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ARTICLE



## Anti/Aunty as Critical Method: From Gendered Resistance to Soft Grace

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### ABSTRACT


This article chronicles the author's transformation from an anti-aunty Tamil South Asian socialisation to a more critical acceptance of aunty-ness as a queer ethnographer. Committing to reflexive ethnographic methods, I contemplate on the figure of the 'invisible aunty' as a way of disrupting the field while also being self-serving to one's queer body and psyche. Particularly, in drawing from the nourishing strain of critical aunty dialogue, especially around discourse and subversion, I share how my own research and personal identities have coalesced, allowing for a radical reimagination of once-distant terms and concepts. This return to past discomfort and resistance with soft grace and new ability, I argue, is at the core of the critical aunty—or anti-aunty—method.

### KEYWORDS

Aunty praxis; auto-ethnography; India; queer methods; self-reflexivity

On my first trip back home from college, I brought back a friend, V, to visit. After a night of stories, sleeper train sweat and Guntur Junction grape juice, V and I got up at the crack of dawn to meet my parents who waited for us at the Chennai Central railway station. Even though it was over 20 years ago, one sliver of their first exchange remains vivid: my mother, after many welcome hugs, introducing herself by name, and V organically responding with 'Hi, J'.

Calling my mother 'J' feels natural now, but I remember the nervous surprise I had for the greeting then. There is always an awkward moment—not necessarily just for South Asians—in age-dissonant encounters, where the younger person says their name and the older person says 'hello' or nods without really offering theirs back in return. Subsumed in the exchange is a common understanding that an elder's name is out of bounds, and if volunteered in an exchange, it is meant for information rather than use. I had never called my mother, who is barely two decades older than me, 'J', and I do not think anyone else had called her that prior to this exchange. It was not an entirely inaccurate shortening of her name. I must have shared how I sometimes called my mother Jechi (a childhood bastardisation of her name), and V, borrowing from the insomniac bravado that nightcap storying offers new intimacies, must have felt this

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liberty accessible to her too. Still, the use of ‘J’ caused my parents to chuckle rather than bristle in the moment, and in the decades since that encounter, ‘J’ has been the most popular moniker for my mother amongst my circles of care and trust.

A few years ago, I made new *desi* friends whom I introduced to my mother; her mild horror when they assumed she’d want to be called aunty was informative. There was still chuckling, but this time it was directive: ‘Just call me J—that is what Swe’s friends call me’. On the one hand, J was much older during this interaction than she was at that Chennai Central encounter, so aunty might have been more acceptable as a descriptor. Many of my (decade younger) sister’s friends call my mother ‘aunty’, so it was not an absolute resistance to the term. But my friends were closer to J in age and, given how curiously cohorts meld over time, the term might have held different implications for status. But added to this linear analysis about time and state, I’d like to think, was a call for a kind of intimacy too: J’s desire to bring the encounter closer by *not* being an aunty.

This article explores this tendency to distance oneself from being an aunty—or being called an aunty—critically. I use what Kalivis refers to as an ‘au(n)to-ethnographic’ lens to trace my own journey with the term as a child in Madras<sup>1</sup> and observe the ways in which different aunty scripts<sup>2</sup> socialised me to have what I refer to as an ‘anti-aunty’ perspective. Particularly, I offer the ways in which the term ‘aunty’ signalled a form of social distancing rather than intimacy in my communities and how, in my embedded surroundings, the essence of aunty-like caring was done, instead, by many who rejected the term. Starting from these anti-aunty perspectives that I may have internalised into my own performative (non-)auntying as an adult, I recall the shifting nature of this valorisation over time. Specifically, I contrast my early inheritances of resistance to the term against a more complicated recent engagement as a gender-fluid ethnographer in rural Kerala, where, despite my initial hesitation and discomfort, the category of being an aunty held generative possibility. It is this paradoxical lens produced by marginality that I refer to as the anti/aunty method in this article. Beyond autoethnographic reflexivity,<sup>3</sup> I suggest that paying attention to new forms of presentation (styles often imposed on the aunty) and interiority (an affordance rarely granted to aunts) could have important implications for critical theory and praxis. I offer that the qualification of critique (i.e. ‘anti’) sits in similar alignment, in that it is restrictive as well as instructive in its capacity to build community. Reading the category of aunty not with dismissal and opposition (anti-aunty), but instead with softness and grace for past selves (anti/aunty) offers another way of sitting with hard categories. The construction of anti/aunty as an interchangeable either/or concept is intentional theoretical architecture. Just as ‘anti’, when read by those who wish to see, can be a powerful tool for collaborative critique, ‘aunty’ could be powerful too as a similar critical tool, interchangeable with that certain definition of a generative ‘anti’. In this juxtaposition,

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1. Madras is the erstwhile name of Tamil Nadu’s capital city, Chennai. Chennai is no longer my residence and when I recall it as Madras, it is for a place in both nostalgic and factual memory (the city changed the name officially in 1996, and I moved away a few years after).

2. George Kalivis, ‘Becoming a Manual: Au(n)to-Ethnography and Queer Performances of a Greek Theia’, *Text and Performance Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2022): 298–314.

3. See, for example, Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe, eds, *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Routledge, 2020).

the ‘/’ does not just connect alternatives, it also presents a route and connects these non-contrasting terms, allowing for a capacity for two things to coexist and have equal, opposite readings: a reading of soft grace to self, rather than a feeling of disorientation.

