions about how people think of 'community' (2020). Shingade proposed that 'It's not a monolithic entity'; it's more so a continually transformative entity. This resonated with me in terms of the forms in which community manifests. And through reaching out and navigating my solitary space at this time, I came to perceive how a community transforms almost rhythmically like a flow around circumstance and overlaps in a non-linear way, much like how I think of time or timescale to be. These accounts of repetitious and mirrored activities and conversations of the generic, banal and monotonous, stemming from boredom, solitude and/or curiosity became echoes of that period in lockdown.

It was a struggle to readapt to the opening of our bubbles upon coming out of Aotearoa's first lockdown. I was shunted by the change in life's pace. I was thrown back again to reflect, to a time before COVID, to imagine a way forward. Thinking in a cyclic or repetitive motion, I was drawn to conversations I shared with my mum in late 2019, which prompted me to revisit the beginning of this journey where the narrative of my parents and grandparents align.

After lockdown in 2020 I continued the trend of experimenting with diaristic methods to produce work. I was drawn to look back to previous ideas left unattended that I felt had potential to get back on track. Informed by notions of connectivity, community, and the new reality of what the everyday had become, I was simultaneously called to re-examine my place within the socio-political and cultural fabric of Aotearoa.

I thought about the journeys of my mother and my ancestors and what that may have looked and felt like for them. I felt a need to understand the dynamic of the South Asian diasporic experience and the transformation of that in this corner of the world. As a third-generation migrant I felt, and still feel, a disconnect to my ancestry abroad, and thus, it reflects an on-going sense of transience in my own life.

I revisited a letter that my late grandfather wrote to my mum on 27 December 2007. This letter sat with me like a key to a locked door that I'd left unopened for about a decade. After scanning, animating, and digitising the letter, I wanted to breathe life back into the narrative that it'd opened (see Figure 3). A first iteration saw the letter enlarged and glowing against the dark concrete walls in the underground test space at university. It felt like an exhumation of a past I had conveniently tuned a blind eye to for many years in my adolescence. It was cold, confronting, and exciting.

This letter was the last that my grandfather, Raman, sent to my mum and our family before he passed. Detailing the goals and intentions that he planned, it was written as an informal will. He mentions his investment in property and the security he wanted to leave for his children and grandchildren—my siblings and me. The letter was very difficult for me to understand; it was written in broken English and a cursive hand-written style, like a distorted version of Gujarati script which added another layer of disconnection to the story. I sought help from my mum to translate the letter. As phone conversations between mum and I unearthed a depth to Raman's letter, I was able to start connecting the dots of missing cultural and intergenerational links. My mum, Indira, helped me understand that his intentions stemmed from the desire to live a better life than what he may have had at my age. She told me he migrated to Aotearoa at the age of twenty-seven in the year 1927, the same age I am now.

My first language is English. I am a New Zealander by birth and yet questions still emerge in my day-to-day life about my country of origin. These questions made me wonder about how I fit into the contemporary society in Aotearoa and became a major motivation for further developments in my creative art practice.

