Narratives of (Dis)Unity:

Diaspora, Nehemiah, and Silence in a Chicagoland Tamil Church

A THESIS

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Introduction:

When one thinks of diaspora, conceptions of narrative (those of imagined homelands, a peoples' history, stories of migration, and so on) follow closely after. The narratives that a diasporic people hold, relate, and value are key in their positioning themselves as "diaspora" and reveal certain ideologies (Gal & Irving 2019) that undergird their project of diasporic creation. In his work *Little India: Diaspora, Time and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius,* linguistic anthropologist Patrick Eisenlohr stats that "as a social practice, narrative has the power to link subjects into experienced communities, creating a "narrative identity," a sense of collective being and location in history" (Eisenlohr 2007). However, the notion of "a (singular) narrative identity" becomes complicated in diaspora by the very stories that those diasporic peoples hold—which is to say, what of a diaspora that is not united in its narrative understanding of its becoming, being, or beliefs? Further, what if the diasporic narrative is itself littered with schisms, pushing against the notion of diaspora as some united monolith?

Any "singular" diaspora is not so singular: "diasporic orientations are not to be presupposed by knowing the place of origin of migrants; rather, diasporas are produced through and ongoing reinterpretation of history" (Eisenlohr 2007); thus, when a diasporic people are taken as a united monolith, those various reinterpretations, and the narratives that arrive therefrom, of a "shared" history become neglected. In his essay Cultural Identity and Diaspora (2019), Stuart Hall argues that diasporas are always framed by two simultaneously operative axes, one being the axis of similarity and continuity, and the other of difference and rupture (Hall 2019). Diasporas are processual, constantly oscillating between "a bounded homeland-oriented identity and unbounded transnational identities…Rather than speak of 'a diaspora' or 'the diaspora' as an entity, a bounded group, an ethnodemographic or ethnocultural fact, it may be

more useful to speak of diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices, and so on" (Khosravi 2018).

In my ethnographic work, I landed amidst a diasporic project of Tamil-Christian church formations, a project which is undergirded by and has resulted in a number of (shared, contested) narratives which themselves hold numerous voices and perspectives, littered with matters of value, power, and identity: Since its founding in 1997, just 26 years ago, the Chicago Tamil Church (CTC) has seen a number of fissures—approximately four in total, according to the collected narratives from my interlocutors—that have resulted in the establishment of four other Chicagoland Indian churches, of which three are Tamil, that have each since experienced *their own* fissures. From my very first day attending CTC, the members of CTC—notably the men in the congregation—presented their history of the church and its splits as a complicated, fraught lore (particularly in regard to their most recent church-split in 2015), one which marks *this* congregation—CTC—as explicitly and implicitly differentiated from the others or the particularly "other". This, within a minority ethno-linguistic-religious group which is in so many ways *already* othered.

The south-eastern state of Tamil Nadu, India (population around 63 million), has an approximately 88% Hindu religious population and a Christian religious population of just over 6% (Wolf & Sherinian 2017). A minority religious group in Tamil Nadu, Tamil-Christians in the American diaspora are, as one interlocutor from CTC described to me, "a minority within a minority" — a minority religious group amongst Tamils, a minority ethno-linguistic and religious group amongst South Asians in America, and a minority ethnic group in America-at-large. This is not just a singular diaspora: neither a singularly Tamil one, nor a singularly Christian one. Tamils themselves are not a monolith, ranging regionally, nationally,

etc., and Christianity is not exactly known for its singularity in theological interpretations/practice. Diasporic Tamil Christians themselves practice Christianity in a number of ways, cross-denominationally, cross-lingually, and so on.

In the face of such divisions and ruptures, there is often a striving for unity; yet, in the case of the diasporic Tamil-Christians, the minority diasporic group is met with further splits, creating a fractaled diaspora. Linguistic anthropologist Courtney Handman, in her book *Critical Christianity*, argues that internal critique—and the ensuing schisms that follow—is the very "stuff" of protestantism (2014). It is in this critique that the pursuit of a "perfect" or "perfected" congregation is formed: here, I see the Tamil church fissures not only as a way to perfect "church" but to perfect the American, Tamil-Chrisitian diaspora. The vessel for the ideology of diaspora are the narratives they are housed in.

Framing Ethnography and Arguments

While my project can and does point to narratives of/in diaspora at-large, I am ultimately dealing with a *particularly* religious diaspora—which is to say that what differentiates this project from a project on diaspora generally or Tamil diaspora specifically is the group's religious identification as Christian. Religion can act as a compelling force in creating a sense of collective and diasporic identity; the narratives of a shared religious history, experience, and those narratives in the scriptural texts themselves act as a binder in bringing together "community" (Johnson 2012). Religion acts as a vessel for diaspora, and diasporas themselves extend, riff on, and in some way shape/transform the religion that they carry (Johnson 2012).

