"Women With No One": Community and Christianity in a Secular South Indian Homeless Shelter

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines daily life and social service practices in a secular homeless shelter for women in Tamil Nadu, south India. The residents of the shelter have diverse backgrounds but local staff members and volunteers describe them collectively as “women with no one”: unwed mothers, orphans, widows, women abandoned or abused by husbands and lovers, former sex workers, prisoners’ wives, and women deemed mentally or physically unfit for marriage. Daily negotiations of belonging take place among this transient and diverse group of marginalized women and equally diverse and transnational care providers. The closed shelter campus provides an opportunity to query the everyday experience of secularism and pluralism. Shelter board members emphasize these concepts as guiding principles of the institution. Indeed, they are touted in many settings as a necessary and laudable framework for democratic life in globalized and increasingly diverse populations. But how do individuals and communities, in everyday life and interactions, understand and engage with such abstract ideals?

Ethnographic research, conducted between August 2008 and August 2009, revealed important insights regarding the ideals shaping the secular goals of the shelter, namely women’s social rehabilitation. First, the definition of secularism cannot be assumed and is not universal. Inline with commonsense equations of secularism and pluralism in India, the secular goals of the shelter involved passionate displays of religious conviction, continuous ethical deliberation, and reflection on cultural ideals of womanhood and family. Secularism, in other words, was a religious, cultural, and gendered idea and practice. Second, just as there were many secularisms, many Christianities were embodied and articulated within the shelter. The institution depended
on various local and international Christian communities for donations of time and money. They each had different understandings of the relationship between Christianity and women’s social rehabilitation. Third, cultural ideals are fragile. The social stigma faced by women living outside of patriarchal family structures and the forced intimacy of women with diverse backgrounds living together on a closed campus emphasized this fact. Faced with the fragility of social and cultural ideals, women at the shelter took great risks to forge new terms of belonging, community, and womanhood.
“WOMEN WITH NO ONE”:
COMMUNITY AND CHRISTIANITY IN A
SECULAR SOUTH INDIAN HOMELESS SHELTER

By

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B.A. Concordia College, 2002
M.A. Syracuse University, 2007

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology
in the Graduate School of Syracuse University

May 2012
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From offices and conference rooms to back porches and downtown Syracuse to auto rickshaws and the shade of a tamarind tree, many people have listened to my questions and thoughts about gender, religion, secularism, and the work of social rehabilitation. Their insights constantly opened new avenues for exploration and consistently pushed me to refine my writing and analysis. More often than not, this support transcended intellectual concerns of punctuation and theory. My advisor, Susan Wadley, is a perfect example. She offered critical feedback on papers, proposals, and chapters, a phone for interviews, theatre tickets, and a home during my first weeks in Syracuse. I’m thankful for her guidance, mentorship, and hospitality, all of which contributed to a successful and rich academic experience at Syracuse University.

I am grateful to the members of my committee: Ann Grodzins Gold, John Burdick, Cecilia Van Hollen, and Corinne Dempsey. They encouraged me through each stage of this project and have been remarkably engaged with my writing and thinking. Their insights and suggestions have improved this dissertation and given me direction for continued revisions and new projects. I also thank Anoop Sadanandan who chaired my defense. We survived the fire drill!

Lori Klivak, Karen McNamara, Emera Bridger Wilson, and Ian Wilson provided important moral support and careful reading in our writing group. Conversations and dinners with Bethany Bloomston, Adam Arbree, Carolina Arango Vargas, Julian Velandia Arango, and Jesse Harasta at 610 Fellows helped me clarify my thoughts and enjoy the process. Special thanks also to friends who have discussed this dissertation with me at baseball stadiums, in classrooms, and on rooftops in Madurai: Trudy DeLong,
Nicole Wilson, Laurah Klepinger-Mathew, Chris Klivak, Liza Gijanto, Steve Lenik, Holly Norton, and Dale Theiling.

This research would not have been possible without the patience, friendship, and support of countless people in Madurai. My deepest gratitude goes to all the residents, staff members, board members, and volunteers at Arulagam who participated in this research and shared their lives, hopes and frustrations with me. I thank my dear friend Priyadharsini for her companionship and research assistance. I thank Dr. Bharathy and all of the teachers, staff, and students at American Institute of Indian Studies. They helped me immeasurably, as I slowly slowly learned Tamil and made a home in Madurai. Viji Lakshmi and all the staff and students at Sudar were gracious and welcoming neighbors and provided help with transcriptions. I thank Rev. Margaret Kalaiselvi and all the faculty, staff, and students at Tamilnadu Theological Seminary for supporting my research with their time, honest conversation, and archival resources.

Material support from several institutions made this dissertation possible. Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships from Syracuse University supported my coursework and Tamil language studies from 2004-2007. Numerous grants from Syracuse University enabled me to carry out preliminary fieldwork studies during the summers of 2006 and 2007. American Institute of Indian Studies supported my Tamil language studies in Madurai during the 2007-2008 academic year. This research was carried out from 2008-2009 with the generous support of a Fulbright-Hayes Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad grant, # P022A080039.

Sara and Clark Olson-Smith and Elaine Olson always know how to celebrate the milestones. Thank you for the ice-cream cakes, baseball art, cards, and love.
I learned the importance of constructive criticism early on from my dad, on rides home from my basketball games. He might be a tough coach, but I’m so much better for it! I’m grateful for his insistence that I finish, his reminders that I’m too hard on myself, and for his pride in my work. My mom has absolutely no doubt in my abilities. Her calm, yet overwhelming, belief in me is a constant source of support. Thank you for always knowing and saying exactly what I need to hear.

Finally, I cannot thank Brent Olson enough for the sense of curiosity and adventure he has brought not only to this intellectual project, but my life. Thank you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: You Have to Adjust ................................................. 1

Chapter 2: Pastor, Prisoner, Wife .............................................. 13

*Today I am Like an Orphan:*
  Ladha, a long-term resident’s story ..................... 37

Chapter 3: You Will Write Negative Things Too ......................... 40

*Do You Know How Many Difficulties I Have?:*
  Aameena, a short-term resident’s story .................. 67

Chapter 4: Trading Fanatics for Father, Wolves for Husbands ....... 70

*I Will Not Be in the House and Simply Waste My Life:*
  Deborah, a long-term staff member’s story .............. 99

Chapter 5: Building a Wall for Freedom .................................... 106

*I Would Laugh Like an Insane Person:*
  Lakshmi, the new live-in superintendent’s story ........ 136

Chapter 6: Secular Ethics and Strange Visions ............................. 148

Chapter 7: Hallelujah Morning ............................................... 175

*I Will Also Go:*
  Fathima, a long-term resident’s story .................... 203

Chapter 8: A Goodbye Kiss ................................................... 206

Chapter 9: Conclusion .......................................................... 226

Bibliography ................................................................. 238

Curriculum Vitae ............................................................. 257
Three women and two children had run away from Arulagam [Home of Grace], a women’s homeless shelter in Tamil Nadu, during the night. When I arrived in the morning, staff members were still reacting to the news. They accused each other of not watching the residents, of not being vigilant. The live-in superintendent, Lakshmi, targeted Sundari in particular. Sundari had grown up in the shelter and now served as a live-in mat weaving teacher and warden. “Why wasn’t she watching? What work does she do?” Trusted residents were consulted. When did they leave? How did they escape? Who helped them? “There’s a wall all around. How did they go?” asked Lakshmi. She contemplated the need for more security. The warden could lock the residents inside their rooms at night, she thought out loud. The idea received a skeptical look from Deborah, shelter secretary. “That is too much,” she replied. Talking to no one in particular, Deborah asked sadly, “What were they thinking?” Her voice trailed off, head shaking, “Devil . . .”

Lakshmi left the office, where Deborah and I continued to sit and talk. “They have run since the beginning,” said Deborah. “Lakshmi has been here three months. I have been here thirty years! I have seen many women run away.” She smiled. “A thought comes to leave. A memory of family, of home comes. And they look around this way and that.” Deborah hunched her shoulders in her chair, looking slyly in both directions as she turned her head slowly. She turned her head and peered first to her right, then to her left. “Waiting for an opportunity.” Deborah paused for dramatic effect, looking at me from the corner of her eye. “And then they run,” she concluded with another smile, looking out the office window. I couldn’t help but grin at Deborah’s empathetic impersonation of the devious women.
Out of the corner of my own eye, I saw Lakshmi returning to the office. She was a large, tall woman in her 50s. She was an outspoken woman who had never married and made it no secret that she cared little for men. She wore her emotions on her sleeve. I made eye contact. She raised her clenched fist next to her face with her eyes squinted shut. She took several heavy steps quickly towards me and walked through the office doorway. “We should brand them when they come. Then they won’t run,” said Lakshmi.

Horrified at this sudden connection made between the residents and branded cattle, I expressed my disagreement with a simple but firm, “No.”

Lakshmi: Like a vigilance home. Then they won’t run.¹
Connie: No. This place is different.
Lakshmi: How? How is it different? Tell me.
Deborah: Vigilance is a jail. This is a hostel, a home.

The vigilance home was a government-run institution where detained sex workers were housed, established in conjunction with the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act of 1956. It was originally a program of Tamil Nadu’s Jail Department and was later moved to the Directorate of Correctional Administration. Its purpose is to provide “custodial care, correctional treatment, education, vocational training, rehabilitation, and after care to institutionalized . . . girls and women under the SIT Act” (Nair 1983:19-20; see also Antonyappan 2003; Ganapathysundaram, et. al. 1992).

According to informal and passing remarks and looks among Arulagam staff members and residents, the vigilance home was notoriously linked to HIV/AIDS, uncleanliness, and overcrowding. Its founders, staff members, and the broader community perceived Arulagam as a hostel that supported the maintenance of the family, physical health, spiritual life, and emotional and mental well-being. It would provide what the vigilance

¹ All conversations at the shelter were spoken in Tamil. Italicized words and phrases were spoken in English.
home, a government-run institution, lacked: interpersonal care that resembled familial commitment and reflected Jesus’ unconditional love.

Deborah gazed out the office door. She gently wiped tears from her eyes, but expressed calm confidence in God. Lakshmi scowled and looked out the window. She also wiped her eyes, with a bit more force. We were silent for several seconds. Deborah articulated sad understanding of the residents’ actions. Lakshmi exhibited an outburst of anger and violence. I had explicitly disagreed with a research interlocutor, a position I tried to avoid. Our anxieties may have shown in a variety of ways, but the cause was shared. We were all worried about the women who had left the campus. We would probably never see them again nor learn where they went. If they ran away, these unwed mothers, orphans, widows, women abandoned or abused by husbands and lovers, former sex workers, and prisoners’ wives had nowhere to go. They had no one to turn to. Their only belongings were a few pieces of clothing and rupees they had managed to steal from other residents before they left. It was too easy to conclude that they would end up homeless and begging on the streets, housed in prison or in the vigilance home, or working in the sex industry.

Residents were neither committed to Arulagam nor living there voluntarily. Margaret Harris, a British woman who founded the organization in 1976, anticipated this ambiguous organizational identity - on the boundary between being a family and an institution (Harris 1982). The women were both daughters and inmates. Staff members cared for them like kin, but also had supervisory power over every aspect of their life. A few women had somehow found a way out of Arulagam’s surveillance, but had left for a
dire alternative. My own emotional and theoretical unease regarding the runaways appeared in my fieldnotes:

Did running away make them criminals in need of greater levels of surveillance and discipline, like Lakshmi concluded? Or by running away did they demonstrate the limits of institutional power and the possibilities of agency and social change? I clearly didn’t agree with the former analysis. Nor am I convinced of the latter. They escaped. Escape would seem like a classic and clear-cut example of resistance. But it doesn’t feel like resistance.

I flirted with an analysis of the homeless women’s escape as resistance from vigilant supervision and locked gates. But I was also acutely aware of anthropology’s “romance of resistance” (Abu-Lughod 1990). A knight in shining armor didn’t accompany the women over the wall, Deborah reminded us. They were at the hands of the devil. This wasn’t a romantic escape from power.

When the residents left the campus, they may have abandoned the shelter’s unique forms of power, but they entered the streets and a whole new and foreboding context of gendered and classed power. Power takes different forms in different contexts. Rather than focus on moments of resistance as evidence of “the resilience and creativity of the human spirit, . . . we will use them strategically to tell us more about forms of power and how people are caught up in [and running away from] them” (Abu-Lughod 1990:42). The ways in which staff members responded to the news that women and children had left the shelter revealed important forms and methods of power within the shelter. Asymmetrical power relations between staff members and residents were
apparent in staff members’ control of residents’ movement. Methods of implementing power involved high levels of supervision and hall enclosing walls, heavy-handed discipline and sturdy locks. Power relations were also interpersonal relations of strong emotional attachment and care. Finally, power was wrapped up in cultural assumptions about Tamil womanhood and morality, where women need protection outside patriarchal family structures.

Discipline, emotions, care, and morality were all themes that shaped the forms and functions of power at the women’s homeless shelter. The complicated relationships that emerged raised an anthropological question. How do people live, and support others in living, a moral and fulfilling life in this community of women on the margins of society? It was an impassioned dilemma, as Lakshmi demonstrated with her raised fist and contemplations of human branding. Sadly, it was a goal that would not always work out the way one imagined it, as Deborah exemplified with her tearful reflection on 30 years of work in the shelter. And even if people shared common concerns and goals, the day-to-day details of working towards moral and fulfilling life were contentious, as my critical interjections into the conversation revealed. With our various actions, complex emotional dispositions, and tense interpersonal relationships, we were all reflecting and acting on our assumptions about morality, a fulfilling life, and questions of right and wrong. During my visits to the shelter and with people who lived, worked and volunteered within its walls, I focused on the socio-cultural contexts that helped shaped the community’s goal of, and approaches to, achieving women’s “social rehabilitation.” These contexts include the spatial layout and rules of the shelter, cultural understandings of ideal womanhood, the diverse religious convictions that motivated involvement in the
social service program, historical considerations of gender, religion and development in India, and the strong personalities that comprised daily life.

This ethnography emerges out of my awareness of pervasive concerns for ethical and moral life at the women’s homeless shelter, and questions about the lived experience of everyday ethics. I use the terms *ethics* and *morality* interchangeably in this dissertation (see Lambek 2010). The English phrase *moral danger* appeared on occasion in organization publications. However, staff members, residents, local volunteers, and board members did not use either word when they talked about community concerns regarding evaluations of their own and others’ character, actions, and words, conceptions of good, right, and proper conduct, and the urgency of providing care in difficult circumstances. Two of the words used to mark these concerns at the shelter were inherently gendered, a particularly illuminating linguistic detail. People spoke of *karpu* (chastity, female virtue, conjugal fidelity), the English word *adjust* (a concept that applies particularly to what young women need to do in their marital homes), and *kuṇam* (disposition, character, nature).

Following scholars who “seek to acknowledge the ubiquity of the ethical and to explore the ways in which it pervades ordinary speech, action, and the situation of persons living together” (Lambek 2010:10; see also Pandian 2009; Pandian and Ali 2010; Prasad 2007; Swearer 2010), I approach ethics as an indistinguishable part of human life and interaction rather than a distinct, elite concern. Its centrality was imprinted in every handicraft that left the shelter. Tags noted that each item came from Arulagam and that “proceeds help women and girls in moral danger.” The residents of the shelter (including
live-in staff members) sewed this message of moral danger into each mat they wove and sari blouse they stitched and sold at local Christian institutions as a fundraiser.

Understandings and pursuits of ethical life, questions of right and wrong and of morality, are heterogeneous and changing. As such, living ethically involves the myriad “attempts in everyday practice and thought to inhabit and persevere in light of uncertainty, suffering, injustice, incompleteness, inconsistency, the unsayable, the unforgivable, the irresolvable, and the limits of voice and reason” (Lambek 2010:4). Margaret, a shelter staff member, and I never became close friends. In fact, she only agreed to participate in an interview during the last week of my research. Her two-word responses to my questions incited sarcastic looks and prodding from her co-worker, Ahaalya. When Margaret said that she had “not known any difficulties [working at Arulagam],” Ahaalya urged her to “speak truthfully” for my research. It may have been the shortest interview of my research, but looking back on it now, Margaret provided one of the most basic facts about shelter life. “We have to adjust, right? When you got married, you had to adjust to your husband, right? Like that, we are always adjusting.”

In the chapters that follow, I look more closely at attempts within the community to adjust. Arulagam is a secular organization that depends on Christian networks and congregations, both local and worldwide, for volunteer and financial support. What were the religious, secular, and cultural convictions involved with “social rehabilitation”? In what ways did they attempt to build community among a diverse, transient group of abandoned women? In what ways did they define the boundaries of belonging? In what ways did strangers engage in the intimacy of everyday ethical life in a closed campus? In what ways did they construct meaning in sometimes hopeless circumstances?
In chapter two, “Pastor, Prisoner, Wife,” I consider the centrality, and fragility, of cultural ideals of Tamil moral womanhood. By focusing on the fragility of cultural ideals I am able to consider how adjustment plays a critical productive role in everyday social life. I also contextualize this analysis of culture, gender and morality in the existing literature on women’s homelessness, a majority of which is situated in North American settings. I argue for the importance of comparative approaches that complicate how moral judgments regarding homelessness and the homeless are influenced by particular cultural constructs of gender and family.

I then turn to my own sometimes tragic comedy of building rapport and conducting ethnographic research in a Tamil women’s homeless shelter. In chapter three, “You Will Write Negative Things Too,” I use my own experiences of failure, rejection, and ridicule to discuss more general concerns regarding unrealistic expectations, abandonments of truth, and the pervasive uncertainty that fill shelter life. In line with the theoretical concerns outlined in the introduction, I ask how these failures presented “potential openings within and beyond the impasse of adjustment that constant crisis creates” (Berlant 2011:7). These openings lead to the questions that guide subsequent chapters.

In chapter four, "Trading Fanatics for Fathers, Wolves for Husbands," I draw on archived materials at Tamilnadu Theological Seminary to present the shelter’s origin story. The origin story, as it is repeated in the archives and in annual celebrations, reinforces the cultural ideal of family and domesticity that shapes social and personal rehabilitation at the shelter. This chapter draws on anthropological literature that critiques the often “mythical structure” of rehabilitation narratives and programs (McKinney
2007:285). I consider how stereotypical characters in various bodies of good (fathers, husbands) and evil (fanatics, wolves) create an ideal of rehabilitation that can’t be achieved within the complex histories, emotions, goals and relationships that constitute rehabilitation. The second half of the chapter transitions, then, to staff members’ and residents’ experiences of this failed cultural ideal, and the productive role of doubt in the process of rehabilitation.

In chapter five, “Building a Wall for Freedom,” I describe the shelter campus, arguing that the shelter volunteers, staff, and board members constructed the campus as more than simply buildings, rooms, walls, and gates. In their living and working in the place and through their memories and stories about the place, they created a particular kind of lived spatial experience. Most importantly, they constructed the shelter as a family and a home rather than an institution. I draw on a rich body of scholarship regarding the interactions of personhood and place in Tamil culture to connect the physical structures of the shelter to cultural ideals of the patriarchal family.

How do visions and dreams disrupt reality, strangers and devils contribute to our theorizing and ideals of community? In chapter six, "Secular Ethics and Strange Visions," I return to the broad discourses of inclusion that frame shelter leadership, what I call a secular ethics of belonging. In the first half of the chapter, I consider how staff and board members have various understandings of secularism, its role in shelter social work, and its relationship to their Christian faith. In the second half of the chapter, I focus on religious or spiritual narratives told by residents and staff members on site. These reflections on secular ethics and strange visions all reveal how individuals understand difference, community, and self, as well as ideal Tamil womanhood. These narratives are
particularly significant because they emphasize the context-specific, embodied and emotional work of community-building, rather than abstract notions of tolerance and acceptance often espoused by institutions like the shelter or even the state.

In chapter seven, “Hallelujah Morning,” I take a closer look at the religious practices and convictions of the shelter’s staff and board members and volunteers. As there were multiple secularisms at the shelter, there were multiple Christianities. I consider how this diversity shaped life at the shelter, in particular the ways in which different underlying motivations and convictions either pushed people apart or brought them together for shared social service work. I bring critical insights from literatures about colonialism and Christianity as well as transnational feminist theory to the phenomenon of volunteer tourism that regularly takes place at Arulagam.

When does intimacy threaten belonging? In chapter eight, "A Goodbye Kiss," I explore staff members' suspicions about, and disciplining of, homosexual relationships among shelter residents. I return to questions of methodology in this chapter, with a focus on issues of intimacy and distance as they relate to legitimacy/authority and privilege. I argue that the anthropological, self-reflexive literature on these topics as they relate to ethnographic writing and research also apply, and are perhaps more importantly applicable, to research settings, contexts, and questions.

Arulagam residents sometimes found work as live-in maids or as "mothers" in orphanages, some jumped over the wall or slipped through the gate to run away from the shelter, others were returned to their husbands, uncles, or fathers. Many of these women, without other safe living options, eventually returned. For instance, when one young woman arrived at the shelter, I realized that other residents greeted her. They knew her.
She had stayed at the shelter for several months until the staff members found a suitable marriage partner for her. She was married and left the shelter. A few years later, she came back. Her husband was an alcoholic and beat her. He had died in a drinking and driving accident. She moved from family to shelter to a new family and now back to the shelter. This slippage between mainstream society and homeless shelter provides a unique perspective of the world, what bell hooks experienced as "an oppositional world view."

Living as we did - on the edge - we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. . . This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us an oppositional world view - a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors - that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity. (hooks 2000:xvi)

In the conclusion, I revisit the major arguments of the thesis. I argue that while women at the homeless shelter, both staff members and residents, existed on the margins of larger discourses about ethics and morality, they spoke directly to these issues. In their daily negotiations of difference, careful contemplation of women’s lives outside of patriarchal family structures, on-going judgments of each others’ actions and character, and interpretations and applications of religious texts in relationship to their own and
others’ lives, staff members and residents were active creators, rather than passive victims, of moral narratives and ethical expectations.
An invitation written in white chalk lured me onto the seminary campus in Madurai, Tamil Nadu on a Saturday morning.

I arrived at the Hall just after 9:00 a.m., ready to collect unknown Tamil words, phrases, and conjugations in my notebook and digital recorder. At 9:45 a.m. I saw signs of life, a crowd of about twenty women walked closely together. They passed through the Hall entrance, spread into a line as they walked up the center aisle between folding metal chairs, and filled the seats and rows around me. A flood of names, questions, information, and strong personalities soon transformed strangers into possible teachers and friends, mothers, and ready confidants.

Selvi said “sister” loudly in English before each Tamil sentence she spoke to me. “Sister, have you had tea? Sister, you know Tamil? Sister, teach me English. Sister, I will teach you Tamil.” As soon as she had the opportunity, Poovarasi, a shelter warden, told me everyone’s names, their quirks and vices, and life stories. Angel reached her tiny arms out to me with a smile from her mother’s arms. Nalini touched her baby’s and then my cheek to indicate a similarly pale skin tone. “You are the same!” she said. Angel may have been light-skinned relative to the crowd of Tamil women around her, but we were not the same. Regardless, for the time being, a connection had been made. The women’s quick gestures of acceptance and generous offerings of friendship would eventually allow us to explore our differences, right down to the blood. As we spent more time together,
my northern Minnesotan skin was a constant source of fascination. Many women, including Nalini and her young daughter, Angel, traced the greenish blue visible veins in my arms and hands with a look of concern on their faces. Others were curious about why I had freckles. Likewise, over the next several months I learned about Nalini’s court case, inquired about her and Angel’s blood tests, and followed her quest to prove Angel’s father’s identity and return to her family.

A man soon interrupted us. Walking through the aisle towards the podium, he greeted several women with signs of familiarity: cheerful questions, comfortable conversations and laughter. A bright white rectangle nestled in his shirt collar marked him as a member of the Christian pastorate. The program listed him as a professor at the seminary where we had gathered and board member of the social service organization Arulagam. He was to speak about “Interreligious Worship.” We sat quietly facing the podium, a small crowd of women and one man standing in the back of the room with a camera. The pastor welcomed his “sisters from Arulagam” and began his message. The women’s warmth and interest in me was easy to reciprocate; the pastor’s message, with its themes of gender equality and religious diversity, peaked my interest in this community of women and pastors. This was how his message, and my research, began. It started with a joke. But we were not supposed to laugh.

There was a pastor in the city. He wasn’t like me. He would preach very concisely; I talk unendingly. [audience laughs] He would preach very briefly, never talking more than fifteen minutes. He would preach very short, very meaningful messages. Everyone praised his preaching. “Our pastor speaks excellently! He speaks so meaningfully, so concisely.” Now,
his teeth were starting to rot and fall out. He was becoming old. After all his teeth fell out, he went to a doctor.

“Doctor, all my teeth have fallen out. I am a preacher. I need teeth because it is my job to talk.”

“I will fix your teeth, Pastor. It will cost 20,000 rupees.”

The pastor returned to church. The women of the church found out about his need. They got together and raised 20,000 rupees. They went around telling people, “Our pastor needs teeth.” People gave 100 or 200 rupees. Eventually, they raised the full amount for a beautiful new set of teeth.

The pastor got his new teeth and a week passed. He was an old person, but he had young teeth. Then he returned to work. The first week after getting the teeth he got up behind the preaching podium. He got up and preached. The whole city was happy. But he started to talk. Fifteen minutes passed. Twenty minutes passed. Thirty minutes passed. He didn’t stop. Forty minutes passed. One hour passed. He didn’t stop. After one hour and ten minutes, he stopped.

The city asked, “Is this really our pastor?”

“Yes, he is our pastor. He is our preacher.”

Everyone was surprised that he had talked for one hour and ten minutes. Also, he spoke pointlessly, without meaning. There wasn’t even a little meaning. He talked like a grazing cow. It was a big
shock. “What happened to our pastor?” They wondered if his brain had become confused.

Then, after finishing the puja (worship, Hindu), finishing the ārātāṇai (worship, Christian), he went home. That pastor’s wife scolded him. [audience laughs] “What happened to you? Why did you talk endlessly today? Without meaning, you talked for one hour and ten minutes. What happened to you?”

He said, “I don’t know why I talked like that. I don’t know why I talked so much.” The same evening, he went to see the doctor.

The doctor asked, “What is it pastor? How are you? How are the new teeth?”

“They are good, doctor. There is no pain. But there is only one problem, doctor.”

“What, pastor?”

“It’s nothing, doctor. It’s just that after fixing these teeth, I talk endlessly. I talk badly for a long time. I speak without meaning, doctor.”

“Sorry, pastor. May I tell you a secret?”

Our pastor paused, withholding the punch line. There was a brief moment of silence. He interjected with this commentary: “What I am going to say is a very important issue. How many of you are going to laugh? How many of you are going to be mad? We will see.” The seriousness with which he said those words contrasted with his intermittent chuckles during the story. He maintained his seriousness as he delivered the punch line.

“Please tell me, doctor. What is the secret?”
“The tooth set I fixed in you is a woman’s tooth set.”

The women around me laughed. The pastor was silent. The charming smile he had displayed all morning had transformed into a straight line. A few seconds passed. The women stopped laughing.

“Should we laugh?” the pastor asked, breaking the new silence.

I looked at the women’s faces. They now imitated the stern face questioning us from the podium. Selvi quietly said, “No.” Poovarasi’s “no” was louder, more assertive. Angel squirmed in her mother’s arms. The pastor continued.

Should we laugh? No, we should be angry. Who writes these jokes? Why do they write them? It is a male-dominated society. Anger must come. We must be mad at the creator of this story, right? We must not laugh at this story, at this message that says women talk endlessly, badly, without meaning. That is why I said that we must not laugh. Who must the writer be? A man. A man created this story, a fanatical man. “Women are bad,” this man says. “Women speak endlessly, pointlessly.” They say this to keep women substandard. This is a story created through male-dominated society, through men. We must not repeat this story.

In this message, the pastor, Dr. M. Gnanavaram, presented one image of the stereotypically ideal Tamil woman: silent. When women in the audience laughed at the joke, it offered him a teachable moment. It demonstrated the ways in which women are expected, and continue, to support men in their supposedly superior position in society. He wanted them, instead, to be critical of patriarchal cultural ideals of Tamil
womanhood. He asked the critical questions. Who defines these ideals and what forms of power do they reinforce?

This dissertation follows the comedies and tragedies of everyday life in a women’s homeless shelter in Tamil Nadu, comprised of a religiously diverse group of women with equally diverse personalities. Through these stories, I explore a broad anthropological question: Faced with failed, impossible, or undesirable cultural ideals, how do communities and individuals live and articulate meaningful, valuable, and ethical life? Which stories need to be adjusted, rather than repeated? The women in the homeless shelter – living on the outskirts of the city, outside patriarchal family structures and in-between religions – helped me ponder this question and raised questions of their own. In striving to be a family and to become members of families, women at Arulagam sometimes reproduced and at other times subtly shifted the terms of belonging, the meaning of womanhood and community in secular India.

In this chapter, I describe Arulagam in relationship to existing anthropological literatures on homelessness and Tamil womanhood, respectively. I concentrate on the importance of cultural contextualization in studies of homelessness, as particular understandings of belonging, family, and womanhood inform public discourse and practical considerations regarding home and homelessness. Arulagam, according to Dr. M. Gnanavaram, who would later become the President of the organization, was an attempt to write a new story and to break cycles of male-dominance in society. In practice, I argue, the story of male-dominance is often reproduced, as the ideal goal of rehabilitation is to restore women to families. Patriarchal family structures, whether as the cause of women’s homelessness or the goal, remain central in shaping shelter life,
programs, discourse, and goals. This discussion highlights the continuing significance of Tamil ideals of womanhood in diverse contemporary settings.

**Arulagam: A Place For Women With No One**

For over 30 years, faculty, ordained pastors, students, students’ wives, and foreign volunteers hosted at the campus of a Protestant ecumenical seminary, Tamilnadu Theological Seminary (TTS), have worked for the social rehabilitation of women rejected by family and shunned by society: former sex workers, prisoners’ wives, unwed mothers, widows, orphans, women who were mentally or physically challenged, and others who had been abandoned or abused by family. It began when a British woman, Mrs. Margaret Harris, welcomed a released inmate from the local women's prison into her home at TTS in September 1975 (Hay 2000). Margaret Harris lived at TTS with her British husband who served on the seminary faculty. The outreach grew until it opened its own campus in 1976, with an office, kitchen, dining room/TV room, superintendent's apartment, three sewing and mat weaving classrooms, laundry stations, bathrooms, two large rooms where "unmarried" (younger, without children, or had never been married) women slept, and several smaller rooms shared by two to four "married" women (older, with children, or had been married at one point). In these rooms, each resident has a small cabinet to hold a mat for sleeping on the ground, clothes, toiletries, and other personal items that often included photos, notebooks, and/or a Bible.

A bulletin board in the main courtyard gives a sense of the organization’s activities. Usually a few greeting cards hang from pins, with pictures of newly born babies, Christmas messages, marriage announcements, and brief notes written in English from former North American, German, and British volunteers. A weekly chore list,
written in Tamil, details who is in charge of various cleaning duties and the week’s cooking. Finally, a schedule, written in both English and Tamil, describes daily life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6:30 – 7:00</td>
<td>Prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:00 – 7:30</td>
<td>Cleaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:30 – 7:45</td>
<td>Tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:45 – 8:30</td>
<td>Personal cleaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30 – 9:00</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30 – 10:00</td>
<td>Staff and students prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00 – 1:00</td>
<td>Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00 – 1:30</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:30 – 2:00</td>
<td>Rest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:00 – 4:30</td>
<td>Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:30 – 5:00</td>
<td>Tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:00 – 6:30</td>
<td>Gardening work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:30 – 7:00</td>
<td>Prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:00 – 7:30</td>
<td>Supper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:30 – 8:45</td>
<td>Relaxation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:45 – 9:00</td>
<td>Personal prayer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prayer framed and punctuated each day, with versions expected at 6:30 a.m., before breakfast, 9:30 a.m., before lunch, 6:30 p.m., before supper, and 8:45 p.m. In addition, the early evening gardening work was replaced several times a week with Bible studies. Regular, weekly volunteers from various Christian communities, including TTS faculty and students, as well as women from nearby Pentecostal and Church of South India (CSI)² congregations, led these bible studies. Class consisted of either sewing or weaving mats. Residents, or “students” as they were denoted on this schedule, earned a few rupees for each completed item, with accounts managed by one of the staff members. If a resident wanted to purchase something, usually jewelry, she would inform the staff member. Since residents were not allowed to leave the campus, a staff member would

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² The Church of South India (CSI) formed in 1947 as a union of Anglican, Reformed Congregational, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches. The American Methodists backed out in the last minute and remain an autonomous denomination in India. The other denominations ceased to exist independently in India after the CSI's formation. It is a prominent church in India, with membership estimates of over two million (see Frykenberg 2008).
choose and purchase any desired item for residents who had earned enough money through their handicraft work. Staff members visited local schools and churches to sell the handicrafts, with profits supporting Arulagam operations. Residents took turns cooking two teas and three meals a day over a wood fire. Residents usually took a nap during afternoon rest. They passed evening relaxation by watching TV or sitting in small groups and chatting. Each week, there were two outings. On Sunday morning a handful of residents joined a live-in staff member to walk to a CSI service just down the street from the shelter. On Sunday evenings, a vanful of residents joined a live-in staff member to Tamilnadu Theological Seminary for a worship service and community dinner.

Arulagam’s motto is “accepted and enabled.” The social service it provides aims to change women’s lives and change society. Despite the overwhelming emphasis on prayer, volunteer work largely organized around Bible study, and outings limited to Christian worship services, the organization and its official mission are secular. Given divergent commonsense notions of secularism in the US (absence of religion) and India (religious pluralism), these simultaneous commitments to Christianity and secularism are not as oxymoronic as they might first appear. Arulagam’s Memorandum of Association and Rules and Regulations establish that “The benefits of the society are open to all, irrespective of caste, religion, creed, etc.” Its mission, printed on the back cover of a Souvenir publication (1982), was as follows:

The Association of Arulagam
Opposes any practice derogatory to the dignity of women.

Rescues, rehabilitates, restores to society those seeking release From immoral life forced on them

Utilises regular activity – cooking, handicrafts, mat weaving Textile weaving, sewing, etc. as means of rehabilitation and
Satisfaction

Looks after others in moral danger – those unable to return
   Home, orphans, deserted wives, wives of prisoners

Accepts and enables these to become respectable citizens and
   Be restored to families

Gives hope and love to those in need of them.

Arranges for them to be received back into society in various
   Ways

Makes efforts to protect young girls from being lured into
   Being victims of immoral traffic.

Arulagam residents and staff members came from all different religious and caste backgrounds. At any given time, 20 to 40 women lived together at the shelter, along with a live-in superintendent and one to three live-in wardens. There was a core group of about fifteen residents who had lived at Arulagam for more than five years. I heard vastly different stories of women’s pasts that eventually brought them together in the homeless shelter. Sundari was the warden Lakshmi, the superintendent, blamed for the runaway incident. She had been living in Arulagam for nearly 30 years. Deborah told me, “Sundari was a good girl, but her family wouldn’t marry her.” She came to Arulagam after eating copper sulphate.

   All of her bones were corroded. She had lost all of her hair . . . and was terribly thin. We brought her to the hospital, put her in bed. They gave that child innumerable treatments. In truth, it is a big wonder that she is alive.
   No one would come to take care of her. Only after she was healthy, then all of her relations came to see her. But everyone pushed her aside. She
had an older sister. She died and Sundari’s brother-in-law would not care for her.

Velli was another long-time resident. She was deaf. She had been working in a brothel as a young girl. When she arrived at Arulagam about five years earlier, staff members told me, she was constantly taking off all of her clothes, yelling, and thrashing around. “Look at her now,” staff members would say. “She is neatly dressed. She is calm.” Another life-long resident in this short-term shelter, Aarti, could not walk. She had no wheelchair, and unlike Geethavaani, who also could not walk but was very thin, I never saw her leave the room she slept in upstairs. While residents would carry Geethavaani downstairs for meals and functions, they would bring food, bath, and toilet to Aarti upstairs. Her mother had taken her from home when she was young, fleeing an abusive husband. They had nowhere to go. So her mother brought her daughter to Arulagam. Aarti hasn’t seen her mother in over a decade.

While their stories were very different, women came to Arulagam, or were brought there by police, doctors, pastors, and family, through circumstances of gendered abuse, poverty, and health issues beyond their control. Staff, board members, and local volunteers reduced these differences and established the women’s commonality by describing them as “women with no one.” Such generalizations about women staying in a shelter, as well as summaries and evaluations of their past and assumptions about their desired futures, shaped social service practices of rehabilitation at the shelter.

Ethnographic studies of homelessness, however, demonstrate that paying attention to the particularities might better help us understand what homelessness means, how it is
experienced, and what steps might be taken to support the diverse people who find themselves living in shelters.

**Women’s Homelessness**

North America and Europe provide the context for a majority of the ethnographic literature on women’s homeless shelters (Arrighi 1997; Bridgman 2003; Edgar and Doherty 2001; Harman 1989; Liebow 1995; Scott 2007; Waterston 1999; Williams 2003). “Although female homelessness is an international problem, the issues affecting homeless women around the world are not uniform” (Sikich 2008:148). Yet, there is a dearth of qualitative research about these issues. In India, for instance, scholarly references of short-stay shelters for destitute and homeless women are limited to interview quotes regarding HIV+ women who once stayed in one (see Majumdar 2004). With attention to a women’s homeless shelter in Tamil Nadu, India, I consider how cultural beliefs about gender shape experiences of homelessness and rehabilitation. In North America, women are considered to “belong” at home and thus, especially if they embody traditional female qualities of dependence, vulnerability, timidity, and need, move more easily than men through the social welfare system (Passaro 1996). In what ways does the ideal Tamil woman, imaged in patriarchal family structures, help shape discussions regarding the cause of homelessness, programs for homeless women’s social rehabilitation, and popular characterizations of homeless women?

**Hostels and Homeless Shelters**

While this ethnography draws upon and contributes to ethnographies of homeless shelters, it is important to note that the Arulagam community never used the phrase
“homeless shelter” in their descriptions of the residents, the organization’s social rehabilitation work, or the buildings. They often used the term “hostel” to describe the place and “women with no one” to describe its residents. In South India, women live in hostels for a variety of reasons. They may live in hostels during their college or university studies (see Lukose 2009) or when they are unmarried and working in a city far from their natal family. Orphanages and shelters, like Arulagam, are also referred to as hostels. South Indian women who live in hostels might be in quite different life situations. What they share is a lack of familial relationships, whether through necessity of working or studying far from home or through the misfortune of having no family support. In North America, by contrast, it is important that these situations be differentiated. A college student far from home lives in a dorm; a young person who is not studying and does not have people to live with may seek the services of a homeless shelter.

The lack of emphasis on the word “home” reveals important distinctions between North American and South Indian understandings and experiences of homelessness. What was important in describing Arulagam residents was not that they lacked material possessions and resources, like a home, but that they lacked familial relationships. Many people in India live on the streets or in makeshift structures. What differentiates women who come to Arulagam from this houseless population, estimated at more than 1.9 million (Indian Census Bureau 2001), is that they have no family support system. As “women with no one” they joined an estimated institutional population of more than 7.8 million (Indian Census Bureau 2001). This distinction leads to different understandings of the causes of homelessness and practices towards its abolition.
Generally, in North America, shelter residents are described, explained, and aided in relationship to a central problem: lack of housing. In this context, “homeless women” face the underlying societal problem of adequate affordable housing and poverty. Rehabilitation for the individual, therefore, focuses on helping women become earners who can maintain employment and secure housing, while long-term societal goals might include addressing social, political, and economic problems related to fair wages, social welfare, and housing. At Arulagam, in contrast, shelter residents are described, explained, and aided in relationship to a different central problem: lack of family. “Women with no one” failed to belong in patriarchal family structures. Rehabilitation for the individual therefore focused on helping women become safe and happy members of families, while long-term societal goals included abolishing male dominance in society, as Dr. M. Gnanavaram described in his International Women’s Day message.

These distinctions between homelessness in North America and South India are often blurred. Concerns regarding housing conditions and systemic poverty apply to urban slums in south India, just as domestic abuse is a concern relevant to homelessness in North America. Liebow (1995:83-84), for instance, talks about a shelter resident in Boston, MA who distinctively describes her and other’s homelessness as a result of lack of family. However, the extent to which patriarchal family structures exist as the normative mode of existence for women in South India plays a significant and unique role in homelessness. Many, though not all, women in South India have two options for living arrangements: family or hostel (see interview in Weidman 2003:198-199). Anything outside this is often considered suspect and immoral wandering. Although there are important cultural differences regarding gender and homelessness, moral judgments
of homeless people in public imagination and popular representation stretch across those differences. In and around Arulagam, such public representations were often simplified into oppositional characters, like the prisoner’s wife and the pastor’s wife.

**Pastor’s Wife and Prisoner’s Wife**

During pre-dissertation research, I attended fifteen CSI, Methodist, and ecumenical women’s Bible fellowship meetings in two Tamil Nadu towns. Through these meetings, I earned the intrigue of one my non-research related Tamil friends who would see me through open church entranceways "kneeling and singing" with what she described as "unexpected fervor." I did come to enjoy singing the songs. I also became intrigued with a recurring theme: "fallen women." One woman, a pastor's wife, recalled taking a fallen woman into her house. The pastor's wife provided the woman a bed, toiletries to bathe and keep herself tidy, fresh food, and clean clothing. "But she couldn't change. I had to bring her to a shelter," lamented the pastor's wife. In these short couple sentences, the pastor’s wife had attributed lasting ("she couldn’t change”) moral deviance ("fallen women”) to a homeless woman. As Desjarlais notes, “homelessness denotes a temporary lack of housing, but connotes a lasting moral career” (1997:2). It is a career continued, for many women, in homeless shelters like Arulagam.