In addition to offering new ways of thinking about the category of aunty, this article also begins to think about the negotiation of interiority in the field, about queering the aunty as a category that does not always invade space and is subversive in such invisibility.<sup>4</sup> Queer reflexive methods have been crucial to thinking about the paradoxes of visibility—both as a construction of self as well as a way of navigating distance and proximity from others.<sup>5</sup> These juxtaposing frames contemplate the idea of the ‘invisible aunty’ as a way of disrupting the field while also being self-serving to one’s queer body and psyche. What, for example, might it mean to ‘make space for the psyche’ as a way of doing interactional self-determination when one is seen as an aunty even when one resists the term?<sup>6</sup> What about when the resistance is to the particularities of subversion that the term itself might offer—if one strain of aunty subversion is to read the category as explicitly visible, loud and hypersexual,<sup>7</sup> what subversive possibilities remain for invisibility, evasion, or even exit, especially when theorising the complexities inherent in intersectional asexuality?

As a gender-queer but then predominantly cis-presenting person trying to blend into my surroundings, being seen as an aunty in the field initially felt like a high personal cost of gender presentation, especially in light of my own anti-aunty socialisation. Yet, over time, this reception also offered a position from which to investigate queer consequences for such proximity, passing and pleasing. In paying attention to both invisible aunty figures as well as active anti-aunties as important nodes in one’s ‘manual of becoming’, I hope to offer new tools to build solidarities with those calling for more invading and reflexive ethnographic methods.<sup>8</sup> Particularly, in drawing from the nourishing strain of critical aunty dialogue, especially around discourse and subversion, I share how my own research and personal identities have coalesced, allowing for a radical reimagination of once-distant terms and concepts. Scholars have made the argument for selective inheritance and subversion in other contexts of auntying.<sup>9</sup> In paying close attention to my own process of framing and buffering the coordinates of the term *aunty* (and anti!), I hope to be able to illustrate the usefulness of the term as self-reflexive methodological praxis.

To think of the aunty as a mode of alternative inhabitation rather than as a concrete category that demands refusal and assertion could offer new ways to approach the

4. For other subversive possibilities of the invisible, see Swethaa Ballakrishnen, Priya Fielding-Singh and Devon Magliozzi, ‘Intentional Invisibility: Professional Women and the Navigation of Workplace Constraints’, *Sociological Perspectives* 62, no. 1 (2019): 23–41.

5. For examples of queer reflexive methods as possibility, see Gayathri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetics of Queer Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Srila Roy, *Changing the Subject: Feminist and Queer Politics in Neoliberal India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

6. C. Riley Snorton, ‘“A New Hope”: The Psychic Life of Passing’, *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 77–92.

7. See, for example, Darshana Sreedhar Mini and Anirban K. Baishya, ‘Transgressions in Toonland: Savita Bhabhi, Velamma and the Indian Adult Comic’, *Porn Studies* 7, no. 1 (2020): 115–31.

8. See, for example, Anima Adjepong, ‘Invading Ethnography: A Queer of Color Reflexive Practice’, *Ethnography* 20, no. 1 (2019): 27–46; Ianna Hawkins Owen, ‘Still, Nothing: Mammy and Black Asexual Possibility’, *Feminist Review* 120, no. 1 (2018): 70–84.

9. See, for example, Bimbola Akinbola, ‘#AfricanAunties: Performing Diasporic Digital Disbelongings on TikTok’, *Text and Performance Quarterly* 1, no. 14 (2022): e2044071.

ethnographic field. It could also expand the ways in which one approaches critique as a site of reparative knowing<sup>10</sup> that works with rather than against hard categories and modes of analyses. Although I hope my (perhaps paranoid!) reflexivity to the term aunty offers new journeys of self-critique and possibility, it is not meant to apply to just this one strain of resistance. Even if others do not have the same gendered or historical resistances to the term aunty, I hope they are able to use their own historiographies to consider the usefulness of categories that might have similar triggers and possibilities for their own relationships to the field. It is that kind of sitting with contradictions with ‘critical generosity’<sup>11</sup> to the ‘self’ alongside others that can offer the new capacities for generative research that are central to the anti/aunty method. At the same time, I acknowledge that in exploring invisibility as a way of performing auntyhood, or suggesting that all return to past selves can be celebratory, I might be simplifying the high costs of passing and pleasing. Invisibilities might have different valences depending on their reception and this reception itself might change over time and circumstance. While claiming categories at odds with oneself might be subversive at times, it can also sometimes reinforce existing hierarchies. It is this navigation of otherness and self that I turn to next.

### Background to the au(n)to-ethnography: Aunty as other

Aunties might be *desi* cultural capital,<sup>12</sup> but *desi* and aunty have both been terms that have historically felt distancing and imperialist to my own Tamil upbringing. The term *desi*,<sup>13</sup> like ‘Asian’, has more resonance for diasporic and foreign audiences as a category of representation than it does for natives, or at least natives whose cultural roots diverge from the predominantly represented North Indian majority. So, just as I was taught (by a seemingly kind administrator who asked me to check my forms) that I wasn’t ‘Asian Asian’ when I first moved to the United States, I also learnt, as I started to build community, that I *was* ‘*desi*’ (and that when someone said Indian restaurant, of course they meant a *North* Indian restaurant). These layers of meanings and identities that get clubbed together in immigrant translations extract violence even as they have rewards for solidarities. But it was a different kind of resistance that I harboured towards the term aunty. Aunty, unlike *desi*, was not an unknown term to me growing up in Tamil Nadu. There were aunties in abundance on TV and in the lives of my friends whose parents had large circles of friends. But for a kid whose biggest childhood social network was an extended family, aunty was the polite term you used to distance someone you did not really know and whose encounter demanded a certain kind of contrived politeness and, by extension, distance.

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10. Sedgwick calls this ‘desire of a reparative impulse’ both ‘addictive and accretive’: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003): 149.

