archive of tongues

an intimate history of brownness

MOON CHARANIA

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For my mother, whose words cut . . . through everything.

And for Zoya, who inherited these lexical intimacies
but who might just find a way to shake loose
the spell of this inheritance.

CONTENTS

PREFACE

This book is a brown maternal archive. It is an archive of the stories, memories, songs, shapes, ghosts, attachments, and vernaculars that live on my mother's tongue. Textured, whispered, melancholic, womanly, lesbian, failed, and analytic, this is the tongue I share. The stories, memories, chronologies, experiences, and speech acts that I detail are real, in that they were all directly shared with me by my mother. Others are my memories of her and my memories of her recounting her memories (with me and with others). Both her memories and my memories of her memories are presented here, with some details obscured and remixed to shield (certain) identities. But if I am to be (even more) truthful, many of the "events" in this book are records of things that never happened or happened but had little consequence. There is no collective memory here, only idiosyncratic, minor, minimal, miniscule historiographic traces, even as many of these nonevents left no trace at all. They are, instead, matters of feminine memory, maternal memory, brown memory. These are my mother's stories, and this is my intimate, anxious, tender, erotic, raging, and careful curation of my mother's life. But like all witnessing and retelling, this archive is shaped by materiality and speculation, by lived conditions and by fabulation, by cognitive observation and by affective longing, by fact and by fiction. This book is the skin, heart, blood, and bones of

one brown mother, just as it is my memories, reflections, indictments, and witnessing of her life and mine.

As such, I am in this project—as narrator, as interpreter, as daughter, as beloved, as shadow, and so many other ways I cannot articulate. My mother is me. I am her. This strangely Lacanian experience of negotiating my mother's stories, stories that are inside me on many levels, compels a reading of critical theory as an intimate encounter with one's own ideas and with the subject who is also the self. This double genitive positions my mother as both inside and outside—inside as philosopheme, outside as part of my life, inside as analysand and outside as analyst, inside as self and outside as *other*. Such a hybrid multivocal witnessing is a collaboration that enlists and mediates the contradictions of reading the mother through the daughter (inevitably and simultaneously Lacanian and Fanonion and Kristevan—a project that perhaps reflects its own iteration of glorified psychoanalytic tragedies). I offer a sensual and structural reading of the brown maternal that underscores the texture of this project as one of a mother-daughter dyad, in which memory, trauma, and subjectivity are passed from one to the other, like the vagaries of a diasporic utterance that sounds like an old childhood lullaby. Indeed, I have a perverse relation to this archive, to my mother, to the maternal. Julietta Singh's words resound: "The archive is a stimulus between myself and myself."[1]

Archive of Tongues is a narrative and theoretical experiment in which I confront and reflect upon how we read and write feminized, racialized maternal pasts and the debris they leave behind; how we might *listen to* the vernaculars, grammars and speech acts that emerge from (my) brown mother's tongues across time and space; how the brown mother's tongue/s expose a whole world where aspirations of *the good life* are cast aside for the everyday necropolitical; and how we might understand the affections, erotics, solidarities, socialities that are born out of impossible situations. This is not to suggest that the mother tongue evokes/requires/acquires a transhistorical quality. Rather, I want to think about how the brown mothers' tongue reconfigures itself across diaspora-time, rejects the linearity of historicity, challenges the notion of futurity, conflates yesterdays and tomorrows, queers epistemology and temporality, and opens the way for other modes of consciousness to be considered seriously—those of ghosts, for example, and the maid, the wife, the lesbian, and the whore.

By engaging in a multinarration of what has been historically an Orientalizing narrative, I hope that my reader will do the work of *not* falling into the trap of appropriation and instead will think with me about what political and ethical questions weigh most heavily in this deeply gendered, sexual-

ized, racialized, and felt archive. I hope that my reader will *read* with greater "thickness," as Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel propose in their work on the impossibility of area studies, by which they refer to historicized, material, multilayered, and interdisciplinary readings.[2] I hope that my reader will understand that such an archive lends itself also to an anxious reading, disrupting how a reader conventionally reads, demanding from the reader (just as it demands/demanded from me) a different practice, one that is in relation to uncomfortable affect, one that is willing to sit with a level of opacity that may be unfamiliar. I share this archive as one that deliberately subalternizes the brown mother and her feminine and feminized knowledges. My use of the term *subaltern* gestures to a Spivakian argument that class privilege is defined by access to knowledge production and that access to knowledge production is a politics of power that travels across geopolitical differences; I am thinking here of Spivak's point that White critique and postcolonial theory are contiguous class formations. I have stakes in this framing of subalternity.

