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Diasporic Longing and Rhizomatic Belonging: Art, Objects, Memory, and the Queer Diasporic Experience

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the imbrications of queer identity, diasporic belonging, and memory through the lens of material objects and art practice. Focusing on queer immigrant and refugee narratives in Scotland, this research examines how objects, such as a great-grandmother's ring and a rice bowl, become conduits for negotiating diasporic identity and reimagining belonging in the face of cultural displacement. Central to this inquiry is the concept of "diasporic longing," a sensuous ache of partiality and incompleteness that permeates my interlocutor's experiences of frayed histories and ephemeral homes. To capture the complexity of belonging, this research draws from two ecological metaphorical frameworks: the "rhizome," which symbolises a flexible, multi-rooted identity that resists traditional inert categories, and the "siphonophore," an oceanic organism composed of interdependent parts that create a unified whole. This research seeks to contribute to discourse surrounding the role of material culture in queer diasporic communities, offering insights into how objects facilitate the process of self-making and the articulation of home, identity, and desire in diaspora communities.

Keywords: Diasporic Longing, Post-memory, Belonging, Sensory Ethnography, Queer, Scotland

Twisting, contorting, suffusing a deep orange in the blue expanse.

It is strange, compelling, almost amorphous,

not bending to a rigid form but stretching across the ocean.

It often finds itself in a spiral coil, or emulating that of a long chain:

a feeding posture, a way to best occlude

its prey.

The orange, red, green, blue hues emanate from its body,

spilling colour.

This study is concerned with belonging and the sensuous "diasporic longing," a phrase uttered by participant Madura, one of many first and second-generation immigrant and refugee people of colour (POC) in Scotland. I analyse these experiences through the optics of assemblages proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus*. Through the notion of an assemblage, they envision a form of subjectivity that constitutes a "multiplicity [...] made up of many heterogeneous terms [...] which establishes liaisons, relations between them across ages, sexes and reigns –different natures" (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 69). An assemblage is thus predicated on a relation constituted by multiple, heterogeneous parts linked together to form an agentive whole (Müller 2015). Due to their heterogeneous modality, there are no preconceptions of what is constructed to form a whole—be it humans, animals, objects, ideas—nor is there a dominant entity constructing a

Figure 1. Praya Dubia, Giant Siphonophore. (c) October 2018 Wikimedia Commons

non-hierarchical assemblage (Bennett 2010; Müller 2015). They are productive, producing new "territorial organisations, [...] actors, and new realities" (Müller 2015, 29).

In tandem, the notions of "rhizome" and "siphonophore" will be introduced as accompaniment to provide a conceptual and visual framework for my argument, wherein my interlocutors in the research workshops I conducted are observed as they reconstitute themselves, resisting static or cohesive belonging or identity formations. I work through this claim by deploying sensory ethnography through a series of workshops I facilitated as my ethnographic research. The workshops were initially guided by insights learned from object-oriented ontology and art practice, which elucidated a heterogeneous assemblage of sorts. This is not to say that the complexity of belonging can be neatly packaged into a cohesive whole and that this whole is closed. Rather, I posit that, just as the rhizome and siphonophore embody a state of continuously becoming, my participants also emulate this. Here, I turn to my first visual companion, the rhizome. Though a tree's form may suggest complexity, it ultimately reinforces rootedness and singularity. In contrast, Deleuze and Guattari (1988, 25) offer the rhizome as a model of multiplicity:

> A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb "to be," but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, "and...and... and..."

The tree is individuated through a linear and vertical structure with a 'fixed root;' it imposes a "to be." On the contrary, the rhizome, inspired by the complex structure of a stem, is a horizontal system not bound to a specific plant or tree, nor do they resolve neatly into singular points or traceable trajectories, but, alternatively, embrace multiplicity. As Deleuze and Guattari (1988, 25) assert, the rhizome is the conjunction "and...and...and," privileging becoming over being, a continuous and ongoing movement. Here, the use of such a polysyndeton cogently delineates the rhizome as a dynamic system that continues to evolve and contort. By referring to the rhizome, I consider how my participants are not bound to a single tree but a multitude, growing and thriving within a fractured understanding of their own belonging and somewhat entropically branching out in a constant state of "and...and... and."

In the poem that sits above the introduction, I write on the siphonophore (Figure 1), an oceanic animal, visually akin to a jellyfish (Wilson 1975). To an observer, the siphonophore can be perceived as a "tangled, confused mass of tentacles and appendages" (Winsor 1976, 61). Yet, siphonophores are complex and highly polymorphic creatures, whose colonies are composed of many "polypoid and medusoid" individuals, often referred to as "zooids" (Mackie, Pugh, and Purcell 1988, 98). Each zooid fulfils a role that distinguishes it in its colony: some catch prey, while others digest it, and others may propel the colony forward (Ocean Twilight Zone 2014). Thus, while all elements are heterogeneous, they are simultaneously interdependent, with each organism contributing to form a cohesive body, working together towards a common goal of survival.

The siphonophore, I propose, is a visual cue to think through the elusive concept of belonging among the diasporic immigrant and refugee community in Scotland. I work with the siphonophore within a triptych form. First, I consider the siphonophore as utopic: a model for belonging where distinct individuals with varied roles and experiences work together to form a heterogeneous body. Second, I consider how each organism and participant is critical to the collective; everyone contributes uniquely to the broader diasporic identity. Last, despite forming a collective identity, the siphonophore's components retain their unique roles. Similarly, my participants retain their individuality but rest on one another for support and survival amid the current politically fraught landscape in the UK. I entwine both these metaphorical frameworks in hopes that they enable us to think differently about "belonging."