The diasporic (or otherwise) re-shaping (or re-imagining) of a religious practice can certainly lead to division; these divisions often exist on the lines of doctrinal/generational

differences or issues of moral/political identity (Starke & Bruno 1996; Shin & Park 1988; Mahokoto 2019). However, in this diasporic Tamil-Christian case, the conflict and ensuing fissure at hand is one of authority, which while itself not an uncommon cause of splits (Starke & Bruno 1996) has a particularly pertinent role in the case of this project; I demonstrate that the Tamil-Christian diasporic community, not created under duress or in the face of crisis, has the freedom to explore *in and through* its diaspora the bounds of its religious identity and practice.

The Tamil-Christians who congregate in the Chicagoland diaspora did not arrive in the United States under issues of authority; rather, most immigrated for the purposes of schooling, work, or marriage. Thus, where a diasporic community which is formed under the weight of an oppressive history, with a shared history of fleeing from authority may strive to stay united, I demonstrate how the diasporic Tamil Chrisitians were perhaps *able* to split off from one another to explore and redefine matters of authority within the diasporic space, creating something of a diasporic diaspora.

Paying mind to the major 2015 church-split, I argue that undergirding the Chicago Tamil Church's project of diasporic (Tamil church) (re)creation are subtle yet persistent historical-narratively-charged voices which index and indeed prefer certain perspectives (Gal & Irvine, 2019) over others, and in doing so (re)define or (re)determine limits/boundaries of (institutional, religious, and otherwise) power. The very narrative-of-fissure which exists within said voices is then cited in administrative documents and real-time discourse by church members, revealing the ideologies that the narrative (and its usage) hold, particularly in how the congregation understands (their) "diaspora" itself.

My interest in narrative as the scale of tracking diasporic division/creation is borne of my ethnographic work itself; while much of the work of anthropologists in studying (perhaps

particularly Tamil) diaspora functions at the level of semiotic and intertextual analyses, my interlocutors were themselves more interested in sharing, voicing, and citing their narratives in understanding the history and aftermath(s) of their fissure(s). In tracking the movement of CTC's narrative, its constitutive parts, and the authority/power therein, I think of what historian Michel Trouillot says in his work *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*: "The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots." I end my work by following moments of silence in the congregation, moments where a certain dissonance between what has been, what is, and what the church believes points to the congregation's (understanding of their) narrative and the power/ideologies housed therein.

A Haunting Personal Narrative:

Before I enter my ethnographic work, it is of import to note that my interest in diasporic narratives—especially those of Tamil Christians in America—does not exist in a vacuum; rather, as a diasporic subject myself, my familiarity with the continuity, rupture, and (re)creation in embodying a diasporic identity is deeply personal. At the age of nineteen, meditating on personal history as a child of Indian immigrants, ethnicity as a Tamil-Indian, nationality as an American, and religion as one born into a Hindu-convert-Christian family, I write the following:

The settings of this history tell a story in themselves. Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu, in my grandfather's office library—his love for the British, his profession teaching English literature, held in each of his dusty books; the Christian school my grandfather sent my father to in order to give him a proper English education, only to have his son return with a Bible in his hands and a new God in his heart; on an airplane, inside my mother as a fetus with my father and older sister

beside us, headed to San Francisco with idlis and chutney, wrapped in foil, stowed away in the suitcases; at Hillview Bible Chapel, age four, with my baby brother in my lap, watching our formerly Hindu mother accept her husband's religion as her own, dipped gently into a tub of water by a man with kind, blue eyes; in the photo hanging above my family's fireplace, all five of our brown bodies dressed in white shirts, blue jeans, smiling wide for the camera, and under the framed image, a wooden carving on the fireplace mantel: PRAISE THE LORD.

At the edges of each of these scenes (divided by semicolons as they are) is rupture—and yet they are held together by certain continuities; in them is spoken an intimacy with movement, loss, and evolution. It is with this intimate familiarity of diasporic-being that I arrived as a researcher, compelled by some (mis)understanding of my own, personal narratives to study other Tamil-Christian diaspora(s) in the United States.

In his work *Multisituated*, anthropologist Kaushi Sunder Rajan discusses the diasporic-subject-as-researcher-of-diaspora. Citing Gabriel Schwab, Sunder Rajan states that "'autobiographical traces' are not just about confronting or situating one's autobiography; the trace is not reducible to reflexivity [but is] transferential" (2021). In my subject-position as researcher in a Tamil Christian diasporic space, my own autobiographical understanding of (the) diasporic positioning traces into the very work itself—in the very space of encounter within ethnographic material, I and the space are "haunted" by my own narrative (Sunder Rajan 2021).

Encountering Ethnography:

Haunted, thus, as I began my research on diasporic Tamil populations, I made a Google search for "Tamil churches near me" and was met with three different churches in three different

locations, unaware at the time the story behind this diasporic, Chicagoland Tamil Christian diaspora. CTC was the first church I reached out to and happened to be the first one founded; the current pastor and his family, too, happened to live in Hyde Park, quite conveniently. What follows are months of weekly carpools to church services, Bible studies, cultural events, and "church-family" gatherings, as I learn more about the narratives that created this diasporic community.

