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Introduction

WORLDLY AFTERLIVES

GOWSEE SHUFFLED his feet while waiting with several dozen other Indian laborers outside a small building. Heat radiated from the building—the sun beat down on the tin roof, and the windows were closed, blocking relief from the cooling sea breezes. He was told that the conditions were necessary so an officer could take a picture of his face—they called it a photograph. Gowsee was unsure what to make of this bizarre procedure. He had traveled miles on foot to reach the Immigration Depot, a formidable space filled with painful memories. He thought back to the day several years earlier in 1873 when he had first entered the depot on arrival in Mauritius from India. They had taken his name and given him a number in return, 361788, which British officials would use to amass a bureaucratic record of his life. On that fateful day, he tried to appear calm to reassure his wife, three sons, and daughter-in-law, who traveled with him. Internally, he was less confident. Had the family made the right decision to leave their home in Ghazipur? Was he wrong to trust the sweet-talking agent who had convinced him that Mauritius was a land where chili trees bore gold? He laughed now to think how gullible he had once been. He never could have imagined the terrible sea sickness and the endless hours of back-breaking labor that awaited them on the plantation.

They survived, but the immigration depot was not done with them. His employer explained that now that they had completed their first term of indenture, Gowsee and his sons must return to the depot to have their photographs taken. The picture would be affixed to an “Old Immigrant Ticket,” which they would be required to carry to prove their residence and ongoing employment. Gowsee had seen other Indians return after such trips, carrying their tickets, bearing their ghostly grey faces, in government-issued tin boxes strung around their necks. They were the most hideous jewelry Gowsee had ever seen! But their bearers told him they must keep the papers safe from the elements and prying hands, which the boxes helped ensure. If an officer interrogated them on the road, and they failed to produce these documents, they would be dragged off to jail and charged as vagrants.

Suddenly, the officer's assistants pushed Gowsee into the sweltering building, filled with strange chemical smells. In front of him, the officer manipulated a peculiar wooden box with two menacing glass eyes that stared back at him. The assistant told him that the camera had traveled all the way from England. He had heard that the wealthy goras, as the Indians called the Europeans, paid princely sums to have their pictures taken in studios in Port Louis but also that criminals were made to sit for these pictures so that the police could keep their images locked away in their cabinets forever.

Later, the assistant handed him his "Old Immigrant Ticket" with a warning to guard it with his life. Attached to the paper was his picture, about a finger-length in size. He stared mesmerized at his face and his bald head—nearly five decades of work and worry had taken its toll—but he noted with pride that his flowing white beard made him look like an elder of authority. His sons were staring with wonder at their photographs, but he ordered them to put them away—who knew when and where they might need these strange images in the future?¹

Today, Gowsee's photograph hangs in a simple white frame alongside pictures of his son, grandson, great-grandson, great-great-grandson, and great-great-great-grandson in a home in the United Kingdom.² The nineteenth-century photographs traveled there from the Mahatma Gandhi Institute's archives in Mauritius, which holds approximately 175,000 ID photographs that were taken of indentured immigrants between 1864 and 1914, likely the earliest large-scale use of photographic identification for a non-criminal population.³ Copies of the photographs of Gowsee and his sons were retrieved by Caitlin Golaup, who married into the family. She later shared them with another roots researcher who also married into the family, Kyriaki Anagnostopoulou, who had the pictures framed as a gift for her father-in-law, Gowsee's great-grandson. This image inspired Caitlin to make another collage of photographs that included women relations, which she posted to a Facebook Group, "Gowsee Udhin and Rosunnee Emamboccus' descendants."⁴ Gowsee's photograph has thus traveled many routes. As Kyriaki explained: "When Mauritian family come to visit, they will often take pictures of it. . . . So the pictures have become pictures that others are now showing to their own descendants. It's taken on a life of its own. . . . Even though it was originally a means of documenting indenture and technically showing that this is my slave, it has now become a family album and possibly an heirloom in the future."

Caitlin and Kyriaki are serious family researchers who have traced their families' Mauritian roots, as well as Ukrainian-Jewish, Polish, Trinidadian, American, Austrian, Greek, Italian, Irish, Scottish, and English ancestors. I found their profiles on Ancestry.com and MyHeritage.com. When I reached out to them, Caitlin and Kyriaki explained that their investigations had been

met with curiosity, but also puzzlement, from other family members. Why were the White foreigners who married into the family researching their Indian and African roots? As another White foreigner who married into a family that traces its roots through Kerala and the Gulf, I could sympathize with this feeling of being an insider-outsider to family histories. (Caitlin also told me that she thinks that some of her Mauritian in-laws are puzzled that she would be so interested in the past since they want to “look forwards rather than backward.”) Resisting the narrow boxes in which heritage is often framed, Kyriaki described her son, Gowsee’s fifth-generation descendant, as a “citizen of the world.”

Could Gowsee have imagined that his photograph and family would have such worldly afterlives? We can never know—the opening paragraphs of this book are my fictionalized account of his experience being photographed. But my account is not conjured from nothing, nor does it seek to recuperate a past otherwise lost.⁵ Instead, it draws on the vast archives that British colonial officials amassed to track the over thirty million Indians who left the Subcontinent between the middle of the nineteenth and the middle of the twentieth century, of which the collection of indenture photographs in Mauritius is but one example.⁶ The book collages materials from these archives with vestiges of the past that migrants and their descendants passed from generation to generation—albums, stories, material, and immaterial inheritances—of property and heirlooms, of habits of mind and body, and of memories of what was lost. I am especially concerned with the creative possibilities that open up when we travel between these different means of collecting and making sense of the past.

While many of the family stories I trace stretch back even further, I pick them up in the following pages as they intersect with the heyday of British imperial power in the Indian Ocean. This “Age of Empire” saw the consolidation of Crown government in India after the Rebellion of 1857 alongside the rapid expansion of the British Empire across Asia and Africa.⁷ The economic extractions of British colonialism pushed Indians out of India while propelling them towards other parts of the empire. Famines devastated India, forcing many to seek livelihoods elsewhere. These crises were set in motion by disruptive El Niño weather patterns, leading to devastating droughts in the 1870s and 1890s, but British policies greatly exacerbated them. Peasant households increasingly produced raw materials for industrializing economies elsewhere rather than food to feed their families. Growing cotton, indigo, rice, and jute in good times could net Indian farmers profits, but when a crop failed or prices crashed, they were left with nothing to eat. Miserly British relief programs, cloaked in Malthusian doctrines that cast famine as a “natural” check on overpopulation, left millions of Indians dead. Millions of others left their homes in search of something better.⁸