In the following section, I begin by delineating my methodology and ethics,

explaining my rationale for employing object-oriented and art practice-centred workshops. Next, I draw on perennial grief and "diasporic longing," how home and belonging are encountered through heirlooms and partly fabulated storytelling, experientially felt through touch, smell, and sound. Here, I pose that these narratives need not be predicated upon an objective reality to be meaningful. After, I use an object brought by a participant as a conduit to articulate the political context of the period when the research took place. This coincided with a time of far-right riots in England and Northern Ireland in 2024, which is particularly relevant in understanding how POC immigrants and refugees view their bodies as sites of political contestation. Further, I explore how my interlocutors were able to find refuge and ground their feelings and experiences of alterity in objects and art. Finally, I touch on competing elements of my interlocutors' queerness and ethnicity that struggle to co-exist, one must pick to "belong." Yet, my participants transcend ossified understandings of what it means to exist as both an ethnic minority and queer subject, subverting traditional judgements. All sections of this paper begin with an ethnographic vignette and use the participant's object to guide the reader through each discussion. Through this research, I ask how art and objects, particularly those embroiled in diasporic and queer identities, uproot traditional narratives, serving as conduits of negotiation and reimagining of belonging, identity, and cultural memory?

Methodology and Ethics

It is a July evening in Edinburgh. Light pours in through my windows; a small flock of clouds kneel above us. My room, temporarily transformed into the site of my ethnographic research, is filled with sound. The sounds can be attributed to my music speaker and my participants that are now sprawled across my carpet, unwilling to let conversation drop by introducing themselves or, if having met prior, catching up and sharing musings. My desk that sits in the alcove carved out by my bay windows is populated with food. *Khaliyat nahal* (honeycomb bread), half filled with saffron and cream, and the other half cheese, jollof rice,

Figure 2: Commissioned Poster by Yennis Begar. Shared on Instagram and WhatsApp for Participant Recruitment.

plantain, *cong yau mien* (spring onion oil noodles), soya devil (Sri Lankan-Chinese fusion curry), *gỏi cuốn* (summer rolls), coupled with a peanut sauce, a coconut pineapple cake, milk tea, and tahini cookies; a combined effort of my participants and me (see Figure 3). This informal introductory meeting is a potluck designed to help my participants and me get a sense of one another and familiarise ourselves with the experience of collectively participating in the workshops to come. We introduced ourselves and got to know one another over commensality, an act that softened the experience of strangeness (Carsten 1995; Vanderslice 2017). After filling our plates and informally chatting, Abbas, one of my participants, halts the conversation. Abbas suggests we all introduce ourselves formally, going around what was now a concentric

formation on my floor: stating our name, pronouns, where we grew up, our ethnicity and how many languages we speak. This formula of introducing ourselves became something of a ritual in each workshop as new people joined.

This research spans June to September 2024 in Edinburgh, Scotland. It draws on multi-sensory and embodied ethnography (Pink 2015; Culhane and Elliott 2016; Howes 2019) and arts-based methods (O'Neill 2008; Raw 2014; Imran 2021) as both theoretical frameworks and concrete methodological tools. These methods were implemented predominantly through collective workshops, with one one-on-one workshop. In these sessions, I prioritised participants' sensory engagement with the group environment and the objects they brought. Participants were encouraged to attend to how objects felt in the hand, the feelings they elicited, and the objects' own sensory qualities, independent of their mediation. Activities included writing, drawing, and engaging with objects tactilely and imaginatively. These practices enabled me to capture feelings that might not emerge through structured interviews alone, particularly those that are difficult to put into words.

Art was positioned as a central tool within this methodology, following principles articulated by O'Neill (2008) and others in arts-based and sensory ethnography (Raw 2014; Culhane and Elliott 2016). In my own ethnography, employing art as method felt axiomatic in engaging participants in ways that could not be captured through standard interviews alone. Artistic and mimetic practices imbued a safe space for complex and non-verbal narratives to emerge, particularly in relation to transnational identities, home, and belonging.

To garner interest and recruit participants, I sought out community groups I was already integrated into, namely Saffron Cherry, a queer POC community group in Edinburgh, and ESEA Outdoors, an East and Southeast Asian outdoors community group that has various branches across England and Scotland. I sent out messages asking whether anyone was interested, supplemented by commissioning my friend to produce a poster (see Figure 2). This poster was initially posted solely on Instagram, which some community organisers I knew reposted. In turn, friends I had made through community groups asked for my permission to share the poster with other communities they were a part of, effectively invoking a form of snowball sampling (Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019). My interlocutors' ages range from 21 to 35 and were a mix of students and workers. They are partly friends, yet the majority strangers, and are thus a sample reflection of the worldviews and groups I engage and participate in, producing a sense of intersubjectivity.

Following this intersubjectivity, David Morley (2000, 1) posits that "all theory has roots in autobiography," thus, while this work is grounded in theoretical frameworks, it is crucial that I reckon with my positionality within my writing. Ontologically, I hold an insider positionality to the culture of investigation as a queer Japanese and German second-generation immigrant (Fetterman 2008; Miled 2017; Holmes 2020). I strongly insist upon the excerpt, "we cannot be separated from our biographies," a claim which continues to be rendered veridic throughout my work (Lumsden et al. 2019, 16). As such, both my participants and I occupy a similar demographic as 'queer,' 'POC,' immigrants and refugees.

The etymology of the word "queer" comes from the Greek meaning, "cross, oblique, adverse" (Ahmed 2006, 161). Throughout my work, I slide between meanings, but I primarily denote it to be a sexual orientation or gender expression that "disturbs the order of things," that is, oblique and asymptotic (Ahmed 2006, 161). It is a disturbance of hegemonic heterosexuality; yet, it is also a reclaimed and joyful term that both my participants and I embrace under its umbrella. Additionally, the term 'POC' is deployed throughout my writing, a term that is rightfully contested due to its monolithic, reductionist connotations. Here, I find the siphonophore a beneficial companion in contesting the term and what constitutes an individual. The siphonophore is a kind of holobiont: an "assemblage of different organisms that behaves as a unit" that can visually be placed under the category of a singular animal, yet it is composed of many different organisms that hold unique roles (Sheldrake 2020, 103). Therefore, I use this term

"POC" with caution, acknowledging that while my participants fall under this umbrella term, their experiences are vast and unique.