Growing up, my diasporic, Tamil-church-family was simply that—my nuclear, Tamil family with whom I went to church. My family attended multicultural, American, English speaking protestant churches, and within a non-mainline assembly at that. So, entering my fieldwork, I had no real idea of what I would encounter or how I would encounter it: my imagination of the Tamil-Christian diaspora in America was fairly limited, if not nonexistent.

The American imagination of a Christian church, however varied, probably does not feature a chapel filled with Tamil women dressed in sarees or churidars, fragrant jasmine flowers pinned in their hair; or hymns sung in carnatic-style Tamil songs (keerthanais) accompanied by the rhythmic beat of a tabla; or sermons delivered by a Tamil pastor in a mix of sen (pure) Tamil, colloquial Tamil, and English; or a refreshment table during the fellowship hour, post-service, with your choice of one aunty's mutton biryani, another's chicken curry, and yet a third's thire-sadham (yogurt rice). My imagination of a Christian church (as a Tamil woman who was raised in American protestant churches) must have, then, been fairly American. It was only in beginning my fieldwork at CTC that I was introduced to particularly Tamil ways of doing Christianity—and particularly Christian ways of doing Tamilness, amongst other Tamil-Christian ways of doing things.

For members of CTC, their diasporic family is not simply their nuclear families, but their church-family itself. Membership into this family, it seems, is predicated mostly on being Tamil—and perhaps secondarily Christian. When I first reached out to the church, I was connected with the church board's president, Rohan, who then connected me not to the pastor, but to the pastor's wife. We met over the phone, and I explained my interest in attending the church as a researcher; we were speaking in English. She asked me where I was from, speaking quickly and with an almost detached interest. I told her that I am from California but that my parents are from Tamil Nadu.

"Oh," she said, suddenly excited. "*Tamil-ah?*" I laughed.

"*Aamam.*" Yes, I am Tamil. The rest of the conversation carried on with a sense of familiarity and comfort—and in Tamil. My ticket into the church, before even discussing my family's religious identity, was my being Tamil itself.

This sense carries across a number of CTC's attendees: those who come from a Catholic background but attend a protestant Tamil church in the US, young adults who did not attend their family's church back home but do attend here, others coming together in the name of diasporic unity. And this is not so dissimilar to the foundations of CTC itself—diasporic Tamils uniting, coming together as a group and (re)creating a home, an extended (church) family.

With my ticket as a Tamil (and a researcher, and someone raised as a Christian), I am invited into the church. The pastor and his family pick me up the Sunday after my initial phone conversation with his wife, and in an old, silver Honda Pilot (one gifted to the family by the congregation), the storytelling begins, in bits and pieces, until many months of ethnographic work, oral narrative collecting, and interviewing later, I am left with something that could be called a narrative. As Trouillot correctly states, "History is always produced in a specific

historical context. Historical actors are also narrators, and vice versa" (Trouillot 2015). What follows is a recounting of the historical narrative that I was told as the "history" that happened both from my interlocutors and from other data sources, from websites to constitutions to articles.

Narrative(s) of Foundation, Fissure, and Power:

Foundational History

Leaving an already-established Chicago Indian church, Indian Christian Fellowship Church (ICFC), in 1996, a group of three Tamil-Christian men approached a United Church of Christ (UCC) white-American church with a proposal for a church project, to be the first of its kind: an Indian church affiliated with (and eventually to become a part of) UCC—Chicago Kristuva Indian Koil, translating to Chicago Christ Indian Church. The American church's then and current pastor, Joe—the "white pastor of the white church" as the Tamil congregation refers to him—played a pivotal role in the Tamil church's establishment, advocating for a minority-ethnic group to use the space. The American UCC denomination—known for its progressive ideologies and stances—is congregationalist and functions on a principle of allowing local churches to practice Christianity and administer their church as they please, as long as it is within certain UCC theological guidelines. Explicit issues of racism notwithstanding, the project passed, and in 1997 the "Indian" congregation was given a monthly meeting space in the American church's chapel hall, after the American church's service. Despite marketing itself as an 'Indian church', an interlocutor described the purpose of establishing Kristuva Koil as follows: for Tamils to have a place to worship in their own language, with their own people, and so that they would not become Americanized; thus, from that first year itself, the pastor and most

congregation members were Tamil, and sermons were delivered in Tamil. A year in, and the church was: fully Tamil, meeting weekly rather than monthly, had installed a new pastor (one of the founders, pseudonymously called Pastor Adaikalam), and was rebranded to United Church of South India (UCSI).