Some found their way to recruiters, selling stories of the riches that could be reaped abroad. Most famously, over a million Indians were contracted as indentured laborers to replace enslaved Africans on plantations in the Caribbean and Africa. Others, who violently resisted empire, traveled in chains to Britain's penal colonies.⁹ Yet numerically, these migrants constituted only a fraction of overall migration from the Subcontinent. Some signed other types of contracts to defend and expand the British Empire as soldiers, sailors, and police.¹⁰ Many others took loans from a *kangani*, the Tamil word for a recruiter, to help their families financially in exchange for joining a gang of workers traveling to Malaya, Ceylon, and Burma, the closest and most popular destinations for colonial-era Indian migrants.¹¹ Having traded along the coasts of the Indian Ocean for centuries, Indians plied much of its transregional trade, even as they were pushed into subordinate positions by European businesses backed by colonial governments.¹² New cadres of graduates from English-medium colleges, who often struggled to secure gainful employment at home, set out to work in colonial offices and courtrooms across Asia and Africa. Others pursued innumerable other pathways abroad as nannies to British families, circus performers, and students.¹³ Most eventually returned to India, but others remained abroad, forming a vast global diaspora.¹⁴

The descendants of these migrants, alongside many more recent migrants from the Indian Subcontinent, today are part of what many describe as the “Indian” or “South Asian” diaspora, one of the world's largest.¹⁵ But stories such as Gowsee's, Caitlin's, and Kyriaki's suggest how family trails unsettle national, ethnic, and regional labels, as well as the distinction between labor and merchant diasporas, which many academic studies adopt. Instead, they point to histories in which different forms of mobility were entangled: physical migration, intermarriage/cohabitation, conversion, socio-economic ascent and descent. They suggest diasporas flowing into each other during an era when colonialism, global capitalism, world wars, and post-colonial nationalism set many different peoples adrift. The resulting families often describe their diasporic identities as a bequest of worldly habits, of being “citizens of the world,” and of being descendants of empire. For many families, these legacies outweigh conventional definitions of diaspora that center on ancestral homeland or ethno-religious identity—categories that divide their own kin.

Just as these families complicate geographically bounded frames for studying diaspora, they also unsettle historical temporalities that divide past and present migrations. Gowsee's photograph now exists in many places and inhabits multiple historical moments. I have imagined what it might have felt like as a pendant hanging around his neck. At that moment, it was a talisman, at once subjecting him to surveillance and preventing his arrest as a vagrant—a

symbol of the limbo he inhabited between the enslaved and the free. Today, sitting in an archive, it takes on a different life as a memorial meant to educate the public about the history of indenture. In this reincarnation, Gowsee is both present and absent—he is visually present in the photograph but marked by its faded monotone and delicate condition as long since dead. Digitized copies of the picture have traveled even further and taken on other relationships with the present, disembodied into megabytes before being reembodied as framed family heirlooms. They arrive in descendants' inboxes as the first glimpse of a relation about whom stories have been passed down but whose face they had never seen. The initial surprise that such an image exists in a distant archive quickly transforms into a sense of recognition—an inherited nose or chin.

This tendency to shape-shift between absence and presence, embodied and disembodied forms, allows these objects to bring the past into the present in unexpected ways. In the book, I engage with these presences through a framework of haunting. Borrowing from Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters*, I recognize haunting as "that which makes its mark by being there and not there at the same time."¹⁶ I noticed this ghostly aura in other objects (and memories of objects) through which families connected with the past. It was the absence/presence of the remembered, but now missing, trophies that haunted the *armoire* of a family in Kuala Lumpur. Whether touched or conjured as memories, these objects invite an intimate connection with the past that stirs the senses differently than a historian's carefully constructed argument. When families affix a modern photograph to a century-old one and gently caress the assemblage, the past is hauntingly close and yet not quite touchable; the dead are present but also painfully absent. Thinking with ghosts challenges historians to question the linear chronologies that undergird our analysis, which assume the pastness of the past and its separation from the present. Haunting also opens space for considering how our emotions are at play in our work, shaping our analysis in ways that are obscured through disciplinary norms that often still discourage historians from writing themselves into their scholarship.¹⁷

My interest in these haunting presences may seem strange to professional historians. We are meant to read sources, not caress them. But I suspect that my encounters with ghosts will feel less odd to descendants (a position which historians, too, might assume). Family roots researchers and historians often sit side-by-side in archives but less frequently acknowledge each other's presence. Professional historians often view roots researchers as hobbyists who might benefit from reading our work but have little to teach us. My many encounters with families inside and outside archives have convinced me otherwise. Families have pushed me to use new sources and methods, leading me outside the archive to albums and curio cabinets. They have challenged me to

think about what it means to ethically engage with the past when the lines between the living and dead blur. I have also tried to reciprocate. I have shared archival materials with descendants and suggested how my own frames of gendered analysis might enable them to reexamine family stories, often framed as histories of founding patriarchs, to recognize the influence of women. In the process, our collective understanding of diaspora and family shifted, showing how historians and descendants have much to learn from each other, even when we might not always agree.

“I Am Diaspora”: Diaspora and Empire

One such transformation was how working alongside families and descendants pushed me to rethink conventional academic approaches to diaspora. Academic studies of diaspora typically frame it through national, regional, or religious modifiers, referring to the Indian, South Asian, Sikh, or Tamil diasporas. In contrast, I found that outside of academia and in the borderlands where it interfaces with other creative fields, the descendants of migrants who traveled the Indian Ocean during the heyday of the British Empire were approaching diaspora in more fluid and mobile ways. Esha Pillay, who runs an Instagram account called “Coolie Returns,” captured how diaspora, particularly when used without a modifier, opened possibilities for engaging with the intergenerational legacies of migrations that defy political borders and identarian categories. The descendant of indentured migrants, she explained that she was uncomfortable identifying as “a Fijian” or even “an indo Fijian in Fiji.” She felt a deep connection to Britain, and when she traveled as a young adult to the UK, she described feeling that she had arrived in the “Motherland.” This connection, however, did not inspire diasporic patriotism but rather a feeling of intergenerational trauma that Britain was “responsible for my family’s displacement.” Summing up her refusal of a narrow definition of belonging, Pillay proclaimed: “I am diaspora.”¹⁸

Similar themes ran through a collective conversation between the writer-academic María del Pilar Kaladeen, architect Sumayya Vally, poet Gitan Djeli, and artist Shivanjani Lal, who also trace their family histories through journeys of indenture. Kaladeen noted that although she has used the phrase “‘indentured labor diaspora’ . . . I don’t think it adequately represents the way that it can sometimes feel as though we are all family to each other.” Vally ruminated that “To be hybrid is a position of power. The ability to absorb, intuit and resonate across geography and cultural conditions is itself a language of imagination and empathy.” Djeli elaborated that although the contributors shared common bonds, their ancestors “did not travel with the same caste, social, educational, and economic background.” Instead, she pointed to “this

ocean journey that connects us to each other, but also to the diaspora of the last five hundred years of colonization.”¹⁹

These five ruminations on diasporic family pasts from individuals working in different creative fields provide a template for rethinking what it means to be diasporic. All invoke the idea of being diasporic without a modifier—gesturing at a relationship to being diasporic that exceeds categorization as “Indian,” “South Asian,” or “Indo-Fijian.” While all think deeply about the legacies of indenture, Kaladeen even finds the label “indentured labor diaspora” limiting. Instead, they frame diaspora, family, and empire as deeply entangled in ways that push us to rethink each. They speak of bonds rooted in shared experiences of oceanic journeys and the violence of being subject to imperial power as more formative than ties to an ancestral homeland or an adopted host land. As a “Motherland,” Britain becomes part of a family saga in which the intimacy of connection makes the violence of abuse even more painful. The children and grandchildren of this colonial diaspora share a kinship beyond those limited to heteronormative couplings and biological reproduction. It is these family trails that the book traces.

