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Devotional Love: Abolitionist Ethics of Care and Eroticism in Survivor Community Care in Higher Education

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Centering devotional love (Bhakti) and the erotics as a form of relational abolitionist ethics of care in QT2SBIPOC survivor communities both as an educator and researcher, this article seeks to create QT2SBIPOC survivor geographies that allow room to radically imagine our futurity outside of the impoverished white colonial imagination. This type of QT2SBIPOC deviant care is a form of defiance against white colonial theories of change that require us (QT2SBIPOC) to expose pain and evoke empathy as a form of change making, effectively removing our agency as subjects of our own narratives and change-making practices. Centering devotional love and the erotics as an abolitionist relational praxis of care challenges carceral care that centers colonial and racial capitalism's antirelationality. If we view displacement (from land, community, family, home, bodies, etc.) as a form of antirelationality, then actively thinking about, reclaiming, and sometimes reshaping our ancestral pedagogy of relationality allows us to begin healing our attachment wounds. In this paper, I reflect on the survivor community I am surrounded by in higher education in Tkaronto and the collective healing of our attachment wounds through devotional love (QT2SBIPOC survivor deviant care). This allows us survivors to reclaim our eroticism or devotional love outside the framework of white cisheteropatriarchy. I then apply the knowledge learnt in survivor community spaces in my practice as an educator.

The story closest to my heart is a novel that seven-year-old Siva read, called, "Frog and Toad Together," by Arnold Lobel (1970). That story was his first experience of the power of stories to enact change. It was also his first lesson in how relational devotional love, expressions of devotional love, and the freedom from shame of devotional loving, can help beings experiencing violence grow together. He was very excited to apply what he had learned from that story to his life. However, he was not prepared for the grief that comes with devotional love, so it was also his first lesson in grief, loss, and the fear of devotional love.

> Toad put his head very close to the ground and shouted, "NOW SEEDS, START GROWING!" Frog came running up the path. "What is all this noise?" he asked.
> "My seeds will not grow," said Toad.
> "You are shouting too much," said Frog. "These poor seeds are afraid to grow."
> All the next day Toad sang songs to his seeds.
> And all the next day Toad read poems to his seeds.
> And all the next day Toad played music for his seeds. (Lobel 1970, 22)

The story ends with Frog and Toad rejoicing together when the seeds start to sprout. Amidst the violence that surrounded him, seven-year-old Siva decided to plant a lime tree and

name him Ganesh after his Istadeva. Ganesh did not grow for a long time. He was dying. Siva was very concerned and upset. Through what he had learned from that story, Siva decided that day that Ganesh would not grow because he feared the violence that surrounded them both. Ganesh needed to be protected and loved. However, Siva was too embarrassed to sit beside Ganesh and sing while everyone else was listening to him. It seemed rather random and mad. What would others think seeing him talk and sing to a plant? In secret, he woke up in the middle of every night to sing to Ganesh. When Siva got sleepy, he would end the session with Ganesh by reciting the invocation to Pillayar, Ainthu Karathanai. This would ensure that Pillayar would come forth and protect Ganesh while Siva drifted off to sleep. The invocation, Ainthu Karathanai, is a Tevaram, from the first seven volumes of the Tirumurai, of the twelve-volume collection of Tamil Saiva Bhakti poetry.

> Ainthu karattanai yaanai mugattanai
> Inthin ilampirai pohllum eyirtranai
> Nanthi magantanai nyaanak kolunthinai
> Punthiyil vaittadi pottrugindreneh
>
> He who has the five hands and the elephant's face,
> Whose tusk is as the crescent moon,
> The son of Nandi. The Flower of Wisdom,
> Him I cherish in thought, His feet adore.



Figure 1: Digital illustration of a young brown-skinned child resting his head on one hand and gazing peacefully and joyfully at a leafy green lime plant in a terracotta pot. He has dark hair gathered into a bun adorned with rudrāksha beads. On his forehead is a Saivite tripuṇḍra, consisting of three horizontal lines of thiruneeru and a central red-and-yellow pottu made with kumkum and turmeric. He wears gold earrings. The background is white.

In five years, Siva's beautiful lime tree had grown to half of Siva's height, had a vibrant dark green colour, and was very healthy. Siva was deeply in love. He would admire Ganesh almost daily after school, telling him that he was proud that Ganesh stood so tall. That day, like always, when he returned home from school, he went to see Ganesh to admire his lush green leaves. When he saw Ganesh, uprooted from the soil, the smile on that child's face dropped, his heart started palpitating, and his breath was caught somewhere between grief and rage. When he found his breath again, he wailed. His roots had been pulled out of his soil.

The story of my lime tree, Ganesh, depicts my early exposure to notions of love, loss, grief, and displacement, whether expressed toward a plant, a deity, or a community. As a mad-identified researcher and educator grounded in mad embodied knowing, I sit with these early

lessons to reflect on where my ideologies of relationality come from and what they center. Devotional love, or Bhakti, offers me a foundational framework for this work. Bhakti, "the loving devotion to a personal god [Istadeva]" (Radhakrishnan and Rajagopalan 1984, 209), comes from the root word bhaj in samaskrtam, meaning "to partake in, to belong to, to share with" (Dhavamony 1971, 14–22). In Tamil Saiva Bhakti traditions, Bhakti is not limited to a paternalistic or fatherly relationship with the divine; rather, it is a reciprocal form of love and the erotics, intimately tied to displacement (unrequited love) and expressed across both platonic and non-platonic contexts (Dhavamony 1971).