In subalternizing the brown maternal, l think about how brown maternal memory, intimacy, sociality, and speech underscore not only the failures of White, Western, Northern scholarship but also certain strands of postcolonial studies, feminist studies, and queer studies. The very condition of archivization of my mother's tongues—a mode of knowledge production not seen as such—implicates many of the tensions and aporias that shape these fields. By offering (her) archival tongues, I limn these fields' epistemological questions about what constitutes an archive or evidence, what makes an utterance a truth or a lie, what is instituted as knowledge and what is dismissed as gossip. I reject the imperative to produce my mother as an abstract subject within the scholia of Foucauldian terminology (whose interest in the subject never included figures like the brown mother or, for that matter, the racial *other*). Subsequently, I also understand that just as I interpellate my mother as a subject in relation to the world, I simultaneously hollow her out in the very act of naming her as subject and her subjectivity as theoretically relevant. This dialectic between constitution of subject and emptying of subjectivity is perhaps inevitably part of the fiber of scholarly and disciplinary research. I do my best to fail at this mandate.

My mother's stories compelled a gathering around bad objects—abjection, oppression, femininity, brownness, melancholia, negativity, shame, embarrassment, disability, illness, and violence. Stories of self-induced abortions, dead babies, rapes, beatings, madness, magic, fabulation, dystopia, mysticism, instinct, gut, and gore sat somewhere deep inside of her, maybe in her brownness, maybe in her heart. I could not exactly tell. For her, both the category

brown woman and the category brown maternal were sites of negation, abjured and overdetermined. I sit in a feminist contemplation of these bad objects and "bad feelings" ("ugly feeling," to invoke Sianne Ngai's 2005 phrase) and read them sensuously, promiscuously, nakedly, replacing the systematic forms of interpretation, reason, logics, methods, renouncing Anglo-Bourgeois values of legibility and privatization of pain.[3]

Walter Benjamin noted that to "articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger."[4] Following Benjamin, I write to make my mother's private experiences public knowledge, to unravel the unrelenting demand to privatize our past, to shake our comportment of the present, to lay bare the impossibility of separating the psychological need to protect those we love and the intellectual effort to uncover harm and hurt. There is no simple excavation or symbolic revival. Language is ideological. Subjectivity is partial. Theory can be empty and unfulfilling. All I have is what Toni Morrison called insistent memory, mutated from fact into fiction, then into folklore, and then into nothing.[5]

Regardless, this rendering of the private self public and, conversely, the public self as opaque is a destabilizing epistemological practice (although, ironically, a common methodological one). It is also important to say that I do not find privacy to be a feminist notion: its very contours are shaped by patriarchal and colonial logics. The assumption that privacy is a sanctuary, a site of dignity, a space to be who you are is mediated and modulated by access to resources, as well as gender, class, and sexual norms and expectations. It's worth more explicitly pointing out that for queer people and women the private domestic space is one of policing, abuse, confinement, silence, and shame more than a sanctuary. What, then, is privacy but a concept worthy of critique, perhaps even abandonment? Through this public telling of private stories, I seek to critique privacy by speaking what some may consider a private language. I try to think about all the ways we fail at privacy, or where privacy breaks down, the vagaries and compulsions of privacy, the disappointments and violences of privacy. If privacy is sanctuary, intimacy, and opacity, then it is also secrecy, shame, humiliation, and risk. The internal sociality of this text and the social relations of this book's production erode the very possibility of bourgeois notions of privacy. I take this erosion seriously.