11. David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998).

12. Kareem Khubchandani, *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020): 2.

13. The diasporic term ‘*desi*’ is derived from *desh*, which is a Hindi or Urdu word for homeland or country. It has many regional homophones, but it is used in Tamil (*desam*) much more to signal territory than a sense of identity. On the construction of the *desi* terminology by diasporic trajectories, imagination and settlement rather than actual recall or descriptive analysis, see Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

Part of this distance from the term *aunty* comes from the relational position of other *aunty*-like relationships from which the term distinguished itself. Tamil, like many languages, has words that specify particularities in relationship to denote kinship and connection. I had an age and relationship diverse set of *aunty*-proximate relationships, but they were made special and proximate to me by being named particularly. For instance, I had *paatis* (grandmothers), *kollu paatis* (great-grandmothers), *athai-paatis* (grandfather's sisters and female cousins) and *chitti-paatis* (grandmother's younger sisters and female cousins) who raised me and who, over time, I started calling by special names (*ammama*, *thathi*, husband!, baby!). I now have *athais* (father's sisters), *periammas* (mother's older sisters and sisters-in-law), *maamis* (mother's brothers' wives) and *chittis* (father's brothers' wives), but none of them have ever been *aunty* to me. Many of these women were technically not siblings to my parents, or, if they were, they were second-cousins twice or thrice removed, but they were made proximate with the terms given to them. Thus, although the original words were meant to dictate actual lineage of kinship, they were often approximations for other kinds of loving interconnectedness, a way of socialised signalling that someone was a close adult, a space in which a child could use their inside voice and manners.

In contrast, the term *aunty* while growing up was what was used to categorise posh women whom I did not know, or women whom I were in a formal relationship to more loving elders, or women whom I needed to be polite to but had strict boundaries with. My middle school's founder, for example, a widowed princess, was referred to as 'Aunty' among the teachers and students alike, but this attempt at informality fell flat because those who knew her well called her *aachi* (the Tamizh word from her dialect that is used to refer to older women lovingly, with proximity).

Beyond relational terminology, *aunties* also occupied an inherent positionality of otherness that called for a specific performative of neoliberal politeness that was dependent on one's social networks and position. For instance, the few women I did refer to as 'aunty' were coded in my childhood brain as being cooler and more modern than the adult women in my familial circuit of care. Now that I think of it, both 'aunties' I am thinking of were professional women who had had 'love marriages' and wore jeans, and I imagined their life to be terribly different from the women I knew, even if not in a personally aspirational way. In this way too, their presence offered a paradox: I knew that the women I was close to felt distance from these *aunties*, even suspicion. But even as I inherited strains of their resistance, I also could not deny how striking the few *aunties* I knew remained in—perhaps by—their difference and distance. I knew, for example, that my mother's boss' wife or my uncle's colleague from Delhi were *aunties* before whom I had to be an extra 'good child' because my behaviour reflected on my elders. But they were not the ones to whom I could complain about my starched frilly frock, they were not the ones who would tell me I looked like a boy in my favourite blue dungarees, they were not the ones most likely to clean up after my imminent carsickness in those very dungarees they'd helped me change into. As another extension, *aunties* were also strangers that one had to be polite to but stay on guard against. The kind lady who offered you a *molaga podi*-dusted *idli* on an overnight train was an *aunty* (even though you didn't call her that if she was Tamil), and you knew this because you also knew you were meant to say 'no, thank you' to the

invitation. In these myriad ways, I was taught to gauge across what Kalivis would call ‘personal testing fields’, a range of aunty archetypes even if I was not personally coding them as aunty. In fact, it was the term that was distancing, not its extensions, which were well operationalised in many of the caring women who (loudly and nosily!) raised me. And in playing with these ideas of distance and proximity, I was implicitly schooled in the language of my own aunty possibilities, even if I would not reflect upon them with critical acceptance for decades after.

I offer these snippets of my childhood both because they frame my initial positionality of resistance to the term aunty, and because they offer a location to trace the ideological distance I have since traversed from the term. This chronicling of my journey away from hesitation or dismissal (i.e. what I think of as an ‘anti-aunty’ perspective) to a more critical acceptance that has nudged me to each of these terms (i.e. anti and aunty, respectively and together) has been crucial not just for my own interiority, but in my evolution as a critical ethnographer. It has made me sit with the difficult relationships between performance and subjectivity and forced me to see the field anew from perspectives that I might have once not known to pay attention to. In paying attention to the ways in which distance is produced and internalised in aunty-ing, I ask how categories we seek to isolate ourselves from may offer new tools to re-engage with our embedded surroundings. This return to past discomfort and resistance with soft grace and new ability, I argue, is at the core of the critical aunty method—or, as I think of it, the anti/aunty (rather than the anti-aunty) method.

It is the collocation of these terms and the possibilities they hold for theory and method that I seek to trace in the next two sections: first by outlining the ways in which the otherness of the term aunty made me resist that label when I was in contexts where it could be applied to me, and next by offering the possibility of the anti/aunty method as a tool to unearth subversive possibilities within those very interactions that first distanced me.

### **Anti-aunty: Aunty as gendered resistance**

In 2017, I spent several weeks in the district of Malappuram, Kerala, doing fieldwork for a project that was committed to centring the narratives of those usually characterised as ‘left behind’—the transnational families of Gulf migrant workers.<sup>14</sup> Men’s migration has had important implications for women and families left behind, but these accounts of agency and autonomy are mostly centred around economic or political participation narratives or demographic accounts about changes in politico-economic trends.<sup>15</sup> Kerala has been an important site for these patterns because of the impact of Gulf migration on the state’s economy in general and the state’s capacity to engender what has been dubbed a ‘gendered paradox’.<sup>16</sup> My collaborator for the project

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14. Indians constitute the majority of the population in the UAE, and Kerala sends the largest group among them: see Kunniparambil Curien Zachariah and S. Irudaya Rajan, ‘Kerala Migration Study 2014’, *Economic & Political Weekly* 51, no. 6 (2016): 66–71.