United States media accounts tend to identify the assumed and imagined qualities of homeless people in opposition to the assumed and imagined qualities of public spaces as calm, peaceful, dignified, and sanitary. The homeless invade these spaces with their dirty skin, ragged clothes, unruly hair, and grotesque bodies, “all of them wretched, bizarre, and amoral” (Waterston 1999:3). Popular accounts of homelessness rely heavily on visual clues. “Because [the homeless] ‘identity’ is deemed sufficient and
interchangeable, the ‘homeless’ usually go unnamed. The identification is typically achieved through spectral means: one knows the homeless . . . by seeing them” (Desjarlais 1997:2). Lacking other credentials and connections, homeless women's appearance "make[s] a great difference in how they are treated by the rest of the world" (Liebow 1995:xvi). With a series of excerpts to prove his point, Desjarlais argues that a widespread “vision” of homelessness presented in newspapers depicts the homeless living “in an underworld; they are a ghostly, animal-like brood who threaten the peaceful, artful air of cafes, libraries, and public squares” (1997:2-3). Like zombies and vampires of current popular culture fame, they are sure to bring disease, disruption, havoc, and heightened sexuality if ever they emerge. According to this literature, a shelter with enclosed grounds on the outskirts of town, like Arulagam, not only protects homeless residents from life on the streets. It also protects society from the abnormality and immorality embodied, the danger imposed, by the homeless.

Deinstitutionalization of mental health patients, beginning in the 1960s in the US, has left many mentally ill persons with no place to live. With cuts in the number of long-term care facilities, increasing numbers of mental health patients found themselves moving through emergency rooms, prisons, shelters, and the streets. While there is a connection between homelessness and mental illness, qualitative research on homelessness in the United States often critiques widespread representations of the homeless as dangerous, criminal, diseased, dirty, and deranged. Some demonstrate how such representations fuel anti-homeless legislation and neighborhood politics (Forte 2002; Lyon-Callo 2001; Rosenthal 2000; Takahashi 1998). Others analyze how such representations of abnormal bodies and minds lead professionals and the general
population to locate the cause of homelessness within individuals. The resulting “medicalization of homelessness” assumes that the causes of homelessness can be cured with medicine and therapy. Homelessness becomes an individual’s problem rather than a social problem rooted in broader political economic structures (Glasser and Bridgman 1999; Hopper 2003; Lyon-Callo 2000; Mathieu 1993; Mossman 1997; Snow, et. al. 2001). Still others focus on how such representations reinforce continued inequalities and hierarchies based on constructions of self and Other. The homeless are abnormal, immoral, uncivilized, not-quite-human. The housed are normal, moral, civilized, fully human and citizens. If constructed in certain ways, homeless women can provide society convenient narratives about normalcy and deviance that absolves most from the problem and causes of homelessness. Representations of homeless people help contribute an opposing sense of normalcy and morality.

"Captured in stereotype," writes Waterston in her ethnography of a women's shelter in New York City, "the women of Woodhouse are emblematic of all our social problems. Any one of these 'attributes' signals the pressing social problems of our day; collected under one roof, they form its powerful symbol. Woodhouse women are the quintessential 'other'" (1997:7-8). Desjarlais understands this particular story, repeated in newspapers, magazines, films, and television, as one of representing the homeless as “characters writ large, serving as figureheads of despondency, vagrancy, insobriety, madness, or moral failure . . . and thus as illustrations of the value of other ways of being” (Desjarlais 1997:4-5). In their otherness, this line of argument would go, Arulagam shelter residents help society define and delineate normalcy and morality. Both
prisoners’ wives and pastors’ wives become characters who represent immorality and abnormality (prisoners’ wives) or morality and normality (pastors’ wives).

Some volunteers and former staff members understood their work with Arulagam shelter residents within these two polar extremes, explaining the relationship between the two as “basic,” obvious, natural. I would ask people, after hearing stories of the difficulties they faced working with Arulagam residents: Why did you stick with it? Why did you endure these hardships? “It is a Christian basic thing,” responded the former staff member. Another volunteer said, “This dedication, it’s a basic thing. How can I send them out?” When I interviewed a former staff member (1990s), she described her decision to help such women: "Following Jesus means helping people bonded in suffering, sin." Archived letters to Arulagam reinforce the idea that residents were mired in not only disease, but sin. Some, like this doctor from a local Christian hospital, emphasized the women’s need for repentance. “It may be good if we can kindle in AIDS victims hopes of a life beyond death, if they would repent of their past sinful life and seek God’s forgiveness and love” (Tharien 2003). Others, like a former missionary and Arulagam secretary, echoed this call for repentance but also emphasized Jesus’ outreach to women like those who live in Arulagam.

Our Lord and Master was accused of being “the friend of sinners” and stated that he had come “to seek and to save the lost and call sinners to repentance.” Have you noticed how often Jesus had a word of forgiveness and encouragement for women despised by others? Just think of the woman by the well in Samaria, “the woman who was a sinner,” [and] “the woman caught in adultery” to mention a few. [Hay 1982]
For some involved in Arulagam’s social rehabilitation work, "fallen women" gave body and life to abstract, and basic, Christian nemeses of evil and sin. In this formulation, homeless shelter volunteers and staff members side with Jesus and God, while the homeless shelter residents are associated with sin, disease, and suffering.

Whether focused on representations of the homeless, the medicalization of homelessness, or policies dealing with homelessness, many analyses of homelessness focus on how society Others, pushes away, disconnects, and dichotomizes homeless women from the rest of society and from oneself. This theoretical narrative, however, falls short in my overall experiences with Arulagam volunteers, staff, and board members. A recent sociology article urges researchers and urban planners to consider the similarities, rather than the differences, between variously positioned populations’ efforts and priorities in building community (Wasserman and Clair 2011). This approach draws on research that is critical of top-down approaches and brings attention to homeless people’s sophisticated social and material community-building (see Dordick 1997; Duneier 1999; Hopper 2003; Pippert 2007; Toth 1993; Wagner 1993; Wasserman and Clair 2010). As Arulagam staff members’ and residents’ life stories unfold in this ethnography, the closeness and similarities between homeless residents and shelter staff comes into relief, seen not only in their ability and desires to create community but in the personal difficulties they face meeting cultural ideals for womanhood and family. Moreover, the story of Arulagam is a story of intimacy, care, and concern between homeless women and women with families and homes. While they were very different, they constantly sought to forge relationship. The first time I met them, at the Women’s Day Celebration, they began to make these connections. “You are the same,” said Nalini.
Shattering Obviousness

In relationships developed between those with homes and those without homes, there is an inherent tension between care and power. This relates to what Foucault (2007), in his 1977-1978 lectures, calls “pastoral power,” a form of power adopted by the State and modeled after the Christian pastorate who ensures the security and well-being of its flock. “Pastoral power is a power of care” (Foucault 2007:127). It is the power in which women with homes have to care for, and therefore control, almost all aspects of a homeless woman’s life – her dress, her food, her daily schedules and habits, her movements, even her religious practice – for the sake of the latter’s well-being and security. I consider how staff members and residents of a homeless shelter are connected in a “power of care” as they negotiate cultural ideals and lived experience. The authoritative shadows and fixed expectations of cultural ideals merge with the emotional attachment and necessity for flexibility in lived experience.

Social rehabilitation at Arulagam aspires to reproduce ideals of moral Tamil womanhood, namely to restore “women with no one” to families. It is within the context of family relationships, as auspicious married women, that Tamil women are recognized for their cultural authority and moral power, their sakti (the divine feminine creative force of the universe). However, many Arulagam residents were already wives and mothers. As anthropologists have shown, Tamil womanhood is not about simply being a married woman, although it might be a prerequisite. Instead, it is about a set of embodied practices – tying a sari, plaing the hair, being a good cook, caring for family members, educating the family, negotiating community and village life, performing rituals, political engagement, experiencing the pain of childbirth – that enable Tamil women to cultivate
moral power and cultural authority (Busby 2006; Egnor 1980; Flueckiger 2007; Hancock 1999; Menon, K. 2010; Menon, U. 2002; Ram 1991; Van Hollen 2003; Wadley 1980). Tamil women who face social stigma, including those who live in a shelter like Arulagam or female actresses of Special Drama (Seizer 2005), must find ways to negotiate the differences between cultural expectations and lived experience.

Shelter residents and unmarried, live-in staff members constantly critiqued each other, not for failing to be living with a husband and children, but for failing to act like a wife and mother. They were called “hard-hearted” for their critiques of family members (regardless of the particular history involved), scolded for cooking a poor tasting meal (regardless of the ration rice and minimal other ingredients), reprimanded for bad posture, made fun of for tying a sari poorly, sent back to their room for unplaited hair, and dismissed for not knowing rituals (regardless of one’s particular religious background) or how to read. Correcting these faults and limitations became the objects of women’s social rehabilitation. My contribution to the rich body of literature of Tamil womanhood and fluid concepts of their moral, cultural, and divine power is to ask what happens when a community must face not merely shifting contexts and understandings of women’s moral power or sakti, but the instability of the very ideal. At Arulagam, no matter what many of the women did, no matter how they sat or dressed or cooked or ate or prayed or cared for others, they would fall short of the organization’s mission. Many would fail to meet societal expectations for moral Tamil womanhood and, as the long-term resident population evidenced, would not be restored to families.

In residents’ inability to belong, “the obviousness of reality is shattered” (Goodman 2009: 123). The process of social rehabilitation, I argue, entails dealing with
disappointment, uncertain futures, and expandable horizons of being and belonging that result when individuals and communities address “unsettled questions about the ideal self” (Goodman 2009:124). Whether discussing psychiatry and mental illness (Brodwin 2011; Corin 1990; Koegel 1992; Larsen 2004a; Van Dongen 1998) or physical rehabilitation (Mattingly and Lawlor 2001; Mol 2008), ethnographers reveal the fragility of cultural ideals of personhood, health, and normalcy. Frustration, futility, and bewilderment become operative words. Homeless women in Tamil Nadu, like the mentally ill in this literature, draw attention away from “the typical” Tamil wife and mother or “the normal” life story arch to “the edge of experience,” to living as a single woman who refuses to marry or as part of a community of women (Jenkins and Barrett 2003:5). They “accentuate and challenge our cultural being” and “represent individual struggles coming to terms with cultural norms, values, and perceptions as well as social demands and expectations” (Larsen 2004b:448).

This struggle is not only Arulagam residents’ to bear, not only for the mentally ill and homeless. It is an everyday problem for everyday people. “Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming” (Berlant 2011:10). How do individuals and communities create meaning not only in existential crises, but in everyday frustrations and concerns regarding runaway residents and their children, the “daily action, of trying, adjusting, and trying again,” in “the demands and hard limits of the present situation” (Brodwin 2011:192-193). Lauren Berlant (2011) writes about “cruel optimism” in the context of the United States and Europe, the persistent attachment to ideas about “the good life,” even when one knows that such aspirations – of for instance job security,
social equality, upward mobility, lasting relationship – are merely fantasies, at best, and costly to our well-being at worst. Following Berlant, I consider everyday life at the shelter not as an exceptional, but as a particular case study about “the on-going activity of precariousness in the present” (Berlant 2011:10).

Berlant describes “the ordinary as a zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine” (2011:10). In this convergence, people adjust, fail, become sad, become violent, develop relationships, question. “What happens to fantasies of the good life when the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation whose sheer volume so threatens what it has meant to ‘have a life’ that adjustment seems like an accomplishment?” asks Berlant (2011:3). At Arulagam, people were questioning how to be in relationship with women outside of patriarchal family structures. “How do we treat people who do not want to marry?” asked Rev. Maggie, Arulagam’s Honorary Secretary in a Sunday evening sermon. This dissertation is a convergence around this question of unmarried, widowed, abandoned women. It includes staff members’ and residents’ life stories, as told by them, as well as my own ethnographic analysis of their life in the shelter.

While this case study of one homeless shelter in Tamil Nadu, Arulagam, is quite small and closely bounded, the themes are widespread. How do people try to facilitate the perfect life in dire circumstances? How do they cope when their cultural ideals no longer seem relevant? How do revolutionary ideas continue to serve the norm? It is a story of awkward, power-filled, ambiguous relationships in a fluid and dynamic community. It traces the unease with which members of the community constantly negotiate
relationships and the easy slippage between categories of stranger, enemy and friend. It is about community-building in plural contexts, of developing relationships with people one does not always know or understand, of facing one's own or another's suffering, and of working towards personal and social healing. It is a social process that becomes a context for adaptation, as people recognize the limitations inherent in normative frameworks of belonging and ideal womanhood.

My first interactions with live-in staff members and residents of Arulagam demonstrated this adaptation. Women in the shelter built meaningful connections with others, outside patriarchal family structures and across religious, caste, class, and cultural differences. However, as I learned more about these women, heard their reflections on life and hopes for the future, as I witnessed their disagreements and disappointments, the framework of patriarchal family predominated. The woman I met were willing to create new standards for belonging, stretch the boundaries of community, and value various ways of being a woman. They also always framed these theoretical approaches and embodiments of moral and meaningful life in relationship to the family. This commitment to patriarchal family structures and critical questioning of its necessity was a central tension to life in the shelter.
I have so many relatives: older brother, younger brother, aunts and uncles. Even though they are all there, I am like an orphan. I have no one. Today I am like an orphan.

I was married in 1984. We were close and happy. But my husband discovered I had a disease. I have fits and fall down. I take tablets. I also have wheezing and asthma. When he found out, without saying anything at all, he left. This is true. I wouldn't lie. My husband left me. I won't forget that day. I prayed to Kali and to Mary. “Someone has used sorcery for bad effects. Now husband and wife are separated. If you are the real god, show me my husband.” I put this request to every god because I didn’t know what to say, what to do. My mother-in-law hung herself and died. She had the feeling that problems would come. My parents had married both me and my younger sister. It was very hard. My mother was thinking about my life and regretting. She fell ill and the doctors told us she needed an operation. Father gave them permission to do the operation, telling them, “Make my wife better." But after the operation, my mother was not healed. She died.

In 1992, my father and I were in Madras. Relatives started to blame me for the mistake. My father remarried. To separate me from a good life and put me in an independent situation, close relatives began to blame me. You need to know this. Women like me are swept away like dust. My father wasn't able to keep me either. He was a carpenter. My father's second wife started to do terrible things to me. She wouldn't give me good food. She would give only my father good food. My father didn't like it. He ordered her, "Give my child good food." After that, there were a lot of worries. I went to
work for a company, earning 300, 400 rupees a month. I would give 200 rupees to the house and save 100 rupees for myself. My father told me, "You keep it."

Father had many friends. Some of them were Hindus who had accepted Jesus. They told him, "If you need to, send your daughter." My father said okay and told me to go if it was my wish. It was my full hope to go and see. So I went. The men were kneeling. The women were kneeling with their heads covered. They were praying. I also prayed like that. My father and a man there had a heated discussion. After that, I didn't go there.

Even though I feared that they would hit and scold me, I didn’t tell my father that I wouldn’t go. Instead, I only said, "Everything is God's work." But my father said, "You don't need to be there."

I was going from one house to the next, from my grandmother's house to my older sister's house. I was causing them difficulty. "Ladha," they would call. "Ladha, you are wandering here and there. We will ask if there is a hostel for you to live in." I told them, "I am taking treatment. I need to buy all the pills. Therefore, see if there is a hostel that will give me good treatment. I will watch TV. I will be happy at home. I will watch TV. I will take my pills. I will eat. I will sleep. I will just be like that. As much as I can, I will help. I will help with cooking and cleaning."

The day before I came here, a vision came to me of angels. There were a lot. I didn’t know what it meant. But God entrusted me to this place. For a few days I just didn’t know. After some time, I accepted Jesus fully. I didn’t even ask my family. “I have taken baptism,” I told my family. They said, “Whatever you need to do, if you are happy that is enough.”
Twelve years earlier, in 1997, Ladha’s sister-in-law came to see her. “I told my sister-in-law, ‘Let my husband come here to see me.’ I was told he would come after a week. How many days have passed? Still, he hasn’t come. I am expecting him. He doesn’t come.”
A young boy sat still and stoically on a merry-go-round. His mother was at the hospital.
The other twenty women at Arulagam were caring for him in her temporary absence. I sat
next to him on the ground to talk with Ladha. Ladha was always smiling, read the Bible
every morning, knew all the words to the Christian songs sung during Bible study, didn’t
cause trouble, but also rarely worked. She greeted and said goodbye to me every day,
almost without fail, by punching me on the arm with a disapproving look. She would
scold me for not visiting enough and then laugh. She was one of my closest friends at the
shelter. The previous month, Ladha had told me about her family. It was a tale full of
love, care and affection. “My husband didn’t forsake me,” she said. “Compared to my
younger sister, my parents looked after me with affection. My mother wouldn’t leave me
for even a minute.” Suddenly, her mother-in-law committed suicide by hanging herself.
The reason, explained Ladha, was sorcery. “Someone had decided to separate her from
the world.” Her husband’s younger sister ran away and got married. Her husband cared
for his sister so much that he couldn’t let that matter rest. In his concern, he “lost his
way.” She attributed the problems of suicide, sorcery, love marriage, her husband losing
his way, and her eventual (but unexplained) residence at the homeless shelter to the
capital city of Tamil Nadu, Chennai. “Because we were in the city, troubles came to me,”
she concluded.

On this day, next to the merry-go-round, Ladha and I quickly began laughing at
familiar inside jokes we’d developed over the past several months of our friendship.
Breaking into this silly, predictable and scripted banter, without looking at us the boy on
the merry-go-round said in Tamil, “There’s no one at home.” It was a refrain I’d heard
often from the women’s shelter staff members, volunteers, and board members in their

3: “You Will Write Negative Things Too”
summary of residents. Whether an introduction to a foreign group or sighed in moments of resignation about the state of their work and efforts, they repeated, “They are women with no one.” Spoken from a boy, orphaned if temporarily, on a merry-go-round – a place of youth and play, bright colors and fast movement – I heard the weight of the words, realities of loss, and persistence of failure more clearly than I had before.

I looked up at the merry-go-round, once colorful now stripped of paint from the wear of elements and children and drying clothes. My emotions took away my words. In these moments, I never knew what to say, how to find and form the right Tamil words to offer what some involved in Arulagam care work called “consoling words” (in Tamil) or “counseling” (in English). While my laughter turned to solemn silence, Ladha’s gave way to spirited reflection. She didn’t acknowledge the boy or his statement. But she did respond. And she wanted it recorded. It is the story that opened this chapter. There were familiar storylines – a suicide, sorcery, a carpenter – but the narrative was quite different from the first version I had heard days earlier.

Ladha’s two versions of the same story suggest that the embarrassment of failure, questions of truth and representation, and the significance of obscurity and anonymity were not only themes pondered and debated by ethnographers, but also negotiated by members of this women’s shelter. In this chapter I consider such dilemmas both reflexively in terms of my own ethnographic practice and in terms used by the community. I emphasize how my methodology and resident and staff members’ daily lives emerged, in necessity, out of constant adaptations to “the heterogeneity of concepts and the uncertainty of moral striving” (Lambek 2010:29).
**Beginning with Failure**

I had been waiting for the phone to ring all day in my Madurai apartment. A Presentation Sister, from an order of Roman Catholic women, had promised to give me a final answer regarding whether or not I could conduct my dissertation research with them. I was interested in their transnational work on women’s development projects. Over the course of two years, I attended their training sessions and talked with many of the sisters in person and over email in two Tamil Nadu towns and New York City. During this time, and in consultation with several Presentation Sisters, I developed a research proposal focused on their religious life and social action. My IRB application for this research was assigned to full board review. As a consequence, they required a letter of cooperation from my research community, on account of the risk my research would supposedly pose to Christians, a community that were targets of violence in India. This conclusion seemed misplaced. Violence against Christians is not prevalent in Tamil Nadu and this particular community does not try to mask their Christian identity in any way. Each sister wears a recognizable pale pink sari and a large cross necklace. One can easily spot them on busses, walking down the street, drinking a coffee, or shopping.

Presentation Sisters met my request for a letter of cooperation with hesitation. Every weekend, I would ride the bus four hours up the switchbacks from the Madurai valley to the hill station of Kodaikkanal. I would meet Presentation Sisters I knew on the street and exchange friendly conversation. We caught each other up on the latest lesson learned in Tamil language class or latest project initiated for women’s development. I would make my way to their convent and school, meeting with anyone I could to ask about the letter of cooperation. They met my inquiries with a persistent question: Who
could write and sign the letter on behalf of the community? No one seemed to know who I should approach, so I approached everyone I could, in two Tamil Nadu towns. No one was willing to sign off on the letter.

That morning in my apartment, when I answered the phone, I remember hearing, “You can do social work with us. But you can’t do research.” I remember explaining myself and the project, yet again, and asking for explanation from them. I remember one response: “Your research would take too much of our time.” My inability, despite countless attempts, to effectively explain how doing social work and doing research could be combined in my anthropological research approach and my failure to secure cooperation was devastating. I had been building rapport for two years, all for my research to end before it had even begun. I had lost my research community and connections. I was ashamed and sad. I remember dragging my mattress out into the living room and watching a lot of TV. The question I asked that weekend to myself became a question that shaped my approach to research at a women’s homeless shelter. I had two recurring thoughts echoing repeatedly in my head while I lay under the fan: “rejection” and “what next?”

Failure became a key focus in anthropology’s postmodern turn. Can ethnographies successfully represent a culture, or are they merely fictions (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Cushman 1982; Strathern 1987)? Scholars emphasized the myth of ethnography, the magical expectation that it could and would lead to “total understanding and representation” (Visweswaran 1994:21). Spivak (1988) pointed out history’s failure to identify the consciousness of the subaltern; Geertz wrote that ethnography was “a task at which no one ever does more than not utterly fail”
Visweswaran (1994:99) discussed how Western feminists had overlooked differences among women and failed to complicate the concept of gender across racial, cultural, and sexual differences. These critiques often coincided with analyses that demonstrated vestiges of colonialism in contemporary anthropological and historical scholarship. This literature demonstrated Western academics’ tendencies or desires to assert full comprehension of the Other when there was partial understanding, complete solidarity when there were material differences, or true representation of another culture when it was fragmented and limited to the researchers’ positionality.

A danger inherent in these analyses of epistemological failure is that ethnography turns into an introspective activity that loses sight of, and closes off avenues of exploration regarding, the cultural phenomenon it focuses on. In fact, according to some scholars, these analyses led to disciplinary crises and “despair” (Chakrabarty 1992), intellectual shame that leads to non-action. Instead of failure being an end-point, I agree with Visweswaran that failure is “an epistemological construct” (1994:99-100). Failure not only marks “moments when a project is faced with its own impossibility” (Visweswaran 1994:98), but forces a “project” in new directions, on different terms (Spivak 1987). I understand failure as a productive social force that can help us better understand cultural practices (including, but not limited to ethnography), as well as cultural ideals and their limitations.

If failure is in fact constructive – shifting the terms of our cultural ideals (i.e., ethnography should not aim to speak for others, but rather speak with others) – what is missing is a critical examination of how failure is itself a cultural phenomenon, experienced, explained, and defined in unique ways. At Arulagam, people often
described women’s failure to meet cultural expectations for ideal Tamil womanhood in terms of lack, in particular a lack of patriarchal family relationships. However, they also often described women’s faults in terms of excess, in particular an excess of desire that emerged as envy (porāmai).

The question of failure was faced by the pastor’s wife during my pre-dissertation research who decided that the woman she attempted to rehabilitate in her home couldn’t change. Faced with this failure, she sent the young woman to Arulagam. It was a place for women whose worlds had fallen apart. They had no one. Drawing on connections I had made through women’s Bible fellowship meetings, I developed a research project at Arulagam instead of with the Presentation Sisters. It was late in my actual research, however, that I realized how influential experiences of failure were to my larger theoretical and ethnographic project. “What follows rejection?” was a question not only of practical but theoretical import. My experience of rejection not only played a large role in determining who my research community would be, but critically shaped the intellectual curiosities and questions that informed my interview questions, perceptions in the field, and ethnographic writing. How do people not only cope, but continue to care for themselves and for others, in contexts where their ideals for belonging and community fall short? What does failure teach us about our cultural and academic ideals, about ourselves and our relationships? What new types of and spaces for self, belonging, and relationships might emerge? What is the significance of stories about what happens after the experience or suspicion of failure?

In this chapter I address, rather than covering up or ignore, perceived failures and faults in various manifestations. I hope that, in doing so, I am showing respect to the
struggles, work and goals of the Arulagam staff members and the women who lived there, doing justice to our complicated and meaningful relationships, and moving beyond a "veneer" of success that inhibits us from engaging in larger, if more difficult, political, social, and theoretical problems (Goslinga and Frank 2007:xvii-xviii).

People Like You

Each of the groups of people associated with Arulagam brought different convictions about womanhood, social rehabilitation, and homelessness. All of these conflicting identities and agendas did create a merry-go-round effect, both nauseating and exhilarating. Poovarasi, a warden, and Lakshmi, the superintendent, lived at the hostel. Poovarasi was a Roman Catholic in her 40s. She told me the day I met her at the International Women’s Day Celebration at TTS that she was a “spinster.” She was opinionated, confident and vocal. Poovarasi had polio as a child, her mother died, and her father spent time in prison. She was never married. She lived and worked at Arulagam for ten years, eventually leaving to help take care of her father who was having medical problems. She moved into her own house a short walk away from her father’s house. Lakshmi was a Christian in her 50s. She was from a wealthy family. Her father had been murdered and her mother driven to leave upon accusations of immorality. Lakshmi was treated badly by her uncles and was taken out of school. She was extremely opinionated and loved to perform. She gave long speeches, sang, danced, and existed on emotional extremes, either very sad, very angry, or very jolly. She never married, and wanted nothing to do with men. She had studied at Tamilnadu Theological Seminary and had traveled throughout South India, working for various social service organizations. She spoke the most English among the staff.
Two sewing teachers, a childcare teacher, and two administrative assistants commuted to the shelter six days a week. Deborah had been an administrative assistant at Arulagam since its beginning years. She was Pentecostal and a widow with two sons in college. Mary, the other administrative assistant, was also Pentecostal. She was married and had children in high school. Margaret, a married Pentecostal with children in high school, and Aahalya, a Hindu woman who called herself a secularist and who had been left by her husband and subsequently rejected by her family, were the two sewing teachers. The childcare teacher said she had accepted Jesus. She had two young girls and was married. They struggled to make ends meet.

Arulagam was meant to be a temporary home, providing shelter, food, clothing, and skills training to women from any and all religious, caste, and class backgrounds. Typically, women either stayed for a few weeks until they returned to their parents or husbands, or they stayed for several years sometimes leaving for different jobs for short periods of time. This is a widespread problem in homeless shelters, which might be considered “hybrid institutions” (Hopper 1990), simultaneously providing temporary respite and long-term housing for a population shunned by society and family (Desjarlais 1997:29-30; see also Gounis 1992; Timmer, et. al. 1994; Waterston 1999). Arulagam staff and board members had to deal with an aging cohort living long term in a short-term shelter. One example was the weaving teacher, Sundari, who had grown up in Arulagam. She worried about where she would move in her old age and asked the Honorary Secretary to make plans to open an “Arulagam old-age home.” She was Hindu, had never married, and had health problems that were related to drinking poison when she was young. Her family had refused to care for her, but she had a good relationship with a
brother in town, who had polio and a skin condition. She supported him and his two children with her small salary as much as she could.

Visionary and administrative leadership came from a Board of Directors, the majority of whom were connected to Tamilnadu Theological Seminary. Rev. Maggie was the Honorary Secretary. She was well-educated, well-traveled, and articulate. She had a vision for the association that often deviated from on-the-ground precedent and staff opinion. I talked to several other contemporary and former Board Members, who I will introduce as they appear.

The organization depended on donations of goods, money and volunteer time from both local and foreign Christian congregations and individuals. However, other local religious organizations (for example, a group of Jain women) also contributed food and clothing. Female high school graduates from Germany, the United States, and England visited Arulagam for volunteer placements that ranged from a few weeks to one year. If they were there for a week or so, they stayed in Arulagam’s guest room. If they stayed for several months, they stayed on the TTS campus.

The variety of people involved in Arulagam’s rehabilitation work led to a number of complicated assumptions and sometimes competing values. TTS board members and staff members talked about the foreign volunteers’ “Western feminism.” Staff members and foreign volunteers noted TTS board members’ emphasis on “secularism” and “religious pluralism.” TTS board members and foreign volunteers recognized the prayer-centered, emotional, and individualized “Pentecostal leaning Christianity” espoused by many on-site staff members. These various priorities and worldviews shaped how
Arulagam pursued women’s social rehabilitation. It also led to a lot of gossip, hard feelings, and misunderstandings.

“Many people like you have come,” Deborah once told me. The category “people like you” was complicated. Depending on the day, urgent needs, and moods, I was approached as people I was not – a social worker who would help rehabilitate shelter residents, a Christian missionary who would lead prayers, a rich American who would donate money generously and often, a qualified counselor who would provide psychiatric care to the residents – and people I was: a volunteer, a researcher and a student. I intentionally and consistently fostered my identity as a secular volunteer, researcher, and student. Not only was this decision important to represent myself and my role in the community accurately, the identities I fostered aligned with Arulagam’s vision of secularism and care. I never accepted Christian leadership roles, including praying or giving Christian messages, but I happily listened, sang and read Christian texts during Bible studies. Staff and board members, on occasion, described their financial needs and asked me to support them. Rather than donate large amounts of money, I would often bring fresh fruit to the shelter, sometimes buy dinner for the staff and residents, and offer smaller amounts of money on a regular basis. When staff members asked me to do counseling or social work for the residents, I said that I would not provide counseling but I would listen to their stories, concerns, and worries.

Listening, in my experience at the women’s homeless shelter, meant hearing a lot of sad stories and mean gossip. Sometimes it was downright evil.
Petty and Silly Things

Talk of evil was common at Arulagam. When I asked Rev. Maggie, Arulagam’s Honorary Secretary, about evil, she said,

Jealousy is evil. Double standardness is evil. Not real love and care, that’s evil. In Arulagam I see a lot of personality clash and power politics coming between [staff members], all petty petty petty silly things, petty things and silly things.

One example was food, and I can’t deny participating in the dance of trying to avoid or decline Arulagam food. A combination of factors contributed to the poor tasting food, including a lack of quality ingredients due to financial constraints, lack of cooking experience among residents that took turns cooking for the group, and lack of leadership and training by the staff members to improve the inexperienced cooks’ work. They used ration rice, a thick, bland, and short-grained variety and minimal fresh produce. One Methodist volunteer said of her time at Arulagam, “Food is a problem. I am lucky to be able to buy some good fruit and veg to supplement the very basic diet” (Hamilton 2009).

In addition, some staff members insisted that I, the known vegetarian, drink beef broth when I was sick and served me meat biryani, insisting that it was veg during an outing to Kodaikkanal. Food was also an issue for commuting staff members. Deborah and Mary, the administrative assistants, told Rev. Maggie that they “eat after everyone else because there is no space.” Rev. Maggie described how this wasn’t a matter of space, but of hierarchy between staff and residents and power struggles among the staff members. “I was thinking about this,” she said.

They gave me excuses that they receive phone calls during that time so they stay in the office. I observed that they bring their own rice from their
home. They take only the side dish and curry [prepared at Arulagam], so they want to eat late. All others are eating the same food. Lakshmi [superintendent] is trying to change it – she wants everyone to sit and eat together. There is ego clash between these three.

Deciding to bring their own food from home and not share the rice, and sometimes the side dishes, prepared at Arulagam for the residents was significant because it sent a message that the Arulagam food was not good enough for them. In Rev. Maggie’s opinion, “their attitude is different like, ‘eh, it’s okay, let them eat this.’ That means, indirectly, that they are thinking, ‘Why do we have to provide them healthy food? After all, they are victims.’”

I found myself caught up in these power politics immediately. Early on, Poovarasi informed me that the other staff members didn’t want to talk to me. I’ll never know if that was actually true. But I do know that I had much more fun talking with, and felt much more welcomed by, the residents. The friendships I developed with them, as well as my growing criticisms of staff practices over the months, led me to spend more time with residents. My relationship with local volunteers, the staff members’ friends, were also strained. One evening Mary, a Pentecostal volunteer who lived nearby, came to lead a Bible study. When she arrived, I sat on the floor with the residents, leaving the chair next to her empty. “Come sit,” she said to me while patting the chair next to her and smiling. I told her I was comfortable sitting where I was. She told me to come. I said I would like to sit on the floor. She stopped smiling and asked, “Why? Why are you sitting with the girls? Come sit on the chair.” “It’s okay,” I responded.” Come sit,” she insisted. When I realized that I was really making her frustrated and she wasn’t planning on beginning the
Bible study until I took my proper place on the chair next to her, I got up and sat in the chair. We immediately bowed our heads in prayer, at which point I looked at Nalini and Sundari, who I had been sitting next to on the floor. They were looking at me and smiling. I smiled back. I think it is because of this loyalty that Ladha, and many other residents, eventually told me two narratives about their life: a first, abbreviated and generally positive story and a second, more detailed and dark story. My relationship with staff and volunteers suffered, however.

Mary, for instance, never did agree to sit down with me for an interview. Other staff members did, but gave very generic and very brief answers to my questions. In a small, closely-bound community such as Arulagam there are certain to be cliques. I valued everyone’s perspectives and friendships, but I learned some perspectives more thoroughly and developed closer friendships with some than with others. A limit of ethnographic research, and it is certainly true in this dissertation, is that it often leans heavily on the insights and experiences of those with whom we are able to build not only rapport, but friendship.

**Truth and Obscurity**

Another limit of this research is that I followed the lead of residents, rather than staff members and local volunteers, regarding informal conversation. I noticed that I never heard a resident ask another woman about her past, even if her past was the topic of conversation. There was an informal no-prying, no-questions-asked rule that I decided to obey. In so doing, I disobeyed what one of the local volunteers asked of me during my first week of research. “Do one thing with your research,” she said. “Find out the truth about these women.” She talked about how they lied about their past, making it difficult
or even impossible for staff members to help return residents to their families. This was a priority that I, and other foreign volunteers at Arulagam, did not always support. One German volunteer told me that the Honorary Secretary had “happily” informed her that one of the “inmates” had been “reunited with her family.” The German volunteer was frustrated. She knew that the woman had come to Arulagam because her husband beat her. “What is Arulagam for?” asked the young German woman. “For making women learn how to live in bad families?” I shared this skepticism. My research focused on women’s lives and stories at the shelter, rather than to trace or discover facts about their life histories (however, see Biehl 2005 for a remarkable example of ethnographic research about the family, state, economic, and pharmaceutical worlds that led to one woman’s social abandonment and diagnosis as mentally ill).

The difference between Ladha’s initial story and the one she recounted near the merry-go-round demonstrates the significance of obscurity in the shelter. When a woman comes to the shelter, although the long-term goal is often to reunite her with her family, the immediate goal is safety. Arulagam is a place of respite from the streets, abusive families, prison, and brothels. “This is a place where they can find short stay, shelter, and a kind of security,” said Rev. Maggie. She was worried that foreign visitors often took pictures of residents, and especially their young children. “What do they do with those pictures?” she asked rhetorically. It is easy to find pictures of Arulagam residents on the internet, usually on foreign volunteers’ personal blogs or contributions to faith-based organizations’ websites. Worried that women’s family members would see pictures of their relative at Arulagam on the internet, come to the place, and demand that she be released back to them, Rev. Maggie requested that I not use any pictures in publications
or presentations. She also asked that I provide pseudonyms for all Arulagam residents. In this case, anonymity – a standard ethnographic practice – had the purpose of providing protection against possibly abusive family members.

Staff members, while wanting to find out the truth about residents’ families and histories, encouraged residents not to share the details of their life stories with each other. Other anthropologists have discussed the power of obscurity in homeless shelters. Desjarlais (1997:43) identified “the act of obscuring” as “one of the dominant manifestations of power in and around the [Boston homeless] shelter.” “Ways of knowing,” he continued, were “predicated on opacity, surface knowledge, contingencies, and diverse planes of meaning” (Desjarlais 1997:43). Arulagam residents kept their histories secret to avoid confrontation, humiliation, ridicule and rejection from other residents. Staff members encouraged such silence and secrecy, telling me that disclosure led to “competition,” comparison, or jealousy (*porāmai*) among the residents. Staff members also told me that they didn’t want residents to focus on the sadness and hardships they experienced in the past. Residents shared their stories with only their closest, most trusted friends. Often, I was privileged to become one of those friends. Other times I was not. Ladha told me that I was one of two people (the other a fellow resident) at the shelter who had heard her life story. She explained, “If I tell the women in here [my life story], problems will come. Fights will come. Therefore, I keep it in my heart. I am crying and praying at nighttime in my heart. There’s no other way, ‘sister’. No one knows this matter. I am crying, containing it inside.”

Ladha shares with homeless people in varying cultural contexts an experience of being treated like dirt. “You need to know this. Women like me are swept away like
dust,” she said. Desjarlais (1997:5) brings attention to widespread “police ‘sweeps’ of homeless people” in United States cities in the 1990s and quotes a homeless man who told a film director: “They look at us like we’re germs, like we’re dirt.” Such perceptions of being treated as less-than-human coincide with difficulties finding avenues for meaningful conversation. I asked Ladha if she ever talked to staff members about her life or posed the questions she wanted to ask God to pastors from TTS. She had not. Like in other homeless shelters, Ladha’s “ethics of listening,” the value of simply being heard, was at odds with the staff and board members’ goals of achieving some end (Desjarlais 1997:195-196). Staff and board members asked residents if they had accepted Jesus into their lives, if they had showered, eaten, taken their medicines, brushed their hair, washed their clothes, if they were ready to go out and find some work cooking or caring for children in someone’s home, in an orphanage, or an AIDS hospice. “They won’t listen,” said Ladha. “You come and you ask with interest about the details, about our lives. You ask with interest about the difficulties, suffering we came with. If they asked about us, about what situation we have come from . . . If they asked with interest . . .,” she trailed off.

My methodology was simple. I didn’t have to ask questions. I just had to listen. In each of the stories in this dissertation, whether excerpts from interviews within chapters or the narratives provided between chapters, I simply asked residents to “tell me your life story.” In listening and writing, with interest, I aimed to present Arulagam residents and staff members, who in most cases were just slightly better-off than the residents they cared for and shared some level of outsider status with them, as meaningful interlocutors in contemporary discussions about community and belonging as well as about religious
pluralism, secular democracy, and global feminisms. The anthropological approach to my research allowed me to move beyond abstract and exclusionary vocabulary, like secular democracy and religious pluralism, to demonstrate how residents did participate in such discourse and practice, even if they might not use the same language. Women living, working, and volunteering at the shelter fought, disagreed, and held different expectations for women’s social rehabilitation. However, they also found ways to live together amicably despite differences. They articulated the importance of accepting and including people in the community as they were. And they debated the various ideas about and ideals of womanhood brought to the shelter by women from India, Germany, the United States, and England.

Anthropologists have used life histories and participant-observation, accounts of day-to-day life, interpersonal relationships, and informal conversations to argue that homeless women are often less Other than society would like them to be. Many anthropologists of homeless shelters strive for an "experience-near" ethnographic account of the humanity of suffering people (Kleinman and Kleinman 1995:96). They succeed, according to peer reviews, when they, like Waterston (1999), "bear witness to the humanity of those who are despised, mistreated, or ignored by the world around them, . . . testifying to the courage, humanity, humor, and intelligence of women" living in shelters (Cassell 2000:616). It was true that residents and staff members didn’t talk much, if at all, about religious pluralism, secular democracy, and global feminisms. They did, however, have interesting, important, and complex things to say about family life, womanhood, gender inequality, cultural differences between themselves and foreign volunteers and
researchers, religious and other differences, and the ways in which they valued, pursued, and found difficulties building community and a sense of belonging in the shelter.

Scholarship about U.S. homeless shelters concludes that the “dominance of reason led to the devaluation of certain ways of being” and cast “a negative cloud over” residents’ speech, opinions, reactions, and practices (Desjarlais 1997:207). Arulagam resident were not typically recognized as interlocutors or valued as active participants and creators of a secular, plural community working against patriarchal society – the kind of work and vision articulated by TTS leaders like Rev. M. Gnanavaram who gave the International Women’s Day message that sparked this research. Instead, Arulagam residents and sometimes staff were often excluded from these conversations, on account of being poor, traumatized, and crazy. Although this difference that cast them outside normative society was one that interested me, women at Arulagam were concerned about another, more material, layer of difference.

Envy

My research design followed many of the conventions of ethnographic research in homeless shelters. These included using the least intrusive methods possible, minimizing material differences between the researcher and the research population, and building rapport through informal conversations and “hanging out” (Desjarlais 1997:41; Rosenthal 1994:173-191). However, conducting research in a Tamil women’s homeless shelter invites different underlying cultural concerns and motivations. How did my research methodologies align with the community’s methods for women’s social rehabilitation?

Many of my methodological struggles revolved around attempts to negotiate cliques and gossip. I came to accept the fact that my failure to develop a good
relationship with every woman in the hostel revealed less about my inadequacies as a researcher than the very struggle at the heart of day-to-day hostel life. Women at the shelter were “women with no one.” Rehabilitation required building new relationships and community, whether with a woman’s original family, a new family, or for women like Sundari, in the hostel itself. Arulagam was created, according to Mary, precisely because “today women cannot be alone.” It is dangerous, she explained. “A woman being alone is not good.” Arulagam, on a day-to-day scale, did not seek to address the failures of gender inequality in society or systematic failures of family life for women. Instead, they sought to restore relationships and to give women with no one, some one. They tried to create harmony in the face of *porāmai*.

