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INTERRUPTING INTERGENERATIONAL SILENCES BETWEEN INDO-CARIBBEAN  
WOMEN AND GENDER NON-CONFORMING PEOPLE THROUGH PARTICIPATORY  
ORAL HISTORY AND DIGITAL ARCHIVING

by

ARITA BALARAM

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of New York

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## ABSTRACT

### Interrupting Intergenerational Silences between Indo-Caribbean Women and Gender Non-Conforming People Through Participatory Oral History and Digital Archiving

by

Arita Balaram

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This study used participatory oral history and digital archiving to explore two interrelated questions: How do the stories that Indo-Caribbean women and gender non-conforming (GNC) people tell challenge dominant narratives of resistance to historical oppression which represent women and passive and non-confrontational, and fail to represent GNC people at all? How might oral history and digital archiving be used to work against the historical erasure of women and GNC people? In the first phase of the study, twelve Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people across generations participated in an oral history workshop where they were trained in oral history methods, co-created an interview guide, conducted oral history interviews of one another, and engaged in collective reflection about processes of storytelling. In the second phase, four co-authors of a community-owned digital archive participated in semi-structured interviews about the possibilities and challenges of working to construct alternative histories and genealogies of resistance.

In this dissertation, I explore how Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people practice resistance by breaking silences in their communities around gender-based oppression, shifting norms through producing analyses of their own stories, and reshaping community narratives. I argue that participants practice resistance relationally, demonstrating that healing happens in

community through collective remembering and storytelling. Furthermore, I explore how oral history participants and co-authors of a digital archive understand the risks associated with sharing stories, ultimately arguing for a decolonial feminist storytelling praxis grounded in the values of redistribution and reciprocity.

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## CHAPTER 1

### **Introduction**

Memories of the past—people, places, feelings, moments in time—are contested. Individual stories can challenge assumptions and accepted judgements that are reinforced through master narratives, especially the stories that come from the experiences of people who had previously been silenced or voiceless (Liem, 2007). Oral histories are concerned with how everyday people remember and narrate the past to consider how memories and myths have influenced people’s actions and sense of agency (Field, 2008). The process of archiving stories is not simply about collecting and organizing stories, but also about making deliberate choices about what to include and for what reasons. Early oral history projects, beginning in the 1940s, focused on memoirs of those who “contributed to society or who were close affiliates of world leaders, what may be called the ‘great men’ approach” (Abrams, 2010, p. 4). Feminist and decolonial approaches to oral history require new archival imaginaries (Caswell & Cifor, 2016) and a re-envisioning of what stories matter in understanding how the past becomes part of the present.

Building on the work of intersectional feminist psychologists who argue for the importance of women’s stories to understanding of inequality (Hurtado 1997, 2010; Segalo, 2014; Nagata, 2013; Ward, 1996), this dissertation problematizes conceptions of whose memories are seen as valuable to historical knowledge and worthy of being remembered. It goes a step further to explore what it means to remember together, and to contextualize one’s own story with/in the stories of others who continue to live through the trauma and legacies of colonialism. Drawing from oral history interviews of Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people across generations and conversations with co-authors of a community-owned digital archive, I



discuss how documenting and preserving the stories of those most affected by gender injustice allows for stories of oppression and resistance to be written into history, while also raising important ethical dilemmas around the risks of storytelling and the dangers of enacting new erasures.

This research sits at the intersections of critical psychology, critical race and feminist theory, and narrative inquiry. The study of identity within critical psychology has long argued for the importance of understanding how individuals grapple with dominant discourse about the histories of their communities as they come to develop a sense of self and identity (Bhatia, 2007; Sirin & Fine, 2008; Cross, 1971). Critical race theorists argue that part of the project of sustaining white supremacy is controlling the production of knowledge, especially about people and communities of color, which has always been met with resistance by everyday people (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Oral history is one methodology that focuses on how individual stories can subvert dominant historical readings by shifting focus away from those in power and instead focusing on how those most marginalized by racial, gender, class, and other forms of oppression experience the world.

The research questions guiding my inquiry emerged from collaboration with an Indo-Caribbean gender justice organization in New York City called Jahajee Sisters. In traditional social science research, research questions are shaped by identifying “gaps” in the literature; for community-engaged researchers, questions also emerge through relationships. Furthermore, they are guided by a commitment to using research to support ongoing social justice efforts, including efforts to end gender-based violence. The research questions I explore in this dissertation are: How do the stories that Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people tell challenge dominant narratives about resistance to historical oppression? How might oral history and digital archiving

be used to work against the historical erasure of women and GNC people? In the following chapters, I explore how Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people practice resistance by breaking silences in their communities around gender-based oppression, shifting norms through producing analyses of their own stories, and reshaping community narratives. I argue that participants practice resistance relationally, demonstrating that healing happens in community through collective remembering and storytelling. Furthermore, I explore how oral history participants and co-authors of a digital archive understand the risks associated with sharing stories, ultimately arguing for a decolonial feminist storytelling praxis grounded in the values of redistribution and reciprocity.

In Chapter 2, I review literature across three areas to set the context for this study: the functions of silence and struggles to remember; feminist oral history and archiving; and the social, historical, and political production of master narratives. Across these literatures, I explore the political importance of unearthing the stories of those most marginalized by the intersections of racial and gender injustice while also engaging with perspectives critical of the emancipatory potential of storytelling. I present findings from a pilot study that informed the development of this dissertation, which speak to the specificities of silences among Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people within history, within families, and across generations. Finally, I discuss the importance of approaching intergenerational work from a critical aging lens (Evans, Swanson, Chazan, & Baldwin, 2018), which argues for new ways of imagining activism and resistance across generations.

In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology of the study, which integrated participatory oral history and digital archiving. I outline how I designed each phase of the study to explore my research questions, describe the participants of the study and how they came to the project,

discuss how the community partnership was developed and nurtured, and introduce the frameworks I used to analyze data from the oral history interviews and semi-structured interviews with co-authors of a digital archive of Indo-Caribbean stories.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 explore storytelling as a practice of resistance, grounded in collective remembrance, relationality, and time-travel. In Chapter 4, the oral history interviews are presented as short biographies, organized in the groups of 2-3 they were shared in. After each pair/group of interviews is a reflection on how I interpret their individual stories and the relationship between/among their stories in the context of larger historical narratives about Indo-Caribbean resistance and the role of women and GNC people in that history. Here, I explore themes within the pairs/groups rather than across them, exploring the inner dimensions of resistance through the act of remembering.

Unlike chapter four, chapters five and six are guided by themes that emerged across the data, from the oral history interviews to the interviews with the co-authors of the digital archive. In Chapter 5, I explore how participants narrated resistance as relational, working to breaking cycles of silence in their communities by sharing their experiences of gender-based violence and strategies for healing. I also look at how they imagine different worlds for themselves and future generations, unpacking their analyses of the barriers that stand in the way of building relationships across generations. In Chapter 6, I explore how the co-authors of the digital archive understood the importance of documenting stories of resistance and how they grappled with the dangers associated with making private stories public. I also argue that the co-authors of this archive are engaging with this work with a deep sense of past, present, and future, traveling between time to understand the resources that they wished existed when they were younger and to build new narratives for future generations of Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people. I end

with a discussion in Chapter 7 about how the findings from this work speak back to dominant narratives about Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people as passive and non-confrontational or erase them altogether. Furthermore, I discuss the implications of this research for developing a decolonial feminist archival praxis and suggest future directions of this work.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Literature Review**

Learn to read and think deeply, as I too have learned to read and think deeply with Indigenous women and women of color who lay bare their wounds so that those who come after can learn and labor against further damage. (Solis, 2017, p.198)

Women of color cannot afford to be fools of any type, for our objectification as the Other denies us the protection that white skin, maleness, and wealth confer. This distinction between knowledge and wisdom, and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them, has been key to survival. In the context of race, gender, and class oppression, the distinction is essential. Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate. (Hill- Collins, 1990, p. 208)

In this chapter, I draw on literature within and outside of psychology to set the context for this study and provide justification for the research questions that shape this project and the methodology that follows. I look at three specific areas of research: the functions of silence and struggles to remember, feminist oral history and archiving, and the social, historical, and political production of master narratives. Across these literatures, I explore the political importance of unearthing the stories of those most marginalized by the intersections of racial and gender injustice while also engaging with perspectives critical of the emancipatory potential of storytelling. I present findings from a pilot study that informed the development of this dissertation, which speak to the specificities of silences among Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people within history, within families, and across generations. Finally, I frame the current study

within emerging literature on Indo-Caribbean feminisms and discuss the importance of approaching intergenerational work from a critical aging lens (Evans, Swanson, Chazan, & Baldwin, 2018) which invites new ways of imagining activism and resistance across generations.

### **The Functions of Silence & Struggles to Remember**

Silence around trauma is common, serving as a medium through which the effects of experiences get passed down to the next generation (Liem, 2007). Commitments for women to stay silent are multi-layered, embedded within the individual, interpersonal, community, and structural levels. At the level of the nation-state, there is an investment in preserving accounts of history that re-assert the power of the nation so that those who wish to speak out retreat into silence in fear of being branded as “disloyal”. Spivak (1988, 1992) writes that in patriarchy and imperialism, women inhabit a precarious position with divided loyalties, between being a woman and being in the nation. By speaking historical trauma, women’s stories become a battleground upon which ideological wars about national honor are fought. For these reasons, stories by, about, and for women--and in particular, women of color--are crucial to decolonizing memory, to expose the “colonial wounds we bear and the knowledge we carry to suture and heal” (Solis, 2017). Decolonizing memory, then, is to speak one’s trauma, but also to acknowledge the ways in which people continue to live, thrive, and find joy. As hooks (1993) writes, decolonization requires “breaking with the ways our reality is defined by the dominant culture and asserting our understand of that reality, of our own experience” (p.4).

The consequences of silences within communities is vast, with younger generations unable to see elders as victims of their own trauma (Liem, 2007). As argued by Hill-Collins (1990) in the quote above, wisdom gained through experience is essential to survival, and the sharing of this wisdom is what supports the collective survival of women of color. For this

reason, silence about trauma and historical oppression can be detrimental for women of color, young or old, trying to navigate their own pain and processes of healing. Telling stories requires active remembrance, which serves a number of functions including promoting self-understanding, increasing self-worth, alleviating depression, and helping people deal with crisis, loss, and life transitions (Zusman, 2016). Reminiscence with elders is meant to restore a sense of personal value which may have been damaged by social dislocation, isolation from family and friends, and loss of independence (Abrams, 2010).

In the above quote, Solis (2017) speaks the importance of learning from Indigenous women and women of color who have spoken and continue to speak their stories, despite the ways in which memory can be manipulated to function as a form of censorship, particularly for those who embody the memory of violence. Forgetting distances responsibility from the continued aftermath of violence so that the entanglements of coloniality which structure everyday life are made invisible. This project seeks to affirm women and GNC people as bearers of knowledge and wisdom whose stories are critical to our understandings of systems of oppression. It is women who are socialized to keep the secrets of patriarchy, especially within the family (hooks, 2010) so that violence cannot be named, let alone challenged.

This dissertation contributes to a long tradition of work from indigenous women and women of color writers who argue for the importance of healing among community to demystify the factors that undermine women's capacities to be self-determining. Scholars of healing justice, including the Kindred Healing Justice Collective who coined the term<sup>1</sup>, argue that Western-based health models in the U.S. are based on profit-making privatization that isolate the individual

<sup>1</sup> Created by Cara Page and the Kindred Healing Justice Collective, "healing justice...identifies how we can holistically respond to and intervene on generational trauma and violence, and to bring collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies, hearts and minds." (<http://kindredhealingjustice.org/>)

from their community. Simultaneously, many communities of color have been forcibly removed from land and resources that traditionally enabled them to communally respond to the emotional and physical needs of their communities. For this reason, healing justice scholars argue for holistic responses and interventions into generational trauma and violence that acknowledge the ways in which trauma affects entire communities.

The act of remembering can be evidence of resilience and a will to survive (Field, 2008), but can also jeopardize already fragile and tentative coping strategies (Ross, 2003). The aim of this project is to critically engage with the process of story-sharing across generations, recognizing both its emancipatory potential as well as tensions that can emerge in conceptualizing storytelling as purely liberatory. Speaking one's truth requires vulnerability, and silence is often used a coping mechanism to repress memories that are too painful to remember. Literature that attends to the functions of silence makes visible the ways in silence is practiced in order to resist efforts to co-opt and commoditize one's stories. Silence can indicate refusal to participate in a process that simplifies complex lives into data (Tuck and Yang, 2014). Smith (1999) argues that decolonizing methodologies "relates not so much to an idealized remembering of a golden past, but more specifically to the remembering of a painful past, remembering in terms of connecting bodies with place and experience, and importantly, people's responses to that pain" (p. 146). In other words, a critical approach to remembering facilitates people's connections to one another, to ancestors who came before them who lived through trauma, and knowledge-sharing so that survivors can see themselves in one another and "learn familiar ways to heal wounds" (Solis, 2017, p. 199).



## **Feminist Oral History and Activist Archiving**

Beginning in the 1970s into the 1980s, oral history was considered “recovery history”, as the practice of interviewing people was considered a way to provide evidence about past events which could not be retrieved from conventional historical sources (Abrams, 2010). This oral history project considers memory a reliable source for discovering how people make sense of the past and connect individual experience to social context, which resists a central project of mainstream social psychology concerned with determining the bias and unreliability of memory (Thomson, 2007; Abrams, 2010). The framework grounding this project also borrows from Zinn’s (1980) “history from below”, which attempts to account for historical events from everyday people, rather than from those in power.

Oral history is not only the product that is created, but perhaps more importantly, the process of building new sources of knowledge out of complex personal histories and experiences. Oral history crosses disciplinary boundaries, located at the intersection of academic research and the political sphere, and is both a research methodology and a result of the research process, considered a “cross-over methodology” (Abrams, 2010, p.2). Oral history works to transmit stories to the public domain, ameliorating the social and psychic isolation of survivors and violence to bring about social change in terms of wider cultural and political knowledge of an event and its impact (Abrams, 2010). Laub (1992) writes that “the telling becomes a means of validation and integration of the experience into everyday life because those who do not speak become victims of distorted memory. The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor’s conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of actual events” (p. 79).

In documenting resistance in its many forms, recent literature highlights the importance of looking at “quieter” or less visible contributions that typically fall outside the purview of historical memory, amplifying the diverse activisms of women and those who fall outside of the gender binary (Chazan, Baldwin, and Evans, 2018). At the same time, women’s similar contributions to social change can be differently valued, recognized, and remembered even within the same movements (i.e, it is often women who are considered “respectable” whose contributions are made visible). Foundational to feminist oral methodologies is a commitment to producing work/knowledge about women rooted in grassroots, non-hierarchical, and collaborative cultural and intellectual exchange production (Chenier, 2018), which provides important justification for a participatory approach to oral history.

This work is also embedded in activist archiving, which rejects the idea of being archived and instead “positions people as active agents of their own collections and authors of their own accounts” (Evans, Swanson, Chazan, Baldwin, 2018, p. 215). The social and emotional dimensions of collaboration significantly influence the contours of an archive itself, yet are rarely discussed (Ashmore, Craggs, and Neate, 2012, p.81). Archivists are active creators and mediators of social memory, as archives are always evolving and directed towards the future (Juhasz, 2006; Eichhorn, 2013). Caswell and Cifor (2016) theorize a feminist ethics of care approach where archivists are seen as caregivers, bound to record creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility. Furthermore, archives have the capacity to produce and reproduce social justice and injustice through their constructions of the past, engagements in the present, and shaping of possible futures (Caswell & Cifor, 2016, p.26).

A social justice agenda in archives requires undertaking a critical analysis of power, its operation, distribution, and resources, working towards equity in distribution of resources and

opportunities, and reinterpreting archival concepts to challenge dominant power structures in support of social justice principles and goals (Caswell & Cifor, 2016). Cotera (2015) asks, can an archive become a site of “encuentro”, or encounter, rather than simply a repository where new ways of producing and exchanging knowledge are explored? This project considers historical erasure as a form of violence and explores the ways in which archives can be used to promote distributive justice (Belmonte & Opatow, 2017), or the potential for material about the past or recent past that was otherwise unknowable to become available, allowing people to connect with historical events and social issues. Furthermore, it considers archiving as an act of self-determination in knowledge production.

### **The Social, Historical, and Political Production of Master Narratives**

Women’s stories cannot be fully understood without first considering the specific power structures within which they are constructed and told (Romero and Stewart, 1999). The current study explores narratives embedded within the social, historical, and political context of high rates of gender-based violence among Indo-Caribbean communities; rising white supremacist rhetoric which constructs immigrant communities of color as perpetually foreign; and ongoing heteronormative logics which tempt communities under threat to stifle “transgressive” behavior. It is grounded in the stories of Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people in the U.S. who are the descendants of indentured laborers brought from India to the Caribbean to work on sugar plantations beginning in 1838, in the aftermath of the emancipation of slavery. In order to understand patriarchal violence and its manifestations in the present-day, it is important to deconstruct the historical context of indentureship and its gendered legacies.

## The Intersections of Gender and Indentureship

Indentured women were for the most part illiterate (Bahadur, 2013) and only three first-person accounts of indenture exist, all written by men. Women who made the journey from India to the colonies as indentured laborers were those most vulnerable in their communities: women seeking escape from abusive households, lower-caste women, widows, and sex workers. Women made up less than 30 percent of Indian plantation workers during the period of indenture, and because they were scarce, they were sought after, sometimes taken by force and sometimes leveraged by both Indian and white men (Bahadur, 2015). In 1883, the Indian Emigration Act exacerbated the shortage of women with its intention to keep married women from deserting their homes for the colonies (Bahadur, 2011). Women who did reach the colonies were able to leverage their scarcity for their own survival, “trading up” in relationships to men with more money or status in either the plantation or caste hierarchy (Bahadur, 2013, 2015). Indo-Caribbean women came to be viewed as morally loose on the one hand or they were dismissed by colonial authorities as passive, non-confrontational, and submissive to rigid Indian patriarchal values (Mohammed, 2013). Bahadur (2015) argues that who Indo-Caribbean women were, and who their descendants are, is “at its heart a story about the demand for women’s bodies, for labor, for sexual gratification, and for procreation” (p. 55). When indentured women appear in the archives, it is because of the high rates of violence they faced; most frequently, they appear in reports from white plantation officers of incidences of sexual and domestic violence.

Indentured laborers who were gender expansive and gender non-conforming are largely absent from archives and historical narratives, despite a long history in the Indian subcontinent and its diasporas of the existence of more than two genders (Agrawal, 1997). Ali (2010) argues for the existence of *hijra* in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Indo-Guyanese society as a “third gender identity

that survived transatlantic separation from India, colonial oppression, and postcolonial suppression” (p. 3), drawing from accounts they have heard from family members and close friends about rituals *hijras* are known to practice at weddings and births to promote fertility. While the terms “gender queer”, “gender expansive”, and “gender non-conforming” came into use during the mid-1990s among political activists (Tobia, 2018), understandings of gender beyond the binary of “man” and “woman” have been found to exist previous to the use of these terms. As argued by King (2014), adopting the terminology used in North America and Europe to define the diversity of gender identities in the Caribbean “that Caribbean people have neither created nor always identified with” (p. 21) can perpetuate epistemic violence, thus further research must be done to uncover the historical meanings of gender-expansive and gender non-conforming in the Indo-Caribbean context and expressions of gender diversity beyond these terms.

### **Indo-Caribbeans in the U.S: Gendered Negotiations of Race and Nation**

At the time the Immigration and Naturalization Act was passed in the U.S. in 1965, large numbers of Indo-Caribbeans migrated out of the Caribbean fleeing political and economic turmoil as nations in the region struggled to assert their independence from colonial rule. Forming large communities in New York City and Florida (with smaller populations spread out in cities like Minneapolis and Atlanta), Indo-Caribbeans in the U.S. migrated primarily from Trinidad and Guyana, but also from Jamaica, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and at least 18 other Caribbean nations. Today, over 50 years later, the first wave of Indo-Caribbeans migrants are aging, and their stories are disappearing with them. These stories hold memories of growing up in the Caribbean during the Cold War, witnessing the optimism and violence that comes with nation-building, and experiences of migrating across waters to the U.S. The stories of women

and GNC people, in particular, rarely get told, especially those stories that subvert dominant discourse about their roles in movements of resistance. The second-generation hold their own stories about growing up in the U.S., navigating racial inequality in a new place while working to piece together the histories that brought them here.

In a pilot study I conducted exploring issues of identity, community, and belonging among Indo-Caribbean youth and young adults (Balaram, 2018), participants shared their desire to learn more about the histories of their ancestors to not only have language to communicate their identities to other people, but also to make sense of the stereotypes projected onto them by people within and outside of their community. In these acts of recovery, participants found that their ancestors' names had been mis-transcribed by colonial agents; that stories of sexual violence and transgression were hidden between branches of family trees; and that with each migration, came further loss.

19-year old Shabana shared, for example, that for a long time she “had no idea what indenture was”. She said, “I literally thought my grandparents got on a boat one day and decided to go to Guyana without knowing the real story.” 23 year-old Amanda reflected on stereotypes people have of the Caribbean in the U.S., saying, “it’s like a distant place compared to here. There’s nothing going on..no voices happening out there.” When I asked participants if they had ever learned about Indo-Caribbean history in school, overwhelmingly, the answer was no. When the answer was yes, as it was for Shabana, she said, “The only thing you hear about the Caribbean is Columbus, it being colonized and sugar plantations, but you never hear anything about the people who work there, or the history, or anything.”

Participants reported feeling starved of historical knowledge, which became even more present for them as they struggled to navigate strict gendered expectations placed on them about

what it means to be a “good” Indo-Caribbean man or woman. The young women who participated in the study shared that they felt their value was determined by how successful they were in the domestic sphere in their roles as daughters, mothers, wives, sisters, etc. Furthermore, they shared that their movement was policed in ways that were inherently gendered. Because one set of stereotypes attached to Indo-Caribbean women constructed them as “immoral”, confining women to the home can be understood as an attempt to counter these stereotypes and restore morality. This manifested in 25-year old Meera’s story, who was told by her mother that she could not travel anywhere by herself until she “found a husband”. During her interview, she reflected on the moment, saying, “I’m like, I’m 25, and I don’t really want a husband right now, and what if I wanted a wife? If I break away from this tradition, am I less Guyanese? Do I disrespect the ancestors?” Shabana, on the other hand, found that her mother encouraged her to push back against gendered expectations, sharing a story about her mother rebelling against her father and what it felt like to hear that story from her mother. Shabana says:

“She told me she would get dressed up and put on her heels and put on English clothing and go to the English theater, by herself! And in my head and I’m like, Ma you were a young feminist. But I don’t think she interpreted that as resistance, she was just doing what she wanted. And it was such a funny thing to hear because something as small as going to watch an English movie was an act of rebellion or something. I told my best friend and we were just like, yeah, I’m pretty much my mom, she doesn’t realize it but I’m doing the same things she did but in a different society. And my form of resistance looks different from hers but it’s pretty much the same idea behind it.”

These types of stories were told less frequently, but when they were, they were transformative for participants. The young men who participated in the study were also met with

a great deal of silence around trauma, collectively socialized to embody strength and resilience and to avoid showing weakness. Furthermore, many participants made connections between violence and substance use in relation inherited trauma and silence around mental illness. Alcoholism, for example, has sustained itself as a strategy to find temporary relief from trauma and to erase memory. Its roots are in the plantation economy, as overseers would offer to pay laborers in rum, leaving them in debt and unable to free themselves from their contracts. A 2014 report found that Guyana has the highest rate of male suicide in the world (World Health Organization, 2014), which prompted conversations within Guyana and across its diasporas about the stigma of mental illness. Several participants spoke of their parents instilling in them the importance of “not bringing shame to the family”, which forces people into silence in fear of disappointing one’s community. Shame acts as a powerful force which demands that what is spoken reinforces social norms, rather than transgresses them. Everyday acts of resistance that challenge capitalist and patriarchal notions of what “success” looks like for immigrant communities rarely get told.

### **Framings for the Current Study**

The current study builds on recent literature from Indo-Caribbean cultural theorists and feminist scholars who seek to address the silences around trauma and transgression which haunt the present. *Kala pani* discourse, as theorized by Mehta (2004), makes visible the displacement of women’s place in indentureship history marked by a “singular, subaltern, patriarchal, heterosexual, *jahaji-bhai* (ship brothers) plantation experience” (Pirbhai, 2010, p.38). A recent anthology bringing together writers across indentured labor diasporas about the legacies of indenture (Dabydeen, Kaladeen, and Ramnarine, 2018) and literature from Indo-Caribbean women in the diaspora (Jaikaran, 2017; Bahadur, 2013) have opened up new spaces think



through what Maldonado-Torres (2007) calls the “coloniality of being”, or the ways in which coloniality becomes part of our common sense and what we live each and every day.