This move to rebrand as UCSI while affiliated with UCC is significant, as the largest congregation of Christians in India, after the Catholic church, is CSI—the Church of South India. Significantly, most members of UCSI—now CTC—grew up in Tamil-Christian families that were CSI, and the practice (order of service) and style of worship within the diasporic church has maintained CSI sentiments and aesthetics.

History of CSI

The Church of South India was an eighteen year project in the making when—in 1947, just a month after India's Independence from the British—the denomination was formed. A unification of Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregational, and Methodist denominations, CSI set out with the goal to hold unity above all else: to be a "demonstration of what happens when divided brethren come together in a spirit of mutual trust and in penitence and humility, disowning all ideas of superiority whether imagined or real and determined to unite because of the conviction that division is sin" (Gladstone 1997). The denomination's slogan, shared, fittingly, with UCC, is "That All May Become One." CSI is a united protestant church that functions under an episcopal polity, with appointed presiding Bishops, local Pastors, and church Deacons—which is to say that it is fairly hierarchical in its authoritative structure.

The Chicago Tamil Church, despite its promises to the American UCC denomination of being one of the first Indian churches to be of UCC, is still incredibly CSI in identity. In an

interview with the white pastor, he himself tells me, leaning in as though someone may overhear, that in his opinion "the Tamil congregation is UCC in name alone." I nod along as though this is news to me.

Despite holding on to some CSI aesthetics, practices, and styles of worship, UCSI did not make actual attempts to function under the authority of CSI or create a "diaspora diocese" (a project which is currently ongoing in the CSI community). This refusal to work under the order of CSI could be due to the church's allegiance with UCC in order to have a chapel space, but it is just as much the case that, in this new land and with this new congregationalist church-space, the Tamil-Christian congregation was presented with the opportunity to step away from the authoritative structures they were accustomed to and instead establish their own. In what follows, the establishment of and shift in authority will be mapped.

Fractured Pasts

By 2004, UCSI had been officially inducted into UCC, and was rebranded yet again: Tamil United Church of Christ (Tamil UCC or TUCC). Another significant rebranding, as this shift took place after the congregation's official affiliation with the UCC denomination. It is around this time that a blogpost is made on the church's website: "Only eight years to look back on, but lot more ahead…" The following is an excerpt from the post.

> Tamil UCC might give the impression of just another gathering of Tamil Christians. Well, it is just another gathering of Tamil Christians. So, what's different here? … The foundation is strong. "If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will

> bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work" (I Corinthians 3:13 NIV). … Am I saying it is a rose bush without thorns? No. In spite of all the gifts, ministries and spiritual food there are some short comings. There is some gossip, which seemingly harmless still stretches the bonds of unity to its limits. There is some laziness, which restrains expansion. There is some jealousy, which curtails some ministries. There is worldly cares, which chokes the word of God from being fruitful a hundredfold. … There have been major issues that have split the church from top to bottom. But like it says in Job 8:7, "Though thy beginning was small, yet thy latter end should greatly increase." I believe God is using and will use Tamil UCC for the growth of His kingdom. Come and see.

This post was written by an anonymous church member who had joined the congregation around 2000. Already, at the time this post was written, the church had seen two splits: one in 2000 due to denominational differences that came down to issues of money and music, and another in 2002 due to differences in opinion regarding the affiliated UCC's acceptance of gay marriage.

Throughout this all, the Pastor of TUCC was still Pastor Adaikalam; this remained the case until 2015. The most commonly circulated narrative in CTC regarding the 2015 split centers around two things: the "elders for life" concept and the congregation's perception of the Pastor's abuses of power. In 2009, Pastor Adaikalam (now pastor of 12 years who had already seen three splits in the church), had gathered a group of "elders" (or, directors) — a concept put forth in First Timothy in regard to church administration. In Tamil Nadu's CSI congregations, and indeed all other Tamil protestant congregations, the position of "elders" is re-filled by an election every

two years; however, in this diasporic church-building case, the same lay-members—seven men—had been cycling in and out of these elder roles without any elective process since the early foundations of the church. Thus, in 2009, the congregation voted in the annual church-body meeting (by a ⅔ majority vote) to instill elders-for-life, as deemed by who the pastor wanted to be in that group. Already in 2009 there was pushback against this item; however, that pushback only continued to grow as a small group of lay-members (including two of the "elders") began to raise the item of ending the elders for life all together and instilling an elective, voting-based, democratic system through which to decide on who holds administrative power. This item was raised year after year, as described by one of my interlocutors:

> And every year, there'll be like, only two or three votes. Like, I know for sure I voted against it every time. [A friend] was another one. And I don't know maybe like one other person. Everybody else was okay with it. This went on for like several years. Until like, one year—the year before that split happened. So in 2014, that little body there was like, like, we did a lot of campaigning, actually. To say, "Okay, there are a lot of new people," and we said, "Okay, let's put an end to this. Let's say no." So, we actually—like I was never involved before that— I hated all this political stuff. So I used to go away from it, but that year, like, I got very involved in 2014. So, I wanted to campaign—like I didn't go calling people, but anybody who came to me I would explain to them; I'd start explaining why [the elders concept] is like hurting the church and why we need to put a stop to this.