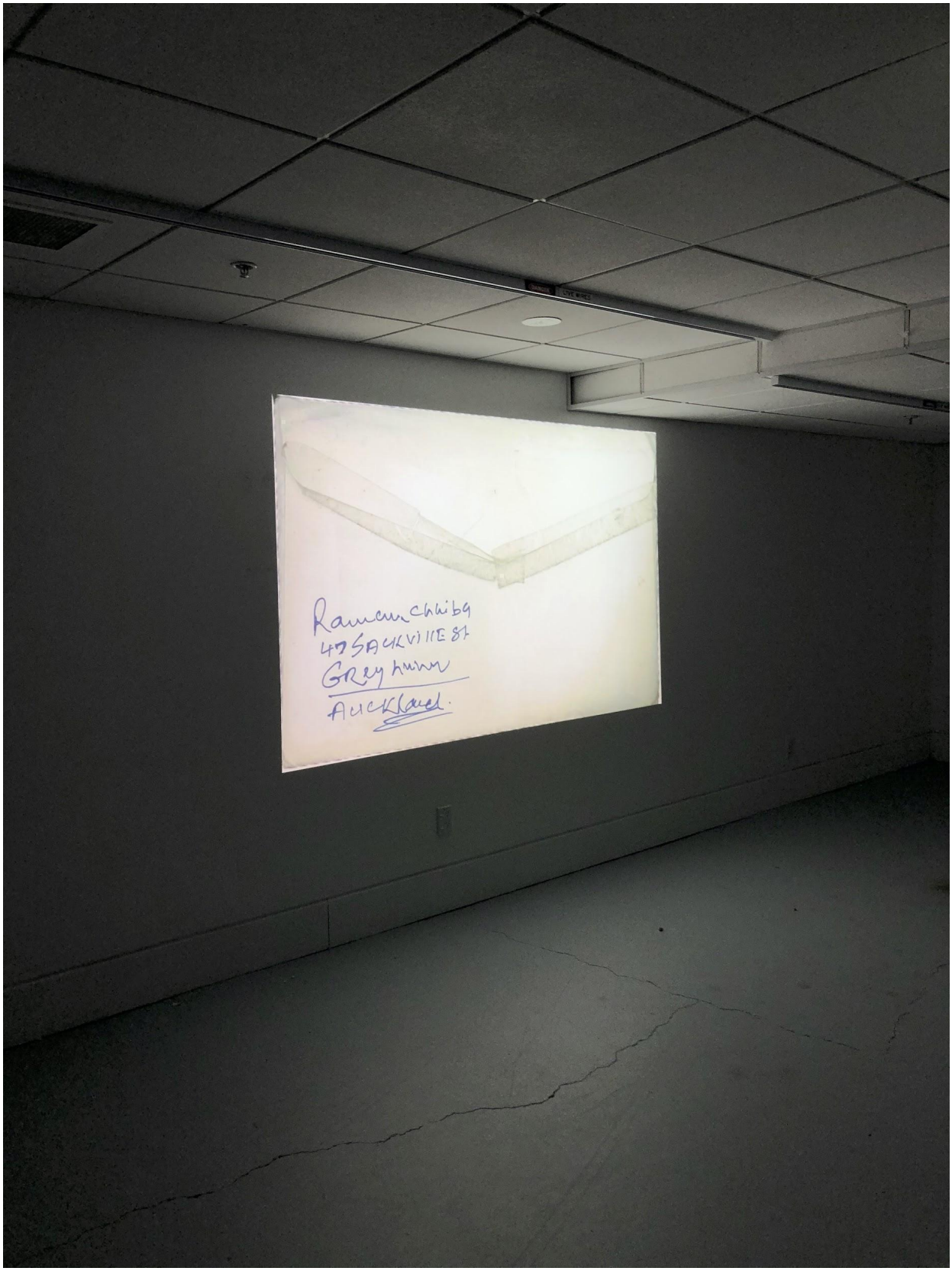

Figure 3. *Untitled (Letter sequence)* (2020). Digital Video, Sound, Textile
03:07, 6B15 Tv Studio, Massey University, Wellington, Ilish Thomas (2020).

I continued to talk to my mum. The knowledge, memories, thoughts, and feelings she shared became invaluable, generative components to my work. We recorded our conversations. I recorded and transcribed her reading of my grandfather's letter. This process echoed the recordings made in lockdown with the making of *Seclusion* (2020) (see Figure 1 & 2). These recording and collecting processes continued to grow a diaristic archive that I could look back on to move forward with new iterations.

I re-presented a version of this letter for a critique in September 2020. This time the projection was cast onto a long draping of fine cotton from the ceiling to the floor. I wanted to create a softer kind of materiality, tactility, or tangibility to the letter projection, moving from a flat surface and away from the small scale and flat paper of the original archived letter. By shifting the materiality of the work; playing with scale and texture of the cotton, I was able to imagine and decipher the words of the letter in a different way. The feel of this iteration, *Untitled (Letter sequence)* (see figure 3), lent to aspects of memory and memorialisation of my Grandfather. The quietude mimicked a moment of silence that enabled me to reflect on what the letter meant to me. I thought of my grandfather's words and what it meant for him to write the letter at the time. I thought of how he came to Aotearoa to start a new life and the timeline that led him to supporting my mum, and grandchildren today. Although he has passed, fragments of his memory still live on with the letter.

Some feedback from the critique of *Untitled (Letter sequence)* (Figure 4) mentioned how the installation revealed layers that are difficult to grasp, and memories that are disconnected. Others had said it displayed a stillness in the room with the work. I felt this as fitting for a gentle and contemplative approach, the depth of the letter to me meant that I wanted viewers to be introduced tenderly to this part of my identity. In the vein of putting intimacy to the forefront, I introduced voices of my mum, grandfather and I that spoke of survival, security, and economic independence as a migrant family - and as the descendants of.

Figure 4. *NAMASKAR & Merry Xmas* (2021). Digital video, sound, textile 15:56, Meanwhile Gallery, 99/2 Willis Street, Wellington, Ilish Thomas (2021).

I learnt that dialogue, memory, and the archive were strong thematic elements of my Letter moving-image iterations (see Figures 3 & 4). The extension from the diary and the everyday meant I could focus on the importance of specific histories, namely personal, oral, and lesser-heard voices within the dominant historical narrative of Aotearoa.

I recalled how In June 2019 I went to the City Gallery for a guided tour of an exhibition called *Eavesdropping* curated by James Parker and Joel Stern (“Eavesdropping”). A central focus of this exhibition included questions around the ethics of listening, privacy, surveillance, and implications of the act of eavesdropping. The exhibition featured strong durational content, and one that stuck out to me was Joel Spring’s *Hearing, Loss* (2018) (“Eavesdropping”). The work features audio and two moving image projections displaying the insides of the artists’ and their mothers’ ear canals. As round-orb-like

projections facing each other in a dark room, the sound of conversations teetered around the room. (See figure 5)

In an extremely up-close and personal display, *Hearing, Loss* reveals a subjective indigenous experience of Spring and his mother, Juanita Sherwood. Spring's mother shares the disparity of healthcare for indigenous people in Australia as an experienced nurse working during the 1980s-90s (Spring, 116). Both Spring and his mother experienced an inflammatory disease called Otitis Media, that affects the eardrum, and further, the ability to hear (Spring, 118,119). Widely affecting the indigenous people in Australia, this disease brings issues of audibility, visibility, and bodily and socio-cultural autonomy. *Hearing, Loss* (2018) speaks of a wider issue of subjugation within the health care sector for indigenous people. The loss of hearing can not only affect the individual's ability to hear, but also their ability to be heard, which Spring highlights by stating, "Hearing is a resource that allows you to listen to yourself and to your community" (118).