In this paper, displacement refers to a relational, embodied, and collective condition shaped by violence and structural harm that produce antirelationality from the body, the land, our ancestors, and community. I demonstrate how these ancestral and cultural notions of love and displacement shape my understanding of what it means to love and how I love. At the same time, as part of the diaspora, I trace how I attempt to reshape these understandings through lessons drawn from QT2SBIPOC scholars who theorize abolitionist, anti-colonial love, as well as from survivor communities in higher education in Tkaronto who practice it. Survivorship, in this paper, is a process of living with and through antirelationality while actively working to restore relationality through devotional love, the erotics, and abolitionist relational praxis. Survivor communities are the relational spaces where this work of survivorship is collectively held and practiced, while survivor geographies name the emotional, political, and spatial terrains in which survivors live, organize, and imagine otherwise within and beyond higher education in Tkaronto.

If displacement—from land, community, family, home, and our bodies—is understood as a form of antirelationality, then reclaiming and reshaping our ancestral pedagogies of relationality through devotional love becomes a way to begin healing our attachment wounds. As a person who is constantly called to do death work, healing the attachment wound remains central to preserving my capacity for community building and care. In this sense, the paper reflects on how survivors in higher education collectively live with and through antirelationality while working to restore relationality through devotional love, the erotics, and abolitionist relational praxis. Drawing on storytelling, theory, and lived experience, I explore how survivor communities and survivor geographies emerge within higher education through practices of collective care, politicization, and pedagogical resistance, and how these relational practices inform my teaching, organizing, and commitments to abolitionist ethics of care.

In what follows, I move from ancestral and personal narratives of devotional love to an exploration of survivor communities, abolitionist care, and pedagogical resistance in higher education. With these early lessons in love, grief, and displacement, I return to Bhakti as a living practice, one that continues to shape how I experience joy, intimacy, and relational connection.

Devotional Love (Bhakti) and Its Capacity for Joy

She said, "I love you," and then gave me this expectant, curious, demanding yet playful look. "Why don't you ever say I love you back to me?!" I stuttered, "Um, well … it feels a bit chaotic right now." To which she eloquently replied, "Bitch! You are mad. It [love] will always feel and be chaotic." She kept looking at my face for a reaction. My emotions were dissociating from my body. My body refused to give her a reaction, and my mind was obsessed with one thought: "Nobody makes demands of me!" Let intentionality take a backseat for a few seconds in your mind while you read this next statement. My devotional love is stubborn. It

takes shape in its own chaotic way; it wills itself. Tamil people have many different words to describe the feelings that the English language often reduces to the term "love." In many diasporic Tamil families, Anpu is the everyday expression of love. "Anpu [...] is a way of living. It is a way of transacting life. It is expressed, but not spoken of, as love. Anpu has certain inherent characteristics. [...] Anpu grows in hiding; it needs to be contained (adakkam)" (Sriram and Chaudhary 2004, 115; Trawick 1992). Adakkam is often a term used to control many different forms of love, and it often transpires in a way to police everyday behaviours, namely gender norms. It effectively polices what forms of expressions of love are available to whom—and in what circumstances love becomes appropriate to express—under the framework of cisheteropatriarchy.

It was common in my family for older women to police the behaviour of younger women and girls, specifically in the presence of cismen. Growing up, my aunty or amma would hit me and say, "kāla mūḍikkoṇḍu, adakkam oḷukkamā iru," which approximately translates to sit with folded legs, remain modest and disciplined, and in a way that limits the space you take up. "As a girl, adults always told me to 'close my legs' as if to shut off a light in an empty room, or closing a lid on stinky trash. I realize now the 'closing' had more to do with a disconnecting me from unfurling truths and succulent prayers." (Petrus-Nasah 2020). Petrus-Nasah points out that from a young age, she has been taught to suppress the erotic. Devotional (erotic love) love is hard, primarily because we are taught to suppress it through violence, particularly for women and gender expansive survivors. As an Eelam-Tamil transmasc mad-identified survivor, my devotional love is chaotic and is often trapped in adakkam, as learned through violence.

What can abolition praxis teach us about liberating devotional, erotic love within chaos (Lorde 1978; brown 2019)? This is important because carceral logics—understood here as punitive and control-based ways of regulating harm, behavior, and desire (Hwang 2019)—shape our everyday interactions with the people who surround us and form our communities (Davis 2003). We would need to confront the ways in which we police desires and imaginations to abolish policing from our mind and hearts (Kaba 2021). Through exploring, expanding, and redefining the erotics outside of white cisheteropatriarchal structures of power, we have the power to unlearn and liberate from internalized carceral logics (Lorde 1978; brown 2019). So, once again, I ask, why is this important? Erotics outside the framework of white cisheteropatriarchal structures expand our capacity to embody joy (Lorde 1978; brown 2019).