Night of the Split

The annual general body meeting of 2015 starts on a Sunday in February, as normal. There is tension in the air, felt from any congregation member who might know the stakes of this meeting, who might know those who care for the results. The meeting begins, and items are brought to the body, one at a time. Everything progresses without incident, until the last item is raised: Do we keep the Permanent Elders? An interlocutor, speaking with me in his living room, looks at me with a sad smile on his face as he recounts the night, "...Unfortunately, we got a majority that year. Unfortunately—yeah. Then the split happened."

The meeting, which normally lasts from around 3pm to 8pm, goes until 3 in the morning. Children are downstairs in the basement, playing with their friends, excited to be staying up so late past their bedtime, unaware that upstairs, the adults—their parents, siblings, uncles and aunties—are yelling at one another across the room, breaking down crying, sitting in shock as Pastor Adaikalam states that he will be leaving the church, that he cannot stay any longer. The children—whose parents are now seemingly either bound for life or sworn enemies—do not know that this is one of the last nights that they will be able to laugh with their friends.

Suddenly, a few of the children are taken from the basement by their parents, walked to the parking lot. Some drive away immediately; others linger, looking back and forth between the church building and those who are leaving—those including their pastor.

"It got pretty heated," one interlocutor tells me. "It got pretty rowdy. Afterwards, someone came to my house, threatening me, saying something to the effect of 'the next time you see me, it is a machete you will see.'" He then says it in Tamil: "Adathe thaduve parkumbothu, aaruval thaan paarpeh." He laughs lightly after he says it.

When I first arrived at CTC, a number of uncles were eager to tell me about the church's history. One of them, in discussing the splits—the pain of them—said to me, "Tamil love is as strong as Tamil hate." I think of that now.

After the split, the pastor and five of the seven "permanent elders" leave TUCC; within two weeks, they secure a new church building to conduct their services in, just 10 miles away from the church they had just left; they call themselves "Christ Tamil Church, Chicago" (CTCC). Those left at TUCC scramble in this unexpected outcome—in some ways a victory, in other ways an immense loss—and rebrand for a final time: Chicago Tamil Church.

Administrative Aftermaths:

Even just in the history thus laid out, there are evidently a number of different voices, perspectives, and ideologies at play (including but not limited to interactions between theological, denominational, national, regional, caste-based, racial groups, among others). However, I will be turning my analytical attention mainly to the narratively-informed voices from the most recent church-split (and the regimes of value they imply) by looking at the administrative practices and language of CTC prior to and after the most recent 2015 split.

After the night of the split, the remaining members at what is now CTC come together to reinstate an election and voting practice for determining new leadership every two years. Seven value-based teams are made for the congregation to be involved in the organization of the church, all of which congregation members can volunteer to take part in. Pastoral power decreases significantly, and an explicitly democratic move arises. According to one church

member I interviewed— an uncle who many claimed to be the arbiter of knowledge on matters of the constitutions—the group that remained after the split

> …was a *little bit* more liberal or different. And we wanted some Democratic values and some other things. The group we have now, we saw the pastor as an employee, right? As opposed to a leader. And not everything he sets the standard for is with the administration…teaching wise, that's different, right—teaching wise. But administration wise, he's not in charge, not really, right. So if we want to give him a raise, we have to evaluate how you're doing, right. So it's a different outlook. So even if you see now, there could be some conservatives. But in general, it's much more liberal—just like the society, you know, with younger people now being more liberal…and equity and all that stuff.

Where the pastor of the church used to be something of the figurehead, the guide, the "father", as described by a church member, in the diasporic Tamil church reimagined/created, the pastor becomes a fixture—"an employee" for the congregation. The pastor, then, can be let go, if the congregation decides on it, just as the newly established "Board of Directors" (replacing the "Body of Elders" which was all-together done away with on paper) can be elected and voted in. What follows is an analysis of excerpts from the church constitution before the 2015 split (TUCC Constitution) and after the 2015 split (CTC Constitution).

Excerpts from the Constitutions:

<u>2009 Constitution (TUCC)</u>

Article 4: Government

"The **Government of this Church is vested in the General Body** of the church and **administered through the Body of Elders**."

Article 4.2: Pastor

Here, the ability to govern lies with the congregation—the general body—but the authority to exercise that governance is with the Elders (who are later described in the constitution as being "Elders for Life". The first subsection in Article 4, which as described above lays out the church's governing structure, is the role of the pastor, pointing to the pastor's close involvement with the elders and in having that authority to exercise governance.

<u>2015 Constitution (CTC)</u>

Article 4: Government

"Recognizing that **our Lord alone has authority over the Church and its Congregation**, the responsibility of the governing the affairs of the Church is fully vested with the Congregation of the Church, **administered through and by the Board of Directors at the direction, discretion and authority of the Congregation**."