The collaborative methods Spring employed in *Hearing, Loss*, correlates with my own processes of conversation with my own mother for *NAMASKAR & Merry Xmas* (2021) (see Figure 4). It resounded heavily with how I considered my mother's voice and her transcription and translating of my grandfather's letter to me, to effectively bridge intergenerational gaps. What moved me in Springs, *Hearing, Loss* was the attention to the subjective experience of being marginalised, by way of bodily autonomy and social-political agency for the indigenous in Australia.
I am reminded again of the lack of visibility of the South Asian diaspora within the indigenous & settler-colonial histories on our own soil, and the parallels of these stories with indigenous Māori here in Aotearoa.

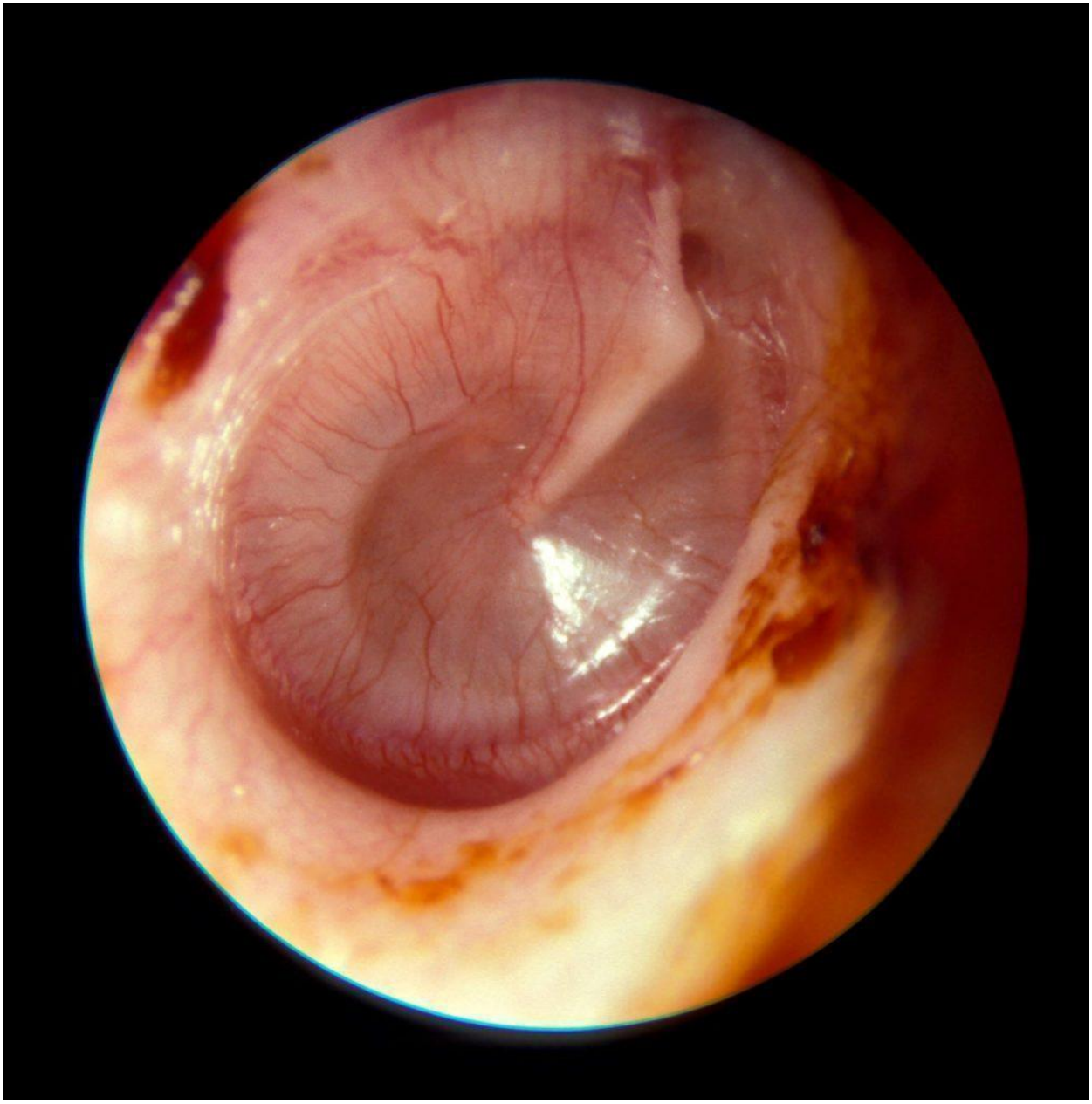

Figure 5. Joel Spring, *Hearing, Loss* (2018). https://liquidarchitecture.org.au/artists/joel-spring

I am reminded again of the lack of visibility of the South Asian diaspora within the indigenous & settler-colonial histories on our own soil, and the parallels of these stories with Māori peoples here in Aotearoa. Moana Jackson refers to a subjugation of narratives that asserts resistance within a now marginal space; “yet as the fiercely

asserted right of self-determination became a selflessly determined will to survive, the old stories were told in the quiet of the marae." (Jackson, 147)

With further mention of quashed histories, Jacqueline Leckie poses the questions; "but of what experiences of non-European migrants, specifically Indians and their descendants, in Aotearoa? Both within the negative history of colonisation and racism and, more positively, within the scope of the treaty and biculturalism?" (14) It can be understood that there has been a priority of focus on a particular narrative with violent exclusion of mana whenua and non-European tauiwi.