Following these trails requires rethinking the who, what, where, and when of how we study diaspora, family, and empire. I start by considering why I find the concept of diaspora useful despite the many questions scholars have raised about its applicability to Indian Ocean migration.²⁰ Following family trails has meant traveling to nearly every region of the globe, so the book is not geographically limited to the Indian Ocean. Still, it is profoundly shaped by insights and methods from this field. Most of the family trails I traced were journeys between different regions of Asia and between Asia and Africa. For scholars who foreground such South-South migrations, the term diaspora can seem an awkward fit. Its original association with Jewish biblical exile and the predominance of South-North migrations within diasporic studies, including Atlantic slavery, have linked diaspora to forced separation, extended exile, and longing for return to an ancestral homeland. Many of these characteristics map awkwardly onto the geographies and temporalities of migration in the Indian Ocean during the Age of Empire. Migrations between South and Southeast Asia and between Asia and Africa were often temporary, with migrants returning home permanently or for periodic visits, muting for some the experience of exile that has been so central to other diasporic experiences. As Isabel Hofmeyr has argued, “the Indian Ocean has been home to failed diasporas, notably people who move but do not embark on projects of cultural memory and constructing homelands.”²¹

In other cases, migrations were more extended but multi-sited, blurring the distinction between homeland and destination. For example, amongst the records of indentured Indians who migrated from Calcutta and Madras to

Natal, South Africa, I found references to migrants who had previously spent time in Mauritius, Guiana, Trinidad, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Reunion, Jamaica, Suriname, and Guadeloupe, suggesting that they served out one term of indenture, returned to India, and signed up for an additional term of indenture in a new locale.²² These itineraries extended even further in future generations. I traced how one family's journey from India to Natal in the early twentieth century now shapes how they think about their twenty-first-century migration from South Africa to Qatar. Natal functioned as an adopted host land for this family in one generation, and South Africa has become a remembered homeland in another. Just as Natal became part of South Africa after 1910, shifting political borders meant that migrants moved through landscapes that were themselves mobile, including during the seismic partitions of the Subcontinent in 1947 and again in 1971. The economic disruptions of the Great Depression, followed by World War II, and then the decolonization of Asia and Africa in subsequent decades saw families who had moved for generations around the Indian Ocean caught, as Kalyani Ramnath elegantly puts it, between "borders arbitrarily drawn and mobilities ignored."²³ Uncomfortable in new nations and citizenship regimes that sought to equate territory with racial, religious, and linguistic belonging, many kept moving, as I found when I reached out to the descendants of colonial-era migrants. Many were themselves also migrants interested in learning more about their ancestors as a means of reflecting on their own journeys. Such repeated, circuitous migrations are not unique to the Indian Ocean, but subsequent waves of colonialism, global depression, world wars, and post-colonial nation building have made for particularly complex journeys.

While these circuits have led some scholars of the region to avoid the concept of diaspora altogether, others consider it valuable in particular contexts. For example, Sunil Amrith writes, "The term is more useful, however, when it draws our attention specifically to the kinds of connections migrants maintain with their homelands and with others of shared origin dispersed around the world."²⁴ In this framing, scholars use diaspora to describe groups that self-consciously cultivated homeland-oriented imaginaries and ethno-linguistic patriotisms, such as Engseng Ho's exploration of the role of ancestral graves in Tarim in anchoring the Hadhrami diaspora, or Amrith's own study of the rise of a Tamil public sphere in British Malaya.²⁵ The idea of diaspora has also been usefully deployed to study political projects of expatriate nationalism, as in Sana Aiyar's study of Indians in Kenya.²⁶ Many scholars of the region, however, remain wary. Rachel Leow has recently offered a particularly pointed critique, arguing that diaspora may be an "inescapably arboreal concept" that elevates "biological models of race," "territorialized loyalty," and "patrilineage and patriarchies."²⁷

I echo Leow's call to rethink diasporic histories in non-essentialist terms, including by centering women. Rather than abandoning the idea of diasporic roots, however, I try to reimagine them outside of what Leow identifies as the limits of "arboreal" thinking. As conventionally imagined, the family tree presupposes a permanent and stationary attachment to land, and a linear logic of growth, rooted in the past and branching into the present. But actual nature is far more creative. In the following pages, I trace diasporic roots not just vertically as they became embedded in a particular patch of soil but also horizontally across fluid landscapes in which water and earth intermingled.²⁸ Drawing on my experience as an amateur gardener, I think with perennial roots, which, unlike trees, must be periodically divided and transplanted to thrive. Like perennials, diasporic families spread their roots through movement rather than attachment to a single place. I also think of mangrove trees, which thrive not on land but in salty water. While away from my garden, researching in Abu Dhabi, I took pleasure in observing its mangroves. I learned to think with their roots, which sometimes rise out of the water and turn upwards like branches, as the past haunts the present.

In trying to rethink diaspora, I also look to the borderlands where academia interfaces with art and literature as offering possibilities for thinking about mobility, rather than essentializing categories of identity, as a thread linking diasporic histories. Within academia, diaspora studies are deeply shaped by methodological nationalism, or the tendency to take nations as the default unit of analysis, even as the field reflects a broader embrace of transregional research. The almost ubiquitous use of modifiers, whether "Indian" or ethno-linguistic or religious categories such as "Tamil" or "Sikh," treats diasporas as bounded communities. They function akin to de-territorialized nation states that are geographically dispersed but nonetheless defined by identarian boundaries. Yet the artists and writers cited earlier engage diaspora more fluidly. On Instagram, a platform where I found many creative efforts to document migrant pasts, the hashtag #diaspora has over a million posts, far outnumbering references to specific regionally, ethnically, or religiously defined diasporas.²⁹ Academics sometimes complain that diaspora has become too mobile a concept, a diaspora of diasporas, which threatens to vacate the term of any meaning.³⁰ But I embrace this mobility as resonating deeply with how the families that populate the coming pages talked about the past and its relationship to their present. These cultural memories focus less on origin than the legacies of repeated movement. They are the mindset of worldliness that Kyriaki Anagnostopoulou attributed to her son, and the hybridity that Sumayya Vally invoked as "a language of imagination and empathy."