Figure 3: Food brought by my participants and me for the introductory potluck. Photograph by author.

I facilitated an "object-embodiment workshop," premised in actor network theory (Latour 2005), object-oriented ontology (Harman 2018) and onticology (Bryant 2011). These frameworks advocate for a widening of human ontology, to interpolate not in our presuppositions about what entities are most valuable or useful, but to find an ontology capacious enough to accommodate all entities on their own terms. Graham Harman (2018), for instance, critiques anthropocentrism by arguing that human access to objects does not exhaust their being. In other words, objects have a reality that exceeds their utility, symbolism, or availability to human perception. This presents a conceptual challenge: if objects exceed human access, how do we engage them meaningfully in practice? I intended to have my workshop work within this tension; rather than fully decentering the human, I began with familiar, emotionally charged human-object relationships. While this foregrounds the human perspective, it also acts as a point of departure — a way to destabilise anthropocentric thinking from within. Participants were then invited to imagine their objects as possessing their own perspectives and agencies, gesturing beyond the human without negating the importance of embodied experience. In this way, the workshop did not attempt to resolve the tension between relationality and autonomy, but to inhabit it, borrowing from sensory ethnography. In turn, challenging anthropocentric ontology not by denying human-object entanglements, but by reconfiguring and reimagining them. This theoretical grounding inspired the methodological design of my first workshop. To implement this, I took inspiration from Ian Chillag's podcast *Everything is Alive*, which anthropomorphises everyday objects, collapsing humour and profundity to explore how objects mediate human relationships with the world. Listening to an episode where a shirt and trousers converse, it conjured memories of childhood — when a tree was not simply a tree but a body that contorted to satiate its craving for sunlight, to feel a bird taking refuge on its branches, feeling the weight of a human press against its bark to rest.

For this workshop, I had asked participants to bring an object that reminded them of home, evoked belonging, or connected them to their cultural heritage. It could be old, new or borrowed, passed down through generations. I introduced an episode, "Sal, Sock", in which "Sal" humorously narrates his everyday life and relationships (Chillag 2021). Participants were encouraged to imagine their chosen object's perspective and document thoughts, sketches, or observations. This workshop was conducted both individually and in group format, where each participant introduced their object, what it meant to them, why they picked it and passed it around.

My second workshop design was a collective workshop grounded in art practice, wherein I provided my participants with a breadth of materials (see figures 4 and 5). I prompted participants to create an artwork on 'What is belonging to you? How has your sense of belonging been affected by the current political climate in the UK?' Interlocutors were given an option of creating collective/shared pieces; however, each participant opted to create their own piece. Although many participants found commonalities in their experiences, each experience remained unique to the individual. My rationale for engaging with this praxis was to go beyond the standard interview: understood here as a structured or semi-structured, researcher-led format in which participants respond to questions in a formal, one-to-one setting, and to invite participants to

express themselves through a less formal medium. Using arts-based methods better equipped me and my interlocutors to capture emotional and sensorial experiences and to infuse inquiry with visual representation (Cole and Knowles 2007; Gauntlett 2007; Eisner 2008; Bagnoli 2009; Rutten 2016; Goopy and Kassan 2019; Jeffery et al. 2019). This approach also enabled participants to dip in and out of conversation, facilitating a more relaxed environment.

Figure 4 & 5: Art materials laid out on a desk in preparation for the workshop. Photographs by author.

Finally, I employed 'intimacy as method' (Shah 2017; Cîrstea and Pescinski 2024) that, while fraught with blurring the boundaries between researcher and participants, led to real and genuine relationships with my interlocutors, now friends. To echo Ana-Maria Cîrstea and Janina Pescinski (2024, 3), building intimate relationships in the field is a "contingent and organic process rather than a strategic objective." In line with this, each aspect of my research organically became deeply predicated in an intersubjectivity not just between myself and an individual participant, but as a collective. Referring to the siphonophore, my participants, in addition to their art and objects brought, cultivated a common subjectivity and shared consciousness. Like the siphonophore, their contributions remained individual yet interdependent, collectively forming an assemblage of perspectives that deepened our collective understanding.

Outside the context of the workshops wherein I bore witness to what objects participants held dear and their engagement with art practices and dialogue, I draw on a post-research example to illustrate how intimacy as method stretched beyond my expectations. Shortly after the workshops, one of my participants was evicted from their long-term flat due to their landlord selling the property. Through connections fostered during my research, another participant opened their home, providing them a space to stay for some time. I received a voice note from my participant thanking me for the space I had created. I think this example epitomises my gladness in employing such a method and, in turn, creating a space for connection.

"Diasporic Longing:" Perennial Grief as a Quiet Elegy

Figure 6: Alix's Object: Rosette Iron used for Chinese New Year. Photograph by author.

It was just Alix and me; the rest of the participants who were supposed to show today had cancelled. Alix and I had met twice before for ESEA outdoors community hikes, so I felt more comfortable conveying my embarrassment at her having been the only one to show. I offer tea and cookies I had baked in preparation, a small offering to apologise for having to indulge in strange exercises with me, alone. We sit on my floor, and I play music to ease the environment. Alix is softly spoken with short, dark hair. She grew up in Hong Kong but moved to Scotland as a child and now lives in Glasgow's suburbs with her brother. Alix presents me with her object (see figure 6), which is steel with a wooden handle, and Alix explains to me that by dipping the mould into batter and frying it in oil, it forms light, crispy biscuits for Chinese New Year (CNY). This rosette iron used to belong to Alix's mum, and it was only used once a year for CNY. Alix had received this object after her mum had passed away. We begin, reflecting on what memories it conjures up.