This is referred to in an eloquent and piercing statement by Jackson;

> ..the colonisers wrote new stories that deliberately misremembered and obscured the injustice of what they were doing. History became a kind of rebranding in which colonisation was not seen as a violent home invasion but a grand if sometimes flawed adventure that was somehow 'better' here than anywhere else because of the proclaimed honour of the Crown in treaty-making. (Jackson, 145)

The reference to a "violent home invasion" (145) can be said of multiple colonies, such as Gujarat and South Africa, where my grandparents came from that led them to seeking a new life in Aotearoa.

Chapter 4: At Meanwhile

The process of developing this work came about after various iterations and refinements of the letter from my grandfather, Raman. Meanwhile Gallery accepted my proposal which allowed me to extend this piece into a body of work held together by a continuous narrative.

At the same time, the Wellington gallery Play_Station accepted my exhibition proposal. This was an odd and exciting coincidence. I felt this was an interesting position that would work well with the curation of the MFA works. The timing meant that each exhibition would be back-to-back, which heavily determined the nature of each show. I decided, according to the progression of my work and the rolling iterations throughout the last year, that I'd have them act as sister-shows; Part-one at Meanwhile, and part-two at Play_Station.

The intention was to situate the work in a public space as an action of defining the intersection of private versus public issues regarding the forms that marginalisation of South Asian diaspora in Aotearoa takes. I re-edited the video, *NAMASKAR & Merry Xmas,* and re-recorded my mum transcribing the writing to me over the phone. I planned to install the work in response to Meanwhile's existing architectural features. By measuring the window dimensions, I constructed a floating screen out of metal and stretched fabric to hold the letter reproduced close to the same aspect ratio and parallel with the windows looking out to the street. I developed a sister work *NAMASKAR & Merry Xmas* using net curtains to filter out the light of the gallery's windows. (See figure 6 & 7)