Furthermore, this research takes a critical aging lens (Evans et al., 2018) and anti-teleological approach to resistance, which takes seriously the knowledge both youth and elders hold about their experiences and interrogates the notion that older generations must “die out” in order for progress to happen. A critical aging lens recognizes the ways in which intergenerational dynamics are often only intelligible within a framework of heteronormative familial scripts, which dictate rigid generational and gender roles (Farrier, 2015). American society is highly stratified by age (Hogeland, 2001), so it is rare for people across generations to get to know one another, learn alongside each other, or work together for similar causes.

Like other intergenerational projects, this research refuses a unidirectional version of knowledge transmission and instead frames intergenerational memory as more complex and multidirectional, with women and GNC people across ages nurturing each other as co-creators of their community stories. This work provides important justification for new ways of challenging normative scripts or dominant ways of understanding and performing relationships across generations, to imagine new possibilities for intergenerational healing.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Methodology**

The methodology for this study was designed to explore two interrelated questions: How do the stories that Indo-Caribbean women and gender non-conforming (GNC) people tell challenge dominant narratives about resistance to historical oppression? How might oral history and digital archiving be used to work against the historical erasure of women and GNC people? For the first stage of the research, I partnered with a gender justice organization based in New York City, Jahajee Sisters, and designed a methodology combining elements of participatory action research (PAR) with oral history. The second stage brought together nine community members to co-create a digital archive and engage in a reflective process about questions of access, privacy, and accountability through semi-structured interviews.

I was both the primary researcher of the project and a participant; I completed an oral history interview and was a member of the group of co-authors who worked on the creation of the digital archive. In mapping the effects of social injustice, researchers might choose to “study up” (i.e, study those who hold power) or “study down” (i.e, study those who have been disempowered). I chose to “study across” because of my commitments to thinking through how research can be used to support ongoing social justice efforts in the communities I belong to. Starecheski (2014) argues that when scholars produce knowledge that can be deployed by a movement with which they are allied, they become engaged in an iterative process of testing and refining that knowledge. In other words, engagement and alliance with a social movement can contribute to scholarly rigor.

This approach also moves away from notions of the “detached researcher” and community members as “ingredients in our research recipes” (Dillard, 2000). Women of color

scholars critique these notions of detachment from research, asking, “how do we reconfigure ourselves as witnesses when our observations of poverty and oppression include the communities of our families?” (Cruz, 2001, p. 662). I also draw from theory in the flesh (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981), where critical analysis is believed to emerge from “the physical realities of our lives, our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings” (p.23).

Fundamentally, my methodological choices were shaped through collaboration with community. In the sections below, I describe in detail not only how the data were collected, but also the levels at which collaboration was necessary in order to design a methodology driven by community needs and desires. The research questions guiding my inquiry along with the corresponding methods are outlined below in Table 1.

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Methods</b>
How do the stories that Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people tell challenge dominant narratives about resistance to historical oppression?	Three-part oral history series designed in partnership with community organization to train Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people in oral history methods. Twelve participants are matched in pairs and conduct oral history interviews of one another. Six participants engage in reflection about the process in a closing focus group.

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<p>How might oral history and digital archiving be used to work against the historical erasure of Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people?</p>	<p>Community members are invited to join project as co-authors of the digital archive. Four co-authors participate in semi-structured interviews and are asked to reflect on the process of building a community-owned digital archive.</p>
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**Table 1: Research Questions and Corresponding Methods**

**Participants**

In the first stage of the research, twelve Indo-Caribbean women and gender non-conforming people across generations participated in a three-part workshop on the foundations of oral history: deep listening, trust-building, and storytelling. The participants for the oral history series were recruited through the partnering organization, Jahajee Sisters. Jahajee Sisters is a New York City-based organization that was created in 2007, after two Indo-Caribbean women were murdered by their abusers within the span of a few months. The murders of 20 year-old Natasha Ramen and 22 year-old Guiatree Hardat received national attention, yet there were few spaces for community members to gather to grieve the deaths of these women or speak out about the high rates of gender-based violence in the community. The mission of Jahajee Sisters is to address violence against women and GNC people in Indo-Caribbean communities through dialogue, healing, the arts, leadership development, and grassroots organizing. The term “Jahajee” comes from the Hindi word “Jahaji” which translates “ship”. The name Jahajee Sisters represents a shared identity of “ship sisters”, calling in female ancestors who traveled together from India to the Caribbean as indentured laborers.

The study was publicized via email outreach, social media, and in-person at community events and was articulated as an opportunity for Indo-Caribbean women and gender non-conforming people across generations interested in oral history and storytelling. It was also framed as an opportunity for community members to build their deep listening skills and identify some of the barriers they face in their own lives in telling their stories. Participants were informed that there would be an opportunity for them to record their own oral histories, which would be analyzed as part of a research project on the lives of Indo-Caribbean women and gender non-conforming people. They were also told they would be able to choose whether they wanted their interview to be included in the creation of a digital archive of stories from Indo-Caribbean women and gender non-conforming people. Interested participants were given information about the location and dates of the oral history series to share with their own networks. They were also informed that childcare would be available and that they would be compensated with a \$25 prepaid visa gift card for their participation in the oral history interviews.

All participants who expressed interest in completing an oral history interview were invited to participate. Twelve people who attended the oral history series participated in oral history interviews. Seven of the participants were between the ages of 19-28 and identified as second-generation, while five of the participants were between the ages of 38 and 69 and identified as first-generation. All participants resided in New York City, with four participants residing in Queens, three participants residing in Bronx, two participants residing Manhattan, two participants residing in Long Island, New York, and one participant residing in Brooklyn. Ten participants identified as cisgender women, and two participants identified as gender non-conforming. All participants identified as Indo-Caribbean, with two participants coming from an

Indo-Trinidadian background, one from an Indo-Surinamese background, and the remaining participants from Indo-Guyanese backgrounds. Seven participants were born in the U.S., while five were born in Trinidad, Guyana, or Suriname.

Six participants of the oral history series also participated in a closing focus group interview. Focus group participants were between the ages of 22-69. Five of the participants identified as cisgender and two identified as gender non-conforming. Two participants identified as first-generation, and five identified as second-generation. I have indicated below the participants who both completed oral history interviews and participated in the focus group (see Table 1).

Recruitment for the group of co-authors happened simultaneously, and participants of the oral history series were invited to also be part of creating the digital archive. Eight community members were recruited to join the project as co-authors of the digital archive for a total of nine co-authors. All of the co-authors were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews about the process of creating a community-owned digital archive. Three participants of the oral history interviews also served as co-authors, but the four co-authors who participated in interviews were not part of this group. Of the four co-authors who participated in the interviews, three identified as cisgender women and one identified as gender non-conforming. The age range of the participating co-authors was between 22 and 28. One of the participating co-authors resided in New York City at the time of the interview, with the other three residing in Boston, Massachusetts, Miami, Florida, and Washington, D.C. Interviews with three of the co-authors residing outside of New York City were completed over Skype, while the interview of the co-author residing in New York City was completed in-person. Appendices A and B provide the demographic characteristics of both samples. Below, I have included a snapshot of the sample:

<b>Participants of Oral History Interviews</b>		
Pseudonym/Preferred Name	Preferred Gender Pronouns	Age
Shama*	She/her	37
Sarah	She/her	19
Karen Sonilal	She/her	24
Liloutie	She/her	42
Irene*	She/her	69
Lotus*	They/them	22
Jayasri	She/her	65
Kushri	She/they	27
Made	They/she	22
Rani*	She/her	22
Rita*	She/her	28
Ambika*	She/her	37
*also participated in a closing focus group interview		
<b>Co-Author Participants of Semi-Structured Interviews</b>		
Pseudonym/Preferred Name	Preferred Gender Pronouns	Age
Ashoka	They/them	23
Tanuja	She/her	24
Alisa	She/her	22
Jenni	She/her	28

**Table 2: Snapshot of Sample**

## **Jahajee Sisters & Community Partnerships**

My connection to Jahajee Sisters began long before I was formally introduced to the organization. With the three co-founders, I shared experiences of growing up in the Bronx, attending Hindu services in the basement of an apartment building off of Jerome Avenue, and going to Big Market on Castle Hill Avenue to get Indo-Caribbean groceries like karela, bodi, and garam masala. We only learned of these shared experiences when I began attending their sister circles in 2013, after the founders of the organization returned from a brief hiatus. When they decided to start their programming again, we all gathered at one of the co-founder's apartments, a room-full of Indo-Caribbean women and GNC folks hungry for community, intergenerational sisterhood, and a space to imagine and dream different futures for our communities.

After completing the pilot study for this project, it became obvious to me that the project that would be created from the dissertation needed to be nested within an organization that participants could return to, to continue the work beyond the scope of the dissertation. In the summer of 2018, I reached out to the co-directors and shared one of the major findings from the pilot study—that participants had few resources to grow their historical knowledge about the gendered legacies of indentureship, and specifically the stories of people who are typically underrepresented in Indo-Caribbean narratives: women and gender non-conforming people. After a series of conversations, we came to see this project as a way to build on the work Jahajee Sisters was already doing to bring women and GNC folks together by identifying skills (deep listening, trust-building) that could be built in the community through the oral history series and to document people's stories to be accessed by different audiences. For the next six months, we designed a three-part oral history series that would be nested within their monthly sister circles, which were gatherings of women and GNC people to share stories and build community.



## **Oral History Series**

The oral history series was held at a local community space in Queens, New York. The first session introduced participants to Jahajee Sisters and to the oral history series. Community members engaged in dialogue about the value of oral history and were invited to share their hopes and expectations for participating in the series. As a group, we decided on community agreements and engaged in three exercises to build their interview skills: a toning exercise, a writing exercise, and a deep-listening exercise. Participants were then invited to be matched with 1-2 people for an oral history interview in one of the next two sessions. The interviews were grounded in the concept of reciprocity and mutual vulnerability, and we encouraged participants to choose a partner who differed in age from them. The group engaged in discussion about the structure of the interviews and the guiding questions, which focused on personal history, community history, and solidarity across generations of Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people. Together, we created an interview guide and ended with each person writing down one personal goal for the interview. Appendix C provides a list of sample interview questions, and Appendix D provides an outline for the first workshop.

In the second and third sessions, participants interviewed each other in their previously selected pairs of 2-3 people ranging from 1 hour to 1.5 hours long in a private office at the community space. While interviews were being conducted, the larger group continued to participate in reflective exercises related to their personal and community histories, which included creating family trees (chosen and biological) and drawing self-portraits. At the end of each interview, participants had 10-15 minutes to debrief, respond to each other, and reflect more generally on their experiences as both listeners and storytellers in the interviews. At the end, participants filled out consent forms where they were asked whether they consented to the

interviews being analyzed for the purposes of this research project, and whether they consented to storing and sharing their interviews for the creation of a digital archive. If they consented to storing and sharing their interviews, they were asked to choose from a list of audiences they wanted to share their stories with, or to write in specific audiences that they would like their stories to reach. The options they were given to choose from were: public, anyone who identifies as Indo-Caribbean, only Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people, and only other participants of the project. Participants were given these options to honor that some participants were not ready to share their stories publicly but wanted community members who were experiencing similar struggles as they had in their lives to be able to access their stories as a resource. The group of co-authors were able to identify a content management software called Mukurtu, built by and for indigenous communities seeking to preserve cultural heritage, which allowed for us to manage privacy settings on each of the interviews so that we could honor people's boundaries around access. Transcription along with the original audio was shared back to participants to confirm accuracy.

During the third and final session, a focus group was conducted with six participants of the oral history series to reflect on the series as a whole. Sample interview questions were: How did it feel to participate in the oral history interviews with women and GNC people in your community across generations? Were there particular stories your partner shared with you that resonated? What was it like to hear those stories? Are there voices that weren't represented? Even after participation in the oral history series, were there still topics that you felt like you were unable to talk about? We also invited participants to attend future Jahajee Sisters events to continue building networks of support to hold their stories given the psychic costs of storytelling and the difficult emotions that may come up long after the interview ends.

## **Building a Community-Owned Digital Archive**

Recruitment for co-authors of the digital archive began in January of 2019, right before the first oral history session was held. Interested participants were invited to participate both in the oral history series and as co-authors of the digital archive if they wished. Three of the nine co-authors participated in the oral history series, while the remaining chose to participate only in the creation of the digital archive. Interested participants filled out a Google form asking for demographic and contact information, experience working on digital projects, and interest in joining a group of Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people in creating a digital archive. I spoke to all interested participants before inviting them to join the project as co-authors to give them background on the project and discuss expectations for the co-author role, for a total of nine (including myself). A total of 19 people filled out the Google Form; five people could not be reached after they submitted the form, and six people were unable to participate because they were not based in the U.S. but were invited to keep in touch for future opportunities to be involved.

From January to March, the group met over video conference monthly to build a collaborative process for creating a community-owned digital archive. From April to November of 2019, the group met bi-weekly to identify and distribute tasks in four areas: audio, website, research, and communications. The audio team was responsible for editing and transcribing audio and writing up short descriptions and key words for the interviews. The website team was responsible for developing and designing each element of the website, including a mission statement, a glossary of terms, and a “resources” document on further reading about Indo-Caribbean history. The research team was responsible for creating a collection development policy, guidelines for interacting with the oral history interviews, and developing a process for

obtaining virtual consent from community members interested in submitting their oral history interviews to the archive in the future. Finally, the communications team was responsible for designing the logo, creating social media pages and a social media calendar, and planning a launch event for November of 2019 to publicize the digital archive and engage community members in dialogue around how the archive can be used to support ongoing social justice efforts in the community.

In June of 2019, the co-authors were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview about the possibilities and challenges of creating a community-owned digital archive to work against historical erasure. Four participants expressed interest and availability to participate in the interview, and all interested participants completed interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes long. Each interview was transcribed immediately after collection.

### **Analytic Frameworks**

The oral history interviews were analyzed in a few ways. In the first analyses chapter, rather than using the oral history narrative as “evidence”, the narrative guides the analyses (Abrams, 2010). In this way, the narrator leads the reader rather than the researcher. In sharing their stories, participants speak back to dominant/master narratives, defined by Romero and Stewart (1999) as “stories that subsume many differences and contradictions and restrict and contain people by supporting a power structure in which gender, class, race, sexuality, and ability all define who matters, and how” (p. 13). In this chapter, I analyze each story individually, integrating the language participants used to describe their experiences as much as possible to honor the expertise participants have over their own lives. In this chapter, I identify themes within the interview groups, lifting up the ways in which remembrance can be considered a form of resistance.

In the second analyses chapter, I use thematic analysis as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) to find themes across the oral history interviews and focus group that emerged specifically in relation to intergenerational relationship-building. I explore how participants narrate resistance relationally, as they work to make sense of the barriers that prevent women and GNC people across generations from building relationships with one another. I also analyze participants' responses to questions about the hopes they have for current and future generations, as well as the stories they wish they could tell Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people from the past, present, and future. In this chapter, I also look across interviews to identify intergenerational (dis)continuities among the stories shared.

In the third and final analyses chapter, I analyze reflections from oral history interview participants and the co-authors of the digital archive on both the emancipatory power of storytelling and the risks associated with it. I also analyze the semi-structured interviews with the co-authors of the digital archive using thematic analysis to explore how they articulated the possibilities and challenges of creating a community-owned digital archive to work against historical erasure. In this chapter, I discuss in-detail how the interviews opened up discussion about the future of the archive and allowed for the group to engage in a reflective process about the core ethics and values of the project, ultimately articulating a decolonial feminist storytelling praxis.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Silenced Indo-Caribbean Voices Speak**

I never want to build a ‘body of work,’ but to preserve these, our bodies, breathing and unaccounted for, inside the work. (Vuong, 2019, p.175)

This chapter offers a view into the complex lives of Indo-Caribbean women and gender non-conforming (GNC) people across generations. In documenting these stories, there is a commitment to recognizing that these stories are from a particular time and place, and that many other stories exist and will continue to be written. The title of this chapter borrows partially from the name of the digital archive that was created from these stories, *Ro(u)ted By Our Stories: Silenced Indo-Caribbean Voices Speak*.

The stories in this chapter are presented as biography, distinct from each other yet interconnected through the legacies of colonialism, migration, experiences of violence, and survival. They are also connected by their insistence on being heard; each participant crafted their life histories with the awareness that the stories they shared could be included in a digital archive and reach audiences beyond the one or two other participants in the room with them. Each story is a testament to their belief that storytelling can be transformative, for both the self and others, and evidence of their resilience. They are also evidence of participants’ resistance to being silenced, particularly in relation to their experiences of oppression and the value of their knowledge and analyses gained through telling their stories.

Resistance, here, is choosing to remember and speak one’s story despite the risks. This does not mean, however, that their stories stand on their own. They are part of a collective narrative of survival where their relationships to other women and GNC people are inseparable

from the individual choices they have all made in their lives. Their stories are of their struggles to live agentic, independent lives, while being held up and weighed down by their community. To honor each participant's analysis of their own stories, I have chosen to organize this chapter not by theme, but instead led by each story. This lens is informed by a life history approach, which emphasizes the importance of the full story to give context to the interpretation. A life history approach warns against fracturing narratives to fit within defined themes, and instead argues for the narrative to guide the interpretation.

After each pair/group of interviews is a reflection on how I interpret their individual stories and the relationship between/among their stories. I explore particular memories of obstacles, inquiries, and dilemmas participants shared and the continuities between how they understood their experiences and found solutions. In particular, I look at how participants reconcile expectations of dependence and struggles for independence; reclaim joy and shape girlhood; engage with questions of safety and refusal; navigate social meanings of the body and reproduction; and move from reflection to action in building different worlds. While I address these themes with each interview group, in some cases the themes appear across different interviews. Thus, the narratives should not be reduced to these themes, but instead understood to emerge from my subjective position as a listener, participant, and researcher interested in how storytelling can reveal everyday forms of resistance through active remembrance.

### **Irene and Shama**

#### ***Irene, 69, she/her***

Irene and Shama were the first pair to conduct oral history interviews of one another. Irene arrived at the second session of the workshop with a small notebook she used to write her responses to the questions she had chosen from the interview protocol we finalized at the previous session. She shared that in the ride over with her daughter, she felt nervous about not

knowing where to start in sharing her story, so she decided to pre-write her responses to the questions. In the audio recording, you can hear the gold bangles on her arm jingle each time she turns the pages of her notebook. After participating in a grounding exercise and check-in with the larger group, Irene and Shama walked together to the designated interview room, the office of the owners of the mandir where the sister circles were held. Adjacent to the interview room was the office of the founding pandit of the mandir who passed away almost ten years ago, the furniture left untouched. They sat in two office chairs facing each other, with pillows and blankets nearby to provide warmth from the chill of January.

Irene begins the interview introducing herself to the listener. Irene uses she/her pronouns, was born to a Hindu family in Berbice, Guyana, the oldest of six children. She reads from her notebook:

“My mom instilled that we had to be respectful, work hard, and always be compassionate to others. I had a very happy childhood and got married at age 21. My life became sad when my husband passed away after five years of happy marriage and was widowed with two daughters, ages two and one. I had ventured out to Canada to escape my past and grief and seek a future for my daughters. I first went to Canada to further my studies and then migrated to the U.S. I always believe that hard work and believing in yourself and the universe and praying, you can achieve anything in life. I came to the U.S. with a visa and overstayed my visa and became undocumented. That was very fearful to be undocumented and it was a setback in many ways. I stooped to conquer and took a job, was overworked and underpaid to get sponsorship in order to reunite with my two daughters who were left behind.”



She goes on to talk about the negative stereotypes her community attached to her as a woman who was migrating on her own, a widow, leaving her children behind. She says, “There were no phones or anything to communicate, I would write letters to my children and family and tell them I still love them and care for them, and not to bother with the community and the gossip that I will never come back for them.” When she moved to New York, she was the first in her family to migrate. “Strangers adopted me”, she says, until she met someone who helped her find a place to live on her own who later became her husband. When Shama asks her what it felt like to later own her own house, she shares tearfully, “It was the best thing that ever happened, I dreamed of owning my own home”. She gave birth to her third daughter and returned to Guyana in 1981 to bring her other two daughters over after receiving her green card.

Her husband, she said, was never really supportive of her and started cheating on her. “Life was a struggle with three daughters. I surrendered my life to the universe and to Maha Shakti Goddess who guided me”, she says, invoking a Hindu goddess who she later describes as “the divine strength within me and my daughters”, which motivates her to achieve her goals in life. She says that her spirituality has taught her that “you can’t just sit and wait for things to come to you. You have to set very high goals, work towards them, and also believe that there’s a superior force that’s overlooking whatever you do.” After her father passed away in 1981, her mother moved to the U.S. to live with her and help her raise her daughters. She talks about how fearful she was to leave her husband and raise her three daughters without him:

“I was afraid to, I was just afraid. Like we were not taught that we could do everything by ourself. Like we thought, you know, you could not live without the man, you needed him in your life, even though he was just an ornament. I still had to work alone, pay my bills alone, and just had a man to show that I had a husband.”

Shama then asks her, “When you think about your story and what you’ve shared, how does it make you feel?” Irene responds saying that it makes her proud that she’s overcome her struggles. “That’s what made me, all the struggles made me strong, made me independent. And it doesn’t matter to me what the world thinks about me, only what I think about myself.” Shama follows up and asks her whether there are any stereotypes or myths of women in her community that she feels are important to challenge given her own experiences or the experiences of women in her life. She says:

“We were taught that women, you know, women should not speak out and not come out. You know, we were always being suppressed and the males were more dominant and they could, they could go out and do whatever they want while we were kept in the house to help with chores and never could speak out freely what we thought or what we wanted to do. And I taught my daughters them differently, that they should always be able to speak your truth and express themselves and don’t be suppressed by anyone or the community.”

After working in the same hospital as a medical administrator for 35 years, she retired two years ago, and tells stories about the joy she finds from watching her three daughters and grandchildren grow up. She says her daughters “outshined” what she expected of them, and that seeing her struggles inspired them to be very strong women and to succeed. Shama asks her what she has learned from her daughters, and she shares, “I learned a lot. They taught me to be independent, that I’m strong, that I can do whatever I want, and they’re stronger than I was.” Shama asks her if there are any funny or joyous moments with her daughters or granddaughters she wants to share, and Irene ends her interview with a story about a recent conversation she had with her eight-year old granddaughter about relationships:

“Two weeks ago, I was with my granddaughters and I was reading them bedtime stories. They ran out of ideas and started asking me funny questions. They wanted to know how come I had another husband after their grandfather passed away and why I was not living with my husband. And then the eight-year-old, she was able to make her own judgment that if he was not a nice enough person to me, she will not call him a grandfather. She's already strong and makes her own decision, you know, he can only be an uncle. He cannot be a grandfather because he was not nice to me. That's my fun story.”

In telling this story, Irene shares the satisfaction she feels in her eight-year-old granddaughter bearing witness to her story, but also being able to identify at a young age that she has choice over her relationships. This was a lesson that Irene learned later in life after years of struggling with the expectations placed on her as a woman, as a wife, and as a mother. As she experiences her granddaughter resisting messages about women's complicity at an early age, she witnesses a cycle being broken.

***Shama, 37, she/her***

Shama has known Irene for many years, and they see each other often, but she says they “got to know each other in a different way” by being paired together in the interview. Shama begins her interview narrating a map of the places she has lived and spent time in: Guyana, Jersey City, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, Maryland. “I kinda grew up everywhere”, she says. When she first migrated from Guyana to the U.S., her family lived in Jersey City until her parents split up. When there was a fire in her home, she moved to the Bronx where she lived with extended family. Then her mother remarried, so she moved to Brooklyn. She came to Queens to attend college and then moved to Maryland for graduate school, and finally returned to Queens after graduating. She says:

“My sister and I were the first grandchildren, so in some ways we were everyone’s children. And because of our migration history and our issues with our father, we also lived with our different family members. And so in some ways we were very lucky because we got a lot of love from a lot of people, like really genuine love. And we got to enjoy our grandparents and our aunts and uncles before they had their own kids...but also what came with that was a lot of, I’m going to say policing, but what I mean is, a lot of watching.”

Irene asks her about some of the message she received about being a woman when she was growing up, and she talks about the expectation that she should “be seen and not heard”. As she got older, she realized that she started to engage in self-policing, watching what she was wearing and how she was presenting her body in order to not attract attention. “In a way, it’s like you don’t want people to see you, right?” Without her voice, she could only be a body, and even her body had become a source of anxiety and fear. She shared that these messages don’t serve women later in life when women don’t know how to take up space or advocate for what they want. “Being silent, being invisible, actually works against you.”