Article 4.2: Church Officers

Here, after the split, it is made explicit by those who remain that they are placing authority in the hands of their god, who ultimately moves through the congregation, to whose direction/discretion the board of directors heed. The first subsection in this version of the constitution are the roles of church officers: congregation members who are elected/voted in

every two years to help make decisions for the church, as opposed to the pastor or the appointed/permanent head of the congregation.

The historical narrative of the church splits that the remaining congregation in CTC hold—one of fissures on the lines of administrative practice and power struggles—and its effects are traceable within these administrative texts in how the very language and practice of "authority" is understood. "Power" moves away from any permanent or singular head and is dispersed among the masses—a nod to the "democratic values" that the congregation now hold with pride. The congregation's shared understanding of their own historical narrative is voiced in how the limits and boundaries of institutional power are documented after the split. Further, this narrative and these limits/boundaries make appearances in moments of interaction themselves, speaking to how the congregation in current times understand, process, and recover from their diasporic/fissured histories.

Nehemia Reading Group: A Diaspora on Diaspora

Nehemia: 1

> **1** Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem, but the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while nine-tenths *remained* in the *other* cities. **2** And the people **blessed all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.**

It is 4PM on a Sunday afternoon. Once the service has finished, once the food has been served and eaten, and once social conversations have completed, I sit with the adult members of

the congregation members around a plastic, foldable table, seated in a circle of brown, plastic folding chairs, waiting to discuss this last week's Bible Reading Group's books: Ezra and Nehemia. We are in the chapel basement, where all food and festivities are held/housed. The children run around, screaming and playing and occasionally being hushed by their mothers until they are herded by some auntie into another room.

The Bible Reading Group is a new invention for the members of CTC, introduced shortly after my initial arrival, when I was not yet fully familiar with the narrative(s) of the congregation. The leader of the initiative is an uncle named Daniel, a longtime member of CTC who has seen two of the church's major fissures.

Seated together in this socratic-style discussion are the women and men of the church, with the women at one side of the circle and the men at the other. The youths, those around my age in their early twenties, are seated together, at the outskirts of the discussion. The pastor is asked to give a description of both books, Ezra and Nehemia; and it is just my luck that it is these two books that the group is discussing this week—littered throughout both books are descriptions of Jewish diaspora, stories of dispersal, return, authority, power, and ideological narratives. Books about the project of nation building, Ezra and Nehemia chronicle the (return of exiled Israelites to the land of Jerusalem, as they attempt to (re)create a spiritual and territorial community; ultimately, the books are an illustration of a diaspora.

The reading group (as well as my analysis of it) is an act situated within narrative contexts, featuring relevant characters, and holding whispers of a shared history which all index the ideologies of the church congregation, as well as the relationships between the differentiated sites (that of CTC vs CTCC) as understood by CTC members.

"They just **came together** to do the work of God," the pastor says.

One congregation member first says that it is a matter of Nehemia's **authority** that people come together and others agree, observing Nehemia's seeming obsession with himself and his power, at some level… Conversation erupts, fast Tamil layering atop one another… The pastor speaks up, and the gathered members fall silent, eyes turning towards him—he pushes against the idea of "authority," saying instead that people come together in **moments of crisis**: without a shared higher purpose, people do not stand **united.** In nation building, says the pastor, we have to unite over a single cause; he references the second verse of the Book of Nehemia: "the men who volunteer to stay in Jerusalem are blessed—because they have stayed united!"

The circle falls silent for a moment, a few members smiling slightly, looking at one another, before an uncle brings the following into the discourse: "The church's legend," he says into the silence—and it sits for a while.

"Exactly," says the pastor, smiling. "Exactly."

In the citing of the "church's legend" (which is to say the congregation's shared narrative of its split and the subsequent aftermath) *referential* to the Isrealites' nation building, a few things are happening. In part, the diasporic Tamil, religious-congregation is seeing itself mirrored in another diasporic religious group, pointing to the congregation's understanding of themselves as such, as a "Tamil-Christian diaspora". Further, in comparing their church-building to the project of nation building, their very church/congregation *body* becomes something of a diasporic subject—that the Chicagoland Tamil-Christian diaspora has dispersed, and that *this* church had to be built up as its own diasporic project, separate from the other churches, is pointed to—that they have recreated or returned to a home of their own. Then, there is the undertone of voluntarism as the ticket, somehow, to unity, and perhaps particularly to the project of diasporic unity: that those who volunteer to work towards (proper/perfected) diasporic

(re)creation, something which can be especially motivated during times of crisis, are the ones working in the favor of unity. This valuing of voluntarism, both in the scripture itself and in the congregation's understanding of their own narrative (that they volunteered to stay "in Jerusalem") indexes those very perspectives of democratic positionings, an underlying ideology which permeates in this new-found Tamil-Christian church group.