In her ethnographic study of gender and capital transformation in a Tamil Nadu fishing village, Kalpana Ram (1991) describes the social significance of *porāmai*, or jealousy/envy. It is at the root of “psychic and social imbalance” and “refers to the infinite capacity of human beings to want what cannot be had, a capacity which turns rancid with frustration” (Ram 1991:54). In both versions of Ladha’s life story, someone uses sorcery on her mother-in-law, who commits suicide. “It is *porāmai* which underlies attempts . . . to employ sorcery on one another, thus providing the entry point for supernatural agencies to attack” (Ram 1991:54). Mary, a Pentecostal administrative assistant at Arulagam, described Satan’s presence on earth in terms of *porāmai*. After describing Lucifer’s fall from heaven, she said that God (*āṇṭavar*) created everything on earth. “In the morning and evening, when *āṇṭavar* was talking and becoming close to Adam in that cool garden, *porāmai* came to Lucifer’s heart. He came as a serpent.”
Poṟāmai is an acute threat in a community like Arulagam. “In a community where even daily food is an uncertainty” or where one does not have family, “poṟāmai need not focus on anything extraordinary.” Arulagam residents can experience “disequilibrium, exciting deep-lying resentments” (Ram 1991:54) when different things and ideas are brought to the shelter: when staff members brought food from home, I wore new shoes, or the TV star had a beautiful gold chain around her neck. “Disequilibrium, the absence of harmony, may thus be socially generated, but finds its symbolic locus in the excesses of a desiring psyche” (Ram 1991:54). Disequilibrium did not necessarily involve differences in material goods. “The different resources of family support that young women bring to their time in the hostel become a dividing line between them,” writes Ritty Lukose (2009:114) in the context of a college hostel. This is why staff members discouraged residents from talking about their pasts and discouraged me from wearing new shoes.

Poṟāmai is a “subset of the broader category of desire, in this case desire full of resentment over the good fortune of another” (Ram 1991:54). Like TV actresses, staff members were apt to point out to me, I also represented everything Arulagam residents did not and could not have: wealth, marriage, travel, education. Staff members were nervous that my very presence would make residents feel poṟāmai. Differences were inevitable, but minimizing differences considered “showy” was a concern within the shelter community. Poovarasi, Arulagam warden, once reprimanded me for wearing new shoes to Arulagam. On another day she very angrily told me to not bring my bag and camera to the shelter. She described how they would see my new shoes, pretty bag, and fancy camera and poṟāmai would come to them and cause trouble. After the second day
of angry looks from Poovarasi, I limited my research wardrobe to hardly more than three salwar kameez and simple chappals. I also left my camera at home but introduced Brent as not only husband, but camera man, for functions. Shelter staff unanimously supported this practice.

Rev. Maggie might have called it “petty” and “silly,” but poṟāmai – or the risk of it – shaped social practices at the shelter. More importantly than influencing my wardrobe, “Fear of arousing envy feeds into the distribution of resources and living arrangements, the management of food and income within households” (Ram 1991:54). While the extended family was the context for Ram’s analysis of this particular link between emotions and material distribution, the same is certainly true at the hostel. Staff members held and managed money individual residents earned through craftwork, refused to distribute my gifts of used clothing until there was enough for every resident, and shifted residents’ living arrangements based on assumptions of desire or conflicts. “Fear of arousing envy” (Ram 1991:54) also made it difficult for people to talk openly about what they had, what they had lost, and what they wanted in life. Learning about the residents and staff members was a time-intensive, informal process.

**Hanging Out**

In my initial conversations with Arulagam's Honorary Secretary, she informed me that I could live at the shelter during my research. There was a guest bedroom with an attached bathroom for long-term foreign volunteers. During my research, two women - one from England and one from the United States - each stayed for about a month in the guest bedroom. However, when I informed Rev. Maggie that my spouse would accompany me during the 12-month research period, she said that I would stay off campus instead.
Unmarried staff members lived at the shelter while married staff members commuted, she explained.

I ate meals with staff members and snacks with residents. We taught each other games. We watched movies. I observed new residents become admitted and rare meetings between residents and their visiting family members. I learned how to weave mats on a giant handloom and, despite their best efforts, failed to become a competent seamstress. Residents, staff, and I spent the majority of our time together sitting and chatting - on the steps with very milky tea, in the crèche with crying babies, outside the sewing room with residents who didn't want to work, in the office with staff, and in the hot kitchen over a wood fire. Residents rarely left the shelter and the activities available to them were limited to Bible studies, sewing or weaving. Homeless shelters, in general, have “a conversation-based reality, perhaps more so than other social worlds” (Desjarlais 1997:41). Informal conversations and notes that I took as soon as possible after - sometimes at the shelter itself and sometimes back at our apartment - formed a large part of my data.

I made sure to schedule participant-observation at various times, sometimes the morning, sometimes the afternoon or evening to get a sense of the daily schedule. I sometimes stayed overnight for two or three nights in a row, and many weeks I spent one night at the shelter. I recorded Bible studies and took notes during prayers and songs. I attended Sunday evening worship at Tamilnadu Theological Seminary with staff and residents. I participated and recorded celebrations, including Christmas, Founder's Day, and International Women's Day.
Several months into the research, I told residents that I would record interviews with them if they wanted, explaining that I would write about their stories in books and presentations in the United States. After this initial invitation, I waited for residents to ask me for the interview. During these interviews, I tried not to press for more details about their past, instead focusing my efforts on listening and asking questions about life in the shelter. Some interviews lasted only five minutes, others spanned several days and several hours. In all, I was able to supplement participation in daily activities and conversations with a series of over 80 interviews. In addition to interviews with volunteers, residents, board and staff members, I also interviewed former board and staff members, now located in various cities throughout South India, former Tamil volunteers and donors, and former international volunteers, the latter over email.

While it would have been advantageous to live at the shelter, I was happy to have a place of respite from a cycle of prayers and Bible studies interrupted by monotonous daily routines of sewing and weaving and endless, repetitive internal gossip, fairly constant critiques of my hair, clothes, and marriage (just what was Brent eating while I was gone all day?), and the often poorly cooked food and ration rice at the shelter. In fact, on a couple evenings when I did stay overnight, the food was deemed inedible by all of us and I went down the street to buy idli, sambar, and chutney for the residents, live-in staff, and myself. The residents' stories were filled with violence - rape, physical and mental abuse, neglect, pain, disease, shame, silence. Their futures were bleak. The few women who left for work or to rejoin their family often returned. Whether fair or not, I was personally frustrated that the organization addressed the residents' medical, emotional, psychological, and social needs solely through Christian practices. They
needed so much they were not given: education, relevant skills training, medical attention, counseling, fresh produce, physical activity, mental stimulation, trips outside the shelter, a vision of the future beyond the shelter.

I returned home many days in tears of sadness and frustration. There, I wrote fieldnotes and revised interview guides. I also cooked and relaxed so that I could return to the shelter the next day with renewed energy. With this break, I could return enthusiastic about questions people had about my culinary habits, willing to laugh at my inevitable cultural miscues and frequent language mishaps, and - most significantly - able to listen to another story of pain, loss, rejection, and violence. Living away from the shelter helped me cope with the failures I perceived in society and shelter life.

While social rehabilitation often seemed to fail to provide safe, nurturing, inspiring, and fulfilling lives and relationships to the homeless women, I became very close to many of the women over many a cup of hard-to-swallow tea, many hard-to-imagine stories. I shared many laughs with the residents and enjoyed my time with them very much. But I consider it important that I also write about my frustrations, the particular difficulties of doing ethnography in a Tamil Nadu women’s homeless shelter, for those frustrations reflect the daily realities of life and the practices of rehabilitation within the shelter. "You will write negative things, too. That is research," said Arulagam's Honorary Secretary, who holds a PhD in Communication Studies, during our initial meeting. This acknowledgement, and permission to explore, the negative side of the organization in the name of research meant a lot to me. Recognizing failure as a significant and powerful force in our lives might not always put people in the best light. However, writing "negative things," if they are to be an integral part of ethnographic
research, must not be merely a documentation of failures, but an exercise in epistemic "risk-taking" (Goslinga and Frank 2007:xvi).

On June 3rd, 2009 towards the end of my stay in Tamil Nadu, I summarized my research in a Facebook message to Laurah Mathew-Klepinger, one of my peers in the department who also does research in South India:

I think I've finally recognized (accepted?) a piece of reality that my research speaks to - one of deep suffering and rejection and about the very incomplete ways in which we try to deal with that - acceptance within aversion, hospitality that verges on hostility, redemption through the humiliation of asking forgiveness. . . . I expected to be doing a project that was happier. There's happiness in there, for sure, it's just very much immersed in some ugly human dispositions, ideologies, and structures.

Upon my return I found an excerpt from an ethnography about a women’s homeless shelter in New York City that echoes the sentiment I tried to articulate towards the end of my field research:

Woodhouse women are at once vulnerable and strong, failures and survivors. They are at once in need of ‘help,’ ‘healing’ and ‘teaching,’ a paternalistic and infantilizing approach, and at the same time they need respect, freedom and autonomy, independence. Woodhouse is at once a home that nurtures, heals, cares, embraces, and a precarious institution that names and labels, constructing otherness and essentializing women’s experiences with poverty, homelessness, mental illness. Just as the women signify our social problems, Woodhouse is emblematic of our social
solutions, always fragmented and partial. (Waterston 1999:142)


Conclusion

Conducting research in a woman’s homeless shelter in Tamil Nadu presented unique challenges. The shelter residents, as well as several of the staff members, had lived difficult lives and experienced isolation, rejection, abuse, and heartbreak. Building rapport, I would argue, was at once incredibly easy – residents wanted people to talk to – and painfully difficult. My transient nature simultaneously sparked staff members’ and residents’ suspicion and provided them opportunities to talk about things they might not share with more stable members of the community. My friendship with Ladha entrusted me with versions of her life story she wouldn’t share with others. She also regularly punched me on the arm and accused me of not visiting enough. It wasn’t just banter. I had to prove my commitment to the community, their efforts at social rehabilitation, and to the individuals. It required that I simply hang out for months before even discussing the possibility of recording interviews with the residents. An “ethic of listening” – rather than checking in on residents and their day-to-day habits and chores like staff members or focusing on semi-structured interviews like I had designed before I started the research – allowed me to hear not only residents’ public version of their life story (of good family background) but the one they felt they needed to keep secret.

I consider failure an important and productive cultural phenomenon, in that it requires people and communities to engage in an on-going process of rethinking community, belonging, and womanhood as people individually and collectively face cultural ideals they cannot meet. Being willing to “write negative things,” as Rev. Maggie
acknowledged in our conversation about ethnographic research, or discussing negative things, as Aameena does in her life story below, can be a willingness to engage in critique, a commitment to honesty, or a statement about the ways in which one values different opinions and perspectives. Addressing “negative things,” in other words, is a productive practice, a way to theorize, to do ethics, to think about different ways to be human and to be in community. What might at first glance be a case of failure – my failure to gain the trust of a community of nuns, residents’ inability to meet societal expectations for Tamil womanhood, ethnography’s failure to articulate objective truth, Arulagam’s failure to rehabilitate women and ensure their short-term only stay at the shelter – all of these failures also constitute very humble and human efforts to bridge the gap between cultural, professional, and ethical ideals, on one hand, and lived experience, on the other hand. Embodying, or being privy to, stories of failure is to inhabit a space of vulnerability, a space that often enables critical reflection about the societal limitations of life, of the difficulties of being a young Muslim woman in love with a Hindu boy.
“Do You Know How Many Difficulties I Have?”
- Aameena, a short-term Arulagam resident’s story

Aameena had arrived just a few months earlier. She was a Muslim girl who had fallen in love with a Hindu boy. This is what she told a group of us in the main courtyard after getting off the phone with her father, who had called the shelter.

*Look here. On Monday, my mom and dad are coming. You’re all going to scold me, but I will not change. Falling at my parents’ feet, I will tell them, “Please, I want him for life.” I will ask, “Can I be with him or not?” If they say, “No, you can’t be with him,” that day is the last I’ll see their faces. I will tell them to leave thinking that their child is dead. What will they say to me? “You do not know our love and affection. You do not know our values. Tomorrow you will know the pain of birthing a child, and you will understand our values,” they will say. Even if I birth a child, it’s okay. If I don’t birth a child it’s okay. Everyone has pain, whether or not they have children.*

*For how many years our family has been separated! Today I am here and I have fallen in love. And now the family has become united! Do I need to go to see all of their faces? Do you know what they said? Do you know what they did the last time we were together? They welcomed me to celebrate a festival. “We need to do puja,” they said. One day before the puja, they called me to the house for five minutes [only a day]. I left here and went to the house. What did they think? They were thinking that they needed to do black magic on me. They said that my younger sister had become mad, so they locked her with a chain. If I go there this time, they will do something like that to me. Calling and going somewhere, there will be some man. They will tell me to marry him. Do I need that? Didn’t they know that he is a Hindu while talking to him? If he were a Muslim, I would not have come here like this.*
Nalini: Talk to them. Phone your house and talk to your parents.

A: I called and talked, sister (akkā). I am not of age. I am coming of age in three months. I am afraid they will marry me to someone.

N: Let’s phone.

A: But already there has been so many problems. If I have been separated from my family for the sake of him [the Hindu boy she is in love with], I am in want of nothing. I tell you the truth. I will not get this much happiness at my house. Coming here, I know that I have been very happy. If I go home, how will it be? It will be harsh. I will see. The first day, on Monday, they will tolerate me. Just watch. Falling at my feet, they will say, “We will bring you home.” But I will not go. Once I went with them, believing that they had turned over a new leaf. But I got cheated by them and came here with these two problems: marriage and parents.

Today I revealed all the happenings of my life, which I had hidden before.

N: Don’t worry. Pray well. Those who birthed us, those who are higher than us, we must not disgrace. Weddings happened to us.

A: How will I be? Do you know?

N: Here, how many people are without a mother and father?

A: Up until that, I would have talked to mother in anger. But I won’t talk to my father in anger. I shamefully respected them. Overcoming that, the years passed. Even though he [the Hindu boy she is in love with] didn’t come searching for me, no worries. I am going to be here. I will not go to my mother and father.

N: What will everyone here say? If you wait for him for two years and he doesn’t come, what will you do? They will speak about you disgracefully.
A: I know. I will not talk. My mother and father talked like you are now. Do you know how many difficulties I have? Bringing me here, do you know what all they did? They don’t even understand a little. They will take me. They will take me around to where my family is. My relative’s son was married, but he divorced. They will give me to him in marriage.

I am scared.

Her father did come on Monday. They talked calmly and quietly in the shelter entryway for several minutes. Then Aameena gathered her belongings and left with him. Since she was reunited with her family, Aameena’s dynamic, outgoing, and friendly presence at the shelter would be transformed into a quantified tally of success in the shelter’s annual report.
4: Trading Fanatics for Fathers, Wolves for Husbands

As women with no one, Arulagam residents fall outside of established cultural relationships and patterns of meaning. Such populations can become institutionalized, stigmatized, and marginalized. “Those living on the streets and in shelters are disturbing because they threaten assumed paradigms of meaning” (Desjarlais 1997:17). Members of the Arulagam community responded to this threat, generally, in two ways. The first was to ask critical questions about the validity of “assumed paradigms of meaning.” “Should we laugh [at jokes about women]?” asked Dr. Rev. Gnanavaram. “No. We should be angry.” The second response was different than critical anger. It involved an act of myth-making, a sometimes simplified and stereotyped act of storytelling of an evil male world and their unwitting female victims.

The archives present Arulagam’s founding and history as a mythic tale of good vs. evil. The narrative works to build wide public support for Arulagam’s social work, across oceans, cultures, and religions. Reduced to victims and villains playing out a scripted story of lost innocence that leads, finally and victoriously, to social rehabilitation, Arulagam’s official history risks compromising the complex relationships, histories, emotions, and goals of the people involved with Arulagam’s rehabilitation program. In the first half of this chapter, I recount Arulagam’s history as it is presented in the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary archives, making an argument for the political act of telling stories about history and their practical impact on people’s lives and rehabilitation programs. In the second half of the chapter, I turn to interview-based data to complicate vignettes of success found in the archives and the role of doubt in processes of rehabilitation.
Poetic Disturbance

The story of Arulagam’s founding involves two unlikely accomplices: a Tamil lawyer of “name and fame” and “a very elderly, frail European lady” (Santhosham 1982b).

Dharmaraj Santhosham, the lawyer, would become the first Arulagam President. Margaret Harris, the elderly British woman, would become Arulagam’s founder. The story, according to Dharmaraj, begins in 1944. Margaret would not appear on the scene until 30 years later. But that year, Dharmaraj began his career as a defense lawyer for women charged for prostitution under the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act (S.I.T. Act). The S.I.T. Act was passed in Tamil Nadu in 1930. While this Act aimed to abolish prostitution, economic and political connections between police, politicians, brothel keepers and pimps led to a set of practices that tolerated prostitution and brothel keepers while criminalizing individual prostitutes (D’Cunha 1987:1920; Ghosh 2005:58).

Dharmaraj witnessed this process firsthand during his initial S.I.T. Act case in 1944. He documents this experience with ethnographic detail in an Arulagam anniversary document, housed in the Arulagam collections at the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary archives.

“This is my personal testimony and tribute to the services and achievements of a great lady who cared, dared and did, while others merely watched and wailed or did not care at all.” So begins Dharmaraj Santhosham’s poetic essay about the founder, Margaret Harris, and beginnings of The Association of Arulagam.

It was a Monday morning in 1944. The time was a little before 9:00 a.m. I was in my office chair, studying a brief. I was a very young lawyer then, who had just earned some name and fame. A very big built man [entered
my office]. His silk shirt, jari dhoti, the minor chain round his neck, the
gold wristwatch, and rings of various designs and precious stones loudly
proclaimed his immense wealth.

The man informed Dharmaraj that an old lady would soon approach the lawyer. Her
daughter was in police custody under the S.I.T. Act. He handed Dharmaraj 300 rupees
and left. Soon thereafter, the old lady entered the lawyer’s office “with great humility and
hesitation.” She told Dharmaraj that she had taken her daughter to the biggest lodge in
Madurai “to spend the night with [the owner].” That night the police raided the lodge,
taking the girl in custody. The police registered a case against the girl under the charge
that she had “solicited a man for illicit intercourse.” They released the lodge owner
(Santhosham 1982b).

Scholars have corroborated Dharmaraj’s implicit reference to the rule of bribery
and connections between brothel owners, pimps, lawyers, and police. These bribes can
turn police officials’ eyes away from brothel owners and pimps. In Mumbai, during a
four-year period from 1980-1984, police arrested 660 brothel keepers/pimps and 5,543
prostitutes. “All brothel keepers and procurers arrested were released on bail” (D’Cunha
1987:1920). Prostitutes were also often released on bail.

Knowing this, Dharmaraj told the old woman that he could present a bail bond in
court. He would only need the girl’s father to sign the paperwork. “At first, the woman
said that the girl’s father was dead. But later when I told her that without the father, it
might be difficult to get release for a minor girl, they went and brought a middle-aged
man, whom they said was the father.” They all went to court. The lawyer moved for bail.
The father signed, and the girl was released. After years of watching the workings of this
“underworld from the inside,” Dharmaraj realized that the “so-called father” was most likely a pimp or brothel-owner who posted bail and picked up the girl “to start [her] old life once again” (Santhosham 1982b). The cycle slowly became apparent. Brothel owners and pimps often posed as parents before the court. The girl was often handed over to them without any question. If a ‘parent applicant’ was found fraudulent upon investigation, the only penalty was a fine. “Thus the court in effect orders girls back to the brothel” (D’Cunha 1987:1922). While D’Cunha rightfully notes that we cannot estimate how many young women have returned to brothels in this way, Dharmaraj wrote in his account that it was not invisible. Police officers were aware of this process. Much of the public knew. Lawyers had uncovered it. “Yet no one ever thought that this situation called for intervention and action. Years passed” (Santhosham 1982b).

It was not the young lawyer with “name and fame” who exposed it to the wider public and tried to break the cycle. Instead it was the “very elderly, frail European lady” who arrived at the lawyer’s office thirty years later. “It was some day around 1974,” continued Dharmaraj. “The time was about 6:00 p.m. I was sitting in the inner room of my office talking to some clients.” A British woman came in and said, “Mr. Santhosham, the most horrible thing has happened. We must do something immediately” (Santhosham 1982b).

The woman was Margaret Harris. Margaret and her husband, Rev. William, started a Prison Ministry program at Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, serving inmates and their families at a prison near the seminary campus. Margaret visited the female yard, while William visited the men’s prison. Margaret learned that most female prisoners had been charged under the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act. In the encounter that
encouraged Margaret to approach the S.I.T. Act defense lawyer, a young woman in prison asked her for help. She said that her family would never accept her again, and she feared returning to a brothel. Margaret returned to the prison the same evening, intending to take the young woman to her own house until she could make other arrangements. Upon arriving at the prison, she was informed that a man and woman – her “parents” – had come to take the young woman away. Margaret was suspicious.

Just as Dharmaraj had learned about an “underworld from within” (Santhosham 1982b), Margaret’s prison ministry yielded a disturbing discovery. A former Arulagam superintendent and joint secretary wrote, “Margaret was shocked to find that the majority of the [female] prisoners were charged under the ‘Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act’, often facing trumped up charges” (Hay 2000). Thirty years apart, a young Tamil lawyer and an elderly British woman had come to know women affected by a social pattern that was not unknown, but was seemingly ignored. Margaret Harris needed to find a way to talk about what people already knew. “To escape a sense of blockage, those confronted by the homeless resort to irony, mythic themes, and a rough poetry to give meaning to their encounters” (Desjarlais 1997:65). The shock of discovering an underworld from within is the “poetic moment” repeated by Dharmaraj in 1982 and a shelter superintendent in 2000.

By poeticizing an unsettling moment, the moment ceases to disturb. The author puts a lid on formlessness by giving it a tangible form. To talk about the homeless (or any other presence that lacks stable form) can quickly lead to a poetics that situates the talk within an architecture – a
rhythm or structure that gives form and meaning to the formless.

[Desjarlais 1997:66]

Poetics may help provide meaning, but the process of constructing a triumphant historical narrative like Arulagam’s also involves a sharper edge, “a rhetorical razor that defines included and excluded, relevant and irrelevant, empowered and disempowered” (Cronon 1992:1349). The next aspect of this narrative I focus on are its characters. These characters – female victims, male vultures, and foreign saviors – populate the “mythical structure” of rehabilitation (McKinney 2007:285), and introduce a series of critical questions regarding transnational feminism, agency and rehabilitation.

**Predator and Prey**

Margaret Harris envisioned a home of refuge that would help rehabilitate sex workers so they could return to society. The home would provide counseling, skills training, medical care, and help women reunite with families. She met with lawyers – like Dharmaraj – judges, police deputies, and secular and theological professors to garner support for the project. Dharmaraj and Dr. Samuel Amirtham, President of Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, offered their legal expertise. But Margaret herself “mastered the provisions of the Registration Act [to] produce a Memorandum and Articles of Association” to open a new, registered home (Santhosham 1982b). The opening of the home promised other new beginnings for individual women and for society at large. The sixth and final aim of the Association of Arulagam, according to the Memorandum Rules and Regulations Margaret composed, was “to mobilize and inform public opinion of matters pertaining to social health.”
Key to the success of public mobilization was a clear narrative of good vs. evil, stripped of moral ambiguity, personal complexity, and controversy.

The very authority with which narrative presents its vision of reality is achieved by obscuring large portions of that reality. Narrative succeeds to the extent that it hides the discontinuities, ellipses, and contradictory experiences that would undermine the intended meaning of its story. . . . A powerful narrative reconstructs common sense to make the contingent seem determined and the artificial seem natural. [Cronon 1992:1349-1350]

International donations from around the world would, and continue to, provide a large portion of Arulagam’s funds. In fact, according to on-site staff members, Arulagam depended largely on money donated to the organization by people in England. For several years, Margaret Addicott, former Arulagam superintendent, has single handedly secured these donations. They attributed the financial difficulties the organization faced during my research (sometimes resulting in staff members not receiving a paycheck) on the fact that Margaret Addicott was getting older and was not able to raise funds to the extent she once did. Evident in this interpretation of financial difficulties was the fact that the Arulagam mission had to speak to many people. Their audience includes a diverse global Christian population and a diverse, local concerned community comprised of Hindus, Muslims, secular Gandhians, and Christians with their own heterogeneous convictions. This audience of possible donors, supporters, and volunteers heard a story they could understand, no matter their cultural background; a story they could have a clear position about, no matter their ethics and ideals. It builds upon the image of the two imprisoned sex workers who met Dharmaraj in 1944 and Margaret in 1974.
Margaret staged two public meetings to expand community support. She, along with various professors and community leaders, delivered speeches about prostitution in Madurai and Tamil Nadu. As Margaret spread awareness about prostitution in Madurai, people mobilized around a particular cast of characters in a drama: innocent, vulnerable girls and evil, less-than-human men in an “underworld.” The way Dharmaraj portrayed the two female prisoners, whose stories became the motivation for the rehabilitative shelter and work of Arulagam, laid the groundwork for a series of assumptions about womanhood and corresponding commitments to a clearly defined project of rehabilitation. His portrayal of innocent, respectable, victimized women enabled the public to mobilize around an uncontroversial feminist issue, to recognize the need for an agency like Arulagam, and to imagine rehabilitation as an achievable goal.

Dharmaraj doesn’t tell us much about the two young women’s particular backgrounds and experiences, but he does make sure to point out that they are charming and respectable. He establishes the young women’s innocence and purity by consistently referring to the imprisoned sex workers as girls. Youthful innocence is naturalized, universalized and capitalized upon elsewhere in the archives. A volunteer from the UK notes that she spent most of her time at Arulagam with children who “bring with them, like all children everywhere, such unique Love and Joy” (Dyes 2003). In Dharmaraj’s case, “the police brought an exquisitely beautiful girl, more charming and more glamorous than most cinema stars” into the courtroom. The young woman who confided in Margaret during the prison ministry program said that she “came from a respectable family.” But, after a minor disagreement with a family member, she had “thoughtlessly left” home and had been forced into prostitution. She told Margaret that her parents
would never accept her again, but that she wanted help “to regain her dignity and a decent way of life” (Santhosham 1982b). The first goal of publishing the Souvenir, an Arulagam publication to raise awareness about the work of the organization, was to bring to the attention of the public the pathetic plight of innumerable women and girls who are victims of Immoral Traffic. They are treated as slaves and exploited in the most inhuman manner by heartless and unscrupulous anti-social elements. They are despised by society and disowned by their kith and kin and in most cases they are innocent, unsophisticated girls who are more sinned against their sinning. [Santhosham 1982a]

While women have the character necessary for rehabilitation, men involved in the circle of prostitution do not. Men in this story hint at an animal, wild, or untamed nature that call their character, their very humanity, into question. Recall Dr. Rev. Gnanavaram’s International Women’s Day message: “Who must the writer be? A man. A man created this story, a fanatical man.” In the archives as well, men exist on the boundaries between animal and human, leading to a predator-prey relationship between men and girls. Rev. Florence Robinson, a former Honorary Secretary, deems them “human vultures” (F. Robinson 1982). Dharmaraj Santhosham, the lawyer, does not even name them as men, but as animals. “Even, if occasionally, girls escape from the clutches of [brothel] Keepers, they run into other Wolves waiting for them with jaws wide open. When she comes to some bus stand or railway station, the ever watchful eyes of the wolves see a prospective prey” (Santhosham 1982b). The girls of Arulagam – aged 16 to 60 years – are “vulnerable” prey easily devoured by wolves, “easily tricked, trapped and
drawn into [prostitution]” (F. Robinson 2000). The narrative repeats, just as does the

cycle of prostitution. A British missionary who held the titles of Arulagam superintendent

and joint secretary used very similar words, arguing that girls are “tricked, tempted and

trapped into prostitution” (Hay 2000). They are innocent victims, captured most
dramatically by an unknown author in the 1982 *Souvenir* in the Arulagam Collections,

TTS Archives:

> Once these girls are trapped, they have practically no way of escape. . . .

> Even if a girl wants to give up this trade and wants to start a new life, she

> has no way out. Anyone showing the slightest inclination to escape is
tortured and silenced. Thus their life goes round in a circle, until they

> contract some venereal disease and die.

A trapped, silenced girl is caught in an endless cycle. Her agency has been stripped. She

is not able to talk or move, her body vulnerable to sex, torture, disease, and death.

   Constructing Arulagam residents as innocent victims is a crucial aspect of a

   narrative of good overcoming evil. “The closing scene has to be different from the

   opening one.” If the story is going to be “the happy conclusion of a struggle to transform”

   prostitutes into family women, “then the most basic requirement of the story is that the

   earlier form of that [woman] must either be neutral or negative in value. It must *deserve*

   to be transformed” (Cronon 1992:1354). In their descriptions of innocent and

   unsophisticated girls, Arulagam board members “idealize survivors as pure and

   innocent,” a prerequisite “for the possibility of redemption” (McKinney 2007:286). The

   moral agency of female residents, while lost, is the very thing that separates them from

   the opposing character in the story: the evil, barely human men. While residents are
objects of rehabilitation, “evil people are beyond rehabilitation, will never be transformed, and most certainly shall never attain redemption” (Waldram 2009:229). Instead of being inherently immoral or evil, like the men involved in prostitution, Arulagam residents are constructed as women who lived, knew, desired, and could return to the dignified life they had lost, that had been taken away from them.

While women are constructed in this narrative as innocent victims, in part to imagine them as both fully deserving and fully capable of rehabilitation, men in the story often appear similarly one-dimensional. They are evil. Just as it is easier to champion women’s social rehabilitation for young girls who desire to be married than women who have more complicated lives, ambitions, and critiques of patriarchal Tamil society, it is “easier to struggle against a demonic presence” than human beings (Waldram 2009: 220). These stories are told, and caricatures drawn despite the fact that the Arulagam community is full of people who complicate these religious and social dichotomies. Men, like Dr. Rev. Gnanavaram preach about the male chauvinism of popular comedies and culture, more broadly. Female staff members, like Poovarasi, Ruth, and Lakshmi, play key leadership roles in day-to-day shelter life. Yet they proudly embody the roles of spinster and widow, women who live boldly outside of patriarchal family structures to do challenging social work and live out religious convictions that support those who are poor, destitute, sick, and marginalized.

Black and white dichotomies, though, provide the structure of a clearer kind of story, one that residents, staff, and volunteers alike reproduce: good and evil, innocent girls and animal-like men, female prey and male vultures, family life and prostitution, and finally the geographical dichotomy: village and city. When Ladha initially told me
her story, she ended by simply saying that all problems had come to her because she had been in Chennai. It was a vague statement, but she didn’t need to say anything more. The city was often used as the reason and context of women’s homelessness and immorality. The rest of the story was implied. Rev. Florence, former Arulagam Honorary Secretary, documented the evils of the city in a report:

They all come to the big cities and fall into the hands of human vultures (pimps or brokers) who lie in wait for such preys and easily identify these girls who are new to cities. Many educated, unemployed women from the villages are deceived by fraudulent benefactors who tempt them with the promise of finding better jobs in cities and take them away from their homes. Once they bring them to the cities they sell these girls to lodges or brothel houses. Some are, of course, driven into it due to penury and unbearable poverty (F. Robinson 1982)

Arulagam is on the side of good, of God. “God,” wrote Margaret Harris (1982), “inspired the undertaking [and] has guided and blessed its growth and development.” As one foreign donor wrote: “Arulagam’s struggle with the evils of society and men has to be supported by all means in order to witness for God who loves the world, for God who loves man and woman, for God who loves you and me” (Grundmann 1982). Evil finds its way onto many of the archived pages, in remarks such as the following, from a former TTS Principal: “Prostitution is the most dubious and viscous circle of evil in society” (G. Robinson 2000).
**Defining Success**

In the archived documents about Arulagam’s history and social rehabilitation work, the poetic beginning and dichotomized characters lead to a clear-cut ending. There are two options for this closure. One is happy; the other is not. Both narratives result in the same moral lesson: Tamil women ought to live in families. The narrative “finally draws to a definite close. . . . Completed action gives a story its unity and allows us to evaluate and judge an act by its results. The moral of a story is defined by its ending” (Cronon 1992:1367). The unhappy ending marks the end of an individual’s history and life story. Women who find themselves living long-term at Arulagam, or staff members that need to describe women’s long-term residence at the hostel, say they are women with no one. It is a sense of tragic closure, of nothingness, that Cronon describes in a very different context, through an autobiography of a Crow Indian chief named Plenty Coups.

Few remarks more powerfully capture the importance of narrative to history than this last of Plenty Coups: “After this nothing happened.” For the Crows as for other Plains tribes, the universe revolved around the bison herds, and life made sense only so long as the hunt continued. When the scene shifted – when the bison herds “went away” – that universe collapsed and history ended. Although the Crows continued to live on their reservation and although their identity as a people has never ceased, for Plenty Coups their subsequent life is all part of a different story. [Cronon 1992:1366]

For Arulagam residents who had no family, their story changed. It was no longer the accepted life narrative of Tamil womanhood, but of life in Arulagam.
No matter the histories or goals of individual residents, the universal goal was to return women to families. The archives acknowledge difficulties, but focus on the positive option for closure and successful social rehabilitation. A former superintendent wrote:

Our aim is to restore these people in to society as respected and respectable persons as soon as possible. For some this can be done in a short time, but for others it takes longer to find someone prepared to accept and love them. More than half of those who come have eventually been restored to their families or their husbands. [Hay 1982]

Dharmaraj, the lawyer and first Arulagam President, concludes his essay by emphasizing Arulagam’s success in such efforts.

Today there is the light of home and a definite possibility of a respectable and happy future. There is a sanctuary, where they get not merely food and shelter. But help and training for rehabilitating themselves as respectable citizens and probably as wives and mothers in dignified families. [Santhosham 1982b]

While the narrative closure is yet to come, incomplete and difficult, it nonetheless leads us to thoughts of good overcoming evil. “The dramatic framing of the threat sutures the wound. Tensions linger, but they are artful ones. We still glimpse the horrific, but it is tamed . . . The homeless have been framed” (Desjarlais 1997:67).

The “fallen women” of Arulagam (Naidu and Venkataratnam 1982) and the human vultures that constitute prostitution rings are the morally charged characters in a myth of rehabilitation. In part because the characters stand in for good and evil, rather
than reflect complex, unpredictable, and unique individual stories, the public can use such rehabilitation narratives to contest moral concerns that “call into play broader, conflicting understandings of the very nature of humanity” (Waldram 2009:220), broader understandings of moral human life.

Rev. Maggie understood a much broader norm within Arulagam’s rehabilitation work, one that is not just relevant for homeless south Indian women, but for all of society and humanity.

Theologically speaking, we were made in God’s image, but we lost it. Whatever we have lost in the first chapter of Genesis, we want to regain it. When we regain it, we are regaining full humanity, dignity, and respect. We are regaining wholeness: social, political, economic, gender, spiritual, ideological, and religious wholeness.

Rev. Maggie’s image of humanity in “a beautiful ruins,” combined with archival stories that contextualize Arulagam, its social work, and its residents within a narrative of an evil “underworld” that victimizes women aligns with Desjarlais argument that “the homeless,” writes Desjarlais, “are the recipients of a mythology.”

The mythology, with its air of animality, death, and the underworld, stands on two acts of the imagination. There is an immediate confrontation with the homeless, which can involve a glimpse of the unsettling, and there is a retreat into strong images that cast the homeless as a beautiful ruins.

[Desjarlais 1997:67-68]

The “lost image” theme of Arulagam’s social rehabilitation work for women without homes and family support is not uncommon among rehabilitation programs.
Medical Anthropology of Rehabilitation

Medical anthropologists reveal that rehabilitation programs, whether for physical, mental, or social rehabilitation, often follow the narrative patterns outlined in Arulagam’s archives, with particular consequences for its subjects. “Psychological, moral, and political ambiguity and complexity are eliminated by purifying and idealizing victims and demonizing and othering perpetrators” (McKinney 2007:285). It results in “impoverished views of subjectivity and agency” that reinforce women’s victimhood and vulnerability rather than acknowledging and strengthening their agency (McKinney 2007:291). There can be certainty about who are perpetrators and who are victims. However, this narrative trope of “unambiguously demarcated” battles between “innocence and guilt, good and evil, and victims and perpetrators” may lead to more harm than good for women involved in rehabilitation (McKinney 2007:265). “An ideology may crystallize that casts [those in rehabilitation programs] as innocent victims, paradoxically denying a sense of their full moral and psychological agency rather than restoring it” (McKinney 2007:267). In emphasizing innocence, vulnerability, weakness, and purity, this narrative reinforces “traditional constructions of feminine experience that can be debilitating,” rather than rehabilitating (Haaken 1998:359).

One of Arulagam’s primary goals, established in the Memorandum Rules and Regulations and displayed on archived and contemporary promotional materials, is “to oppose any practice derogatory to the dignity of women.” Defining a practice as derogatory to women is not as straightforward as this statement might suggest. The emergence of critiques, most influentially with the edited volume This Bridge Called My Back (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981), regarding how feminism reflected the experiences and perspectives of middle class white women revealed the danger of essentializing
women’s experience and collapsing differences among women. This has led, more recently, to critiques of western feminism’s secular modernist assumptions about the individual, agency and freedom (Mahmood 2005), assumptions that can lead to the conclusion that religion is incompatible with feminism or that veiling subjugates women.

More specifically, through its stated objectives, Arulagam simultaneously established prostitution as the enemy and the family as the rehabilitation goal. “[Arulagam] accepts and enables women to become respectable citizens and be restored to families.” Another goal is to “make efforts to protect young girls from being lured into being victims of immoral traffic.” Identifying the main character of Arulagam narratives as girl victims of prostitution rings “permits political mobilization around the least controversial issue within feminism: child sexual abuse” (Haaken 1998:358).

Staff members insist upon the dichotomy of prostitution and family life, even when they recognize the possible connections between the two. A former Honorary Secretary cites the dowry system as motivation for parents to send their female children into prostitution rather than pay a future groom’s family unaffordable amounts of cash and goods at their daughters’ marriages (F. Robinson 1982). Analyses such as these, found throughout the archives, suggest that prostitution and family are intertwined, not two polar opposite moral and cultural institutions (Ringdal 2004:2).

Throughout the archival documents that celebrate the origin, history, and accomplishments of Arulagam, language of normalcy blends with vocabularies of family, wife and mother. It is returning to an imagined preexisting norm (Haaken 1998; Hansen and Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 2008). On a day-to-day level, the imagined preexisting norm is traditional family life. Residents want a changed life, a normal life. They want to return
to families. The normal state of womanhood and family life was interrupted by prostitution. Prostitution was abnormal, immoral, and deviant. “Rehabilitation is first and foremost about normalization and deviance” (Hansen and Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 2008:375). This is not easy work. “Even if she does get a chance to move out of her circle, she is not accepted by the society as a normal being. This once again forces her to go back to her old life” (Naidu 1982). An authorless essay in the 1982 Souvenir reinforces the norm and the difficulty of achieving it. “We try to find marriage partners and arrange marriages whenever possible. . . . Our aim is to help the girls to enter into normal life and get integrated back into society. But this we find not very easy, since it is difficult to find marriage partners for all.”

Repeatedly, Arulagam leaders, staff, and supporters construct sex workers as victims that need and depend upon the Association of Arulagam. The trope of victimization allows an Agency (or organization) – the Association of Arulagam – to assume the duties of the women’s lost agency (or ability to act). When organizations make moral appeals on behalf of groups like the homeless or autistic children, “autistic children themselves never appear (one might argue they cannot appear) as moral agents in their own right (Antze 2010:314). As the Agency co-opts women’s agency, the women’s needs and desires become obvious, uncomplicated, clear, universal. According to Arulagam’s archives, all of the women want a new life. Reinforcing the ubiquity of the assumption, an authorless essay in the 1982 Souvenir articulates a sentiment repeated throughout the archives: “All of the women want to lead a changed life. They look for people who will accept them like normal human beings.” What is this changed, normal life? Later, the author explains: “All of them wish to get married and settle down in life.”
In co-opting agency, residents are unified as a group, collapsing differences among a diverse group of women. They are different ages, have had different experiences, embody different sadness, anger, memories, and goals. In determining this unmerited sameness, the rehabilitation program assumes there is one problem and one solution for all of these women: to trade wolves, vultures, and fanatics for husbands, fathers, and uncles. Residents become characters in a master narrative of progress that “inculcate particular cultural, political, and moral views that pose as universally meaningful and desired ones” (McKinney 2007:293).

The mythic structure of rehabilitation may tend to define rehabilitation in limited terms for all women at the shelter. This does not mean, however, that residents lack agency, or are unable to imagine other futures, question cultural ideals. As I noted previously, this myth is only one response and narrative structure at the shelter. Staff, board members, and residents also recognize the limits of this myth, the ways in which women fail to meet, find happiness and security, or desire these cultural ideals of patriarchal family life.

In everyday life at the shelter, and in open-ended interviews reflecting on the history of the organization, this clear narrative becomes murkier. Nonetheless, the story told in the archives is important because it has an impact on how Arulagam staff members, volunteers, and board members understand the process and aims of women’s social rehabilitation. “Stories we tell change the way we act in the world” (Cronon 1992:1375). The clear narrative of good vs. evil provides a script for rehabilitation that strips feminism of its complexity and limits understandings of rehabilitative success to one cultural ideal. “There is a mythology of homelessness that situates the homeless in a
deathly underground. Yet there is also an active production of homelessness, for the 
myths instruct us how to treat people, construct shelters, and write sentences” (Desjarlais 
1997:68). In particular, this narrative was one that on-site staff members seemed to fully 
embrace and reproduce. In contrast, interviews with board members and residents 
revealed doubt about the official narrative and its universalized goal of restoring women 
to families.