The story Shama wants share with other Indo-Caribbean women is her story of pursuing her education, gaining her Bachelor’s, Master’s, and finally her Doctorate in English. She says, “For me, that was a really big accomplishment because I felt like I had to do a lot on my own.” As the first in her family to go to college and being an immigrant, she shares that she had to figure out a lot by herself while navigating the expectations of people around her to choose a career that would make her a lot of money. She said:

“I think I had to fight, even though I was very quiet about fighting. I just sort of kept doing what I wanted to do even though I felt like people expected me to do something

else. And I just kept doing with wanting to be a teacher. I went to college for English and people said things to me like, you're so smart, why are you becoming a teacher? Why are you wasting your life?"

She went on to say that she understands why people think that way, and that for people who are immigrant, poor, and working class, families are investing in younger generations so that they can get jobs and opportunities that they couldn't. She says, "For generations, people have been investing in me through their labor, through working in cane fields, rice fields, by migrating here. My mom's a nanny...I felt like there was a lot of expectation for me to go to school to get an education, but also to get a job that would put me in a better position than my previous generation." At the same time, she shared how it was isolating for no one to understand why she was going to graduate school, why she wanted to be a teacher, or "do something bigger for the world". Her community at home in New York were supportive and proud that she was in graduate school and taking care of herself, but she struggled being in graduate school without mentors or a support system as she witnessed her peers who had come out of middle class homes arrive in graduate school with skills and cultural knowledge that she didn't have. School was her priority because of her love for it, but also because it offered her a sense of stability when other parts of her life felt unstable.

She was also in a long-distance relationship when she entered graduate school, which was difficult for her because of the pressure she felt from both her tight-knit family and her partner to travel back-and-forth between Maryland and New York. "We celebrated everybody's birthday and they would ask me if I would come for so and so's birthday. So I was coming home two times a month, instead of studying, which is what I should have been doing." She said that she got into a cycle of traveling four hours to spend the weekend with her family and partner to

return to class on Monday feeling lost. Each time she got back into the rhythm of graduate school, she would leave again. She shares:

“It was this constant cycle of trying to please everybody, trying to please the people at home, trying to please this boyfriend, because he wanted to see me and I wanted to maintain this relationship, and then I would go back and have to deal with a lot of anxiety...I realize how much work I did to hold onto a relationship because I felt like I needed that relationship. I felt like I needed this guy. And I think from a very early age, especially because I had lost my father, I was sort of taught that I needed to get married and I needed somebody to take care of me. At the same time, I saw my mother take care of herself and take care of her children as a single mom. And so in some ways I got this like really mixed message that I had to economically take care of myself and I had to get an education. But at the same time, I also needed a man to protect me from all kinds of things.”

Here, Shama emphasizes that young girls are taught to “need”—relationships, men, marriage, protection, and care. She talks about the fear instilled in young girls that they are unable to take care of themselves without the presence of a male partner. She acknowledges the contradiction between what she has been taught and what she has witnessed herself growing up with a single mother. After she got married, every time she went to a family event people would ask her when she was planning on having a child. “Nobody ever asked me about school, nobody ever asked me about, you know, teaching or other things that I did. And so I felt like I had to have a baby. And so I did (laughs). I feel like there was another box in some ways that I was checking...I feel like in some ways, for some people it doesn’t matter what I’ve accomplished. It’s all about being a mother and being a wife.”

Irene then asks her about the ways she's seen discrimination against women and girls in her family and community. Shama talked about witnessing her mother and grandmother in relationships where they always had to appease the men in their families, and in particular with her mother, who was the victim of domestic violence. She says, "my father was abusive, he was an alcoholic. He beat my mother, but he also wasn't present and didn't contribute economically..and so not only was he physically abusing her, but he also abused her by not contributing to the household and not taking care of his children." She reflects on her role as a mother and how she is trying to raise her son to witness unconventional gender roles and see different models; she as a professional, and his father as a caregiver. She talks about how hard she has had to work to point out how sexism manifests in her home and in her relationship with her partner:

"At home, I'm, you know, constantly navigating sexism and It's not intentional, but there are times, especially when I was younger, when my husband didn't really listen to me, I, he would say, do you want a red apple or, or a green apple? And I'd say a green apple. And he'd say, but the red apple looks better. Let's get that. He really didn't let me have a voice for like ten years in our relationship, he just dominated. And I've had to work really hard to get him to recognize some of that behavior, and he's really come a long way."

Reflecting further, she realizes that the things she can give her son, no one else can. "I try to think about what kind of adult I want him to be, and what do I need to do now, including thinking about what he sees, right? What kind of woman he sees me being and the way he sees me interacting with his father, family members, or the kind of job that I do. What is he learning from that and how is that going to affect the way he treats women?" Here, Shama articulates the

everyday ways she is working to break intergenerational cycles of violence through resisting the ways that patriarchy shapes one of the most intimate spaces: her home.

### **Reconciling Expectations of Dependence and Struggles for Independence: Towards Interdependence**

A central theme that connected Irene and Shama's interviews was how both participants navigated gendered expectations around dependence; more specifically, how they reconciled the contradiction that women are taught to prioritize the care of others over self-care, while also being taught that they need the presence of a male partner to take care of them. This contradiction positions women as responsible for the well-being of those around them, yet incapable of taking care of themselves. In their interviews, Irene and Shama each share how they learned these messages, their struggles to reconcile what they had learned with their lived experience, and their articulations of independence and interdependence in response to those struggles.

In Irene's narrative, I was struck by how she talked about the particular struggles she faced as an immigrant woman migrating on her own. In recounting this experience, she talks about how her community in Guyana shamed her for leaving her two young daughters behind when she left for the U.S., suggesting to her daughters that she was never going to come back for them. Irene rejected these stereotypes and wrote letters to her daughters letting them know that she loved them and would come back for them when she was stable enough to take care of them. Here, she recognizes that her independence and sense of agency was tied to her ability to care for her children as a single mother. Irene also talks about how she and other women of her generation were taught that they couldn't do things on their own, that they couldn't speak out about their experiences or desires, and that they "couldn't live" without a man. Each of these



messages contributed to a broader expectation that women were dependent on men not only to care for them, but also to determine their choices for them. After surviving an abusive relationship, Irene learned that the expectation of being taken care of by a male partner was an empty one; he was “just an ornament” which provided her with the illusion of safety and stability while she nurtured it for herself and her family on her own.

In her interview, Shama shared early on that she and her sister were “policed” by family members from a young age as the first grandchildren of her mother’s parents. She talks about how she experienced her family constantly “watching” her behavior to make sure her choices aligned with their expectations of her, which led her to internalize that she should be policing herself as well.

Like Irene, Shama was taught that she should be “seen and not heard” and to please others before herself. This sense of responsibility gave her a great deal of anxiety, especially as she navigated her own sense of purpose in life with what her family members were communicating to her about their expectations. This dilemma arises as she talks about her decision to obtain a graduate degree in English and pursue a career in higher education. While in school, she recalls struggling to maintain her relationships with family and her partner in New York while attending school in Maryland and how she felt they were only concerned about her role as a daughter and wife. She recalls feeling alone during her graduate studies, with no one asking her about her individual goals for herself but instead about when should be getting married, and later when she would have a child. She shares that she felt that she had to “check the boxes” of becoming a wife and mother, which influenced her decision to have a child at the time she did. During the interview, she shares that she feels like she could have waited longer to have a child.

Similar to Irene, Shama quickly realized that even though generations of women in her family, including her own mother and grandmother, were expected to appease the men in their lives in exchange for protection and safety, she witnessed women taking care of themselves and instead of being protected by their partners, be abused by them. She shares that both her mother and grandmother experienced physical violence from their partners and that they also experienced another form of violence through their partners not financially contributing to the household or being present to care for their children. She talks about how she has experienced her husband's dominance in their relationship and the difficulty of pursuing her own dreams and maintaining her relationship with him, but also shares that she has worked hard to educate him about the importance of dismantling harmful gender norms, especially for future generations. While Shama's sense of independence has been fragile due to the pressure placed on her by her family to live up to particular expectations, she narrates her commitments to pursuing her passion for "doing something bigger" for the world, creating a path for herself.

Both Irene and Shama demonstrate how navigating expectations requires a great deal of invention, as both participants narrated a desire for independence while maintaining a sense of interdependence. In Irene's case, her struggle to care for herself and her children made her independent, sharing that the only person whose opinion she cares about now is her own. She left Guyana on her own to "escape" her grief and seek a different future for herself and her daughters. As she narrates this story, she focuses on the individual choices she made that allowed her to eventually bring her daughters over to the U.S., to become financially stable, and to later purchase her own home. She credits her hard work, compassion, and respect for others for helping her succeed in achieving her goals in life. At the same time, she shares the importance of her relationships to her sense of self: the impact that her husband's death had on her, the support

strangers gave her when she first migrated, and the joy of watching her daughters and grandchildren grow up to be strong and outspoken. While her belief in a higher power motivated her to not “wait for things to come” to her and instead manifest the things she prayed for, her spirituality also required surrender. Irene spoke about the importance of feeling like someone was watching over her and how this sense of being protected by a higher power allowed for her to take risks and make difficult choices.

Shama’s sense of interdependence emerged from her sense of responsibility to pursue the career she was passionate about in order to redefine success for future generation. While her family reinforced the importance of financial success so that future generations will have the opportunities that previous generations did not, Shama also draws on her own experiences of being denied opportunities based on her gender and wants to intervene into breaking a different cycle. Like her family members, she wants to make things better for the next generation and sees her role as shifting attitudes in her community around gender so that future generations can have more agency and autonomy over their lives. Both participants reject the idea of women as passive and dependent, yet also demonstrate a sense of shared responsibility to their communities and a commitment to the legacies they will live behind.

### **Karen, Sarah, and Liloutie**

#### ***Karen, 24, she/her***

Karen, Sarah, and Liloutie gathered around the audio recorder propped on a pile of books in the interview room. On this day in February, the space was cold, so Karen took out two large comforters from a closet that they layered on top of each other as they shared their stories. Karen volunteered to be the first one in the group to be interviewed, with Sarah and Liloutie taking turns to ask her questions.

Karen starts off sharing that she was born in Trinidad and migrated to New York at the age of seven. She is a dancer and singer studying architectural technology. She grew up between Barrackpore, a small village where her dad's family lived, and her maternal grandmother's home in central Trinidad which was more middle-class but surrounded by sugar plantations and farms. She describes Barrackpore as a "village of people that was all of our family, or we pretend that was our family. It was either a blood relation or we made them a blood relation". Her home in Barrackpore was surrounded by farmland, and she recalls waking up in the morning to her grandmother's voice yelling for her and her sister, four years older than her, to get fresh cow's milk. She remembers the time she spent with her grandparents fondly, getting lost in her grandmother's garden, sitting in between the crops eating green peas while her grandmother called for her. She would find her grandmother only so that she could remove the worms from the vegetables she would find. She would watch her grandfather fall asleep in his hammock, waiting until he drifted into sleep before scaring him or stealing his cane to throw into the bushes, after which he would stumble out of his hammock to retrieve it. Her older sister would wake up early in the morning to bathe their dogs, take care of the chicken and ducks, and wash their clothes.

The women of her village, including her mom, built a team of women that would organize clean-ups and plant crops along the road. Every week, they would pick someone to cook. They would walk to that person's house and cook duck, drink, and eat together. She says, "They just had each other's back all the time if you needed just like a grain, if you needed someone to cook. That's one way they would all get along, especially if their husbands were out."

Liloutie then asks her how old she was when she came to the U.S. and what her experience was like migrating. Karen shares that when she left, she was fleeing domestic violence but too young to know at the time. She says, “I knew that mom and dad had these horrible fights, that my sister would take me and leave me at my uncle’s house..at that time I didn’t realize just exactly why mommy left for three months.” Karen’s mother migrated to New York first, holding the passports of everyone in Karen’s family so that no one would come after her while she secured a place for them to stay. Karen and her sister were left with their grandmother until Karen’s mother sent for them three months later. Karen sees her grandmother and her aunt as major figures in her life, as they financially and emotionally supported her mother to leave. During those three months, Karen’s father would call her mother asking her to give him another chance, to fly to New York with her and her sister, but at the time, she had no idea. “I thought we were going on a trip”, she said. Because she was young, she adjusted quickly. She remembers just being happy to be with her mother again. “I think it was difficult, but I didn’t know that yet”, she said.

Now that she’s older, she says she able to decipher domestic violence in her community in Trinidad. “Even when my mom and dad would fight and there would be blood shed, people still kind of expected her to take care of our house.” She attributes this to the idea that women are an extension of the home and only valued for their ability to maintain the illusion of a happy household. She talks about how she has witnessed women be denied of opportunities to make their own money, limiting their ability to be independent. “My mom, she tried her best to do any little side work. She would be cutting grass at the side of the street sometimes in Trinidad just to be like, I have extra money, you know?”

After sharing this, Sarah asked Karen whether she saw any changes in the expectations placed on women when she migrated to Richmond Hill, a predominantly Indo-Caribbean neighborhood in Queens. Karen shared that her father actually followed her, her sister, and her mother to New York so her mother continued to experience domestic violence despite her efforts to flee. She says:

“People still, they are bringing that mentality from Guyana and Trinidad like, oh, don’t see anything. Neighbors don’t get involved. That’s a man and his wife’s problem. And that just right now bothers me because its like, someone could be getting killed, you know, why did they still have that mentality? So it just showed me that because we move across seas doesn’t mean our mentality is going to move too.”

She says that it’s up to us to change that mentality wherever we go and expresses gratitude for Indo-Caribbean groups advocating for survivors and women in the community who are able to offer empathy and understanding for why her mother left her father. “I see now in the later years we’re getting that voice and it’s building stronger as the years go by in the Indo-Caribbean community over here.” She acknowledges that her mother didn’t have these resources when she was experiencing domestic violence, and that if she had, it’s possible that she would have left earlier in her life. When her mother left her father, she shares that her life changed drastically:

“Growing up I would, I would say 50% of my childhood was literally holding back dad from like hitting my mom..It was seeing my mom like run for her life or hit him back or try to just be alive and stay alive. It's like, why was I seeing that as a child? You know? And after they split, it was just, I don't need to think about that anymore. I don't need to be worried if dad’s going to kill mom today. I don't need to be worried about my mom

anymore. It was more of um, just go to school. It was do your homework, like priorities changed. I didn't need to, the things that I was worrying about was more childlike, you know, like what am I going to color in class today? Rather than like, oh, do I need to stay home from school today because dad might like kill mom or beat her, you know, so it was like, it changed drastically in that way. It also hurt because I wasn't seeing my dad as much, so I missed him and he was calling. He was like, where are you? He wanted to know our location and as a child I knew what he was trying to do and it, so just being away from that also changed me, but it brought a sense of peace and it brought a sense of stability that I had that I never had before.”

She goes on to share that she believes there is a misrepresentation that women aren't strong enough or that it's their fault that they're in abusive relationships. She says, “I don't think any woman ever wakes up one day and says, I want to be abused. I want to be in a toxic relationship..I think that a misrepresentation is just, we're inviting what comes into our lives..I think that's something that people need to think about when they think about, oh, why am I not in this situation but that woman is? It's because this person came into her life, unfortunately, it's not because of karma or anything. I think that we need to understand that women are strong and resilient, but they need help. I can tell you that 100% all of us would choose to be happy.”

Here, Karen insists on the resilience and strength of women but emphasizes the importance of understanding that strong and resilient women also need help. By making these two statements together, she refuses to deny survivors of their strength despite the support they might need to imagine and build better lives for themselves. Like many of the other participants of the project, Karen shared that religion has helped her heal from the trauma she has experienced as a result of witnessing domestic violence. Before her parents split up, she

experienced religion as something she was expected to practice as she witnessed her grandmother sing *bhajans*<sup>2</sup> every day and was called to sit for *puja*<sup>3</sup> with her. As she grew older, she says it saved her life. “For my mental health, coming to temple just helps me be happy. It helps me have faith in something, something that I feel is greater than me. Like before we came into this room, I was meditating because I didn’t feel like I was strong enough to be here today. I was having a hard day. So religion just helps me on those hard days. Knowing that they, something or someone out there has your back.”

Now, Karen is working to undo the trauma she has experienced. She says, “people don’t tell you this, but when you’re undoing trauma you have to relive it first. Which, right now, I’m going through hell with that.” In working to heal her relationship with her father, she shares that it’s brought up a lot of resentment to process the harm he caused. She says she’s been planning to speak to him, and she wants to do it soon. She wants to know what his mindset was, to “see if he can be a man that no longer thinks that this is okay.” She recognizes how hard this work is, and that she feels conflicted often between wishing bad upon him, experience hate and rage towards him, and feeling sorry for him. She realizes that she’s not in a place of healing yet to be over what happened, as she continues to dream about what happened, and experience shock that he could enact this kind of violence on her mother. She often talks to her mother about it, trying to look for answers. “It’s so hard to kind of hate someone that you favored as a child”, she says.

She is still learning about the extent of the harm through her sister and mother, as she was too young to understand a lot of it while it was happening. She says, “a lot of the time I try to

<sup>2</sup> *Bhajan* is a Sanskrit word meaning “singing to glorify God.” It is also the name of a Hindu genre of devotional songs and hymns.

<sup>3</sup> *Puja* is derived from the Dravidian word *pu* (“flower”). In its simplest form, *puja* usually consists of making an offering of flowers or fruit to an image of a god.



write about it, I've started to try and go into therapy sessions because I think that's a place of healing that sometimes we all need to go to..I think that that's helpful too. I think also just speaking to that person about it. If it feels safe to you, maybe writing down questions that you want them to answer.” In speaking about her own healing journey, she lifts up the complexities of holding abusers accountable when they are part of our communities, our families, and people who we want to believe can change.

***Sarah, 19, she/her***

The youngest participant of the project, Sarah, was the next to share her story. She introduces herself as an Indo-Guyanese American woman who grew up in Kew Gardens and Glen Oaks, Queens. Her parents migrated from Guyana separately; her father, barely able to read or write migrated at thirteen, and her mother came in her early twenties and began working as a babysitter. Her father had the chance to go to school in the U.S. because he migrated while he was still of school-age, in contrast to her mother who migrated later in her adult life. She notices an educational gap between the men and women in her family which has been present in all of the generations in her family that she can remember. Her grandmother was taken out of school at eight by her mother so that she could help take care of her siblings. Up until the point, she had grown up with her grandparents, not having much contact with her mother and father as they were farmers in a different area of Guyana. “When they finally called for her and took her out of school, it was because it was time for her to work”, Sarah shares. Her grandmother had an arranged marriage at 19, and Sarah remembers her sharing with her that she didn't want to get married at the time, but her parents left her no choice.

Sarah grew up spending her days in Kew Gardens with her brother and extended family. Her grandmother had eleven kids, so she would spend a lot of time at family members' houses.

She remembers her grandfather babysitting them with his cane, “wielding it very strongly”. Her brother and her younger male cousin played a big role in her youth, as they went on adventures together and spent a lot of time outside in the yard. She recalls that her two Indo-Caribbean friends from school also shared the experience of going outside, sitting on the porch, and “enjoying the wind”. She says:

“We always made use of what was there. I remember my cousins were over once, and my neighbors were also there and they were South Indian, and we would all just congregate in the backyard..I guess both of our families had this thing about having a garden every summer, we must have one. So we had tomatoes, karaila, bora, all growing, cucumbers, different spices. The eldest girl would take this knife and she would just chop through the jungle and we would follow her around...everyone went to the backyard, we had a hammock also in the backyard. Every summer we would put it up and either sleep or just swing a lot in it. And it was interesting because it was also a place for us to congregate intergenerationally. My grandma would come, take a little fire, a little stove in the backyard, start making curry. My grandfather would go with his weekly duty of cleaning up and emptying the pond in order to keep the mosquitos away.”

At a certain point in her childhood, she remembers being treated differently from her brother based on expectations around the kinds of activities were appropriate for young girls to engage in versus young boys. She remembers singing in a *kirtan*<sup>4</sup> group with him until the boys and girls were separated into two classes: the girls were expected to play harmonium, while the boys were expected to play *tablas*. She witnessed her brother be encouraged to play different

<sup>4</sup> *Kirtan* is a Sanksrit word meaning “praise” or “eulogy where chanting is carried out alongside instruments such as the harmonium or *tabla*.

<sup>5</sup> *Tabla* is an instrument consisting of two small drums of slightly different size and shape.

types of instruments, and because she didn't receive the same encouragement, she didn't take as much of an initiative as he did. In recalling the messages she received from her uncle, she says:

“He definitely didn't tell me not to play the guitar, but it was something that was in my mind, like just swimming around. And then when it came to me actually trying to perform it, I didn't really put as much effort into it as efficiently as my brother did because I thought I was not really capable of it.”

Her brother was the one who started encouraging her to play more, and she says, “it was nice having some sort of outside force encouraging you, and now I actually take lessons in college.” Another message she recalls being socialized with was the idea that women and girls have to hold themselves to a higher standard than boys, and in particular, that women and girls should not be loud. Being loud, she says, was something that she was never given the opportunity to be as a child. She was always very quiet and reserved, saying “it was definitely possible for me to have more of a voice, if I was permitted to have more of a voice.”

She also recalls being told as a young person who was very successful at cross country and track “every single week to quit the team” because “you're sort of losing an aspect of your femininity if you're running”. She remembers competing and coming back to tell her male family members about her successes, much to their disapproval. At the same time, if she did well at a race, they would be proud of her, so she received contradictory messages about what was appropriate for girls to do and under what circumstances. Liloutie asks her whether she believes change is possible, and Sarah shares that with the rise of organizations like Jahajee Sisters and other gender justice organizations, she sees that there is more awareness about the issues that plague women in the community that had previously been normalized. She has been able to witness change in the span of her lifetime, sharing:

“I guess through each generation I do see a difference, I guess compared to my grandma’s generation, my mom had more of an education and compared to my mom, I now have more of an education and I feel like that will continue.”

As she reflects on the opportunities she has been given that previous generations were denied of, she is hopeful that with each generation, more change will come.

***Liloutie, 42, she/her***

Liloutie grew up in Guyana until the age of nine, when she moved to the U.S. She has lived all over New York City; Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. She also practices Hinduism. She remembers her time in Guyana as very idyllic, living in a fishing village and growing up with her aunt who she “draws a lot of strength from” as a major figure in her life. She says, “Anytime I face a really, really hard moment in my life, or that moment where I feel like a total failure, I can still hear her voice in my head telling me not to worry and that everything will work out. To have somebody, I feel like on the other side looking out for me is what keeps me going and gets me through the tough times.”

For the first five years she lived in the U.S. she was undocumented and remembers those years as some of the worst of her life. Her mother was a teacher back in Guyana, but when she migrated, she became a babysitter. Her father was an accountant and became a taxi driver. “They had to kind of start over”, she says. She admires her father in particular for how he has “completely refused to assimilate”, pointing out the distance she observes between new immigrants and those who have been in the U.S. for a number of years and forgotten what it feels like to “just newly come to the United States”. She says her parents got married really young “before they even realized what marriage really was”, but they were following the cultural expectation to get an arranged marriage, have children, and work hard to be able to provide for

their families. She says “no one ever pulled them aside and said they, you know, you can change that. You can do it different.” She also goes onto share more about what her relationship was like with her parents growing up:

“I wasn’t told, oh, I love you and you’re this amazing person at an early age. I was never told that. It was like, I came home with a 98 and I thought I did such a good job. I was the only kid in the class that got a 98 on the test. I showed it to my dad or my mom and it was like, what? What is this? And I was over the moon about it, but it was like, big deal, try again, get 100 next time.”

Here, Liloutie shares the high expectations she was held to from a young age and the lack of positive affirmation she received her parents, even when she exceeded her own expectations. She considers herself resilient for her determination and will to survive, sharing how her experiences into adolescence and early adulthood built her sense of strength. She attended an elite liberal arts institution for college, an experience she describes as shaping her into the person she is today. She says, “it exposed me to privilege that I never even could imagine existed”, having transitioned from a predominantly Black and Latinx high school to a predominantly white institution. She said that it was a “total culture shock”, and a “story of learning how to survive but also thrive and get through something that was really difficult.”