As a death worker, deepening a capacity for joy with other survivors is particularly important in grief work. Deepening my capacity for joy allowed me to access joyous grief. I have had access to many healers over the years, who facilitated and guided my grief work. I am grateful to have crossed paths with all of them because they taught me something I needed to learn. That said, I prioritize healers who can facilitate access to my joy, even in grief. Processing my grief is still hard but I can access it, and it flows through my body, both uninvited, and on invite. However, accessing my joy, primarily in my 20s was still very difficult. A healer I once worked with was trying to reduce the isolation of grief and built my capacity to form relationships with other humans through grief. He was frustrated with me and said, "You hate everything!" I was talking a lot about everything and everyone I hated, and I was very resistant to new human connections. But I was also talking a lot about the one thing that made me happy in that moment. At the time, I had recently adopted a rescue cat named Stewart Mclovin', a being who had been through untold violence. He showed me I can be loved and that I can love like water, without fear and shame. The healer failed to share in my joy and was dismissive of it. I felt that he treated my joy like it was frivolous, maybe because that joy and connection was a cat and not a human. He refused to prioritize or entertain conversation about the one thing that

made me happy in that moment. I got the sense that, to him, me speaking of my joy was only to avoid conversations about my grief and forming new connections with other humans.

However, joy is part of grief and grief work. There is such a thing called joyous grief. Joy is not frivolous, and if someone is sharing their joy with you, consider yourself privileged to take part. What he failed to understand was that Stewart was a reminder that love returns to you in waves and you can return to love in waves (Waheed 2013), meaning he was the roots (grounding) I needed to re-establish my care community with other humans. The story about seven-year-old Siva and his Ganesh (lime tree) was a story about joyous grief. However, when I initially narrated this story for the major research paper I wrote for my master's degree, it was framed only through grief, displacement, and violence. When I was able to access my joyous grief—the five years Siva spent loving, caring for, and nurturing Ganesh—I was able to begin reconnecting with plant life as an adult, while working through the extreme fear I had of death. I still got sad every time a plant I loved died, but I replanted again and again to provide care, consciously and intentionally. I drew the picture below of seven-year-old Siva and Ganesh a few years ago as a way of expressing my joyous grief. Siva would wake up in the middle of the night and whisper secrets (to Ganesh) about all the mischievous things he had done, like secretly drinking all his akka's mango juice and letting his appa take the blame. Ganesh kept all of Siva's secrets (stories) with care. This is why joy, for me, is intimately tied to what I have come to understand as chaos.



Figure 2: Digital illustration of two seated children on a white background. On the left is Pillaiyar, the elephant-headed Hindu deity, wearing yellow garments and gold earrings. His trunk is decorated with a red floral vine, and his forehead bears three horizontal lines of thiruneeru with a central red-and-yellow pottu made with kumkum and turmeric. On the right is a young brown-skinned child seated cross-legged wearing a tiger-skin garment. He has dark hair gathered into a bun adorned with rudrāksha beads and wears gold earrings. A long green serpent curls around his shoulders and extends upward. He is winking and smiling. His forehead has a Saivite tripuṇḍra, consisting of three horizontal lines of thiruneeru and a central red-and-yellow pottu made with kumkum and turmeric.

Chaos-, Erotics-, and Relational-Accountable Meaning Making

At this point, you might be wondering what I mean by chaos. My professor once told me that I often throw around terms without explaining what they mean to me, and they were right. Academia is a place that requires certainty. Contextual learning is not a thing. I jokingly and patronizingly asked him, "Couldn't you understand what I mean in context?" He flat out said, "No, I will not." I appreciate his stubbornness, but I will never tell him that. In academia, certain words and concepts produced by Black and Indigenous scholars and activists of colour are overused, appropriated, and taken away from their original creators and purpose to the

point where they lose meaning. Tuck points out that the concept of decolonization has been largely metaphorized to make "settler moves to innocence" possible through an attempt to problematically reconcile settler guilt and complicity and ensure settler futurity (Tuck and Yang 2012). There is a growing trend to apply the language of decolonization with ease and out of context to its original creators and purpose. Many discussions about decolonization make no mention of Indigenous people, Indigenous sovereignty, Indigenous intellectuals, activist theories, and frameworks of decolonization (Tuck and Yang 2012). The process of meaning- and world-making requires genealogy of thought and concepts taken up in a way that allows for its expansion without appropriation or loss of origins. This is why I practice relational-accountable, reciprocal storytelling, which includes consent in the usage of stories.

I have my own notion of the concept of chaos in devotional love, but before we get into that, I want to acknowledge and discuss chaos in the context of the erotics, and the scholars that built with me the language and framing I need for this paper. Have you ever felt a concept as a feeling and practiced it but did not have words for it or found the English language specifically within academia to limit the ways you can express that felt knowledge (Million 2013)? English is not my primary language, and I often struggle with the process of articulating Tamil and my ancestral knowledge through a colonial language. Not because I lack the mastery of the colonial English language, but rather, because English, as a language, is used for genocide, to work against us (BIPOC), to assimilate, to kill, to erase. Yet, I continue to speak my truth, "at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood" (Lorde 1984, 40). Then I come across queer, trans, Two-Spirit, Black, and Indigenous scholars, activists, and artists of colour who rip open the English language and demand it bend its will to our children and grandchildren (children whose access to their languages have been displaced by colonialism and genocide), and I remain grateful for that labour of love.