If these soaring imaginaries speak to the power of oceanic journeying in fostering diasporic memory, I also came to see how the legacies of empire

weighed them down. In Chapter 2, I explore how a family who repeatedly litigated their affairs in colonial courts in Bombay and Zanzibar passed the resulting habits of litigiousness from generation to generation long after the assets they disputed were exhausted. The recent flourishing of legal history in Indian Ocean contexts suggests that they were joined by many similarly litigious Parsi, Hadhrami, and Chettyar families, who made fortunes arbitrating between Asian, African, and global markets, and lost these same fortunes litigating in colonial courts.³¹ Colonial legal logics became woven into the warp and weft of these families' most intimate affairs. Colonialism also imparted other habits. In Chapter 3, I speak with a family about how their vexed relationship with South African settler colonialism lives on in the family's compulsive desire to invest in real estate. They speak to how settler colonialism affected groups, including Asians in Africa, who do not typically feature in studies that oppose White settlement to indigenous displacement.³²

That such migrants and their descendants are rarely considered part of a British imperial diaspora shows how essentialized notions of race and territorial nationalism continue to undergird much scholarship on diaspora. Work on the British diaspora and empire thus typically foregrounds the dispersion of White migrants from Britain across the empire and the resulting Anglophone and settler-colonial cultures that emerged.³³ Conversely, studies of the South Asian diaspora have emphasized the role of dispersed Indians in anti-colonial movements, inspiring diasporic patriotism that resisted empire.³⁴ Studies of how migrants from India identified with empire, however, are limited, perhaps because they represent a potentially problematic false consciousness—a sense that such Indians overlooked imperial racism and violence.³⁵ This is the case, however, only when diasporic identification is understood primarily as a feeling of patriotic belonging—hallmarks of an approach shaped by methodological nationalism. Thinking diaspora through family, in contrast, opens avenues for exploring how colonial-era migrants and their descendants identified with empire without endorsing it, including through inheritances of traumatic displacement. Empire reshaped family relations. Many also experienced empire as akin to a family relationship. Thus, in Chapter 3, I consider the case of an Indian-South African matriarch who wore a pendant with the image of Queen Victoria on her breast even as she protested against White racism. She used embodied intimacy, literally wearing the Queen as one might a familial relation, to stake her own claims to imperial motherhood.³⁶ As these examples suggest, studying diaspora through the intersection of family and empire unsettles ancestral homeland and ethno-religious identity as the central lens through which we think about the legacies of migration. It foregrounds the intimate, also often violent and traumatic, inheritances of mobility and empire.

Feminist Family Histories

Studying diasporic families in this way requires unsettling who we consider family and how we study them. The book works at the intersection of two fields: critical histories of gender and sexuality and biographical family histories. The former has shown how governing intimate relations, just as much as territory, was central to European empires.³⁷ Imperial regimes restructured conjugal and inter-generational relations by applying new systems of family law to marriage and inheritance. Policing the family, particularly those that crossed borders, was central to instituting racialized regimes of governance. Hiving off domestic from market relations also birthed new economies that masculinized market relations. These insights have defamiliarized structures often treated as timeless and rooted in biology, including definitions of family that prioritize legal and conjugal relations over other forms of kinship, as well as racial and religious identities.

These insights have percolated more slowly through the scholarly literature on diaspora, which often still centers on mobile men as key figures in ethnographically or religious-regionally defined diasporic communities. According to official migration statistics, which measured movement across political boundaries, men significantly outnumbered women in the great wave of Asian migration that stretched from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century.³⁸ But this one rubric for measuring the relationship between gender and migration has spawned a scholarship that is decidedly patriarchal in orientation. Thus, Indian Ocean studies has privileged the perspective of masculine merchants, scholars, seamen, and laborers, who are described as scattering their seed along its coasts. While this scholarship acknowledges the influence of women's wombs and local soils in shaping diasporas, they chart genealogies organized around masculine lineages.³⁹ These accounts, as Chie Ikeya pointedly critiques, relegate women to minor roles, "domesticating and nourishing what have been sown, spun, and propagated by men."⁴⁰ This is beginning to change, but much work remains.⁴¹ Patriarchal frames also dominate public histories of diasporic communities, which often center hagiographies of great men.⁴² Roots researchers understandably often begin their explorations with such patriarchal norms and identarian categories baked in. Yet, as I found out when I spoke to them, many also sensed that their families' pasts were more complicated.

The simple but still radical *feminist* move of asking about the women in such families is the first step towards excavating these more complex histories. I began my research for Chapters 1 and 2 looking for the histories of two great men and their families, Thamboosamy Pillai and Tharia Topan, who are frequently cast as the progenitors of the Tamil-Hindu diaspora in Malaysia and

the Gujarati-Khoja diaspora in Zanzibar. When I connected with their descendants, they, too, were primed by previous conversations with other scholars and journalists to tell me about their fathers and grandfathers. But when we began speaking about women in their families, particularly Thamboosamy's and Tharia's wives, Alamaloo and Janbai, we together unearthed alternative histories: from the critical role of widowed matriarchs in managing family businesses to transnational networks that bound women to women through overlapping habits of cosmopolitan consumption rather than via shared blood or identity. When we foreground women in studies of diaspora—from mothers who anchored households of migrant men, to the daughters of mixed couples (married or not), to women who undertook shorter or temporary journeys that were excluded from official measures of migration—the very idea of what it means to be diasporic necessarily shifts. The legacies of repeated mobility come into focus as one of the key features of what it means to be diasporic.

Yet historians who study family and empire also have much to learn from descendants and roots researchers. In engaging deeply with family stories, the book borrows from historians who have used the lens of a particular family to navigate imperial and global geographies.⁴³ I have also learned from scholars who have written about their own families—projects that challenge academic norms that cast the historian as an objective, outside observer of others' pasts.⁴⁴ Yet these works rarely grapple deeply with how historians and roots researchers engage with the past in different ways.⁴⁵

In thinking through this question, I have been inspired by scholars studying the Black Atlantic. Since at least 1976, when Alex Haley published his seminal *Roots*, scholars and lay people have looked to family history to grapple with the legacies of slavery. As a result, scholars working on Black diasporas have engaged deeply with family archives and memories to recover histories obscured in official sources. My work has been enriched by such engagements, from Tina Campt's work on family portraits and albums to Tiya Miles's retelling of family journeys through textiles.⁴⁶ In Chapter 5, I also draw inspiration from Alondra Nelson's analysis of DNA genealogy, which, while attuned to its many problems, shows the surprising ways African Americans have used it to fight for reparations and restorative justice.⁴⁷