Soon after finishing her undergraduate degree, Liloutie got married and has now been married for almost nineteen years. She has three children: two sons and a daughter. As a parent, she says she is “trying to clear a pathway that hasn’t been cleared before” by raising her children with compassion and positive reinforcement that she didn’t receive when she was growing up. She points to how the affection her own parents got was limited because her father was one of eight, and her mother was one of eleven. From a young age, Liloutie always dreamed of having

kids and knew that even if she didn't get married, she wanted to have at least two children. She recalls that her college friends saw her as a "total feminist" and a "rebel" and were surprised to see her get married as young as she did. She says, "I'm still in here, you know. I'm still, I'm raising three kids, took a lot out of me, but I'm still in here. I still want to be a trailblazer. I want people to feel the challenge to change the world." She says that in raising her two sons and her daughter, she still makes mistakes, and shares a story about a recent interaction she had with her daughter:

"I have to share this story because it happened recently. My older son has just been having a tough time in school, so of course he gets the bulk of the attention. So I started to talk with my daughter recently and I said, you know, I could really use your advice. I feel like I'm messing up. What is something I can do or change and she's like, first of all, I don't even want to talk about this. And she really laid into me and not in a, I hate your guts kind of way. But in a total like, I'm sorry, but if you want to talk about him, I don't want to talk about him because all week, you have not asked me one day how my day was. You don't ask me how I'm doing. You haven't asked me anything. And as she was talking, I remembered I had had the same exact conversation with my mom and my mom in her in response to my bringing it up, said something like, well, no one asks me about my day and it was like I was reliving that moment in my head and I'm like, oh, what have I done? I've turned into my mom in this subconscious way. I'm perpetuating the same behavior that I thought, I thought that I was just an evolved person."

Her advice for other parents is to be forgiving of yourself, let things go, and acknowledge that you have to change. She says, "You have to set the example and just work

hard at it and know that you're not going to be perfect at it, but don't give up. Tell your children every day how amazing they are. If your kids are blunt and honest with you, you're doing something right because they're standing up to authority. You don't want them to coast along and do what's expected of them. You want them to challenge everything. So I think if my kids are challenging me and questioning me, everything, everyday I'm doing something right."

She goes on to say that parents "have the ability to change the narrative and to change the cultural dynamics of how you raise your kids." She has also tried to change these dynamics deliberately with other women in her family like her sisters and sister-in-law, even though she knows it will be slow-paced. She grows passionate talking about the change she wants to see in her larger community, especially in regard to sexual violence and exploitation of young girls. She tells a story that she heard in the salon about a 13-year old girl who was being raped by her mother's boyfriend and the framing of the story as it was told to her as the young girl "seducing" her mother's boyfriend. Karen asks her about whether she thinks it has become normalized for young girls to be blamed for the abuse they face, and she agrees, saying that it happens because of the "pervasive secret-keeping that is happening in our community." She says that these narratives are learned, so it is our duty to unlearn them. When it comes time to have hard conversations, she wants us to push through because "we can't remain invisible or silent about our experience."

### **Reclaiming Joy and Shaping Girlhood**

Karen, Sarah, and Liloutie's stories each explored their childhoods and memories of patriarchal violence that shaped their early experiences. What is interesting about their narratives is that all three participants remember an idyllic, carefree childhood before their sense of safety and security was fragmented by a moment of witnessing violence, a lecture about not being

“good enough”, or a feeling of being treated differently based on their gender. After this moment, each participant became aware of what it meant to be a “good girl” and the distance between who they were and who “good girls” were. Their power is in how they have each tried to reclaim the sense of joy that was stolen from them at an early age, failing to accept that those moments should define them forever or determine their lives.

Karen’s story is one of resilience and knowledge gained through experience. When she migrated from Trinidad to the U.S. at the age of seven, she was fleeing domestic violence but was too young to know at the time. She remembers that her parents had horrible fights and that she and her sister would be left at family member’s homes for long periods of time without seeing her mother, but she didn’t understand why. When Karen and her sister joined her mother in the U.S., she remembers the happiness she felt in being reunited with her and says that it was difficult, but “did not know it yet”. In each of these statements, Karen demonstrates how time became ruptured in witnessing violence at a young age, able to identify what she was feeling at the time but only coming to understand the details of what happened later on in life. Before her mother fled, she says that half of her childhood was spent holding her father back from hitting her mother, watching her mother “run for her life or hit him back”, and “try to just be alive”. When her mother left, she could be a child again and find joy in deciding what she would color in class instead of worrying about her mother’s safety.

At 24 years-old, Karen recalls joyful moments of her childhood: the playfulness of getting lost in her grandmother’s garden, the surprise at finding worms in a fruit she picked, and the mischief of stealing her grandfather’s cane as he would drift to sleep. She shares that she believes everyone would choose happiness if they could and is working to heal her younger self through religion, therapy, and talking with her mother and sister about what happened. She is



also working to repair her relationship with her father, allowing herself to feel anger towards him, but also love and affection for the father she lost at a young age.

Sarah recalls idyllic moments of her childhood as well, summers spent between Queens and Long Island with her extended family and children in her neighborhood. She remembers spending a lot of time outside with her family, sitting on the porch “enjoying the wind”. This example in particular suggests a sense of peace and serenity in her childhood and among her family. She describes imaginative games she would play in her backyard, embarking on adventures with her South Indian neighbor who would “chop through the jungle” while the younger children followed. The garden was a space for her family to gather intergenerationally over a pot of curry. She describes these scenes with vivid detail and memory, locating each person in her family in a particular activity: her grandmother over the stove, her grandfather cleaning the pond.

She shares the story of her grandmother being taken out of school at the age of eight to take care of her siblings, not having much contact with her mother and father and being raised by her grandparents until she was called to work. She recalls her grandmother sharing even though didn't want to agree to an arranged marriage at the age of nineteen, her parents left her no choice. This story that she has inherited about Indo-Caribbean girlhood suggests a few things: Indo-Caribbean girls of her grandmother's time were allowed to be children, until they had to be caregivers. Sarah story is one filled with community, imagination, and adventure, until she witnessed the ways in which she started being treated differently from her brother. While both of them started taking music classes and playing instruments together, her brother was encouraged to continue while she was made to feel that she wasn't capable of being successful at music. She also started receiving messages that “good girls” are quiet and submissive, and that they should

not draw attention to themselves (through music, sports, etc.). She shares that it was her brother who encouraged her to start playing harmonium again and that she now takes lessons in college. In some ways, this step allowed Sarah to return to a time when she and her brother moved together with the quiet rhythm of the Queens summers of her childhood, before they were taught to play different instruments.

Liloutie's story is one of restoration, as she is "carving a new path" to give her children what she felt was missing in her relationship with her parents. She migrated at the age of nine with her parents and was undocumented for the first five years of living in the U.S. She remembers those first nine years in Guyana fondly, living in a fishing village with her aunt who taught her strength and how to believe in herself. After migrating, her parents had to start their lives over in the U.S. and held high expectations for Liloutie. She shares that her parents rarely told her that they loved her or that they were proud of her, and attributes this to the ways they were raised by their parents. She talks about how her grandparents' generation were preoccupied with meeting basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter for families larger than they could support, so "the affection they received was limited". She also shared that she felt her parents got married too young to know what marriage was, and that their perception of their role as parents was primarily to work hard to provide financially for their children.

Liloutie shared a great deal of reflection on the type of parent she wants to be so that her children don't experience the type of loneliness she did as a young person. Her passion for and commitment to raising children who challenge her and push back on her comes through in her narrative, allowing her to locate her own parenting mistakes within the ones she saw her mother make. Liloutie takes her children's challenges as gifts, evidence of their strength and belief in themselves. Their ways of challenging her unsettle illusions that intergenerational cycles are

broken overnight; they happen as parents admit their mistakes, and commit to being better for their children, but also for their younger selves.

### **Made and Jayasri**

#### ***Made, 22, they/she***

Made and Jayasri never met before they sat down for their interview, and the oral history sister circle series was Made's first introduction to the Jahajee Sisters space. Made uses she or they pronouns, depending on who they're around. They are mixed-race; their mother is Indo-Caribbean and their father is Black and Indo-Caribbean. Both of their parents were born in Guyana, and they were born in New York. In reflecting on their experiences as a mixed-race person in New York, they say that they "don't get a lot of racist street harassment", but that they are racialized in ways where they have been the victim of Islamophobic hate slurs. They say that the biggest issues they've had with racism have been when they were at their undergraduate institution, "being around a lot of very wealthy, elitist white students who just don't know better but when you try to teach them, are very resistant to it." They talk about experiencing racism from both their peers at school, but also professors which resulted in an unhealthy learning environment. During their senior year, the campus police was militarized with automatic weapons, bulletproof riot gear, and unmarked police cars, which heightened their sense of being under surveillance as they and other students of color they knew experienced being stopped and questioned by campus police.

Made now works for a housing discrimination non-profit organization in Long Island City. They live on their own in an apartment with roommates, and Jayasri notes that Made seems very independent. Made affirms this, sharing that everyone in their family jokes around about how independent they are because they're "not around a lot". They share that they had to take on a lot of responsibility growing up as they had to "emotionally raise" their sister in ways that their

parents weren't able to because they were working all of the time. "I felt like I had to grow up quite fast compared to most people", Made says, reflecting on how not getting along with their parents made them want to "get out of the house as soon as possible".

Jayasri asks Made whether there were messages they were taught growing up that no longer serve them. Made reflects on how their mom had very strict ideas about gender roles, but how they also received mixed messages from her because until they were eight or nine years old, Made says, "My mom very much raised me to be a tomboy". Made's mom encouraged them to hang out with their older brother, "rolling around in the dirt and playing football with them". As they got older, they witnessed their mother impose gendered expectations onto them, expecting Made to act feminine and take on more household chores. They say:

"It definitely impacted the way I was allowed to act and speak in the house. She definitely pushed me kind of be more quiet, not be more outspoken around the house, to sit up properly and everything..it was difficult not because, I don't think at any point I had internalized any of it. I don't think at any point I was just like, 'Alright, well I'm a girl and this is how I'm supposed to be.' I always very much had the mindset of 'I don't agree with this. I don't think this is how I should be.'"

Made has also witnessed how women in the community are expected to take care of everyone else, no matter what age they're at or what their relation is to other people. "If anything, it should be if you're talking about taking care of each other, then why aren't men stepping in those roles to be taking care of other people? How come every time I walk into any family function or whatever in a house, it's all the women in a kitchen and all the men are sitting around drinking a beer, talking to each other?", Made says.

Jayasri asks Made if they think that their mother was trying to prepare them for a particular kind of role, and Made agrees, saying that now that they are older and have the space to reflect on their childhood and relationship to their mother, they realize that their mother was trying to protect them, despite witnessing their mother be very independent and strong herself. While Made's father's side of the family are very supportive about outspoken women, Made shares that their mother's side of the family is conservative and traditional, so their extended family expected them to be more quiet and subservient. "I've always been a loud person, especially with my younger sister. The two of us will laugh for hours very loudly and I remember being at my grandparents' house and my grandpa getting really angry with us and yelling at us that we needed to be quiet because we were making too much noise for girls." Made notices the difference between how they were treated compared to their brother, as he has gotten away with "a lot of serious harmful things" and the family's response to him has always been affirmative of their love for him. On the other hand, Made experiences that any time they make a mistake, they get reprimanded harshly. More recently, their brother has been a source of support for them, as any time they try to defend themselves it is seen as rude or impolite. "There is really no way for me to advocate for myself in the moment, so what I do now, I just don't really interact with them", Made says of their extended family.

Jayasri then asks Made how they digest/process it when they are policed and reprimanded by people in their family. They say that they are an emotional person, that "crying feels good. It's a way for me to recognize that yes, this is something really horrible that happened to me and I have a right to be very upset about this." They remind themselves of the people in their life who accept them. "I think it definitely helps that literally everywhere we go, my dad and my grandpa

are always like, this is Made. She's the smartest out of all the grandkids and she's gonna go do all these amazing things."

In speaking about their struggles with their gender identity, they share that "it is really rough to be a woman in the world, or I guess perceived as a woman". They say:

"When I feel like I'm not being listened to or I'm being treated differently because I'm a woman, that frustrates me so much. It makes me really angry because I know my worth. I know that I'm an intelligent person and I don't like people dismissing me. I don't like it especially when men talk to me in a very gendered way, so when they're like "ma'am" or "miss" or just like "this lady". You know the way that they change even their body language when a woman is in a room? It's really difficult to describe but they act like very different around women than they do around men that I feel like disrespects me because they don't see me as a colleague, they see me as a woman that they need to cater their behavior towards--or other things where I'm expected to cater my behavior towards other people."

They note that these expectations extend beyond their family to every space they occupy—at work, on the street. They say that they push back "as gently as possible" because they understand that their position, wherever they are, is not always secure. In reflecting on the expectation that women are supposed to take care of everyone else, especially in the home, Made discusses how they find themselves defending their younger cousins when they're called on to do domestic labor. Made says, "I'm just like, they're in the other room hanging out. Why are you calling them in here because you need something from the kitchen? Your daughters are not your slaves." While they recognize that they have established a reputation in their family as being "the

black sheep”, they also work to support younger generations of women and GNC people in their family who are being pushed into a similar role that they were as a young person.

***Jayasri, 65, she/her***

Jayasri was born and raised in Guyana and migrated to New York City at the age of seventeen to join her mother and younger sister, who migrated after her sister was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. Her remaining six siblings migrated the year after. As the eldest of eight children, she was the “chief cook and bottle washer”, which she says was hard but because it was normalized, she “took it”. Made asks her how the transition from Guyana to New York was for her, and she says it was one of the most difficult things of her life. She says:

“In Guyana, even though life was not easy, it wasn’t hard either. It was kind of more idyllic because of course I was much younger and very protected. My youth protected me. So coming to New York from a little town where, you know, I rode my bike to school, we didn’t have too many things like cars. We still had donkey carts and horse carts, so walking into New York with its massive buildings, subway systems, it was just so dizzying and it took me a very long time to adjust. I longed for home for a very, very long time.”

Made asks her to talk more about what it was like to grow up in Guyana, and she complicates this picture, sharing that her memories of the time are mixed because her father was an alcoholic who “when he got drunk, was very cruel”. She says, “he would beat my mom very badly, he would beat us up too and being the oldest, I got a lot of the brunt of those beatings. The first three of us of the eight really received a lot of those blows.” She says, “for that reason it was not good”, but feels lucky that she grew up in a community in Guyana where people were looking out for each other. “When I got beaten up, the looks I would get from them is just

empathy and sympathy, you know, that kind of thing. No one judged me for it.” Made asks Jayasri whether she thinks that the community she had was the primary reason why she was able to survive the abuse she suffered. Jayasri responds with affirmation, sharing that her relatives were always a bike ride away, especially in the year after her mother and sister migrated when she was living at home with her father and remaining siblings. As the eldest, she was put in charge of the labor that her mother had been responsible for. She says, “I went to school, but I got up in the morning, I cooked, come home, I got dinner for them, I iron their clothes, I wash their clothes. I went to market and you know, did everything that a mother would do and still went to school.” As a daughter, she noted that there was favoritism towards her brothers. “The boys got to go camping, they got to go swimming, they got to go to the movies. You can’t go because you’re a girl, you know, you have to stay home.” She shares that one of the messages she received clearly as a woman was that she had a certain place in society. Made asks Jayasri if she resents any part of her childhood, or how she feels reflecting back on that time. Jayasri shares:

“The only part I resent is, and it’s not even a resenting. As you grow older, what happens is you begin to understand. And I understood that my dad was a sick man, that alcoholism is an illness, that he couldn’t handle it. That’s the way he medicated himself. And then whatever it is he couldn’t take, he took it out on his wife and his children. And that’s the only misgiving. I mean, if things had been different, I don’t know. I would have been a different person too. So you begin to think, if Dad was hunky dory Daddy, you know, pleasant all the time, what would that have...how would I have turned out? Would I have striven for excellence, or would I have it made, you know, I don’t know.”



When Jayasri moved to New York, she remembers being overwhelmed by how new everything felt to her. “A simple thing, I remember going into a soda fountain, back then in the 1970s they used to call them, and the guy gave me a straw with a paper over it. We never had that in Guyana, I looked at this thing going, what the heck do I do with this? And it’s small things. There were big things too. The biggest thing was the racism, you know, non-white versus white in this neighborhood.. so coming here at the time that I did, you have to protect yourself, take care of yourself.” Without her community to support her, she also took steps to protect herself from her father. The first time her father hit her in New York, she called the police, had him arrested, and went before a judge. It was 1972, and she had a black eye after being hit with a phone. She remembers being prepped to go in front of the judge and being asked, “why don’t you feel sorry for him?” She stood her ground, refusing to put up with it anymore after being put in the hospital twice in Guyana.

The judge ended up giving him a warning, telling her father, “if you love your family, you’re not going to do this again. If you do it again and have to come here again, you’ll have to move.” Jayasri didn’t stay around for long and left her parent’s house in New York at nineteen. She says, “If I didn’t leave, I would have been messed up. Because you know, the thing is with this sort of lifestyle is that, when mom got defensive, she too had a mouth. Especially when coming to New York, she had more strength, more power and here she got to talk back. So you have these two people just bickering back and forth. So I just had to leave.”

Made asks Jayasri what it felt like to leave, and she says “Liberating. I had my own life. I was very poor, poor as a church mouse. I think I was homeless at one point for a little bit, couple of days. But um, you know, it was mine, and it was peaceful.” When she left, she remembers her brother expressing repeatedly that he never knew how much she did until she left. She says that

they resented that she left, but that she had to protect her own sanity. Today, she has a good relationship with most of them, except her younger brother closest to her in age because he had to “pick up the pieces” after she left. She also says her relationship with her parents got better when she left, especially her relationship with her father. She continued to visit him and bring him gifts, even as her own daughter questioned why she maintained a relationship with him after all the abuse she suffered from him. She says, “That’s my father. That’s my dad..I always believe in humanity that when we know better, we do better.” Eventually, she moved in with her boyfriend who became her husband and they finished school together, and “life just went on”. She didn’t allow her daughter to spend much time with her grandparents, especially on her own. She remembers being guarded with both sides of the family, including with her daughter’s paternal grandparents. She would hear comments from her family members that she didn’t trust them with her. She says, “but I never really answered their questions. I had to protect myself and I had to protect my daughter.”

When Jayasri became a mother, she says it was one of the highlights of her life. She says, “I got to, I would say for the first 11 years I got to live over, I got to redesign my childhood. Just watching her play and draw and paint and be happy. You absorb those and kind of relive almost as though I did myself over. I know it’s kind of hard to even imagine, but it gave me that chance to repattern my own abusive childhood.” Jayasri demonstrates how motherhood allowed for her to heal from the trauma she experienced as a child by witnessing first-hand what a childhood without violence looks like. She “absorbed” the happiness she witnessed her daughter experience as a child, pointing to new ways of thinking about what travels between generations beyond trauma. Joy can also be passed down—and up—and ripple outwards. Made goes on to ask

Jayasri if she ever had a conversation with her daughter about what she experienced in her family. Jayasri responded, sharing:

“Her grandfather’s been gone a long time, but I think she knew. I remember one time I was taking her over. I don’t know if he was still around, and she said, are we going to visit grandma critique? You know, grandma’s always criticizing, criticizing. And then, I realized she understood. I don’t think I should go and say, you know what, this is why I did so and so. But if she asks me, every once in a while she does ask and I’ll give her the answers... Sometimes we protect a young person. For instance, my mother’s mother abandoned her when she was a baby. But she didn’t know that, she got a whole different crooked story that they told her so that she wouldn’t feel abandoned or you know, not loved. And it wasn’t until her mother was gone, my grandmother died in her nineties, that she came to understand her mother gave her up. My mother, for part of her life grew up in an orphanage. Her dad was an alcoholic as well but he wasn’t abusive, but he couldn’t take care of her. They don’t tell you until you reach a certain age where they feel you can handle it. So it’s not a matter of hiding, but a matter of appropriateness as to, when do you reveal this? When should this person know, or a community know?”

Made ends the interview asking Jayasri if she misses Guyana. She says, “More and more I’m beginning to, yes. I was in Guyana for a long, long time. Guyana was a state of mind for me and even now, sometimes when I’m going to bed, I imagine myself back there in a safe space. That’s what it was. It was safe and I felt safe. Even though my dad was all that. I still felt safe. We slept with our doors and windows open, we didn’t have telephones. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard this, but if something happened to you three miles away from home, they know before you and you felt safe. My drunk dad fell one day off his bicycle and the next thing we know we

have like four guys bringing him home. It's the safety aspect. Yeah, I miss that. There's no where in the world that's like that anymore. I can't imagine." She talks about going back with her daughter in 2007 and her feelings of isolation as everyone she knew was no longer there. She says that she wouldn't go back to the city because of how much it has changed, but she would go "just to feel the earth beneath my feet, to smell it and you know, to see the wildlife." Made asks her if she's felt this type of safety in New York and Jayasri replies "Yes, and that comes with contentment. There's a safety in contentment. I'm not going to get anything, I have everything. But it's also fleeting too, right. If I'm with my daughter and my husband and we're having a good conversation over a good meal, feels food. Feels safe, yeah."

### **Safety and Refusal: Choosing to Leave**

Across Made and Jayasri's narrative emerges a tension that can be found among other stories in this collection: when home is no longer a safe space and safety cannot be redeemed, what comes next? In this section, I look at how both Made and Jayasri choose refusal over submission, particularly in relationship to leaving abusive homes and families that did not provide them safety.

Made shares early in their story that their family considers them independent as they are "not around a lot" and moved out from their parent's home as soon as they had the opportunity to. They don't share much about what this decision was like for them, how their parents reacted, or any struggles they faced in leaving their home, which might be deliberate. It is possible that their narrative is one of choosing themselves, without reservation or struggle.

As a gender non-conforming person, their reflections on how their mother and extended family expected particular gendered behaviors from them and their rejection of those expectations gives the listener a sense of Made's insistence on being themselves rather than

internalizing what others project on them. Despite being able to reject these expectations, Made refuses a portrayal of themselves as purely resilient, sharing the weight of the responsibility to not only parent themselves, but also their younger sister. Made shares that when they are reprimanded by family, crying helps them to recognize that their feelings are legitimate and that they have a right to be upset about the pain that they have experienced. They shared that for some time, they became quieter and less outspoken around the house in response to their mother's expectations, following the rules imposed on them despite feeling that they were unfair. Made recognizes that pushing back might take many quieter forms because their position is not always secure. Having the space to reflect back on their childhood now, they realize that their mother was trying to protect them, but it does not stop them from recognizing how harmful gender expectations can be on young people. They continue to defend their younger cousins whenever they can and avoid sharing space with family members that they know do not accept them. They call themselves the "black sheep" of the family, refusing to build community with those who reject them and instead modeling for younger generations how to say no. They refuse to be quiet any longer.

Jayasri's practice of refusal both parallels Made's but is also distinct in how she has made sense of the abuse she faced from her father starting at a young age. Like Made, Jayasri was expected to take care of her siblings as "chief cook and bottle washer" and says that because it was normalized, she accepted her role. She reflects on how she was expected to stay at home while her brothers had the freedom and agency to make their own choices about how and where they spent their time, which she now realizes was gendered. As the oldest child, she also attributes her age to the reason why so much was expected of her and why she faced so much physical abuse from her father. Despite both witnessing domestic violence between her father

and mother and experiencing physical violence herself, she describes her childhood as protected and idyllic because of the community she had in Guyana that empathized with her and supported her through the violence.

In describing how the abuse affected her life, she refuses victimization and shares that she wouldn't be who she was today without her struggles. She also demonstrates a great deal of empathy and understanding for her father, recognizing that he was a "sick man" and that alcohol was "the way that he medicated himself". At the same time, when she moved to New York with her parents and her father hit her for the first time, she refused to accept the abuse anymore. She called the police and had him arrested, despite being shamed in the courts for it. She realized soon after that she couldn't stay with her parents anymore, especially as her mother started to resist her father more, with Jayasri getting caught in the middle. When she left, she says she was liberated, despite having very little resources to survive on her own. Struggling with being homeless and feelings of rejection from her family for having left, she said she had to protect her own sanity. Her choice to leave also improved her relationship with her parents, including her father.

Decades later, she now finds "safety in contentment", realizing that she has everything she needs while also recognizing that safety can be impermanent. Both Jayasri and Made's choice to leave did not mean that they had escaped violence forever, but instead that in a particular time and place, they decided that the space they were in was not serving its purpose of protecting them and keeping them safe and made the decision to find other possibilities. Both participants recognized that there were moments they "could" or "could not" leave; at times, the risks were too great. Feeling like they "could" leave might have meant different things for both Made and Jayasri. For Made, it might have meant leaving with enough resources to move out on

their own and meet their basic needs. For Jayasri, losing the community of support she had in Guyana might have influenced her decision to leave to find new community, isolated as a new immigrant with her parents. For both participants, there was a moment of refusing to accept, and choosing to take the risk to make possible the lives they imagined for themselves despite arriving at that moment in their own ways.

### **Rani, Kushri, and Lotus**

#### ***Rani, 22, she/her***

Rani and Kushri sat down together to interview one another and were later joined by Lotus, who was new to the Jahajee Sisters space. Rani and Kushri knew each other previously from their involvement with Jahajee Sisters and while sitting in the sister circle preparing for their interview, bonded over their love for pharmacy store make-up and ASMR videos on YouTube.