It became clear to me, in writing this book, that my mother's itinerant encounters, memories, modalities, affects—all the sights, sounds, smells, secrets, socialities—that eventually became her mother tongue, came also to be mine. I bring this fleshy merger—her tongue in my mouth—this subject-object,

mother-daughter coagulation, to bear in this book. I move inadequately from one tongue to another, or perhaps I am insufficient to work the many tongues in my mouth. Arundhati Roy, when asked whether the English language is always colonial, responded that even one's mother tongue is "actually an alien, with fewer arms than Kali perhaps, but many more tongues."[6] Even in my best effort to write back to or against this coloniality, the language I use already contains my ruin. What can I offer, then, with this tongue in my mouth? Seduction, coercion, hauntings, irreverence, intimacy, perversion, theory? I do not know where this tongue will commence, nor do I know what this tongue will command (from me, from you), but I cannot stop reaching for it.

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GRATITUDES

I am made of tongues. Mine, my mother's, her mother's, her mother's mother and other mothers, aunties, sisters, daughters, friends, teachers, mentors, and lovers. These tongues taught me, trained me, tamed me, tormented me, tainted me, tempered me, and took care of me. These tongues shape my feminist grammars, impulses, intimacies, practices, and solidarities. So intimately entangled am I with these tongues that at times it is hard to tell where theirs end and mine begins. Without these tongues, this book would not exist.

This kind of solidarity is difficult to express. We know when it's there, we feel it, we connect with it, are grateful for it. It's a visceral, bodily charge as much as love, as much as the erotic. This kind of solidarity is rare and wild; it gives oneself over to another regardless of self-interest. It is a deeply resonant affinity that requires constant affective labor, constant epistemological undoing. This is the kind of solidarity that has made this book possible.

I am grateful for my core community of thoughtful interlocuters with whom I think and write and learn: Tiffany King, Jane Ward, Ghassan Massouwi, Elizabeth Beck, Kristen Abatsis-McHenry, Stevie Larson, and Cory Albertson. At different moments in the process of writing this book, each of them read, edited, advised, and counseled me in ways that profoundly shaped not only this book but also my relation with and to the academy. I am deeply

dependent on the presence of these committed readers, thinkers, and writers in my life and in this project. I am fortunate to have each of them, as Toni Morrison phrased in *Beloved*, as "friends of my mind."

I am not sure where I would be as a writer and thinker without Wendy Simonds. She is easily the most important and most intimate working friendship of my life. She has read every article, every chapter, every version of this manuscript, redlining sections with her incisive editing until the final click. I am immensely thankful to C. Riley Snorton, who in a tremendous act of friendship and solidarity, read entire parts of my early manuscript one afternoon in New Orleans—an afternoon of exchanging ideas and thoughts that charted this project toward new critical grammars and that suffused me with new, unexpected possibilities and solidarities. The very first time I met Jasbir Puar I immediately sensed that we would become fast friends—a lovely, unexpected night in London spent connecting over feminist ideas and struggles at a conference that was more than a little lackluster. Over the years, our friendship has grown into fierce femme sisterhood. I could not be more grateful to Jasbir for her meticulous reading of my work, who, even from afar, managed to get at the heart of this text, pushing me to write *for* and not against, untangling my ideas without ever abjuring them. Amber Jamila Musser's voice and support hovers over this project. It was an unexpected encounter when Amber joined a cooking group Jasbir and I had put together at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pandemic fear, isolation, and lockdown forced us to create a world of connection, solidarity, levity, and laughter in a way that none of us had ever anticipated and with people not part of our physical worlds. Connecting with Amber as we Zoom-cooked spicy Pakistani dishes week after week was a precious gift from the feminist goddesses, as our friendship strengthened and took new turns. Amber's generous reading of this manuscript was a gesture of that feminist friendship and her ethics to lift junior faculty. For me her reading affirmed the extraordinary brown maternal world of words and how it resonates with other worlds and world making. Jyoti Puri has been, without a doubt, one my most passionate and genuine allies in the academy, always reading my work with nuance, capaciousness, porosity, generativeness, and love, always reaching out to include me in dynamic thought collectives. I owe a special thanks to Beverly Guy-Sheftal and Cynthia Spence, both of whom opened up intellectual space and financial resources for my work and invited me into the warm embrace of Black feminist world making at Spelman College. I am especially grateful to Beverly's intuitive advice throughout my time at Spelman, simultaneously humorous, irreverent, and priceless. I feel lucky to work in the shadow of her dynamic Black feminist presence.