While inspired by work on the Black Atlantic, the book explores the different land and seascapes through which historians and roots researchers travel in the Indian Ocean. Historians of African slavery have struggled with the problem of humanizing subjects who were often recorded as nameless inventory.⁴⁸ While I have similarly encountered silences and dehumanization while tracing families through archives, I also grappled with invasive detail and excesses of information. After abolition, British officials sought to prove that the

Indian laborers who replaced enslaved Africans did so voluntarily and that indenture promoted family ties, in contrast to enslaved mothers who were separated from their children at auctions. Creating dossiers of consent and kinship was thus crucial to veiling the continuities between the two systems. Similarly, documenting the belongings of migrants was essential to depicting them as owners of property, rather than the enslaved property of others. British officials recorded the contents of even minuscule estates when migrants died abroad—such as the leather saddlebag of Said Tasselma, a *fakir* or wandering holy man, who died in Alexandria, Egypt, and the crumpled IOUs found in the pockets of Narang Singh, a watchman for the Shanghai Nanking Railway.⁴⁹ These records provide remarkable tools for tracing family trails. But some contain family secrets that migrants or their descendants might have wished to hide, necessitating delicate ethical maneuvers.

Haunted Collages

Working with families, paging through photo albums and caressing delicate heirlooms together, taught me to engage with the past through feeling ghostly presences rather than just reading texts and analyzing arguments.⁵⁰ Concretely, this involved incorporating visual and material sources into my work alongside textual documents. These alternative archives, which are central to how many families engage with the past, are crucial to writing inclusive histories of migration in the Indian Ocean, even as they remain peripheral to much historical research.⁵¹ According to the 1911 census of India, only 5 percent of Indians were literate and only 1 percent of Indian women.⁵² Given that literacy rates were low and highly gendered, images and objects are essential to writing histories that look beyond the migration experiences of elite men.

Yet this shift required more than incorporating photographs and objects as sources. It entailed learning to *feel* sources, as I feel my grandmother's ring rub against my finger. It required finding ways to weave into my staid scholarly prose the haunting intimacy with the past that this touch conjures. It meant thinking of history not as an abstract inheritance but as an heirloom, derived from the Middle English *lome* or implement—a tool from the past that only gains value in the present when we use it to weave something new.⁵³ Approaching history as heirloom necessitated taking seriously the skills passed from one generation of women to the next as methods of interpreting the past. It meant finding inspiration for my work in unexpected sources, such as the art of Suchitra Mattai. Mattai uses vintage needlework (depicting historical scenes of women, enslaved/indentured people, and colonial settings), sari scraps gifted from her mother, and sewing skills inherited from her Indo-Guyanese grandmothers to construct multi-layered woven sculptures that

reimagine time and space.⁵⁴ Her art helped me to see roots as also threads that could be salvaged from one garment and sewn into something new.

As I made this shift in my thinking, I came to notice things that I had previously ignored, like the images of my own fingers in the digital photographs of documents I collected from archives. In this way, it equally transformed how I interacted with textual documents as well as objects and images. Migrants, many of whom were illiterate, *felt* the power of texts. They literally *touched* the documents that sealed their fate—placing their thumbprint on a labor contract. But documents were not just tools of official control. Letters, sometimes with snapshots enclosed, allowed migrants to connect with distant kin. Here, again, touch was crucial—I encountered many examples of letters that were carried in migrant’s pockets, a form of intimacy potentially more powerful than hearing words that were often written and read by others.⁵⁵ As I imagined how touching these letters and photographs transported migrants and their relations across continental distances, I also came to understand why, when I touched them, I felt *haunted* by a past that felt more intimately present.

The book deploys haunting as a method to explore how a focus on feeling, particularly the intersection of physical touch and emotional connection, destabilizes dominant historical methods and temporalities. In both the humanities and social sciences, texts reign supreme as sources and as method—so much so that scholars read many things as “texts” that are not even written documents. As Clifford Geertz famously argued: “The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong.”⁵⁶ In contrast, families made me see that not everything is a text waiting for scholars to read. They taught me that the past can be seen, touched, and felt—by viewing photographs, wearing family heirlooms, retelling stories, and sifting through archives.

In conceptualizing how these practices might work as alternatives to “reading” the past, I have been inspired by practices of artistic collage, particularly the work of artist Renluka Maharaj, whose artwork graces the cover. Maharaj’s ancestors migrated from India to Trinidad and Tobago as indentured laborers, and today she uses her training in photography and painting to create arresting visual reinterpretations of that past. Maharaj’s recent work was sparked by a series of postcard photographs of indentured Indian women. The photographs were taken by French photographer Felix Morin, who ran a studio in Port of Spain, Trinidad from 1869 until the late 1890s. In a series that came to be known as “Coolie Belles,” Morin adorned Indian women with elaborate jewelry before taking their photographs, which he sold to tourists.⁵⁷ The photographs, in Maharaj’s words, were “objectifying, exoticising and, thereby, othering these women.” As she explained of the mixed-media collages that she subsequently created: “It became important that I lift them out of these archives and re-present



FIGURE 0.1. Renluka Maharaj (Trinidad and Tobago, b. 1966), *Lillah* (*Pelting Mangoes series*), 2020, found photograph, acrylic paint, rhinestones on canvas, 2022.4.3. Courtesy of the Flaten Art Museum, St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN. Purchased by the Flaten Art Museum at St. Olaf College with support from the Dreyfus Foundation and Brenda Berkman '73. Selected by the 2022 students of ART 280: Art Now Critical Issues in Contemporary Art taught by Assistant Professor of Art and Art History Hannah Ryan: Emily Barta (staff), Lily Braafladt '22, Sophie Call '24, Zoe Golden '22, Emma Haren '22, Marcus Hauck '24, Cris Hernandez '23, Elias Ravn Iversen '25, Lauren Jacobson '24, Manaw Kyar Phyu '25, Jessenia Mia Prado '24, Lauren Schilling '25, Martha Slaven '24, Charlotte Smith '24, Han Timm '22, Kira Vega '24. Photography by Cy Hennings '26.

them in a respectful, beautiful, engaging and confronting way. Given my fragmented history, any one of these women could be a relative and I felt it was my responsibility to protect them.”⁵⁸ In the works exhibited as part of the traveling exhibit “Pelting Mangoes” (2020–2021), Maharaj overlaid colonial-era photographs with vivid hues and embellished them with beads, rhinestones, glitter, and gold leaf (see Figure 0.1). In 2022 and 2023, she expanded on these themes in a multi-media exhibit, “Bhumi’s Daughters,” in which additional collaged photographs were introduced with a film, “March for the Ancestors,” which Maharaj also produced. In the film, members of the Indian-Caribbean diaspora in New York paid homage to their forebearers by marching through Little Guyana (Richmond Hill) and carrying fabric banners bearing photographs of family members. Maharaj also incorporated objects that evoked memories of her childhood home in Trinidad, including a vintage dresser painted a vivid neon green and swings that hung from the ceiling. Visitors could view the photographs while sitting on the swings, literally setting the images in motion.⁵⁹ Harkening back to the framed family portrait of Gowsee and his descendants, Maharaj’s work was reminiscent of strategies that I had seen families use to transform documents of objectification and surveillance into intimate keepsakes.