Rani uses she/her pronouns and identifies as Brown, Indo-Caribbean, Guyanese, Indian, and American. She is 22 years-old and was born in New York but grew up in Miami. Kushri starts by asking Rani about whether there is a story from her life she wishes she could tell other Indo-Caribbean women, those who have come before her, those who are in her life, or future generations. Kushri says, “if you could just get into character, just tell your story.” Rani responds saying she wants to tell a story to those before her about education:

“I’d want those before me to know that not only did I graduate from my undergrad and earned a Bachelor’s degree, but I kept going and got my Master’s degree in social work. That it was possible, that it was hard at times, but I had the support of women around me to help me get through that and for those before me, I feel like that was something that was never even possible, never dreamt of.”

She goes on to share that her mother was taken out of school very young, and that she thinks it would be incredible for someone before her to see that she's accomplished so much in education. Kushri asks "I'm just kind of curious, how do you think that your maternal and paternal great-grandfathers would have reacted to you?"

Rani starts with talking about her relationship with her maternal grandfather, who she calls her best friend. Rani and Kushri share that they each have nicknames for their grandfathers, bonding over the playfulness they have been able to share with their grandfathers. Rani says, "I'm one of five of his granddaughters, but him and I have the closest relationship because I call him every day, he knows a lot about my life, and I think the reason he is so open and receptive to what I do is because he was the exact opposite with my mom and he saw what that did. I think with him he realizes now things are so different and things are changing, and he's just supportive, which I feel so lucky to have because I know that other Indo-Caribbean girls in their twenties don't have that." She also acknowledges that she has "checked a lot of the boxes" that he's wanted her to check off, especially around education. "I have my Bachelor's and my Master's and I'm the only person in my family who's done that and so he's like okay, you at least got your education, something I couldn't do, do whatever you want."

She also acknowledges that her grandfather is happy about her partner being Guyanese, and that when she was dating someone who was half-Black and half-Guatemalan, she hid the relationship from her grandparents because she knew that she would "no longer be the favorite". She reflects on how her father didn't feel like he could share stories about Guyana or his life with her previous partner the way he can with her current partner and that it put a strain on the relationship because they never fully accepted him. She says her parents are a lot more open with her younger sister and brother, and she encourages them to date whoever they want and to not



feel restricted around their relationships. Rani's paternal grandfather passed away when she was twelve, and she says she's not sure how he would feel about her decisions, having moved away from her family to live with her partner without being married. "I don't really know, I would hope, but again, who knows".

Kushri asks her to describe some messages she learned as a young person that no longer serve her and how she came to resist those messages. She answers the second part of the question first, saying that she came to resist a lot of the things she had learned growing up when she was around 15 years-old and in an "explosive" relationship. She says that her relationships when she was younger were hard to let go of because it was not normalized for people to have multiple relationships in her community. At that point, she said that she stopped caring about a lot of what the community imposed on her. She says, "I think it was that age when I stepped out of those messages of what will the community think? What will they say about your family, what will they think of how your parents raised you? It was different when it was coming from people who knew me and cared about me truly, but from people who I don't even know who were like, oh my gosh, you're dating that boy? He's so bad, and you're so good! I was like well, I don't care! You don't know him, and you don't know me that well!"

In reflecting on how she has seen her sister handle relationships, both romantic and platonic, she says, "I know that my sister was watching me through all of that and I think that's a bigger reason she feels like she is the strongest most independent seventeen year-old anyone will ever meet. I love that she has the mentality of, well I gave it something but it didn't give me what I needed in return, so it's not serving me and I'm gonna put it away now." For her, she says, "it was like oh, this thing happened but it was okay, keep trying, keep going. Keep giving it whatever it needs to be given until you're broken and dead..I think about how different my life

would have been if I had been as strong and independent as she was. I reflect on those relationships that really affected my life and how I can pinpoint a moment in that really explosive one where I should have just cut it. But I didn't, right? I think about how differently things may have shifted for me if I had that mentality of, oh this happened, and I don't need that, goodbye."

Kushri then asks if there are any stereotypes or misrepresentations of women in her community that she thinks are important to challenge given her own experiences or the experiences of women in her life. Rani says, "sometimes I wonder if I challenge these stereotypes just to be rebellious." She reflects on being at her mother's house for a birthday party and going to get food for herself but asking first if anyone wanted something to drink or eat. Later in the party, someone pointed out that she took out her partner's food, and she says, "In my head I was like, I don't mind taking out his food, and then I was like but do I do it because I don't mind, or do I do it because I have to do it? And I was like, I think it's the first one. Because sometimes I make him take out my food." At the same time, she realizes that there are stereotypes that limit women's agency that are important to speak back to, and that she "combats pretty much everything", especially when she witnesses her parents enforcing patriarchal values onto her sister. She recalls a recent moment when her parents reinforced ideas of menstruation as "unclean", how it affected her sister's ability to participate in a Hindu ritual, and how she resisted the narrative being pushed by her parents. She said:

"I remember last year, I had a full conversation with my mom about my sister being on her period, and I was telling my mom, 'Who cares if she's on her period? Let her light a damn *diya*.' And she was like, 'Oh, but it's unclean.' And I was like, 'Why is it unclean?'"

<sup>6</sup> *Diya* is a small oil lamp, usually made from clay.

Why!’ And she goes, ‘Because!’ And I was like, ‘Don’t because! It’s just unclean because that’s what you think. That’s what people told you. That idea of you can’t do it because someone two million years ago said that. Maybe they were unclean two million years ago because they didn’t have pads, but we have pads now, we have tampons. We have to shift things to accommodate what we have.”

Rani shares that it is often difficult to change her mom and dad’s minds about messages that are ingrained in them and in this case, to convince them of how ideas about menstruation have shifted over time. Kushri ends the interview with asking whether there are ways she has seen or experienced discrimination against women and girls in her family or community and whether she believes change is possible. Rani says that she does believe change is possible, and it starts with women realizing that they don’t have to do what other people tell them they need to. She says, “The only people whose opinion matters to me are mine at the top, and then the people who are always thinking of my best interests: my parents, my siblings, my partner, my grandparents. My best friends. No one else really matters.”

***Kushri, 28, she/they***

Kushri was born to Indo-Guyanese immigrants in Brooklyn, New York. She identifies with she/her pronouns “and maybe a little bit of they, because I believe in this higher idea that we’re all comprised of both and that our soul is genderless.” She is queer, and a firm believer in humanism and the idea of unity and inclusion for everyone. Rani asks her to share some of the funny or joyful things she remembers from her childhood, and Kushri shares that she has “always been a clown”. Her paternal grandfather, she says, “had this thing against dark skin people because he identified as a Brahmin”, and although he disliked her mom and siblings

because they were all dark-skinned, he favored her because of her spunky personality. When he was living with her, she remembers watching Bollywood movies together and singing along with him to the songs in the movies. She was always musical, as she is now. She says, “My grandfather would just jump in with me and start singing. Mind you, this is a man who was part of political and religious uprisings in Guyana back in the day and he’s sitting there with his granddaughter that he doesn’t wanna like but he likes anyway and he’s singing with me. So, that’s one of my favorite memories.”

Rani then asks her to describe messages she was taught as a young person that no longer serve her. She says:

“This whole idea that you can be whoever you want until you hit puberty. You can be a tomboy, you can go *lash yuh dad up* as much as you want a pretend to be a wrestler, ‘cause that’s what I did. Then the moment I hit puberty, everything changes. My dad started acting all different. All of a sudden he was like, you need to be a big girl now. You need to behave properly, speak properly. You’re not daddy’s little girl anymore. Then I start to conform and think that I really had to start watching the way I speak, how I carry myself. Even from a little girl, I knew I was queer. But it’s like going out into society, I was this very bottled person. I would go out and live in my dad’s image, I’d basically be his shadow.”

She especially noticed how ideas about women’s “impurity” played out in the *mandir*<sup>7</sup>, where her father was a *pandit*<sup>8</sup>. She recalls an incident that happened when she was a teenager:

“This idea of being a very quiet girl, knowing how to conduct yourself, don’t go to certain

<sup>7</sup> *Mandir* is a Hindu temple.

<sup>8</sup> *Pandit* is a Hindu priest.

places if you have your period, don't serve your dad while he's reading a *yajna*<sup>9</sup> because he's fasting and he shouldn't take food from you. Literally a scenario like that, he had a *yajna* to read and I had my menstrual cycle and I cooked dhal and rice and *seim* curry, which I don't even like *seim*, but I cooked it. I know he liked it, and I'm taking out the food and he's not saying anything. I see him squeaming, 'cause at this point I'm this hardcore feminist if you say something stupid. He calls my mom and he says, 'Can you tell her I can't eat from her?' So she calls me and she's stuttering. She's like, 'Your dad's fasting and...don't worry about taking out his food.' I said, 'You're damn right!' One, he should take out his own food but secondly, why? It's like, he's eating from other people and then she says, 'cause you're on your period'. She's like, 'I'm at work, I don't have time for this.' So, I said, 'Really?' The Brooklyn came out of me. I was like, word? Something just went off. I remember, I would be a kid and I'd want to open his books and I didn't even know how to read Hindi and I would just read it and I was about nine when I got my menstrual cycle. I went to go grab his book and he was like, 'No, no no. Don't touch it. When you're done with your period you can look at it.' That hurt, you know?"

After this happened, she shares that she went on her father's computer and looked up the anatomy and biology of women's bodies. She looked up information about a Hindu goddess, *Kamakhya Devi*, who represents the *yoni*, which in some translations represents the female reproductive organs, and in others represents an origin, source, or abode. She says, "I wrote up this whole summary of what women should mean, what we are, how we're made and the fact that because of our menstrual cycle, we're all able to exist. I printed out 50 of those and pasted it

<sup>9</sup> *Yajna* is the Hindu ritual of sacrifice which gives the *meaning* to a prayer, praise or worship

all over his *murtis*<sup>10</sup>. I pasted it on his car windshield, on the mirror in his bedroom. If he was sleeping, I would've probably pasted it on him." When he saw what she had done, he called her phone and apologized to her, and she remembers it as one of the most resilient stages of her life where she felt empowered to point out the contradictions of patriarchal thinking in Hinduism. "Men who worship goddesses and then go home and discriminate against their own wives and daughters are discriminating against the goddess that they pray to. It's just the way I see it."

As an aspiring priestess who has been told that she comes from a long lineage of male pandits, she realizes that in many religions and parts of the world, a woman asserting her ideas of spirituality and religion is frowned upon. She says that she faces discrimination herself, but the worst kind of discrimination, "the one that really boils my blood" is "women discriminating against themselves". Women putting limits on themselves, gossiping about one another, trying to compete against one another and hold each other to particular norms is what she sees as the most dangerous aspects of patriarchy. She recalls a conversation she had with her mother earlier that day:

"For example, my mom, she and my dad were going to a *puja*<sup>11</sup> today and she wore this beautiful navy blue *kurti*<sup>12</sup> like what I'm wearing now. And she puts it on and she looks at herself and I'm like, you look nice. And she's like, yeah, but your dad's going to catch a fit. Cause you know how he feels about these dark colors. And I said, can't you just for once, do something you want to do for yourself, stop discriminating against yourself by thinking for him, by thinking about what he wants for you."

<sup>10</sup> *Murtis* are images or statues of Hindu deities.

<sup>11</sup> *Puja* is an act of worship.

<sup>12</sup> *Kurti/kurta* is an article of clothing similar to a tunic, which can vary in length.

She realized that she wanted to be a priestess after she was in a six-year relationship with a woman at the age of eighteen who made her “question every aspect of why she was who she was”. There were things she loved about herself, including her spirituality, music, and social justice advocacy, but when she came out as queer to her family, she struggled with her family not accepting her. Her relationship with her partner also grew abusive, physically, emotionally, and sexually. She says, “I just lost myself. I stopped going to temple. I stopped praying. I didn’t sing for six years, I didn’t touch a harmonium. And my spirit was totally broken. It was a really traumatic breakup because by the end of that relationship, I felt like I only had one piece of hair on my head.”

At that point, she moved back home and her mother encouraged her to go to temple with them. She says, “I was basically going through this I hate everyone phase. I don’t want to go to the temple because all people do there is just talk shit about me. All they do is just compete with one another. I’m not about it. And she says, if you feel so strongly about it, come back and make a difference.” At that point, she started reading more and “started looking at the *murti* as if it were a mirror.” She says, “You should see yourself as a goddess. You should see yourself as wielding all these weapons, which are your skills, your tools to navigate through your own darkness, to help people. I guess through fasting and repairing myself through music, I started to really gain my voice again.” She says that to some degree, her community did welcome her back and she realized it was where she belonged. She also realized at that point that women were coming to her father for help and that he didn’t have the resources or knowledge to help them. Her father realized that she was passionate about helping women who were experiencing intimate partner violence, witnessing the ways in which she was able to reach women in the community in ways he couldn’t.

She says that this was the turning point when she realized, “You’re not meant to just shut up. You’re not meant to just ignore everything that you love about yourself. These are the tools, these are your arms and weapons and your intellect is that crown and your ferociousness is the tiger you sit on.” Her father has continued to support her, but has also struggled because of the criticism he has faced from other pandits in the community. She realizes, though, that she was meant to do this work with or without his support. She says, “I’m happy, you know, of course there’s still struggles. Now I’m dealing with the community and not just my dad anymore, but I also have a community that holds me. And I think once you find other collectives that’s going to support you and your dream and that you can help support, I think that’s important because you’re moving together.” Kushri does believe change is happening through open conversations, accountability, and healing. She realizes, though, that it can only happen through people wanting to change. She thinks that when people start challenging themselves and other people to take accountability, lasting change will come.

***Lotus, 22, they/she***

Lotus uses they/them pronouns but is fine with people addressing them using she/her pronouns. They identify as Indo-Caribbean and are from Jamaica, Queens. Rani asks Lotus if there are messages they learned as a young person that no longer serve them, and how they came to resist those messages. Lotus responds saying that messages around what it means to be a “proper woman” no longer serve them; as they’ve grown older and had the space and opportunity to live away from their family and community, they’ve had the opportunity to see how the world is going to see them and how their mistakes will be received by other people. They identify college as a turning point but also a “turbulent time” because of the ways in which people put them in boxes they didn’t identify with. Lotus shares that it was the first time they



unlearned subliminal messages they were taught around sex, virginity, purity, and promiscuity.

They say:

“I want to sit here and say ,’Somebody told me that it was okay for me to be myself and I just listened to them’. but I didn't, because that fear of being rejected from my community or that fear of being rejected from my family was so strong that anyone could really tell me anything and I would just see it as, ‘Oh you can say that because you're not me’, ‘You can say that because you're older’, ‘You can say that because you're not Indo-Caribbean’, or ‘You can say that because you don't live with your parents anymore’, or something along those lines. So I didn't really trust that other people or other women or other feminists even were looking out for me because I was just so scared of making a mistake.”

While they experienced college as a time where they could test some of the messages they learned growing up, they realize that they could only push those boundaries because they had the space to. Lotus shares that if they were still living at home, they could not have experienced new perspectives and realized that “everything my community taught me about what it means to be a good girl or proper woman was 100% a lie.” They go on to say that one of the biggest messages they had to contend with was learning to not be ashamed of their body, especially around learning about menstruation and their own body parts. They say:

“I knew all of this stuff but reproductive and otherwise, I had absolutely no idea. I was like, why don't I know this about myself? I menstruate every month, why don't I know why I menstruate and why don't I know what causes it, you know? I decided to go to a feminist group and I learned so much about my body. I learned about birth control methods, which was messaging I wasn't getting from my community. I personally suffer

from a really heavy menstruation cycle, so I had no idea there were ways to relieve the pain I was feeling. Now that I know about alternative methods to enduring some of that pain or having to live with certain conditions, I'm like why? Why did nobody tell me this sooner? Why did they let me suffer?"

They say that this experience "opened up a whole world" for them, realizing that there were so many people like them putting themselves at risk for things because they were not properly educated about "the new responsibility puberty brought". They share that when they came back home and tried to talk to their mom about some of what they had learned, their mom was finally willing to share her experiences around birth control, menstruation, and childbirth. Lotus says, "I found it so weird because these were the first times we were having conversations like this after I had learned this knowledge from somewhere else." They also talked about how difficult it was to navigate menstruation on their own without any knowledge of whether the symptoms they were experiencing were hereditary or not. Lotus shares:

"I asked her, 'Mom, do you have a heavy period?' She was like, 'Yeah, after I had given birth to you, I was diagnosed for having fibroids.' And I was like, 'Excuse me? You didn't think to tell me anything? You know that I miss school all the time when I'm menstruating.' She was just like, 'No. I didn't.' I was like, 'What do you mean you didn't think? You didn't think to ask? Like this is just normal? I'm just gonna be lying in bed for days because I have my period?' She just didn't have an answer for me and I was so frustrated."

Lotus shared that the first time they went to see a gynecologist was when they were twenty-two years old, long after the first time they became sexually active. They say, "It's all of

these little things that don't align properly and don't make logical sense that I'm like, wow, and I know I'm not the only one."

### **Social Meanings of the Body & Reproduction**

Rani, Kushri, and Lotus' stories are each complex and touch on many different themes. One of the themes that ties each of their stories together is how they have navigated the social meanings attached to their bodies and reproduction. All three participants shared (mis)information they have received about their bodies. For both Rani and Kushri, these meanings were attached directly to religious beliefs about women's impurity during menstruation. Rani shared that her parents did not want her sister to light a *diya*, a practice which represents many different beliefs in Hinduism, the most common the triumph of good over evil. Their reasoning was that menstruation is "unclean", and Rani pushes back asking them to unpack what that means. In her narrative, she offers a practical analysis of this concept, suggesting that perhaps menstruation was thought to be unclean before women had access to menstrual products. She challenges her parents to think about where their beliefs come from, to consider the specific time and place those beliefs emerged, and to interrogate why those beliefs might no longer be true in the current moment.

As a dark-skinned queer Indo-Caribbean person, Kushri's story raises important points about the intersections of colorism, queerness, and gender. She begins her story talking about the close relationship she has with her grandfather despite knowing that he disliked that she and her siblings were dark-skinned. Anti-blackness and colorism have a long history in the South Asian subcontinent and is tied to the caste system, with darker skin associated with lower caste. This ideology is particularly prominent among the Brahmin caste, or the highest caste, from which Hindu priests come from. Her grandfather identifying as a Brahmin meant that her dark skin

threatened his caste identity, but Kushri shares that some of the most joyful memories she has from her childhood were in the simple moments of watching movies together or singing along with Bollywood music when she felt accepted by him and appreciated for the qualities that make her who she is today.

She goes on to talk about how puberty and menstruation shifted her identity and relationship with her parents. Expectations about how she should behave and speak began to be communicated to her, and she began feeling “bottled up”, unable to be herself around her family or in the outside world. She felt that she had to live in her father’s shadow and witnessed her mother also be complicit in reinforcing gender norms. She shares a story of her mother telling her not to serve food to her father during a religious ceremony because she was menstruating, and deconstructs the multiple layers of patriarchal violence she experienced in that moment: her father’s rejection, her mother’s complicity, the belief that women are “impure” during menstruation, and the expectation that she should serve her father at all. In this moment, her faith is tested because she expresses interest in participating in the ceremony through serving her father food, but her father’s rejection leads her to unravel the multiple levels at which power was being taken away from her.

She uses this moment to educate herself about menstruation and reshape narratives about women’s bodies in Hinduism. She learns about aspects of Hinduism that challenge patriarchal ideologies, particularly around women’s bodies and their roles in society, and confronts her father about how his beliefs go against Hindu scripture. In constructing her argument, she challenges that idea that feminism and Hinduism are incompatible, and instead argues that enforcing the suppression of women is betraying the fundamental ideologies of Hinduism. As an

aspiring priestess, she has a platform to rewrite narratives that have existed for a long time in Hinduism that reinforce the oppression of women and other groups of marginalized people.

For Lotus, the “responsibility that puberty brought” was also about gendered expectations around behavior, but also about a different kind of responsibility—the responsibility to care for one’s body. Growing up, Lotus had to unlearn the shame they were taught to associate with their body, sexuality, and reproductive health, sharing that the shame they were taught prevented them from learning how to manage menstrual pain or develop healthy sexual practices. They say they never received any information about menstruation until they went to a feminist group in college where they learned about birth control methods and gained other sexual and reproductive health education that they weren’t receiving from their family or community. They express a great deal of frustration about the silences and shame surrounding sexuality, saying, “Why did they let me suffer?” Here, Lotus demonstrates that these silences can have detrimental consequences for young women and GNC people, who are ill-equipped with information about how to care for their bodies and by extension, themselves.

When they finally connected with community who were sharing knowledge with them about sexuality and reproductive health, they say it “opened up a whole new world” for them. It also opened up the possibility for them to talk to their mother about birth control, menstruation, and childbirth. To engage in this conversation, Lotus had to be equipped to ask questions that would give them answers about their own bodies; without community to help them identify those questions, their conversation with their mother might not have been possible. Lotus’s declaration that they are “not the only one” suffering in silence highlights the pervasiveness of shame and silence around sexuality and the importance of community in demystifying what has been made invisible.

## Ambika and Rita

### *Ambika, 37, she/her*

Ambika and Rita have known each other for three years through their work together at Jahajee Sisters. Ambika identifies as an artist, activist, and organizer from the Bronx. In her family, her parents were the first ones to migrate from Guyana. Her dad was nineteen when he migrated to the U.S. in the 1970s. Her mom was in her late twenties and migrated from Guyana to Canada and then Canada to New York, where she met Ambika's father. They were both living in Harlem when they met, and when they had Ambika they decided to move to the South Bronx. Up until she was 7 or 8 years-old, they lived on the Grand Concourse. At the time, there were a lot of other Indo-Caribbean people they were in community with, particularly through the *mandir*. When they could afford to, her parents bought a house in Castle Hill, close to a subway stop so that her older sister could get to school, close enough to Jacobi Hospital where her mother worked, and close to the Cross Bronx Expressway so that her dad to get to work in New Jersey. She says they were one of the first Indo-Caribbean families to move to Caste Hill, but she says now "it's like the other little Guyana outside of Richmond Hill", with roti shops and West Indian stores throughout the neighborhood.

Ambika started doing movement-building work when she was 16, joining an arts collective of activists and educators committed to using the arts for social change. She would perform poetry, hip-hop, and theater to raise awareness about the prison industrial complex and catalyze people into change. She says, "Just having had that experience from a really young age, it just naturally felt, you know, that I would stay in movement-building work and social justice work. I never thought about any other career."

She shares that growing up, one of the things she always heard from her mother was

that she was a dreamer. She describes her mother as a “really hardworking Guyanese woman who at any time would hold three or four jobs”, from her job at a hospital, to managing a medical office, to cleaning houses on the weekends, to helping a business owner with their accounting and bookkeeping. She says, “My mom was always working really, really hard and I don’t think she had a lot of time for me and my older sisters, and we just understood that that’s what she had to do to take care of us.” Ambika’s mother pushed education on her and her sisters, but in doing that, Ambika felt that she didn’t understand the larger goals she had for her life. She says, “When she would say I was a dreamer, it didn’t have a positive tone to it. It was more of like, snap out of it, get out of the clouds and do what you need to do, what’s important. So other kids would be outside playing, riding their bikes in the summers. I would be inside, doing book reports and extra math work.” Ambika recognizes that her mother pushed them so hard because she wanted her children to live an easier life than her, but she also “took a lot of it to heart”. She says,

“There’s this very traditional path you’re supposed to take. You’re supposed to be either this doctor or this lawyer and any kind of job that’s going to bring some kind of financial stability. And that was never my thing. I never thought about, oh I want to get this job because it’s going to pay me a whole lot of money. It was more about, what is it that my heart is telling me to do and wanting to make a difference in the world and really leave some legacy behind and help people.”

She remembers beginning her undergraduate career pre-med and hating it. She didn’t have an affinity for Math and Science but was fond of English and History. At one point, she was motivated to become an American history teacher:

“Growing up, I feel like the history books never told me about myself. There’s wasn’t a whole lot of information about the Civil Rights Movement or the Black Arts Movement

and all the different ways that people of color had made a mark, made changes, and transformed communities. So I found myself diving deeper and trying to find those stories on my own.”

As she developed this passion and was ready to declare her major sophomore year, she remembers her dad telling her, “Are you crazy? You’re going to be a political science major? First of all, what is political science? If you’re going to be a teacher, you’re just going to end up driving a taxicab one day. You’re not going to make any money doing that.” She says that she has always been a person that pushes back and told her dad that she didn’t care about making money because she’d be making a difference. She says, “My parents were always really confused about my decisions, but I had to find a way to not let that deter me.” She does express gratitude for having older sisters that were “breaking the mold themselves”, who were supportive of her career choices. When she came out of school she started teaching at an alternative high school, then an afterschool program, and then got what she called her “dream job”:

“There was this one job where I could work in an after-school program in the Bronx and get a pretty decent salary for someone who just came out of school. And then there was this opening..I would be running a program, and it was a leadership and organizing program and to me it was a no-brainer. Like yes, I am going to travel to Queens from the Bronx and do this job because it’s my dream job. And I remember my parents were still kind of scratching their heads like what?”

