

Title

Culture and the Liminal space: investigation of threshold ritual practice of migrants from South Asia and position of the feminine translated to creative practice in clay and performance

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Abstract

Creative practice can sometimes provoke a query by giving permission to the viewer to enter a place of encounter. It is within this context the following paper explores ceramic practice incorporating other creative disciplines and materiality in a selective manner that is experiential.

The creative practice-led investigation explores threshold ritual practice of women within the South Asian diaspora as a means to translate narratives of dispersed migrants. Case studies of the practice of the ephemeral ritual drawing within the diaspora inform the ceramic practice and performance. Conveying of loss, transience and separation of cultural connections are explored through transformative state of materiality, process and action. Participation of the broader community in performance and making offers an opportunity for closer dialogue through the gesture of shared experience.

The content of the work is culturally inscribed as a dislocated everyday practice, and the translation intentionally displaces the viewer, "fracturing cultural connection". This is a process of being located in a liminal space, comparable to the reflexive experience of migrants, to develop a sense of identity that adapts to their environment. The complex terrain of migrant experience that is explored through creative practice-led research has relevance to arts education in a global environment.

Biography

The creative practice-led research of Varuni Kanagasundaram predominantly in ceramics explores the expression of migrants from South Asia as a means to bring a broader dialogue on migrant experience. The expression of displacement and how they navigate between cultural traditions in new lands is central to the arts practice,

are translated through cultural rituals. The creative practice of Varuni Kanagasundaram incorporates performance and community participation addressing themes of identity, place, loss, confluence of cultural practices and memory from the feminine perspective.

Following the completion of a Bachelor of Arts Honours (1st class) in Ceramics in 2013 at RMIT University, an Australia Council Art Start in 2014 helped to develop the practice that explores Cultural Hybridity. She is currently undertaking a PhD in Arts and is a casual staff member within the School of Art at RMIT University. She has been a presenter at international conferences and recipient of US art residencies, awards in major sculpture/fine art exhibitions in Australia, Scholarships and the American NCECA Multicultural Fellowship. These opportunities have allowed her to connect with the broader global arts community to convey migrant stories.

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Introduction

The exploration of the threshold ritual of *Kolam* practiced by women from the Tamil community in South Asia examined in the paper as a place of encounter is an ephemeral drawing on the ground (Nagarajan, 2018) marking the entrance to the home, symbolically welcoming visitors. The significance of the ritual drawing and how they are practiced by diaspora, was investigated with the notion of translating into ceramic-art practice and performance that could creatively articulate the migrant experience. Conveying of loss, transience and separation of cultural connections are explored through transformative state of materiality, process and action. Participation of the broader community in performance and making offers an opportunity for closer dialogue through the gesture of shared experience. The complex terrain of reflexive experience of migrants that adapts to new surroundings is explored through creative practice-led research that has relevance to creative discourse and arts education in a global environment.

In order to investigate the cultural practice, it is important to frame the paper within the broader context and theory that underpin migration. A significant social development last century has been the movement of people following decolonization of Western imperialism (Pooke and Newall, 2008), that included people from Sri Lanka and India. Recent times have seen political migrants as well as global opportunities becoming accessible to wider population leading to increased mobility. As part of the dialogue of immigrants to Australia, those arriving from South Asia have been a topical subject.

Hybridity that became a dominant idea in postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994) is constantly shifting as the interplay of cultures and traditions, as well as the social and political landscape of place, impact on expression of migrants. It is explained that the

'right' to signify from the periphery of authorised power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be re-inscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority' (Bhabha, 1994, p3).

It is within the theoretical consideration 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' by Gayatri Spivak (1988) this paper examines the distinct cultural ritual practices of women within the Tamil ethnic community originating from South India and Sri Lanka. Others have extended the theory to consider the expression of ethnic communities through the lens of the post-colonial world (Morris, 2010). The cultural theory of these practices (Nagarajan, 2018, Pinchman, 2007) examines the re-assigned empowered position that women occupy within community.