The rosette iron stirs up memories of being used in her childhood kitchen in Hong Kong. Alix remembers this object being solely Alix's mum's role when preparing for CNY festivities. Her childhood kitchen would be replete with streams of laughter and gossip. I imagine an abundance of Alix's mum's friends in their kitchen, a cacophony of excited chatter. We try to sit with the perspective of the rosette iron together. I imagine the object sitting in a miscellaneous drawer, waiting for its moment once a year. It does not often see the light, unless it is rifled and pushed past when looking for another object. It sits obediently waiting for its turn. I imagine it knowing the contours of Alix's mum's hands well. It nestles into the familiarity; it recognises her face and the sound of her friends talking. It can sense the heat of the oil before it is submerged, it is CNY. After Alix's mum passed away, I imagine it sitting in its designated drawer and, when it is reached for, it feels a different hand, it sees a different face. It is not Alix's mum but her daughter.

Alix tells me that now she uses the object just as her mum did, in the kitchen with her friends, with similar cacophonies and streams of laughter. Alix tells me that she associates food with home, and this object feels like an entryway into the past. Grief is often treated as an aberration, lacking a cantabile melody, without metaphor or redeeming symbol. Grief is instead something of a discordant rhythm; not always sitting at the surface but wedged in the creases. In this chapter, I consider how my participants feel a "sensuous absence" (Billie, Hastrup and Sørensen 2010), a yearning for an ephemeral home or home never visited that is supplemented by narrativising and storytelling: felt as "phantom pains" (Meyer 2012). Here, I argue that grief and absence are translated through objects and art practices. Regarding materiality, the objects brought and the art produced lend themselves to malleability: they transcend what the authentic object's purpose is and take the form of, to borrow from my participant Madura's words, "diasporic longing." In this section, I work with grief as "adjusting to a new reality," requiring modification of one's usual life (Brison and Leavitt 1995, 396; see also Hertz 1960). I ask: Can grief, like the rhizome, move in nonlinear and unexpected directions - emerging through sensory memory, material practices, and shared rituals - rather than following a fixed trajectory or resolution? Does the diasporic community, in particular, feel a connection to objects and materiality?

It is an August evening, the sky is stained blue, and the streetlights are on. My room is flooded with a red hue emanating from my red lamp and paper lantern. Candles populate the space, lodged into wine bottles that harvest dried wax. My participants and I are once again sitting in a concentric formation on the floor, with my music speaker placed in the middle. It is the group object-embodiment workshop. Some of us are lying on our front, some cross-legged. When I stop the podcast, I ask if anybody is comfortable going first to "embody their object." Madura offers to go first. Madura shows us a few rings; she fiddles with them as she speaks. The silver rings are slightly misshapen and beautiful. Everyone touches the rings carefully. I feel in the ridges. My thumb hesitates at the jewel, feeling its texture. It is smooth and cold.

Madura states that they are, in some ways, redundant and obsolete as they do not fit her fingers, but, alternatively, exist as pieces of art that she exhibits in her room. She describes the

Figure 7 & 8: Madura's Great-Grandmothers Rings.

tradition of brushing the rings with toothpaste to clean them, adding that they probably have residual toothpaste wedged in them. We laugh. I imagine what it is like to be worn on different generations of women's fingers — pressing, adjusting and contorting its body to wrap around a new finger. It is silver and elegant with curving protruding lines that wrap around its body, framing a turquoise jewel in the middle. She passes it around while telling us of its history. This was supposedly her great-grandmother's ring, and, despite being contested by Madura's mother, Madura likes to imagine it to be so regardless of the veridical story. It is elegant, and she thinks it harbours an accurate representation of her great-grandmother. In her own words, perhaps the insistence of it being her great-grandmother's pays ode to the projection of "diasporic longing" onto objects passed down, whereas for our parents' generation, *"it's not that deep."*

Figure 7 elicits a constructed nostalgia for Madura; it is a sentiment of loss yet also a "romance of one's own fantasy" (Boym 2001, 19). Here, Madura lingers in longing; despite the factual lineage of the ring contested by her mother, this ring draws the nexus between her and the loss of her great-grandmother. Heirlooms and relics are often cast to the inside of a glass cabinet, a mantelpiece, and they are to be displayed as a museum might do — a predication upon a "distal" form of knowing (Hetherington 2003, 1934–1935). They "privilege the disembodied gaze of the observer," participating in the notion that objects are to be abstracted from an embodied part of the world (Harries 2017, 115). Madura espouses both a disembodied gaze, by displaying the ring and not wearing it, yet breaching the boundary of a dispassionate display by passing the ring around, fiddling with it, and in so doing, 'touching the past.' Here, touch inaugurates a proximal way of knowing; we attain a kind of *ichi una*, "skin knowledge," allowing participants who have no knowledge of Madura's family to encounter a history, a past through tacticity (Howes 2005, 27).

Following this, Marianne Hirsch (2012) ruminates on why she could recall such moments from her parents' wartime lives in great detail, "the textures, smells, and tastes of the urban and domestic spaces" (2012, 4). Hirsch, citing Young (1997), reflects on how, increasingly so, she has inherited a "postmemory," a "received history," in which Hirsch bears the personal and collective experiences of her parents (2012, 5). Analogously, the patina of the ring evinces a "postmemory" of sorts, its markings reflect Madura's matrilineal predecessors' wear, and its veridic history does not have to be real to be meaningful. The tactile memories of both Madura and Hirsch enable the skin of memory to be permeable, not encasing the past but "breaching boundaries of skin in such imagery that memory continues to be felt … rather than seen as contained other" (Bennett 2005, 41–42). Therefore, in sense memory, "the past seeps back into the present, as a sensation," collapsing the boundaries between memory and imagination (Bennett 2005, 42). However, why does she feel, in Madura's own words, a

"diasporic longing," a preoccupation with the ring, whereas her mother does not?