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I am thankful to my family for their support of me, even as my life and work have presented challenges and complexities in their own lives. I am especially thankful to my father, who sat with me for hours at a time, recounting his difficult journey of migration, family politics, and racialized experiences, even when it meant going to places that he had tried so hard to leave behind.

Sara Shroff, my lesbian, feminist, brown girl-cousin-sister-love, I cannot thank enough for working with me in this book and in life. She is always there, laughing at a shared memory, reaching up to clarify a word, shaking up a queasy-making loyalty I hadn't quite worked through, offering up a translation and a folklore, leaning in to whisper an important fact, deepening my analysis with a simple word or memory in my ear. Sharabi-style, Karachi-style, she will always be a comrade in my life.

I still remember in vivid detail how, from the very first moment I met her, Erin's handsome tenderness, feminist masculinity, and Southern astuteness struck me. To my life partner, I owe enduring love and debt for never failing to orient me toward pleasure as I pursued a project marked by pain. Her belief in this project has been unyielding, even as it meant becoming vulnerable in the ink of this book.

No two people have shaped me more profoundly than my mother, Maher, and my daughter, Zoya. The lifeworld in which I came to be my mother's youngest daughter and the world making involved in being Zoya's mother have unflinchingly made me who I am. The very act of writing this book strengthened both these bonds—that of being a daughter and that of being mother. Zoya grew up watching me write this book, moving through her teenage years, jettisoning old identities to fashion new ones, learning in wanted

and unwanted ways the sticky inheritance of her mother and her mother's mother. The dialectic of loss and desire that shaped the years of writing this book and watching Zoya grow into the dynamic brown feminist presence she is today is the greatest gift I have been granted. Everything she is already exceeds my wildest dreams.

I lack the words to thank my mother, who shared with me so many stories, advice, memories, observations, and in doing so, relived sadness and suffering. I still have not figured out if, through this extraordinary commitment to telling, retelling, overtelling, still telling, she metabolized pain or anesthetized it. What I do know is that writing my mother's stories was to intercourse with her hauntings and mine, even when writing, like the English language, like translation, like my academic training, always betrays. But if I do nothing more than affirm the psychic presence of my mother or turn the face of history toward her history (to paraphrase June Jordan), then I have already done something more extraordinary than I thought possible.

Mother, loosen my tongue, or
adorn me with a lighter burden.

—AUDRE LORDE, *ZAMI: A NEW SPELLING OF MY NAME*

PROLOGUE

I look for her shape. . . .

—PATRICIA WILLIAMS, *ALCHEMY OF RACE AND RIGHTS: DIARY OF A MAD LAW PROFESSOR*

I see my mother's face in my eyelid's inner flesh. . . .

I see my mother's face—elusive and material, fantastic and contingent. Avalanche of emotions. Site of my exile. The lights, shadows, colors, vibrancy, tactility, sounds, scents, spirits. All familiar. Familial. I search for my mother's face. My mother searches for her mother's face. Her mother, now dead, searched in vain for *her* mother. There is a history here that does not belong solely to the order of genetics. I remind myself that I am searching for something for which there is no coherent articulation. I think I am possessed by my mother's dispossession, and her mother's, and her mother's. . . .

I see my mother's face in an old photo from 1979. We are in Alaska, she reminds me. Her younger brother, a successful immigrant with many white employees, lives there, and she and I have come for a visit. The photo, I think, is lovely. Her brown eyes. Her soft mouth. Her full cheeks. Her forehead broad. Her face clear and smooth in a picture that looks blurry and faded. Her eyes refuse the simplicity of the gaze. She is wearing a blue-and-white-striped western

dress, fitted around her rounded body, an unusual departure from her usual going-out sari. Her hair is wrapped in a bun that sits low at the nape of her neck. She never wore her hair down. She has a half smile on her face, giving the impression that the camera clicked too early, but I know it's because she's shy and self-conscious that her photo is being taken. But she is also proud of making it here, that her brother made it here. She understands the importance of arrival (in America), the significance of success, of mobility, of the photograph, of the memory. I know this because I know her. Knowing her gives me this knowledge, because her face is as silent as the photograph. My two-year-old self sits on a wicker chair, legs crossed, looking up at her, as she stands shyly in front of a burning fireplace. . . .