**Doubt**

The archived story of Arulagam’s origins reveals much about how ideals of morality, 
society, and family informed the opening and functioning of a shelter for destitute women 
in Madurai. In doing so, it features depersonalized stereotypical gendered villains and 
victims, suppressing the unique experiences, desires, feelings, and aims of a diverse 
group of women lumped together under the phrase in Arulagam literature: “women and 
girls in moral danger.” Anthropological literature on rehabilitation challenges the 
assumption that rehabilitation can be measured, predicted, universal, and structured. 
What happens in real life, in lived social relationships? This is the second story of 
rehabilitation at Arulagam. In this story the mythic architecture that leads to narrative 
“forms of closure, polarization, and exclusion” collapses (McKinney 2007:290). I draw 
here on ideas of rehabilitation as informal, unpredictable, creative, and ambivalent 
(Goodman 2009; Mattingly and Lawlor 2001: Meachum 2001). “Rehabilitation is not a 
monolithic concept. . . . [It] is a moment-by-moment construction,” dependent on the 
experiences, goals, and moods brought to the process by people engaged in rehabilitation 
(Meachum 2001:289). In privileging informality, unpredictability, creativity, and 
ambiguity, I specifically identify doubt as a moment of rehabilitative potential. As staff
and board members enter into specific relationships with residents and engage accepted methods of doing rehabilitation, they reproduce the ideal of patriarchal family structures. Yet, questions, emotions, and doubts offer space for staff members to evaluate the limitations of rehabilitation.

Each Sunday, I attended Sunday evening Community Worship at Tamilnadu Theological Seminary with residents and staff from Arulagam. We would all put on our best clothes, gather a bagful of plates for the community meal that followed, and pile into the Arulagam van for the seven-kilometer ride from the shelter to the seminary. The first Sunday I attended, Rev. Maggie preached. Those of us who had shoes left them outside and sat on the right side of the chapel, usually taking up about two rows. I walked in with my eyes to the ground, hoping to find a seat next to a mosquito coil. In the midst of the rest of the gathered TTS community, the residents and I prayed, sang, and shared my Odomos cream to further defend ourselves from the mosquitoes. We often watched a group of children perform a dance, song, or skit. We listened to the message and watched as others went forward to receive Communion. Arulagam residents never went forward to partake in the Common Cup Communion. I did once and then decided, as I often did, to follow the residents’ lead.

In her message, the impact of Rev. Maggie’s experience working with Arulagam and its residents was evident. She was speaking about women’s problems in family life. She spoke about the women who approach her with concerns and questions. In her conversations with women “very important, very hard, very troublesome problems are raised . . . For any reason, may a husband push aside his wife? May we divorce?” She discussed more concerns: child marriage in which girls are not ready for marriage
relationships, the idea that women need protection from male family members, the ways in which affection is overwhelmed by dominance. “Here, apart from the dominance relating to sex, there will not be real affection. Instead, it is like ‘I own her. She is my wealth.’” After listing these family problems, she challenged the congregation.

Some people don’t have interest in marriage relations. We need to accept that with boldness . . . Recently, two weeks previously someone brought a girl here. She came pitifully. Her genitals were leaking with blood. She came with pain and with agony. She was a victim of harassment. She was abused by everyone. When she came here, she had three names. One is an Islamic name. One is a Hindu name. One was a Christian name. After that child died, when the relatives came, we came to know her original religion through them. But today in our Christian society, and in other religions, it is a big question mark. How do we treat people who don’t want to marry and people who don’t have the body attributes for marriage relations?

Today that is a question we are intent on. How does the church look at unmarried people’s problems?

As Rev. Maggie pointed out in this sermon, Tamil Christian society’s “imagination has yet to account” for life outside of this structure.

Returning to Arulagam’s origin story reminds us of the intimate and personal relationships formed as Margaret and Bill welcomed former sex workers into their home. On September 15, 1975, Margaret Harris took “the first two ex-prisoners seeking protection” to her and Rev. Bill Harris’ house on the seminary campus. The number of young women increased, until they required a separate building. TTS Principal, Dr.
Samuel Amirtham, designated a married housing building on the seminary campus for this purpose (Hay 2000). During that time, the home was called Adaikkala Arulagam, Refuge Home of Grace. When the Society was officially registered in 1976, it was called The Association of Arulagam. Dharmaraj Santhosham was named President. Margaret Harris was named Honorary Secretary. Even after moving to a separate building on campus, space was a growing problem. Word spread throughout the prison. More women requested Margaret’s help. In 1977, with financial support of philanthropists in Madurai, a good building was built on a large piece of land approximately seven kilometers from the seminary at the cost of 2.5 lakhs. The home continues to function at this site (Santhosham 1982b). As the organization grew and spread further from Margaret’s home, she worried about the very depersonalization I highlighted in the organization’s rehabilitation discourse. “I did have one nightmare,” admitted Margaret.

Arulagam might become static, an ‘institution’ instead of a ‘short-term hostel’; that it might become large and impersonal instead of a ‘family’; that the burden of administration might become too heavy and not leave time or energy for caring for individual girls. Only one fear – that the Hostel might become too big! [Harris 1982]

Margaret Harris’ “nightmare” regarding the future of the shelter might have been a concern about inactivity, but it was not a desire for radical change, assertions of agency or resistance. “The difficulty of reproducing contemporary life” (Berlant 2011:18) that Margaret Harris referenced was not about the struggle between structure and agency, status quo and change. Rather, it was a continual attempt to reproduce social life in a
particular way, to reproduce certain types of relationships, ethical community here represented by “family.”

The act of reproducing social life is “not deterministic or monolithic” (Goodman 2009: 135). Goodman suggests that rehabilitation involves acts of mimesis, as staff members help residents mimic ideal, moral selves. This process involves social practice, relationships, creativity. “In their efforts to duplicate dominant moral selves [Tamil wives and mothers], new ways to re-inhabit the social world through new forms of these selves” emerge (Goodman 2009:135). The norm is not as fixed as the term implies. We can situate “the constitution of norms in the movement of life” (Esposito 2008:188). In open-ended interviews with former and current board members and in participant-observation, I heard about the social relationships, emotions, and doubts that comprise the daily work of rehabilitation. The suppression and expression of these different narratives – one generalized and clear-cut with polarized characters, the other particular and messy with complicated characters – served two different purposes. “It is not merely their conclusions that differ. Although both narrate the same broad series of events with an essentially similar cast of characters, they tell two entirely different stories” (Cronon 1992:1348).

The first story, reduced to a battle of good vs. evil and of sexually victimized girls, appears in English, in informational pamphlets and anniversary newsletters distributed to past and possible donors. It is a story of certainty, of clear and measurable goals. To demonstrate success, board members tally the number of residents who have been married, reunited with families, or have found work as caregivers in orphanages and old-age homes or as domestic help for families. The second story, one that expresses
ambiguity and uncertainty, is the story of everyday life. It is the very process of rehabilitation. And it is this process that offers opportunities for social and personal change. When healing is neither clear nor complete, what some call “fragile” (Mattingly and Lawlor 2001), it inspires critical reflection and a possibility to revise the concept and process of rehabilitation. Staff and board members did not explicitly recognize these complex narratives as part of the process of, let alone necessary for, rehabilitation. They told and lived them as part of their personal experience of being in relationships of rehabilitation with particular residents. With the questions, uncertainties, and doubts this experience raised, they implicitly critiqued rehabilitation.

Rev. Florence Robinson, former Arulagam Honorary Secretary, articulates these different narratives of rehabilitation about the same woman in two contexts: a written account in a 25th anniversary booklet (2000) and an open-ended interview I conducted with her in 2009. The latter account offers a glimpse into the social and emotional contexts in which women entered and left Arulagam. Rehabilitation takes place in social relationships, in which morality is not always clear-cut. Doubts and questions intermingle with preconceived and generalized goals. In the former, however, the narrative is a success story, a marriage.

A moving instance is the marriage of one of our girls to a blind man, solemnized by a blind pastor. The marriage was arranged with her full consent. When I gave away her hand to the bride-groom, she looked at me and cried. During the reception time, the principal of the blind school at Palayamcottai gave her the instruction, how to guide her husband when he has to move in a strange place. I shed tears. Here I want to say that the
relationship between the girls and me was very intimate. [F. Robinson 2000]

In an interview with Rev. Florence, I asked her to tell me the most important thing she did at Arulagam. The story she told me – about this marriage of an Arulagam resident to a blind man – revealed not only emotions, but her own questions and doubts about this case of rehabilitation. It diverges from the “official” rehabilitation discourse at Arulagam because it does not offer closure.

Rev. Florence recalled this marriage as a “particularly emotional occasion.” She described the young woman’s history and experiences at Arulagam. As she revealed these details, Rev. Florence explained that marriage itself was not the endpoint of rehabilitation. It had to be an appropriate match. In this case, the woman was a “senior girl, thirty [years old] or something.” The man was forty years old. She described the conversations she initiated with the woman. Rev. Florence made sure that the woman understood the extra responsibilities she would have as wife to a blind man. As Rev. Florence remembered the wedding, she said several times that she cried. “Really, I was in tears. I really cried.” She was concerned about the stigma, the emotional and physical burden, the woman would face after she married a blind man. “I had to give her hand to the blind man. Really, oh dear. Tears were pouring down. [big sigh] Whether it’s right or not, I wasn’t sure.”

Rev. Florence laughed as she recalled crying. “Still I’m not sure whether it is right or not.” The emotions and the social relationships surrounding this marriage were complex. Right and wrong were not unambiguously demarcated, leading to doubts and questions. What should rehabilitation look like? Her story of this marriage ended far from
closure and certainty. “It was a real nice wedding. It was real nice, but I was not happy.” Rev. Florence experienced emotions that did correspond with the cultural expectation. She calls this wedding her biggest success. She was able to arrange a marriage, even for a “senior girl” that was beyond ideal marriageable age. In so doing, she achieved success in relationship to the rehabilitation model of the organization. Yet, she had doubts regarding whether or not it really was a success, in terms of being in the best interest of the resident.

People construct rehabilitation in social relationships. They encounter difficult pasts and explore future possibilities. Rehabilitation, because it is often linked with a norm (here, marriage), is assumed to be expectable, clear-cut, measurable, a line in the annual report. Residents, too, had doubts about marriage and rehabilitation. “People tell me I should marry again,” said Ladha while we sat next to the merry-go-round. “Marriage is confinement and agony. For a woman’s mother and father it is so difficult. As soon as they get a loan, the man will grab her hand. We have to think about that, sister. I definitely don’t need marriage.” She continued with a spirited list of questions she needed to ask God, including ones about marriage.

But I have a doubt, sister. If a man and a woman get married and have a family dispute, so many men will leave. Many will leave an infant behind. They’ll search for a new woman. Even if they have a wife, they will look for a new woman. If women do it, they call them prostitutes. If men do it, it isn’t a mistake. That is one thing I do not understand. If God came and stood before me, I need to ask that question. It’s true, sister! Today, if women do it, they are called prostitutes and kicked out of the house. If men push away the woman they married, mother and father will give a
different woman. For us, we are called prostitutes. If a husband dies, they will put flowers and cry if he was young. After your husband dies, you cannot put jasmine in your hair, you can’t apply a poṭṭu. You can’t put a gold chain around your neck. Everyone will know that the woman is a widow. Why is that? I need to ask God that question.

All of the doubts articulated in this chapter, by the founder Margaret Harris, Honorary Secretaries Rev. Florence and Rev. Maggie, and resident Ladha, present ideas about what kinds of relationships were right, good, and fair. Margaret Harris wondered if the institution of Arulagam would overwhelm individual care and interpersonal relationships within its programs and walls. Rev. Florence, Ladha, and Rev. Maggie all questioned the cultural assumption that marriage was necessary for social rehabilitation and social belonging. Their doubts also highlight the fact that rehabilitation occurs in social relationships. It is not the same in every instance, for every person. Talking about his participation in Arulagam, the Treasurer said that he never goes beyond the office, rarely talks to residents even though he holds an important office in the organization. “I do not go into the residents’ places since I am a man,” he said. He paused. “Do you think that is right?” The limitations of gendered roles in rehabilitation emerged. Without questions, ambiguities, and doubts, Arulagam rehabilitation discourses collapsed differences among women and left the “normalcy” of marriage and gendered roles intact. For the most part, rehabilitation at Arulagam followed this norm. It featured victimized women and fanatical men, traded sex work for family life, and repeated patriarchal forms of relationships. But, if I listened closely, there were significant pauses and questions that offered space for a different ending in the same old story.
“Whether it was right or not . . .” Rev. Florence’s question trailed off.
“I Will Not be in the House and Simply Waste My Life”:
- Deborah, a long-term staff member’s story

I was born to a Hindu family. When I was a small child, I learned a lot about Jesus through my teachers. I would go to church. I was very interested in the Bible. Because I studied well, I was the CPL – class pupil leader – in every class. I would be the head in drama, other speech, clay works. I was well disciplined. All the teachers really liked me. I went to the church and asked for baptism. I was young. Being afraid of my father, no one would give my baptism. I asked at school. I also went to the Roman Catholic Church, kneeled, prayed, and asked there. “I will not give,” they said. After I finished +2 [high school], I wanted to go to college. Our father said that girl children must not study in college. We had a lot of good lands. We had a lot of good servants. We had everything then. They said that I was too young for college. “Wait for one or two years before you do teaching training,” my family said. “I will not be in the house and simply waste my life,” I said. I went to a shorthand class. I finished both lower and higher shorthand, accountancy, typewriting, English, Tamil. When I finished, then I would do service in church Sunday class. I would do hospital service. We would do house visiting. We would go with the pastor.

Without my father’s knowledge, I took baptism at 18 or 19 years old. After I took baptism, I began to go to church. When I went to church on Sundays, they would look for me at our home. They started to search. From morning until afternoon, they would look for this old child. I have a younger sister and two younger brothers. They asked my younger sister, “Where is your older sister?” “I don’t know,” my younger sister would say. “She would have gone to the garden. She would have gone to the grove.” If they would have gone here and there searching, they wouldn’t have been able to find me. But
then my younger sister said, “She took a big black book. She is sitting and reading on a tree branch.” My family started to follow me. I went to church. After church finished, I came outside. Our mother was sitting outside of the church. She said, “Your father is fighting with me. You must not go to church. Our gods (cāmi) will be angry. You must not pray to this cāmi.” Once again, I went to the Hindu temple, the Palani Murugan temple. “Please don’t make me pray to all the ghosts (pēy) in the temple. God (kaṭavul) doesn’t like it,” I said. They didn’t listen to anything I said. They brought me to the temple. I cried and fasted and prayed for three days.

Around that time, my younger brother was studying in 5th standard. When he was running and playing, he slipped and fell on the backside of his neck. He was crushed in this accident. Right after he was crushed, he was brought and put in the hospital in Madurai. He died. I cried hard. I said, “I will not stop going to church.” As soon as I started to cry, our father and everyone cried a lot. My younger brother died. “We don’t need to pray to all these cāmi, said our father. He took all the photos of cāmi off the wall and ripped them up. “We can pray to the cāmi that our child prays to.” In our family everyone took baptism – father, mother, younger brother, younger sister.

All of us believers in Usilampatti came together and we built a church. They made me the in charge, warden, accountant in the orphanage. When I was working there, a social worker came from TTS and told us that they were going to start Arulagam. The social worker was my teacher and my younger brother’s teacher. We would go to her house for Sunday class, Bible studies, fasting prayer, sisters’ meetings. I wouldn’t miss even one of these. As soon as church would finish, Sunday class would finish, evening would come and we would go with pastor amma for house visiting. For hospital visits we
would go to each and every bed, we would put our hands on their heads and prayer. Pastor amma would say, “Sister, don’t lay your hands. If you do, evil spirits will affect you inside. If I put and pray, they will get health. Our savior came and gave me this gift.”

She told me to submit an application for Arulagam. “You know both higher and lower shorthand, accounts everything. Submit an application.” She wrote the application, I signed and submitted it.

As soon as they finished the building for Arulagam I came for an interview. One week before my interview, I hadn’t seen these buildings. But I saw the buildings in a dream. There were 10 or 15 people in line. Jesus was standing close to me and saying, “Give a big form, daughter. This place is for you. Everything is here, pā [term of endearment]. Give the form.” At church everyone told me, “Sister, you are going to go and leave us. You are going to leave for work.” The next day I went for an interview. There were 10 or 15 people that had come to attend and interview. They selected me. Pastor amma cried. “You will not leave me,” she said. “How do you get mind to leave us? Akka, you need to be with us. Don’t leave us.” They didn’t allow me to pick up my luggage. Until the bus stand she came crying. I said, “Wherever I go, I will be a witness for the Lord (karttar, Christian word). I will invite god (tēvar, high standard word). Look at me, I will not forget anything in my heart/mind. I will protect the promises I gave to the male deity (āṇṭavar) always.”

I did all the work here. Letters, statement, balance sheet, I did everything here. We went to the hospital, to the jail, to court, to the police station. On Sunday, we would go to church. As soon as it was over amma and I would go to the jail. Then we would see all those children. We would talk to them, tell them stories, sing. We would listen to them
one by one. We would ask them all their names. We would ask them why they had come to jail. We prayed for them. “Because our aunt did horrible things I came,” said one. “I went out and bookers [pimps] caught me by hand,” said another. “I got entangled in a brothel case,” said another. “I don’t like brothel life. I need to live well,” said others. “I’m going to commit suicide,” said another. When they talked like this, amma would say, “There is kaṭavuḷ. He will forgive all of your sins. You will get a good life again. You may come to Arulagam. We will give you good treatment, teach you good skills. If you didn’t go to school we will make you study, for the future you can stand on your own feet, you will mature to the extent of being able to earn money. If you need to get married, you may get married. You may work. You may do whatever you wish to do. We will tell you good things.” As soon as she said that, if they had a date in court they would tell us about it. We would go if they gave a date. I stood in civil court. I argued in court. I argued to many Magistrates and had all the certificates in my possession, in my hand. I showed that to them. I argued with all the lawyers in court. Some lawyers support the bookers because they get money. I would not stop arguing. I have paid the fine for bail. Many children have come here.

We also went to children in the hospital in the V.C. ward where they had disease. We tested their blood and urine. Then, we took them for treatment for all the diseases. After they were cured, we made them sit in class because many men would keep them in a brothel or else they raped them. Therefore those children, poor things, I listened to each case history. I would cry. I wrote case histories and sat. I was all in all. With amma, for two years I worked alone. I would not take leave for anything.
I supported my family. I gave and finished a wedding for my younger sister. I made my younger brother study. Father, in longing for my younger brother who died, laid in bed for one year and died. Then rainwater did not come. In the garden, in the lands there wasn’t any kind of harvest. Without a harvest, life was difficult. Therefore, mother sold all the cattle and everything. After that, they started to ask for me [for marriage]. I said that I don’t need to get married. If I would have been there, there were many relative grooms. They would have asked for marriage. So I didn’t go there. I wouldn’t write home. If I went, I would stay inside the house only and on the same day I would get on the bus and come back here running. I was like that. But amma told me, “You get married and then you may continue to work here. We will not leave you. You need to be here until the end.”

After that I was engaged. Three months passed, and then we were married. I was 26 then, 26 or 24. They gave one-month excess salary. Everyone came together here, and we did the wedding. Everyone ate well and amma took photos like it was a big cinema. Finishing everything, I was well. Then during ten days leave, I was bored. After ten days, I came back to work. I went to jail, I went to court, I did escort duty for the children, there was a lot of letters and official work here. After this, the first baby, a son was born. After one year he was born. Right after he was born, I took one-month leave. After that I returned to work. After two years, another son was born. For his birth, they brought everyone in the van.

Here at Arulagam, they all showed really a lot of affection for me. But now how many fights come! Then I didn’t fight with anyone. We didn’t fight. We were all united. They hired two sewing teachers. They sent me for a soap-making course when my son
was four months old. That was a six-month course or something. I did it in one month. I finished the toilet soap and washing soap course, got a certificate, and returned here. Doing the work, doing all the work, I became sick. Doing an abortion, I was in bed. In that time, I thought, “We definitely needed to hire an assistant.” Two people needed to be in the office. If one person takes leave, the other needs to be there. If not, they would come to call me at my house. It was very hard. After, they put two people in the office.

My husband and I didn’t fight ever. Working and working, moving here and there, doing this work and that work, somehow he got some aluminum inside of him. His stomach hurt. He got a bad fever when my son was 11 years old, my eldest son. Then he went to the hospital. They said that he had a lot of salt substance. Then they tested him at the hospital. They said that he had a kidney stone. He needed a kidney transplant and many different medicines. I said that I would give one of my kidneys. He said, “If you give a kidney, they would guarantee me a few days of life only. You have good health. I have something. It is very difficult. Therefore, I don’t want a kidney.” After saying that, the doctors looked at his kidney. They did a scan and reported. He said, “Deborah, there is a problem in my kidney. I will not live. I need to build a house for you. You are renting a house.” He, who was without health, he only bought all the things, each baked brick and stick. He called the people who put bore wells. They put a water level and a motor. They built the house, finished everything. When we wrote the letter that invited everyone, my husband was very sick. He wouldn’t eat medicine. “Don’t tell me to eat medicine. I am going to kaṭavul. I did all my duties, I did everything for you.” We closed the provident fund. We looked and put all the insurance on file. He said to other friends who were working to help me with money. “I am going [dying].” Everyone cried. Calling our
mother and mother-in-law, he said, “Be with your daughter. I am going.” When he talked like this, āṇṭavar came, angels were all there. Talking like this, sitting and leaning on my lap, life left him.

When their father died, the older boy was studying in 5th standard and the younger boy in 4th standard. Now they are studying well.
5: Building a Wall for Freedom

Walking from the main road towards the Arulagam buildings, trees and a flower garden framed the outdoor courtyard on the left. On the right, there was a large circular garbage bin and a small garden of young banana trees planted in short neat rows. There were benches under the two largest tamarind trees, where every once in awhile a resident got to sit with her visiting relatives. Much more frequently, residents gathered in these shaded areas with a volunteer from a local church, singing songs or praying in the early evening. Moving through the entryway, there was a small inner courtyard. Along the entrance wall, to the left, there was a three-room apartment, including a kitchen, for the live-in superintendent. On the left, there was a mat-weaving classroom, where Sundari supervised about four young women who worked on large handlooms to make bed sheets and kitchen towels. They earned a few rupees for each item they made. Deborah kept track of the residents’ earnings. Most women would use their earnings to buy small pieces of jewelry (that Deborah would pick up in town, because the residents could not go out) or purchase a piece of fruit or underwear from old women who came into the campus about once a month to sell these goods.

On the right, there was an office with three desks. This was where Deborah spent most of her day, along with the accountant and the superintendent. On the right side of the inner courtyard, there was a common area used for eating lunch (the residents ate outside during the cool mornings and evenings) and watching TV in the evenings. One end of the common area opened into a meditation hall. Every morning, staff and residents gathered here at 6:30 a.m. and 9:30 a.m. for prayer. They also sat there on most evenings (when they didn’t meet outside), around 6:00 p.m., with volunteers for more singing, prayer, and Bible study. The other end of the common area led to the kitchen, renovated
while I was there, but cooking remained a wood-fire process “for the residents’ safety.”

Each month, three residents worked together in the kitchen, preparing three meals and two tea breaks a day. Residents practically lived in the kitchen during their month of duty, and earned a few rupees for their service.

On top of this U-shaped building, there was a sewing classroom, where two commuting teachers and several women worked on sewing machines. They sewed blouses for other residents and me, repaired torn clothing, and sewed a variety of bags, pillowcases, and clothing to sell at local craft fairs, often organized by Christian churches and schools. The most skilled residents were assigned to the sewing classroom. This was also a “hangout” area for some of the residents who chose not to work, either that day or ever, like Ladha. I spent many days sitting and chatting right outside the sewing classroom. On either side of the sewing classroom were dormitories for about ten of the “unmarried” (younger) residents who slept on mats on the floor. They each had a very small cabinet to keep their belongings. Most of these cabinets did not have locks. Sometimes, when residents ran away from the shelter campus, they would steal clothing, but there weren’t often valuables kept in these small spaces. Deborah kept the residents’ money.

Walking through the inner courtyard and following the walkway to the left, where residents washed their clothes, there was another small courtyard surrounded by dormitories for “married” (older) women. Each of these rooms housed two to four residents. The guest room, where I spent many nights, was here – special because it had its own bathroom with a western style toilet. Turning left again, there were bathrooms (I was never allowed to go into these bathrooms) and more dormitories for “married”
women. In the center of this area was a jungle gym and a merry-go-round for children. Usually there were about five young children in residence. Any children older than five years were sent to an organization that provided housing and care for children and sent them to school. Residents were not allowed to leave the campus. However, some residents, who had lived at Arulagam for years, had earned the trust of staff members, and felt confident themselves to go out alone and return, were able to visit their children there on occasion, as often as once a month. Others – if they could not go by bus alone – would have to wait until school vacations, when the children were brought back to Arulagam. Residents were, of course, sad to have their children housed away from Arulagam. However, they were also happy and proud that their children were able to go to school.

Many Saturday mornings, from breakfast until lunch, residents cleaned the outer courtyard area, sweeping leaves and garbage off the top of the red dirt, watering plants, and picking weeds. On my first Saturday morning at the shelter, I wrote in my fieldnotes:

After breakfast, residents bring folding metal chairs outside. I was directed to sit in one of these chairs, along with the staff members. They chat, give orders, and make sure residents sufficiently complete their chores. Poovarasi (warden) and Margaret (sewing teacher) were curious about my research. We started to talk about women’s power (pēn sakti). Margaret started to list “Mary miracles.” At one point, Poovarasi and Margaret argued passionately about the Christian origin story. Poovarasi insisted that men and women were created equal. Margaret insisted that Poovarasi was wrong because “women were created second, after man.” When I
asked Margaret why, she said I had to ask God. I told her I couldn’t. Both women repeated the phrase, “A family without a woman is nothing.” They agreed that women’s power was to create life by having children, taking care of children and husbands and parents, doing the cooking and household chores.

Later that evening, Poovarasi and I talked at length about what she claimed were common and negative foreign reactions to the shelter. She told me that foreign visitors and volunteers would ask, “Why do you lock the gate? Why do you keep it like a prison here?” She thought this question was a cultural misunderstanding. “They [foreigners] do not understand our Tamil women. They do not understand the importance of our chastity (karpu).” Rev. Maggie also talked to me about how foreigners react to their time at Arulagam and at Tamilnadu Theological Seminary.

They don’t like to be locked in. The volunteers are going there as soon as their [high] school is over. There, [in their home countries] they are free children in the house and in the schools. They never experienced someone keeping them inside and locking the door. So that is a great cultural shock for them. That takes really a long time to [understand]. Actually, even in TTS [where many of the volunteers stay during their post at Arulagam], the ladies’ hostel is locked at 10 p.m. That is always a discussion.

These reflections on the different ways young female foreign volunteers and Tamil female residents experience and react to the shelter campus hinted at the ways in which culture contributes to the construction of a place.
Spatial Stories

The connection between place and people is of interest in two bodies of literature relevant to this research: ethnographies of homelessness and ethnographic accounts of Tamil Nadu. In interviews and conversations about a Boston homeless shelter building conducted with shelter residents, staff members, and passers-by, Desjarlais discovered that people had strong emotional reactions and associations to the spaces it created.

“Spaces could have moods and physiologies as much as people did” (Desjarlais 1997:58). “The building,” he concluded after documenting various accounts of the structure as crazy and dangerous, “absorbed meaning and feelings” (Desjarlais 1997:63). The homeless shelter acquired the feelings of disorder and chaos, danger and insanity assumed to be embodied by its homeless inhabitants.

In Tamil Nadu, E. Valentine Daniel discovered the opposite, that space – whether the soil of one’s village or one’s house itself – can influence the character of its inhabitants. People are understood to have a physical and mental substance or quality (kuṇam) and a surface disposition (puti). Many Tamils believe that, after the formative childhood years, a person's kuṇam can only change under very rare circumstances. Moreover, "women's kunams are even less likely to change than are men's" (Daniel 1987:141). There was one instance in my fieldnotes and recordings that referred to the idea of kuṇam in the shelter. Lakshmi, the superintendent, suspected that Deborah, an administrative assistant, was stealing Arulagam money. Lakshmi said to me on several occasions, in long evening-time conversations after the commuting staff (including Deborah) had left for the day, that it was Deborah’s kuṇam to steal. Deborah was born to a Kallar caste, Hindu family in Usilampatti, near Madurai. The town and the particular caste community are notorious for female infanticide, violence, and theft (see Dumont
1986; Pandian 2009). Lakshmi’s comments implied that Deborah couldn’t avoid being a thief. It was in the soil of her village and thus part of her character.

More recent scholarship also recognizes the transfer of specific qualities between bodies and the earth they inhabit. At Arulagam, space and identity interacted, as a recent edited volume describes, “as process, [in which] Tamils tell what Michel de Certeau has called ‘spatial stories’; . . . through imaginative and expressive acts and performances, space becomes a ‘practiced place’ in the Tamil region” (Selby and Peterson, eds. 2008:3). The story is less about the observable structures than the experiences and perceptions involved as one accounts for them. Spatial stories link places to people. This approach is a relevant framework for this dissertation in two ways. First, it acknowledges how narratives of a women’s homeless shelter can reinforce or reframe places to fit within cultural ideals, ideals that are sometimes “unrealistic.”

A spatial story can possibly include public concerns and private fantasies as well as past events or future imaginings. This ‘extra information’ can be inserted sequentially and/or simultaneously. A spatial story about a walk through the city might explore the city itself yet at the same time creates a new (or subjective or unrealistic) one: it includes only a limited number of city features but adds various private perceptions. [Miske 2007:4]

Second, like the mythic structure of rehabilitation, the framework of spatial stories acknowledges how people recount their experiences of disorder (lack of family structure) in ways that re-establish order (Blunt 2000). Like the possessed man whose walk around a village re-draws village boundaries (Mines 2008), Arulagam staff members tell spatial stories that can re-configure the boundaries and meanings of the shelter. Descriptions of
and movements orchestrated through the shelter campus create it as something other than a shelter. It becomes a home, while shelter residents and staff members become a family.

At Arulagam, spatial stories of the shelter – its historical developments and architectural improvements, the patterns of life it supports – are often repeated in such a way to link the place with home, to equate a sense of space with a sense of family. It is a theme repeated at the Founder’s Day Celebration, an annual assertion to calm Margaret Harris’ (1982) fear specified in the introduction -- namely, that the shelter would become an institution rather than family. A friend of Margaret Harris’ concluded her speech at Founder’s Day with the following sentiment, repeated in some version by everyone who spoke:

You must not think, “our situation is like this, we have no one, we have no relations, no one loves me, my brothers and sisters don’t love me.” God is with us. Because God loves you very much, he has brought you to this place where they show love, a lot of love. . . . There are organizations with 5,000 people. But God has separated you out and has placed you here in this small family. You have all come from different places. You have all come from different situations. But, today you need to make a decision. We are like children born of the same mother. By your words and actions, you must not cause wounds. You always need to obey what those who care for you say. You need to be happy and to be a family.

In such speeches, Arulagam leaders explicitly transform the shelter into a particular kind of place, a home and family, with particular kinds of expectations for its inhabitants, obedient daughters.
The power of this normative family narrative and associated expectations for obedience lie in many conversations I had with residents. For instance, Ladha described how she silently accepted an uncle’s unfounded scolding. He blamed her for her asthma and fits. “He said loudly, ‘You didn’t take your tablets all at one time. That’s why you’re like this.’ He scolded me. It is his right. He is my mother’s younger brother, so he has the right to scold me. I have always taken the tablets every day in the correct way, up until today.” The predominance of this particular cultural ideal for womanhood and family life emerged in Deborah and Rev. Maggie’s responses to my question: Can you tell me how this campus has changed since you began working here? Their answers began with physical structures and quickly changed to normative ideas about Tamil womanhood that revolved around family relationships and the need for protection. Normative expectations and emotions of family life fill the place of Arulagam through spatial stories.

**Deborah: Being the Mother of a Thousand Daughters**

Deborah had worked for over 30 years in Arulagam. During my research, she came by bus six days a week. Deborah regularly pinched my cheeks and also demonstrated a great deal of patience towards my Tamil. She spoke painfully slowly to ensure that I comprehended her words, even for the simplest greetings, even after 14 months. “Are . . . you . . . well?” she almost yelled each day when I arrived. An exaggerated smile always rivaled her overstated voice. Prompted by my question of the changes she had seen on the campus, Deborah described how Arulagam had transformed from “full forest” to a full campus of buildings. This description lasted three sentences, before she began to describe instead her own personal transformations. She didn’t quite interweave stories of
architecture with personal history, but provided quite extensive “extra information” when she thought about the past.

“It used to be full forest here,” described Deborah when I asked her about the beginning days of Arulagam. “Then, after some time, there was a house here and another over there. In between the houses there was no light.” Today, on the outskirts of Madurai, a watchman monitors entry to the Arulagam campus. A red dirt road, about 100 feet long and lighted, led to the main entrance. Today staff members often gather at the end of the red dirt road in a rather large entranceway of the main shelter buildings, with pictures of residents and staff taken by volunteers hanging on the wall, two metal chairs, a table, a fish tank, and an image of Arulagam Founder, Margaret Harris, atop the inner entranceway. Commuting staff members gathered here Monday-Saturday at 4:30 p.m. to gossip before their work day ended and they left at 5:00 p.m. Live-in staff members also tended to sit there in the mornings to read the newspaper or talk before breakfast. Leisure time in the entranceway according to Deborah, was a recent habit. “Back then, there wasn’t a watchman,” continued Deborah. “We were warden, watchman, peon, we were everything.” This is when the story turned to Deborah’s youth and her family, the story that introduced this chapter.

Deborah was worried that marriage would confine her to the home. When her parents wanted to arrange her marriage, she would visit her family only for a day and then “come back to Arulagam – running!” But the foreigners supervising the organization at the time told her that she should get married and continue working at Arulagam. She did get married after much resistance, but successfully refused to replace her social service work at Arulagam with domestic life. “On ten days leave, I was bored. After ten
days, I came back to work.” Deborah tells her life story as one that pushes the boundaries and limitations of patriarchal family life without rejecting the value and personal satisfaction she found in both marriage and motherhood. She framed her decisions to disobey her father and resist a husband within the biblical story of Abraham, father of the people of Israel. “‘Go, and I will bless you with land and children,’ God said to Abraham,” she continued, suggesting that this demand and promise was one she also experienced. She also went, leaving her father’s house and her husband’s house to work at Arulagam. And she was also blessed.

After marriage, Deborah gave birth to two boys and got sick during a third pregnancy that ended in an “abortion.” Deborah used the English word here, which Tamil speakers use to refer to either a miscarriage or an abortion. She is very proud of her biological children, who were studying engineering and accounting. But Deborah’s fictive children at Arulagam – the countless women and girls who had come and gone – were also blessings. “Without giving birth to any girl children, at Arulagam I have thousands of girl children. I will not look at these children with bias. I will not ask what caste my children are. I look at all the children with one and the same look.” As one of the first Arulagam residents and now a live-in warden, Sundari, walked in to listen to our interview, Deborah smiled at her and motioned for her to come near. Deborah put her arm around her.

This is my old child, my eldest child. The two of us went together to learn how to make soap. Today my children, my old children, they have very much affection for me. I won’t scold anyone, any of these children, to
drive them away. To that extent, there is a lot of affection. I have love for all my children. They give me a lot of respect.

Deborah had resisted her father’s mandate that she stay at home. She resisted marriage. She was a widow who refused to embody any stigma (see Lamb 2000). God commanded him to leave his own father’s home and go to a new land, where he would be blessed with land and progeny. God promised all people on earth would eventually be blessed through him (Genesis 12:1-3). Deborah interpreted her own life through this covenant between God and Abraham. Hers was not a story of resistance, but of obedience towards the patriarch. It might be understood in Foucault’s words as a “counter-conduct.” Her “objective is a different form of conduct, that is to say: wanting to be conducted differently, by other leaders . . . and through other procedures and methods” (Foucault 2007:194-195). However, it corresponds to existing power relations, to proper modes of conduct informed by women’s obedience towards men – fathers, husbands, patriarchs. Deborah exhibited resistance that “by definition, . . . can only exist in the strategic field of power relations (Foucault 1978:96). She resisted yet reaffirmed patriarchal power.

“May you be the mother of a thousand sons” is a common Indian blessing. It connects back to the discussion Poovarasi and Margaret had in the open yard on a Saturday morning, but doesn’t fit as neatly into Deborah’s story of Arulagam.

To wish a woman a thousand sons shows how important fertility is, and how much the best achievements envisaged for women are deeply linked to the feminine role as wife and mother. At the same time, this greeting is one more, among many everyday gestures, which marks the inferiority of women, their “valuelessness” when compared to males, and consequently,
the undesirability of daughters in comparison to sons. [Joana Passos, no date]

*May You Be the Mother of a Thousand Sons* is also the title of a journalist’s book about women in India (Bumiller 1991). An editorial review from Publishers Weekly says this book chronicles the “overall powerlessness of Indian women.” One of the case studies, Chapter Five: No More Little Girls, features female infanticide in Deborah’s hometown. While for some, the phrase cuts to the heart of women’s oppression, for others, like Deborah, it is easily modified to articulate a more complicated message. Deborah’s story subtly challenges this trope of valueless, powerless Indian women, even as she reproduced a dominant feminine role. She is proud to be the fictive mother of a thousand daughters and to be an administrative assistant, an “all in all” for Arulagam, not only a “wife”. She is also proud to be the biological mother of two sons, and to have experienced a few very pleasant years of marriage. Through her work at Arulagam she actively constructed family in new and old ways, in her own life and in the shelter campus.

As in any family, fights (*caṇṭai*) were part of life at the shelter. Deborah was the one who dealt with them. Almost every one of my interviews with Arulagam residents featured at least some reflection on the prevalence of fights. Some arguments, as Diana alludes to in the following conversation, related to religious differences.

* Diana: All kinds of fights happen here.

* Connie: Have you had fights with your friends here?

* D: We must not be friends with them.

* C: Why?
D: We need to pray to Jesus cāmi only. We must not pray to others, this or that cāmi.

C: If women here pray to other cāmi, that woman is not your friend?

D: No, because we need to pray to Jesus cāmi. They pray to all these cāmi. They pray to Murugan [son of Siva] and to those in the goddess temple. That is Satan. Putting stones, putting statues, that is all Satan. We must not pray like that. *Kāṭavul* is the one. They pray to these cāmi and those cāmi. They will be Hindu Christian. They put stones and make statues. We must not do all that. It will not be Murugan for us.

These types of religious fights often involved calm debate regarding how to solve the types of problems faced by shelter residents. When Aameena, the Muslim girl in love with a Hindu boy, returned from her phone call with her father, she was visibly and audibly upset. Her voice was a little higher and her head was down. Other residents tried to console her. Nalini sat down next to her, a look of concern on her face, and touched Aameena’s arm. Other women tried to make her laugh by putting Angel, Nalini’s baby, on Aameena’s neck. She pushed Angel off and said, “Don’t make me laugh.” But she was laughing.

N: Why can’t you just tell them, “I am going nearby,” and instead go to him [the boy she was in love with]?

A: How can I just simply go? Don’t talk like a fool. Normally, in our Muslim religion, we used to cover our whole body from head to toe. So I can’t go anywhere. As soon as I enter the house, they will lock me inside. I am not a Hindu like you. You are free.

N: They cover you from head to toe and nothing will be seen, right?

A: They will ask me to wear burka as soon as I enter the house. Second, they won’t allow me to go out. I am not a Hindu. I can’t go out freely. When I sit inside a bus, two people from my family will sit in front of me, two will sit behind me, and two people will be on the side, surrounding me.
Other arguments about day-to-day life and chores or simply involving personality clashes were much more volatile. I witnessed resident hunger strikes, crying, shouting, and hair pulling, in various combinations. One morning, after prayer, Lakshmi, the superintendent, and Deborah, an administrative assistant, addressed some on-going fights. The night before, a group of residents had claimed that they were to “go on strike” because they were angry about the quality of the food. Lakshmi had implemented a new policy that each woman would rotate through cooking duty that month. Previously, staff members had only given the good cooks kitchen duty. One resident, Joy, claimed that the food had taken a turn for the worse when Suriyapriya started cooking. Lakshmi defended her new policy by saying, “It’s not my problem. It’s not her [Suriyapriya’s] problem. It is a hot weather (veyi) problem.” Then Sofi, Tamilvaani, and Fathima said that they were going to leave. They were crying and shouting. Fathima was yelled at. She was accused of not doing her morning water duty because she was watching another resident’s children. Tamilvaani yelled at Lakshmi because she didn’t go to church the previous Sunday, meaning that she (Tamilvaani) was not able to go (a staff member was required to chaperone the voluntary outing to a nearby CSI church service.) At various points during this series of exchanges, women walked out. It was only Deborah’s calm and steady voice that slowly stopped tears and quieted shouts that morning. Many times, I watched her enter a room of yelling, crying, fighting women. When she talks about the place of Arulagam, she weaves descriptions of the trees, buildings, and light posts into a cultural story of wasteland transformed into family, buildings into homes, and danger into safety. She tells a spatial story of Arulagam as family and she is, in many ways and moments, the mother.
Under the Tamarind Tree

One afternoon, again in the first weeks of research, Poovarasi and I sat in the shade of a tamarind tree, on a concrete bench. She offered me my first round of gossip about the other staff members and some of the residents with particularly disturbing background stories or remarkable personal traits. I asked if the residents ever talked about religion or their differences – the two topics that had played the most prominent role in my introductions to the shelter. She just looked at me, raised her eyebrows, pointed at her head, and moved her finger in a circle - indicating that they were crazy. “They don’t think about that.”