Madura here is perhaps touching on what Kumarini Silva (2009) elucidates, in which immigrants pastoralise a homeland that stays "frozen in time — the time they left it" (2009, 700). The ring is then perhaps more meaningful or *"deeper"* to Madura, having immigrated from India to England at a young age, because her experience of living in India was characterised by an ephemerality as opposed to her mother's. Madura "wants to be affected" (Runia 2006, 309). She wants to be brought closer to the everyday rhythms of life in a former time, as though "no time has elapsed between then and now" (Edgeworth 2012, 81). She desires an intimacy, to capture the essence of somebody no longer here. Thus, the ring transcends its tangibility, symbolic of the interstitial moment between the past and present, "concretising the past as a nostalgic and unchanging place" (Silva 2009, 700). Subsequently, there is refuge to be found in the ring, as it captures a "discursive emplacement" (Naficy 1998, 4), a way in which Madura can proximately contain the loss in her own possession, a piece of home and her matrilineal family on her bedside table.

Next, I turn to Madura's art produced during the art workshop, which perhaps speaks to *why* Madura may feel a preoccupation with tangible tactile pieces of her family history as a form of "sensemaking" (Brooker 2010), a way in which the past becomes "accessible in the present" (Katisi et al. 2024, 2).

Sat in a booth at a cinema cafe, Madura passed me her artwork in a white envelope: it had been incomplete during the workshop, and she had asked to finish it at home. She had picked a postcard by Paul Klee (1913) from the art supplies I had provided during one of my workshops. The postcard swirls in a deluge of form and colour; it is fragmented and composed of geometric shapes that amalgamate to form a cohesive abstract piece. I feel almost obliged to spin the great spirals of shapes that sit behind the words, but I read the words first while she sits across from me. I am struck by how visceral the experience is when I finish reading. I tell her which particular words stand out to me and ask whether picking the postcard and words was intuitive or carefully curated. Madura says it was mostly intuitive, but what largely imbued the art was thinking of a piece of her family history, something that has been occupying her thoughts for a while.

Madura proceeds to tell me the story of her grandad when he tragically passed away in the

Figure 9: Madura's collage on a postcard, composed of cut-out words. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

air force in the Himalayas. Having flown with a small group of other men on a particularly stormy evening, they had crashed. Strangely, Madura's grandad was the only one not found; there were no traces of his body, nor his belongings. At the time, Madura's *nani* (grandma) was in her early twenties and pregnant with Madura's mother; the loss of her husband was devastating. He was never found and, by law in India, Madura's *nani* was required to wait eleven years to get remarried as he was not officially dead. Her next husband was much later revealed to have been the man who signed off on the flight Madura's grandad had crashed. This tragic portion of Madura's

family history thus sets the tone for the framework of the piece.

Consequently, Madura finds herself "swathed in stories," and the disquieting nature of this piece of her family's history remains open-ended. Having only been articulated during COVID-19, it stands partially fractured and incoherent—a seemingly embedded condition of the immigrant experience. This is a story untold yet finally revealed, elucidating how diasporic POC are often left to live through fragmented oral histories sought out from older generations (Buccitelli 2016). The "always incomplete" partiality of Madura's rings and the story behind the artwork is perhaps the very source of their power: they must remain impoverished and undetermined to be supplemented by a narrative discourse, one that fills in the gaps, the inconsistencies (Stewart 1993). There is an ache for the unattainable, the partial story that requires salve to fill in the gaps. The rhizome is useful here to consider how Madura's family history is neither rooted nor sedentary, but fractured, just as Klee's (1913) painting is, in a perpetual state of "and… and… and." Histories being unearthed as time passes form a rhizomatic sense of belonging: non-linear and adapting, growing in complex, interconnected ways.

Fabulations of Inherited Memory? The Evanescence of a Constructed and Imagined Home

Shola tells me, "I lost my nana and grandad when I was quite young, and they were the main sort of people that connected me to Jamaica and would tell a lot of stories and cook Jamaican food." Shola wears an afro paired with silver hoops that hang from their ears. They wear a dark green jumper that sits beneath denim dungarees. Shola laughs loudly and smiles often. She is kind, incredibly warm, and speaks with a Liverpudlian accent. Shola is in their final year of undergrad but grew up in Liverpool with a Northern Irish mum and a Jamaican dad. Shola often feels the weight of "grief and sadness" because they feel "a disconnect from my roots because I've never been to Jamaica," and, with the loss of their nana and grandad, their thread to Jamaica is frayed. This is particularly difficult as Shola's father struggles to speak openly about Jamaica, making the deaths of both grandparents even more impactful. The thread of discourse that has emerged from Shola's nana, grandad, and father has constructed an image, authentic or fabricated, of Jamaica. Shola does not draw on their own memories, nor does Jamaica tell her

Figure 10: Shola's artwork (A3, mixed media). Reproduced with permission of the artist.

of its past or present; rather, the stories received from family constitute a form of anemoia: a felt connection to a past one has not personally experienced (Koenig 2021), containing its image like the lines of a hand, written in the sounds of "Peter Tosh and Bob Marley" and the "ocean" reminding Shola "what it would be like to be on the beaches of Jamaica" and the smells of "curry goat, plantain."

Revisiting Hirsch's (1997, 111) "postmemory" experientially felt by Madura, Shola also conveys how memories can be experienced through mediation, reactivating and re-embodying the history of one's family (Dragojlovic 2014). Shola quite literally embodies this legacy by paying homage to their blackness through fashion, "dressing in patterns, colours," music, "ska, reggae, rock steady," and tragedies experienced by ancestors such as "Windrush." In line with this, Hirsch (1997, 106–7) writes that "postmemory's connection to the past is not mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation." Inexorably, as Shola puts it, despite being "more connected to my whiteness and those parts of my identity" are "labelled and

present as a black person" with their "afro being a huge part of that." Shola perhaps feels a greater desire for an "inherited knowledge" for the homeland they are compartmentalised into (Baser and Toivanen 2023, 306; see also Weldon 2015). Thus, there is a pull to "imaginatively invest, project, and create" a connection to a homeland they are perceived in the UK to belong to, only truly encountered through smell and song.