She found support from the director of the organization she accepted the job at, who told her “I want you to work here because one day, I want to see you fill my shoes and run this organization.” She says, “I just felt like I was doing such amazing work, but no one in my family could understand why I was making life so hard for myself. And I just feel so proud of the work



I was able to accomplish there. The whole point of that is like,, if you don't push for what you want and you let other people tell you it's not possible, you'll never actually accomplish the things you were destined to accomplish. And I feel like the work I did there was just a starting point." She recognizes, though, that she experienced a lot of conflicting feelings about navigating her own desires and her family expectations. When the position ended a year later because there funding ran out, she had moments where she was "in a dark place", asking "what am I doing with my life? Am I on the right path?" as she was hitting walls and challenges.

She recalls being in a slump, doubting and questioning herself. Around the same time, she found herself in an abusive relationship that she says, "took a toll on my spirit". She reflects on this time, saying:

"I wasn't working for a good year and I was still in this relationship. And I didn't know how to get out of it. Every time I tried to leave the situation I'd get sucked back in and have to have all this happen at the same time, yeah.. it was hard. And I think my family was just confused because they were like, what's going on with you? I think they could see that this person wasn't the right fit for me. He was a Guyanese guy I met while I was traveling to Richmond Hill every day so it also became this other thing like, 'You see, if you had stayed in the Bronx, you wouldn't even have found this person.'"

During this time, she started learning about a lot of other women who were in domestic violence situations and having seen it in her own family, she "started connecting the dots". When an Indo-Caribbean woman in the community was murdered by her rapist, it was an "eye-opening moment of like, oh my god, this could be me if I don't leave. Like I knew the person grew up in a domestic violence household, so there was this place in my heart that had a lot of compassion and empathy, but I think it was to my own detriment." Her older sister had been involved in

justice work for many years at this point, and when the murder happened, her mother-in-law came to her and Ambika and asked them when they were going to return to the community to offer support to Indo-Caribbean women experiencing violence at the hands of men in the community.

Ambika says, “somehow things were lining up in a really divine way that even I couldn’t see at the time.” She says, “the only thing I could think of in my head, how am I going to help other women get out of this when I can’t even get out of it?” She says that even with these doubts, she and her sister organized a summit for community members to process the high rates of violence against women in the community and she says that it was critical to create that space for other people, but it’s where she’s found her own healing, too. For the next year, she helped grow a ten-week arts and empowerment program where survivors could use poetry to heal from the trauma they had experienced. She reflects, saying “Again, I found myself helping to organize this and helping to co-facilitate it. And I’m like, if I’m going to ask other women to be this vulnerable and tell their story through poetry then I need to find a way to do that also.”

She says that through the work she was doing and the space she was in, she was able to come back to her community and get out of the situation she was in. She says, “I was able to find that strength to say I’m putting me first. So I end up coming back to this thing about living your purpose and passion. I know working in my community and working with young women and women in general and supporting them to heal and find their truth and purpose is what my purpose is.”

Rita reflects on Ambika’s story and asks her whether her family has been able to see how important it was for her to follow her own journey, especially after initially doubting the path she was taking. She says,

“I mean I certainly think they have these moments like what the hell is she doing? I think my journey taught them to be more open minded, like they still might not entirely get what I do and they may not be able to share it with other people, and I’m pretty sure my dad doesn’t know what type of consulting work I do. But they no longer worry the way they used to worry, or maybe they just saw that I was really stubborn and that I was going to make it no matter what. But it’s a good question because I’d love to have that conversation with them and see how their perception shifted or what they might have learned. I’m curious because I don’t entirely have the answer. I think the most important thing that I’m grateful for is having my mom in the space too. She sees the importance of the work, and I think for her to see me manifesting the organization and growing it, and making it a space that more people can actually have access to is giving her a little bit more hope. It’s also been a healing space for her because I’ve seen her shift in so many ways. Like my mom had a really, really hard life and there’s just so much hurt and trauma and I think the space has allowed her to tap into her own healing and step into her power more, where she can take more ownership and control over her life. Because I think for a long time it was about putting her family first and now she’s retired and can travel and do fun things she never did when she was younger. So I hope in some way, my journey is giving her more hope around what’s possible for her own life.”

Rita then asks her when she believed change was possible, especially when she was facing her own struggles and witnessing other women in the community face similar issues. She says, “I think I realized change was possible just by living, living it. I think being a survivor of gender-based violence and having been in a DV, very toxic, unhealthy relationship has taught me that it’s important to hold empathy for other people’s journeys. I had so many people asking me,

why are you still with this person? But everyone moves in their own time..and the only thing you can really do is just let them know that you're there and you have their back. I feel like that's what I needed more so than the judgement I feel like I was receiving." She says that being a survivor of domestic violence has helped her understand that it might take a lot of tries before someone is able to leave and seek help. She says, "If they know they have a network of support and a community that has their back and is there for them, that's enough. It's just important to hold empathy and let people know that. To affirm their own sense of power and agency."

***Rita, 28, she/her***

Rita, 28, uses she/her pronouns and identifies as Indo-Caribbean with Guyanese and Trinidadian heritage; her mother is Guyanese and her father is Trinidadian. She was born in Montreal, where her parents met, and moved to the Bronx when she was seven years-old to join her mother's family who had settled there in the late 1980s and early 1990s. She shares that she is very close to her nuclear family, even though she has a large extended family in New York. "For a long time, it's been me, my sister, my dad and mom, and my grandmother." She identifies her grandmother as an important "main character" in her life story. Her parents worked a lot when she was young, so she and her sister were primarily raised by their grandmother. She says that a lot of her early memories growing up in Montreal are of her, her sister, and her grandmother spending time together in the front yard, watching people walk by until it was time for her grandmother to go inside for her afternoon soap operas.

The first question Ambika asks Rita is, "If you were to think of your life as a movie, what are some of the major scenes that would be in that movie?" Rita responds saying "I feel like I'm always reflecting on different times in my life. There are a lot of scenes, a lot of moments that maybe at the time, I didn't realize were really important, but now I realize were." She goes on to

share that she and her sister were very close growing up, only two-and-a-half years apart. She says, “We were constantly in competition with one another, both really into school. And I think part of that was being immigrants and my parents being really unfamiliar with living in New York City and really mistrustful of letting us out of the house. So we spent a lot of time just really being good at school, studying.” She talks about being Valedictorian of her 8<sup>th</sup> grade class and the satisfaction she gained from preparing for school spelling bees and science fairs. “It was the one place I could direct my energy”, she says.

After being awarded a scholarship to attend a predominantly white independent high school, she felt “a total shift” in her social life and academic identity and says she is still processing some of the trauma of losing her sense of feeling empowered in educational spaces. She says, “I felt like I went from feeling like the smartest kid in school to feeling like I was not on the level of the students who I was taking classes with. I went to this, just a very privileged high school with all white people. It was my first time really knowing a white person or any white people, spending time, being in spaces with white people.” When she went away to college, she started connecting with other students of color who had similar experiences as she did, and that was where she learned the importance of “community that was really supportive, and supportive of each other’s joy”. She says that a lot of her identity is rooted in how she’s navigated educational spaces and used them as a platform to do the social justice work she’s always wanted to do.

After graduating from college, Rita pursued non-profit work in racial justice and then started a doctoral program where she does work on Indo-Caribbean history and identity. She says that it was through building with other students of color and connecting with community outside of academia that she repaired her relationship to herself as a thinker and producer of knowledge.

She shares, “I’m still swimming in that, swimming in moments of feeling like I really belong and feeling validated in my knowledge and feeling like I have to fight people to listen to me.” Rita explains that she “came to social justice work through education”, saying, “I think people come to social justice work in different ways, but for me, I had my lived experience of racism, sexism, and white supremacy and gained the tools to make sense of that. Not even from my classes, but from the community I had built through school.”

Ambika then asks her if there are any stereotypes or misrepresentations of women in her community that she thinks are important to challenge given her own experiences or the experiences of women in her life. She says that like other women of color she knows who spent a lot of time in white-dominant spaces in their adolescence, she rejected her identity for a long time because she “didn’t know enough”. She says:

“I was operating under the representations that other people were ascribing to my identity. I remember when I told someone I was Trinidadian and Guyanese, it was my white classmate, their frame of reference was like, ‘Oh yeah, I know somebody who has a housekeeper who’s Guyanese.’ Then I remember hearing one of my classmates talk about going to India for study abroad and someone asked him like what it was like, and all he could say was it just smelled really bad. So those were the representations I had about my history and cultural identity as a young person and I think not having the tools to be able to deconstruct those messages at a young age was really hard on me. I think because we don’t learn about our history in school and because there are these harmful and violent messages that young women of color especially hear about who we are and where we come from, it took a lot of work for me to learn other narratives. One, because my parents also didn’t have a lot of access to that history to pass down. I was kind of isolated from

community because I was really sheltered as a kid. My parents were really strict about us going out on our own unless it was for school. So it took a long time for me to actually learn about my history and feel grounded in that identity, and be able to reject these stereotypes and know they were based on white supremacist ideas and not based on the reality of people I knew and what they were like.”

She goes on to say that a misrepresentation she feels invested in speaking back to is the idea that Indo-Caribbean women are passive and not invested in changing the conditions of their lives. She says that this misrepresentation is harmful for a lot of reasons, but especially because it sends a message to young Indo-Caribbean women that their communities are not politicized or engaging in social justice work and that they can’t find liberation within their own communities. She goes on to say, “If we don’t believe that we have the power to do that or that there isn’t a history of women doing that, then there’s no real way to imagine what that can look like moving forward.”

### **From Reflection to Action: Learning from Experience & Building Different Worlds**

Both Ambika and Rita’s stories demonstrate the ways in which they have thought deeply about their own struggles and have moved from thought to action, to build the worlds they want to see. Their stories are a testament to the power of lived experience and reflection in moving towards social change, as the lessons they learned from the struggles they faced allowed them to apply the knowledge they gained when they were in positions to make a difference.

Ambika and Rita both shared experiences of being miseducated about Indo-Caribbean history from a young age. Ambika shared that because she didn’t see herself in her history books, she took on the work of educating herself and finding stories about her community on her own. Her lack of exposure to the history of people of color in the U.S. led her to want to become a

history teacher, eventually majoring in political science in college. While she started doing social justice work from a young age, the lack of resources she had to learn about herself and her history led her to invest time in working with her community to bring about change in ways that were historically and culturally grounded.

Later in her story, Ambika shares that she started working on domestic violence issues in her community after the murder of several Indo-Caribbean women by their abusers. When she began doing this work, she found herself in an abusive relationship that she had tried many times to leave. She said that people constantly questioned why she stayed in the relationship and saw the toll it was taking on her, but every time she left, she would get “sucked back in”. It was through her healing and organizing work that she was able to reflect on her relationship and find the power to leave. She said that more than anything, the experience taught her how to be an advocate for other women in abusive relationships and that the best thing she can do for people experiencing domestic violence is “to let them know you’re there and have their back”. It allowed her to develop empathy and reserve judgement for women who remain in abusive situations because “everyone moves in their own time”.

Rita’s story mirrors Ambika’s in the ways that she is working to transform thinking about history and education after attending a predominantly white institution where she lost her sense of identity and belief in herself as a producer of knowledge. As a young person growing up in an immigrant family, school was a space for Rita to direct her energy while her family struggled to adjust to a new place. In her interview, she says she is still processing the trauma of losing her sense of feeling empowered in educational spaces, but has used her experience to build community with other students of color and used educational spaces as a platform to do social justice work.



She says that being in predominantly white spaces for much of her adolescence, she rejected her identity because she didn't know enough about her history and identity. Like Ambika, she shares that she didn't learn about her history in school and goes on to say that she had learned harmful messages about who she was and where she came from which were rooted in white supremacy and patriarchy. She says that it took a lot of work for her to "learn other narratives" about her identity and says that without debunking myths about Indo-Caribbean women as passive and not invested in changing the conditions of their lives, those invested in social justice work have "no real way to imagine what that looks like moving forward" in their own communities. In pursuing a graduate degree to explore her Indo-Caribbean history, Rita has been able to reflect on her lived experience, understand her own struggles in relation to those of other women and GNC people in her community, and identify how to enact change from her position within academia.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Intergenerational Commitments to Building Legacies of Resistance**

I think mothers and daughters are meant to give birth to each other, over and over; that is why our challenges to each other are so fierce; that is why, when love and trust have not been too badly blemished or destroyed, the teaching and learning one from the other is so indelible and bittersweet. We daughters must risk losing the only love we instinctively feel we can't live without in order to be who we are, and I am convinced this sends a message to our mothers to break their own chains, though they may be anchored in prehistory and attached to their own great grandmothers' hearts. (Walker, 1997, p. 172)

If the subaltern could speak, would not desire be the subject of that discourse? (Perez, 1999, p.157)

The participants of this oral history project were invited to share stories they wish they could tell women and gender non-conforming (GNC) people of their generation, past generations, and future generations. They were also asked to share their hopes for their generation and future generations, narrating their dreams for the worlds they want to see during their lifetimes and beyond. In the following section, I explore how participants narrate resistance as relational, working to breaking cycles of silence in their communities by sharing their experiences of gender-based violence, strategies for healing, and visions for rewriting the past and shaping new futures. I explore three distinct dreams participants shared for past, present, and future generations: dreams of change, dreams of self-determination, and dreams of acceptance. Furthermore, I explore participants' narrations of the barriers that stand in the way of building

relationships cross generations and how participants talk about their experiences working to overcome these barriers. Finally, I look across interviews to identify intergenerational (dis)continuities among the stories shared, or points of departure in how participants across generations understand their experiences of oppression and articulate theories of change.

### **Dreams of Change: Breaking Cycles of Violence**

In their oral history interviews, participant shared their visions for social change, particularly in relation to ending violence against women. In her oral history interview, Irene, 69, shared her hopes for women of her generation. She says:

“I wish that things were different when we were growing up and we were taught different so we didn’t have to have so many struggles and waste so many years of our life putting up with nonsense from the opposite sex and not feel like we were independent enough to venture out on our own, survive, and make things work and raise our children alone.”

Here, Irene locates her own story of struggling to leave an abusive partner within a larger historical context, where women are socialized to be fearful of being alone. She identifies that women were taught to accept abuse in relationships, lifting up that this is a learned behavior rather than a quality inherent in women of her generation. Although she eventually left her abuser, her struggle to accept the reality she was taught was normal is evidence alone of the myth of the passive, non-confrontational Indo-Caribbean woman who is submissive to patriarchal values. Irene wants future generations to know that the struggles she has overcome have allowed her to recognize her own strength. She offers advice to future generations of women, saying:

“For years I put up with someone who cheated on me and was abusive because I wasn’t strong enough to raise my two daughters alone. It took me years of struggle to become

strong and say well, I can do this alone. I do not need you. And future women should not be afraid to speak out, speak their truth and not put up with abuse from a male partner.”

Many participants spoke of wanting to see a world where women can be free of violence and shared that this work requires women to seek community. Shama, 37, asked Irene, “Do you think that your generation can be part of this change, of the way that people think about gender roles?” Irene responds, saying:

“I think it's never too old to change, you know, we can still change. Maybe there are some people who still don't feel like they're strong enough to do, to be on their own, and be independent and they have to depend on the opposite sex, on a male partner. So I think people at my age can still change, if they can come out and seek help and speak up.”

Karen, 24, shared her wish for future generations by invoking messages she’s heard from her own grandmother and reflecting on the conversations they’ve had together about violence against women:

“I asked my grandmother, what would you say to domestic violence survivors or people going through that? And she said back in the days, we were taught to basically just go through it and bare until we were dead. She was like bare until you dead and she said, you don’t have to do that anymore.”

In breaking silences about violence in her own family, Karen is able to draw on the knowledge and experiences of her grandmother in imagining a different world for herself and future generations. Similar to Irene’s articulation of how women are socialized into particular gender roles, Karen’s re-telling of her conversation with her grandmother demonstrates that her grandmother has now realized that messages about women’s place in society can be resisted.

By offering this advice to Karen and survivors of domestic violence, she makes visible the dire consequences of submitting to these expectations (“bare until you dead”) and normalizes rejection of these expectations. Furthermore, she opens up possibilities for women to think about other choices they can make in living full, agentic lives. Shama, 37, shared that a world free of violence against women requires redistribution of power. She shares:

“My hope for future generations is that women and girls will not experience the kinds of things I’ve seen the women in my family experience and that I’ve experienced, but also that the men will be more conscious of their power, be more conscious about gender equality, believe that women can do whatever they can and maybe even more, and not think that they need to dominate, but that we’re equals.”

Here, Shama shares her hope that cycles of violence will end so that future generations will not experience what she and women in her family have experienced. Kushri, 28, similarly recognizes the importance of building spaces where men can undergo their own transformations in order to understand their role in reinforcing patriarchal violence. She tells a story from a Hindu scripture to demonstrate the toll that it takes to constantly be fighting against gender-based violence:

“I think change is happening through open conversations, accountability and through healing. And through people actually wanting to change and being okay with it, but it's going to be hella hard because you know, have you ever heard the story of Raktabij? Mother Kali was summoned to basically fight against this demon named Raktabij because every time he'd be cut or inflicted, with every drop of his blood, a hundred more like him would be born. So he was basically immortal and mother Kali came upon the scene, and she basically catches the blood whenever it falls on the ground. Eventually he

met his end, I don't exactly remember how, but he did. So it's like, we shouldn't be expected to run around like Kali trying to provoke these different ways of thinking. We shouldn't but we have to. But I think that for men to truly take that accountability and to start challenging themselves and challenging other men and even challenging other women with this psychologically embedded idea that we are confined to our roles, I think that's when the change is going to come.”

In telling this story, Kushri symbolically demonstrates the difficulty of sustaining a movement against gender-based violence without wide-reaching support from people of all gender backgrounds. The demon Raktabij’s perceived immortality represents the impossibility of sustaining gender justice work in a context where there are always more “battles” to fight. Kushri recognizes that we are all human, and that it takes collective effort and commitment even when it seems impossible to imagine a world without patriarchy, or what steps need to be taken to build that world. When Rani asks Kushri if there are any stories she wishes she could tell other Indo-Caribbean women in her life, she says:

“I feel like I would just want to walk around and hug every woman that I see and tell them that, you know, I feel you, and I might not have experienced what the hell you’ve been through. But if you can really just sit for a moment and look within you and find that power within you, that power has kept you surviving this long and really acknowledge it and hold onto it. You don’t have to be someone’s doormat. You’re not just someone’s mom. You’re not just someone’s wife or a sex object. You are a woman; you’re given the opportunity to exist in this world and you should’ve subject yourself to this role or responsibility. And I know a lot of you are forced into it, and I’m sorry. And if we can come together as women and try to fight your way out, do it.”

Here, Kushri reinforces the power of being witnessed. While many participants spoke of the importance of nurturing independence in future generations of women and GNC folks, Kushri lifts up the value of community and extending empathy to those around her, even if she has not experienced what other women in her community have. She also recognizes that often, independence is not possible because women are “forced into” dependency, and that it is through a personal sense of power but also the power of the collective that women will be supported in fighting their way out of oppressive conditions.

### **Dreams of Self-Determination: Speaking out Against Injustice & Redefining the Self**

Several of the participants of this project spoke about the importance of speaking out against injustice and manifesting the courage it takes to resist. Kushri wants future generations to feel free to ask as many questions as they want and defy expectations. She says, “Your consciousness is your best friend. Listen to it. And if you know deep down in your core that you’re being mistreated, definitely take a stance against it, even if it’s coming from a religious or political leader, you were born as equals. Question. Fight for what you rightfully believe in.” She also wants women to know that they are the “fruits of our ancestor’s sacrifices” and that nothing should be taken for granted. She says, “Scream, so that somebody in the future who might feel so trapped can hear you and see you in the future. I’m going to keep screaming so you can hear me.” She both identifies that her ancestors made sacrifices so that she could live the life she is living now and takes on responsibility for speaking out so that generations who come after her will know that she was fighting for them and reap the benefits of her resistance.

In reflecting on her own journey to follow her dreams of pursuing education despite her family’s resistance, Shama says, “I think I’d share that story with Indo-Caribbean women to just do whatever you want to do and don’t live your life based on other people’s expectations. Have

faith and work hard that you can take care of yourself and you can accomplish whatever it is that you want to do.” She wants younger generations to know that it’s okay to not “check the boxes” and to take time to figure out what they want. Similarly, Sarah, 19, says “I would definitely tell future generations that if you really have a passion, you should follow it. And no matter whether or not someone approves, it’s important.”

Jayasri, 65, says that she would like to tell Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people to not live with the expectations of others. She says, “The only person’s expectation that matters is your own expectations of yourself..if I could teach generations to come, it’s that it’s you on the inside. It’s not what on the outside. It’s nobody else’s expectations but your own. So let it play out, but don't get emotionally involved. Don't place too much on, on those things and on what's going out outside. Just be steady with how you feel. Take care of your own emotions, take care of your insights and your mental capacity because that's what's going to serve you all throughout your life.”

Here, Jayasri prioritizes the importance of mental health and the ability to manage one’s emotions. She also emphasizes that women and GNC people should stand by the expectations they hold for themselves, rather than those imposed on them from the outside. Similarly, Ambika, 37, wants women across generations to “follow their dreams by any means necessary”. She goes on to say:

“There’s going to be people along the way, including family, who are going to say that sounds crazy, that’s not possible. But it’s important to just hold fast to what you believe and what you dream for yourself, especially if it’s your passion, your purpose. And not to let anyone else tell you that it’s not possible. Because if you dream it, then you can become it and manifest it.”



Like many of the participants of the study, Ambika points to the importance of believing in oneself, especially in the face of disapproval by those closest to us. Self-determination is central to her narrative, believing that manifesting one's purpose rests on the ability to "hold fast" to one's dreams and desires. In reflecting on what she wishes she could tell future generations, Rani, 22, says "I have no idea where the world is going to go or where things will take us, I would want them to know that nothing is set in stone and nothing has to be what anyone else says it has to be. She remembers a recent conversation she had with her younger sister where she encouraged her to be open to new experiences and welcome uncertainty:

"She texted me to tell me that she misses me and she loves me and in that moment I told her, nothing is planned, nothing is set in stone. You can do literally anything that you want to do, just don't get caught up in the routine of doing what it is you're doing now. Whether that's school, or a partner, or your family dynamics, don't get caught up in how comfortable and safe it feels because there could be something out there waiting for you that you have no idea."

### **Dreams of Acceptance: Living in One's Truth**

Rani starts off her interview of Lotus, 22, by asking what hopes they have for this generation and future generations. Lotus shares that their hope is that "we all learn how to be ourselves unapologetically". They say that even though they are still young, as they get older, they are learning how to forgive themselves for a lot of things they were taught were shameful, particularly around gender, race/ethnicity, class, and spirituality. They say:

"I think that it's important that we kind of stop listening to this narrative that we have to take up as little space as possible and really step out into the world and into the light and practice what it means to be our best selves. I definitely think that being socialized as a

woman or presenting as someone who's femme, you feel the social pressure to go with the flow, or be seen and not heard or take up as little space as possible.”

In this quote, Lotus encourages current and future generations to resist the idea that they should be silent, and instead “step out into the world and into the light”. They go on to say that they dream of a world where Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people don't pass on the intergenerational trauma they have inherited and instead, raise the next generation with love and compassion. They also hope that future generations will have the space to “be human and make mistakes”. Kushri speaks of acceptance in her narrative as well, saying, “whether you're queer, whether you're in a relationship that doesn't seem normal, whether you're just the person who thinks a little outside the box, just embrace that.” In their interview, Made, 22, shares their hopes for future generations:

“I hope that they're kind to each other. I think that that's so difficult sometimes, especially when you feel like you're going through some really rough patches. It's difficult to remember to be kind to each other, but also be really kind to yourself and loving to yourself. Because a lot of people will try to put you down in the world, whether they're aware of it or not, but just reminding yourself to be gentle and patient with yourself and where you're at are really important.”

Here, Made encourages self-compassion and dignity for one's own journey and the practice of compassion towards others. Rita, 28, also shares her hope for future generations to practice self-acceptance, especially in healing from trauma:

“I think what's coming up for me is that healing never ends and your journey is complicated. Healing is not an overnight process. I think recognizing that is difficult, but it's really important because we put so much pressure on ourselves to feel like we've

gotten past the trauma we've experienced, and I guess I'm talking about Indo-Caribbean women and some of the trauma that stems from even the plantation during indentureship, like alcoholism in the community, what it means to have healthy relationships, whether that's romantic relationships, friendships. So I just think there's some power in acknowledging that you are always growing and changing. And if you have a setback, it doesn't mean you or your journey are any less valuable. Because I think our healing processes are not linear and none of us are perfect. So I think just trying to know yourself and the things that bring you joy and trying as much as you can to hold onto those things and still knowing that you're still valuable even when you're not able to take care of yourself the way you want to. Because I think we're so afraid to talk about the hard days with each other and the struggles we have."