15. See, for example, Abdul Azeez and Mustiary Begum, ‘Gulf Migration, Remittances and Economic Impact’, *Journal of Social Sciences: Interdisciplinary Reflection of Contemporary Society* 20, no. 1 (2009): 55–60.

16. On the one hand, Kerala consistently ranks at the top for gender empowerment measures and gender development indices: see A.K. Shiva Shiva Kumar, ‘UNDP’s Gender-Related Development Index: A Computation

was a demographer who helped me see the starkness of many of these patterns within these rich metadata, but my own interest in the field followed a line of research that was interested in more micro processes.<sup>17</sup> Particularly, I was interested in the everyday lived lives of these families and the interpersonal networks that buoyed them. Rather than thinking of the site as one of lack that was framed by the disadvantage of being 'left behind', I was interested in the queer possibilities and capacities for kinship that male absence offered these women. Specifically, I was interested in the 'similarities' across religious and casteist boundaries, which were, at the aggregate level, seen to be more important for 'difference' in the institutional analysis of these data.<sup>18</sup>

This research was also motivated in some part by my own biography. As someone born in Kerala but who has never lived there, I felt both a need to complicate this analysis of those who leave, and a sense of access that speaking (enough of) the language afforded me. I stayed with an old Muslim couple who had a spare room, and was often referred to as 'Dr.' formally (e.g. in introductions to guests), and over time, within the house, as '*pattar*'—the colloquial derivation for Tamil Brahmins. The 'Dr.' allowed me to subvert gender so I appreciated that, but '*pattar*' reinforced a caste identity I had strong discomfort with claiming. My attempts to distance myself from '*pattar*' fell flat both because I was not equipped to have a nuanced anti-caste conversation in Malayalam and because caste advantages buffer ethnographic navigation no matter what the actual terminology.<sup>19</sup> And over time, my hesitation became something my hosts could tease me about, a dynamic that made the term's reception even more ambiguous because it disoriented me while simultaneously offering me new kinds of rapport in the field. In her reflection on what it means to navigate direct caste acknowledgements in field interactions, Sneha Annavarapu deftly reminds us that beyond the 'awkward shock' of caste being called out (in her case, a respondent being forthcoming in the field because, in his words, he saw it as 'his duty to help brahmins like her'), ethnographic research for Brahmins, especially from elite universities in the West doing work in India, is consistently buffered by a range of visible and invisible

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for Indian States', *Economic & Political Weekly* 31, no. 14 (1996): 887–95. On the other hand, feminist scholars warn us that gender inequality has changed little in Kerala, women's gains in health and literacy notwithstanding: see Praveena Kodoth and Mridul Eapen, 'Looking beyond Gender Parity: Gender Inequities of Some Dimensions of Well Being in Kerala', *Economic & Political Weekly* 40, no. 30 (2005): 3278–86.

17. There is a rich ethnographic literature on the cultural micro processes of those left behind and the ways in which globalisation shapes local social processes in South India: see, for example, Prema A. Kurien, *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002). However, less is known about the gendered economic lives and labour networks of the women left behind beyond political economic accounts of remittances. For a notable exception on queer gender navigation and its connection to migration and local economies, see Shakthi Nataraj, 'The Thirunangai Promise: Gender as a Contingent Outcome of Migration and Economic Exchange', in 'Migration, Sexuality, and Gender Identity', *Anti-Trafficking Review* 19 (2022): 47–65.
18. This is not to say caste and religion are not important: see, for example, Sharika Thiranagama, 'Respect Your Neighbor as Yourself: Neighborliness, Caste, and Community in South India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 61, no. 2 (2019): 269–300; Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, 'From Transience to Immanence: Consumption, Life Cycle and Social Mobility in Kerala, South India', *Modern Asian Studies* 33, no. 4 (1999): 989–1020.
19. In other work, I attempt to think through the idea of a 'brahmin or *savarna* fragility', which makes speaking on behalf of caste problematic both when it is done and not done. For a broader deliberation on these weighted inconsistencies and the ways in which these buffers have served me even as they have distanced me from my own vision of presentation, see Swetha S. Ballakrishnen, *Accidental Feminism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).



structural privileges, making all such research ‘colonial and extractive’, no matter what the caveats.<sup>20</sup> Much like Annavarapu, acknowledging the coercive nature of my social position felt like it was both necessary and not enough in these interactions and these ‘messy’ dimensions that eased my access to the field also complicated my ability to write about them.

Being *pattar* and *Dr.* meant I was also unusually rewarded for my contradictions. I was not once asked about marriage or children, even though these would have been entirely age-appropriate questions to ask, especially by the *valyammai* (another non-aunty aunty!) I was staying with. Instead, my fieldnotes are rife with comments about them explaining me—a weird presence in the village—to others by softening my awkwardness with tales of exaggeration about how hard I worked and how down-to-earth I was for cleaning my own plates. They were tickled by my inconsistencies—I ate *erachi* (beef) and did not wear make-up—and they laughed at my anglicised Malayalam, but they also felt a parental ownership over my efforts: ‘the non-vegetarian *pattar* works so hard, she does not sleep through the night!’ It was, over time, these exaggerated caricatures and acts of kindness that made the field accessible to me, and it was their generosity that allowed my inconsistencies to be viewed in ways that humanised me.

But while I enjoyed the benefits of being read as an ascetic scholar within the household, these characterisations did not always extend to my other encounters. My autorickshaw driver, Iliyas, who would, over time, become a key informant and connector, referred to me on the first day as ‘*yamerikken ammaayi*’ (American aunt). Although this sobriquet softened over time to *chechi* (older sister) or Swethaa on my insistence, it still framed our encounters. Iliyas was formal the first few days, but we spent so much time in the autorickshaw together, going from village to village, that we started talking about the families and worlds we inhabited. Much like Annavarapu’s famous female autorickshaw driver Narayanamma<sup>21</sup>—a veritable aunty in her field side—Iliyas was curious about my choice to ‘write books instead of finding a husband’, asked me outright if I wanted to be a nun, and took me to an out of route Hindu temple known to respond to unmarried women’s prayers. These nosy conversations made the field more traversable for me, but they were also key embodiments of discomfort that come with passing in ways that do not feel true to one’s full self.