Shola's desire to engage in narratives of stories about Jamaica perhaps reflects, in Deleuze's (1998) terms, a yearning not for a singular thing or place, but for an assemblage. Deleuze propounds that desire extends beyond a single object to encompass a multiplicity. For instance, one does not desire a woman, but a landscape enveloped within her, an unfamiliar terrain. Similarly, Shola does not yearn for Jamaica as a singular, fixed entity, but as an assemblage, a composite of inherited memories and smells. Thus, Jamaica becomes a place of multiplicity: an ideological construction where Shola would feel at "home." I draw on Chrisyl Wong-Hang-Sun's (2024, 13) conception of "home" here, in which she writes of the Mauritian and Chaggosian kreol for "home," translated not into a singular word but a short sentence, *"kot mo mem"* ("at me myself"). There is, to both the Mauritian and Chaggosian peoples, an implausibility of identifying a single location of "home" as a member of the diaspora, but rather home is the "ability to *feel* at home in oneself" (Wong-Hang-Sun 2024, 13). Jamaica, similarly, is captured only within the oral archives of Shola's family, not simply a 'root' for Shola, but an ability to *feel* at home in herself, an inseparable continuation of her family biographies and diasporic experiences (Baser and Toivanen 2023).

Politicising Bodies and Bowls: The Abject and "Care"

We are listening to the podcast *Everything is Alive*, which feels like an exercise wherein one is reminded to extend care to what we may consider quotidian, disposable, or abject. I stop the podcast and ask who would like to try embodying their object: what would their object say? What journey has this object had? The awkwardness and embarrassment of leaning into such an exercise are acknowledged, and we giggle.

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This chapter is shaped by my participant Vi's bowl (see Figure 11). This bowl anchors the ethnographic and theoretical discourse throughout this section, serving as a conduit for both Vi and the chapter it shapes. As immigration constitutes an "especially unsettled condition" (Mehta and Belk 1991, 400), a comfort can be found in objects that feel familiar. These objects often serve as anchors for continuity, enabling individuals to maintain behavioural rituals that preserve a coherent model of the self (Swidler 1986). In this way, material familiarity offers both emotional comfort and an entryway into a past self, allowing one to resume, on a small scale, a life that was left behind. This diasporic self is, however, in the case of my participants, observed through objects representative of a transition that reflect 'multiple

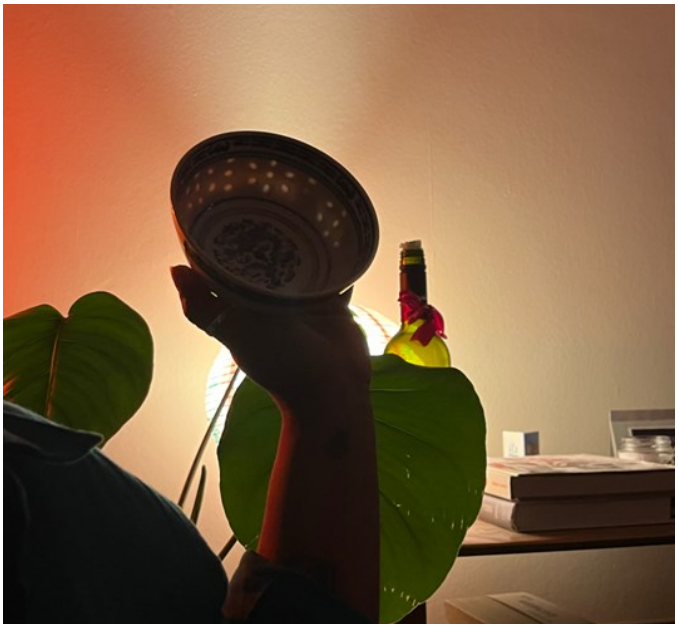

Figure 11: Vi's Rice Bowl brought to the object workshop. Photograph by author.

belonging' (Pechurina 2020; Boym 2001). Thus, during periods of unsettled conditions, material objects become permeated with meaning to help organise experience and, by transporting and keeping objects, individuals can "transport" and "preserve" these identities in a new home country (Mehta and Belk 1991, 398–400; Swidler 1986). A previously ephemeral established identity can, therefore, be drawn on to reconstruct and reckon with the self that exists as immigrated or displaced through objects that retain memories.

I met Vi for the first time at my door. They had been the first to arrive. Despite being strangers, I had felt an instant warmth from them. They have on black trousers that fall elegantly, paired with a tucked-in white shirt. They wear round, rimmed glasses that complement the dark hair that falls around their face. During the workshop, we go around the circle one by one. It is Vi's turn. Vi grew up in Hong Kong but immigrated with their parents as a child to England. Now, they live in Edinburgh, soon to move to Glasgow. Vi holds up their bowl (Figure11). They describe it as "cheap," "simple," "factory-made," "not ornate and not pretty." Vi reflects on the bowl, telling us, "...nobody's ever looked at this bowl and thought this was meaningful to me. This is just a bowl that we pass around and put hot rice in and throw in the sink without thinking about it." This bowl to Vi has never required much thought or reflection. It exists in Vi's home to fulfil its role, a vessel for food, rinse and repeat. Its ceramic shell is familiar with the sensation of the sink, lying lopsided with residual rice grains glued to its body. It is not perceived as ornate, but as something disposable and replaceable. Figure 11 constitutes little monetary value yet, when realised as a promise of visual intimacy, the bowl validates the experience of Vi's own biography and notion of the self (Stewart 1993).