In this reflection, Rita points to the fear surrounding failure and the power of women and GNC folks owning imperfection and making mistakes in their healing journey. She talks about how the pressure to be past both individual and collective trauma makes it difficult for people to accept the reality that "healing is not an overnight process" and to share their struggles with each other. Participants spoke of desire for acceptance on many levels, including in relation to their Indo-Caribbean identity and the fragmentations of history that result from migration and displacement.

Lotus shares that there was always a lot of resistance and shame in their family in talking about Indo-Caribbean history and identity, and that these silences have existed for generations in their family. They say, "When people ask me questions about my family or specifically when people ask me questions about being Indo-Caribbean, I always feel like I'm missing out on something. For everyone else it's like, 'My dad's brother lives down the street and every

Saturday we go to his house because he makes good cookup rice' or something like that, and I've never had that. For the longest time, I really shied away from identifying as Indo-Caribbean."

Here, Lotus points to the expectation that Indo-Caribbean people share similar cultural norms and practices and the distance they have experienced as a result of this expectation. Lotus lifts up the ways in which racial/ethnic identity is policed, resulting in isolation.

Lotus goes on to say, "My mom and dad have both lost a parent. Now that they're gone, that tie to the information is gone. I want people to know that people like me exist out here. You don't have to have a direct line to Liberty Avenue<sup>13</sup> to feel like you're Indo-Caribbean or you don't need to know six generations back, what was the name of the relative on the ship that brought them to the Caribbean. Your claim to being Indo-Caribbean is not quantified by all of that." In this quote, Lotus speaks directly about the desire they have for people to know that claims to identity are not dependent upon one's access to historical knowledge and goes further to say that it is important for others to recognize how quickly knowledge disappears with passing of each generation.

### **Building Intergenerational Relationships**

It takes three generations. If you resolve your relationship with your mother you'll both change, and your daughter will have it easier, but her daughter will be raised differently.

In the third generation the daughters are free...the relationship between mother and daughter stands at the center of what I fear most in our culture. Heal that wound and we change the world. (Morales, p. 56)

In her interview, Liloutie, 42, was asked by Sasha what she thinks stands in the way of women across generations building relationships with one another. Liloutie responds saying,

<sup>13</sup> Liberty Avenue is an avenue in Queens that cuts through the neighborhoods of Richmond Hill and Ozone Park, where large numbers of Indo-Caribbeans migrated to beginning in the late 1960s.

“We don’t understand the idea of sisterhood”, and points to the level of competitiveness she has witnessed between women in her community and the stereotypes that are reinforced about how women and girls should behave that get reinforced across generations. As an example, she points to the expectation that women “should not be sexual or have sexual desire because that means something, right? It means you’re a slut in that sense and you’re not allowed to do that.” She also says that there is pressure for women to “maintain the culture” by not deviating from the norm.

She says:

“You must dress a certain way, appear a certain way, carry yourself a certain way, but never be outspoken about your sexuality or even be...not heterosexual. That’s completely looked down upon, even as you stretch the gender norms. There’s this expectation that you must uphold a certain level of sanctity of the culture. I think the idea of shame and family is so pervasive and I think it’s the thing that stands in the way most for relationships across generations.”

Similarly, Rita speaks of the pain and defensiveness between women of different generations and the ways in which she has witnessed women reproduce oppression against one another. She says, “unless we do the work of knowing what it’s like to really listen to another person and hold space for them, and also hold them accountable and to experience what that looks like ourselves, it’s really hard to building those relationships because there’s so much mistrust.” Here, Rita points to the difficulty of women across generations to both listen to each other and hold each other accountable because of the mistrust that has grown between generations. She goes on to say:

“There’s this idea that we’re young so we have the fresh, new ideas and that our elders are just backwards. They’re just not on our level of consciousness, which I think is unfair.

And then on the other side there's this idea that we're young, so we don't have all the answers. We don't know as much as the elders know. And on both ends, those narratives hurt us because they don't validate the knowledge that all of us hold about our experiences and about what we've learned from them."

Here, Rita points to dominant misconceptions of women across ages; that younger women have not had enough experience so they "don't have all the answers", and that older women are "backwards". She says that these misconceptions do not serve us because women aren't able to feel validated in the knowledge they hold about their own experiences and the lessons they might have to share with other people. Jayasri similarly shares that (mis)perception influences how open women and GNC folks might feel to be vulnerable with one another. She says:

"I think the biggest thing is perception. Things that we perceive. We see each other, right? We don't know each other. But we have a certain, we have a perception of, this person might be that way so I'm not gonna bother building a relationship. Even people that you have relationships with, you still have those perceptions. Like my mom and I, I might have a way of imagining how she would respond if I said a particular thing. To break down those perceptions is the biggest thing, open those doors and take it for what it is. This is the way I see it. And the other being all right with who you are, and you still have a relationship. You can still love each other, still care for each other."

In her reflection, Jayasri points to the assumptions that make their way into intergenerational interactions. She says that even when people know each other, there are assumptions made about how another person might respond to something said, preventing opportunities for connection. She says that the most important part of building intergenerational

relationships is breaking down those assumptions and being able to accept another person's perspective in order to sustain the relationship. Kushri's response to the same question illuminates the difficulty of being able to sustain a relationship with fundamental differences in commitments to justice. Kushri reflects on how her grandmother and mother have reinforced patriarchal expectations for her to behave in ways that "honor" her father. She says, "my grandmother constantly says, 'whatever you must do, you must live for he'. And then over the years it just became grandma, I can't live for him anymore. I have to live for me or else me go dead. Me go just be one walking dead, I will just be nonexistent. I'll never be me." She goes on to share how she finds herself in the middle of the expectations enforced on her from her grandmother, mother, and father, saying:

"Then there's me who was just like, do whatever you want, just don't be a bad person.

You can be promiscuous if you want, you can be a sex worker if you want. You can be a stripper if you want. And you can be shamelessly in love with god too. And I feel like if my grandmother, and if my mom and I were able to coexist on this idea of women's liberation and the fact that we were born as equal human beings, then we could definitely build that community, build that togetherness and that solidarity between each other."

Kushri lifts up the difficulty of connecting with women in her life without sharing commitments to liberation, particularly as she continues to face rejection and criticism from them. Made similarly shares that even though they advocate for younger generations of women in their family, they don't feel like they can defend older women in their family against patriarchal thinking because "it would be seen as disrespectful", and they "don't want to speak on behalf of them". In reflecting on the expectation for women to do domestic labor, they say, "for example, my mom...she expects herself to be doing all of this, so for me to step in and be

like, don't ask that of my mom, she'd say, 'why are you saying that? I'm fine doing this.' And for her, she is fine." A participant of the focus group demonstrated why chosen family is important for women who are unable to find healing within their biological families. They share, "I was talking earlier about Jahajee Sisters, but also this idea coming up of Jahajee daughters, Jahajee mothers too, and I say Jahajee kin with some Jahajees who are non-binary. Coming from this very unhealthy, abusive, dysfunctional family, Jahajee Sisters redefines family and community for me. I get to have that after all." For this participant, a shared commitment to gender justice and healing from intergenerational trauma lays the foundation for family and community.

When asked what has helped her build relationships with women across generations, Karen shares that she's able to relate to women just by saying, "I understand your struggle, not because I've been there, but because I'm related to these women, and I kind of carry their trauma with me." Here, she demonstrates accountability to women in her community not through shared experience, but through being in relationship with them. She illuminates the ways that trauma not only affects the individual, but the entire community the individual is nested within. In "carrying their trauma" with her, she shares responsibility for supporting their healing.

Karen is hopeful that more stories can be shared and encourages older generations who felt like they couldn't speak out about the violence they've experienced to come forward, share how they've survived, and suggest changes that they want to see happen in the community. Recently, she learned that her both her grandmother and sister were survivors of domestic violence, and she says, "I want us to be on the level where we know what is toxic behavior, toxic relationships, and we know what steps there are to getting out of it or getting help." She wants people to know the story of how her mother left Trinidad to escape domestic violence, "that she



literally moved across seas because she wanted freedom.” She also wants to share her own story of getting help with the trauma she experienced from witnessing domestic violence in her home at a young age as a resource for future generations.

### **Intergenerational (Dis)continuities**

Participants shared complex accounts of their impressions of life in the Caribbean vs. the U.S., the role of education in achieving upward mobility, and how silence functions among women of different generations. Many of the participants who identified as immigrants migrated at a young age after the Immigration and Naturalization Act was passed in 1965 and saw higher education and “hard work” as necessary for success. Irene shared, “My mother always taught me that hard work and prayers, whatever goals you set in life can be achieved and I also taught my daughters that you have to aim for the stars. Whatever you work hard for, you can achieve in life.” Ambika shared that she had grown up with her mother reinforcing these messages and while she recognized that her intentions came from wanting to see her daughters be successful, she felt that her mother discouraged her from pursuing the non-traditional path she was on because of her fear that Ambika would not be able to financially sustain herself. A participant of the focus group pushed back on the idea of higher education as a way to achieve upward mobility because of how educational institutions have failed her in her life. This participant saw going away to college as her “escape plan” to liberate herself from her the abusive household she was living in, but quickly realized that educational institutions are spaces where trauma can be reproduced and relived.

Participants also had contrasting ideas about the differences between life in the Caribbean and life in the U.S. Participants who grew up in the Caribbean remember their time in the Caribbean as idyllic, but acknowledged that this may have more to do with how they remember

their childhoods than about Caribbean life in general. Jayasri, for example, says, “Of course I was much younger and very protected. My youth protected me.” However, participants did express feeling supported by their communities in the Caribbean, with Jayasri going on to say, “even though communities were mixed, all kinds of people living together, they look out for each other”. Karen shared similar reflections about growing up in Trinidad but also points out the particular challenges women face, especially in more remote areas, because of underdevelopment (i.e, not having access to washing machines, which places additional responsibility on women in the domestic sphere). Irene shared that she wouldn’t have been able to stay in Guyana after her husband passed away and left her to raise two young daughters alone. When Shama asks her if she had any regrets about migrating to the U.S., Irene says, “No, I don’t because I don’t know what I would have done in Guyana and, I feel like I’ve survived. I’ve succeeded and I’ve raised three beautiful daughters, which I could not have done in Guyana all by myself.”

Participants across generations spoke about silences that exist around women’s bodies, but participants of the older generation in particular shared having to “learn things by accident”. During the focus group, Irene shared a story she heard from her midwife:

“Back home, we were so young when we got married and nobody would tell you anything, and then the midwives would deliver the baby and stuff. So when she came to delivery my baby, my first big daughter, she said she just went to deliver a baby and the woman was opening her mouth for the baby. And she say like what the hell is wrong with you? She slapped her in her bum and says where it went in, that’s exactly where it have to come out!”

When Irene shared this story in the focus group, the room filled with laughter, emerging from a shared experience of misinformation and confusion that characterizes so many of the stories shared about women and GNC people and their bodies. This story prompted a discussion of the silences that exist specifically from elder women in the community in intergenerational spaces. Rani shared that often elder women will attend the sister circles but will take more of a listener's role. She expresses frustration with this dynamic:

“Sometimes when we have our circles and we have older generations of women come in, I've heard—let's say we have ten women at a time, I've heard nine of them say, I'm happy to be here, I just come to listen. I just come to sit. And sometimes I wanna be like, you're not allowed to do that. I want to hear what you have to say, I want to hear your stories. I don't want you to just sit and listen because that's how our stories get erased..we die and no one ever hears the story. Like even my grandma, I've had conversations with her where I learned so much about her story and I'm like, I would have never guessed that because you never talk about that kind of stuff. I feel like *coolie* people are so easily going about their days and no one talks about the struggles they endured. I think about indentureship and how I didn't even know that was a part of our family's history until I was older..and then you think about how Guyanese people are so resilient and strong to have survived that trip and ten gotten there, and that's just crazy to me.”

Participants then started to talk about how younger generations might contribute to the silencing of older generations, especially those who have more education. One participant shared, “I think part of that is about age, but it's also about education..the people who don't have higher education, their voices still matter. In our community we act like they don't.” Participants

began to reflect on why it might be important to create spaces specifically for elder women to share their stories and for their knowledge to be validated without the presence of younger generations. Shama noted her perception that often, women become more comfortable talking as they get older, which is tied to a sense of wisdom and freedom that they perhaps have not felt at other stages in their lives. The group reflected on the possible barriers that exist in community spaces that might prevent elders from sharing their stories, including shame around talking about family dynamics in contexts where privacy might be compromised. Rani shared in the focus group, “there’s also this idea that came up when I was sharing the project about privacy, and about how you shouldn’t go around talking about your story or family in the community, and when you present this idea of that being there forever and in a digital platform, yeah no, that’s crazy! No way.” In response to Rani, one participant shared how inviting elders into the space to talk about the stories of their parents or grandparents rather than their own lives might be one way to bring them into a storytelling space.

### **Ways Forward**

In this chapter, I deconstruct how participants reimagine past, present, and future and work towards healing their relationships across generations. Across their narratives, participants are drawing from their own experiences to shape their analyses, the experiences of people who are close to them, and in some cases the experiences of people they might never know. In doing so, they are shaping new histories and genealogies through their visions for social change. In the chapter that follows, I explore how co-authors of a digital archive of stories from Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people are investing in the visions shared in this chapter through the creation of a community-owned digital archive, traveling through time to imagine themselves as ancestors of generations to come.

## CHAPTER 6

### **Oral History and Digital Archiving: Working Against Historical Erasure**

In sharing stories and working to preserve those stories through the creation of a community-owned digital archive, participants engaged in an iterative process of reflection and co-creation. The twelve participants who completed oral history interviews spoke of the emancipatory power of storytelling and the ways in which the oral history series allowed for them to connect to the stories of women and GNC people across generations at different points in their lives. The co-authors of the digital archive similarly articulated their hopes for joining the project which were centered around building community and lifting up unearthed stories for present and future generations. However, participants also shared the dangers associated with storytelling, particularly around issues of privacy and anonymity. I explore both the possibilities and challenges of oral history and digital archiving for working against historical erasure and discuss the responsibilities associated with writing new histories. In reflecting on the process of creating a community-owned digital archive, participants articulate core ethics and values of the project which might serve as a resource for other communities interested in unearthing silenced narratives.

#### **The Emancipatory Power of Storytelling**

In their oral history interviews and focus group, participants shared the need for more spaces to share stories across generations. Shama shared that even though her interview partner, Irene, has been in her life for a long time, there was never a space for them to connect as women with similar experiences. She says:

“We connected as being women, not as being auntie and daughter or niece or whatever. But actually like, we’re both women with these experiences, right? And, I don’t know I felt like an adult talking with her in this way because I always see myself with elders as sort of being, even though I’m not really a young person anymore, I always see this hierarchy in the relationship, it’s kind of set already. And because I grew up with her, I don’t necessarily see myself as a woman in these relationships. I always think of myself as a daughter or as a niece. And it’s very different to talk with her about these things like marriage and the difficulties of things that women experience that I wouldn’t have normally.”

Here, Shama highlights the ways in which it is often difficult for her to connect with elders because women are often relegated to particular roles that organize their relationships to one another (i.e, daughter, niece, mother, wife). Irene similarly shared “being in this intergenerational space, it makes me forget how old I am. I just think, well, I’m one of you.” Shama agrees and says that’s how she felt in the interview as well. Irene also shares that while she thought she knew a lot about Shama, the interview made her realize how much more they have to learn about each other. Shama goes on to say:

“I actually hadn’t thought about prepping for the interview, but once you start talking, and if you have a partner who you feel connected to, it actually just comes out. And I think I was surprised at the amount of things that we talked about and I guess to think about things I hadn’t really thought about, which the questions help to bring out, or maybe I had thought about but never vocalized. I think the space and in addition to connecting, I appreciated being able to reflect, and in the interview particularly in such a

focused way. Cause I think about my life this-- there are years that I can't account for what happened during those years. "

In her reflection, Shama notes the importance of having a partner who made her feel like they want to know more about her life and that her story was important. In the focus group, many participants shared the importance of being witnessed and the need for spaces to be able to connect in new ways that they aren't able to in everyday life. Sarah also shared that storytelling can help women across generations connect from their shared lived experiences. She says:

"I always spend a lot of time with my grandma and grandfather. I even talk to my great grandma. And I guess storytelling, it's really important because are certain terms like racism or sexism, they might not know what racism and sexism are, but if you're able to tell a story you're able to show your opinions on something, and in a way provide answers for how you should deal with a certain situation."

Sarah shares here that while terms like "racism" and "sexism" might not resonate with her elders, storytelling can give people the opportunity to share their opinions on their life experiences and pass knowledge down to future generations.

In their interviews, many of the participants spoke directly to the listeners they imagined would be hearing their stories. In speaking about her childhood and feelings of loneliness and disconnection she experienced, Liloutie says, "For anyone who listens to this, they must know that they're not alone. And if they don't feel loved, know that you haven't found your people yet. Keep looking. We're out here, and we're waiting for you." Later in her interview after sharing her anger about how normalized childhood sexual abuse is in the community, she says, "I urge you, if you're a listener and you're hearing anything, anyone below the age of seventeen, it is illegal for you to engage in any sex with them or any sexual behavior. It is illegal. Go to the

cops. Don't even finish listening to this recording, just go straight to the police." She goes on to say that she wants to figure out how to intervene into what she considers a "culture of complicity of well, it didn't happen to me" where the sexual abuse of girls is seen as acceptable.

Made also thinks that for future generations, it is important to communicate openly about systemic and historical oppression rather than normalize it. They say, "even though my hope is that they never have to experience that, I want them to be prepared for the reality of it." They go on to say:

"Especially if I were to have daughters or if I were to be an aunt for any nieces, I want them to be fully aware of how rape and sexual assault happen and the fact that it is never their fault, but there are ways that unfortunately you need to defend yourself as a woman in this world. Even though, like I said, I hope that none of them ever have to go through this, I think it's so important to talk about, though. And I would be comfortable talking from my own personal experiences and being like, 'This happened to me'. Because then also, I want them to feel comfortable that if any of that were to happen to them, that they can come talk to me about it, because I will understand."

Here, Made shares the importance of talking to younger generations of women about sexual violence and equipping them with the tools to defend themselves. In their reflection, they recognize that sexual violence is never the fault of the survivor and share that it is important for survivors to come out so that those who are looking for resources might know where to find them. In the focus group, Irene reflects on both the joy and sadness that is shared through storytelling. She says:

"Telling my story and listening to their stories, even though they're young, they're like 30, 40 years younger than I am, but they still had exciting stories and sad stories to tell



about being oppressed by the male sex and abusive fathers and partners... They should not keep anything secret. They should come out to organizations or friends and share their stories and get help.”

In her interview, Rita notes, “we’re suffering in silence and don’t see people like us coming out with stories”, which reinforces cycles of violence and prevents community-wide conversations about trauma that has plagued generations of women and GNC people. Many participants noted that story-sharing is a necessary part of breaking intergenerational cycles of violence, with stories serving as a resource for women to make sense of the trauma they have experienced in their own lives and the lives of people close to them. In her interview of Kushri, Rani asks her if she thinks any stories from the past should be hidden from future generations. Kushri says:

“I don’t think any story should be hidden, I think that in fact, how we know that history, the most tragic parts of history, our future should know about it. What they should also learn is how we were resilient through it, how our ancestors were also resilient through it. I think that the major problem is suppressing stories and not airing them out. What I think should be hidden from society is certain religious scriptures or the male perspective or point of view it was written from. Somebody needs to go and rewrite these scriptures and absolutely take out those ideas of non-inclusion, of patriarchy, just suppressing the masses.”

In her interview, Kushri shares the importance of sharing even the “most tragic parts of history” so that future generations will know how their ancestors practiced resilience. She also wants to see narratives that have been reinforced about non-inclusion, patriarchy, and

suppression to be transformed and rewritten. Shama also discusses how she wishes she had more access to stories from previous generations of women in her family. She says:

“There are actually so many stories that I don’t know from previous generations, from the women in my family that I wish I knew and I feel like if they had told me, especially if they had told me from when I was a little girl, those stories might have helped me to navigate some of the situations I have encountered. There’s so many things I wish I had known about my grandmother and I can’t ask her now because she’s not here. She died, right. So I think that we don’t really get to ask questions and we don’t really get to talk. And I think that stays with us and it affects the way we communicate with each other. It’s really hard for me to talk to my mom about her life and sometimes I feel like she doesn’t want to talk about it. Not because she doesn’t necessarily want me to know, but because it’s just really hard for her and she’s just kind of locked, locked away a lot of her stories. But I wish that I knew them”.

Here, Shama reflects on how hearing the stories from previous generations of women in her family, especially as a young girl, would have helped her navigate situations in her own life. She also points out how quickly stories disappear if they are not shared, and how she can no longer access the stories of her grandmother because she has passed. Shama discusses how the expectation that women should stay silent and not ask questions of one another affects how women communicate with one another, sharing how her mother has “locked away” her stories as a result. Sarah also shares that it is important to hear the stories of those who we disagree with and those who have enacted harm. She says, “If you’re unable to see the other side and why someone is thinking that way..you need to understand why an abuser would think the way he does in order to tell him that he’s wrong, in order to enact some sort of structural change.” Here,

Sarah shares how she believes that understanding what might bring a perpetrator to enact violence and changing the conditions that produce violence will bring about structural change.

### **The Risks of Storytelling: Navigating Issues of Anonymity and Privacy**

While participants shared the emancipatory power of storytelling, they also recognized the risks associated with sharing stories. Anonymity remained important for participants, and all but two chose for their stories to remain anonymous for inclusion in the digital archive.

Participants were also given the option to share which audiences they wanted their stories to be shared with. They chose from the following options: 1) public, 2) anyone who identifies as Indo-Caribbean, 3) only other Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people, and 4) only other participants of the project. Nine participants chose to have their shared publicly with pseudonyms, one participant chose to use a pseudonym and to share only with other Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people, and one participants chose to share only with other participants of the project with a pseudonym, but later decided she could not include her interview in the archive because of sensitive material she shared about her parents that might put her at risk if her anonymity was compromised. One participant chose to include her full name and asked that her story be shared publicly. She shared that because so many of the stories from the past are anonymized, she wants future generations to be able to search for her story and know that it's hers. Finally, one participant chose to use her first name, but requested that only other Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people have access to her interview because she felt that the content of her interview could easily identify her.

After the recordings were completed, they were sent to the participants for review. Participants were asked whether there were any edits they wanted to make to their interviews before agreeing to submit them to the archive. In reflecting on her interview, Sarah noted that she

got nervous at a certain point and Karen responds, saying “Even though I saw you got nervous, you pushed through it. Even if you paused, even if you had a mental breakdown, it would be okay, just know. It’s comforting..we can edit it out, it’s okay.” Here, Karen reassures her that no story is final, and that they can always be rewritten.

Irene also shared that the interview process was difficult for her. She says, “I still have to decide if I want my story to be out there. You can listen and let me know what you think, cause I got emotional and stammered a little and lost.” In this statement, Irene illustrates the vulnerability it took to tell her story and her hesitation to have her story shared in its raw form. Liloutie also struggled with her decision to ultimately remain anonymous because of her parents being on social media and her fear of them finding her interview. While participants shared the importance of breaking silences in their community, they were immediately faced with the potential consequences of speaking out.

In her interview, Karen notes that we have to continue to be critical of stories. In reflecting on the role technology has played in changing the ways that women interact with one another, she says that social media and the internet can “help us build amazing platforms or it can help us break each other down”. She says, “They are able to see like, I feel this way, and you do too, and you’re experiencing it there. There are methods of helping myself and you”, but also shares that violence against women can be reinforced through storytelling depending on how stories are told or how advice is shared. Here, she raises the importance of not only nurturing bravery in women to share their stories, but also building spaces where women are able to find appropriate support in return.

In their interview, Lotus reveals how the act of breaking silences is not as simple as having the courage to speak, but to speak knowing that others might not hear you, that those who

do hear you might not be able to accept your truth, and that often, a consequences of speaking out is rejection. They talk about the material consequences they might face as a result of being rejected by their families (i.e, having to find housing because they live with their parents).

Sharing stories was considered an act of resistance and a healing practice despite the risks and in some cases, because of the risks. Often, rejection led participants to find communities that did accept them and allowed them to be their full selves.