Audre Lorde is one among those scholars, and she defines the erotics as, "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings" (Lorde 1984, 54). Lorde associates the erotics with the creative power and harmony in women. The erotics as power is a relational ethics that Lorde asserts as a way to connect and honour each other's humanity, autonomy, and expansiveness (Lorde 1978; brown 2019). C. Riley Snorton (2017), in *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, expands this conversation beyond the gender binary by mapping how Black transness and racial capitalism are entangled, showing that racial capitalism is always gendered. This work places Black radical traditions in conversation with Black feminism to challenge and expand the revolutionary potential of Black radical traditions. Enslavement as a form of early racial capitalism was an ungendering process that denied Black women access to feminization (Spillers 1987; Hartman 1997). The concept of ungendering offers a framework to understand how Black women were denied womanhood. While ungendering functioned in particularly violent ways for Black women through the denial of feminization and womanhood, it also operates expansively across other Black gendered bodies under racial capitalism, shaping multiple ontologies through cisheteropatriarchal violence (James 2016). As Joy James (2023) theorizes through the concept of the "captive maternal," ungendering is not only an identity condition but a structural function that both constrains and generates forms of resistance. Cisheteropatriarchy is a practice of racial capitalism that upholds binary categories of gender and sex for capitalist accumulation (Spillers 1987; Sharpe 2016). As Hortense Spillers argues, this challenges us to disentangle ourselves from a reliance on "woman" and instead think through the ways in which femininity and masculinity move in and across all kinds of bodies.

I appreciate the works of QT2SBIPOC scholars, activists, and artists who hold and bring with them the knowledge of our ancestors in conversation to expand ancestral truth to

encompass the realities of our lives and the lives of the communities we serve. Displacement is a form of antirelationality that requires actively thinking about reclaiming and sometimes reshaping our ancestral pedagogy of relationality as a process of healing our attachment wounds. These types of academic conversations framed through relationality are a form of devotional love that challenges the punitive-, antirelational-, capitalist-, debate-, and criticism-based Eurocentric forms of knowledge production that prioritize a universal and dominant truth and punish any narratives that challenge this dominance and structure of power. Abolition frameworks call us to create anti-carceral-, non-punitive-based spaces of collective knowledge production that prioritizes radical imagination to make room for multiple, sometimes contradicting, truths (Montford and Taylor 2022). Neely, in *Building Abolition: Decarceration and social justice: Prisons and Settler Colonialism*, speaks to the quality of story lost to settler colonial imagination and the effects of the impoverished settler colonial political imagination on incarcerated Indigenous youths (Montford and Taylor 2022). Neely places restoring story as central to restorative justice and places abolition as a praxis that restores the logic of gift giving. Witnessing the stories by incarcerated Indigenous youth poets (outside of the impoverished colonial imagination), Neely creates a protocol that prepares them to receive the gift-giving capacity of the students in prison. Centering the process of restoring story (Indigenous ontology and epistemology) to challenge the impoverished settler colonial political imagination effectively and momentarily restores relationality in an antirelational death-making carceral space (Montford and Taylor 2022).

Decentering white colonial ontology and epistemology in this paper looks like saying, to the white gaze, "Knowledge collectively produced by Queer Trans BIPOC people in Queer Trans BIPOC spaces brings us to a place of knowing," and not requiring myself as a transmasc racialized person to justify why I exist through white ontology and epistemology. As a settler refugee of colour, I was once questioned by another settler for using the works of Indigenous scholars in their truth to expand my thoughts in relation to Indigenous stories. The questioning was framed in a way that placed Indigenous knowledge as a single story that did not apply (or is unrelatable) to non-Indigenous people to Turtle Island. Indigenous knowledge production was questioned as something that only applied to Indigenous communities or having expertise only within this context without the recognition that Indigenous stories are produced in relation to all our relations, including me, as a settler of colour. Why are we (QT2SBIPOC) expected to accept whiteness and white ontology and epistemology as a universal neutral truth that applies in general to everyone, which then effectively places white scholars as authority? What does the knowledge produced in Black and Indigenous geographies mean for my work? How does it impact my work? How does it speak to my work and guide me? How does it shift my thinking and praxis? I refuse to be trapped in the authoritative knowledge of whiteness.

As a settler of colour in academia, my relationship to Black people and Indigenous people is often mediated through whiteness. White supremacy creates a type of dialect for Black people and people of colour that mediates our relationship to Indigenous people through whiteness or white people. The same is true for people of colour forming relationships with Black people; it is often mediated through whiteness and capitalist relational understandings. In "Racial Capitalism," Melamed takes up the concept of racial capitalism as a "production of social separateness - the disjoining or deactiving of relations between human beings (and humans and nature) needed for capitalist expropriation of work" (2015, 78) and highlights Gilmore's notion of racial capitalism as a technology of antirelationality. These histories of ungendering and relational rupture do not exist outside of political economy; they are shaped by racial capitalism's ongoing work of disjoining bodies, desires, and relations. The understanding of capitalism as

"racial capitalism" and as a technology of antirelationality is central in abolition work and restoring right relations between humans and between humans and nature (Melamed 2015). Racial capitalism not only disjoins material and social relations, but also disciplines how love, desire, intimacy, and erotic expression are permitted, valued, or punished under cisheteropatriarchal and colonial norms. In this way, the politics of love and the erotics are deeply entangled with antirelationality, as racial capitalism regulates which bodies are allowed access to tenderness, care, and relational freedom, and which are subjected to containment, control, and dispossession. For this reason, I center the ontology and epistemology of Black and Indigenous scholars and activists of colour in order to foreground racialized dialects of love and relationship building in my academic work and community organizing practices.