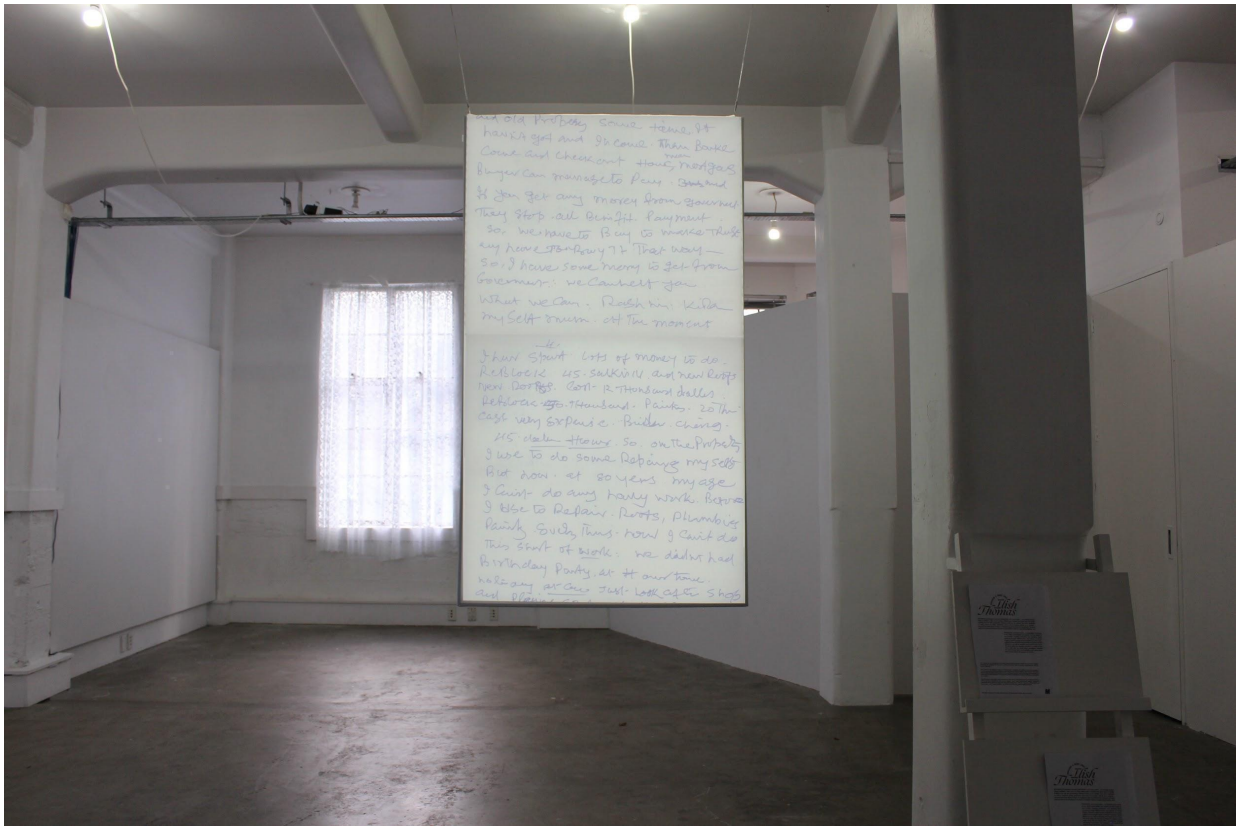

Figure 6. NAMASKAR & Merry Xmas (2021) Digital video, sound, textile 15:56, Meanwhile Gallery, 99/2 Willis Street, Wellington, Ilish Thomas

The decision to install *NAMASKAR & Merry Xmas* as a site responsive work/exhibition was linked to the gesture of inserting a narrative into a given public space and my sense of adapting/assimilating to my surroundings. I played with the notions of privacy in public settings, tampering with the light and ambience of the space. The synthetic netted curtains on the windows simulated the feel of my mother's bedroom. The diffusion of light and clarity of the outside world/view helped create an insularity that I hoped to embrace in and with the letter as a collaboration of words exchanged between my mum, Indira, and my grandad, Raman.

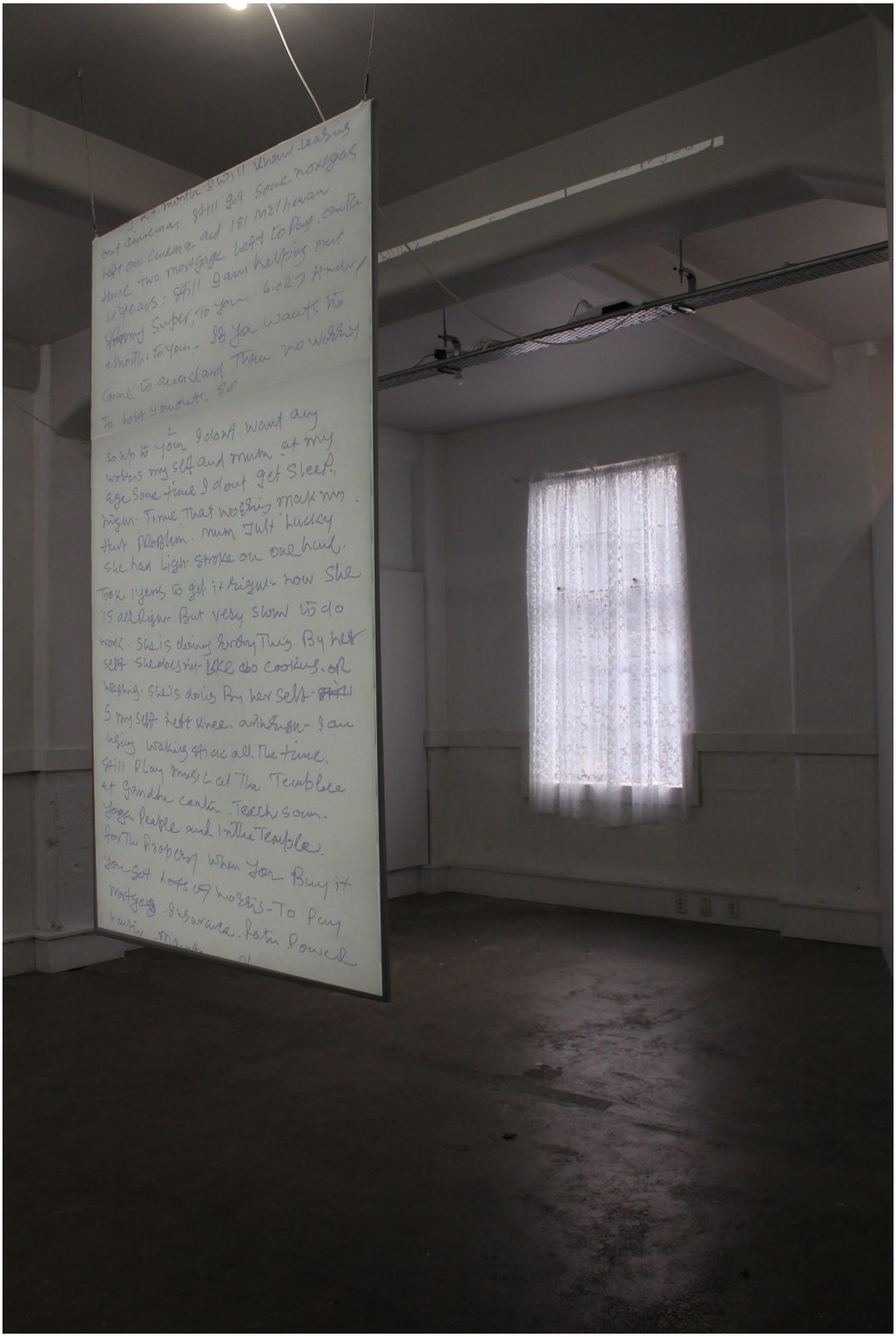

Figure 7. NAMASKAR & Merry Xmas (2021) Digital video, sound, textile 15:56, Meanwhile Gallery, 99/2 Willis Street, Wellington, Ilish Thomas

NZ art critic Mark Amery describes the scene (see figure 6 & 7) of this exhibition a Dominion Post review:

> Right now the windows have white floral net curtains, part of an elegant, minimal yet affecting installation by Ilish Thomas… In tone this could be any family, but the communication is not the Pākehā norm. It's an in-between bridge of cultural space itself…The installation's spareness provides room to see this otherness as not so different from our own. A tender and moving portrait of a family emerges (July 2021, p 14).