The congregation reveals in this ethnographic moment what its members might understand "a Tamil Christian diaspora in America" to be, ideologically: a voluntary project, one which is moved and shaped by the narratives that they hold and share—narratives which keep them together or set them apart. In reading themselves into this Biblical story of diasporic foundations, creations, and fissures, they are further establishing their history to be one of the same and that the aftermaths they occupy are in an effort to stay united in the face of seeming ease of disunity. They use this scriptural moment to process and better understand their own histories—as they have always been understood, perhaps: one which reaches for some democratic ideal, in this, the Land of the Free.

The conversation, in time, turns to the matter of ethics: men marrying women outside of their land—sending away foreign wives: "Is this ethical?" Asks a young woman; she cites inter-religious marriages and whether or not the congregation accepts those. The gathered group laughs, knowing that the young woman is a bit irreverent, that the pastor is studying ethics, and knowing that Daniel, the organizer of this group, frowns slightly upon the subject matter.

A number of individuals' attention shifts towards Daniel, who then tackles the matter of ethics, first expounding on how there are a number of ethical theories, then saying that, from a church perspective, "If you align yourself with Jesus in most of the ways you act, God will help you know what is 'right' over the course of time."

Gazes shift to the pastor. “That’s a PhD level question,” he says. He then goes on to explain that ethics are always changing, and that if peoples’ interpretations of right and wrong did not change, then the people of the Bible might never have accepted Jesus as God. Change, he asserts, is not a bad thing. The group nods, a few murmuring their agreement.

The pastor then turns the question back to the group: “What about inter-caste marriage?” The gathered crowd laughs uneasily, suddenly, drawing back and saying, “Ahhh…”, and the question remains unanswered.

This ethnographic scene, both prior to and following the narrative-citation, points to the shift of authority within the church space pre- and post- split. The current pastor sits amongst the congregation members as an equal, partaking in scriptural conversation at their level; further, the church members’ gazes shift between a lay member (Daniel) and the pastor with near equivalent attention, seeing both as something of an authority on scriptural interpretation. That the interpretation of “ethics” differed between Daniel and the pastor—one pointing to the notion of a singular, Godly ethic, the other advocating for an ongoing, contextually framed reinterpretation of “the ethical—itself points to a concluding notion that Daniel voices in the scene that follows, one backed by the congregation’s narrative history on the role of unity in the church:

After the discussion group has wrapped up, I approach a circle of aunties and uncles, including Daniel, his wife Priya, Rohan, and Sinna, the man who cited the church’s legend. In talking about the discussion group with them, a question arises: “Do you think that unity is important?” Immediately, Rohan, Priya, and Sinna say yes, enthusiastically agreeing that unity is necessary and good.

Daniel, smirking slightly, but quite seriously, says to me, “Unity is overrated.”

In my interview with the pastor, he describes to me what effect he believes the 2015 split had on the Chicago Tamil Church congregation. Having joined as the congregation's pastor six years ago, and fairly happily foregoing pastoral authority, the current pastor was not caught in the mess of the splits, but is familiar with the narrative(s). "They do not want to go through that again," he tells me. "Especially because of how it affected the children—it affected the children a lot—perhaps most of all."

This refrain, "Unity is overrated," is one that Daniel uncle voiced throughout my ethnographic work, and in it is unveiled much about this community, its narratives, and its understandings of themselves/their diaspora. Most obviously, perhaps, in a narrative-aftermath divided (from a history of fissure), the church-members exist within and come to accept their disunified, diasporic community; that a diasporic community must stay united, then, may be overrated to this group which values volunteerism and democratic ideals in its project of diasporic creation. Further, in the remnants of community that remained after fissure, being united in their scriptural interpretations or truth-beliefs (what is "ethical," for example) is not so big of a deal. The newly instilled pastor is himself an incredibly progressive, Dalit PhD candidate, preaching to a church of fairly conservative non-Dalit congregation-members. Unity is overrated, indeed—but what exists in its place?

Unity is Overrated: A Silent, Healing Conclusion

"Pirinjitangala?"
"Aamam."
"Aiyohyoh, athaan nanichen; naan new york illeh irrukumbothu, romba perissa irunthange."
"Appadi than irrukunlleh? Onna renda, renda muuna, muuna naala—pirinjitai irrupanga."

"Did they separate?"
"Yes."

"Oh no, that's what I thought; when I was in New York, they were very big."

"That's how it is, no? One becomes two, two becomes three, three becomes four—they just keep separating.

A conversation between two church members
On a Tamil Christian church in New Jersey

Splits, fissures, ruptures, displacements, diasporas, whatever else one might want to call them, are not any sort of uncommon thing. Protestantism is rife with breaks and break-ups and exclusion and reunion; diaspora and the transnational migration which pairs so easily with globalization means a similar fate is shared by peoples, as well. We are each of us like cells, ever-splitting from one another, occasionally mutating into something unrecognizable. Narratives, afterall, need some sort of climax, even, or perhaps especially, those narratives which make or guide us.