The knowledge produced in academic and organizing spaces is intended for relationship building as it is collectively generated. The use of relational ontology in my paper attempts to acknowledge that knowledge is collectively produced, contextualizes knowledge, avoids essentialization, and recognizes the relational power and privilege in research. In the context of relationship building, relational ontology is a key component to ensure reciprocity and accountability in research. Martin and Mirraboopa (2003), in *Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing: A Theoretical Framework and Methods for Indigenous and Indigenist Research*, claim that ontology is how we develop an awareness of oneself, belonging and our responsibilities and ways of relating to ourselves and those around us; defining relational ontology to be one of interrelatedness and interdependence. Relational ontology prevents universalizing knowledge. Martin and Mirraboopa outline how ontology informs a theoretical framework for Indigenist research and provide three main constructs and processes: "First, establishing through law what is known about the Entities; second, establishing relations amongst Entities; and third, enacting ways for maintaining these relations" (2003, 208). As a researcher, relational ontology creates accountability to the process of collective knowledge production, as a method of moving away from claiming absolute authorship (Million 2013). One must centre Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, experiences, and realities for research without claiming absolute authority, acknowledging that Indigenous people have been articulating this knowledge for centuries (Martin and Mirraboopa 2003). Lee Maracle (2015), in *Memory Serves: Oratories*, articulates some of the anxiety of writing down ancestral oratory knowledge because books such as *Memory Serves* are an expression of individual views on a whole. Individuals do not represent a whole. An individual cannot be assigned that kind of authority. This reminder is central to my own practice of relational accountability. If knowledge is collectively produced and genealogical, then I must name the onto-epistemology that shape my thinking. To make sense of how chaos lives in my body and relationships, and how meaning emerges through relational accountability, I turn to the Tamil Saivite ontologies that have long grounded my understandings of Bhakti, love, and displacement, not as universal truth, but as the ancestral framework through which I have learned to relate.

Centering Tamil Saivite Ontology and Epistemology: Bhakti and Chaos

I suppose you might not be familiar with my ancestors' ontology and epistemology. Taking the time to share this with you is a form of devotional love for my community, which is necessary to build sustainable relationships with you. I hope you can appreciate the retelling of my ancestral stories as a labour of love.

My use of the term devotional love comes from the terms Bhakti, Bhaj, and Anpu (Dhavamony 1971). These terms are often used in Tamil Bhakti literature. As I am someone who does not write Tamil, the meaning of those terms gets lost in English translation. The term Bhakti is often used to simply mean devotion, but it is more. It means partaking in, distributing, partitioning, sharing, participating in, and belonging to something or someone (Dhavamony 1971). Bhakti comes from the root term, Bhaj, which is quite commonly used to refer to the worship, adoring, love, and belonging in Tamil religious literature from the Bhakti tradition (Dhavamony 1971). It can also mean other things depending on the context. The core of the word Bhaj is described in literature as a spontaneous feeling, which impels a person to be devoted and faithful to another (Dhavamony 1971). The concepts of love, belonging, and displacement in my writing come from the word Bhaj in samaskrtam and Anpu in Tamil. These terms are crucial for a better understanding of the concept of love in Caivacittãntam and the Bhakti tradition because they make the connection of how love, belonging, and displacement tie together in our understanding, particularly in sacred spaces. Bhaj expresses not only the love of the devotee to deity, but also that of a deity to their devotees, referring to a reciprocal participation. Displacement is defined as unreciprocated love.

In Bhakti tradition, love between devotee and deity is not always paternalistic or fatherly. In fact, it is expressed like our relationship with other beings: between parents and children, between a lover and beloved, between teacher and student, and between friends (Dhavamony 1971). In the religious context, Bhaj expressed in an erotic manner is not limited to bodily sensation. I want to disrupt the binary of erotic (sexual) love and platonic love, in which romantic feelings are limited to erotization (in the sexual context). Romantic feelings are very much applicable and felt in platonic relationships. It is how I choose to hold space for my chosen family and community members, despite the complexities of those relationships as survivors. Displacement, in the context of my writing, can mean many things including displacement of memory, the lack of reciprocal love from my deity, someone, or a community (to not belong).

While Bhakti is invoked in this paper to foreground a counter-narrative (Solórzano and Yosso 2002) to white colonial carceral love, it is not, in itself, a casteless or automatically liberatory formation. Following Krishnamurti's (2025) critique of caste's persistence within diasporic religious and feminist spaces and Soundararajan's (2022) articulation of caste as embodied and migratory trauma, I approach devotional love not as a universal ethic, but as a relational field that shaped my early encounters with love, displacement, and (un)belonging. As a caste-privileged diaspora settler, my work within QT2SBIPOC survivor communities must grapple with how casteism is not external to these spaces; it circulates within them, shaping authority, safety, desirability, and whose pain is rendered legible (Khubchandani 2019). Historically and in diaspora, caste has structured whose devotional expressions are preserved as poetry, philosophy, or theology, and whose are dismissed as disorder, impropriety, or noise (Krishnamurti 2025). Attending to Bhakti's joy, chaos, and erotics therefore requires naming how caste mediates devotional legitimacy; without this naming, diasporic articulations and practices of devotion risk becoming another site where caste privilege remains unmarked while appearing spiritually radical. Displacement, understood here as a form of anti-relationality, demands an active reckoning with how ancestral pedagogies of relationality are reclaimed, refused, or reshaped in the process of healing attachment wounds.