Methodology and Research design

The *Kolam* drawing is traditionally created at the threshold using rice-flour. As people walk across the entrance into the home the ephemeral drawing gradually merges with the ground. For some it is a daily devotional ritual whilst for others it marks auspicious occasions (Nagarajan, 2018).

One aspect of the methodology involved engagement with women practicing the *Kolam* within the Tamil communities in Australia and Singapore where they form the diaspora. Observation, images and dialogue informed the subsequent translation. Ideas within cultural displacement and identity were conveyed through exploiting the material characteristics of clay and performance. Materials, colours, markings and forms made reference to culture, hybridity and migrant experience through process, transformative properties of materiality and action of the artist.

It was through a reflexive process of testing and responding through exhibitions that the artwork developed. The artwork moved from art-installations to an experiential narrative through: creation of a ritual space for installations including public spaces; inclusion of performance as a ritual act; involvement of community in performance and making.

Research into cultural practice of the threshold ritual drawing within Tamil community

Ritual practice has been defined as a type of performance that is constructive and strategic, producing specific types of meaning and value through stylised repetitive

acts that help to produce identity (Pintchman, 2007). Furthermore, 'when individuals participate as agents in ritual performances they may function to produce, transform, repeat, resist or even defy norms and ideals' (Pintchman, 2007, p6).

Women play a significant role as performers of Tamil rituals and as such their social and gender identity given value within the community (David, 2010, Jain, 2011, Nagarajan, 2017). They also act as messengers conveying what is happening within the home.

The primary research devoted attention to elements and the changing nature of the ritual within the diaspora to inform ideas for its translation.

The study engaged women from Tamil communities in countries where they formed the diaspora. As a devotional practitioner living in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, Gayathri, a devout Hindu in her late 50s, originally from Chennai in South India, draws the *Kolam* using rice flour at the rise of dawn every day. It is often elaborate, traditional and abstract in design using white rice flour. Every aspect of the sequence from preparation to the act of *Kolam* drawing has codified meaning.



Figure 1. Threshold ritual drawings of the Tamil diaspora; Rice flour, rice, natural dyes; various dimensions; 2017 and 2018

Maya who has resided in Melbourne for nearly 10 years, originally from outskirts of Madurai in South India, draws the *Kolam* as a creative devotional practice during auspicious occasions (Figure 1, left). The design is her creative expression, often referencing flora and fauna that have symbolic meaning which she combines with elements from her domestic life. Brightly coloured natural pigments are used with rice flour to draw the *Kolam*.

At the entrance to an apartment within a housing development complex on the western suburbs of Singapore, Ranjini, a woman in her 70s with the assistance of her helper, Devi, draws a *Kolam* for the extended family every morning (Figure 1, right). A cloth soaked in slurry of rice flour was used to create the design on the concrete floor, an adaptation to modern lifestyle. The practitioners above learnt to draw the *Kolam* as young children within their homes in India. Having migrated, none of the younger family members representing the diaspora carried on the practice. However, the practitioners emphasized they have a cultural and social responsibility to continue the practice for the wellbeing of family and community. The agency of the performer activates the space and material through the drawing for the benefit of community.

Translation through Exhibitions

The threshold drawing of *Kolam* is an apt metaphor for crossing of boundaries experienced by migrants; the departure from one space and arriving at another coupled with uncertainty is part of crossing thresholds. It is the liminal space occupied by migrants. Thresholds have been described as a frontier that divides two different territories, rhythms and atmospheres (O'Donohue, 2008). Migrants are often forced to leave their familiar place of origin that holds cultural and familial connections, embarking on a precarious journey where their destination is unknown. Loss, transience, fear, hope and a complexity of emotions are experienced. The ephemeral nature of the *Kolam* and exploitation of material enabled expression associated with transience to be articulated.

Through exploration of a series of exhibitions, this paper examines how the *Kolam* is translated to artworks to convey the experience of the Tamil diaspora and broader migrant communities.