The iconography of Figure 12 depicts the ceramic bowl drawn in pencil and fine liner with letters cut out spelling, "Are you Chinese Enough?" The bowl is delicately drawn; there is a consistency to the design of the rim, a repetitive intentionality. Comparatively, the lettering strikes a bold contrast to the rest of the bowl; the letters protrude, and some show residual snippets of other letters. An imperfection bleeds in, augmented by the cracks that are visible underneath the lettering. Vi reflects on the common experience of a "diasporic identity crisis," in which one is neither "quite British enough to be in the UK nor quite Chinese enough to go to China or Hong Kong." A tension arises here where Vi must, just as their bowl is, reckon with feelings of displacement from two "homes." Both Vi and their bowl find themselves in "transit," existing in a liminality where they now stand out in both homes — in the UK and Hong Kong — occupying an interstice where the diasporic identity lies (Bhabha 1994).

Figure 12: Vi's artwork produced in the workshop (A4). Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Vi tells me that this artwork was inspired by Catalina Cheung's ceramics, which blend bold identity statements with the delicateness of traditional Chinese ceramics. One piece, which reads "You are gay and Chinese," resonates deeply with Vi, particularly because it juxtaposes this message with the quiet beauty of a traditional Chinese vase. Similarly, figure 12 reveals the interstices where the diasporic identity converges, collapsing in on itself, producing a "crisis." By subverting the bowl as Cheung does, Vi indexes a terrain for initiating and contesting what it means to be queer and Chinese living in Scotland. The bowl taken from its set now stands alone and must forge a new identity where it may not look like the others, where it may move through social landscapes differently. Vi, here, is reckoning with this "third space" where they do not feel enough to belong in either homeland (Bhabha 1994). Yet, Homi Bhabha's (1994) model is limited as it seeks resolution between thesis and antithesis,

offering a synthesis that may oversimplify Vi's experience. Comparatively, Deleuze's (1988) rhizome helps better understand Vi's identity as something that cannot be neatly compartmentalised. This "identity crisis" is particularly exacerbated by the UK's hostile political climate, where migrant bodies become sites of contestation (Ahmed 2000). Vi expands on incurring racial and nativist narratives, notably exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, stating,

> I think this justification of identity and belonging has become magnified by the current political climate, where immigrants and people of global majority are increasingly ostracised and reduced to their (perceived) ethnicity, such as statements like 'go back to China' particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Statements such as "go back to China" were a particularly prolific utterance aimed at East and Southeast Asian individuals throughout the pandemic. First identified in Wuhan, China, the rampant spread of COVID-19 (Chung et al. 2020) and the UK government's negligence congealed, increasing infections and, consequently, deaths. Social distancing, restrictions on time spent outside, and being confined to one's home propagated fear. This fear propelled racist sentiments in which COVID -19 was referred to as the "Chinese virus" (Xue 2021; Devakumar et al. 2020). East and Southeast Asian individuals quickly became the targets of an onslaught of racism and xenophobic rhetoric due to the perception that they are attacking the purported homogeneity and cleanliness of the state, becoming symbols of a disease. The ostracisation Vi describes and embodies through their object positions them as a defiling presence, as matter out of place, countering the "normative" landscape (Douglas 1966; Foucault 1986). These experiences can be interpreted through the lens of Julia Kristeva's (1982) "abjection."

Drawing on Kristeva's (1982) abjection, I evince how the identification with my participants' objects and the art they produce unfolds broader discussions on how the queer POC diasporic community in Scotland reckon with the UK's hostile political landscape. Vi's bowl specifically enables me to consider how quotidian objects, often rendered disposable, become increasingly meaningful objects, fostering resonance and empathy. This process can enact catharsis as reflected in processual art practices. Here, I ask how quotidian objects serve as conduits to navigate and articulate one's experience of belonging or alterity. How do these objects and art practices contribute to the political discourse around immigration and racialisation in the UK? Furthermore, I consider how material objects ground belonging and function as tools for understanding how belonging is constituted through an assemblage of things. While I use the term "abject," I do so with caution. My participants did not explicitly use it to describe their experiences, and it does not wholly capture their feelings. Nonetheless, I adopt it to engage with the far-right narrative of othering and the way this narrative impacts my participants' sense of safety and belonging.

Using Kristeva (1982)'s notion of abjection, we can articulate how the contemporary political landscape in the UK and increasing nativism and far-right populism contest my participants' feelings of belonging and home as evinced by Vi's bowl. When skin on the surface of milk is presented to the eyes or touches the lips, an affective disgust is produced; it stiffens the body, our lips curl, crinkling the brows. One protests its unfamiliar texture, its departure from the mundane. According to Kristeva (1982), abjection provokes such a response, an affective convulsion. It is a defilement from the quotidian, the pure, the homogenous, begging the question of what sits inside and outside our sense of order.

Dissonant Touch: Guanyin and the Politics of Belonging in an Era of Far-Right Resurgence

After the art workshop, I am looking at Sophie's artwork. Sophie was born and raised in Singapore and now lives in Glasgow. Her art piece is imbued by the body: hands, arms, and feet contort and stretch across the work. A figure that sits on the right side of the collage is standing on a platform, its arms outstretched, reaching for a larger hand that sits above the figure. Despite reaching, the figure's hands cannot reach the hand it seeks to touch. A small

distance remains. They are out of sync, their hands both directed slightly off one another.

When interpreting the artwork to me, Sophie states, “it’s like a Guanyin imagery … and then the whole reaching out thing, not feeling I belong anywhere, because Singapore’s rejected me for citizenship. Feeling unwanted in any part of the world.” The name Guanyin is a short form of Guan-shi-yin, “the one who listens to the cries of the world” (Reis-Habito 1993, 62). Guanyin is a deity often called upon by worshippers in times of ‘uncertainty, despair, and fear' and is believed to offer relief through healing powers that emanate from the 'tips of her fingers' (Reis-Habito 1993, 66).