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Chaos and Carceral Logic in Carceral Care

As survivors, who experienced childhood displacement at home and in the community at large, we are not generally taught or provided space to explore what love can look like, as something that serves us and the people we love. This means we are learning how to love and set boundaries as adults, while healing our attachment wounds. The space between the spontaneous feeling that arises from devotional love, and the unknowing and uncertainty attached to healing our attachment wounds is what I mean by chaos. It is a space where love and harm can both take place, where our humanity as survivors is often rejected when we cause harm or when harm is done to us. What can abolition praxis teach us about liberating devotional, erotic love within chaos, and I ask again and again, why this is important? Transformation is a deeply sensual and vulnerable process. It asks us to release old expectations and patterns of being that no longer serve us or our communities, to grieve both what was lost and what might have been, and to open ourselves to the desire of possibilities of what could emerge (brown 2019; Lorde 1978). What might it look like if, instead of preparing for harm, we leaned fully into the path toward justice (brown 2019)? What would it have looked like for me to tell her, "I love you too. I love you to the moon and back," and resisted the urge to protect myself and her from my chaos, to not fear devotional love? While gently holding space for the above thought, consider the displacement I experienced while obsessing over this thought: "Nobody makes demands of me!" As a neurodivergent person, my love language looks different, and verbalization of emotions remains hard. What would it have looked like for her to hold space for and value my love language? Maybe love would not have felt so carceral and punitive for the both of us? Displacement occurred because I felt trapped in my body and in the demand. How does neurodivergent love appear in your social, spiritual, and emotional space? What do you imagine neurodivergent love looks like and feels like? Is it enough? Are we enough? What does it look like and feel like to be enough? When we ask questions that hold space for our humanity along with the humanity of the people we love (survivors), chaos becomes a place of multiple possibilities and truths. It transforms into a place where creativity and radical imagination can happen in the world-making process, through the power of eroticism (devotional love).

Taken together, devotional love, chaos, and containment name the relational tensions at the center of this paper. Devotional love opens the possibility of relational repair within survivor communities, while chaos names the uncertain and vulnerable space that emerges when survivors attempt to love and heal attachment wounds shaped by displacement. Containment, whether through adakkam or colonial carceral logics, attempts to regulate or discipline these expressions of relationality. Abolitionist ethics of care therefore becomes a practice of reclaiming chaos as a generative relational space rather than something to be controlled or suppressed. Yet when ancestral ways of holding love and chaos encounter colonial cisheteropatriarchy and institutional power, they are often met with carceral attempts to contain relational expression, drawing me toward abolitionist ethics of care as a lived praxis of liberation.

Abolitionist Ethics of Care (Deviant Care) and Access to Eroticism in Survivor Communities

Abolition as praxis seeks to radically reconfigure justice, subjectivity, and social formation, without our dependence on the existence of the carceral state or carceral power (Rodríguez 2019). Rodríguez defines the carceral state as "a statecraft that institutionalizes various forms of targeted human capture" and carceral power as "a totality of state-sanctioned and extrastate relations of

gendered racial-colonial dominance" (2019, 1576). Carceral care refers to the use of deviant bodies to rationalize the expansion of institutional punishment, as a logical outcome of a moral civil society (Hwang 2019). Carceral care is then the liberal reformist approach to the improved treatment of incarcerated deviant bodies (Hwang 2019). Carceral care in this paper refers to a complex web of practices, performative measures, and actions for community care (Hwang 2019) that uses carceral logic; the use of carceral state's punitive logic in everyday community accountability praxis when harm is caused (Davis 2003) which does not account for the underlying cause of harm in community; and institutional violence in carceral spaces (Hwang 2019). Hwang encourages us to disrupt the impulse to be trapped in the rigged framework of carceral care and brings forth QT2SBIPOC radical relationalism as deviant care and as a possibility of life-giving care in death-making carceral spaces. Deviant care inhabits defiance to the state and carceral spaces and deviance in relation to the state and one another (Hwang 2019).

Unlike carceral care, which is punitive, devotional love or erotics is hoping to set boundaries, consent, and communication outside of the framework of carcerality and punitive cultures to form relationships. Boundaries are not borders constructed by colonialism. Boundaries are consent, communication, and our freedom to love and be loved in a way that nourishes our bodies and soul. Boundaries are ethics of care that recognize the colonial exploitation of labour put on certain bodies, namely Black and Brown femme, and feminized bodies, and the need for reciprocal care for Black and Brown femme and feminized people. Boundaries are the freedom to reimagine care through the assertion of Black and Brown femme and feminized people, where, to be assertive, and the assertion of boundaries by Black and Brown femme and feminized people, is seen as devotional love, as opposed to a denial of care or love, or something to be feared.