According to this interaction, residents could participate in the shelter’s secular ethics of belonging, but only as recipients or objects of the staff and board members’ secular practices of acceptance. Excluding women from conversations about religious diversity is not a problem unique to the shelter (see King 1998; O’Neill 2007). Volunteers and staff members at the shelter point out that it’s not just women, but the poor, who are easily ignored in conversations about religious diversity. Religious pluralism or secularism, many assumed, was too abstract to be of interest to poor women with more immediate concerns. “Poor people are struggling to live, struggling to live peacefully. They don’t give much importance to religion or think about, this god or that god” said one long-time self-described Arulagam “well-wisher” and volunteer. “Immediate things are their problem, not religion. The question of religious differences did not arise,” said a former Arulagam superintendent. Women’s rights, others assumed, were too emotional for women who had recently lived through gender-based trauma. As Rev. Maggie put it, “Their speed of understanding certain issues, human rights, is still at
So some individuals who come here with a human rights attitude sometimes trigger girls’ emotions, make them to be rebellious.” Reflecting on life in secular community with diverse individuals, still others assumed, required levels of reason and rationality that residents lacked. During my first week of research one of the live-in wardens told me that residents didn’t talk about their differences because they were “mental”.

At Arulagam, “accepting women where they were,” as Rev. Maggie often said, referred to shelter residents’ cultural locations outside of community and family. It also referred to their mental and emotional state. Many residents were considered to lack the mental and emotional capacity to live successfully outside the shelter or to participate in conversations about plural community or women’s rights. Staff members, volunteers, and residents used the phrase “mental” to describe this. Finally, it related to where women were in the physical and poetic Tamil landscape: under the tamarind tree.

In Tamil culture, relationships between a person and the places she inhabits are negotiated through exchanges of substance. The goal is to bring about an equilibrium, or continuity, between the substance of oneself and the substance of the land and home she inhabits (Daniel 1984). “Space and place are ‘person-centric’ and inherently imbued with specific moral and aesthetic qualities” (Selby and Peterson 2008:9). Because of this fluidity in Tamil culture between the substance of a person and the substance of a place, place is an integral aspect of personhood, community, and ethics. Land, house, family, self, morality, and feeling interweave with each other. To lose one’s family, like the women in the homeless shelter, is to lose them all (Trawick 1991:237). Where, then, are
homeless women in this cultural and geographical landscape? One way to answer this is to ask where tamarind trees grow.

Space is organized into five major landscapes in Tamil poetry. Each landscape corresponds to a major ecotype and particular human feelings: hill, field, pasture, seashore, and wasteland (Selby and Peterson 2008:9). Each of the regions has corresponding vegetation. For instance, the kuriñci flower represents the hill landscape. The flower is extremely rare, growing only in cool mountainous regions once in twelve years. In terms of human feelings, the hill landscape is associated with comfort, coolness, and rarity. In Tamil poems, the hill landscape is one of lovers’ union. These poetic connections between particular places and specific types of human relationships, between ecological conditions and work relationships run deep in the Tamil imaginary. Anand Pandian focuses on “the ways in which imagined qualities of land and labor lend themselves to imaginations of collective identity” (2009:56). Pandian is careful to point out that this connection is not “natural.” Rather, common identity – associated with agrarian landscapes, for instance – is “built . . . through the articulation of a common moral project” (Pandian 2009:257). At Arulagam, residents of a women’s homeless shelter face the common moral project of becoming ideal Tamil women. What is different about these formulations is that the place, Arulagam itself, must also be imagined and articulated. It is not an already existing space within the Tamil cultural and literary imaginary that organizes space. A homeless shelter is neither a home nor a village that corresponds to a particular family or caste group. It is not “one of the five ‘landscapes,’ (tiṇais) into which space is organized, and that correspond to the major ecotypes (nilam) of the Tamil region: hill, field, pasture, seashore, and wasteland” (Selby and Peterson
If, “in Tamil culture, person and place interact with each other in organic ways,” the inorganic nature of a woman’s homeless shelter can reveal the ways in which ideas of people, place, and culture fail to account for all types of being in community, in relationships, and in the world.

One of the landscapes, however, seems to help explain many of the marginalized spaces of the Tamil landscape. The wasteland is common and dry. “The wasteland can appear anywhere” (Selby 2008:26). The wasteland is where tamarind trees grow. “The hardy tamarind tree has natural and cultural properties that make it especially compatible with such an unseasonable landscape, for it seems to thrive even during severe droughts, and is classified in Tamil folk taxonomy as ‘sour’ and ‘inauspicious’” (Clark-Decès 2008:178; see also Beck 1969:569; Gandhi 1989:27). The wasteland is on the periphery of community and village life. It is a space that is “unincorporated, undomesticated, and lacking the features essential for the establishment of social life” (Clark-Decès 2008:189). It does not have the features of domestic life, where women should be. It is the place of death, ghosts (pēy), sexual passion, possession and madness. “The wasteland . . . represent[s] an ‘in-between’ place, a place only to be traversed and not dwelt in, a hostile region of hardship” (Selby 2008:36). Selby also writes that it “has a permeating aspect – it touches all the other contexts, making none of them safe from its desiccating, uncomfortable features” (2008:26). The wasteland is “unlivable – but lived in” (Mines 2008:212). This is where tamarind trees grow, where residents’ live and perceived madness took root in my research, a landscape that lacked the conditions needed to support social life and a mental and emotional state that lacked the stability needed to contribute to family life.
The contemporary wasteland is not only the dry infertile ground of ancient poetry. Ladha once blamed all of her family’s and her personal problems simply on Chennai. The contemporary wasteland does extend into large urban centers. It is the uncultivated wild forest and the cinemas and bus stands of cities. Both of these locations play prominent roles in Arulagam residents’ stories. Cinemas and bus stands are where women get caught -- by police, pimps, visions, and spirits. They are places were women are vulnerable (see Clark-Decès 2008:181). Consider the following stories of hallucinations, vulnerability, rape, and imprisonment documented in the Arulagam archives. These are just two examples of several stories set at bus stands and cinemas.

L married against the advice of her father, and the marriage was not a happy one. One night after a quarrel with her husband, she left her house to go to her parents, because she could not stand the tension any longer. As she was standing waiting for the bus, a car drew near to her and stopped in front of her. The door of the car opened, and a man in the back seat enquired the way to a certain town. As L bent down to direct them, the men in the back seat of the car pulled her into it. They immediately shut and locked the door, and the car was driven away for some distance. Then it stopped and the men in the car raped her, and left her under a tree beside the road within the boundary of Madurai. There she was found and brought to Arulagam. She was bruised from head to foot and in a very disturbed and emotional state. She was immediately sent to the Govt. Hospital, where it was confirmed that she had been raped, but she changed the account of her experience at this point, and did not wish to take the
matter up with the police. After some days of treatment in the Hospital, she became calm and her wounds began to heal. Then she came to stay for sometime in Arulagam, where she learnt sewing and eventually her parents came and took her to their home, where she is now happily settled and having employment locally.

Another woman describes how she went to a cinema one evening with a girl friend, and ended up in Arulagam.

When we came out, the police took us away to the police station. We were accused of prostitution and sent to the Central jail. We were in jail for over three months. When we were finally released we were taken to Arulagam, where we were well treated and happy. After two years they arranged a good marriage for me and now I am happy with my husband.

In these narratives, Arulagam is written as neither wasteland nor place of domesticity. Finally arriving at Arulagam allows these women to transition from the wastelands of bus stands and cinemas to the domestic space of family life. The first went home to her parents, while the second is happy in marriage.

The homeless shelter does not fit within Tamil cultural spatial grammar. There are domestic patterns to life and a sense of family among its residents. Yet there are always reminders of its wasteland qualities: talk of madness, tamarind trees, and women separated from family. The continual creation of space, somewhere between domestic and wasteland space, brings any assumption of “natural” universal spatial renderings into question.
Tamil people and communities continually respond to new experiences and modify “classical paradigms through literary and metaphorical mapping” (Selby and Peterson 2008:15). In fostering a secular ethics of belonging, shelter staff and board members had to conceptualize unique types of places and people – patients in hospitals, children in orphanages, women in homeless shelters – within classical paradigms of place, person, and morality. Secular ethics of belonging, if it was to “accept women where they are,” required redrawing the metaphorical map to include different types of being and belonging. Villagers regularly redraw boundaries between “the livable village (ūr) from the unlivable . . . wasteland (kāṭu)” (Mines 2008:212). Deborah described the redrawing of these boundaries at the shelter. “In the beginning, we didn’t have homes [shelter buildings], a road, we didn’t have houses to this extent. We didn’t have these walls. It was fully forest/wasteland (kāṭu) here.” Physical structures and patterns of movement within a place can demarcate these boundaries, as can spatial stories. “Depending on who does the telling, the meaning of a place – its import and spatial dimensions – may be defined quite differently” (Mines 2008:200).

Shepherds and Goats: Staff and Residents

The most recent addition to the grounds, a “few years before,” was a nine-foot tall cement wall encompassing the entire campus. One day stands out as an example of how the shelter campus, including the compound wall, could slip between the categories of home and institution. Goffman (1961) describes total institutions as places that are able to control a resident’s life: their movements, dress, eating habits, postures, daily schedules. At Arulagam, staff members and local volunteers constantly critiqued residents’ dress, postures and behaviors. In addition, they were not allowed outside of the shelter. These
practices and policies made it that much more important for the staff members to actively construct, remember, and imagine the shelter in a different way: as a home and family.

On a cloudy afternoon, Dharmar, my auto driver, pulled up to the shelter gate. Another auto was already parked in front of the closed gate. I looked in the back seat and saw a familiar face. Mary, a Protestant Christian from a nearby congregation and self-defined “well-wisher” of the shelter who once reprimanded me for sitting on the floor with the residents, had arrived for her weekly prayer meeting. For about an hour and a half, she would lead residents through long emotional prayers, up-beat Christian songs, and Bible stories. I paid Dharmar and accepted Mary’s invitation to join her. I sat down while her auto driver tried to keep the gates open in a strong wind. “Maybe the watchman is drinking tea,” commented Mary. Usually, he would have the responsibility of opening the gates for familiar visitors. The auto driver wedged a rock under the gate to keep it open, returned to his seat and received further orders from Mary. “As soon as you leave, close the gate well. We don’t want goats and cattle to wander in. We don’t want the girls to come out.”

Uncomfortable with Mary’s statement, the easy and swift transition from wandering animals to the shelter residents, I asked, “Are the women like goats and cattle?” “No, no. It’s not like that. They don’t know to stay in. They’re destitute (tikkarra) girls,” clarified Mary. The auto driver looked back at us immediately and bobbed his head in agreement. “That’s why,” he said. The Second Edition Kriya dictionary provides the following definition for tikkarra: “with no money, no food, and nowhere to go; destitute.” Staff and board members, when they spoke or wrote in English, replaced tikkarra with either “destitute” or “with no one,” implying a lack of
money and of family support. Mary and her auto driver suggested a further lack. They did not have knowledge about, or the common sense to, conduct themselves properly. “They don’t know to stay in.” Not only did the residents have nowhere to go, they did not know where they ought to be. Like the goats and cattle on the other side of the wall, the residents needed a shepherd, someone to guide them in life because they did not have the common sense to be where they might thrive, the moral compass to go and stay where they should.

Anand Pandian (2009) encountered a similar casual, passing connection between the moral government of animals and particular groups of people in his research about the Kallar caste of Tamil Nadu. He writes, “To those familiar with the ruminations of Western intellectuals, these associations may betray a startling resemblance to what Foucault (1981) had described as ‘pastoral’ power: the government of a population modeled on the relationship between a figurative shepherd and the individual members of a flock” (Pandian 2009:86). Pastoral power relies on the assumption that there are radical differences in kind between particular groups of people that allow some to manage, control, and supervise the lives of others. A few assume responsibility for the welfare of the masses who cannot care for themselves, like a shepherd watching over a flock of sheep (Foucault 2007:231). Those in power act as vigilant shepherds ensuring that each member of the flock has adequate sustenance, does not suffer, and does not stray.

The vigilant shepherd holds a privileged place in the Christian story. At Arulagam, board and staff members consistently linked shepherds with staff and board members, just as they linked residents with Mary the mother of Jesus. As a board member told the Christmas story during a holiday function, shepherds were explicitly
juxtaposed with the character of the virgin mother of Jesus, Mary. Others at Arulagam interpreted this story differently, emphasizing Mary’s courage and chosenness as a positive story for residents who shared many characteristics with her. However, in this version a board member’s Christmas story reveals the hierarchy between shepherd (staff) and Mary (residents).

As soon as the [shepherds] heard this news [of Jesus’ birth] they were not peaceful. They left immediately, saying, ‘We will go and see what was made known to us by the angel.’ The shepherds were vigilant. They were aware. They gave full attention to their duties. As soon as this good news was given to them, they went to see. After they went, they told everything to the people. They were not peaceful. We went. They went and told about that scene that they had been shown. They were heroes. They didn’t keep the news they had been given to themselves. Immediately they went, saw, and told other people. Mary kept all of this to herself, in her own heart/mind (mahacu).

The board member who told the Christmas story privileged the shepherds, naming them “heroes,” and revealed that she sees herself as one of the shepherds when she switched pronouns in the following two sentences: “They [the shepherds] were not peaceful. We went.” The spatial stories of these two characters reveal how staff members and residents are understood as two different types of people. There were staff members/shepherds: bold women who went out and left family life to work at Arulagam. And there were residents: peaceful women who kept their problems to themselves. Mary kept silent while the shepherds proclaimed. Mary stayed still when the shepherds decided to go. The
residents were disciplined to stay within the shelter walls; the staff and board members followed God’s command to go. The character of the shepherds and shelter staff—bold, obedient, and vigilant—was fundamentally different from the character of Mary and the residents—silent, shy, and still. Both types of characters, of course, are crucial to the Christian narrative. However, in the analytical frame of pastoral power, their differences reveal the structures of power and hierarchy that could define family, but could also define institution.

**Rev. Maggie: Building a Wall**

I had learned that during Rev. Maggie’s tenure as Honorary Secretary she had overseen the construction of a large wall to enclose the campus. Knowing this, I also asked her to tell me about changes to the Arulagam campus over the last several years. Rev. Maggie’s response expanded on the theme of this chapter, as she narrated a spatial story that involves more than a wall but articulates normative expectations for lived practice and ideal Tamil womanhood at the shelter.

When I revealed my frustration regarding the fact that all the residents’ problems and needs were only addressed through Christian prayers, studies, messages, and songs, I wasn’t alone. When she took the post of Honorary Secretary, Rev. Maggie found that “the girls were kept inside and always that grill gate was locked.” The residents were not able to go beyond the entranceway and therefore had no access to a large open yard framed by benches in the shade of tamarind trees, flower gardens and new rows of banana trees. She told the on-site staff, “In evening time, either allow them to watch TV to come out of their depressed feelings or make them to play balls, shuttle cock, carom board. Or jump, run, conduct some games, so the emotions are let out and their body
becomes tired. Make them feel at home. Laugh, sometimes laughing is necessary. Make them to laugh.” Instead, all they have is prayer. “It has become more narrow minded,” Rev. Maggie continued. “Only prayer centered. Continuously prayer, prayer, prayer may also give trouble.” She described this approach as focused on “individualistic freedom or individualistic salvation” as opposed to the “group.”

In opposing the individual to the group, and stressing the importance of the latter, Rev. Maggie’s reflections on Christian prayer-centered life of the shelter harkens back to Dumont’s (1980) assertion that Indian society lacked a concept of the individual. Instead of an individual, Indian people understood themselves as encompassed by a village, caste, and family. This dichotomous construction of Western/individual and Indian/relational soon faced criticisms ranging from ethnocentrism to plain inaccuracy (Appadurai 1986; Barnett 1976; Berreman 1971; Beteille 1986; Mines 1994; Shweder and Bourne 1984). As Rev. Maggie continued, she also complicated the opposition between individual and group.

Rev. Maggie was more interested in connecting thought to practice, self to society. In this way, she articulated an idea of ritual that connected person to place, that created a person in place – in tune with one’s physical and populated surroundings. Moreover, her idea of personhood was not explicitly a Hindu Tamil idea. She drew from a much broader range of cultural ideas, from Christian to African.

We are not individuals in society. In African tradition there is a saying: ‘A person is a person become of other persons.’ We need others to live. We are in a way dependent on others. We need to relate with others. We need
to relate with others so that means we are also responsible for others’ problems. So we have to be careful of our own practices and our own self.

Rather than debates about the concept of the individual, a more useful framework for understanding Rev. Maggie’s concern within Tamil anthropological literature would be the relationship between aκαṁ (inside; interiority; private) and pυραṁ (outside; exteriority; public). In her critique of individualistic prayer, Rev. Maggie articulated a “recognition of the human body’s discontinuity with its environment and . . . also an expression of desire for continuity with it” (Selby 2008:29).

The paired conceptions, aκαṁ and pυραṁ, provide much insight into Tamil ritual life. Tamil ritual does not involve symbolic passage out of community (Turner 1967; Van Gennep 1961) or distinctions between sacred and profane space (Durkheim 1965). Tamil ritual and religious experiences, instead,

seek to match public and private worlds in order for them to “meet,” merge, and fuse. This is not surprising, for the Tamil word for God, kaṭavuḷ, means “crossing,” “exceeding,” or “surpassing,” suggesting that the religious experience is always conceived as a form of intersection, a point of contact and coalescence between two domains or more of experience. [Clark-Decès 2000:8]

When the merging of private and public worlds was ignored in Arulagam’s ritual life, when individualistic prayer turned residents consistently inward instead of across interior and exterior realms, Rev. Maggie interpreted a loss of ritualistic power. The type of prayer fostered at the shelter, according to her, failed to meet the full potential of rehabilitative spirit. She emphasized equilibrium (see Daniel 1984). “You need a
balanced life: prayer, cum practice. Whatever you pray you go and try to practice it in life, learn it. And from there, you pray for that practice to proceed, to retain good values, for a constructive life.”

When Rev. Maggie directed the staff members to focus more on group physical activity in the daily routine, they resisted. Rev. Maggie laughed as she recalled their response to her request. “They said, ‘The girls will wander away. They will look for men.’ Those are just lame excuses.” So she built a wall for freedom.

After I came, I asked them to open the grill gate. That wall is there, so they can play around, move around, go around. Let them be a little bit free, feel at home. In the evenings if they want to play, they can play. Because there is a wall, they cannot go out but they can make use of that space to play around, walk around or run around. That was my intention to construct a wall. At the same time, behind that wall there is carpentry work going on and other men used to come and urinate in front of the shelter. So that was not nice. I thought building a wall was good both ways.

Being able to separate the shelter campus from the undesirable aspects of the street and neighboring lots is also a widespread middle-class practice in India.

When I returned to the shelter a year after I completed my research, I walked past a crumbled section of the wall. It had deteriorated in heavy rains, evidenced still in large mud puddles that flooded the courtyard. Where there was once a wall, I now saw a very large pile of wood debris. Men were perched on top of broken chairs spread among the top of the pile. The fragility of the wall – and the sense of protection and freedom it was
meant to provide the residents of the women’s homeless shelter – reminded me of the fragility of cultural ideals. In trying to merge private rehabilitation with social reform, link inner meditations to public practice, Rev. Maggie articulated an ideal that sometimes crumbled right in front of everyone, revealing a less picturesque backdrop full of debris and idle men for a moral community project of creating ideal women.

**Conclusion**

When Deborah and Rev. Maggie described the construction and expansion of Arulagam’s campus over the past 30 years, they accounted for more than simply additional buildings, light fixtures, plants, and walls. They articulated a subjective sense of the place, including concerns about urinating men and runaway residents as well as ideal images of it as a home rather than an institution. Their spatial stories of Arulagam linked people to place, emphasizing particular practices and normative expectations of ideal womanhood. Themes, and dreams, of patriarchal family structures persisted. In this chapter, however, I demonstrated how Tamil notions of *akam* and *puram* contributed to critiques of ritual life within the shelter. The goal was not merely to replicate ideal mothers and wives, but to connect private meditations and ritual life with the social world. Rehabilitation, then, was religious and secular, a personal process and a social one. Considering how architecture and cultural ideals merged in this chapter, the dilapidated wall I discovered upon return to the shelter symbolized the difficulty of maintaining such imagined ideals of home and family, personal and social rehabilitation.

In the story of the compound wall’s origins, the wall speaks to how womanhood, freedom, protection, and domesticity tie together. Deborah reinforced this complex interweaving of ideas and ideals. She recalled in English, “Then, this is a place with full
time, 24 hours lock up only.” And continuing in Tamil, “Then, in the beginning, the children always had to stay inside. We didn’t have all these homes, this road. We didn’t have these buildings. We didn’t have these walls.”
“I Would Laugh Like an Insane Person”:
- Lakshmi, a live-in superintendent’s story

I was born as the eldest daughter of Nayakkar, a man of communist background. My father had two brothers and two sisters. Our family was a joint family with a lot of property. They were also the panchayat leaders. They had government responsibilities and they were landlords. At that time, for the sake of maintaining property and wealth, they would arrange marriages within the family. Like that, my father got one woman – a relative woman – in child marriage when she reached puberty. But even before that, they had given her in marriage to my father. Because they got married in these circumstances, my father was a little older. He was 28 years old. My mother was 13 years old. Because she got married in this way, she didn’t really have understanding. She did not maintain a good life. Her aunt and uncle [who were also now her mother-in-law and father-in-law] established life according to their wishes. They were disturbing my hard working father a lot. They gave problems. This is our background.

But even within these problems given to him by his brothers and parents, our father raised seven children. I have three younger sisters and three younger brothers. My father worked very hard. My mother was very obedient to our father. He was good, but my uncles were not like him. My father toiled hard. Until I was 12, I was brought up and raised well by my father. What knowledge did father give to me? “Like an ant, work hard and eat. Study! Study! Study! You must not go to anyone for help. You need to stand on your own two feet. Watch over your siblings well. Don’t put your signature on anything. Don’t get married.” Because I was young, because I didn’t have the maturity to understand why he was saying all of this, I obeyed him. But, actually, inside of me, I didn’t have that obedience. I obeyed him only out of fear. Because he was a big man in
our village, if I didn’t obey him he would hit me. My father had a dominating spirit. I saw that. He made our mother into a slave. If you are a slave, you do not have rights. In our house, there were no rights for speaking. We had to listen to what he said. In fact, I learned that you shouldn’t stand, listening. You should do what’s asked immediately. Our father was not close with his relatives. I don’t know a lot about our background. But until I was 12 years old, our father had control. Then, something fearful happened to him.

Suddenly our father became mental, mentally disordered. Why? I don’t know. How? I don’t know. Suddenly, when I was 12 he prevented me from going to school. For me, freedom was in school. I didn’t have freedom in the house. Mother also did not have any freedom. I thought, “If she is a slave there, they will make me a slave here.”

Therefore, I didn’t like my mother. I didn’t like father’s speech. I didn’t like the house. I didn’t like property and wealth. I didn’t like relatives. I didn’t like the world. I didn’t like the slavery. I hated all of these things. But where would I go? I was a woman. Women did not have any rights. Where would I go? If I went out, I would ruin the reputation of our whole family.

Then my father’s younger brother and my father’s older brother, as soon as our father became mentally disordered, really tortured me. They told me, “You need to be obedient to us. Don’t go like this. Don’t go like that. Don’t talk like this. Don’t look like that. Don’t stand here.” Our aunt and uncle didn’t have any children. A lot of jealousy came to them, seeing all of us born. I did not know that when they looked at us, this jealousy came. But this big jealousy that came to them was a big torture. When our father was not there, they did horrible things to me and to mother. Mother didn’t do anything
about it. She was mental. Mother did not have that capacity. My mother is total submissive. No power. That’s why I don’t like my mother.

I did not like that. In this kind of situation, one desire came to me – we need freedom in this world. No one must be a slave. We all need to be free. We must not suffer. We need to be happy. I also need to be happy. I need to make other people happy. It is like they had tied me up with a big chain. Putting a chain, it was like they had tied me and kept me as a slave. I thought, “I am a slave. I need freedom.” That thought came to me when I was 12 years old, when I studied in 8th standard. The thought came, but I couldn’t tell anyone because of father.

After father became mentally ill, control went to father’s older brother and father’s younger brother. We had no clothes, no food. All the property/wealth was in their hands. They wouldn’t give property/wealth to anyone. I toiled for daily wages on my land. They would give me five rupees, my father’s older brother and my father’s younger brother. They took all of the joint family’s property. I don’t know in whose name the property was actually recorded. We didn’t have even one friend anywhere. That day I put all my desires to the side. I told our relatives, “I need to study.” My father’s younger brother said, “You will study and then go and write accounts for your father.” That means, cheaply they are using me, rejecting my own thoughts, my own motivations, and telling me, “You want to help your father.” My father’s younger brother says, “Are you going to study and help your father?” That means, ‘women have no use for study.’ “What will you study? What are you going to do? Go, cut the weeds in the shed and eat. Go and work in the cultivated land.”
At one point, my mother got angry at father and left. She was gone for two years. How would I survive there? What would I do? My mother ran away. We were all sitting and crying. Then I told my brothers, “Please go. Go anywhere. Don’t stay here.” One brother ran away somewhere. For ten years, I didn’t know where he was. Another brother was working in a hotel. One brother was a servant to my uncle. That uncle killed him. That uncle raised my brother until he was 22 years old, and then killed him. His body went to the graveyard. One younger brother, he was cut with a sickle twice. Seeing all this, we didn’t know where to go. Our mother left and worked as a servant in Madras. See, it was a good life, but if we women go out they do not accept. They will give women bad names. They hit our mother. As soon as she came back, they hit her. They tied mother to a coconut tree. I was an 18-year-old girl. My father’s older brother and his wife hit her. They tore her blouse. They said my mother had relations with men. How? How, mā? My mother gave birth to seven children. We can see that she doesn’t need another relationship. We don’t need to say she is good or bad. What right do they have to say that? She gave birth to us. Our cells and her cells are the same. Who will separate them? These questions were inside me. Who are they to separate me from my mother? My mother delivered seven babies to this fellow. How can she go to another fellow? They are telling lies. My heart is telling me. Therefore, I fought. I said, “You don’t talk another time about our mother. Don’t talk about me. Our mother left fearfully. She gave birth to seven children.” When this happened, I was an of-age girl. If I would have went out, they would have killed me. Therefore, I asked, “If you are kaṭavul, bring me out of this house. You made a mistake. You created me in a rich family. I don’t want anyone’s property. I want clothes. I want food. I want education. I want safety.”
My father’s younger brother killed our father. In our house there were seven murders. Our own father’s younger brother killed seven people. He only is the one who killed our father. He killed my younger brother. He killed another younger brother. He cut my younger sister’s husband. He did horrible things to our family for 14 years. We experienced all these horrible things and recorded it with the police. Giving directly to the Tamil Nadu police, they arrested our father’s younger brother. They cast him out of the town. I made it public. How many records did I keep?! He said that word: “You are going to study and write accounts for your father.” He said and it happened. The word that he said that day, after 30 years I did it. Positive thinking is fulfilling. Yes, positive thinking happened. I made him stand in court. He stood there and I laughed. Am I insane!? What did he say to me? And what happened? I recorded everything he did to our father and to our family. I made it public. I sent him out of the town. I don’t want this fellow. He is a man that killed our father. He took our father away from the town. “I must take up the Bible,” I thought. “I must not take up a sickle.” In this way, I sent him out. He didn’t take a sickle for 20 years. Through the work of a woman only he did not take a sickle. A woman only can control a man. A good woman only can correct a man. That happened in my house.

I didn’t study for 18 years. I didn’t get my certificate. For 18 years, I was a bonded laborer. I had a lot of questions. Why do I need to live like this? Isn’t there relief from this? Who will raise me? Who will bear all of my weight? For this, who will give me freedom? In our house, none of the men were able to come boldly. They were despicable men. “Whichever man comes, I will give my life to him,” I thought. I will not give my life to these men.
Even as a young 12-year-old girl, I understood events of the world and events in our house a little. Inside of me, there was a spirit. Inside of me, there was a feeling. I thought, “Why am I like this? Why was I born here? Why was I born in a rich person’s house? Why do I live controlled and constrained like this? Why don’t I have freedom? I will leave. I will run far away. I will not be inside this house only. Outside, outside I will run and go to school with friends. At 7:00 p.m. only I will come back home. Saying some excuse like, “I was studying.” I will say like that. But I will be in the next person’s house. I will be in a poor person’s house. I won’t ever go to a rich person’s house. I don’t like those houses.

I had this big house, jewelry, money, there were a lot of things, everything. We had power, we ruled. But I didn’t like it. I didn’t like that men controlled women. I didn’t like that our mother was fearful. I didn’t like that if women went outside they were not respected. I didn’t like that women were expected not to talk. There wasn’t freedom. I saw all of this and suffering came inside my heart/mind. But I couldn’t tell anyone these thoughts. I didn’t have the opportunity to go to the next house and talk about our family issues. Our father was inside the house and wouldn’t allow us outside. “If our house is like this, is the whole world like this?” I wondered. This kind of thinking came to me. Do all women think like this? No. If I told someone my thoughts, they would say I was crazy.

My background is communist. My family won’t pray to kaṭavuḷ. They won’t believe in God. They won’t worship people either. They believe that they are kaṭavuḷ. They will cut people. Taking a sickle, they will cut. Mother, women, children . . . they won’t show compassion for anyone. If someone makes a mistake, they won’t look at them with compassion, as an elder brother or younger brother. They won’t look at her as wife.
They won’t look at them as children, as small children. They will hit and hit only. But in their perspective, that is justice. I didn’t like it. I didn’t like our house. I didn’t like people. I didn’t like our father. I didn’t like mother. Where to go? I only liked studying. I liked friendship. I didn’t like anything else. But many problems came. I was surprised. I didn’t know anything. No one told me about my caste. No one told me about my mother or father. No one told me about religion. No one told me who was kaṭavul. No one told me who was good and who was bad. No one told me about my background. No one told me how my aunt and uncle were. They didn’t tell me their background, or my mother and father’s backgrounds. They didn’t tell me how I have to be.

It affected me very badly. Those acts of cruelty that they did, those acts of cruelty, they were brutal, I didn’t like it. “If I was born to them, then why did I have this spirit?” I thought. Many people have said, “What mā? Born to them, you are talking insanely. Why are you like this? You will not live.” They said I was insane. Am I insane? But if I speak my conscience, I am not insane. I am clear. What I say is my conscience. I hated that I didn’t have rights. Everyone forced me, “You need to be like this only.” What right do my relatives who don’t help me have to say this? “You didn’t help me. How will I listen to what you say?” I don’t need those kinds of relatives. I don’t need a father. I don’t need a mother. I don’t need that house. I don’t need that caste. I don’t need religion either. I pushed that all aside. If I said this much thinking, they would have dubbed me an insane person.

Because I am a woman, I knew I was really thinking over [over-the-top, exaggerated, hysterical\(^3\)]. Compared to man, I was thinking over. I knew that. They will

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\(^3\) A vignette to illustrate the translation of ‘over’ used in English by Tamil speakers: I spent New Year’s Eve in Varkala, a beach town in Kerala, with immediate family. At one point during the night we were
say, “That man has power, power.” I didn’t like that. What man has power that I don’t have? I was the first born in my family. After me, man was born. I, the first born, did not have preference. My brothers who were born after me had preference. Isn’t that a problem? But people don’t understand it as a problem. They make women suffer. They make women cheap. Why do they all see women like that? It was a weight in my heart. It was like the weight of the world in my heart. Without knowing, I had this great weight. I had the question, “Why do I need to think all these thoughts? Why do I need to be like this? Why do I need to accept all this? What sin have I done? What sin, to whom did I sin? What is this thinking for? Who is this that gave these thoughts to me? In this world, do men treat women well? No, they don’t. Then in this world we need to be women only, we must not be men.” That thought came. “We should shoot men. Women only need to have freedom in this world.” All these kinds of thoughts came to me. Terror. I became a terror. I couldn’t hide that.

I thought, “I must not tell my mother that I am this kind of woman.” I don’t like it. I didn’t have use for this kind of mother. I put her in the corner. “You stay like that. Don’t come here. I am doing my work.” My mother was opposed to my thinking. She is against my thinking. She was submissive to her husband. She does not know how to handle her husband because she is an immature woman and she is an alone girl. She had no brothers or sisters. Her husband was a dominant fellow. I gave up on my mother. It became a big problem for me. Through mother, problems came. She would say, “Why? Don’t talk like this. Your father will kill you. Why? You must not be like this. You are a girl child. Why? Why are you like this?” I would laugh like an insane person! “I will not

walking behind three young Tamil men. One was dancing, music blaring from his headphones, with exaggerated arm and leg movements—sometimes leading him near the edge of the path on the cliff’s edge. “You’re dancing ‘over’,” one of his friends said while grabbing his arm to reign him in. “‘Too much cool’.”
become like you. This husband hits like this. I will not become an enemy to myself.” From then on, I wasn’t obedient to our mother.

No one must touch this body. I don’t like men. I don’t want men in my life. If a man comes, he will not treat me well. If he treats me bad, I will kill him because he needs to die. “Let me give freedom to that fellow. Let him survive. I don’t want that man to interact my life.” “I will not give birth to your child,” I said to my uncles. “I will kick you.” Like a rowdy, I said this. “You hit me in the road and did very horrible things. You pulled my hair and hit me.” Where did my power come from? The power of ten men came. I gave them a beating. They ran. They all ran. I went to the police station. I ran 1 ½ kilometers, when I was 23 years old, in order to save my life, to protect my life.

Once I rejected them, I couldn’t go back to that family. They would kill me. I had to choose another way. But I had no way to go. So I ran to police that day. But the whole police department was under my family’s control. So they were telling me, “Your uncles are very good. Your father was mental. You have to be submissive to those people.” Then, one person in the church said, “You come to Madras. You come to Chennai and we will help you.” One person said this in our town, but I was afraid. I was in a place for one month, a Roman Catholic place. The Sisters there, I didn’t like them. I was suffering. They watched me as a slave. I don’t like to be a slave to anyone.

Who helps you in suffering? Relatives are the ones who help. kaṭavuḷ is the one who gives full freedom. I didn’t have either of those two. I prayed to those kaṭavuḷ and didn’t get any help. I don’t need that. I have relatives all over the world, but no one comes and participates in my suffering. I don’t need them either. So first I rejected my family. Whoever hasn’t participated in my problem, I don’t want those relatives. I don’t
want to listen to those relatives. I don’t want to obey them I don’t want to follow them. And I don’t want god, the one who is not interacting in my life, to participate. I don’t want those gods and goddesses. That is my second rejection. I have my own power. I have some power that somewhere I have in my body. Within me, there is integrity. That is my distinguishing quality. My relatives that don’t help, my relatives that don’t say consoling words in my suffering, kaṭavul who does not take away my problems, I don’t need them. I understood that I have freedom to choose and freedom to reject, freedom to follow, freedom to choose. I may choose, I may reject, I may follow. I knew those three things. In suffering only I learned that. I can choose, I can reject, I can follow, what I like. These would be suitable for my life. My decisions need to cooperate with my spirit, my experiences, my feelings, for all the kinds of suffering I know.

I knew I could not go and know someone unmindfully. I needed full support. I needed to follow someone, but who did I know? My house wasn’t good. Will I choose someone in the world, since there is no one good in my house? Those who are in my house, my relatives, my property, my brothers and sisters, my mother and father, I don’t need any of them. I was longing to see that good perfect man or woman. And I didn’t want a man. I can’t go to anyone to ask. If I ask just anyone, they will do bad things. My father didn’t raise me like that. My father has raised me well. Even this bad person raised me well. He gave me a good mind. “You need to stand alone. You must not follow anyone,” he said. Like that, this critical fellow giving good ideas. I knew that I had to follow a particular man.

In this way, I came to know Jesus. I came to know about who are women. I came to know about my family. I came to understand how this world is. It is all one story. How
did I come to know this? I started to be caused to suffer. Only after that I started to think about the world. If our house is this way, will the whole world be this way? If I am a woman who suffers, do other women also suffer in this way? If we do not have freedom, is everyone like this? Within me a philosophy came. A philosophy. I need to be free. I need to make other people free. I need to be happy. I need to make other people happy. This is my concept. This came to me. Within me, a pain, long pain came like it comes to a pregnant lady before she gives birth to a child. That pain when a child comes out, within me that word came to me as thought: “I need to be happy. I need to make others happy. I need to be free. I need to make other people free. In whatever way I live, I need to give that kind of life to other people. If I tie a silver sari, I need to give you silver. I need to be good. But everyone needs to be like me. I will wish for that. Everyone needs to think like me.” All these thoughts came to me. But I didn’t know anything about how to do that. I needed guidance. “Someone needs to guide me,” I thought. I have longings; someone has to guide myself, my life. Who is that perfect person to guide my life?

I had seen a Jesus picture when I was young. That memory came to me. When that kind of thinking came to me, Jesus gave me this memory: In childhood we would go to friends’ houses. Hindu pictures were not there. They put a cross. If you went to their house, there wasn’t any food, only water. We would eat bananas. But they were happy. If you saw their faces, they were bright. They were black [dark skinned], but they were bright. They were of a very bad caste, but they had good love. Our house was very high class, but there was nothing. I thought, “Who is this man? He hangs like this on the cross. If they pray to him, they are good. This is which cămi?” That man, no one told me he was kaṭavul. No one told me that Jesus is a god. I did not hear the Gospel. No one told
me to go to the temple. *I prayed to him like I prayed to all the kaṭavuḷ. Then I asked,*

“*There are so many kaṭavuḷ. Why are you only like this? You appear as a suffering kaṭavuḷ.*” I didn’t know anyone in the world who was honest. I didn’t know who to follow.
Religion was a strong underlying theme in Arulagam’s history, social work, daily routines, and the personal histories of residents and staff members. According to both Ladha and Aameena, black magic, or sorcery, played a role in their respective separations from their families. Visits to local Christian church services and Bible studies with messages, prayers, and songs dominated the list of shelter activities. Many volunteers presented the social services of the organization, as well as the women it served, in terms of sin, redemption, good and evil. International and local patterns of volunteer work and money flowed through Christian congregations, and the occasional Jain women’s group. Women discussed among themselves their different religious backgrounds. Diana said some women were “Hindu Christian.” Aameena said that her Hindu friends didn’t understand her Muslim difficulties. Sometimes one resident would speak for others, like the day Stella cut into a story Fathima was telling and said, “She [Fathima] has accepted Jesus.” I had never heard Fathima talk about Jesus. Later, when I asked her if she had accepted Jesus, she just said, “There are many fights.” Fathima did participate in bible studies and prayers at Arulagam, but she did not usually attend Sunday morning services at the CSI church nor the Sunday evening community worships and dinners at TTS. While Stella called this “accepting Jesus,” Fathima herself was less direct and clear. Instead, she reacted to this label by implicitly pointing to religious differences, the expectations of Christian practice imposed by some staff members, volunteers, and residents, and the fights that ensued in the midst of this complexity and plurality at the shelter. Christian staff members, volunteers, and board members had various beliefs and practices. How did this transient group of people manage the diverse religious convictions embodied at the shelter and the shared work of social rehabilitation?
Together, this and the next chapter complicate notions of “secularism” and “Christianity,” respectively, by exploring how people involved in Arulagam’s social service work understood each in their own lives and work. In addition to religious convictions, members of the Arulagam community used the English word *secularism* and the English word *pluralism* or the Tamil equivalent (*pañmai*) to describe the ideas and commitments that played key roles in shelter life and work. As Fenella Cannell (2010) suggests, individuals’ diverse and complicated understandings of and interest in the secular and the religious lent themselves to ethnographic study:

At this juncture, anthropologists must surely contribute to the expansion of the repertoire of ethnographic studies of actual, lived situations (in the West and outside it) in which local people enact their understandings of, interest in, or perhaps total indifference to the secular and the religious.

[Cannell 2010:97]

At Arulagam, there were various and shifting ideas and applications of the secular and the religious aspects, goals, and practices of women’s social rehabilitation. In other words, multiple secularisms and Christianities existed at the shelter. For some, secularism and Christianity merged in particular practices and goals for social rehabilitation. For others, the two guiding principles were at odds and they emphasized the importance of one over the other.

**Secular Ethics of Belonging**

I approach secularism as a body of ideas about how members of Arulagam – a transient community comprised of people with diverse religious, political and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as diverse personal histories of hardship and abuse – set
expectations, rules, and terms of belonging. What rights do these women from different backgrounds share? Who are included as accepted members of this community? What actions are grounds for discipline within the shelter campus? On what basis can people be excluded from shelter activities or even the campus itself? These questions of belonging, rights and discipline, and inclusion and exclusion within plural contexts are questions that extend to studies of secularism and the state more broadly. These studies have problematized some basic assumptions about secularism.

The common Western datum that explains secularism as “separation of church and state” fails to account for “the ethnographic meaning of the secular in a given context” (Cannell 2010:86). On a nation-state level, India is an excellent example of how the relevance and application of an imported colonial idea, like secularism, could not be assumed (Cannell 2010:93; see Mahajan 2003). While Jawarhalal Nehru advocated for a model of secularism based on separation of religion and state, his predecessor, Mahatma Gandhi, was deeply religious. Indian secularism, he argued, should be rooted in one’s faith. The best moral basis for tolerance, peace and respect was not separating religion from politics, but developing particular types of political theology (de Vries and Sullivan, eds. 2006; Madan 1987; Mitra 1991; Nandy 1985, 1992). Indeed, even when secularism is intended to ensure the separation of politics and religion, overlap persists. For instance, Indian personal laws apply to marriage and divorce, among other issues, and are based in religious traditions, including Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. Research about Hindu nationalism also demonstrates the interactions between Indian politics and religion (Chatterjee 1993; Fuller 1983, 2003; Hansen 1999; Van der Veer 2001; Van de Veer and Lehmann 1999).
This body of work demonstrates the importance of ethnographic research to challenge “the seeming obviousness and inevitability of the secular,” as well as assumptions that secularism means the same thing to everyone, everywhere. (Cannell 2010:90). In particular, it highlights contentious, active, and on-going debates among religious, political, and academic elites about what secularism is and what secularism should be in India and around the world. While intellectuals, politicians and temple priests play an important institutional role in everyday secularism, it is a much more broad community of people who negotiate, implement, and redefine secularism in their daily life, work and relationships. For instance, Christian pastors and faculty members at the seminary played a significant role in shaping the overarching framework of secularism in the shelter. However, on-site staff members had to constantly create a sense of community, belonging, and acceptance, and navigate the complexities of living in a pluralistic context.