I see my mother's face, resting on a cheap, plastic, ribbed pillow, her creamy, brown body soaking in a small tub filled with warm water. She is naked, round, beautiful. I am reminded again of her touch. Her labor floods my body. I want to get in the water with her. She doesn't want me to. This is her time. But she will let me sit in the bathroom, as she alternatively closes her eyes or opens them slowly to fill my ears with stories. I like her stories when she speaks. I stare at her body when she is silent. I am in awe of her body. I am struck by her speech. I feel her presence in me. I commit her stories to memory. I learn nothing. I learn everything. She is my love. My ghost. My salvation. My inquiry. My subject. My story. My mother. . . .

I see my mother's face, her eyes searching for a memory, combing for a correction, a revised detail, possibly a tender moment. This is where she pauses the most. She wasn't one to repress the unpleasant, the disgusting, the violent, the carnal. The fleshy tongue in her mouth produced fleshy stories about fleshy femininity. And she did not need to search for those. Those memories sat at the tip of her tongue, the distance between memory as flesh (tongue) and memory as utterance (story) short and extemporaneous. They simply rolled off, uninvited, unpleasant, uncensored, uncultivated, untender. She was quick with these stories; like spit, she spat them out with an urgency; often even before one had sat down, she had taken them to the bowels of the earth. Yes, she knew too many things firsthand, secondhand, third removed. Yes, she had learned along the way not to fight. Yes, she was easy to defeat. Yes, she joined them in her own demise. But who fails to recognize such a figure? Who doesn't know this story?

I see my mother's face, lined and wrinkled, her oiled hair pulled back in a thinning and graying bun, her nylon pants and cotton T-shirt hanging on her too-thin body. Her saris have been hibernating in the closet for eighteen years. It is noon and time for her prayer. She looks tired, even though the day

has just begun. She has begun to take daily naps, after her noon prayer. She is surprised she is still alive, but death, she says, is the one thing *Allah* has kept in his hands. Then she tells me that our relation, the affective force between her and me, is from another life. Our relationality is the residue of something leftover, something that needed completion, actualization, materiality, touch. She calls this *lein-dein*, a complicated Urdu figure of speech that alludes to leftover debt from a previous life. She tells me it is why she never went through with the abortion when she realized she was pregnant with me, even when she was so close to getting it, even when she knew she needed it, even when she knew it would've made her life easier, even when she had her feet in stirrups, her knees apart, and a male doctor between her legs, asking her for the third time if she was sure. It was 1975. She had married a man who had five (White) children waiting for him in America. She had given him two more children. She didn't need or want a third one. She was sure. But still she closed her legs.

NOTES

Preface

1. *On the body as an archive*, see Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You* (New York: Punctum Books, 2018), 27.

2. *On the necessity of reading with "thickness*," see Anjali Arondhekar and Geeta Patel, "Area Impossible," Notes Toward an Introduction," *GLQ: A Journal for Gay and Lesbian Studies* 22, no.2: 151–71.

3. *On bad or ugly feelings*, see Ghassan Moussawi, "Bad Feelings: Trauma, Non-Linear Time, and Accidental Encounters in 'the Field,'" *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 10, no. 1: 78–96; Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

4. *On seizing up memory*, see Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255.

5. *On the insistence of memory for women of color*, see Toni Morrison, "I Wanted to Carve Out a World both Culture Specific and Race-Free': an essay by Toni Morrison," *guardian.com*, August 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/08/toni-morrison-rememory-essay.

6. *On more tongues than Kali*, see Arundhati Roy, "What Is the Morally Appropriate Language in Which to Think and Write?" *lithub.com*, July 2018, https://lithub.com/what-is-the-morally-appropriate-language-in-which-to-think-and-write/.