As a child rape survivor, I learned at a young age that my body did not belong to me, and that my eroticism was limited to being desired by cisheterosexual men who cause me harm. Women and gender-expansive individuals are frequently conditioned to understand that their access to power is mediated by their proximity to cisheterosexual men (hooks 2000; brown 2019; Lorde 1978). In many cases, sexual violence often teaches women and gender expansive people that access to eroticism cannot be experienced outside of violent sexual encounters, or outside the framework of white cisheteropatriarchal forms of sexual eroticism, which is also violent. The desire to seek out intimacy outside of monogamous romantic sexual relationship is often met with punitive reactions (carceral logic), as informed by Western Christian's moral attachment to monogamy (brown 2019) and family structures that uphold capitalist systems. For many survivors of sexual violence, particularly rape and sexual assault, seeking out romantic sexual relationships as a primary form of love and support may be inaccessible. How can QT2SBIPOC survivors' deviant care inform abolitionist praxis in ethics of care in carceral spaces in specific educational institutions? What does it look like to practice devotional love or erotics within survivor (of displacement) communities to collectively heal our attachment wounds and allow us as survivors to reclaim our eroticism or devotional love outside the framework of white ableist cisheteropatriarchy?

Performing Femininity in QT2SBIPOC Femme Spaces

In my 20s, I was organizing with other QT2SBIPOC sexual violence survivors on campus. A collective of us became close friends and decided to form a WhatsApp chat group. The group encompassed all Black and Dravidian cis femme–identified folks and me. In one of our conversations, we talked about feelings of shame around expressing sexual desires, lack of

confidence, communications with our sexual/romantic partners, and consent and the fear around sex and desire, body image issues, navigating being in relationships, and so forth. One of the group members suggested that we use this space as a platonic romantic support space to learn how to help navigate being sexual beings as femme folks with (ongoing) histories of sexual violence. Support ranged from admiring each other's everyday outfits, making consentful sexualized comments about each other's lingerie selfies, complaining about how boring and sometimes violent heterosexual cis men can be, discussing misogyny in the queer trans community, calling out racism toward dark-skinned Dravidian and Black femmes in the queer community, and navigating the process of learning to recognize 'red flags' in new potential sexual partners. This was a space for us to express the erotics in a platonic romantic space, free of white ableist cisheteropatriarchal dominance, and explore the power of erotics as a form of relationality with each other.

We talked a lot about what boundaries and consent with each other would look like and how we expressed our sexuality and gender. The latter conversation arose after I shared that I identify as a transmasc person. The group was not without its set of struggles. We had difficult conversations about Black femme emotional burnout and the need for more reciprocal care for Black femme group members. Some people in the group were still struggling with my pronoun and name change, and the difference between advice and validation and how to recognize what type of care is being requested. At times, our interactions became chaotic with rage, anger, love, hurt, triggers, collective growth, and boundary crossing. Despite navigating its messiness, all the group members expressed such strong devotional love and gratefulness for this space. For me, it became a beautiful space to perform and explore my soft nerdy femme bio being. You know that feeling when you slowly begin to let go of the idea that you need to hate, fear, or distance yourself from femininity to effectively perform masculinity? Masculinity can look any way you want, and yes, it was very liberating to wear flowers in my hair. The relational lessons I learned in these community spaces continue to shape how I move through academic life as a neurodivergent educator.

Teaching Practice as a Neurodivergent Educator

I was assigned a teaching assistantship (TA) for a course in phenomenology and hermeneutics. The course was taken predominately by South and East Asian first- and second-year undergraduate students. I taught one of the five tutorial courses for that class and designed my tutorials so that the students could be critical about the problematic curriculum in that class. The professor for that course was a racist old white man who dedicated his life's work to studying Martin Heidegger, whose legacy of knowledge production he was obsessed with upholding and protecting. Unfortunately, I did not foresee the bravery that youths of today would exhibit in an academic setting when they are provided space to challenge dominant colonial knowledge. My students were yet to develop the concept of "pick your battles" and started saying in class, "Siva said XYZ in the tutorial. How come you never addressed XYZ?" The professor would get angry and defensive of his curriculum and would yell at me in class in front of my students. I was picking my battles, so I did not say anything in response and let him throw his temper tantrums. I would start dissociating each time to cope with becoming activated in class, before class, and after class. This occurred a few times in the first few classes. However, I did not feel it was my place to crush my students' defiant souls, so I never asked them to stop questioning the professor. However, we had multiple ongoing conversations about the yelling and safety

planning because my students were affected. In each tutorial, they spent some parts of the time venting about the racism in class. Eventually, they chose to pick their battles.