By focusing on the stories, practices, and experiences that constituted the ways in which people set the terms of belonging at the women’s homeless shelter, I consider how “peace itself is the product of a relentless creative labor. Coexistence, as much as conflict, needs to be explained” (Ring 2006:3; see also Das 2010; Varshney 2002). Like women involved in the Hindu nationalist movement who construct politics and ideology that resonates with people’s everyday life, what Menon (2009) calls “everyday nationalism,” women who live and work at the shelter translate the board of directors’ ideology of secularism into everyday practices that make the idea relevant and meaningful in everyday life. Whether based on the exclusion of religious minorities, like the Hindu nationalist women in Menon’s ethnography or based on the inclusion of all
religions, castes, and classes of women like the staff and board members of Arulagam,
everyday secularism involves the creation and maintenance of particular patterns of
social inclusions and exclusions.

What I am calling the shelter’s *secular ethics of belonging* involved complicated,
sometimes contentious, and on-going negotiations of religious conviction and social
outreach. People have an array of authoritative ideas and texts to draw on to imagine their
“moral self” and engage in “an ethics-in-practice” (Prasad 2007:16). Ethnographic
studies of everyday ethical life in South India demonstrate “the dynamic ways in which
individuals not only imagine and live out their ethical worlds, but convey this
imagination to others through narrative” (Prasad 2007:226). Everyday ethical life not
only involves imagination, but possibility.

A focus on ethical life – on the ways in which people practically engage
themselves and their worlds as beings invested with moral potential –
provides a supple means of grappling with the complex and variegated
moral and political possibilities of the present. [Pandian and Ali 2010:3]

By focusing on the relationships and narratives that constituted the process of articulating
and living a secular ethics of belonging at the shelter, I consider how individuals
attempted to transform moral danger into moral possibility.

**Defining Secularism**

There were a variety of ways in which board and staff members understood the role of,
and relationship between, religion and secularism in the shelter, including 1) equating
Christianity and secularism, 2) downplaying or separating religion from the secular goals
of the organization, and 3) understanding Christianity and secularism as distinct concepts
with some overlapping principles. I explore each of these approaches at the shelter, with ethnographic examples of how particular understandings of secularism lead to corresponding ideas about ideal womanhood and the social rehabilitation of homeless women.

“Being a True Christian is Being Secular”

Sometimes board and staff members equated the values of Christianity with the values of secularism. They did this by demonstrating that both Christianity and secularism are founded on pluralism. They did not ignore religion or delegate religious conviction to a private realm. Instead, they defined secularism as acceptance and respect for all religions. They then presented arguments for why and how Christianity has the same values and foundation. Rev. Maggie once told me, “I feel that revealing the true Christian principles would be a secular perspective. Being a true Christian is being secular.” When I asked Rev. Dr. Gnanavaram, Arulagam President, to say more about what he meant by secular, he said, “It is a special activity being a circle of friends of many religions.” He equated secularism to religious pluralism.

   God, who created everything and everyone, celebrates pluralism. God accepts. God shows love to everyone. In this era, there is an urgent need for accepting plurality. People focus on caste differences, economic differences, gender differences. There is no human compassion, no equality, no human rights.

   The emphasis on pluralism led Rev. Dr. Gnanavaram to not only accept women from a variety of religious backgrounds, but to analyze various religious approaches to gender and God. He celebrated different religious traditions and linked womanhood with
divinity. He spoke to residents about religious pluralism and Hindu goddesses during a seminary-hosted International Women’s Day festival I attended in March as part of my pre-dissertation research. He critiqued the patriarchal messages of popular Tamil comedy shows and gave a brief message about God’s image.

What is God’s image? It is the image of male and female mixed. God has male qualities and female qualities. We give praise for this. But Christian religion and Jewish religion are bad about this issue. We have the habit of looking at God as a man. Islamic religion also looks at God as a man. But in Hindu religion, who all is there? Who is there? Say it.

The women in the audience responded in silence, so the pastor gave some examples.

“Mary Mother, Kali Mother, Durga Mother – there are lots of mothers. Say three.” At this point, the women in the audience began to yell out names of goddesses. The pastor repeated some of them. “Kanchi Kaamaatchi, Kaasi Visaalarachi, Madurai Meenakshi. It’s super isn’t it?! Female gods!” The pastor continued,

There is a truth in the Hindu religion. I am happy thinking of the good tradition there of indicating women as God. . . . God is filled with male and female qualities. There is no necessity for God to be a man. Our Hindu sisters do not have that problem. We in the Christian religion have this problem like a thorn. It is very difficult. We have to learn from our Hindu sisters. Christians won’t even make Mary Mother equal to God. But it is a good try and I praise that small attempt. We praise God’s male and female qualities. If you look at Hindu religion, men and women are together. Arttanaareesvarar is half man and half woman. Saktisivan. There are good
themes in Hinduism to create a form that is half man and half woman.

Approaching secularism as religious pluralism led Dr. Rev. Gnanavaram to critique how difference was often used as the basis for exclusion and subordination. In response, Dr. Rev. Gnanavaram approached difference through the lens of equality. Rather than conceptualize God as a man and therefore men as superior to women, God has both male and female qualities. They are equally divine and equal in society.

At the shelter, this approach also played a role in daily life. I traveled from my apartment to the shelter by crowded bus. One afternoon, I was happy to see a bus pull up that would take me all the way to the shelter so I wouldn’t have to switch downtown at Periyar Bus Stand. I was even more happy to see that not only would I get a seat, the bus was nearly empty. I hadn’t realized that it was Sarasvati Puja that day. As we drove along, there were colorful hangings around doorways and huge banana leaves arranged on cars and autos. When I arrived at Arulagam, the residents were not sewing or weaving and the desks in the office were covered in bags. The bags held ingredients for “mixture,” a popular snack. One of the Christian staff members had purchased the snacks and instructed a couple of the residents to ensure that the ingredients were mixed in the right proportions. She said:

There are Hindu women here. Although they don’t pray to cāmi here, they will have thoughts of it, thoughts of their family. I brought this mixture for them on this holiday. And for everyone else, they can just enjoy the food. They are all here: Hindu, Muslim, Christian women. So for the Hindu girls I bought it.

Part of the secular ethics of belonging at the shelter involved not only tolerance, but
acceptance and celebrations, of women from a variety of religious traditions. It even led to theological discussions about the positive and negative ways in which each religion, one’s own or others’, promoted particular ideas about gender, divinity, and difference.

*Secular Security*

At other times, staff and board members promoted the idea that religion really had no place in the secular services the shelter provided to homeless women. “My name or my religion or my gender or my caste should not be the barrier for communicating with the person or helping a person,” said Rev. Maggie. She continued,

Being secular . . . is not bounding oneself within the compound walls, within religious identities, it’s overcoming those identities. That’s a secular perspective. Especially in a place like Arulagam, we need people with a secular perspective because there are girls coming from different walks of life, from different religion, from different social setup. For them, this is the only place where they can get security, where they feel secure because they have all faced different kind of violence in their different walks of life. So when they believe, “This place is for me, it will provide security,” it means the people who are involved in that should overcome certain barriers. At present, there is a fundamentalist attitude that people have – religious fundamentalism, class fundamentalism, caste fundamentalism – those kinds of dominant attitudes are prevailing amongst people. So when individuals come together for this organization, if they have that secular perspective we can work together for these
people, really. The work, the cause, is purely for the affected womenfolk.

That’s what I mean by secular.

Other people involved in Arulagam’s social work, including a former secretary, described this approach as a focus on “immediate concerns.” When I asked her to describe how she focused on such immediate concerns when she was secretary, she said it was about “simply being sympathetic.” She tried “establishing rapport” to understand women’s reasons for leaving home and tried to “understand what they were feeling.” She continued by saying that they talked about God at the shelter, but in a general rather than a Christian way. “We made them concentrate on some person called God. We sang songs. The warden did a ‘thought for the day’ in the morning. It was not compulsory. We didn’t force them. If they felt like it, they joined.” Dr. Rev. Gnanavaram echoed this language before he began a prayer during the International Women’s Day celebration. He told the religiously diverse audience of shelter residents to “take what you want out of it.”

Ruth, along with all of the staff members, complied with this particular understanding of a secular ethics of belonging by accepting women to the shelter no matter their religious, caste, or class background. Every visitor to the shelter, whether a local group of social work students or a foreign church group, was told that staff members did not ask about a woman’s background nor did they encourage or condone baptism.

When a secular ethics of belonging focused on tolerance of religious differences and optional participation in religiously motivated practices, it left room for criticism regarding staff members’ power to interpret and enforce particular religious practices. Many residents pointed out this limitation when they joined in a hunger strike. They
refused to eat precisely because church attendance was optional. They pointed out a small fact I hadn’t considered. Church attendance was optional for everyone. And when staff members chose not to attend, the residents were not able to attend – even if they wanted to. It was a closed campus. Ladha, one of the residents, sat during dinnertime outside of her shared room with her Bible. “I have no family,” Ladha told me. “I read the Bible every morning and every night. I go to church. I sing songs. I study [the Bible] well. Why can’t I go to church? What else will I do?” The language of a secular ethics of belonging highlighted options, but these options were defined by someone, limited by someone. When everyone has options, those in power – the shelter staff members – had the privilege of first-choice. Their choices limited residents’ choices. “If they don’t go, I can’t go,” said Ladha.

*Christian Principles in a Secular Field*

A third way in which staff and board members understood religion and secularism in the shelter is that they were distinct approaches, with important overlap. For instance, Rev. Maggie described “basic Christian principles that are also in the secular field”: care, listening, counseling, empathy, acceptance, and service.

[Considering] the hurt and the wounds there in [residents’] hearts, it will take a long time to heal so during this process pastoral counseling and care, listening to people, is a Christian attitude. That should be provided by whoever is there, whether it is the superintendent or office staff or a warden or a teacher or an outside visitor. They should have an empathetic feeling towards [the residents], listening to their problems. This I’d say is a true Christian principle, and accepting each other with our own
limitations. That should also be there. Accepting each other. We are here to serve them, like Jesus. Jesus came to serve, not to be served. Whoever is there, they should have the tendency to serve people. These are the basic Christian principles that are also in the secular field. One should try to look at it from that perspective.

Lakshmi, shelter superintendent, was quick to remind me that following Jesus’ example required her, and others with similar convictions, to spend significant time, energy, and resources in less-than-heavenly places. Fostering a secular ethics of belonging, for the homeless shelter staff and board members, required engagement with a unique category of places and people in Tamil Nadu. It involved a humble spirit and sacrifice. Describing her work in various hospitals, orphanages, and homeless shelter, Lakshmi said, “It is going to difficult places, smelly places, dirty places.” It is like “going to hell and coming out again.”

This particular approach to a secular ethics of belonging, one that emphasizes self-sacrifice, runs the risk of highlighting the differences between people who serve and those who are served. The tendency to patronize residents emerged in women’s complaints about staff members who constantly criticized residents, for their clothing, hygiene, cooking skills, sewing skills, mothering skills, posture, and participation, or lack thereof, in shelter activities. An example of how staff members reproduced patterns of hierarchical and patronizing relationships emerged when residents pointed out how staff members were often fickle in their support and friendship. One day, I was trying to talk to Nalini in the kitchen. She was standing over a big pot of milk, stirring and holding the handle over the flames. She didn’t look up from the pot. Her face was expressionless.
Connie: Are you tired?

Nalini: The work is hard. It is hard to make tea/coffee for everyone.

C: You don’t have to make it for me.

N: No, no. It isn’t hard making it for you.

C: Will you be done with kitchen work tomorrow [Friday]?

N: No. It is month-long work.

C: When do you take a break today?

N: There is no break.

I sat down on the floor next to the fire.

N: Don’t sit on the floor. It is very dirty.

C: Don’t worry.

N: The women in the office scolded me. There are so many problems, they are telling me. They scolded me because I didn’t hear what they asked me to do. They scolded me because I wore a nightie without a scarf (duppaitā) when I brought tea/coffee to the office when that man was there [the shelter driver]. They scolded me for making bad tea/coffee.

I could see tears welling up in the corner of Nalini’s eyes. “In the morning they love me. In the afternoon they don’t,” she said.

People involved in shelter social work held complicated convictions about secularism and religion. In one interview, Rev. Maggie articulated each of the three approaches outlined in this section. Whether people focused on the overlap between secular and Christian principles, emphasized that religion should be downplayed or separated from the secular work of social rehabilitation, or argued that “true Christianity” was itself secular influenced the way in which community members talked about
difference, understood the parameters of belonging and community, and shaped ethics-in-practice.

Secularism and religious pluralism were important framing discourses in the seminary’s involvement with Arulagam and many other outreach projects. They supported inter-religious dialogue, dalit communities, people who were “gender minorities” (transgender and homosexual), people living with HIV/AIDS, people living in prisons, homeless shelters, and old age homes. The work was not proselytizing, but focused on social uplift and social change. As an ecumenical seminary involved in social service projects with various marginalized populations and hosting an interreligious dialogue group, everyday life of seminary faculty and students involved interactions with a heterogeneous community. As Rev. Maggie had said, the secular perspective of this community of Christians required that they go beyond the boundaries of their own Christian denomination and beyond the boundaries of culturally normative society. It required new definitions of belonging.

Idealized discourse about a secular ethics of belonging often gave way to stories of strange, mad, and evil people and happenings at the shelter campus itself. These narratives and labels didn’t mean that residents and staff weren’t engaged in a secular ethics of belonging, but did demonstrate how difficult the inclusionary project was and its limitations in day-to-day relationships in a marginalized, relatively closed community of strangers. One of the questions this dissertation raises, by emphasizing the diverse range of cultural, feminist, religious, and secular stories, convictions and individuals that comprised shelter social service work, is the question of how a community talks about an ethics of belonging when they don’t share the same language. Shelter community
members spoke Tamil or Hindi or English. They spoke out of the convictions of ecumenical Christianity (many seminary board members) or Pentacostalism (many staff members) or Gandhian secularism (some local volunteers) or any number of Hinduisms (some staff members). They spoke as Western feminists or Tamil wives and mothers or proud Tamil spinsters. These were quite dramatic “ors” and they all existed in this shelter community. People living and working within the shelter together often didn’t share a language – whether in regards to tongue, conviction, experience, or positionality.

Madness, evil, and strangeness emerged through the doubts of belonging, located in the “or” between people with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and goals. By acknowledging and engaging with doubt – through accusations of madness, visions of evil spirits, and articulations of the strangeness of others – I would suggest that the staff members and residents living in this plural context were, arguably, the ones engaged in a secular ethics of belonging. The board members had a removed and ideal vision for the community, but it was the staff members who named (if implicitly), faced, and addressed (if only in the living through) ethical dilemmas of social life. They were doing ethics, in all of its ambiguity, practices of judgment, and on-going debate. I explore some of these debates in an exchange about “cross-cultural blood” and a series of visions, most of which involved Lakshmi, the shelter’s live-in superintendant.

**Being a Different Kind of Woman**

In this section, I explore efforts to redefine the boundaries of belonging to include, rather than exclude, women outside the patriarchal family. In these moments, staff members and residents make subtle arguments that displace the family as the locus of ethical life, emphasizing how they are promoting and experiencing a different kind, and perhaps even
a better kind, of community and life. These vignettes do not necessarily focus on religious differences, like the interview excerpts and participant-observation notes highlighted in the first half of the chapter. However, they do express the processes by which shelter residents and staff members came to understand societal differences in a new way. These narratives of difference, religion, and secularism ultimately led to particular understandings of moral Tamil womanhood and ethical community life.

“I Found it All Too Much”
One short-term resident’s story opens with a failed marriage attempt, and leads to new understandings of her connections to place and people.

Arrangements were all made for my wedding in England, but a fortnight before the due date, we decided to break it off. I set out to visit India again, where I had been happy four years previously. Soon after arriving in Madurai I had fever and for a week dosed myself with antibiotics, eating nothing and staying alone in a lodge. Then I improved and had a good meal. The next day I felt much better so I went for a wander around the city. It was an extraordinary day in so many ways - a day of awakening and awareness, of slowing down and really beginning to 'see' things for the first time.

This woman experienced what Rev. Maggie talked about as an important secular principle for Arulagam. Namely, overcoming barriers. However, rather than a theoretical or abstract principle articulated by a well-educated leader of two institutions, the church and the shelter, this short-term resident demonstrates how ethics is something that people think about, do, and act upon in daily life and in reaction to mundane occurrences. It is
important to recognize that residents were also reflecting on ethical life since staff members, like Poovarasi, dismissed the idea that residents would talk about religion, their differences in background, or reflect on what is right and wrong. To the contrary, residents and staff members alike demonstrated that ethics involves relationships, interactions, and emotions, not simply texts, traditions, and thinking. She continued her account of a life-transforming day:

By the end of the day I felt as if a veil had been lifted and the barriers broken down and I felt strangely open and vulnerable. One experience which affected me deeply was witnessing preparations in the street for a funeral procession. I sat and watched while the paper ship was garlanded with flowers, not really understanding what it was all about. When it came for the old man to be carried away, I found it all too much, and wept openly with the rest of the women.

When I rose at sunrise on the Saturday morning, I was conscious of a great light within me and feelings of great love and joy. I decided to give away everything I did not need to beggars and others I had come to know in Madurai. I missed the 1:00 p.m. bus to Kodaikkanal and feeling very tired, agreed to find a hotel room and sleep for a couple of hours.

With a focus on caste and class differences, this short-term resident articulates her own secular ethics of belonging that celebrated pluralism in the spirit of Gandhi.

From that time on I seemed to lose the balance of my mind and was gradually gripped by the idea that all people of lowly status or caste should be elevated, and treated as equals. I had been very impressed by the
words and life of Mahatma Gandhi, feeling moved and humbled by his purity of spirit and selfless dedication.

I fear I must have been behaving in some strange manner for the police came and took me off the next Kodaikkanal bus. At the police station I felt I was one with the hopeless prisoners sitting there and started screaming and fighting, but, in between, having vivid visions. It was at this stage that I was taken to Arulagam. I felt I had lost my identity and was a blind woman. There I felt was back to normal again, although the folks there were puzzled by my talking and descriptions of hallucinations. I think I was very fortunate to find my way to Arulagam in my hour of need.

This young woman, like many at Arulagam, endured a traumatic experience that meant she failed to meet ideals for Tamil womanhood. She chose to abandon her marriage. Like many of the women at Arulagam, this traumatic experience also enabled her to see the world in a different way, to think about new moral possibilities for womanhood and for community. And, just as Arulagam founders envisioned, the shelter had supported this woman to the extent that she was made “normal again.”

Through the telling of this vision, the short-term resident of the shelter describes a shift in how she understood and prioritized her relationships. Abandoning her planned marriage, she experienced a broadening of her relationships. She was not just going to be a wife in a family, she understood a new connection to all people. Rather than going to a husband in a home, she went to the urban wasteland: the street, cemetery, prison, and homeless shelter. She experienced being equal or one with them. She experienced a sense
of belonging beyond the limits of her own family, class, caste, and religious communities. This narrative points out feelings of connection with marginalized people, a feeling that the woman experienced after abandoning her domestic life and upcoming marriage. This fact is significant for Lakshmi, who argued that domestic worldly life is limiting.

Cross-Cultural Blood

Lakshmi and I were talking in the shelter entranceway. Often during these conversations she would tell me about people in her childhood, adolescence, and current life who had called her a fool or mental. The females in her life said she should have been a boy because she didn’t want anything to do with men, marriage, or motherhood. Her brothers chastised her for “wandering” to various cities alone for education and work. She claimed that her coworkers were trying to pull fast ones on her, stealing money, talking about her behind her back, or undermining her authority. These stories always ended with the assertion, “I am not a fool.”

On this day, she was describing how she had O negative blood, different than the rest of her family. Not only was she different from her family, she was different from other women.

Our thinking should match our blood. When I was young, people said I should have been born a boy because of how I thought and talked. They were asking, “How will you get married with that attitude and behavior?” They used to say that when all of us women were in the fields going to the bathroom. “You should have been born a boy.” I would respond, “I have these [pointing to her breasts] and this [pointing to her crotch], so what are
you saying?” I was very confused about where these thoughts came from.

I did not want to get married and have children.

At this point she asked me about my own love marriage. As she talked, other staff members began to enter the entranceway for the end of the workday chat. Lakshmi focused on cultural differences in her narrative. She used Biblical narratives, bio-medical claims about blood, and the English phrase “cross-cultural” to make an argument for celebrating pluralism.

Lakshmi: I have cross-cultural blood. There has always been mixing, look at Adam and Eve. I have that cross-cultural blood.


L: There must be some cross-cultural seed in me, because I don’t think or talk like my family. Where did I go to get these thoughts? I was stuck in the house. Who taught me these thoughts? No one.

At this point, Mary walked out without saying anything, shaking her head. Lakshmi was still talking. “When I talk, everyone leaves,” said Lakshmi with a chuckle and shrug of her shoulders.

Connie: Why do you think Mary disagreed with you when you said you have cross-cultural blood?

L: She came into the conversation in the middle, so she wasn’t able to understand my deep thinking. She is possessed with her own life. She is settled, married, she has children. Those are limits. Marrying, having kids, owning property like my brothers. It is a limit. I wanted to see the world. They were possessed by the world. I am not captured by another in this world. Earth, gold, men, if we can overcome these limits we can achieve. I have to increase that power I have inside me to overcome the world – that integrity, that woman power through meditation, good thinking, limited way of talking, self-control, no close relationship with anyone, distance. My family are not like me. They have brains occupied with property and wealth. I left it all.

C: Can everyone leave it like you did?
L: I also couldn’t leave. I cried. Who gave me the strength? Someone gave me the strength and I left. I left it. I was 27 years old. At 12:30 in the night I heard a voice like my father’s voice saying my name. Inside my heart, it asked, “Who?” [She says this with much anger.] This question was inside here [pointing to her chest]. My mouth did not open. I was fighting with my spirit. Then, in the depth of my heart I heard, “I am Jesus.” I cried. I cried how much. I was an empty basket. I thought, “I am a free bird. I don’t need anything.” This was in 1989 on a Friday. My mother told me that it was truth. I didn’t leave everything at once. I was stubborn. A pastor helped me, but I was against him. He was a man. He would make me a slave. I didn’t want to surrender to any man. But he told me that he has a wife and children, that he wouldn’t do anything. I didn’t listen. Then, a widow lady told me to leave everything and follow Jesus. Within one year, I was happy with no weight in my heart.

Selby writes, “The Tamil poem is an expression of the poet’s recognition of the human body’s discontinuity with its environment and perhaps it is also an expression of desire for continuity with it” (2008:29). Lakshmi’s comments during this conversation highlight the many “confusing” discontinuities she faced as a child and adolescent. Her inner thoughts did not align with the context in which she lived. She was not like her family. She was not like the women around her. She didn’t want to – and never did – get married or have children. She wanted to – and did – travel, study, and work as a single woman. By the end of the journey, Lakshmi had reconciled her inner feelings, thoughts, and even blood [with their different constitutions] with her environment as a single, educated, working woman. As Lakshmi said at the end of this conversation, “My childhood thoughts were fulfilled.”

What did this mean for a secular ethics of belonging? Lakshmi redrew the boundaries of her community, extending them out beyond her family, village, and even Tamil Nadu. She had “cross-cultural blood.” There is a Tamil literary genre, the Kuṟavañci, that is “devoted to the voices and activities of . . . mysterious outsiders, persons with marginal social identities.” This genre offers “an imaginative commentary
on changing relations among persons, land, and landscape in an era of fragmented polities, increased migrations and shifting social identities in the Tamil region” (Peterson 2008:60). Lakshmi’s tales of cross-cultural blood, spirits, and travel can also be read as “imaginative commentary” about shifting ideas of womanhood in Tamil Nadu.

I asked Lakshmi about how she used these experiences to help the Arulagam residents.

They have to work. They don’t have the thoughts I have. They have brain darkness because of slavery and dominance. There have been lots of good changes among them, though, since I have come these three months. I tell them about the world, about my life, about the places and people I have met.

Despite acknowledging the limits of marriage and worldly life, when Lakshmi was 46 years old she cried all night because she wasn’t married. Although she cried, she emphasized that it had been her choice not to marry. Her father and mother had never told her to marry or not to marry. She did not think that anyone was “bold” enough to marry her, to be connected to her family, which was “brutal” to the people around them. She had a vision (kāṭci) that night.

In the vision there were three young women, sitting. One of them was me. There was a book floating through the air. The two other women were quietly sitting. But I was moving around. I was anxious, stir crazy. I wanted to see what was written in that book. Finally, I saw. In the book it said, “You have been married.”
Jesus tied a marriage chain (tāli) around my neck. I felt tingly all over, like I was in love. I even asked Jesus to give me a baby that night. “What a fool,” she said about that, laughing hysterically. For six months she was “filled with the spirit.” [As she said those words, she touched my arm and leg and head lightly, indicating a tickly tingly feeling.] My friends would see me at this time and ask how I had this feeling, at 46 years old! This is how I learned the message of marriage.

There was another message written in the book. “Marriage is glorious work,” it said. Marriage work is feeling, serving, caring, listening. These are heavenly characters. God’s character comes through this marriage life. Through marriage we can understand God.

Through the retelling of this vision, Lakshmi reinforced the significance of marriage, but redefined marriage to be particular practices that echoed her secular ethics of belonging: “feeling, serving, caring, listening.” Another day, Lakshmi described a dream from the previous night.

Last night I had a long, long struggle with an evil spirit. A young girl with full jewels like a bride appeared in front of me and invited me to follow her. I just prayed in that dream and felt that I was possessed by God’s spirit. Just by praying, I burned her, I burned it, burnt that figure. You think I will go for that? I prayed and burned it. I am not like this, desiring jewels and all. I am coming from a very good family background.

Lakshmi, in real life, had rejected the jewels of a bride by choosing never to marry. It had caused her many problems. In the dream, however, her restraint was evidence of her
“good family background” and her good character. Although she was a woman with no husband and no children, like the residents, her restraint provided evidence that she had “good family.”

Through both of these visions, Lakshmi constructed a narrative that reinforced the ideals of marriage. However, for Lakshmi, embodying the ideals did not require a husband. They were constituted through particular practices that could be applied and experienced in a wider variety of relationships. She did not have a husband or children, but she felt, served, cared, and listened to a community of women living outside the support and care of patriarchal families. Lakshmi once told me that she didn’t know, in English, “bedroom life, hug and kiss.” But she insisted that was the only difference between her and the married staff members. “My husband, Jesus, is there and he doesn’t leave me like their husbands do.” One day, Lakshmi wore an especially beautiful sari. Mary asked her, “What, is it your wedding day?” Lakshmi replied, “For you, your wedding day is one day. For me, it is everyday.” For Lakshmi, marriage was an everyday principle, a purpose. “Everyone has to have a goal, whether you are a man or a woman,” said Lakshmi. “If not, your life is garbage, a waste.”

Arulagam’s secular ethics of belonging required a continual negotiation of normative cultural constructions of womanhood, community, and belonging. Women at the homeless shelter were outside the patriarchal family and, metaphorically, living in a wasteland. How did they foster moral community in this marginal context? Fostering ethics in this community required a focus on practice rather than place, relationships rather than identities. Through strange visions, life stories, and claims of cross-cultural blood, residents and staff articulated the idea that their lived, embodied and emotional
experiences offered alternative options for being a Tamil women. For instance, marriage was not about a woman’s identity as a wife but a woman’s work feeling, caring, serving and listening. Daily practice and interpersonal relationships focused on dynamic movement, rather than entrenched, rooted identity. As Lakshmi said, it didn’t matter if you were a man or a woman, a Hindu or a Christian, living in a family or living in a shelter. What mattered was whether or not you had momentum, a goal.

**Conclusion**

Lakshmi did what she could to extend the boundaries of belonging, to include different ways of living and being a woman outside the patriarchal family. She told some new, certainly imaginative, and often critical stories about women, family, and relationships. Living in plural, marginalized community demanded bold, creative new narratives about moral life for women outside patriarchal family structures and between religions. Such bold interpretive leaps sometimes led to further rejection, sometimes ridicule and momentary abandonment. But it could also lead to the beginning of new terms of belonging, terms rooted in the emotions, practices, and thoughts that constitute everyday relationships and experience, rather than in established and assumed patterns of belonging. The difference Lakshmi made in her stories was subtle, not oppositional, and important. Being a woman meant caring, listening, feeling, and serving. Lakshmi employed these practices not as a wife but as a superintendent at a homeless shelter. Deborah employed them not only as a biological mother but as a secretary at a homeless shelter.

Ethnographic studies of ethics have offered important contributions to our understandings of how the cultivation of ideal selves are formed through daily, gendered
embodied practice (Gade 2004; Mahmood 2005; Prasad 2007; Schofer 2007). Kelsay suggests that ethnographies of ethics need to expand on this approach to examine how ethical self-formation takes place in relationship to particular social and political structures (2010:489). The focus on the self leaves “readers to wonder just where the self receives direction, and how its participation in social and political life should be understood.” As Kelsay suggests, it is not merely through “transgression of institutionalized norms” (2010:450). The arguments in this chapter demonstrate how women do attempt to cultivate and embody a sense of ideal Tamil womanhood. In line with the goals of the shelter and the expectations of society, they contextualize their efforts in relationship to the terms of patriarchal family life. They are respectable wives, mothers, and daughters. They are from good families. They simultaneous participate in and transgress these norms by shifting the terms of what it means to be a wife or mother or daughter. Rather than particular patriarchal relationships, they focus on particular practices, sensibilities, and purposes. They demonstrated both the struggles and the opportunities inherent in a secular ethics of belonging.

The focus on a secular ethics of belonging brings attention to the places and people of everyday ethical life. Ethical deliberation is often considered esoteric, rational, intellectual, elite, individual. But the ethical challenge of creating community and a sense of belonging among women who have been rejected by family – arguably the most important source of identity and belonging for Tamil women - demonstrates the limits of that assumption. It is emotional, ordinary, relational, public work. Foregrounding relationships reveals what types of inclusions and exclusions a secular ethics of belonging fosters.
Ethnographic studies of ethics can help reveal these struggles, the tensions between the normative power of institutions and the emergent power of interpersonal emotional and thought work of community building. They can reveal new terms of belonging, where shared language might be found – caring, listening, feeling, serving – but in diverse modes of belonging among women who are variously positioned as wives, spinsters, mothers, and superintendents.
Sundari, a hostel warden, chose a picture from a small stack to show me. I had asked her what life was like in Arulagam’s early days, when she was a hostel resident. The picture was of several solemn women, lined up in two rows and dressed in what appeared in the black and white photo to be identical light colored saris. They each held a dark colored book in their right hands. Sundari pointed out a younger version of herself in the photo and talked with a huge smile on her face about visiting the CSI church, Bibles, and baptisms. During my research, she never attended church on Sunday mornings with other staff members and residents, nor did she talk about Jesus or her religious beliefs, ideas, or practices. While Sundari and I were talking, most of the other staff members joined us in the entranceway, as they did every afternoon, to gossip and small talk during the last half hour of the workday. The topic this afternoon was an upcoming Christian wedding at TTS. Sundari said she wouldn’t go. “Why would you?” asked Mary, speaking not to Sundari but to the other staff members. “You pray to Hindu gods.” Everyone smiled. In the span of just a few minutes, Sundari – happily Christian and publicly Hindu – embodied the complexity of religious identity among women in the hostel. And everyone smiled.

The hostel’s Christian identity was significant. The buildings and the social work it provided architecture for was imagined, instituted, managed, and supported by Christian people and communities. However, the women who lived and moved through the hostel and made the hostel a living and social place through their cooking, sleeping, sewing, singing, eating, sweeping, arguing, washing, growing old, giving birth, dreaming, remembering, accounting, filing, volunteering, laughing, and crying created religious and ritual space that could not be described as simply “Christian.” There were hallelujah
mornings full of praise and hands raised to the sky and inquiries about others’ acceptance of Jesus. There were mornings of silent Bible reading, and trips to church services. There was storytelling and running commentary regarding movie plots, visions of evil spirits, and skepticism. People brought their varied ideas about gods and divine worlds, humans and social worlds through the shelter, framing theirs and others’ experiences of suffering and hope. The intersection might have been something identifiable as Christianity, but only as an accepted point of reference. Christianity was not one set of practices or ideas, it was not an identity represented by one set of emotions or relationships. As a vocabulary and a worldview to explain one’s commitment to homeless South Indian women’s social rehabilitation, Christianity provided as much misunderstanding and accusations of wrongdoing as it did shared conviction. Differences were apparent. With focus on the experiences of volunteer tourists at the shelter, I explore gendered social service work at Arulagam in the context of postcolonialism and Christianity.

Can You Spot the Difference?

Missionary movements provide a crucial historical background to contemporary volunteer work at Arulagam, as they are a precursor to international volunteering (Raymond and Hall 2008:531). Female British missionaries used the discourse of “mission of sisterhood” to argue for the significance of religious agendas of empire and of female missionary efforts in the empire (Haggis 1998a; Haggis 1998b; Rowbotham 1998; Twells 1998). The language of sisterhood meant to signal shared experiences and goals as women, but the missionary effort facilitated relationships of asymmetrical power. British female missionaries could gain access to homes in ways that male missionaries could not. They could foster female domesticity that met “civilized,”

The archived story of Arulagam’s origins echoes this legacy. It presents India as a country in need of rehabilitation, and white missionary women as the saviors of powerless and universally oppressed Indian women. It is a story of universalizing, Eurocentric feminism (Mohanty 1986). India is described as a hyper-patriarchal society in which women require the support of family, or in its absence the support of foreign assistance. “In India any girl facing the world alone is in moral danger,” said one Arulagam missionary (Hay 1982). Such statements, with their grave moral undertones, demonstrate the weight of residents’ simple statements of being alone, including Ladha’s comment, “I have no one,” and the young boy’s statement on the merry-go-round, “There is no one at home.”

Arulagam’s British founder, Margaret Harris, became an almost hagiographical character in the archived collections. She was compared to Mother Theresa (Santhosham 1982b; Tharien 2003) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Harris 1982). Following Margaret Harris’ service, two female Methodist missionaries, also from Britain, served as Arulagam superintendent: Jean Hay and Margaret Addicott. At the annual Founder’s Day Celebration at the shelter, Arulagam staff, residents and volunteers remember this genealogy of women, and finally foreigners in general. A self-defined “well-wisher” of the organization gave a speech at the 2008 event:

How much sympathy was in [Margaret Harris’] heart?! Praise her! Praise her! . . . [Jean Hay] did many great things. She made many good self-sacrifices. . . . We will not forget [Margaret Addicott’s] service. Praise
her! Praise her! . . . How many foreigners come and go!? Because of their good thoughts, because of their good actions, they have done many good things for Arulagam. . . . How does all this money come? They are running in the foreign market, working hard for the sake of Indian children. They speak and collect donations.

After Margaret Addicott left India in 2003, there was no superintendent until 2009, when a south Indian woman, Lakshmi, took over the post. I often heard staff members, including the Indian superintendent, comment that they needed a “good missionary” or a “good foreign lady” to live at the shelter. The general consensus was that, compared to a local superintendent, both staff and residents would listen to and respect the leadership of a foreigner. Rev. Maggie once told me, “This culture has a tendency of listening to foreigners. When Margaret Addicott was there, being a foreigner, [the staff] would run to prayer. During the eight-year gap, they were like sheep without a shepherdess. They started their own practices, coming late . . . giving all sorts of excuses.”

Transnational feminist theory acknowledges feminism’s historical ties to racism, colonialism, and imperialism and attempts to build equitable and productive connections among women in different cultural contexts (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Jayawardena 1986; Kaplan, et. al. 1999; Lowe 1996; Mohanty 2003; Shohat 1999; Spivak 2007). I consider in what ways legacies of “sisterhood” missions continue to reinforce relationships of dependence between Western women and Indian women at Arulagam. The ideal of cross-cultural relationship is an important topic within academic literature about voluntourism. Voluntourists, according to this literature, “seek a tourist experience that is mutually beneficial, that will contribute not only to their personal development but
also positively and directly to the social, natural, and/or economic environments in which they participate” (Wearing 2001:1; see also Benson 2011; Holmes and Smith 2009; Lyons and Wearing 2008). Most of this work has focused on how voluntourism can lead to cross-cultural understanding and global citizenship (Broad 2003; Brown and Lehto 2005; Cabtree 1998; Clifton and Benson 2006; Lewis 2005; McGehee 2002; McGehee and Santos 2005; Wearing 2001). Voluntourism has been described as “solidarity” based on recognition of “universal siblinghood” (Fogarty 2009:90), harkening back to the “mission of sisterhood.” “Solidarity, in contrast [to altruism which is unidirectional], is fundamentally dialogical. It is an impetus of the human spirit to reach out and establish a relationship with another human for mutual benefit that will result in a sharing of material and spiritual resources” (Fogarty 2009:92).

Voluntourism may offer tourists and host communities a way to connect in interpersonal relationships, as this literature emphasizes. However, a critical perspective is lacking. To what extent and in what ways do voluntourism experiences foster interpersonal exchange and understanding across cultures? “The existing research surrounding voluntourism falls short of assessing the degree of differences and cultural divide between voluntourists and residents” (Woosnam and Lee 2011:309-310; see also Lyons, et. al. 2011; Raymond and Hall 2008; Sin 2009). Anthropologists can offer a much-needed critical approach to the intercultural situations experienced by people in the context of voluntourism. What are the legacies of earlier voluntourism – missionary activity – on the site and in what ways do they impact host community expectations for voluntourists? In what ways do staff and voluntourists negotiate secular and religious motivations for social service?
The colonialist legacies of missions of sisterhood laid the groundwork for particular expectations, dependencies, and hierarchical relationships between European volunteers and the local Arulagam community. A British woman who spent some time at Arulagam posted a couple pictures of herself standing with her arm around the shoulders of a residents, each with the caption: “With an Indian friend.” Global sisterhood assumes that women around the world share an experience of oppression at the hands of men and patriarchy. It fails to acknowledge power differences among the women and the particular ways that women, based on race, class, culture, ethnicity, age, and sexuality, experience and fight against gender inequality in unique ways (Davis 1981; Haraway 1991; Mohanty 1986). The lack of engagement with such particularities is symbolized well by the nameless descriptor of “Indian friend.” The same foreign volunteer posted another picture that did acknowledge difference. A caption under a picture of the British woman sitting with a group of Indian women reads: “Can you spot the non dalit?”

Whether young volunteers from North America, Germany and England looking for women’s freedom, Tamil Pentecostal volunteers eager to lead half-hour long prayers, shed tears, and share songs, well-educated and well-traveled board members who envisioned secular community and gender equality, local wives and widows commuting to the hostel each day to earn some money for their families, or live-in unmarried staff members who were like the hostel residents in many ways, everyone had a way of dealing with difference, destitution, and deviance at the hostel.

Confusion

A variety of Christian organizations and denominations place volunteers at Arulagam. Anglicans in World Mission have an Experience Exchange Program that allows
volunteers to serve for up to one year. They frame the work through the lens of siblinghood, travel, and learning. “As partners together in Christ’s way grant us the humility to receive new insights from fellow travellers, especially from brothers and sisters whose journeys have been different from ours.” The same page directs readers to “pray for Patricia Hamilton . . . who is helping with women’s ministry for the Arulagam Association, in Madurai, India” (http://uspgireland.org/pray.php, accessed July 30, 2011). Another faith-based organization supporting voluntourism to Arulagam is Global Ministries, of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ. Short-term volunteer assignments with Global Ministries last from two weeks to one year. “This is a great way to use vacation [or] summer breaks as a student or educator,” they advertise (http://globalministries.org/mission/volunteers, accessed July 30, 2011).

I met several such volunteers during my research. I draw on interviews and participant-observation with four of them, those who I got to know the best, in this chapter. Melissa and Lisa were young women from the United States and England, respectively. At different times of the year, they both spent about one month at Arulagam and one month at an HIV/AIDS hospice. They stayed at the hostel itself, so I shared the guest room with them on my overnight stays. They both learned about Arulagam through people at their home congregations. Melissa contentedly participated in Arulagam daily life. She dressed in saris, spent time in the kitchen trying to learn South Indian recipes (she enjoyed the food very much), went to church with the staff, toured Madurai’s temples and downtown with the staff, and participated in an Independence Day flag raising.
Lisa arrived with intentions to provide service. She had volunteered in Calcutta and was a nurse. She wanted to draw on these skills and experiences, but found herself treated as a guest and tourist instead. On the day of her departure, she was particularly frustrated when the entire staff insisted on driving her to the train station and buying snacks for her journey. The fanfare and production proved too intense. Lisa’s train send-off ended when she, to the staff members’ horror, left her suitcase on the train and insisted that she walk us all back – briskly – to the van to say goodbye. She didn’t want them to wait with her, buying her food. I spent the van ride back to the hostel trying to explain what had happened to the very confused, concerned, and hurt staff members. Lisa had been a wonderful roommate and a generous hostel guest. I was happy to try to explain the cultural differences.