Ceramic Installation and Performance: *Kolam* Borders

An art residency at Anderson Ranch Art Centre (Colorado, USA) from February to



Figure 2. *Kolam*_Borders, Ceramic Installation and performance, l250 x w180 x h7cm; 2016;
Photo Ian Edquist

April 2016 was used as a period for the development of ideas to explore ceramic floor installations that translated the ritual drawing of *Kolam* (Figure 2). Two key elements of the ritual drawing initially presented themselves as powerful factors to convey migrant displacement. Firstly, it is a drawing at a threshold of a home that marks departures and arrivals; secondly, the ephemeral nature of the drawing capturing these movements of people.



Figure 3 Kolam_Borders. Ceramic; l250 x w180 x h2 cm; 2016; Photo Ian Edquist

The *Kolam* ritual as an ephemeral-floor-ceramic installation and performance 'Kolam Borders' at a gallery space was first explored as a means to convey fragility, transience and uncertainty associated with crossing borders often experienced by migrants.

Repetitive forms were made in clay conveying the voyage; the points of departure that hold generations of cultural connections and hopes of arrival at new frontiers, that also present the unknown. At the edge of the installation was a sand-border marking the end of the journey. Placed on the sand border were repetitive turmeric-yellow fragile ceramic pieces with Sari block design in vivid red (Figures 2 and 3). The sand border guided the participant towards it as an invitation to walk before being confronted with having to step on the ceramic pieces.

It was important to consider the artist as the ritual performer at different stages in the development of the work. The creating of the repetitive forms is a type of ritual act itself by the artist, a conscious act of performance, albeit solitary in the making, preparing the space, installing and performing as a ritual act. Artists such as Kumari Nahappan (Sabapathy, 2013) and Wolfgang Laib embed as important aspects of their practice.

Upon commencement of performance, the artist first walks across the sand-border barefoot followed by participants having the option to walk barefoot or with footwear. The participants could visually see, hear and feel the fragile pieces being crushed beneath their feet and the patterns with cultural reference fragmenting (Figure 2) to

eventually resemble the colours of spices. A parallel can be drawn with the work of Ken Yonetani's Art of Destruction that consisted of fragile tiles with butterfly design of species endangered in Australia (Humphry, 2009). Yonetani made the audience "feel and think about the fragile environment and contradictory human desires" through their own action - that is, by stepping on and breaking his artwork.

There was intention in devoting time to making the individual pieces, some hand-painted only to be crushed. Some, albeit few, expressed reluctance to step on something precious. Others were prepared to walk across the border, fragmenting the fragile forms. The interactive component tries to convey the trepidation that initially occurs when embarking on the uncertainty of an action such as experienced by migrants arriving at borders. Fragmentation and loss being part of migrant expression conveyed in the artwork was experiential for the participant through their own action permitted by the artist resulting in transformative states of materiality and trace (Jones, 2015).



Figure 4 *Kolam_A Welcome beneath your feet*, clay slip, public art, RMIT Artland 2017

Public Art and Performance: '*Kolam_A Welcome beneath your feet*'

The ritual drawing of *Kolam* is also created at the boundary of public and private spaces on auspicious occasions (Nagarajan, 2018). An opportunity to participate in a public art exhibition, RMIT Artland/MoreArt 2017, allowed the translation of the ritual practice of *Kolam* to be expanded by considering the public space frequented by members of the community.

The central lawn on the Brunswick campus of RMIT was the site of the public space used for artwork. It faced the entrance to the main building on the campus and thus a

threshold. The bricked pathways and the lawn were passageways for students, staff and community walking across the campus.

The architectural features and the trees within the grounds were used as the grid that guided the drawing in clay slip on the lawn (Figure 4). The raw clay slurry was compatible as a material to the ground surface but also related to the slurry used in the traditional *Kolam* discussed above. The title of this ephemeral outdoor installation '*Kolam_A Welcome beneath your feet*' suggests an invitation to the public to step on the drawing as a welcoming gesture. The artwork that has its origins within practices of the Tamil community was also created to reflect on the publicity that surrounds migrants entering the country across the borders and often being translated as being unwelcomed.