Drawing inspiration from Maharaj’s multi-media collages, I adapt these techniques by thinking deeply about how working across different archives and mediums, including texts, images, and objects, produces multi-dimensional, tactile views of the past. I also borrow from Maharaj and other descendants a sensitivity to the power of moving documents originally produced and archived in colonial contexts into new assemblages. By handling such materials in ways that seek to dignify their subjects, we cannot undo, but might mitigate, the legacies of violent touches. Thus, Maharaj seeks to “protect” the women in her collages from the invasions of the photographer Morin, who may have manhandled their bodies as he clothed and bejeweled them for consumptive display. The opening page of each chapter features a different kind of source or combination of sources that were crucial to my research with that family—a map, photograph and bracelet, a genealogical tree, an album, and an Instagram post—but each chapter also weaves across multiple archives and mediums to create new assemblages. These haunted collages blur the distinction between lives in the past and creative possibilities in the present—akin to the vivid hues that Maharaj layers on top of black-and-white photographs.

In repeatedly moving between institutional archives, family collections, and oral histories, I also grapple with conflicting views of the past, including cases where my analysis diverged from how families understood their ancestors. Rather than minimizing such moments of dissidence, I allow myself to be haunted by them. Often, while working on the book, I woke in the middle

of the night, trembling with the knowledge that however I reconstructed a family's past, someone, dead or alive, would find my version wanting. But eventually, I learned to embrace rather than resolve the inevitable rips, seams, and patches in the narratives I was assembling, just as a collage exposes rather than hides its imperfect, assembled form.

For me, encounters with photographs were particularly productive in pushing me towards ideas of haunting and collage. The philosopher Jacques Derrida saw photography as sharing a particular affinity with “ghosts and phantoms,” writing, “The spectral is the essence of photography.”⁶⁰ Photography unsettles our notions of reality and fantasy, toying with the genre's simultaneous claims to capture reality, including through its entanglement with regimes of surveillance and identification, while also being clearly fabricated. Similarly, when we view a portrait photograph, we feel that the subject is both there and not there, a ghostly presence. This aura is even more powerful when a photograph's black-and-white coloring and delicate condition signal the pastness of the reality it displays. Yet when we pick up and handle it, the border between past and present blurs. Photographs are also not just static visual images—they are embodied and disembodied objects that we enlarge, convert between physical and digital forms, wear, and assemble into albums, a form of collage that I discuss in more depth in Chapter 4.

An early archival encounter was influential in shaping my thinking about the haunting power of photographs. The encounter involved a file from the British consulates in China, dated April 22, 1919, titled “Will of Sher Dilkhan in favour of his son Ussuf Khan (born July 15, 1919).” When I requested the file, I received a sealed envelope indicating that Sher Dilkhan deposited it with the consulate, but it was never opened, perhaps because he had left China. The text of the will suggested that he was one of the many Indian men who temporarily worked as policemen and private security guards in China and South-east Asia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁶¹ Not wanting to disturb the integrity of the archive, I asked an archivist for assistance, who unceremoniously slit open the envelope, as I considered how the file was henceforth forever altered. I then extracted an Urdu will and gasped in surprise when a photograph tumbled out (see Figure 0.2). Staring back at me was a middle-aged, portly man with an elegant handlebar mustache, wearing a suitcoat and vest—presumably the author of the will, Sher Dilkhan. In my surprise, I felt a ghost spring from the archives.⁶²

Here was truly a haunted collage—an assemblage of text and image, which conjured ghosts as it tumbled into my hands and swirled through my imagination. In the will, Sher Dilkhan indicated that all his property should pass to his son, whose date of birth was listed several months *after* he composed the will. Did he imagine that if he died before his son was born, he would at least know



FIGURE 0.2. Installation of *Bhumi's Daughter*, October 1, 2022–January 21, 2023, Project for Empty Space, Newark, NJ. Courtesy of Renluka Maharaj.

his father's face? What did Sher Dilkhan think, instead, of encountering me staring back at him? But I was haunted not just by the sight of Sher Dilkhan, but also the absent presence I keenly felt—the woman in the story. By bequeathing his property to an unborn son (who he probably did not know was a boy), Sher Dilkhan obscured the living, breathing woman carrying the fetus. In my encounter with the file, I sensed that historical time was “out of joint,” to borrow from Hamlet's exclamation on seeing his father's ghost.⁶³ The past and present collapsed as my demand to open the envelop unsealed the past, revealing Sher Dilkhan shuddering at my intrusive desire to write about a woman whom he wished to conceal, abetted by the serpentine logics of British bureaucracy. Would his descendants want to know about this past I had unsealed?

Imagining Sher Dilkhan's disapproval, and the possible reaction of his descendants, is part of entering archives as haunted spaces. Historians are not taught to ask permission of the dead, nor did I conjure a séance to ask his consent to write about his intimate affairs. While I found many descendants of subjects whom I first encountered in archives, I was not able to trace Sher Dilkhan's kin. But imagining what they might think of my work opens a different ethical stance towards historical research. Working with families, who often view the relations between the living and dead in more permeable ways, has meant embracing haunting as a means of ethically engaging with the past, as well as a research method. It has

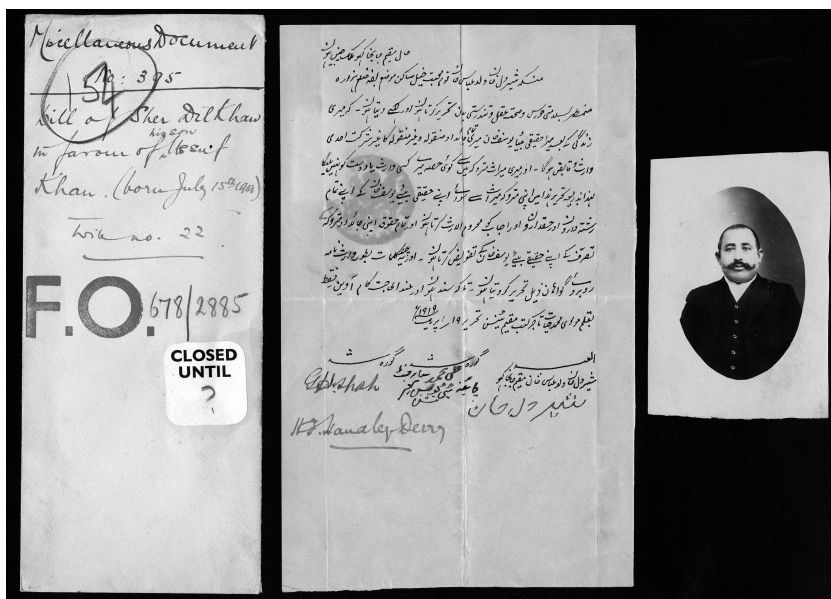


FIGURE 0.3. Will of Sher DilKhan with enclosed photograph, deposited in British Consulate, Jientsin, China, 1919, FO 678/2885. Courtesy of The National Archives (UK).