Other foreign volunteers shared this discomfort in the quickness and intensity with which the Tamil shelter staff members and residents established friendship. Stacey, for instance, critiqued the fast friendship she encountered everywhere in Tamil Nadu, not only in the shelter. She seemed to insinuate that it was disingenuous, or at least shallow. “They are very fast in coming very close in the beginning. You will be their best friend from the first minute on, but they don’t really understand me and their interest in my culture is very small.” The critique derived from her own cultural understanding of what friendship is and should be. In many places, friendship is “relatively durable,” based on cooperation and “shared moral understandings” (Dyson 2010:495). Based on such a framework, Stacey and Lisa were skeptical that the relationships they had with Tamil people could be understood as friendship. They often didn’t understand each other’s language, let alone cooperate. They often did not share a moral understanding of what it
meant to provide social rehabilitation for homeless women. And the relationships could
not yet be proven durable, given the short amount of time they had known each other. But
friendship takes on different forms and meanings in different times and places (Dyson
2010:495). Friendship can be based on social and political goals and on self-interest, as it
surely was at Arulagam between Tamil staff of a women’s homeless shelter that
depended on foreign donations (Dyson 2010; Gratz 2004; Jeffrey 2009). Moreover,
intimate female friendship in India is often a fleeting experience, usurped by familial
relationships and responsibilities. “Friendships are shot through with . . . the sense that
they will not sustain themselves in the face of family and marriage commitments,”
observer Lukose in the context of a women’s hostel for college students and working
women. “So the intimacies of friendship and life in the hostel are both precious and
precarious” (Lukose 2009:114). The context in which female friendships were formed,
solidified, and broken for Tamil women and young German and British volunteers led to
different expectations regarding friendship.

Stacey and Brittany were German and had just graduated from high school. They
lived in an apartment at TTS with another German volunteer who received a placement at
an orphanage. All three volunteered for just under a year. Brittany did not talk much but
smiled a lot. When her family came to visit her halfway through her stay in India, they
told her she had “become even more quiet.” She spent her days at Arulagam sewing.
They taught her how to sew, and she took a position at one of the eight sewing machines
in an upstairs room. Her proudest moment during her volunteer experience was teaching
some of the residents Christmas carols and a dance they performed at the hostel
Christmas celebration. The dance was such a hit that staff members scheduled a second performance at a nearby old-age home.4

Stacey was quite outgoing. She had a very large smile and talked a lot. When she arrived, Stacey considered herself “very self-confident.” During her year at TTS, she “learned that I cannot do everything.” Stacey had wanted to work at an orphanage and thought she was going to be teaching English to blind women who lived together in a hostel and went out for “normal work” during the day. Instead, she arrived without a placement. They asked her to work at the crèche in Arulagam, playing with the two-four young children who lived there with their mothers. Then they moved her to the crèche at TTS, where there were many more children. She had a very good relationship with the crèche teacher at Arulagam and enjoyed building relationships with the children’s mothers. She was very frustrated, however, with practices of “beating” children and expecting them to have long attention spans to sit and recite nursery rhymes.

Lack of preparation and information characterized many of the young international volunteers’ first days at Arulagam. When Stacey arrived at Arulagam from Germany, she said that staff members “were very surprised. They didn’t know about us. Our mentor and our organization didn’t inform them properly.” The staff members didn’t know about the volunteers and the volunteers didn’t know much about Arulagam. Lisa, the young English woman with volunteer experience in other parts of India, described her own “unknown” venture to Arulagam:

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4 Actually, Brittany forgot to leave the cassette tape at the hostel before she left to travel during Christmas. I learned the dance moves from one of the residents and tried to help everyone learn the same dance to a different song. They did not like the results and quit. I was able to convince one woman to perform the dance with me at the old age home. If it were a reality show, I’m fairly certain we would have been voted off.
Before I came to Arulagam, I did not know much about it. I had read a leaflet on the work they do and the people they work with, but was very much coming into an unknown area! I have been told people would speak English to me and I would be able to work alongside the girls at Arulagam in a Christian environment.

Brittany, the other German volunteer who arrived with Stacey, was disoriented when she arrived and learned that English really wasn’t spoken.

The first day was very hard because they didn’t expect anything from me. They just wanted me to sit and to see and to speak Tamil. I didn’t want to just sit and I could not speak Tamil, so it was very hard. It was hard to make contact with women because of the language problem and what I expected was very different.

Lisa also “struggled a lot with not knowing Tamil.” Stacey pointed out that the English they did encounter did not translate well culturally. “We were told that everyone would speak English. [laughs] We were told that there is no need for learning Tamil. They told us the size of the hostel and number of inmates. That’s what they were called, right? [laughs] They didn’t tell much.” Although laughter punctuated this interview quote, in earlier informal conversations Stacey would recall how she was talking to Rev. Maggie about the “inmates.” She stressed the word and rolled her eyes. While the term might bring connotations of prison, punishment and control to the volunteers’ ears, it is commonly used in south India to describe women who stay in hostels for either work or college (see Lukose 2009:54).
The language problem, along with the lack of preparation and information, inhibited the volunteers from doing the work they had imagined performing. “Fighting communication” and navigating daily life in south India proved difficult for Stacey, who had anticipated a “normal” eight-hour work days. “It’s not possible to work for eight hours a day. So much energy is wasted by daily life. Because if you go by bus you look outside and you see this and that and everything is different. I don’t have the energy to work eight hours a day, and fight the communication eight hours a day.” Lisa, a nurse, was particularly frustrated because she discovered that many of the prescription medications distributed at the shelter were expired. Yet they would not allow her to address medical issues.

I found I got very frustrated with not being able to help in a practical, hands-on way, and found I spent a lot of time sitting around during my time at Arulagam. The staff were very happy for me to sit and chat with them in the office all day, but for me I wanted to be out there with the girls, to be spending my time forming relationships with them as they were the reason I was there.

Brittany, the voluntourist who eventually choreographed and successfully taught some of the residents a dance for the Christmas function, described the process of figuring out her volunteer role within the organization as one of complete bafflement. “I had no idea how much they know, what they don’t know. I did not know how to do something with them, what to do.”

Lack of information and preparation, unmet expectations, and language problems contributed to a maintained sense of difference between the Euro-American volunteers
and the Indian hostel residents. They tended to infantilize the residents, describing them as similar to children. An Experience Exchange Programme volunteer wrote, “Though many of the women are quite old, they, like so many children, just want people to be with them and love them.” Stacey added the following:

Some of them don’t wash properly, don’t take care of themselves. They are very kind and they love to have contact and they need people being interested in them and talking to them and taking their hand and they need love so much. They are like children. To me, they are a little bit like children. It might be like that because I can’t understand them.

Later she added, “The crèche teacher is doing very good work with the children at Arulagam, but most of the women are behaving like children so they need that as well. She’s always playing with the children. Something like that should also be done with the women.”

If, in the United States, there is a tendency to construct the homeless as amoral, threatening monsters who need to be separated from society (Desjarlais 1997:2-3; Waterston 1993:3), here international volunteers construct the homeless as childlike innocent victims in need of love. In positioning Arulagam residents as children, volunteers limit the residents’ needs to love and attention. Coincidentally, that is exactly what volunteers could offer. They reframe the residents’ problems and needs around their own experience of service. Lisa said, “I had got really frustrated at not being able to help and serve in a practical way, but I was shown you can serve and make a difference by just being there and giving your time.” In identifying residents with children, volunteers framed the cross-cultural encounter around their own experiences and service strengths,
reinforced a dichotomy between the West and India that constructed the former as adult/civilized and the latter childlike/uncivilized, and failed to address the material inequalities between themselves and the homeless women they came to serve.

Volunteers also described Indian women as generally oppressed. They thought that people didn’t “care” about others, did not have the self-motivation or ambition to succeed or try. Brittany said,

Residents should be thinking about their future. They should not simply hope for the next life. They should try to come out. There are always some chances to come out. Maybe they are even smaller chances here, but there are chances. They are happy with what they have and they do not want a better life. They are not looking forward to what they could do.

They referred to caste as an institution that enforced hierarchy “deep in the minds of people” and arranged marriage as a shopping trip. Brittany said,

They told us that men were coming to see the women at Arulagam. Like in a shop, you can go there and buy your pet. They just come and say, “Okay, I want to marry a woman. Mmm, this one looks nice. I’ll take it.” That is not my understanding of marriage, anyway it is totally different than the Indian one.

In these reflections, the German volunteers constructed Indian women’s oppression with their freedom to choose – to choose their marriage partners, to choose their careers.

Stacey concluded that the underlying “problem is about marriage.” Along with not being able to choose one’s marriage partner, she was concerned that women don’t choose their own career and education paths.
There’s not much caring about what one needs. People will make a plan for your life. In childhood, there is no aim of, “When my child leaves my home they should be self-confident.” There’s no talking about what you want in life because mainly, “Your big sister went for Bachelor of Commerce, so you will go for that.” No one asks what you want. There is just a way for everyone. I don’t know how that works, but it’s just there. People decide for you. In Germany, you take a year of just doing whatever while you decide for yourself, and you can change your mind. But if you start one study here, you finish it.

In the end, however, Brittany was happily surprised to watch the process of an arranged marriage at Arulagam unfold with so much “laughing and smiling. . . . They were really happy and laughing. That day I thought, okay that is a good thing that they do. They try to give the woman a new home. His family was also happy to have her there.” One of Stacey’s goals was “to communicate so that I am telling about my place and they are telling about theirs.” She didn’t claim success regarding this goal, but Brittany did.

Last week they started to ask me about Germany, they asked me how I feel about arranged marriage. They asked me about my family and when I’m going to marry, about the forest in Germany. The secretary translates for me. They asked me about my boyfriend. It was really nice. But that’s just now. I can’t imagine talking about this in the beginning.

Even after 10 months, however, the idea and goal of “social rehabilitation,” remained cloaked in stagnant confusion. Brittany said,
There is a big difference between the way it should be and the way it really is. I would say that they are working here and they’re trying to learn and the aim of Arulagam is that they learn something so they can live on their own. That is the aim but I see that most of them are far away from that and that most of the women won’t go out and start a tailoring shop because they’re not able to live alone and start something like that.

“I’m still now wondering what the goal is,” concluded Stacey. The linguistic and cultural incommensurabilities that shaped volunteers’ experiences at Arulagam rounded out, for Brittany and Stacey, with moral and ethical questions about the motivations, practices, and goals of “social rehabilitation.”

**Varieties of Christianity**

The foreign volunteers did not observe a coherent set of practices nor hear a unified articulation of social rehabilitation from local volunteers, staff and board members. In addition to the official, secular stance of the organization, staff and volunteers articulated and promoted three types of approaches to Christianity: skeptical, Pentecostal, and spiritual.

*Skeptical*

Although they were sponsored through a protestant organization, neither Brittany nor Stacey saw much function for God, Christianity, or religion in the actual process or practices of social work. Religion was more of a mobilizing community. “I started working in our church when I was 12,” said Brittany. “People just asked me, ‘Can you do this? Can you do that?’ I always tried it and it always worked. I really enjoyed that work.
I’m always very happy if I see that other people are happy with what I’m doing.” She stressed that her participation was about relationships and activities, rather than religion. “It was never important [to the pastor’s wife organizing the volunteer work] what we believe or how we believe, as long as we had a good relationship with the children. Mostly we were doing activities: playing with the children, painting with them, all the things which were not religious.” Brittany said that her social service activities, both in Germany and abroad, were “through church but not Christian.”

Stacey was baptized at 12, “to be like everyone else.” But now she was “not very religious. . . . For me, religion is not very important. I don’t think it’s very important.” She continued, “I don’t like this hardcore religion. Everyone can believe what he or she wants. . . . [When we arrived here] people would say, “Please pray for me.” And I would think, ‘What do you want from me? I don’t pray.’ It was strange in the beginning.” While both Stacey and Brittany emphasized the importance of letting everyone believe what she wants, they had strong opinions about how people should support women’s social rehabilitation.

They wanted more communication, ambition, choices and agency. It was a self-empowerment model that reflected some of the downfalls of a “mission of sisterhood.” They emphasized particular [secular and Euro-American] ideas of women’s power, a top-down approach to providing help and services [they claimed to know what the women needed and how to provide it through therapy and training], and located the agent of change as the women themselves rather than broader social and economic systems and actors (Jackimow and Kilby 2006). These volunteers from Germany wanted to see a secular approach adopted at the hostel that emphasized women’s agency through talking
openly about their problems, and learning skills they could employ outside the hostel, motivated them to change, fostered their self-confidence, and highlighted women’s power. Brittany said,

They told us the staff members are doing social work. I came here and my understanding of social work is a little different. Social work means doing something, working together with the people, not just telling people what to do. Social work also means talking to people about their problems, also psychological support. It means doing things with the women, playing games and teaching them their language, how to read and write.

Stacey articulated a similar opinion.

It is good for women to talk about emotions and feel it and let it happen because somehow it has to come out. But they put too much focus on just letting it happen, [saying], “God will do it.” God won’t do everything. They should also encourage them to do it themselves and be strong themselves and not, “Let God be strong and do everything for me.” I think that’s not a solution to their problems. I think there should be meetings so that they can talk. Feeling and emotions coming out in these prayers is very shocking to me. I would just like to have them focus on the women and their force, not on God’s power to do everything.

Stacey didn’t believe that the hostel was engaging in practices that would help them meet its goals for the residents. The secular goals regarding self-confidence, independent living, and earning potential didn’t have corresponding secular counseling practices.

“They would say [the goal] is to make the women self-confident, make them able to live
outside again, to earn their own money, to leave their old problems behind. I have a lack of belief in that. I don’t see anything about counseling. Most of them are left alone.”

Brittany and Stacey considered the secular practices the hostel did encourage, sewing and weaving, unproductive, returning again to the theme of counseling. “They can sit in the sewing class and stitch things or whatever but I don’t feel like much is coming from people working there. No counselor, nothing like that.”

They were both critical of the “religious atmosphere” of Arulagam, remembering one morning in particular that was not a “thought for the day” but “the hallelujah morning.” Stacey described it as “shocking.”

One day we came, entered through the gate, and from all the way out there we heard them. They were shouting “hallelujah” and many of the women were crying. We could hear that. For me that doesn’t feel real. It doesn’t feel right. The prayers are longer, more emotional, more noisy. The superintendent will shout. She will be very dominating.

Brittany also remembered this morning as “frightening.”

If I would have had the choice, I wouldn’t have gone. The superintendent was standing in the prayer hall and just shouting, “hallelujah, hallelujah.”

Everything was in Tamil, but every third word was “hallelujah.” They had their hands in the air. Then she was crying and some of the residents were crying. I didn’t know what she was telling them. I just saw how she was behaving and how the girls were behaving. It was really strange. It used to be just sitting there, singing one song, prayer. This one morning, this hallelujah morning, was really – I don’t know what I should think about it.
I never saw anything like it before. . . . I was a little afraid for the girls in that moment. It was like an exorcism, I don’t know.

**Pentecostal**

After the “hallelujah morning” style prayer meeting, Brittany reflected, “This morning I saw what evangelical means. I told my mentor about this experience and she said this is directly what evangelical means.” What the German volunteers described as “evangelical” aligned most clearly with the Pentecostal traditions of many of the south Indian staff and volunteers. While the board members belonged to an ecumenical Christian institution, there were many local Pentecostal volunteers, several of the staff members were Pentecostal, and the superintendent had attended a Pentecostal seminary at one point, although she did not identify as Pentecostal. These women presented the goals of social rehabilitation as resistance or repentance of evil and pursued this goal almost solely through prayer practices. They encouraged memorization of Bible passages, good posture during songs and prayers, participation in all Bible studies, independent Bible reading, prayer, and acceptance of Jesus. Women who made these practices part of their daily life were praised with smiles and labels of “good child.” Women who slouched, arrived to Bible study without neat looking hair and clothes, kept quiet, did not bow their heads during prayer, or had not yet accepted Jesus were reprimanded publicly at each instance and faced regular questions regarding their acceptance of Jesus and repentance of their past sinful life.

The context for women’s social rehabilitation, within this Pentecostal framework, was primarily a struggle against evil. While others might place emphasis on women’s rights, social welfare, counseling or women’s health, these women highlight the forces of
evil. Rev. Maggie described them as “strong prayerful persons. . . . They can pray well, vigorous.” She also implied that focus on prayer has a material impact on the type of services these individuals support and, perhaps more importantly, the services they do not provide as part of Arulagam’s social rehabilitative outreach. Rev. Maggie reflected on a Bangalore doctor’s recent field visit to the hostel. After all of the time she spent at the hostel and the unique qualifications she had to offer the program, her report was that “they have a lot of evil spirits.” Evil spirits emerged in visions, on TV, and even embodied in the resident ethnographer.

As Rev. Maggie pointed out, the Pentecostal approach to daily life and social rehabilitation at the hostel did not come from the board of directors, nor did they encourage or support this type of Christian framework or practice. However, she did admit that there was a “Christian culture” at the hostel.

[The staff] have this kind of understanding in them that they follow a certain life, like prayerful life, they are having prayers morning, whenever necessary, before food, after food, night prayer, morning prayer, those kind of thing – women’s fellowship visiting them for prayer. So they are already used to this so-called Christian practices. That has brought the girls to automatically come into that practice, whether it is reading Bible, prayer, attending church services. So, otherwise, in their mind they are open. But they find that in this prayerful life they find calmness. See, the girls they are all vulnerable girls. They are not able to say no to any sort of harm done to them in their life. So what happens in this process, because they are so vulnerable, they find, they feel inside they feel hurt,
and also they feel sometimes insecure, sometimes depressed, sometimes they are also angry at others. They will be in different moods so they need someone to listen to them and to pray for them.

The local Pentecostal community, in particular, was good at providing this needed service. “[The residents] believe in god,” continued Rev. Maggie. “So their expectation is that there should be someone who can represent this god and talk to them, in a way that their cries are heard. Mostly, this Christian group is good at it! [laughs] Especially the Pentecostals!”

Rev. Maggie was critical of their approach though. “They may have good impact and bad impact.” She was especially concerned about the Pentecostal tendency to create a sense of guilt, thinking that the residents “are all sinners and we are here to save them.” She continued, “We do have problems with them. They create a guilty consciousness. Some of the staff is oriented in individualistic prayer life, a kind of Pentecostal prayer life. . . . But we are not individuals in society.” Many of the staff and board members did bring focus to society. It was an approach that acknowledged the hope and calm that religious stories and figures might bring to women who had suffered social marginalization.

_Spiritual_

“These women have a low state of mind,” said Poovarasi, a live-in warden.

What do I mean by that? They are thinking, “Our situation is like this. Everything has become bad. I work so hard. Look at everyone else. They are well.” When they look at you, they will be thinking, “Look at her. She is pretty. Look at her. She studies. Look at her. She has come in style.” In
this way, a dependent quality emerges. It brings an inferiority complex to these women.

That is why Christianity, from Poovarasi’s perspective, had an important role in Arulagam’s social rehabilitation program. “We take a spiritual approach. Talking about God’s power, it makes these women happy.” Stories of Mary and Jesus resonated with many of the residents’ and staff members’ lives. With these stories, they sought to transform residents’ suffering into a source of power and pride. As live-in staff members, they found opportunities to simply talk about Bible stories in an informal and laid back manner, often with overdramatic acting and funny extemporaneous songs. They didn’t require residents to do anything in particular. If they prayed or sang Christian songs, they were short and informal. These Christian practices took place in the evenings, when the commuting staff had gone home and there were no scheduled Bible studies with local volunteers.

Poovarasi explained that hostel residents needed a humble god, not “a queen or king god.” They needed to see that “God has chosen people like the hostel residents. Jesus was in Mary’s womb, a woman living in poverty. So he will also be in our hearts, we who live in poverty.” She emphasized humility as a virtue that comes easily to hostel residents because “we are lowly valued. That will raise us a lot in God’s eyes. If you say with ego, ‘I am beautiful. I have a lot of hair,’ you need to be lowered.” Arulagam residents don’t have this problem.

Mary lived in poverty the day Jesus came to her womb. Today we live in poverty at Arulagam. We say, “I am at Arulagam as an orphan. I have no mother. I have no father. My husband is dead. My husband left me.” Mary
was also an orphan. Like them [hostel residents], she was a young girl with no father and mother, no relatives and friends. She had no parents. . . . Mary worked in a church as a sweeper. Those caste people, that pastor, who looked after the church provided her with a little food for cleaning the church. Then, as soon as she reached puberty, what will they do? They have to marry, right? She needed the support of a man. But you can’t get help from a like-aged man. There was an old man. The old man was who? Joseph. “This poor girl [Mary] has come of age. Let someone help her,” they said. They engaged Mary to Joseph. At that time, that Holy Spirit came upon her. An angel came and spoke. You are the most blessed. The Holy Spirit looms on your life. You have received a son. As soon as that happened, Mary thought, “Aiyo, I am getting to know a husband. How will I have a child?” In that society, in Tamil Nadu today, they will speak badly about a woman who has a child without being married. In Jerusalem then, it was also like this. Without marriage, without knowing a husband if a woman has a child they will speak badly about her. “She is a prostitute,” they will say. . . . Slanderous stories like that must not come to a woman. What did that mother do? If it was a real woman, with desperation she would say, “Aiyo, I am coming to know a husband, how will a child come to me?” She would ask with a feeling of frustration. She argued to the angel, who said to her, “Don’t be afraid. The Holy Spirit is on you. You are going to give birth to a very mighty child.” When it said that the child would be a high one, she asked, “Is that so?” Mary
wondered, “What suitableness do I have for that? I am lowly. If God comes in my womb and is born, what suitableness do I have for that? Am I descended of kings? If not? Am I beautiful? If not? Do I have the status?” Saying this and coping with everything, she asked, “What right do I have for this? What suitableness do I have for carrying and birthing a powerful God?”

“Mary asked if she was a blessed woman,” said Poovarasi. “She was. There is a verse in the Bible that says the lowly will become high. The high will become lowly.”

Christianity, in this form, acknowledged the importance of both human and divine action. It was a story that featured a woman character with whom the residents could identify, find inspiration, and follow an example of bold action.

We will also try to be like Mary, to improve our lives. There is need for our effort. There is need for meditation, as well as faith in God. We have to create that. We have to have that intention. We have to try. We need to have faith in God, that he will give us a way, that he will give us power. If you don’t even try, saying “I don’t have faith in God,” we won’t simply hold it all in our hands. We also need to try. That is my opinion.

This day-to-day incorporation of Christianity into residents’ lives was not about the two extreme positions at the hostel. It was neither shouting hallelujah, crying, and giving all hope and agency over to God nor focusing all attention on the residents’ agency through psychological counseling and group therapy.
Conclusion

Christianity and secularism were not opposed to each other within the hostel, nor did one particular group of people belong to only one camp, nor did either of the categories have one shared and homogenous meaning. The superintendent, for instance, sometimes focused on a Christian framework for understanding and engaging with human suffering, poverty, and social justice while at other times led tearful, passionate, prayer-centered “hallelujah mornings.” Categories were fluid, changing in relationship to different contexts and relationships. What was important was how individuals and communities articulated their religious and secular convictions, and in what ways particular motivations, goals, and practices shaped social service, drew people together and pushed them apart. Whether based in particular Christian or secular convictions, people involved in the shelter’s social rehabilitation project were constantly negotiating what constituted, and how to promote, community, belonging, and womanhood. They were ethical and moral questions. And “the ethical might be taken to name the very ground upon which commitments to oneself and to others are made and unmade” (Pandian and Ali 2010:2).

Whether sewing, listening to a story of an orphaned young woman giving birth to a god out of wedlock, shaking a tambourine during a rousing Christian song, or silently weeping while a local Pentecostal woman prayed for her, residents, staff, board members, and volunteers participated in rituals with complex underlying motivations, leaders, and goals. Rituals of rehabilitation were repeated actions informed by Christian culture and addressing social expectations for womanhood. Participants interpreted, and promoted, the aims and meanings behind these repeated actions on a spectrum, revealing different and often conflicting ideas about what was real and urgent about women’s rehabilitation.
Talal Asad (2003) has argued that “secularism . . . has become a hegemonic cluster of projects in the contemporary world. It permits and develops certain ways of being and living, while disdaining, tacitly prohibiting, or stunting others . . . [by categorizing them] as irrational and therefore unjustified” (Cannell 2010:90-91). The young volunteers, with their secular perspectives regarding women’s social rehabilitation, critiqued the hallelujah morning as a “frightening exorcism,” proving Asad’s point. However, ethnographic attention to the role of secularism in everyday hostel life points out that this is not the only perspective held, not the only judgment passed. Dichotomies that often populate the anthropological study of religion do not hold (Mahmood 2005). Everyday spaces are not merely secular or religious. People claim both perspectives, depending on the context and relationships involved. For example, based on her own Christian convictions, Rev. Maggie sometimes emphasized secular perspectives and other times focused on Christian belief. She critiqued some of the staff members’ and volunteers’ prayer-centered individualism, arguing instead that they needed a more secular approach as they managed shelter life. In personal interactions with residents, though, she would sometimes ask if they had accepted Jesus.

It was precisely this complexity regarding the relationship between various understandings of the secular and the religious that shaped everyday behaviors and politics of difference at the hostel, and made it possible for some participants and difficult for others to engage with each other towards a common rehabilitative goal. Continually negotiating different understandings of Christianity as they relate to secular social service work opened opportunities for new relationships. Boundaries, once hardened by shouts of hallelujah, softened.
At the end of her year with Arulagam, Brittany did find the spirit of care among her Tamil acquaintances. She just had to discover it in a practice that she initially snubbed as too religious.

But it just means they are caring about each other when they ask for prayers. I needed a little time before I understood that it’s just saying that you wish someone something good. That has changed. I think my believing did not really change. I think that when I go back to Germany it will be the same as before. I’ll just remember that the church means something totally different here.

When she left, she took along a great collection of stickers for her German friends. “Jesus is everywhere here – the stickers!”
“I Will Also Go”  
- Fathima, a resident’s story

My mother died when I was young. They poured kerosene on my mother and she died. My father went somewhere and had a second marriage. My relatives were all there, but no one would take care of me. My older sister wouldn’t take care of me. My grandmother wouldn’t take care of me. They said they would give me to my uncle for marriage. He said that he didn’t want me and married another woman. Someone did something terrible to me. I sat and cried. It was so hard. One night when I was at the police station, they brought me here. One woman and one policeman brought me here. I came here seven years ago.

I will tell you about a house. There was a rich person. There was a girl in that rich person’s house. That girl got married. Then that girl died. Her husband was there. Her mother was there. Her father died. Her mother died. Finally, that girl was an orphan. Then that girl died. Her husband did a second marriage. Seeing another girl, he got married. That second girl was happy about the marriage. The first girl died. Her father and mother died. She also died. The second girl is happy. Now she has given birth to children.

Outside it is hard. Women are suffering. They need to be put here, in Arulagam. They will give everything well here: rice, they will buy everything. It is good here. I will not go home. I came here and stayed. I won’t go to anyone’s house. I can’t go to another hostel. My friend, Nitya, went to Madras. I can’t go. I will also go. I will not be here. Here, I can’t make a noise. I will go to another hostel. I will go alone.

It is good. I like it here. Here, there are so many mosquitoes. I don’t like it. I will go to a different place. I will be here for a little while only. I will go to a different place.
Fathima’s narratives were confusing, repetitive, and self-contradicting. People listening to this conversation left before she had ended. Some of them shook their heads and said, “mental.” When I asked staff members about her life story, they simply said, “She went with men.” These comments and labels staff members and residents attached to Fathima’s speech, history, and relationships explained and blamed her for her life’s trajectory (Biehl 2005:53). While others consistently dismissed her narratives, Fathima asked me to interview her nearly every time I arrived at Arulagam. Like Catarina in Biehl’s ethnography of a shelter in Brazil, “She wanted to engage.”

Her words pointed to a routine abandonment and silencing, and yet, in spite of all the disregard she experienced, Catarina conveyed an astonishing agency. Once I found myself on her side, we were both up against the wall of language. Language was not a point of separation but of relating – and comprehension was involved. [Biehl 2005:11]

Fathima was grateful for what Arulagam has given her. “Outside it is hard,” she said. “Women are suffering. They need to be put here, in Arulagam. They will give everything well. Rice, they will buy everything.” But they also sent her closest friend, Nitya, away to Chennai. They left her abandoned again by those she cared about, her meaningful social relationships. She desired to stay, she respected her new home. She desired to leave, but couldn’t. She watched others leave, she dreamed of new places and a new life. She was stuck. All of these emotions, realities, and ambitions merged several times in stream of consciousness fashion during our conversations.

Death overwhelms Fathima’s story of the house. The girl of the story dies four times, which confused me as I listened to the story. So much so that I, unfortunately,
changed the topic. However, as I read the story again, a meaningful pattern emerged. The girl died after she was married. She died after becoming an orphan. She died after her husband did a second marriage. These are all gendered identities and experiences that appear prominently in residents’ life histories: marrying, becoming an orphan, being abandoned by husbands who take another wife. Since Fathima follows each of these identities or experiences with death, she might be making a commentary on the sense of loss and social worthlessness women in Arulagam feel in various moments of their lives.

The themes of intimacy, abandonment, friendship and family that drive Fathima’s narratives are concerns that also flavor daily life and conversation within the shelter. Her narrative style captures the contradictions that permeate shelter life, policies, emotions, and relationships. Women desire family life, but they also recognize disturbing patterns of women’s social death at the hands of patriarchal family structures. They appreciate the support Arulagam offers, yet critique many of its practices, policies, and leadership. They want to speak and engage, but are often silenced. Creating relationships outside of the patriarchal family structure is both necessary in the women’s shelter and suspect.
8: A Goodbye Kiss

“You left your husband at home with the cook?” Around the office, staff members were raising their eyebrows, slapping their thighs, and laughing. Through their non-stop jokes about my marriage, shelter staff members made it clear that I did not meet their expectations for a married woman. The ideal Tamil woman is chaste and self-sacrificing. She unifies the family through her suffering and service to family as a daughter, wife and mother (Egnor 1980:25-26). Staff members’ advice to one of the residents before her marriage captures the nature of an ideal Tamil woman. They told her to be obedient, to serve her husband, and to be quiet. My priorities were clearly not so domestic.

I came to the shelter every day, while my husband stayed at home, surrounded by non-kin women. Our cook was often at the house when I left in the morning, and we lived above an organization that provided support for first-generation female college students. By Tamil standards, it was admittedly a suspicious situation (see Vera-Sanso 1993). Thankfully, our cook and the college women and staff we shared an entrance with seemed comfortable around Brent. The college students even told me when he “looked good,” especially after he lost a game of charades with a Tamil-speaking barber and received his first clean shave in ten years. I thought he looked strange. The students and staff downstairs loved it, as did our cook! These differences in marriage, gender roles, and attraction were amusing, interesting, hard to explain and understand – the stuff of conversations and jokes. For shelter staff members, those jokes could have also been a way for them to subtly critique me, my marriage, and my culture, to assert their moral superiority. Whether an assertion of rapport and friendship with me or of power and superiority over me – and most likely it was a combination of the two – the jokes made my gendered and sexualized identity a significant part of my research (Whitehead and
Jokes from shelter staff members revealed how stereotypes of loose foreign women contributed to how others perceived me as a sexual subject (Krieger 1986; Caplan 1993; Dubisch; 1995; Gearing 1995; Morton 1995; Cupples 2002). Some of the teachers asked me over lunch, and more laughs, if I drank alcohol and watched “blue films” (pornography) with my husband. They didn’t take no for an answer. I was the butt of yet another joke. But I was also building rapport, earning trust, establishing relationships with this group of women. I hoped that joining in with the laughter concealed my resentment. Building rapport, it turned out, was an intimate matter. It was my marriage – complete with bizarre gender roles and unspoken assumptions of sexual escapades, with and without me – that continually filled the space between myself and the shelter staff members. It was unfounded, but sometimes I felt as if it was the only thing they were interested in. One staff member, the one who led this particular joke campaign, managed to show virtually no interest in my research for the entire year. I learned through her that intimacy need not be sexual, or even affectionate. Shared aversion could also lead to a certain degree of familiarity, a social dance of avoidance that depended upon mutual understanding. I would not have predicted it, but I miss her.

Some aspects of my gendered and sexualized identity became the object of jokes, others became the objects of reform. Upon my arrival to the shelter, staff members often called a resident to get her comb and “fix” my hair. My frizzy, blond hair pulled back in a ponytail was considered wild compared to the staff and residents’ well-oiled (with coconut oil) and braided hair. They retied my sari and repositioned and pinned my
*duppaítā*, the scarf that drapes over one’s chest and shoulders as an essential part of a salwar kameez. They told me which evening soap operas I should watch and which film stars were good. And soon, I found myself living into those positions. I started jokes myself (most likely a defensive strategy on my part, trying to become the subject rather than the object of jokes), had my fingernails painted, eagerly anticipated the start of the evening soap operas, and spent many hours in the kitchen. I am not the only anthropologist to have painted her nails in the field, and to find that it “provided a time and space to talk about other issues” (Cupple 2002:386-387). I would leave beauty sessions with knowledge, insights, comparisons, questions, and – incidentally – bright red nails. My gendered and sexualized body and identity were crucial parts of the fieldwork process. It was, necessarily and inevitably, an intimate process.

My relationships with staff members and residents were complex, created and maintained through similarities, curiosities, enjoyment, and fondness, as well as formalized interviews and permissions, not to mention suspicion, annoyance, and avoidance. These simultaneously mundane and complex relationships play a large role in constituting anthropological knowledge. “Intimacy of experience . . . drives anthropology” (Ashkenazi and Markowitz 1999:14). Sometimes the intimacy becomes so close that it drives anthropology to reassess its assumptions, methodology, and history, to dig around in Malinowskian diaries (1967) or shadows to discover what *really* drives and limits anthropological research and analysis. What place do we give sex and sexuality in the fieldwork process and, conversely, how does sex and sexuality create place and position in the fieldwork process? The literature on the topic focuses primarily on desire, eroticism, sex, and sexuality experienced by the anthropologist. The intimacy of, and in,
fieldwork relationships is suggestive of the sexualized nature of the fieldwork process, in which the anthropologist is a key participant. However, I argue that we need to draw on and expand these, and our own, reflexive accounts to consider how “erotic subjectivity does things” (Kulick 1995:5) related to our central research questions. For instance, to what extent and in what ways did sex and sexuality shape the ethical work of day-to-day life and of social rehabilitation in a Tamil women’s homeless shelter?

**Avoiding the Intimate**

Just as long-term anthropological fieldwork can lead to levels of intimacy that bring varieties of knowledge and discomfort, homeless shelter life was also necessarily intimate. For anthropologist and shelter staff alike, then, intimacy often emerged as an upsetting phenomenon. Intimacy threatened the stability of day-to-day life. It disrupted routines, dislocated residents. It influenced the spatial arrangement of women within the shelter and to their placements, positionings, back in society. A focus on sex and sexuality in social processes (here, of rehabilitation) in addition to fieldwork processes will contribute to a more critical empirical and theoretical focus on the relationship between vulnerability and intimacy. In this section I review how anthropologists have written intimacy, sex, and sexuality into and out of ethnographic texts. I also explore how intimacy has been both a significant and an outlawed aspect of shelter life.

*Writing and Intimacy*

Anthropologists have distanced issues of intimacy, emotionally-charged relationships related to both sexuality and conflict, from their primary research by writing about them in a diary rather than a field journal (Malinowski 1967), under the cover of a pseudonym
(Cesari [Poewe] 1982; Poewe 1999), and later in their careers (Climo 1999; Rubenstein 2004; Nourse 2002). Intimacy, the very thing that drives anthropology as a discipline, makes anthropologists, as people, feel vulnerable. Both Deborah Benedict (1948:591) and Rubenstein (2004:1048) compare participant-observation to surrender. Although both anthropologists paint surrender in a positive light, for others it leads to ambiguity and perhaps questionable research if, in fact, the researcher is not in control of one’s self, relationships, and therefore research. Is it even research anymore?

“Blurring the sharp distinction between ‘life’ and ‘work,’” as when anthropologists acknowledge or reveal their intimate, often emotionally-charged experiences and relationships as central components of their research, “can seem at once transgressive and threatening” (Goslinga and Frank 2007:xiv). When it comes to sex and sexuality, “the researcher is likely to feel especially vulnerable: this realm of the ambiguous would be safer left alone” (Leibing and McLean 2007:4). They are vulnerable to professional critique (Killick 1995:81-82; Moreno 1995:220; Lunsing 1999:195), to losing their identity, control, and safety (Abramson 1993; Bell 1993; Hutheesing 1993; Moore 1993; Blackwood 1995; Gearing 1995; Hernández 1995:158; Morton 1995; Climo 1999; Huseby-Darvas 1999:151; Markowitz 1999:168), or to bias and distractions that might shape their analyses, some would argue for the better (Altork 1995; Schrijvers 1993; Lunsing 1999:182-183). Others write that sexual vulnerability is simply an aspect of fieldwork, generally ignored by field manuals and mentors (Markowitz 1999:161). Still others recognize the vulnerability of their friends or sexual partners, and so choose not to reveal aspects of their intimate relationships, or under pseudonyms and after some
time has passed (see Moreno 1995:248 for an interesting discussion of the politics of confidentiality, publishing, and rape).

Intimacy in fieldwork can lend itself to silence and secrecy, too much discretion. Exploring and exposing “the shadow side of fieldwork,” as a recent edited volume encourages, requires that we look for “what generally remains hidden in fieldwork productions: that which is unspoken or unspeakable, invisible, mysterious, or not immediately perceivable to the ethnographer” (Leibing and McLean 2007:1). Such writing can then lend itself to reflexive, diary-like accounts, leading to calls for an “economy of disclosure”: “sharing only what we must about our personal lives” to help clarify the analytical question or focus of our arguments (Leibing and McLean 2007:13). The problem with breaking these patterns of distancing to highlight the intimate aspects of the fieldwork process is either too much disclosure (the diary) or too little disclosure (the shadows). We must balance the particularities of intimacy with more generalized and analytical claims about intimacy in our research. The language of shadows and vulnerability, I argue, must be more intentionally complicated to find this balance.

One needn’t lurk around in the shadows to uncover great truth about one’s fieldsite or the fieldwork process itself. What happens out in the open, right in the clear of day, can often help anthropologists reassess previous experiences, revise now-outmoded theories, and follow new hunches. This may be as traditional as a women’s nail-painting slumber party, but these “aha” moments help anthropologists see and analyze things “not immediately perceivable.” We make explicit and complicate – “trouble,” in the words of Leibing and McLean (2007:5) – what is often taken for granted, the unspoken rules, habits, and assumptions of cultures, societies, and individuals. The shadow metaphor and
its opposite, light, might work to reinforce the same trends scholars are trying to avoid: the idea that some topics, experiences, and identities – often related to sexuality – are off-limits or stigmatized (the shadows) in anthropological research and others are legitimate and real (the light). Through feelings of vulnerability and subsequent hiding, distancing, and non-writing, anthropologists have played a central role in creating shadows. And now we are called upon to research, expose, enlighten them. This cycle – if not used to propel us into more nuanced and insightful arguments about communities, cultures, social relationships and institutions – runs the risk of being more disciplinarily insular and navel-gazing than it need be. The insights of the literature on sex and sexuality in the fieldwork process are more widely relevant.

I draw on this reflexive literature to pose similar questions of intimacy and vulnerability working in social relationships and processes happening around, not only through, me in my fieldwork context. If the vulnerability that often accompanies intimate relationships leads anthropologists to avoid or hide the topic in their ethnographic writing, how might others – who do not write ethnographies – deal with vulnerability? How do they change their relationships, hide, move, and otherwise try to lessen its effects? This seems especially relevant for members of my fieldwork site, who are either identified as or trying to rehabilitate “women and girls in moral danger.” If anthropologists can lessen others’ vulnerability by not writing about them or by giving them pseudonyms, in what ways do others help protect members of their communities? In what ways do these practices of protection reveal tensions between caring for and having power over others? Answering these questions about the diverse ways in which particular people negotiate vulnerability related to sex and sexuality forces us to approach
the topic through an intersectional analysis that recognizes patterns of oppression or vulnerability that emerge as sex and sexuality intersect with one’s family status (or lack thereof), education and class background, race, and religion.

*Social Rehabilitation and Intimacy*

Sparked by conversations I had at the shelter with some foreign volunteers who expressed their concern that the staff members didn’t ever touch the residents, I asked Rev. Maggie about shelter practices regarding human touch, care, friendship, and sexuality.

Connie: I’ve heard many stories of Margaret Addicott “laying hands” on residents, but I’ve never seen anyone lay hands.

Rev. Maggie: [Margaret Addicott] was a type of Pentecostal even though she was a Methodist missionary. She had a strong belief in prayer and healing so she used to apply oil. She kept some oil in the chapel. It is still there. After Addicott left and there was no superintendent, the residents used to come to me and say, “When Amma was here, she used to draw a cross on our forehead with oil. Please do it for us. We want it.”

C: Did you put the oil?

M: No. I think her touching and comfort and words might have healed their mental worries. The very attitude of missionaries was very comforting. In whatever condition girls came – some people had VD, some people’s bodies smelled very bad – Margaret Addicott used to take them, give them bath, give them good food, and sometimes if they were sleepless, she would make them to sleep and after some days and sometimes some weeks only they were asked to tell about their stories. Until then they could sleep, they could eat, they could attend some prayers, if they want to cry in between, they could cry. It’s all part of a healing attitude. Not only praying and touching, but also providing a space for a person to be a person. Accepting them for whatever they are, slowly, slowly their body is cared for.

C: Can you tell me an example of this kind of healing?

M: One girl came. She had burns all over her body. Her two thighs, because of burns, were sticking together. It was difficult for her to even go
to toilet or walk. She used to walk with closed legs, not able to cross her legs and she didn’t reveal this for a long time to her friends. But when she was observed, she used to walk like that. Margaret Addicott observed this and saw that her legs, thighs were together because of burns. She took her personally and admitted her in the hospital and there she did a kind of plastic surgery operation and now she is walking, running, jumping. So, this is also, I would say, a healing touch. Not only praying and putting a cross with oil, but also helping a person to retain their strength. That is also healing. Margaret Addicott Amma had the freedom to do this.

C: What kind of freedom did she have?

M: Now nobody’s touching the residents. When someone is crying in Indian culture, hugging them, patting them, crying along with them is part of culture. But at Arulagam, nobody’s touching them. I don’t know. I never see them touching.