Perhaps this discomfort requires more context on dress and presentation while I was in the field. For the weeks I was in Malappuram, I wore one of three cotton saris every day, each that I had worn countless times before and that were easy to drape and disappear into. The fit-rejecting blouses that I wore with them were made from the same white Hakoba fabric that my widowed great-grandmother wore through my entire childhood, and although I did not wear make-up, I did wear a small black *bindi* as I was taught to growing up. Part of my head was visibly shaved (an offering I first did to honour my grandfather’s death, but a performance that has become more striking and even more about my queerness over time), and I was always in the same pair

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20. Sneha Annavarapu, ‘Difficult Encounters, Fragmented Positionalities: Gender, Caste, and Hindutva in the Field’, *Engenderings*, December 2021, accessed October 11, 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2021/12/01/difficult-encounters-fragmented-positionalities-gender-caste-and-hindutva-in-the-field/>.

21. Sneha Annavarapu, ‘Auto Rain: An Aunty, an “American Ammayi”, and an Autorickshaw’, *Critical Aunty Studies Asynchronous Symposium*, 2020, accessed January 29, 2022, <https://www.criticalaunstudies.com/10-ethnography>.

of Birkenstock sandals, another generic code for foreigner. In short, there was no doubt that I was not from the village, but I was also trying to not stand out in the way I might have had I been wearing anything else from my fit-rejecting wardrobe.

At the same time, there was also a performed desire to subvert the meanings for sari-association and its gendered extensions, not dissimilar to what other scholars have sought to establish against different audiences.<sup>22</sup> But beyond gender performance, there were other inconsistencies with this reading and my internal preferred affect. I had always claimed, jokingly, and, over the years, more seriously, that in my innermost core, I was a grumpy old man. The kind of subversion I sought, intuitively, and, over the years, more proactively, was to be, in a sense, an ‘uncle’ (as it happens, my favourite term of endearment). Being seen as aunty felt jarring, not just in the same way it did for my mother at that railway station decades ago, but in a newly personal way as its price became clearer to me. A non-binary student once explained that despite their personal preferences and politics, they never corrected their (mostly pro bono) clients in court because that space was foremost about their client. And this is how I have since made sense of this dissonance in the field: by convincing myself that it was not about me in that space, and to the extent it was, being an aunty was a price worth paying for the intimacies it offered.

### **Anti: Soft grace | Subversion, dress and ethnographic method**

In addition to nosy personal advice, Iliyas also offered core counsel that would help me navigate the field’s particularities. In one of the first houses he introduced me to, Iliyas advised me to not offer money for the interaction because it might be interpreted as something ‘*cheethai*’ (perverse, spoilt). He tried to introduce me the way my hosts had introduced me to him, explaining that I was a professor (I was not) from America (I lived in Abu Dhabi) who was there to talk to women. As my hosts explained to me, ‘People here do not need the money, and if you give them money, they might have to answer to the men in the family about how they got it, and then have to worry about whether you’d use their stories inappropriately’. The inaccuracies of the descriptors used to introduce me did not matter because it was clear what Iliyas and my hosts were trying to do—they were giving broad legitimate categories of recognition for a task that could be seen as corrupt. Without money, in other words, my respondents could speak to me with more faith that the interaction held mutual trust expected between women rather than an exchange where their stories were transactional.

While it was certainly these introductions that gave me access to households, the actual encounters were often buttressed by my connection with the children in these houses. In this first house, for example, Iliyas’ niece, Aarifa, a 12-year-old girl whom I became aunty to instantly, told me that she too wanted to be a doctor ‘when she grew up’. When I explained that I was not a doctor in that sense, she responded pragmatically that she ‘planned to do well in all her classes’ to make sure she became (a real) one. The house Aarifa’s family lived in was full of academic awards that she had won,

22. See, for example, Ania Loomba, ‘The Long and Saggy Sari’, *Women: A Cultural Review* 8, no. 3 (1997): 278–92; Nazia Hussein, ‘Bangladeshi New Women’s “Smart” Dressing: Negotiating Class, Culture, and Religion’, in *Rethinking New Womanhood*, ed. Nazia Hussein (Birmingham and Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 97–121.



**Figure 1.** Aarifa's *puthiya dressu*. Source: Author's photograph.

including two state ranks and a cash prize from the local *madrassa* for being the best student. When I asked her what she did with her prize money, she looked to her mother for permission to share (an expected good child response to a foreign aunty). When her mother said, 'Go on', she beamed, '*Puthiya dressu!*' (new dress), and ran to show me the blue velvet and gold gown that her mother had stitched for her, declaring '*Enthe umma ettavum nalla tailor-a!*' (my mother is the best tailor) (Figure 1).

This encounter was special for many reasons. When we were about to leave, for instance, Iliyas told me to give Aarifa the money I would have otherwise given her mother for the time, since it was common for aunts to give children money in blessing as they left. This was ingenious because it allowed me to compensate my respondents for their time without substantively alienating the people I was trying to understand better. In turn, it set me up as a known other in the field, somehow less *cheethai*—Aarifa told her friends that this 'kind of doctor' aunty would visit and it allowed more women to feel safe having me in their homes once the first family realised I was not writing an exposé that would bring them unwanted attention. The encounter also gave me insights that I would not have otherwise known to ask or observe as just an ethnographer trying to make sense of their lives. Aarifa's mother was an impressive tailor and her clients paid for her labour, but when I'd asked her about

work, she had not brought it up. Because I knew about Aarifa's *puthiya dressu* as her aunty, it allowed me to understand an entirely invisible network of informal vocational tailoring that women in the village did, quite in opposition to their more formal responses to my questions about their work. It was not so much that they were withholding information, they just did not think of this as information at all. Being an aunty, then, allowed for access that was subversive, even if uncomfortable personally for me as someone who was at the time trying to think through my gender fluidity.