This is to say, church-splits (and other points of rupture) happen all of the time—perhaps particularly in ethnic-minority churches, as in the case of Korean American churches in a study that attributes the splits to generational and cultural differences (Hong & Starcher 2012; Shin & Park 1988). And yet, in my experience at CTC, I felt that the pain of the loss lingered; I felt that the rupture was something almost violent. And, yet, what seems to remain in its aftermath is a particular kind of silence—and in that silence exists a community's dissonance between what has been and what is.

I notice moments of silences that carry in them the weight of the church's narrative; of course, I could be, in my own, personal interest in the narrative, imagining things. Yet, one moment stands out to me particularly: It is a Saturday, and a women-led prayer meeting is being hosted by Priya auntie. The theme for the prayer meeting is to stand firm against the troubles of life, and the auntie lists off struggles that we may have individually, as a family, and as a church,

asking those gathered to do the same. Folks participate, saying things like "anger," "jealousy," "ignorance," for the first two categories.

"Okay," Priya auntie says in Tamil, "what about as a church, what are some struggles we might face?" For nearly ten seconds, no one says a word—but from behind me, a young man who is visiting from college, whispers, "The splits…talk about the splits." It is a funny moment; I turn around to him and we share a smile—I do not know if he would have voiced that had I not been present. The other adults in the group eventually say things such as "difference of opinion" and "unity" out loud to the crowd, but leave it at that.

In this moment, rather than voice their shared narrative history—one which occurred not even a decade beforehand, one which church-members voiced to me on my first day in attendance—the congregation remains silent. There is a lack of explicit acknowledgement from the congregation members of the church's past struggles—what has been—and how it may affect the current congregation—what is; there is a dissonance that the church holds space for, a dissonance wherein their history lies but remains unconfronted, not moving forward. The narrative of fissure, here unvoiced, here invisible (Trouillot 2015), carries authority over the congregation; the narrative drives the creation, maintenance, and administrative structure of the congregation, and, when suppressed, it keeps the church from healing.

A young woman I interviewed, one who was a child when the split happened, speaks of silence in her household: "The silence is good; it's good that there are things we just don't talk about. It keeps the peace." The young woman points to the tendency towards silence in the face of pain in the Tamil-Christian diasporic community. In her ethnographic work, *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family*, anthropologist Margaret Trawick discusses how love functions in Tamil households. One feature she points to is *adukkam*, or concealment/hiding; "Tamil love is as

strong as Tamil hate"—and perhaps as lasting, which is to say that it is perhaps out of love—for their community, congregation, past and present—that the church allows for these moments of silence. Yet, it is in those moments of discourse, those moments when the narrative *is* cited, confronted, and indeed interpreted through Biblical narrative itself, such as the Nehemia piece, that healing arises.

As a moment of reflexive honesty, I myself come from something of a conflictual religious background. The church I grew up in was itself fraught with divisions, but, primarily, I was myself divided from the church—which is to say that I stopped attending church in my late teens due to my own religious traumas. After 5+ years away from church, scripture, and Christianity, the experience of re-entering/confronting a church-space through this diasporic church community, the narratives of fissure they house, and seeing them come together as a family, nevertheless, was a certain kind of home-coming, a certain kind of healing, for me.

Once again returning to the work of Sunder-Rajan, I cite a point in his book where he discusses ethnographies which deal with aftermaths:

> The structure that they are all looking at is the experiential structure of the aftermath: the aftermath of genocide, the aftermath of a diagnosis, or the aftermath of deindustrialization. None of them is an apocalyptic tale: the very possibility of their writing inscribes the fact of survival, the fact of a future that has continued to exist in spite of and beyond the happening of violence. Yet all of them are works of mourning. This is not a conservative or romantic mourning for a halcyon past; it is a mourning that recognizes that futures that are to come will have to be scripted differently, in ways that live with and bear the burden of specific (and specifically targeted) kinds of loss. In the

> process of diagnosing and analyzing this loss, and the pasts of which the accounts are an aftermath, each of these texts makes searing contemporary analysis... (Rajan 2021)

Chicago Tamil Church, in the face of its loss, in the aftermath of a violent fissure, has not entirely mourned—it is only in moments when the narrative of fissure is cited (diagnosed) and interpreted (analyzed) that processing and mourning their loss occurs; it is only by confronting the narrative, not allowing it to live in a dissonant silence, that an intentional healing takes place.

The primary aim of this project was to track the movement and effect of a diasporic narrative in a diasporic community in how (boundaries of) authority are accessed, understood, and (re)made; while the ethnographic account certainly points and addresses those matters, more significant to me are these aftermaths of loss: silence, morning, and healing towards a (realized) future *through* a community's analysis and understanding of their (diasporic, divided, dissonant) narrative.

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