Figure 13: Sophie’s artwork produced in the workshop. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Guanyin’s invocation in this context is unsurprising, as my workshops coincided with the rise of violent far-right riots that began in the North of England, quickly spreading across England, also stretching to Northern Ireland. These riots were provoked by the murder of three girls in Southport, where limited information was released about the suspect due to their status as minors. Despite the absence of information, these murders became a spectacle online. The perpetrator was posited to be an “undocumented migrant,” having arrived on a “small boat” (Reilly 2024). Comments such as these incited a greater onslaught of anti-immigration rhetoric, with an estimated twenty-seven million impressions for posts claiming the attacker was Muslim, a migrant or a refugee (Reilly 2024). Images circulate of a hotel in Rotherham housing asylum seekers attacked by over seven hundred far-right rioters, engulfed by flames. Rocks, fireworks, and missiles are hurled at the hotel. Bins fly in the air. Windows are smashed. Libraries are burned down.

One participant decided not to attend my workshop, feeling debilitated by the escalating violence; they are fearful of the response they might provoke. It is immigrants and refugees like them that they see on the news and that are incurring violence, perceived as abject, as “other.” Vi’s bowl as an object siloed within the context of burgeoning xenophobia reflects the visceral feelings of displacement, of not being enough. Yet, Vi’s bowl is increasingly recognised as a meaningful object, an object that can embody resilience, resistance, and rejection to the abject.

Conclusion

The rhizome moves through soil, forges new territories and finds new nodes, countering the teleological. It meets nodes that whisper and unveil new histories, adapting to new paths and comprehension of the self, forming an assemblage. The siphonophore occludes its prey by behaving as a collective. It coils protectively; it is not an individual, yet it is working together to survive, leaning on each heterogeneous element. These unlikely companions have aided me in providing cogent starting points to hold the complexity of belonging amongst the queer diasporic community as something incoherent and open-ended, yet finding a belonging in one another. However, as the rhizome flits and the siphonophore is carried by the current, my participants transcend these metaphorical

frameworks. Here, I am impelled to return to my initial question: how do art and objects, particularly those embroiled in diasporic and queer identities, serve as conduits of negotiation and reimagining of belonging,

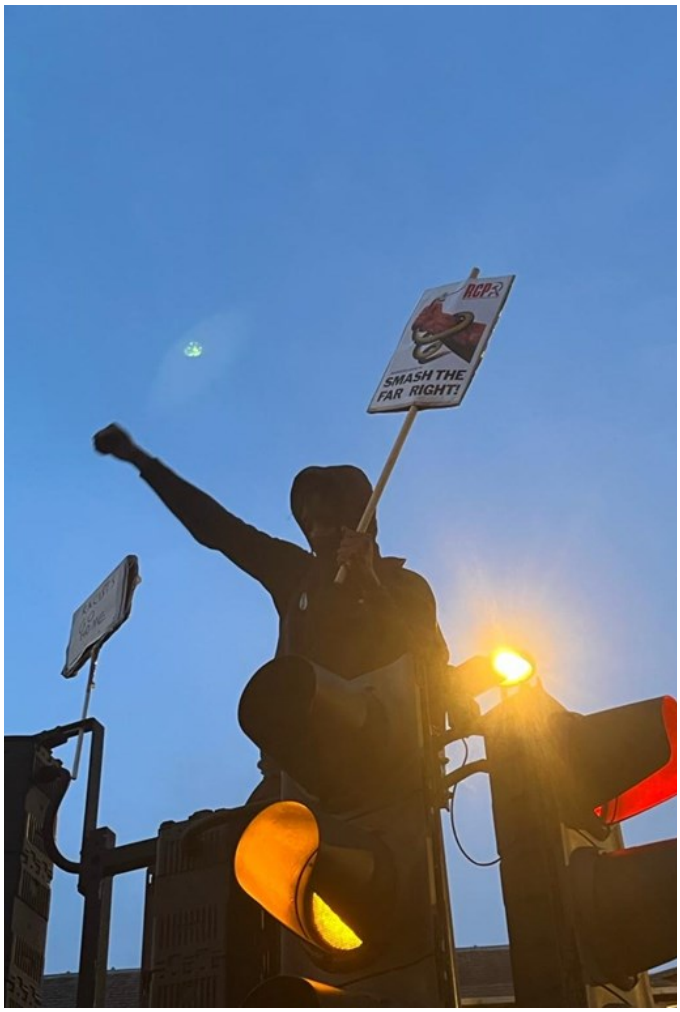

Figure 14: Counter far-right protest, London. Photo: taken by Zoë Ito

identity, and cultural memory, while uprooting traditional narratives and providing new ways to reimagine and perform selfhood?

As conveyed in the work of Vi, their family rice bowl was reimagined with the inclusion of the statement, “Are you Chinese enough?” As evident in this statement, there is a sense of incompleteness, of being partial and, in turn, Vi’s own experience of being excluded. Indeed, there is a yearning to be found in Vi’s bowl: a congealing of an elegy, an ache to fill in a sensuous partiality that seems to inhibit and occupy them. The complexity of this felt insufficiency is captured by interlocutor Madura’s poignant phrase, “diasporic longing,” conveying the perennial desire to fill in this partial incompleteness, to contain, to possess, to trace a transient home and history and to make it proximate. It is, from my own understanding, a visceral ache and preoccupation for what cannot quite be remembered or captured, a nostalgic torment. To satiate this ache, as conveyed by both Madura and Shola, a “postmemory” is invoked. By capitulating to contested and perhaps fabulist narratives of heirlooms and their family histories, they can bridge frayed connections to home and, in turn, their selfhood. Thus, narratives espoused of an ephemeral home, whether pastoralised or only encountered through smell and song, are malleable; they need not be veridical to hold value.

Conclusively, just as the siphonophore does not bend to a rigid form, neither do my participants nor I. In turn, there is belonging to be found in one another by embracing each other’s incompleteness and prolific unfurling.

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