meant grappling with difficult, sometimes unresolvable, dilemmas of responsibility, privacy, and consent. I have had to look beyond official policies, which for many archives include open access to records after a typical lifespan (often 100 years) has passed since their creation, in theory ensuring that people mentioned in the records are dead. While such closure policies are convenient for archives that are custodians of thousands of documents, they overlook how documents can still impact living descendants. Historians who read documents in much more depth are potentially in a better position to consider such complex issues. However, they often receive little training in ethics and, thus, frequently, by default, outsource questions about privacy and consent to archives. Yet archival policies can often feel decidedly ad hoc. The records of one legal case I used for the book were open to researchers at the British Library, while duplicate copies were closed until 2030 at the British National Archives.⁶⁴ Given that history is increasingly entangled with public debates about social justice, the idea that historians can outsource ethics to archives is untenable.

Yet at universities in the United States, where I am based, institutional structures further reinforce the idea that ethics is primarily relevant to research on living subjects and constituted through following bureaucratic and

legalistic protocols. Unlike many social scientists in the United States, most historians do not submit their research for review by their university's federal Institutional Review Board (IRB), which is officially charged with ensuring that researchers follow ethical guidelines when working with human subjects. The growing popularity of oral history led to some confusion concerning the status of historical research and IRB protocols. In 2017, however, the US federal government issued a final ruling that officially clarified that oral history, along with journalism, is not subject to IRB oversight because it does not constitute research under its protocols. The critical distinction for the IRB is that historians are not engaged in "generalizable" research because their conclusions are specific to their particular subjects.⁶⁵ This decision has been of great practical relief to oral historians, who had previously sometimes clashed with IRB panels over whether they were required to anonymize their subjects, a practice that is at odds with the profession's norms, which often consider naming subjects as crucial to understanding past agency, causality, and human individuality.⁶⁶ However, the fact that most historical research falls outside the purview of IRB review can minimize the often complex ethical questions that arise when talking with living subjects about the past.

For families, revelations about dead relations—bequests to concubines and illegitimate children, information about their religious or ethnic background, and details of their property—can feel like information about themselves. Families chose to share or not share such information with me, but what about the information I gleaned from public archival records? As I grappled with such instances, some colleagues suggested anonymizing my subjects to minimize the potential risk of exposing "private" information. However, some of my subjects or their relations were well-known historical figures. Anonymizing them would obscure how my work intersected with historical scholarship and popular memory. I worried that anonymizing subjects when writing family history also reified the notion that these were "private" stories hived off from broader "public" histories, of politics and economy, nation and empire.

I learned long ago the folly of this approach. I began researching this book working on inheritance cases, in which the past is literally proportioned into private parcels of property. This research inspired my broader interest in how, for families, the past often haunts the present through inheritances—of receiving (or losing) bequests of property, handling heirlooms, or remaking memories in light of one's own life circumstances. But, working on legal disputes over estates made me deeply suspicious of the ethics of engaging the past through frameworks rooted in property law. Courts often failed to resolve family disputes, even over property, much less over memory. No one owns the past, and ethical frames built on conceptions of privacy, with its deep ties to private property, fail as guides to navigating contested histories.

Most critically, I found that most of the people I interviewed did not want their words or the histories of their ancestors to be anonymized, even if there was some information they did not want to be public. Many had spent years tracing their family history and wanted credit for their research. Professional standards dictate that I cite my fellow scholars by name when incorporating their findings. Why should I not give similar credit to family researchers, even if doing so opened the possibility of recognizing that our views of the past might diverge? Naming subjects encourages the circulation of historical knowledge between academia and broader publics. It also makes scholars more accountable to those who populate their studies—including empowering them to challenge our work.

Ultimately, I have cobbled together solutions to these ethical dilemmas on a case-by-case basis. Drawing on guidelines published by the Oral History Association and informal guidance from IRB administrators, who agreed to offer counsel even though they deemed my work outside their official ambit, I have used consent forms when conducting interviews. However, I found that these protocols often reduced ethics to law—protecting scholars and universities from being sued—rather than training scholars to grapple with the complexities of weighing complex, sometimes competing, responsibilities to our research subjects, those who read our work, and uncomfortable truths. Throughout, I have tried to respect the desire of families to shape how their pasts are presented, but sometimes honoring the wishes of one relation meant offending another. The dead also have a stake in how their histories are narrated although I was often unsure about what they would want told. I worried about revealing their secrets, and about hiding their pasts because today their descendants find them troubling. Balancing these different perspectives seemed to require sometimes writing about controversial pasts and sometimes omitting them—choices that I have tried to make as transparent as possible even as I feel haunted by what often felt like imperfect solutions. In the coming pages, I do not claim the authority implied by having *heard* the voices of ghosts speaking the secrets of their past. But I do know that I *felt* their presence. This feeling did not deliver the certainty of knowledge that I craved as a historian, but it did create a profound, if sometimes troubling, sense of obligation to handle their legacies with care.

“Public” Histories in the Digital Diaspora

The early inspiration for this book came from the realization that many of the researchers who occupied the desks beside me in archives, from London to Pietermaritzburg, were tracing their roots. Much family research, however, now occurs online. Many popular genealogy websites, including Ancestry.com

and Familysearch.org, are of limited use for families whose roots traverse Indian Ocean geographies, although I encountered some who were creatively repurposing these platforms. The families I worked with often used other tools, which also became critical to my research. I received tips on Facebook groups and traded WhatsApp messages with descendants who crowd-sourced information from distant relations through group chats. The importance of such digital platforms exploded during the COVID-19 pandemic. I could not physically travel to archives, and I was overwhelmed caring for my own family. Burned-out but bored, late at night, I found myself exploring new landscapes of diasporic heritage that flowered when people looked online for the social connections put on hold in person. Diasporic households were already adept at forging such bonds—embracing digital tools to extend kinship networks they had long maintained with letters and photographs. Yet, as many lost older relations to COVID, family histories seemed more precious and fragile. During late-night scrolling sessions, many were re-imagining how to engage with the past through digital archives that featured family photographs and heirlooms.