Lana Lopesi writes of "imagining home" (81). With reference to globalisation theorist, Arjun Appadurai, she expands on how the online space can make "nonsense of false divides and national boundaries" (81) Further reinstating, "this is what Appadurai named 'diasporic publics'." (81) I think back on the making of *Seclusion* (see figure 1 & 2), and the use of the online and digital space, and relate it here to *NAMASKAR & Merry Xmas.* I've explored moments that usually occur in private and bridged the gap from private-to-public in order to propose and imagine a new way of life or alternative idea of 'home'. Lopesi writes of global diasporic peoples; "for Appadurai, the ways that people move around the world and consume mass media enables them to imagine new lives and new worlds." (17)

Chapter 5: At Play_Station

> Diary entry 03/11/2021:
> I talked to mum on the phone last night. We read over the Art Paper interview I did with Connor (Fitzgerald) during lockdown after opening my show at Play_Station and exchanged thoughts. She shared with me how her grandfather, my great grandfather migrated to Aotearoa via Fiji, via Gujarat due to poverty. "The British stripped resources from us and pushed people like him out of their homelands". Mum said that he arrived in Aotearoa because Fiji was also poor and there was no paid labour left. He apparently settled in New Plymouth to set up a fruit and veg market but suffered a lot of discrimination. She mentioned my grandfather, Raman, followed him here in 1953 at 27 years old for the same reasons.

This conversation, for me, recalls what Research Fellow Jacqueline Leckie wrote in her books 'Indian Settlers' (2007) and ‘Invisible’ (2021) on the routes and reasons of migration for the South Asian diaspora in Aotearoa, which align with the timing of the waves of migration during the early-mid 20th century - as mentioned in Chapter 1. It's a large piece of a narrative I wasn’t aware of growing up, a narrative from which I was well disconnected from until now.

Mum also mentioned that both my grandad and his dad were very private and didn't share much at all about their past or personal stories of migrating. She thought it was most likely due to it being an unpleasant experience. This explained why she hadn't known much about this portion of our family’s history and a big reason for her and my own disconnect from our heritage. It evidenced how migration and the formation of new communities in diaspora transform drastically with new lands, cultures, and peoples.

Figure 8. *Indira's Birthday* (ઇન્દિરાનો જન્મદિવસ) (2021). Digital Video, sound, textile 08:04
Play_Station 1/233 Willis Street, Wellington. Ilish Thomas

I drew upon my mum's upcoming 60th birthday to situate the next creative work. I flew to Dunedin to spend it with her and the rest of our family. I brought a camera along with the intention to film during this celebration event. We ended up spending time with my mum at home. On the day of her birthday, I filmed her putting on her favourite saree over her home clothes—a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt. The moment was brief and before we left the house, she took her saree off. There was an unspoken knowing between us around her decision not to wear a saree outside; it made her uncomfortable because it drew public attention to her in a provincial and rather conservative, southern NZ town.

The point of my filming became stronger. I questioned this and we spoke about the occasions in which she'd wear one outside. She said succinctly that her saree is for "special occasions." I noted the shift from the norm of wearing saree as a South Asian to a new diasporic norm. Or perhaps this was a form of assimilation to (special) occasional wear? This saddened me and, to a degree, triggered a sense of shame.

Situations like these emerge every day and linger in the forefront of my mind. I remember many figurative fuses and tripwires laid amongst the context of growing up South Asian in Dunedin, Aotearoa. Memories, such as our elderly Pākehā neighbour, drunk, repeatedly yelling “bloody Pakistani, go home!!” and so on don’t go away even with time. My mum seemed to brush these incidents off while she closed the curtains and told my siblings and I to ignore it; we sat in our house quiet and intimidated. I began to explore these triggers within iterations of the video Indira’s birthday (ઇન્દિરાનો જન્મદિવસ). This is an indicator of how we, our family, navigated the day-to-day, quietly, at our home in Opoho/Northeast Valley, Dunedin. In this instance, resistance to racism was garnered as self-protective silence.

I explored the poetics of the memories of life. In the way of the diaristic, I wrote quick sentences or lists that spurred moments, feelings, triggers and mundanity during the time I was there.

In the initial iteration of this video, I recorded my own voice reciting this list with the intention to encompass the scene of my mother in her humble bedroom. I cut down this footage to gentle moments of her pleating and draping her saree in her room; her dusty and ripped net curtains as the backdrop. This moment was what would become the key element of the Play_Station Gallery installation where net curtains adorned and concealed the windows in the same way they did in *NAMASKAR & Merry Xmas* at Meanwhile Gallery prior.