In their critical reflection of traversing ethnographic sites with a queer body of colour, Anima Adjepong makes the case that normative assumptions about gender and sexuality both shape sites and allow for possibilities beyond them.<sup>23</sup> Following a line of writing from other ethnographers of colour<sup>24</sup> who urge for ruptures and instabilities as ways of producing interactive knowledge, Adjepong decolonises a heteronormative and raced assumption of the legitimate researcher by being various versions of their 'disoriented queer'<sup>25</sup> self within an immigrant Ghanian community in Houston. In doing so, they invite others to use their 'invading ethnography' as a tool to think more reflexively about the ways in which researchers and their bodies are implicated in the research they do. These interiorities of one's ethnographic journey are essential because they allow for a way to think about the narratives we are called to write about. In putting the 'researcher's history and body in conversation with the research participants', one opens up possibilities for connections that might not have been previously imagined.<sup>26</sup>

But more than presentation, Adjepong's reflections urge us to think more critically about the access and costs that identity conjures within a known community. Their identity allowed for a specific kind of access to knowledge, but the striking thing about their analysis is the ways in which it makes space for ruptures—rather than reinforcement—in their assumption of identity to strengthen both their interactions and theory. From being hetero-ambiguous to aunties, to having prying assumptions about partners, to being flirted with whilst simultaneously having reinforcements of undesirability, Adjepong recalls a relatable capacity for violence in the field on one's body and self. But in these spaces of discomfort and disorientation, with messiness of the craft, comes, as Adjepong elegantly suggests, a 'performance [that] takes the queer of color's experiences of disorientation as a starting point towards creating a world in which the tyranny of normativity can be curtailed'.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike Adjepong, as I set up above, I did not present in the field as a queer body, and although I did not mean to present as an aunty, I did not present my otherwise more performative non-binary persona. As an extension, it is not a stretch to see why I might have been seen as an aunty. But it is also worth mentioning that my time in Malappuram was not particular for this performance. My general tendency is to

23. Adjepong, 'Invading Ethnography', 27–46.

24. See, for example, Gloria Wekker, *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

25. Adjepong, 'Invading Ethnography', 33, 41.

26. *Ibid.*, 43.

27. *Ibid.*

traverse spaces with the same intentions of using dress to blend in and *not* disrupt the flow. In this sense, my hyper-draped sari that shows no skin does the same work in India to project what my sister calls my ‘asexual orb of boundary making’ as my non-fitting linen jumpsuits do in California. There is certainly an available reading which marks this passing as non-disruptive in ways that are antithetical to my commitments to alterities. In inhabiting this way of being, I’m resisting being a ‘space invader’<sup>28</sup> and perhaps losing the opportunity to produce what Sara Ahmed would call the radical possibility to use moments of disorientation to produce ‘queer effects’<sup>29</sup> in theory and understanding.

But other readings are available too. My presence in the field was not invasive in the same ways that Adjepong’s was, but it was also not entirely contrary to my own complicated interiorities. More importantly, my performed blending or invisibility allowed for my body to be disruptive in producing new possibilities through my encounters. It is this possibility for sitting with contradictory capacities with ease and new grace that I am starting to think of as the anti/aunty method.

### Anti/aunty as critical method

Each time I encounter my internalised scepticism to being called aunty, I return to my mother’s hesitation to the term for clarity and reframing. I try and remember that there are multitudes to her rejection. Although it was not her named identity, she was certainly still doing labours of care through her ‘aunty work’.<sup>30</sup> Seen this way, her request to be called ‘J’ also feels like a call to reject preconceived notions of what aunty meant, and move beyond the ‘controlling images’<sup>31</sup> that get associated with its category.<sup>32</sup> ‘J’, on the other hand, offered proximity on her own terms, a chance to not just defy age to be subversive, but to also invoke nostalgia for a time when a child lived close and could be taken care of by being in a railway station at the crack of dawn. In these readings, the term’s dismissal has new capacities.

### Invisible aunties | Queer proximities, passing and pleasing

In their work on the hypersexualised aunty, Anirban Baishya and Darshana Sreedhar Mini trace how India’s cultural relationship to the term aunty is not just about the desexualised caregiver, but a more complicated ‘aunty-spectrum’ where these identities sit alongside highly sexualised imageries of the aunty that exist in mainstream erotic discourse through adult comics like *Savita Bhabhi* and *Vellama*.<sup>33</sup> Disassociation from the term, then, can be prompted by multiple registers. For instance, Fatima, a beautiful

28. Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

29. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

30. Anita Mannur, ‘Upstairs Downstairs: The Unseen Labor of Aunties in Ritesh Batra’s *The Lunchbox*’, *Critical Aunty Studies Asynchronous Symposium*, 2020, accessed January 29, 2022, <https://www.criticalauntystudies.com/04-work>.

31. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

32. Courtney J. Patterson-Faye, ‘Aunties Get It In: Beyond Mammy and Jezebel’, *Critical Aunty Studies Asynchronous Symposium*, 2020, accessed January 29, 2022, <https://www.criticalauntystudies.com/05-auntybodies>.