The tutorial class happened right before class with a one-hour break in between. I also did not foresee the community that BIPOC students will attempt to build as a way of surviving a very violently racist carceral space. My activated body could not instantly appreciate the support community that my students were attempting to form with each other and me. I formed structured habitual behaviours, and on days I had class, to cope with my activated being, those behaviours got heightened. After tutorial, I would go to the same Tim's across campus for lunch, sit on the same spot, purchase the same thing for lunch, listen to the same song on repeat, and dissociate until I had to go to class. I did this week after week. By week three, my students had memorized my routine. They would follow me to the Tim's all the way across campus from the location of the class and make conversations with me about the tutorial content while they waited for class. They formed a semi-circle around the spot in which I always sat and would continue to chat with me. A few times, I managed to run away while they were busy talking and ended up at the Tim's. Each time I managed that, the Tim's barista would ask me, "It's Tuesday. Where is your posse?" "I managed to lose them." She would laugh each time, because she knew they would eventually catch up to me, and they always did. If you are wondering why I did not change my routine and go to another café, then you do not understand how disorienting it is for my activated being to change routine. I did not have the capacity then to assert my boundaries, but I started to become disengaged from my students during the break. I would sit on that same spot, listening to the same song on repeat and eating my lunch. Over time, I noticed they would gather around me but made the circle much larger; they would talk to each other about the course content. Occasionally, they would smile at me to get my attention, to tease me about what they called my "weirdness," my multiple attempts at running away from them, eating the same lunch every Tuesday, and other habitual behaviours. It became a running joke of the group, "Siva, you tried to run away from us, didn't you?! Why do you always eat the same thing for lunch? Aren't you bored of it? What are you listening to?" I adored them, and they warmed my heart, so I didn't mind the teasing. I just glared at them, and sat in silence, listening to my music on repeat. I sat there, week after week, dissociating, while my students routinized with me, gathered, and formed community around me, and with me, being just as I was, until we had to go to class. Eventually, I learnt to co-regulate with my students, as my students were anxious, and my level of engagement during the break with my students fluctuated based on our needs and capacity each day. Over time, I have also learned that some of the most meaningful forms of politicization emerge beyond the classroom, in the collective spaces students create for themselves.

Politicization: Prioritizing Student-Led Collective Spaces Outside of Academia

Often, as educators who practice liberatory teaching and learning methods, we ask ourselves, what can we do as educators to encourage the process of politicization in the formal classroom setting? "Politicization is a process of developing a critical analysis of systematic oppression and learning how it impacts the lives of people living within those systems" (Lober et al. 2023, 215). Here, I wish to make a distinction between the process of politicization and political education. Politicization is a practice, and it is often an embodied practice, and political education is not always accompanied with practice. The colonial academic classroom setting as a carceral space is a site of extreme violence for QT2SBIPOC students. This requires decentering the classroom

setting as a space of radical politicization. Decentering the classroom does not mean that some level of political education cannot take place in the classroom; rather, it prioritizes student collective spaces outside of the classroom as primary spaces of radical politicization for students. Educators can acknowledge that the opportunities to build an accountable and reciprocal politicized community in practice primarily occur outside the classroom space among student-led collectives. As shown in example one, students often build community spaces outside of academic spaces for radical politicization (collective learning), collective healing, and radical change. This acknowledgement can allow educators to centre opportunities in the classroom for students to build relationships with each other that can extend outside of academic spaces, as a form of community building in their process of politicization. In example two, at the start of tutorial, creating a collective space for students to vent and process their emotions, share their experiences of the classroom with each other, and check in with each other supported the process of my students building community outside of the classroom and tutorial space. The space they created outside of the classroom and tutorial space allowed them the opportunity to continue conversations with each other that helped first- and second-year students become politicized.

Conclusion

What began with a seven-year-old child whispering secrets to a dying lime tree has become, for me, a way of understanding love, loss, grief, rupture, and joy as relational practices shaped by displacement and devotional love. The story of Ganesh was never only about grief; it was about what I have come to name as joyous grief, the capacity to hold love and loss together without resolving either. In returning to this story, I recognize how devotional love and the erotics first taught me, long before I had language for it, that survivor relationality could be a site of care, imagination, and resistance.

In my organizing and academic practice with QT2SBIPOC survivor communities within higher education, centering devotional love and the erotics as an abolitionist relational ethics of care has produced survivor geographies where we can imagine futures beyond the impoverished white colonial imagination. These practices do not emerge outside of violence or institutional harm, but from within specific histories of violence, displacement, and resistance. QT2SBIPOC deviant care, as I have come to practice it, refuses white colonial theories of change that demand the repeated exposure of pain to elicit white performative sympathy. Instead, it insists that joy, intimacy, and the erotic are themselves forms of knowledge and political praxis.

Through teaching, community organizing, and collective reflection, I have learned that abolitionist care in my work is less about achieving relational harmony and more about embracing rupture and chaos in relationships to cultivating conditions where devotional love can exist without fear of containment. This practice responds directly to racial capitalism's production of antirelationality by restoring connection in ways that remain accountable to history, land, and community, while also confronting the limits imposed by higher education as a colonial and carceral institution. Survivorship, in this sense, is not simply surviving; it is the ongoing labor of living with and through antirelationality while imagining and co-creating a praxis of relational freedom.

When I think back to seven-year-old Siva singing to Ganesh in the middle of the night, I now understand those moments as an early expression and praxis of devotional love and

resistance to cishetero colonial patriarchy's antirelationality. That same praxis continues in the survivor communities I move with today, where love is practiced in its complexity, where chaos is held with care, and where futures are imagined through relational struggle rather than deficit-based narratives.

In returning to joyous grief, I return to a practice that is unfinished, unfolding, and always in motion. What began as a child's devotional love to a lime tree has become a situated abolitionist praxis shaped by QT2SBIPOC survivor geographies and sustained through the everyday work of choosing abolitionist ethics of care within and against the colonial conditions of higher education in Tkaronto.

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