The importance of such digital spaces for public engagement with the past in the Global South and Indian Ocean region, particularly around themes such as migration and family, has received scant attention. Public historians have long recognized the importance of family history and acknowledged roots researchers' pioneering role as early adopters of digital history.⁶⁷ A rich literature on "digital diasporas" has also amply documented how migrants creatively use digital media to remap the relationship between space, community, and intimacy.⁶⁸ Yet minimal scholarship has engaged with the dynamic intersection between these two areas—the particular importance of digital media for imagining alternative diasporic pasts. This is surprising given the enormous popularity of projects such as the Instagram account and Substack "Brown History." The account has a remarkable 700,000 followers (and counting) and crowd-sources content from across the globe.⁶⁹ One of its most popular features is the hashtag #brownhistoryphotoalbum, which includes family photographs and oral histories of migration.

The scant academic attention that scholars have paid to such forums (although many are avid followers) reflects the deep biases in how "Public History" has been studied. The ambitions of Public History are vast, with many scholars now embracing a broad definition: "History for the public, about the public, and by the public."⁷⁰ Yet Public History as a subfield still bears the imprint of its early development in the United States in the 1970s, and its investment in institution building, including degree programs that created an employment pipeline to museums, heritage sites, archives, public policy, and corporations looking to document their history. Recent efforts to

“internationalize” the field have primarily looked to overlapping initiatives in Europe or countries such as Australia, Canada, and South Africa, with large-scale public and private investments in heritage and overlapping legacies of White-settler colonialism.⁷¹

Even when scholars further diversify geographically, they often assume that Public History necessarily plays out in national or local contexts. For example, the editors of the volume *What is Public History Globally?* claim that “Like culture, public history comes from somewhere: it is local; it is from ‘around here’—a locality, region, state or nation.”⁷² I find this a jarring statement as a scholar of the Indian Ocean, a rich laboratory of mobile cultural forms, such as the unique genres of music that developed on board the region’s *dhow*s (sailing ships).⁷³ Yet, because many formal heritage projects depend on funding from states, which prioritize national or regional narratives, or universities and foundations, there is a strong bias towards location-based research.⁷⁴ This often limits “global” frameworks to comparisons between national contexts. Thus, while rich studies of heritage projects and public memory exist for many parts of Asia and Africa, only a handful of scholars truly pursue such work across Indian Ocean contexts.⁷⁵ Fewer still consider their dynamic interface with family history and digital media.

Yet public histories need not be tethered to one place, as quickly becomes apparent when we look to more expansive vistas of engagement outside projects that enjoy state or institutional backing. I signal this shift in perspective by thinking about “public” versus “Public” history. In the following chapters, I look for evidence of such public engagements across spaces and mediums—a hidden grave and garlanded statue in Kuala Lumpur, a bracelet that traveled from Zanzibar to a museum collection in Salem, Massachusetts, and photographs of Asian seamen featured in outreach programs sponsored by the British National Archives. While I find traces of diasporic pasts in all these sites of public heritage, I also analyze how official narratives, as promoted by states, newspapers, and museums, frame these histories through identarian categories that prioritize migrants’ attachments to specific homelands and adopted host lands rather than the experiences of repeated mobility that I often heard families emphasize.

In contrast, I found that digital spaces sometimes (although certainly not always) provided more fluid landscapes for pursuing diasporic trails that flowed against compartmentalizing logics. The low start-up (although often labor-intensive) costs for creating accounts and pages on Facebook or Instagram reduce the need for state sponsorship or institutional backing. At the same time, their inherent placelessness encourages thinking across borders. The name “Brown History” reflects such efforts. While widely understood as a forum featuring diasporic South Asian perspectives, the account

self-consciously resists a binary divide between those inside and outside the region, looking also at migrations during Partition. The name “Brown History” also emphasizes connections with other areas of the Global South, including by featuring mixed family relations.⁷⁶ In Chapter 5, I look in depth at another Instagram account, “Gulf ⇌ South Asia,” which is even more radical. It pushes back against the disproportionate emphasis in studies of diaspora on migrations between the Global North and South to instead feature content that emphasizes the alternative temporalities, including temporary migration, and spatial routes that link these two regions. While the founders and users of these platforms struggle with their profit-seeking algorithms, the accounts show how digital spaces are creative vistas for reimagining what might constitute public history.

The following chapters follow the arc of an afterlife, as the living passed into the realm of the dead, became the subjects of recent memory, and then more distant history. It opens with a funeral and proceeds to the division of a deceased’s estate. It then turns to the retelling of migrants’ stories by future generations and their incorporation into public histories of nations and diasporas. Each chapter narrates a stage in the unfolding of an afterlife through the story of a different family moving across the Indian Ocean and the British Empire. We begin with the funeral of Thamboosamy, a colonial bureaucrat-turned-business tycoon who traced his roots to South India but was born in Singapore and rose to prominence in Kuala Lumpur in British Malaya. This chapter considers how cosmopolitan legacies accumulate and erode in an urban geography reshaped by shifting regimes of ethnic, religious, and national categorization. Chapter 2 takes up the next stage of the deceased’s afterlife: the division of assets, in this case, a process that unfolded in colonial courtrooms in Zanzibar and Bombay. It pivots around the story of Janbai, the matriarch of an Indian Ocean family firm. The chapter triangulates between legal records, a manuscript family biography, photographs, and jewelry, both present and absent, to consider how multi-media collages reveal suppressed histories of gendered mobility.

Chapter 3 shifts forward in time to examine how subsequent generations have attempted to reconstruct their ancestors’ migrations from colonial documents, inherited family stories, and online genealogy platforms. It follows the trail of Angamma, who, as an eight-year-old girl, traveled from Madras to Natal to work on a coffee plantation. The chapter shows how the multi-generational trauma of indenture led to selective remembering, erasure, and recovery, including a recent flowering of interest in the stories of indentured women.

Chapter 4 turns to what happens when family histories become public patrimony. It looks at the different ways in which public histories of Asian seamen might be visualized by constructing an album of John/Jan Mohamed using photographs scattered across archives in the US and UK. Unable to track down descendants, the chapter considers how strategies borrowed from family history, including album making, can contribute to public engagements with diasporic histories that move beyond national frames. Chapter 5 explores rapidly evolving digital genealogy landscapes to show how they open new possibilities for doing public history in Indian Ocean contexts. I also reflect on my own experience researching the chapter while living as a temporary migrant in the United Arab Emirates, which in recent years has hosted the largest number of Indian migrants of any country.⁷⁷

This book is not a history of my family. But my conversations with others about their ancestors often circled back to my roots. Those sharing their stories with me also wanted to know my own. My early interest in history was sparked by listening to my grandmother narrate how her family fled anti-Jewish pogroms in a town then in Russia, now in Ukraine. I grew up in a mixed-faith household and now share my life with my husband, whose family has moved between Madras (now amended as Chennai in his passport), Bombay, Riyadh, New York, and Hong Kong. I hope this book will one day help me explain to my daughter her sprawling roots, even as it hopefully aids other families like ours in tracing their diasporic trails.

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