There is a sense of tranquillity in the setting that the netted curtains invoke, such as to conjure a dream in which my mum could wear a saree and it wouldn't invite despondency. Or perhaps, further, a wishful place where I can imagine the safety of being of mixed-South Asian in the settler-colonial fabric of Aotearoa.

Thinking prior to installing Indira's Birthday (ઇન્દિરાનો જન્મદિવસ) at Play_Station gallery, I presented an initial version in a class critique session. Some feedback came in response to the work - notably on the technical elements such as the voice and the transcription. Firstly, the volume and tone of the voice (my own) sounded young and quiet, the passivity made it hard to connect to the visuals, suggesting that it was a separate entity

to the work. While the voice touched on a range of subjects the execution of the transcription could have produced more warmth to the otherwise very intimate visuals of my mother. I considered, in reflection, the use of another's voice - rather than my own, to undertake the audio component as an extension of collaboration that threads through my practice. In terms of the content of the words there was mention of how I'm speaking for her (my mum) and speaking for myself at the same time, where the tone of a memoir of both my mum's and mine was able to be offered to the class. There was also mention of the pacing of the cuts, that the video lacked an arc that would narrate the moving image smoothly, and with more warmth. Instead, with the iteration presented the cuts between shots were mentioned to have "reset" the viewer when watching through.

With consideration to the content in the imagery, it was mentioned how there's the saree; there's the intimacy between the camera and the subject, and how the sweatpants my mum was wearing was relatable to the viewers' own mother; as well as how it revealed that it was not a cultural thing but a working-class thing in fact. With further mention to the backdrop of the bedroom the work was filmed in, the detail of the rips in the curtains revealed how it wasn't such an orchestrated set to film, how it showed an authenticity; not overstated.

Further questions emerged on how the work would have progressed after filming - did my mum take off her saree? Or was she perpetually tucking, arranging, and pleating with no end? Will the loop of the work demonstrate this? Or would it end with an opening to another part of the narrative? With these responses and questions in mind I considered the function of the imaginary and what I could offer to extend the life of Indira's Birthday (ઇન્દિરાનો જન્મદિવસ).
I thought about what it meant for my mum to put on the saree on her birthday, even if for a couple hours before taking it off again to leave the house.

The iteration I presented so far demonstrated potential for a heart-warming, heartfelt, yet also heart wrenching watch. With changes made to the setting, the room, the audio, and the pacing of the cuts I could see a more intimate and soothing experience for my audience.

Figure 9. Indira's Birthday (ઇન્દિરાનો જન્મદિવસ) (2021) Digital Video, sound, textile 08:04
Play_Station 1/233 Willis Street, Wellington

Prior to installing at Play_Station gallery, I took to the feedback received from my critique and continued to shape the video and audio for *Indira's Birthday (*ઇન્દિરાનો જન્મદિવસ*)* into a memoir or piece of storytelling that better flowed and captured the warmth of the real moment. I replaced my mothers curtains during the time I spent in Dunedin with her. I installed curtains that replicated her old ones into the space-–like at Meanwhile gallery (see figure 6 & 7) and lined the windows with them. I paired audio of my mum speaking to my Aunty on the phone on her birthday, a moment that happened after filming, yet before she took off her saree. I constructed a wall-like screen that interjected half-way into the Play_Station space, acting like a dividing wall that not only reflected light, but performed like a window into and through the image.

I was asked to part-take in an interview for The Artpaper, an independent contemporary art magazine based in Aotearoa. Some responses and reflections were discussed with artist and friend, Connor Fitzgerald (Angel), following the installation of *Indira's Birthday (*ઇન્દિરાનો જન્મદિવસ*)*.
To begin, It is here where I address the linguistics of my choice in titling, in relation to being Gujarati in an English-speaking country:

> I wanted the title to speak directly to that moment and that day. In brackets Indira's Birthday is translated in Gujarati, parallel to the English version, referencing the proximity of both cultural worlds we live in. (Thomas)

Connor drew links of themes of in betweenness within aspects of *Indira's Birthday (*ઇન્દિરાનો જન્મદિવસ*)* to the precarious space of COVID-19. This has been a context that has inherently shaped my methods of producing work for the last couple of years;

> The distanced proximity also makes me think of the themes within your work. This separation, this balance or imbalance, this weird space we're existing in currently. (Thomas)

I discuss further an example of in betweenness in terms of cultural identity and representation:

> My mum putting on a saree in her room would be standard practice if we lived and grew up in India but this isn't the case.

To summarise the reception of my installation at Play_Station gallery, Connor shares her response to reading *Indira's Birthday (*ઇન્દિરાનો જન્મદિવસ*)*:

> The visuals in your work are so beautiful. The minimal nature of this exhibition is very inviting, with the low volume soundtrack and video that shows a single subject being filmed. There's a screen with the video projected on it, your mother in her bedroom, dressing herself, you and her together. Surrounding this are curtains hung across the gallery windows, similar to the curtains in your mothers bedroom. (Thomas)

> You've almost recreated that experience of filming your mum in her room. Sitting there alone and watching this work, the viewer is able to have a similarly intimate moment. You notice subtleties, the way the light interacts in the space, the curtains, the colours, the textural qualities of the sari, the sound that quietly comes in. (Thomas)

Following these thoughts shared, I feel that I made a successful shift from the iteration of *Indira's Birthday (*ઇન્દિરાનો જન્મદિવસ*)* from the cold test space at University to breathing life into the installation presented at Play_Station gallery.