The ephemeral drawing had a performative component at a given time every week, commencing at dawn (Figure 4). The marking of the time, the preparation of the grounds and the solitude within which the creative work began were important aspects of the process. People who happened to be on the premises witnessed the drawing. The ritual performance being conducted without a formal audience was closer to the act of drawing the traditional *Kolam* which is viewed by family members or passer-by.



Figure 5 *Kolam_A Welcome beneath your feet*, clay slip, public art, RMIT Artland 2017.

As the weeks unfolded, the installation faded with exposure to weather and activity of people as they used the space (Figure 5). At other times, lines became superimposed. The constant changes in appearance alerted the frequent users to be more aware of the actions of the artist. The artist activating the space without visible presence but through transformative aspects of materiality and integrity of the artwork, triggers viewers at a later point to connect to the title of the work, the artist's intention and meaning (Jones, 2015, Kanagasundaram, 2017).

Making with community, Installation and Performance through Public Art: 'Journey of 1000 Chai cups'

The symbol of the Chai cup was translated in the public artwork 'Journey of 1000 Chai cups' (Figure 6) for the Fawkner Festa/MoreArt festival 2018, an arts festival along the Upfield railway line in Melbourne, by connecting with community. Making with community was incorporated (Figure 7) to enable connection with people of diverse cultures and age groups.



Figure 6 Journey of a 1000 Chai cups, ceramic installation, MoreArt 2018

The Chai clay-cup made of terra-cotta clay is a familiar sight in India along railway stations. Potters make small Chai cups to supply the stalls in their thousands. They are fired to earthenware such that they can be dispensed after drinking by readily breaking them on the ground. It is this transition from an intact vessel in which tea is served, consumed, to then being broken on the ground to become part of the land that paralleled the intent of the *Kolam* drawing. It demonstrated states of transience.



Figure 7 Journey of 1000 Chai cups, making with community, MoreArt 2018

'Making sessions' with several groups through the assistance of the festival team included street activation, women's and school groups (Figure 7). There was great diversity of cultural groups living within the municipality, particularly those of Pakistani, Indian, Greek and Italian origins. The fact that the public were involved in the making with the artist brought a greater level of interest and query about the translation of the work. Participants felt part of the story.

On the opening day of the Fawkner Festival, 1000 fired cups made over few months were installed on the grounds of the entrance to CB Reserve at Fawkner. The cups formed the punctuated lines that surrounded trees as focal points adopting elements from the *Kolam* design.

The public participated in collecting a chai cup from the installation and having masala tea being served (Figure 8). The empty cups were broken, the shards collecting on the earth. Many who participated in the making demonstrated a connection to the artwork, an aspect that the project was trying to achieve. A ritual of



Figure 8 Journey of 1000 Chai cups, ceramic installation and community event, MoreArt 2018

a distinct community was translated to bring diverse communities together as a point of sharing, connection and celebration.

The intact cups and shards from the event became installations at threshold spaces across the Moreland shire during the period of the MoreArt Festival (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Journey of 1000 Chai cups, installation at Fawkner, Melbourne, MoreArt 2018

Materials from the specific sites were included in the installations to integrate elements from the distinct locations as a way to incorporate the new surroundings.

Conclusion

The creative translation of South Asian ritual of *Kolam* presented in the paper enabled a reflexive process needed to enquire how migrants who occupy a liminal space develop a sense of identity that adapts to new territories. The place of the threshold and ephemeral nature of the ritual were used as metaphors for crossings by migrants. The artist, representing the diaspora and as a female, creates and performs the transformed ritual as an agent using clay and other materials requesting the viewer to experience through materiality and trace. Fragmentation, loss, fading of traditional practices and states of flux upon navigating new cultural traditions at thresholds become the landscape of migrant experience.

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