33. Mini and Baishya, ‘Transgressions in Toonland’.

Mallapuram widow in her early forties, specifically did *not* want to be an aunty because she thought it invited too much unwanted attention from the few men who were still in the village—aunty would have made her seem younger, and possibly more sexual. Being a '*bhoologa sundari*' (world-famous beauty) is not all it is cracked up to be, she told me only half jokingly, because it meant she was always on guard. As other scholars writing about Kerala have suggested, cultural logics of female bodies and hypersexualisation could produce a range of vulnerabilities for women seen as available.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, being a grandmother (which she technically was) allowed her to get the kind of respect and dignity that made her feel safe in her encounters. It also allowed her to have closeness without it being misinterpreted as an advance. In short, it allowed her to be an invisible aunty.<sup>35</sup>

The relationship between being invisible and feeling safe in an identity is complicated, and this idea of comfort in discomfort has important implications.<sup>36</sup> As other scholar experiences in the field have illuminated,<sup>37</sup> raced and queered bodies have to navigate not just their physical embodiment and social reading, but also their own psychic interiority as they pass within and for the benefit of interactions. I hope to emphasise its processual aspects and constitutive power, both in its ability to rearticulate social relations and to shape the contours of lived experiences. This way of thinking about passing not just as it is usually thought of—i.e. as either a ploy for power, a lie, or a form of misrecognition<sup>38</sup>—can help redirect our attention to its lived anguish from the perspective of the one who is *being* seen in the encounter. Thinking about what is at stake when one passes, beyond performance, also allows us to think about the mental space that passing offers. When one allows identities to not have the violence of being perpetually and recursively marked by interaction, it can offer other psychic possibilities for one to inhabit: a way of taking up space in worlds that will not naturally offer it to us as peripheral bodies and actors.

But passing may also allow for, as Fatima desired, an asexual encounter with one's surroundings if so intended. Ianna Owen, for instance, complicates this messiness by offering a reading of intersectional asexuality which 'cooperates and colludes with racial and sexual hegemonies'.<sup>39</sup> Thinking of asexuality within the coordinates of power is an urgent undertaking—for example, the Mammy is a blackened figure that is both 'simultaneously a signifier of sexual excess and also the negation of sexuality'.<sup>40</sup> Yet, both these extensions are by interactional assumption rather than selfhood or choice, and their assumptions have implications for the ways in which a space is negotiated by the figure. Similarly, embedded logics of local power conflate the contradictory methods of seeing (and being seen as) an aunty. I was not dissimilar from Fatima, or my

34. J. Devika, 'Bodies Gone Awry: The Abjection of Sexuality in Contemporary Kerala', in *Sexuality Studies*, ed. S. Srivastava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015): 94–120.

35. Anita Mannur, 'Upstairs Downstairs: The Unseen Labor of Aunties in Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox*', *Critical Aunty Studies Asynchronous Symposium*, accessed January 29, 2022, <https://www.criticalauntystudies.com/04-work>.

36. On the performance of identity to create spaces of personal safety even as it reinforces hierarchies, see Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade, *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011).

37. See, for example, Snorton, "'A New Hope'", 77–92; John Jackson and Martha S. Jones, 'Passed Performances: An Introduction', *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 29, no. 1 (2005): 9–17.

38. Snorton, "'A New Hope'", 80.

39. Owen, 'Still, Nothing', 73.

40. Owen, 'Still, Nothing', 76.

mother, in my desire for proximity, passing and pleasing. Such passing, for instance, allowed me to make more queer kin and community in Abu Dhabi, a space that did not visibly allow for it, than in San Francisco where I'd lived the half decade before. And in Kerala, it allowed me to hide in my sari, but also be fully myself in a certain sense—a form of asexual subversion that felt palpable to my own interiority and navigable for my psyche. Although there will always remain a version of the aunty that is loud and 'takes up space',<sup>41</sup> my version of appealing auntiness allowed me to blend in, be invisible in a sense, and allowed ease in my own body even when it shouldn't have. Making space for this version of auntiness has helped reconcile the vast cleavages between my interiorities and performance, especially with age, as I get read as an aunty more frequently. At the same time, it has become imperative to think about the costs of invisibility—to consider, as Kalivis offers, when being an aunty is 'a home' for others, and when it is a space where one is 'at home'.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Anti/y as method***

It is this capacity for two contrary things to sit alongside each other that I have started to conceptualise as the anti/aunty method: the resistance to the term alongside its acceptance. In these juxtaposed readings, it is in what we take from the contradiction and how we sit with its messiness, rather than in the contradiction itself, that we reveal our affective and integral politics. These strains of affect and inquiry are far from seamless. Still, Adjepong's work offers pearls of synchronicity: the parallels here about thinking of the body in research is not how two queers might have looked the same within communities of proximity studying 'one's own',<sup>43</sup> but, rather, how disorientation between reception and interiority might open new spaces of meaning-making. While in the field, I was also coming into my own ideas of my body and identity, but in the months and years since then, my queerness has both evolved and become central, while simultaneously becoming softer in its need for reactionary affirmation. I use they/them pronouns now and feel internally much more gender queer than I did then, but being misunderstood does not frustrate me as it might have.

This movement from initial irritation to breakthrough is buoyed by a grace that is central to accessing and using the anti/aunty method in the field. For example, early in Adjepong's account is a story about how they were assumed to be Christian because they were Ghanaian, an assumption that irritated them, but that, with time, became a way to make sense of the community's operationalisation of the coordinates of belonging. Like Adjepong, I too was irritated by Iliyas' whisking me away to the temple to pray for a husband, but in retrospect, I see the ways in which it allowed our relationship to be more equal. Just calling me by my name (as I'd requested) did not achieve that; instead, regardless of nomenclature, in giving advice about a part of my life he saw as lacking, there was more of a *quid pro quo* in our exchange, a new way for us to build a relationship. But moving beyond the irritation to see productivity in the

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41. LaWhore Vagistan, 'How to Be an Aunty', YouTube video, 12:27, May 13, 2020, accessed January 29, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9IYJIC\\_VWY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9IYJIC_VWY).