The making of *Indira's Birthday (*ઇન્દિરાનો જન્મદિવસ*)* led me to think and draw threads to Selina Ershadi's video work, *Hollywood Ave* (2018) (see figure 10 & 11). This moving-image work of Ershadi's features modes of storytelling and the union of multiple voices to weave together a circulating narrative. ("Hollywood Ave") In her work *Hollywood Ave*, the archive, memory and aspects of collaboration and participation are sewn together within the image of a private space; of Ershadi's mothers' home. This home is in a state of renovation - or perhaps disrepair. I connect the notches of themes shared between *Indira's Birthday (*ઇન્દિરાનો જન્મદિવસ*)* and *Hollywood Ave*.
The shots, filmed by Ershadi herself, move from the interior to the exterior - at times voyeuristic; other times intimate. Ershadi's text *Notes for 3 Women* (2017) accompanies the image, serving as diaristic support for *Hollywood Ave*. (Duncan) This text mirrors the film contributing multiple entry points to a fragmented piecing together of stories of both the 'real' and imaginary.
Literature, diary, letters and notes bind the image to sculpt a narrative voiced by Ershadi's sister and mother, Azita, (see figure 11) with Ershadi as the third voice behind the camera.

Figure 10. *Hollywood Ave* (2018). Digital Video, Sound.

Fellow artist and writer Clair Duncan wrote in response to *Hollywood Ave* that there comes “affectionate displays of longing, nostalgia and mention of photographs – the ephemera of long-distance care”. (Duncan) As a viewer I'm left to imagine and situate my understanding of displacement and loss felt as a migrant far from the motherland. The use of Farsi and English in Ershadi’s mother’s voice detail a difference between closeness and distance linguistically and geographically from Iran - Ershadi’s family’s place of origin. (Duncan) Words of longing from Ershadi’s relatives and her immediate family are expressed along with nostalgia and recollection of memories through archives of text and VCR. What I can appreciate about *Hollywood Ave* is the multi-textual and multi-referential notes within the image that can be read in any order–a non-linear format that reflects a time-scale much like the resurfacing of memory and lived experiences. Archways, windows and rooms create thresholds between physical and epistolary spaces. (Duncan)

Figure 11. *Hollywood Ave* (2018). Digital Video, Sound.

I am left to read and piece together what fragments are accumulated ambivalently through the image and text. I can see a focus on the intimate relationships between participants, contributors, and artist references where each story becomes entangled with one another. This presents to me what seems like an evolving story passed through many timelines, places and generations. Ershadi's mode of storytelling is what drew me in; I familiarised myself with the notion that Ershadi and her family are disconnected as migrants far from their homeland in Iran. The distances covered through diary, archive and text in *Hollywood Ave* played a role in storytelling that holds similarity to the methods I employ in my own practice. The use of memory; of looking back while simultaneously looking forward to envision imaginary places, moments and spaces is a function for inciting resistance and change. There is a value in the subjective, much to what I believe Ershadi also respects, where intimate, private moments nurture and cultivate resistance.

Conclusion

Marginality can be a site of resistance (Hooks, 341). And with this exploration of the in between, of within margins, as the other on the in/outside, questions of how I got here have been addressed. A global South Asian diaspora was cast into transience due to subjugation and exploitation of imperialism and colonialism (Odeon, 174) The ropes and threads that tie me to this history are my grandparents and their process of survival: migration to Aotearoa. Memories of this survival have been traced back through reopening the Letter explored in *NAMASKAR & Merry Xmas* (2021) and the iterations of this work. The archive of memories and a resurfacing of stories and voices through this work has reinforced what resistance can be. I have been able to discover a sense of self through the journey of my MFA, which coincided with events prompting many shifts in how I see the world around me. The crisis of COVID-19 and the new everyday specifically called upon self-reflective methods of production. The diary aided me in evolving such methods. *Seclusion* (2020) saw these methods emerge and posed questions that became a part of a larger fabric of exploration during my MFA.
Resilience and resistance inevitably developed among learning more and listening to stories shared by my mother and relatives, this was a process embedded in my creative research practice that fostered the dreams and imaginaries to come.
Over the course of my study I have been able to track my own progress and witness and embrace the changes with a diaristic methodology that forefronts voice, conversation and collaboration.
The subjective value in which I record and collate material for works has proved increasingly important to harbour imaginaries. Notably, the digital space of the camera and its mechanical reproduction of life has made itself a tool that simulates an exploratory and imaginary space. Dream-like spaces can be seen in the storytelling of *Indira's Birthday (*ઇન્દિરાનો જન્મદિવસ*),* and Selina Ershadi's *Hollywood Ave* (2018).
I seek to share the dream, and sense of self-determination and resistance I've grown into during my MFA. To transform notions of community, to shift histories and sew in voices of resistance; starting with my mum, and from now on with those in the wider community around me …This is an imaginary of mine.

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