### **The Possibilities and Challenges of Digital Archiving**

Four of the nine co-authors who participated in the process of creating a community-owned digital archive of the oral history interviews spoke of their experiences building both process and product--a process rooted in collaboration and the desires of the participants of the oral history project, and a physical website where community members could access a digital archive of the interviews. The co-authors met once every two weeks over a period of ten months to define the values grounding the project, identify the purposes of the archive, and create objectives that would help fulfill the goals articulated. The co-authors met in-person for a day-long retreat in August and again in November for the launch event of the archive where community members were invited to listen to the oral history interviews, share their own stories and hopes for the project, provide feedback on the website, and offer questions to the co-authors about the archive and its creation. Below, I draw on interviews with four of the co-authors to understand both the challenges and possibilities of digital archiving for working against historical erasure.

In their interviews, the co-authors were asked to share their hopes and expectations for joining the project. Ashoka, 23, spoke of their desire to join the project to document stories that systematically get erased and to address misogyny that becomes normalized in the community.

They share, “I think that’s part of my own family research and stuff, we don’t even realize that it’s happening because they get systematically erased so you don’t even know they got erased in the first place.” Here, they connect the systematic erasure of stories from women and GNC people directly to the perpetuation of misogyny. They go on to say, “I was also excited about the idea of working with a bunch of Indo-Caribbean women and gender non-conforming people because my own community, at least in Boston, is pretty siloed. It’s been really cool to meet so many other people with different backgrounds but with sort of a shared history, because I’m so used to interacting with South Asians who are not of indentured backgrounds.” In their reflection, Ashoka points to how the community built around the archive allows them to feel connected to their Indo-Caribbean identity, despite other ways of feeling isolated based on geography. They say, “I think as a new project, it might have been easier if we were all in the same place, but I think it’s also nice that we’re not all in the same place, cause we’re kind of creating a different, virtual-ish community.” The benefits and consequences of the virtual/digital aspects of this project are lifted up here, as Ashoka reflects on how trust-building is important for this type of work, particularly as the co-authors were meeting for the first time through this project. A participant of the focus group shared that for those most marginalized in the community, it is often difficult to connect with people in-person, sharing, “It’s just hard to stay involved when you’re struggling, so we have to take into account how physical space becomes an obstacle for marginalized people”, validating the value of digital spaces for building community and sharing resources.

Tanuja, 24, shared similar concerns, but was also impressed by how much work had been accomplished despite having “started as essentially strangers”. She says that it’s been interesting to see how communication is different in the digital age, and how it’s possible to have these

types of projects with people located across geographies. She shares, “For me, one of the best things about this project is getting to connect with a group of Indo-Caribbean people of approximately my generation. I didn’t really have that growing up, I didn’t grow up in a big Indo-Caribbean community. I’ve always been accustomed to being the only Indo-Caribbean person in the room, or in my school, or in my community. So suddenly having this group of so many other Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people with shared experiences and a shared cultural background was really amazing. It’s really empowering and affirming.”

She goes on to say that it was especially important to be able to connect with people of her cultural background committed to social justice, racial justice, and feminist activism and to “know that impulse exists in the community among our generation.” She says, “I think it’s a little different, even if you share certain values or ideologies or desires to work towards social justice with other people, I think it’s different when people are coming from a shared background and history as you, because then they tend to share more of the same concerns. Because I feel like the issues that face Indo-Caribbean women in terms of equality and justice are really unique and specific and not represented always in broader mainstream movements towards social justice.”

Jenni, 28, also spoke of her desire to build community through her involvement with the project. She says:

“I’m always really, really hungry for community space with other Indo-Caribbean folks. And it’s not something I get a lot or have been around..I never felt like I had a community of people, and just where, I don’t know, where I could be in a different place where when I go home to Trinidad that kind of sigh and lifting off of something..to be able to experience that also while I’m here. So I just think my hunger for that kind of connection is what made me really excited about it and was my expectation going into

this, this space where I can connect and work with other folks who care deeply about the Caribbean, care deeply about stories.”

As a Trinidadian immigrant, Jenni shares her desire to experience the sense of relief or “lifting off” in her home in the U.S. that she experiences when she returns home to Trinidad. She also shares her hope to connect with people who not only have a shared experience as her, but a shared commitment and care for the Caribbean and the stories of those descended from the Caribbean. Jenni goes on to share her why her experiences working in archives led her to this project:

“The part of archives that has always interested me has been community created archives, so the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, I remember when I first went to that and I was just blown away and was like, wow. It resonated so deeply in ways that other museums or spaces hadn’t. And then I did some work at my undergrad archives, never really saw myself working in archives because I don’t really love the big institutional archives. They feel a little removed from the importance of why these things are worth collecting. And I think that needs to be there for me in order to feel that excitement.”

With a desire for community also came anxieties around the hierarchies that exist within Indo-Caribbean spaces. Jenni shared her experiences of Indo-Caribbean spaces in the U.S. being Hindu-centric, reifying notions of belonging to India, and focusing on the experiences of those who grew up in the U.S. vs. those who migrated here at a later age. She also spoke about the class privilege that comes with being able to do non-paid work, sharing, “I feel like a lot of the folks who are in spaces, I feel like we all because we have the time to do it, tend to have some class privilege in ways that aren’t discussed.” Finally, Jenni spoke about the tensions around being part of an Indo-Caribbean American space having been born and raised in the Caribbean.



She says, “Knowing that the oral histories that were being done were being done by folks who have migrated to the U.S. and that it was Caribbean American stories, I think something I felt tension about in myself. Like how would I say something about that if we were representing ourselves to be an Indo-Caribbean archive, but we don’t really have folks who are currently living in the Caribbean being part of it? I think some of those things going into it I anticipated myself feeling discomfort around not knowing how to share because it doesn’t feel like it’s coming from a place of critique. I know that sharing things like that often comes across as critique and condemnation, and that’s not how it’s feeling.” The interviews served as intervention into the process of co-creating the archive, as what was discussed in the interviews were part of developing a praxis of ongoing reflection about how our decisions aligned with the original mission of the archive, to lift up the voices of Indo-Caribbean women and gender non-conforming people at various intersections of identity.

The co-authors shared other challenges that had come up in the work, particularly around the language used to represent the stories the archive seeks to lift up and mindfulness around the ways in which language can enact implicit erasures (i.e, being sure to use gender-expansive language and not reifying bio-essentialist notions of womanhood). Ashoka also brought up issues around accessibility, stating “If my mom can’t read it, I don’t want to write it”. Each of the co-authors brought up the silences that exist even among the stories that were collected, including an absence of voices from non-binary, trans, and queer people, people from working class backgrounds, people with mental illness, and elders over the age of 70. In reflection on inclusion and visibility, Tanuja shared that our choice to use a content management system that allows for different privacy settings allows us to “lift up people’s voices but also respect conscious silences”, which is important to archival work.

Alisa, 22, spoke of the challenges of collecting stories and the ways that she has witnessed people be protective and possessive of their stories, making it difficult to bring them to spaces where storytelling is considered a practice of connection and healing. As a mixed-race person with Chinese, Black, Indian, and white ancestry, she shares that her father was against her taking an ancestry test because of his own internalized anti-Blackness, which she points to as an example of how shame and erasure is transmitted intergenerationally. She says, “this generation doesn’t even know the stories, but we inherit the trauma from those stories”, and reiterates her commitment to breaking silences in the community and documenting our stories. Having grown up in a community where the only Indo-Caribbean people she knew were members of her family, she shared that she appreciated the opportunity to listen to the interviews and hear different perspectives on how people articulate Indo-Caribbean identity and belonging. Alisa also shared that she appreciated our choice to upload the interviews in their original form, only editing the audio in response to privacy requests from the interviewees. For example, in many of the interviews there is a great deal of background noise (i.e, sirens from the street, music playing from a car parked outside, the sound of children playing in the downstairs area of the interview space), and Alisa shared that she appreciates how these sounds “set the place” and encourage people who submit their recordings to submit them in whatever form is available to them.

These interviews were part of a reflective process to co-create a community-owned digital archive, and after these conversations happened, we returned to the larger group and identified strategies for the challenges we were facing in the moment, but also the challenges we could anticipate emerging in the future. Every choice that was made required unanimous support from each of the co-authors, and consensus-building was central to the process of creating the archive. Furthermore, an underlying assumption guiding our work was the recognition that

archives are always dynamic, aspirational, and unfinished. One challenge we spoke about was making sure we would not simply be relying on those typically underrepresented in Indo-Caribbean narratives to submit to our archive, but that we would have to be intentional about building outreach strategies to connect with communities who are underrepresented in broader historical narratives, but also within our archive. This was an issue we had not yet talked about in the larger group, so the one-on-one interviews allowed for this conversation to emerge and for us to reflect together about building systems to address these tensions (i.e, expanding the work of the outreach team).

Participants spoke of the importance of building a structure that has been conducive to reflection, encouraging transparency about our practices, the stories we have been able to collect (and not been able to collect), how we want to grow, and what kind of community we want to build through the archive. In this way, the interviews were a space for both reflection and action, as they informed how the group of co-authors thought about the future of the archive, including the need for a “sunset plan”. Tanuja shared her thoughts about information in the digital age, saying, “It’s important to understand that what goes on the internet don’t actually last forever, it can actually be sort of ephemeral, and funding can run out, or the platform can get updated and make yours obsolete, so having that long-term vision in mind and not assuming that what we create will be able to last forever.” Here, Tanuja raises the point that while digital archiving is a form of preservation, it is also unpredictable, insecure, and precarious in its own ways.

## CHAPTER 7

### Discussion

Of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger. (Lorde, 1977, p. 42)

Where is the healing place? Community is the healing place. (hooks, 1993, p. 15)

This dissertation explored two interrelated questions: How do the stories that Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people share challenge dominant narratives of resistance to historical oppression? How might oral history and digital archiving be used to work against the historical erasure of women and GNC people? Central to my inquiry is a commitment to understanding the role of storytelling in movements for gender justice. Romero and Stewart (1999) argue that “naming and defining experience, articulating and legitimating new and untold stories, and making space for those stories in the wider culture is crucial work of social transformation” (p. 12). In other words, storytelling is a transformative practice because the stakes are both personal and political.

Below, I return to my initial research questions and discuss how Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people practice resistance by breaking silences in their communities around gender-based oppression, shifting norms through producing analyses of their own stories, and reshaping community narratives. I then draw from the data to articulate a decolonial feminist storytelling praxis rooted in values of redistribution and reciprocity. Finally, I discuss the implications of this work for understanding the gendered legacies of colonialism and suggest future directions.

## **Breaking Silences Through Collective Remembering and Storytelling: Against Passivity**

In this dissertation, I argue that collective remembering and storytelling subvert dominant historical readings and facilitate understandings about how modern colonial logics shape experience. Storytelling is transformative not only for the speaker, but for the listener as well. As argued by Chazan et al. (2018), listening can be considered a form of activism, bringing attention to the critical work of reflection that is necessary to social transformation. This study explored stories of resistance from Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people, arguing against historical narratives which represent them as passive, nonconfrontational, and submissive to patriarchal values. Historically, narratives of Indo-Caribbean resistance have focused on the stories of upper-middle class, educated, Hindu men, failing to problematize myths of Indian authenticity, respectability, and purity, which are inextricably linked to questions of gender. Only recently has attention been brought to the diverse activism of Indo-Caribbean women (Hosein & Outar, 2016), yet there is much to be explored about the role of storytelling in movements for gender justice in Indo-Caribbean communities.

In their oral history interviews, participants spoke about their experiences with gender-based violence across multiple levels, but the most common form of violence spoken about was domestic violence. The stories shared about surviving domestic violence, witnessing domestic violence, and learning of aunts, mothers, grandmothers, and sisters who had lived through domestic violence shed light on the intimate ways patriarchal violence manifests. Because of the continued perception that domestic violence is a “private” issue, breaking silences about domestic violence and inviting community members to be part of social change intervenes on its normalization and perpetuation. As Cruz (2001) argues, making visible the battles that are fought at home is necessary to movements for liberation. Cruz (2001) says, “I first heard the stories of

my great-aunts and great-grandmothers who wore men's clothing and fought in the revolution, only to come home to fight my great-grandfathers.” (p. 657). Thus, storytelling can be considered a form of activism that blurs the boundaries between the public and the private.

While trauma is generational, so is resistance (Comas-Diaz, Hall, & Neville, 2019). In listening to the interviews, there is something poetic about hearing the screams and laughter of children playing in the space downstairs while the speakers are sharing their stories in a closed office upstairs, a reminder of the ways in which generations are bound to one another even when we lock ourselves away. In this context, ‘intergenerational’ encompasses what is inherited and what gets passed on, in linear and non-linear ways; about seeing oneself in history, and in the future. Chazan et al. (2018) argue that critical approaches to aging and intergenerationality consider shifts during the life course as “ever ongoing processes of change, learning, returning, thinking, and acting that happen from birth to death” (p.11), as compared to predominant understandings of aging that assume a chronological progression of social, cognitive, or biological development that reinscribe heteronormative and colonial markers of life passage. “Pumpkin vine” is a common metaphor that Guyanese people use to describe extended networks of people who they are related to through birth, marriage, geographic proximity, and other forms of kinship. The co-authors of the digital archive decided to use the image of a mangrove tree for our logo, as their roots are interconnected to support each other, yet their seed pods drop off of their trees to travel to places where they can thrive. We need not look far to find the ways in which the relationships between living and non-living beings are built, broken, and rebuilt again, in another place.

In sharing their hopes for other Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people, participants spoke about their visions for social change, encouraged future generations to continue to resist,

and shared their desires for Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people to find acceptance within themselves. In their research on the knowledge shared between Navajo women across generations, Schulz, Knoki, and Knoki-Wilson (1999) argue that younger generations will carve their own identities reflecting the social conditions they counter in their own lives, and that the challenge for older generations is to “enable younger generations to assert themselves as knowing subjects who construct identities shaped, but not determined, by their histories” (p. 188). The participants of this project radically imagined the worlds they want to see future generations thrive in, creating possibilities for histories that have yet to be written.

### **Developing a Decolonial Feminist Archival Praxis**

Lugones (2010) defines decolonial feminism as a framework that “enables us to see what is hidden from our understandings of both race and gender and the relation of each to normative heterosexuality” (p. 1). Lugones argues that decolonial feminism starts from a place of coalition, with commitments to “dwelling” in interconnected histories of resistance to colonial oppression. A decolonial feminist archival praxis is grounded in values of redistribution and reciprocity. It is returning stories to the communities they belong to with acknowledgement that archives are always aspirational. It is forward-looking and shift as new narratives beg to be written. It addresses what has been normalized and remains unseen. It prioritizes choice, including the choice to be anonymous, to refuse, or to stay quiet. It makes space for hesitation, vulnerability, and discomfort. It recognizes when narratives that were meant to promote healing are doing damage. It redistributes power to communities who did not know that “social justice impulses” lived in their lineage. It recognizes “if my mom can’t read it, I don’t want to write it”. It also knows that stories don’t last forever, even on the internet.

Feminist archival praxis values reciprocity in that it considers the relationships that guide storytelling and archiving and pays attention to how power moves between those relationships. It is attentive to the positions of storyteller, listener, and archivist, working to promote transparency and dissolve hierarchies. It is in the spaces people share to connect across geography and time. It is to listen and be listened to. It is to teach and to learn. It is joy and sadness in shared experience. It is reaching out and retreating inward. It requires trust, mutual accountability, and taking the risk to connect. It is grounded in the desires of community members rather than the commitments of institutions. It is where stories can always be rewritten.

### **Contributions**

This research contributes to emerging Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship which is concerned with mapping and making visible the gendered legacies of colonialism. In her research on the experiences of women during indentureship, Bahadur (2013) found characterizations of indentureship which described the system as “a kind of limbo into which people disappeared, never to be heard from again” (p. 37). In searching for information about her great-grandmother, Sujaria, who left India for Guyana as an indentured laborer in 1903, she recalls a conversation she had with a guide who showed her around a village in India she believed her great-grandmother to be from. She asks her guide to ask elders of the village if they ever knew of someone named Sujaria, who responds saying that there was no point in asking because “women were not known persons at the time.” (p.19). Later in the book as she works to make sense of the silences of women in the archive, she argues that it might have been intentional, as there were reasons why women might want to remain anonymous. She says, “Sometimes I think the women who left India as coolies kept quiet on purpose..the stories that did descend often reveal as much about how families choose to see their histories as they do



about the actual histories” (p. 48). Here, Bahadur raises an important question about the functions of silence, inviting critical reflection on self-determination in archives. The findings from this research invite further questions about storytelling, conscious silences, and empowering survivors to tell (or not tell) their stories in the ways they choose.

This work also has broader implications for exploring how storytelling might illuminate the intersections of race, gender, and migration in immigrant communities of color. As argued by Cole (2009), little attention has been given in psychological literature to the intersections of race, gender, and other categories of identity, and even less attention has been paid to how social categories depend on one another for meaning. In her seminal piece on intersectionality theory, Crenshaw (1990) argued that because social categories are interacting rather than additive, they cannot be studied in isolation. To understand the long-reaching effects of colonialism in immigrant communities of color, questions of racial justice cannot be separated from questions of gender justice, nor can questions of gender justice be separate from questions of immigrant justice.

Black feminist scholars like hooks (1993) have long argued that white supremacy relies upon a “structure of deceit” (p.22) to perpetuate degrading racial stereotypes, so that Black people were socialized to believe that survival was possible only if they learned how to deceive. As a result, hooks (1993) argues that children are often raised to believe that “it is more important how things appear than the way they really are” (p. 15). While hooks wrote specifically of the Black experience, the importance of what she calls “collective unmasking” (hooks, 1993, p.26) has relevance for dismantling white supremacy and interlocking systems of oppression across communities of color.

## **Future Directions**

In recent years, researchers have explored how educators are integrating oral history methods in their classrooms to democratize history and develop historical thinking skills among students (Llewellyn & Ng-A-Fook, 2017). Future studies should consider how digital archives can transform sociopolitical consciousness about gender injustice in communities of color in various educational spaces, including those outside of formal institutions. For example, how might oral history interviews be used for political education? How does the act of listening to oral history interviews influence people's ability to make sense of the injustice they have witnessed in their communities and experienced in their lives? These questions ask how archives might shift collective memory, or how communities from the family to the nation remember themselves (Abrams, 2010). Gone (2009) argues that healing historical trauma requires addressing the psychosocial need for community and belonging; future research might explore how community storytelling can address these needs by restoring matrilineal lines of care that have been broken through historical oppression (Clarke, 1981).

Another line of inquiry might explore how participant stories shift depending on the audiences they imagine receiving their stories, given that some participants shared concern around whether their stories sounded coherent or "exciting" enough to be recorded and documented. The process of eliciting memories is dialogic, the outcome of the relationship between listener and speaker. Because participants were given the option to choose who they wanted to share their story with, it is important to ask how stories might shift depending on the imagined audience. It is also important to note that knowledge is not only shared through language, but also through affect, intuition, witnessing, interaction, and shared experience.

Future studies might explore other ways that knowledge is passed down and preserved outside of the limits of spoken language

Foundational to participatory action research (PAR) is a commitment to ongoing reflection about whose voices are missing, and whose knowledge remains absent. Future studies should explore how different aspects of identity, including but not limited to sexuality, class background, religious background, and migration status influence the construction of life narratives of Indo-Caribbean women and GNC people. While this project worked to center women and GNC people, there continues to be an overrepresentation of cisgender women's stories, and further work needs to be done to bring the perspectives of transgender and gender expansive people into existing scholarship. Khan (2012) argues that Indo-Caribbean identity is "too new and too precarious for any threat to cultural cohesiveness" (p. 15), and that for the Indo-Caribbean community to achieve full postcolonial Caribbean citizenship, there can be no room for non-normative or transgressive expressions of gender and sexuality. Her argument here about the ways in which new parameters of exclusion are created to solidify other forms of inclusion provides important justification for the study of Indo-Caribbean identities that are considered "transgressive". An underlying assumption of activist archiving is that archives are always incomplete (Caswell & Cifor, 2016; Chazan et al., 2018), which opens up a vast array of possibilities that have yet to be imagined for exploring how participatory oral history and digital archiving can be used to support ongoing movements for justice.

### **Endings/Beginnings**

The urgency of this work lies in the reality that stories are fleeting and disappear if they are not told. During our launch event for the archive, Karen shared that by participating in the oral history interview, she gained a sense of immortality through sharing her story. Her reflection

echoed in my mind when Donna Dojoy was murdered by her husband a week later. In a world full of loss and things stolen, how do we preserve what little we have left? What does preservation do for us?

In the closing focus group, we ended the day sharing our favorite childhood stories. Eileen shared that her late husband was a poet and collected the writing of Khalil Gibran. When she migrated after his death, a copy of “The Prophet” was the only item she brought with her. She said, “I had nothing to hold onto. History was gone.” For Irene and future generations, I wish for abundance to hold on to, and to let go of.

## Appendix A

### Demographic Characteristics of Oral History Interview Participants

Pseudonym/Preferred Name	Age	City/State	Preferred Gender Pronouns	Nationality	Parents' Nationality
Shama	37	Long Island, NY	She/her	Surinamese	Guyanese
Sarah	19	Long Island, NY	She/her	American	Guyanese
Karen Sonilal	24	Queens, NY	She/her	Trinidadian	Trinidadian
Liloutie	42	Queens, NY	She/her	American	Guyanese
Irene	69	Bronx, NY	She/her	Guyanese	Guyanese
Lotus	22	Queens, NY	They/them	American	Guyanese
Jayasri	65	Bronx, NY	She/her	Guyanese	Guyanese
Kushri	27	Brooklyn, NY	She/they	American	Guyanese
Made	22	Queens, NY	They/she	American	Guyanese
Rani	22	New York, NY	She/her	Guyanese	Guyanese
Rita	28	Bronx, NY	She/her	American	Guyanese/Trinidadian
Ambika	37	Bronx, NY	She/her	American	Guyanese

## Appendix B

### Demographic Characteristics of Co-Author Participants of Semi-Structured Interviews

Pseudonym/Preferred Name	Age	City/State	Preferred Gender Pronouns	Nationality	Parents' Nationality
Ashoka	23	Boston, MA	They/them	American	Guyanese
Tanuja	24	Miami, FL	She/her	American	Guyanese/Trinidadian
Alisa	22	Denver, CO	She/her	American	Guyanese/Surinamese
Jenni	28	Washington, D.C.	She/her	Trinidadian	Trinidadian

## Appendix C

### Sample Interview Questions

Each interview will start off by the speaker and listener introducing each other by name, stating the date and location of the interview for the recording.

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself? (gender pronouns, how do you identify in terms of racial/ethnic background, age, where did you grow up?)
2. Think of your life as a movie. If I were making a movie about your life, what are some of the major scenes that would be in that movie? Who are the important characters?
3. Is there a story from your life that you wish you could tell other Indo-Caribbean women and GNC folks (those who have come before you, those in your life now, or future generations?)
  - Provide as many details as possible: Why is this story important? Where does it take place? How do you feel physically when you think of this story?
4. Describe some messages that you learned/were taught to you as a young person that no longer serve you. How did you come to resist those messages?
5. Are there ways you've seen or experienced discrimination against women, girls, and GNC folks in your family, or in your community? Do you believe that change is possible—and if so, when did you realize that it was?
6. What are some of the funny or joyful things you remember about your childhood?
7. Are there stories from the past that you feel are/should be hidden from future generations? Why?
8. Are there any stereotypes or misrepresentations of women and GNC folks in your community that you think are important to challenge given your own experiences or the experiences of women and GNC folks in your life?
9. What do you think stands in the way of women and GNC folks across generations building relationships with one another? What has helped you build relationships across generations?
10. What are hopes you have for your generation? Future generations?

## Appendix D

### Jahajee Sisters Oral History Series: Session I

- I. Toning exercise  
Introduction to Jahajee Sisters  
Introduction to Oral History Series, Project Goals  
Community Agreements
- II. Writing exercise: Look around at the Indo-Caribbean womxn in this space, and think about the Indo-Caribbean womxn in your life now, those who have come before you, and those who will come after. What do you wish you could tell them? What do you wish you could know about them?  
(5-7 minutes to write, 5-7 minutes to share around circle)
- III. Building interview skills and practice:
  - Develop interview agreements and questions for digging deeper during interviews
- IV. Deep listening exercise: Find someone you don't know in the group. You will each take turns responding to the question: Where was your first home? Each person will respond to the question for 10 minutes. In this exercise, we will practice deeply listening to one another without verbally responding to them (you can nod, maintain eye contact, but try to allow the person to speak uninterrupted for 10 minutes) You may ask follow up questions (i.e, what happened after that? How did that make you feel? Tell me about..)
- V. Participants pair up and schedule interviews
- VI. Go over structure of interviews: Participants will interview each other for an hour and there will be 10-15 minutes for reflection at the end. Everyone will receive a \$25 visa gift card for participating and can decide whether they want the interviews to be included in the digital archive. Everyone will get copy of their recording to play over so that participants can submit edits/omissions.
- VII. Develop Interview Guide  
Have everyone write down at least one personal goal for the interview



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