42. Kalivis, 'Becoming a Manual', 310.

43. Soraya Altorki and Camillia Fawzi El-Solh, eds, *Arab Women in the Field: Studying Your Own Society* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988).

exchange, mostly by sitting with my own discomfort softly, has made possible certain strains of subversion that harsh categories have denied me. They have allowed for resistance to normative relations while simultaneously buffering my communities of care in the field and beyond. It is this modality that I refer to as soft grace—to reflect both affect and compassion for selves with which one is uncomfortable. Grace offers a movement beyond disorientation, which is likely to make one pause, or even feel stuck.

Anti/auntiness, then, is to sit with these contradictions, but also to be able to speak about multitudes with fewer sharp edges (and not have that lessened sharpness be read as ‘less sharp’). This is not unlike Patricia Williams’ position as a ‘happy killjoy’,<sup>44</sup> where she admits the hard work of needing to be critical while also wanting to maintain relationships: ‘I think it’s so hard to do because the moment you become a killjoy, you do risk losing it at some point . . . . And I don’t want this to end in a big catfight, or people walking away and never talking again’. What might aid in this effort is a capacity to use what David Román calls a ‘critical generosity’<sup>45</sup> to one’s own self—both as a meaning-making apparatus to imagine others’ performance, but also to make sense of our own stakes and commitments with kindness. Anti/auntiness then is to be able to speak about one’s own with what might look like loyalty inconsistencies, but to ultimately have faith that the performance is in aid of a critical and collaborative generosity.

None of this is to suggest that this process is easy, least of all in the ways in which it might contradict our commitments to performing within and towards what might feel like our authentic or most aligned selves. But running counter to the kinds of sequential or linear authenticity we are called to perform—or might wish we embodied, especially as we speak on behalf of others—might be exactly what is at stake in this process. In a way, then, the anti/aunty method is to move beyond categories and term associations with a little more ease, and to look at categories more fully on their own grounds and as they move across space and time. The *athais* and *chittis* and *paatis* whom I did not call aunty certainly took up space, gossiped, wore bright colours and called me fat as they lovingly fed me cake.<sup>46</sup> But my uncles did that too, often in similar ways. Iliyas, in a sense, was the biggest aunty: without him, I would not have eaten as well, and his care-work came with not just nosy questions about my non-existent partners and religious commitments, but also a loud autorickshaw (Figure 2).

This suggestion that uncles can also be aunties allows for a way to think of auntiness not so much at the individual level, but rather as an affective orb of care that transcends name and physicality. It also, personally, affords ease to my own navigation as a queer body in predominantly heteronormative spaces. I might be uncle *and* aunty to the many children in my life, no matter what they call me beyond my name (*chitti*, *athai*, *nima*, *gama*, or a short-lived *fa-si*) *and* I get to dictate the nature of these relationships on their terms rather than on the texture of their grouping. Once, in Abu Dhabi, three children I loved dearly started to call me Aunty Swe (the only children to ever do so), which I made sense of as a clubbed disaggregated word, ‘AntiSway’, but this idea of the critical aunty offers more patience and grace to that discomfort.

44. Patricia Williams, Carla Kaplan and Durba Mitra, ‘Ask a Feminist: Patricia Williams Discusses Rage and Humor as an Act of Disobedience with Carla Kaplan and Durba Mitra’, interview by Carla Kaplan, *Signs Journal* (2020), accessed November 16, 2022, <http://signsjournal.org/williams/>.

45. Román, *Acts of Intervention*.

46. Vagistan, ‘How to Be an Aunty’.





Figure 2. Iliyas' Aunty Auto. Source: Author's photograph.

Auntiness also is not just method from the perspective of the researcher's identity, it is also method in that it influences how others respond to the researcher. In Adjepong's account, for example, they detail a way in which an aunty at one of the parties they were at for fieldwork 'pulled them to the dance floor' and whispered, 'why would you leave together when we can dance like this?' It is revealing how Adjepong's flexible identity allowed for a particular space beyond their interiority for others in the field to occupy—the possibility it gave, in this case, the possibility for the aunty dancing with them to articulate a queer desire that they might not otherwise have. This is not to say there isn't discomfort or even violence in that assumed space. Adjepong mentions in the same narrative that as the aunty 'wrapped her arms' around their shoulders and 'closed the space between', they 'tried to remain relaxed' because they were 'trying to say yes to more, to loosen up'. This stifling juxtaposed with the expansion it might have offered illustrates exactly the clash and contradictions that LaWhore Vagistan<sup>47</sup> urges us to embody within our aunty interactions. It is precisely within this complicated milieu of affect that there lie crucial tools for self-reflexive inquiry.

Overall, the anti/aunty method requires that we not just look at things anew, but also that we look where we might *not* expect to see. It is to allow resistance—the very embodiment of the term 'anti'—to be a generous and generative method, to be able to make clear the distinction between criticism seeking to undo and critique aimed at growth. It is an acceptance that we are all placed in social positions that can look above and below for coordinates, and an acknowledgment that where we look says something about how we see and strive to be seen. I am reminded here of the change in Maggie Nelson's relationship to the 'seduction of normalcy' during her pregnancy journey in *The Argonauts* (a text I rely on especially now, while navigating my body as a site of

47. *Ibid.*

making): ‘I was wrong on all counts—imprisoned, as I was and still am, by my own hopes and fears. I’m not trying to fix that wrongness here. I’m just trying to let it *hang out*’.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the call is not so much to condone or pardon our old selves for their readings of our environments, but, instead, to let it ‘hang out’ in ways that implicate our own positionalities and precarities. The most immediate note about method, then, is simple: it is to revisit what we know, with grace that may offer new sight.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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48. Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2016): 90. Emphasis in original.