C: Why don’t they touch?

M: Because of a lot of misunderstandings between residents and staff, touching is not allowed.

C: Is that your rule?

M: No, not from me. Not from me. But they are observing this rule among themselves. If they touch too much, there will be a kind of warning that comes from different sides.

C: What kinds of warning?

M: Teasing, gossip.

On-site staff members and residents employed informal methods of self-policing to draw the boundaries of intimacy. Expectations for ethical intimate behavior were not established in authoritative texts, like the Bible, or by authoritative figures, like Rev. Maggie. These ethical judgments about right and wrong behavior, moral and immoral relationships, demonstrated that sexuality was perceived and judged by others only in the context of one’s other identities and in the context of particular relationships.
“In the field we [female anthropologists] are sexualized subjects, we might be viewed as wives, mothers, desirable foreign women, potential sexual partners and these views impinge on the research process in ways that cannot always be predicted” (Cupple 2002:383). In the shelter, everyone – not just the foreign, female ethnographer - was positioned and positioned themselves as sexual subjects. This meant different things for particular people. As Rev. Maggie alluded, some people had the freedom to touch, to become close with others, to enter into different types of relationships (Leibing and McLean 2007:3). Margaret Addicott had this freedom, and as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, I had this freedom. Lakshmi, Chandani, and Fathima did not.

**Being Too Close, Being Moved Away**

Soon after assuming her post as Arulagam’s live-in superintendent, Lakshmi asked a Muslim girl, Chandani, to help her with small domestic tasks in her three room apartment on campus: ironing, preparing tea, and sweeping. She offered Chandani a small amount of money for her work. Rev. Maggie told me that this was standard, acceptable practice. “Usually, they do this. They find someone who can clean their room or help them or bring water for them or wash their clothes and give them some remuneration. If they find someone who is really a kind of helping person, they’ll make them to bring them something like coffee, tea.” Lakshmi also allowed Chandani to sleep in her apartment. She told me that this arrangement helped Chandani because she was “stubborn” and didn’t get along with the other residents. Also, she was Muslim. Since they spent so much time together, Lakshmi could give her a lot of “Christian teachings.”

I noted in my fieldnotes that Chandani did seem much happier during this time than she had previously. I regularly heard Lakshmi praising her good work and her
trustworthiness. “These girls do not steal one penny from me,” she said one day, patting Chandani on the shoulder. Chandani told me she liked working for the superintendent in informal conversations. However, I also began to hear residents and staff members gossip about this arrangement. Why did the superintendent invite Chandani to sleep in her apartment? Staff members asked Lakshmi about this. Rev. Maggie also became involved.

I heard that they were teasing Chandani for going and helping Lakshmi, so I told Lakshmi to be aware of these kinds of accusations, allegations. I told Lakshmi, “You can get help from the girls, but not only one regularly. Choose some girls who can be very truthful. Also, don’t give attention to only one. If you give attention to only one, this will turn into teasing and petty gossip and jealousy.

As in college and working women hostels in other parts of south India, relationships between women were often sexualized.

Ritty A. Lukose writes about a similar situation in her ethnography of a women’s hostel in Kerala. Mini was a long-time resident of this particular hostel. She started talking on the phone regularly with a female friend and stayed out past curfew a few times. “One day, as she walked in,” Lukose writes, “the warden started haranguing her about this and suddenly demanded, in front of several other people, ‘Who is this woman who is calling you? I have gone into your room. Why is your bed so close to Ranjini’s [Mini’s roommate]? I can read the papers, I know what all goes on in hostels.’” Mini responded with her own set of questions and insinuations. “Her bed was set apart from that of her roommate. What about all the other rooms in which people actually put the
beds together to save space? What were women doing in those rooms?” (Lukose 2009:15).

One day, I arrived and Chandani was gone. I asked everyone that day where she had gone. Everyone said, “She went to work in the kitchen at an HIV hospice.” When I asked staff members why, they asked me, “Why do you want to know?” When I tried a lead-in question and asked if something had happened between Lakshmi and Chandani, they asked me, “Why do you want to talk about this?” I received this response on other occasions as well. They made it clear to me that they weren’t going to answer all of my questions. Later, Rev. Maggie helped fill in the gaps.

Lakshmi told me that Chandani had become a very close friend. This she told me. Meanwhile, I don’t know what happened between the staff members. They suggested that Chandani go to the Hospice for cooking. So I asked Lakshmi, “What do you think?” She said, “Okay, let Chandani go there and cook because she’s a very nice girl. I see she’s a good girl so she should be given a chance. Let her go out. I don’t want her to be here, because the things they are saying here about her are not good, so let her go.” So that is why Chandani was sent to the Hospice.

When the superintendent did not change the situation, other staff members repositioned Chandani at a sister organization, an HIV/AIDS hospice, two hours away. Even though the superintendent instigated this living arrangement, it was Chandani who was repositioned. The residents were very frightened of this assignment. They thought that the hospice “smelled bad” and was “depressing.” They thought that, if they went, they would contract the incurable disease. I spent a couple mornings talking with crying
residents before they left to work at the hospice, explaining that they would be safe. The gossip and movements continued.

The mention of Fathima’s name, the woman whose story opened this chapter, sometimes caused staff members to scrunch up their faces. When I asked staff members to tell me what they knew about her background, they simply said that she had “gone with men.” Fathima always ran to greet me with a big smile when I arrived and, as I watched her interact with other residents throughout the year, I found her to be loyal, caring, and considerate. According to staff members, who suspected her friendships, she was too loyal.

One drizzly afternoon, I sat with three residents under a roof. Across the courtyard, three of the teachers sat together chatting. Fathima came down from the unmarried dorms upstairs and cheerfully asked how I was. As we started to talk, one of the staff members came over to us and asked Fathima, “Are you a baby?” Turning to the other residents sitting with us, she said, “Give her only a little food.” She told Fathima to go back upstairs and also said how bad Nitya was. Nitya was sitting with us. She looked at the ground. Later that afternoon, I asked the staff member why she had disciplined Fathima. The previous night, she explained, Fathima had peed in her bed and Nitya had cleaned it up. They were mad because Fathima and Nitya did nasty (asingam) things. Then she said a word I didn’t know. I asked her to repeat it. She laughed nervously and said no.

Staff members suspected that Fathima and Nitya – inseparable friends who were often laughing – had a sexual relationship. “The intimacies of friendship between women [living in hostels] are sexualized, more often than not, as a form of discipline” (Lukose
2009:115). This was also the case in Arulagam. Staff members who assumed Fathima and Nitya’s relationship was sexual then proceeded to separate them by reassigning rooms. Nitya was repositioned on the ground floor in “married” housing and forbidden to go upstairs, where there was a sewing classroom and the two unmarried dorms. The next time there was an opportunity to send one of the residents to a family’s house for domestic work, they chose to send Nitya. She went to Chennai. For the rest of my stay in Tamil Nadu, it was Fathima’s face that was scrunched up. She smiled less and wanted to leave. She thanked me repeatedly for the photograph print of Fathima and Nitya that I had given her.

Fathima reflected on the complicated life she lived at Arulagam, her desires and limitations painfully close to one another in speech and her life. She switched from saying it was good at Arulagam to saying that she would leave, from saying she would stay happily to saying she didn’t like it. It was the type of “nonsensical” statement dismissed, at best, or used as evidence by staff members and other residents of her unrehabilitative, immature, “mental” [English term used in a derogatory manner to describe many residents’ speech and behavior] condition, at worst. To me, it was a situated knowledge of power, intimacy, distance, and desire at the shelter. “It is good here. I will not go home. I can’t go. I will also go. I will not be here. I will go alone.”

If shifting positions does indeed give a person more knowledge of a particular social object, perhaps ironically, the residents and I shared that insight. We both deviated from “the ideal Tamil woman” – chaste, obedient, quiet, self-less mothers, daughters, and wives. I was ridiculed. They were disciplined. We both shifted positions. But I often made this choice to change who I sat next to and change when I came to the shelter. It
helped me gain more perspectives about the community. In contrast, residents were accused of immoral behavior and were shifted, permanently and physically, to other rooms, buildings, and social service organizations. We both had situated knowledge, for different reasons, to different extents, and at different times, that could see power at work (Haraway 1988). Residents could see how power worked because it directly affected where they lived, the distance between themselves and others, the intimacy of such a closed space, their vulnerability to the suspicions and decisions of staff members.

**They Should Be Happy**

While physically moving residents suspected of lesbian behaviors was a common practice, it wasn’t the only or mandatory response. It was an on-going point of concern, with on-going opinions, gossip, presumptions, and partial solutions. Rev. Maggie said,

> I think this will continue there in Arulagam. If someone becomes close with the warden, there is a tendency among the staff to create stories or joke or tease or gossip about the relationship. Who knows? We don’t know. We never did. I do know that there is girl-girl attraction amongst the girls. I don’t know about the staff and the girls. Sometimes staff show sympathy only towards one girl and that creates problems.

I asked Rev. Maggie about her personal opinion about “girl-girl attraction.”

> In the HIV/AIDS context, we speak of gender minorities: lesbians, homosexuals, men having sex with men. I came to know only when I took up this charge. After I interacted with various groups, I realized, “Oh, there are different minorities. We should accept their identities.”
It wasn’t the practice or identity itself that concerned Rev. Maggie, that caused her to pass moral or ethical judgment. It was particular practices, people, and relationships that incited her intervention. She found that sometimes women forced themselves on others.

In Arulagam, we do have different attractions. Some attractions amongst the girls have led them to practice lesbianism. It is there even for the mentally depressed, like Maadhavi. Maadhavi and Aruvi, they were together, practicing lesbianism, using their bodies. We told Maadhavi, “Please don’t, because other girls don’t have these tendencies.” But Maadhavi is not mentally healthy, so she has defiled some three, four girls. We tell Maadhavi not to disturb them. She likes that practice. She just takes them to the top of stairs and makes them remove their clothes and she touches them here and there. By doing that, their emotions are triggered. So they want again and again Maadhavi. So when she calls, they go. When the girls are watching TV slowly they will disappear and you can find them in the bathroom or in the corners. Because of this practice, Arulagam staff members are also kind of having aversion if women are getting more close to each other.

Rev. Maggie also evaluated the behavior based on how it impacted a particular woman’s mental and emotional health.

When Maadhavi was touching these other women, they became mentally sick. They lost their weight and started longing for some kind of touch. Three, four girls she touched. She always wanted someone to use. So this is always there. If they practice lesbianism, they should be happy. But
when I see them, they are not happy. They lose their weight and their face is not at all happy and they look like sick people, those that practice lesbianism.

A final point of concern was for the women’s health.

Practicing lesbianism is always there in Arulagam. The girls report it to the office people. Sometimes it is not good, because we also have HIV/AIDS. We tell them to have a clean practice. Their bodies are not clean always. When they go into extreme practices, it will definitely bring problems in their health, so we tell them to come out of it.

When I asked Rev. Maggie how she personally interacted with women who were practicing unhealthy lesbianism, as she described it, she provided alternative responses. Rather than physically separating women involved in such practice, she talked to them. “I didn’t accuse them or make them feel guilty,” she said.

We should also understand that they do have needs and that their needs should be met. For those who cannot go out, they will always practice themselves, their needs are met among themselves. When Margaret Addicott was here, I heard that if some of the girls wanted to go out and have sex, she would simply [look the other way]. It is not that she is allowing them, but if they run out for two days and then come back she will take them. But she would confront them because if they become pregnant, it was the girl’s problem, not the boy’s. I have heard that.

This was a significant story because during my research, the on-site staff members kept an informal, but strictly followed, no-return policy for women who ran away.
In different contexts and according to different people, evaluating right and wrong, judging behavior, and pursuing ethical life required a variety of different responses: looking away, separating people, talking with people. These evaluations and responses were not predetermined, not predicated on authoritative texts, formal policy, or organization leaders. Instead, it emerged in particular contexts, with shifting sets of ideals, discipline, and boundaries.

**Saying Goodbye**

As I said goodbye to my friends, and sometimes enemies, at the shelter on an August afternoon, I cried. And I was scolded by staff members for doing so. They said it demonstrated a false finality to our relationships and my own weakness of faith. I should trust in God that we would all be well and that we would see each other again. Walking towards the gate to catch an auto rickshaw downtown, I saw one of my closest friends at the shelter, Ladha, raise her eyebrows at me. “Come here,” she said. I walked towards her and started to say that we would see each other again. I also started to brace my arm for the punch she inflicted on me each time I left. But instead of punching me and calling me a ‘bad girl’ for not coming to the shelter enough, she caught me off guard by abandoning the established routine.

Ladha grabbed both of my shoulders firmly and kissed me on the lips. It was unexpected and unprecedented behavior. I heard other residents around us giggling and was instantly aware of the possible repercussions my friend would face for kissing me goodbye and the complete lack of repercussions I would face after I left. Due to the ethical and moral ambiguities of the shelter – as a space filled with women outside of
patriarchal family structures - relationships at the shelter were more often than not sexualized, suspicious, and strange.

At the shelter, people often approached intimacy as something that was not possible, not real, or not right. Stories of abandonment formed major narrative threads of every residents’ life story. Many women had lived their adult lives in the shelter. They didn’t expect to ever marry or live within a family or community outside of the shelter. Familial intimacy, of the kind they desired, was not considered possible. German volunteers questioned the quick friendly intimacy they experienced from shelter staff and residents. If we don’t speak the same language or understand each others’ cultures, how can we be “real” friends, they asked. Intimacy in this particular transient and transnational context, they suggested, was not real. For others, sexual (or perceived sexual) intimacy of the kind residents experienced was not right. They made ethical judgments regarding Fathima, for instance, and her same-sex intimate relationship with Nitya and her heterosexual intimate relationships with men outside of marriage.

My own ethnographic and embodied experience suggests something different in regards to intimacy at the shelter. Residents and staff were quick to embrace me when I first met them at the International Women’s Day celebration. I agree with the German volunteers that we (the residents, staff, international volunteers, and myself) were not, as Nalini told me that first day, “the same.” But assertions of similarity at the shelter were based on pluralistic standards. We were the same because, for one reason or another, we found ourselves in this shared space. And I discovered, when Ladha grabbed my shoulders and kissed me, that the embrace was not empty or fake. It was real enough to take a significant risk.
Intimacy always involves risk. For shelter residents and the unmarried residential staff, the risks were often accentuated. In this social space, intimacy does not revolve around family. It is public and female-centered. In all of these ways, the experience of intimacy in the shelter challenges the norms established in shelter social service goals: to help women become members of families and respectable citizens. Rather than respectable citizens, I considered them risk-taking citizens. By embodying that role, I would argue, shelter staff and residents were active participants in debates about what it means to belong, build community, live ethically, and to be a moral Tamil woman. Some stubbornly risked social disapproval by prioritizing work over the intimacy and security of marriage like Ruth and Lakshmi. Others defiantly risked the dangers of the street as single women by climbing over the wall in the middle of the night like the runaway residents. Others risked the ridicule and punishment of developing intimate friendships with others in the shelter like Ladha and Fathima. By taking risks, women in the shelter constructed meaningful relationships, work, and lives for themselves and others. While often labeled passive recipients of social service or “mental,” Arulagam women revealed themselves to me as true friends and true interlocutors in the human processes of creating coherent systems of meaning and social relationships, of community-building and theory-building, ethical reflection and critique.
9: Conclusion

Whether the message and prayer during Bible studies, the tags sewn into each cloth
women stitched, claims of “cross-cultural blood,” quotidian remarks about another
woman’s behavior, or gossip, questions about morality and ethics were central at the
women’s homeless shelter. Reactions to questionable moral pasts, a difficult ethical
present, and ambitious moral futures shaped social rehabilitation. There wasn’t a single
authoritative narrative or framework guiding this work, but innumerable interpretations
of Christian stories, secularism, and cultural ideals of womanhood that shaped
individuals’ understandings of community, belonging, womanhood, and social
rehabilitation. The daily ethical work of rehabilitation involved numerous, often
incredibly resilient, women converging on a campus to ask, “What’s next?” for women
who had been rejected, abandoned, and abused by family.

This dissertation has explored how homeless shelter staff members, volunteers,
residents, and board members attempted to build moral community in a marginalized
context. Whether through my coding and interpretation or their direct quotes, my aim in
this ethnography is to contribute to an important body of feminist epistemological
literature that recognizes voices and knowledges of those labeled lunatics, inmates,
devils, strangers, lesbians, sex workers, destitute, dirty, or marginal as central rather than
deviant. What can the margin tell us about the core, the socially marginalized about the
cultural ideal? This dissertation examines what happens to ideals relating to community
and belonging in relationships categorized by strangeness, deviance, and marginality. In
residents’ persistent failure to fit into these ideals, they give way to madness and
absurdity, offering opportunities for both social critique and recycled patterns of social
stigmatization: a condition more critical madness than clinical madness.
There are several insights we might gain from this study of morality and marginalization in a women’s homeless shelter in Tamil Nadu.

*Ethics takes place in everyday life; morality is improvised.* While authoritative texts, traditions, and people present normative ideas about ethics and morality, these sources are always multiple. At Arulagam people had a number of sources and stories at their disposal. There were stories of Jesus that glorified suffering and sacrifice, of Mary that glorified endurance and submission to God’s will, of Sita that glorified chastity, of Gandhi that glorified religious pluralism, of the shepherds that glorified boldness and leaving home, and countless others. These, along with one’s own personal histories and experiences, led to new narratives and new ideas about what it means to live in a plural community as a moral woman and an ethical neighbor.

Doing ethics, or theorizing morality, is an everyday practice. Hallelujah mornings contextualized women’s homelessness in emotional frameworks of sin, suffering, and redemption. The written archives revealed dramatic stories of good and evil. But there were many other stories told at Arulagam. People gossiped about friends that were too close, acted on a variety of Christian convictions, debated conflicting ideas about feminism and freedom, sold excuses, stayed silent, gave orders, had visions and dreams. Through all of this, people were constantly evaluating themselves, each other, and the community. They were setting the standards of belonging, community, and ethics through patterns of discipline and praise, inclusion and exclusion. Moral standards and judgments were constantly being abandoned, formed, modified, reinforced.

Rhetorical questions asked by board members regarding community, belonging, inclusion, secularism, and pluralism were practical questions for on-site staff members
and residents. The organization’s official motto “accepted and enabled” – like authoritative moral institutions – only told part of the story, provided part of the prescription. The organization’s informal motto may have been “you have to adjust.” Building moral community in a marginalized context required people to adjust to new circumstances. At times, morality and ethics are set aside from daily life, distinguished through characters of Fanatic and Father, theoretical jargon, cultural ideals of chaste womanhood, grand narratives of good versus evil. However, people were constantly debating, pondering, evaluating, judging, and setting expectations for what is good and what is right. “Ethics occurs by the microsecond” (Lambek 2010:31).

*Peaceful plural community is not the absence of violence; it is an active practice that requires intentional and on-going social attention.* While tension and violence between Hindus, Muslims, and sometimes Christians is an important topic of research in South Asia, and elsewhere, studies of peace and community are equally as significant. Rather than presume that peace is the absence of violence, this dissertation has considered how peaceful community is created in the midst of domestic violence, is a process that emerges in relationships and requires active involvement and intentional negotiation.

Peaceful community life doesn’t simply happen or exist as a default state. Instead, people were constantly creating peaceful conditions by monitoring the closeness and distance between people. They separated friends who were too close and brought people from different religious traditions together for relaxation and mixture on Sarasvati Puja. They were creating peaceful conditions by managing the silences and stories in residents’ pasts. Staff members didn’t ask questions of women’s backgrounds when they came to the shelter and made space for crying during group prayers. Peaceful community life
depended on an intricate balance of intimacy and distance. It was imperative to share
destival enjoyment and cathartic tears with the group. It was equally important, however,
to avoid the envy, competition and rumors that could emerge if someone shared too much
of their life with another. “Coexistence, as much as conflict, needs to be explained” (Ring
2006:3).

*Just as there are multiple Christianities, there are multiple secularisms.* As this
dissertation has discussed, anthropologists have much to contribute to conversations
about secularism. I have examined how secularism involves different types of
convictions, goals, and practices for those involved in social service work at Arulagam.
The range was quite diverse. Sometimes people equated Christianity and secularism.
Other times, people downplayed or separated religion from the secular goals of the
organization. Still other times, people understood Christianity and secularism as distinct
concepts with some overlapping principles. These distinct approaches led to different
types of practices and relationships at the shelter.

The secular Christianity of the German volunteers led to skepticism and even fear
when they experienced the “Hallelujah morning” prayer at the shelter. The secular
mission of the organization led to practical considerations, like accepting all women as
members of the community, no matter their background, and giving them leave from
daily chores on religious holidays they celebrated. Rev. Maggie’s secular perspective led
her to promote a balanced life in the shelter, with not only opportunities for prayer but
opportunities for play and social interaction. For many people associated with
Arulagam’s social service work, secularism was deeply intertwined with their Christian
faith, used interchangeably with religious pluralism. For others, secularism and faith were
two distinct categories. These people identified guiding frameworks and standards for social service work as those principles that overlapped with both secularism and their faith. For instance, Rev. Maggie thought caring, listening, counseling, empathy, acceptance, and service were some examples of values emphasized by both a Christian and a secular perspective.

Secularism is not a uniform idea, nor is it opposed to religious faith and life. Anthropologists are well positioned to consider how marginalized populations, including the homeless women of this shelter, articulate opinions about secularism and a wide range of linked topics, including difference, tolerance, pluralism, acceptance, and community. “[Secularism’s] effects . . . vary according to how far people believe in it and in which ways” (Cannell 2010:86). Ethnographic studies of how people define secularism, understand it in relation to particular religious convictions, and put secularism-in-practice on an everyday scale would enrich current scholarship on secularism, more prevalent in political science than anthropology.

*People create meaning and community even when cultural ideals prove fragile.* In this dissertation I tried to avoid dichotomies of structure and agency, as well as power and resistance, because what I observed was much more subtle and complicated than these dichotomies allow. I witnessed people striving towards cultural ideals of marriage, while at the same time subtly shifting the context and meaning of the very word. People, like Lakshmi, at the shelter were not opposed to marriage but they were critical. She was critical of men, and critical of how she was treated for choosing not to marry. Yet, she valued the ideal qualities of a married woman: caring, serving, listening, feeling. She claimed to embody those virtues of a married woman as a social service worker. This
may be an instance of everyday resistance. But I would argue that it points to something more mundane. Women in the shelter, residents and staff alike, faced the fragility of cultural ideals of moral Tamil womanhood. Many of them would have liked to be a wife and mother, would have been exemplary wives and mothers. However, circumstances beyond their control inhibited them from being who they wanted to be, who they could be. I argue that understanding how people create meaning and value in life in the face of impossible cultural ideals is as theoretically relevant, if not more, than how people resist power in their daily lives.

*Cultural ideas about gender shape the experience of homelessness.* Ethnographic studies of homeless shelters overwhelmingly reflect North American and Western European contexts. While many of these texts analyze the moral assumptions, ideas, and expectations that underlie gendered representations and experiences of homelessness, more comparative studies are needed to understand intersections of gender, culture and homelessness. This dissertation has contributed, generally, to this project by considering how ideals of moral Tamil womanhood inform social rehabilitation practices, as well as representations of Tamil homeless women, at Arulagam. Moral Tamil womanhood emphasizes the imperative of patriarchal family structures. It is through a woman’s domestic life – caring for parents, husband, and children, cooking, maintaining rituals – that they gain moral power, or *sakti.* A woman without a family was in “moral danger.” This informed the singular goal of social rehabilitation in the shelter: to help women join with their families again, or to arrange marriages, as well as broader social aims: to highlight and challenge “male dominance” in society.
The ethical questions that underlie ethnographic research are also questions that underlie many of the cultural processes anthropologists study. The questions that emerged out of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) regarding ethnographic authority, legitimacy, and limitations are questions that helped me understand the limitations of my research. But, more importantly, they were also questions that helped me understand the cultural process I was studying: Tamil homeless women’s “social rehabilitation.” Positionality and narrativity were essential aspects of this ethnography and of life in the shelter.

Some people wanted me to tell the truth and asked for me to learn the truth about the female residents. I decided that the truth, in this case, was less important than the stories people wanted to tell about their lives and situation, the friendships I could make during the process, and the theoretical insights I could gain from thinking about how telling stories – life histories, gossip, visions, and ethnography – broadens or limits the terms of belonging, cultural ideals of womanhood, community. Every narrative at the shelter, whether those found in the archives, repeated at annual functions, or written by me, was an effort to understand contemporary ethical life and marginalized women’s place within it. Some constructed the residents as innocent, vulnerable victims, others constructed them as sinners who needed to repent their sins and change their lives.

I experienced being positioned as a gendered and sexual subject at my research site, but every woman at the shelter was gendered and sexualized. Understanding that process helped me analyze how different people are allowed, or privileged, enough to have certain types of intimate relationships with others. Being a gendered and sexualized subject intersects with the other ways one is positioned within a given community. For
instance, the community did not discipline Ladha for kissing me goodbye. Ladha was a long-time resident, respected by the other residents and the staff for her commitment to reading the Bible and not causing trouble. She had also been married and abandoned by her husband due to her illness. Her kissing me resulted in some giggles. Fathima and Chandani, on the other hand, were physically separated from their friends and assumed lovers (in Chandani’s case this assumption was not grounded in any observable evidence). They were young, had never been married, were both Muslim, and, in Fathima’s case, labeled “mental” by the community.

The ways in which we understand community, belonging, as well as the strangers around us, depends upon who we come to know, who we come to appreciate as interlocutors. Building rapport is not only an anthropologist’s quest, but is a difficult task for shelter staff members as well. Some staff members scrunched their noses at the sound of Fathima’s name because she had a close female friend who was willing to clean up after her messes. I would guess that they will never hear her story as significant, her complex story of multiple deaths and a hope to leave in spite of all the gifts she’s received at the shelter. I limited my research by making friends and enemies at the shelter. In Rev. Maggie’s words, I definitely participated in “petty, petty, petty, silly things” at the shelter. We probably all do. And in so doing, we help reinforce and alter the boundaries of belonging, what counts as knowledge, and who can participate in conversations about secular democracy and religious pluralism.

To “make the strange familiar and the familiar strange” is a familiar anthropological phrase. At the women’s homeless shelter, expanding the boundaries of “normalcy” meant something far more intimate, personal, and difficult. Lakshmi, for
instance, through the telling of her life story and her commitment to social service work among marginalized populations, tried to “make the stranger family and the family strange.”

**Crumbled Wall**

My visits to Arulagam a year or more after my dissertation research concluded involved some changes in the people and architecture of the shelter, changes that demonstrated once again the fragility of cultural ideals of womanhood and belonging, the complicated ways in which people negotiate the terms of one’s own and other’s ethical and moral character through interplays of excuses, rumor, and truth, and the harsh social realities of Tamil homeless women with no one and nowhere to go.

On one of my subsequent visits, I met with the Arulagam President, Rev. Dr. Gnanavaram and his wife, Kirubai. They told me that Lakshmi had left and was now working in another social service organization in Chennai.

Rev. Dr. Gnanavaram: Lakshmi left. The work was not good for her. Staying in one place, one room, it wasn’t good for her. It wasn’t good enough work. It was not up to her level.

Kirubai: Lakshmi was lying. Lakshmi was not good for Arulagam.

G: Why are you saying that?

K: She needs to know.

Did Lakshmi provide good on-site leadership for the social rehabilitation program and for the residents and staff, or did she do the shelter and its residents a disservice with her emotional morning prayers? Was she fired or did she resign? Was she supporting Chandani by offering her work and friendship, or had she crossed an ethical line in a staff-resident relationship? Was she telling the truth about her family and her past, or
telling an intriguing tale to justify her single life and gain the sympathy of those around her? These, and myriad other questions, swirled around Lakshmi during and after her tenure as Arulagam’s live-in superintendent. They were questions about Lakshmi, but they were also questions about what was good, right, ethical, and moral. To what extent and in what ways, if any, could Christian prayer improve or contribute to a secular social rehabilitation program for homeless women? What types of people should be leaders in the program? What types of people could benefit from the program? To what extent and in what ways could friendship help and harm efforts of social rehabilitation? To what extent should the program seek the truth about members of the community? In what ways did people construct stories to shift, reinforce, or redefine the terms of belonging?

Ethnographic studies of ethical life demonstrate how redrawing boundaries of belonging result in particular patterns of inclusion and exclusion. A secular ethics of belonging, argued Rev. Maggie, “is not bounding oneself within the compound wall, within religious identities. It’s overcoming those identities. That’s a secular perspective.” Overcoming boundaries can be an ethically normative imperative. However, when I returned to the shelter a year after I completed my research, I walked past a crumbled section of the wall that surrounded the shelter campus. It had been built just a few years earlier to block the garbage, urinating men, and traffic of a busy street. It had deteriorated in heavy rains, evidenced still in large mud puddles that flooded the courtyard. Where there was once a wall, I now saw a very large pile of wood debris. Men were perched on top of broken chairs spread among the top of the pile. The fragility of the wall – and the sense of protection and freedom it was meant to provide the residents of the women’s homeless shelter – reminded me of the fragility of cultural ideals. In trying to support a
secular ethics of belonging that focused on social interaction and activity, Rev. Maggie articulated an ideal that crumbled right in front of everyone, revealing a far from picturesque backdrop full of debris and idle men for a moral community project of fostering ideal womanhood.

The crumbled wall was a good reminder that boundaries are ideal when one can define their places of strength and flexibility, moments of construction and deterioration. Secularism and religious pluralism, as well as other models for community, belonging, and ethics in plural contexts, is the power of defining when and how, to what extent and in what ways, a social boundary should expand, be broken down, or built up, the power of defining who belongs and who is excluded. Ethnographic studies of ethics can draw attention to the people and institutions that have the power to include and exclude, as well as to the unintended consequences, the unanticipated crumbling walls, of that process.

Arulagam tried to accept and enable homeless women. They tried to reunite women with family, they tried to make the shelter a home and its members a family. “This is not an institution,” said Poovarasi under the tamarind tree. It was a wasteland, a space between, a place of difficulty and separation, a landscape from which the limitations of cultural ideals became visible through the everyday struggles to create and maintain ethical life in plural, marginalized community. While I tried to understand how members of this community participated in broader conversations about ethics, womanhood, community, belonging, difference and pluralism, it is also important to acknowledge that for some people, many of the residents, nothing really changed as a result of these efforts. When I returned to Arulagam after a short stint of research in another town, I sat in the office as usual catching up on the news, gossip, and events I had
missed while I was away. Fathima had run away. The staff members found her sitting at the bank, the next building over from Arulagam, and brought her back. One of the staff members said with a bit of a chuckle, “Where will she go?”
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Harman, Lesley D.

Harris, Margaret

Hay, Jean

Hernández, Graciela

Holmes, Kirsten and Karen Smith

hooks, bell
Hopper, Kim

Huseby-Darvas, Éva V.

Hutheesing, Otome K.

Jackimow, Tanya and Patrick Kilby

Jayawardena, Kumari

Jeffrey, Craig

Jenkins, Janis H., and Robert J. Barrett

Kaplan, C., N. Alarcon and M. Moallem, eds.

Kent, Eliza

Killick, Andrew P.

Koegel, Paul
Krieger, Laurie  

Kulick, Don  

Kulick, Don and Margaret Willson, eds.  

Lambek, Michael, ed.  

Larsen, John Aggerraard  

Leibing, Annette and Athena McLean, eds.  

Lewis, D.  

Liebow, Elliot  

Lowe, Lisa  
Lukose, Ritty A.

Lunsing, Wim

Lyon-Callo, Vincent

Lyons, Kevin and Stephen Wearing

Lyons, Kevin, Joanne Hanley, Stephen Wearing, John Nell

Madan, T.N

Mahajan, G.

Mahmood, Saba

Majumdar, Basanti

Malinowski, Bronislaw

Marcus, George E. and Dick Cushman
Markowitz, Fran

Markowitz, Fran and Michael Ashkenazi, eds.

Mathieu, Arline

Mattingly, Cheryl and Mary Lawlor

McGehee, N.

McGehee, N. G. and C. A. Santos

McKinney, Kelly

Meachum, Sarah Suttner

Menon, Kalyani Devaki

Menon, Usha

Mines, Diane P.
Miske, Urlike  

Mitra, S.K.  

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade  

Mol, Annemarie  

Moore, Lisa  

Moraga, Cherríe and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds.  

Moreno, Eva  

Morton, Helen  

Mossman, David  

Nabokov, Isabelle  
Naidu, Vijayalakshmi and R. Venkataratnam  
Arulagam Collections. Tamilnadu Theological Seminary Archives, Madurai,  
Tamilnadu, India.  

Nair, T. Krishnan  

Nandy, Ashis  
Delhi: Oxford University Press.  

Newton, Esther  
1993 My Best Informant’s Dress: The Erotic Equation in Fieldwork. Cultural  
Anthropology 8(1):3-23.  

Nourse, Jennifer W.  

Pandian, Anand  
Press.  

Pandian, Anand and Daud Ali, eds.  

Pandian, Anand and Daud Ali, eds.  
University Press.  

Passaro, Joanne  
1996 The Unequal Homeless: Men on the Streets, Women in their Place. New York:  
Routledge.  

Peterson, Indira Viswanathan  
2008 The Drama of the Kuravañci Fortune-teller: Land, Landscape, and Social  
Relations in an Eighteenth-century Tamil Genre. In Tamil Geographies: Cultural  
Constructions of Space and Place in South India. Martha Selby and Indira Peterson,  

Pippert, Timothy D.  
2007 Road Dogs and Loners: Family Relationships Among Homeless Men. Lanham,  
MD: Lexington Books.
Poewe, Karla
1999  Afterword: No Hiding Place: Reflections on the Confessions of Manda Cesara.


Ram, Kalpana

Raymond, E.M., and Hall, C.M.

Ring, Laura A.

Ringdal, Nils Johan

Robinson, Rev. Florence

Robinson, Rev. Gnana

Rosenthal, Rob

Rowbotham, Judith
Rubenstein, Steven L.

Santhosham, Dharmaraj

Schrijvers, Joke

Scott, S.

Shohat, Ella, ed.

Seizer, Susan
2005 Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India. Duke University Press.

Selby, Martha

Selby, Martha Ann and Indira Peterson, eds.

Sikich, Keri Weber

Sin, H. L.
Smith, D.E.  

Snow, David A., and Michael Mulcahy  

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty  

Strathern, Marilyn  

Swearer, Donald K., ed.  

Takahashi, Lois  

Tharien, A.K.  

Timmer, Doug A., D. Stanley Eitzen and Kathryn D. Talley  

Toth, Jennifer  

Turner, Victor  

Twells, Alison  
Van Der Veer, P.

Van Der Veer P. and H. Lehmann, eds.

Van Dongen

Van Gennep, Arnold
1961 The Rites of Passage. University of Chicago Press.

Van Hollen, Cecilia

Varshney, Ashutosh

Vera-Sanso, Penny

Visweswaran, Kamala

Wadley, Susan S., ed.

Wagner, David

Waldram, James B.

Wasserman, Jason Adam, and Jeffrey Michael Clair

Waterston, Alisse

Wearing, S.

Weidman, Amanda

Whitehead, Tony Larry and Mary Ellen Conaway, eds.

Williams, Jean Calterone

Woosnam, Kyle M. & Lee, Y.J.
Curriculum Vitae

Connie Etter

**education**

2007-2012  **PhD**, Anthropology, Syracuse University, NY

2004-2007  **MA**, Anthropology, Syracuse University, NY  
Certificate of Advanced Study: Women’s Studies  
Certificate of Advanced Study: South Asian Studies

2003  Graduate studies in Comparative Religion, Iliff School of Theology, CO  
*Withdraw from program because no south Indian languages were taught*

1999-2002  **BA**, Summa Cum Laude, Religion Honors, Concordia College, MN

**RESEARCH & TEACHING INTERESTS**

international education and pedagogy; anthropology of South Asia; feminist research methods; global Christianity; gender and religion; secularism and religious pluralism; morality and marginality

**ACADEMIC SEMINARS**

2009-2010  **Bio/Geo Politics of Religion Seminar**, Macaulay Honors College at CUNY  
Monthly seminar comprised of New York area faculty & advanced graduate students

2006-2007  **Goekjian Seminar**, Syracuse University  
Monthly seminar of graduate students to discuss preliminary research findings

**administration**

2010-  **Executive Director**, South India Term Abroad  
*consortium program of Bates, Bowdoin, Grinnell, Sarah Lawrence, Scripps, Smith, and Whittier Colleges and The George Washington University*
teaching

2010-2011  Teaching Fellow, Gender Studies, Oklahoma State University (declined)

Summer 2010  Teaching Mentor, Graduate School, Syracuse University (declined)

2009-2010  Future Professoriate Teaching Associate, Anthropology, Syracuse University [4 semesters]

2009-2010  Teaching Assistant, Dept. of Anthropology, Syracuse University

Spring 2008  Instructor, South India Term Abroad, Madurai, Tamil Nadu  
Anthropology: Theories and Methods (upper division)

2007  Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award, Graduate School, Syracuse University

Fall 2006  Teaching Assistant, Dept. of Anthropology, Syracuse University  
ANT 185: Global Encounters: Understanding Values and Worldviews Cross-Culturally

GUEST LECTURES

2011  Anthropology of Religion  
ANTH 101: Introduction to Anthropology (Dr. Liza Gijanto)  
Dept. of Anthropology, St. Mary’s College of Maryland, Mar. 24 and Nov. 8

2011  Shakti  
REL 384: Goddesses, Women, and Power in Hinduism (Soonki Lee)  
Dept. of Religion, Syracuse University, Feb. 9

2011  Christian Traditions in India  
REL 283: India’s Religious Worlds (Dr. Alex Snow)  
Dept. of Religion, Syracuse University, Feb. 8

2010  Gender & Morality in Tamil Nadu  
ANT 625: Problems in the Anthropology of South Asia (Prof. Susan S. Wadley)  
Dept. of Anthropology, Syracuse University, Apr. 6

2009  Christian Traditions in India  
REL 283: India’s Religious Worlds (Prof. Ann Grodzins Gold)  
Dept. of Religion, Syracuse University, Oct. 29
2006  **Commodification of Folk Arts**  
*HNR 340: Folk Arts and Oral Epics of India* (Prof. Susan S. Wadley)  
Renee Crown Honors Program, Syracuse University

### research

#### GRANTS & FELLOWSHIPS

**External Support**  
2008-2009  Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship  
grant # P022A080039, $41,799  
2008-2009  American Institute of Indian Studies Junior Research Fellowship  
(declined)  
2007-2008  American Institute of Indian Studies Language Fellowship  
2007-2008  Fulbright IIE Full Grant (declined)

**Internal Support**  
2009  Department of Anthropology Travel Grant Program, Syracuse University,  
$300  
2007  Maxwell School Dean’s Summer Research Award, Syracuse University,  
$1200  
2007  Roscoe Martin Funds for Research, Syracuse University, $1000  
2007  Bharati Memorial/South Asia Center Funds for Research, Syracuse University, $600  
2006-2007  Goekjian Scholar, Syracuse University, $2876  
2004-2007  Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships, Syracuse University  
Summer (3), academic year (2), and semester (1)  
2006  Creative Grants for Research, Syracuse University, $1200  
1999-2002  Faculty Scholar, Concordia College, $40,000

#### CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

2011  When Declarations of Secularism Give Way to Visions of Evil: Ethical Questions of Belonging In a Women’s Homeless Shelter In South India.  


PANELS ORGANIZED


INVITED TALKS


RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

2010-2011  **Research Assistant**, Syracuse University
Researcher: Prema Kurien, Associate Professor, Sociology
Library research on secularism; religion and nationalism; religion and politics; South Asian immigration to the US and citizenship

2008-2009  **Doctoral Dissertation Research**, Tamil Nadu, India
Twelve months of intensive ethnographic research in a Christian women’s rehabilitation shelter. Methods: participant-observation, open-ended interviews, organizational archives [primarily in Tamil]

2007-2008  **Pre-Dissertation Research**, Tamil Nadu, India
Twelve months of intermittent ethnographic research in women’s bible fellowship groups for papers in summer and academic year AIIS language programs. Methods: participant-observation, survey, open-ended interviews [exclusively in Tamil]

Summer 2006  Ten weeks of ethnographic research with nuns working in women’s empowerment programs for pre-dissertation feasibility study. Methods: participant-observation and open-ended interviews [primarily in Tamil]

EXPERIENCE IN SOUTH INDIA

2010-  Administrative trips (2-4 weeks) twice annually for South India Term Abroad

2008-2009  Research (1 year)

2007-2008  Language study (1 year)

2006  Research (3 months)

2005  Language study (3 months)

2000  Study (4 months): “Rethinking Development in India,” Concordia College study abroad

LANGUAGE SKILLS

Tamil: proficient written and spoken

**service**

2009-2010  Promotion and Tenure Committee, College of Arts and Sciences, Syracuse University
2008 Reviewer: *Journal of Development and Social Transformation*, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University

*To the South Asia Center, Syracuse University*

2010 Volunteer: “traditional dress,” program on South Asian culture for 9th grade high school students, Syracuse University, April 5.


**professional development**

2012 *Outcomes Assessment in Education Abroad*  
one-day workshop, Standards of Good Practice Institute, Forum on Education Abroad, March 21

2011 *Teaching about Gender and Sexuality*  
Association for Feminist Anthropology workshop, Nov. 19

2009-2010 *Future Professoriate Program, Syracuse University*  
participation in monthly sessions about professional development offered by either the Anthropology Department or the Graduate School

2010 *Future Professoriate Program Conference, Syracuse University*  
two-day conference for graduate students on various themes of professional development, May 21-22

**PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

American Anthropological Association; Association for Feminist Anthropology; American Academy of Religion; Society for Hindu-Christian Studies

Forum on Education Abroad; NAFSA: Association of International Educators