Preface to *spoken* Tamil
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ABSTRACT
This paper is a contribution to an anthropology of aurality in Tamil Nādu. Using a sociolinguistic approach to performance, I shall argue that contemporary low caste performers in Tamil Nādu are part of a discursive tradition that dates back to Caṅkam times in order to show how this tradition, the dialogue between the art of writing and the practice of speech, is actually a feeling in Tamil that affects the concept of locality in Tamil. This feeling, or *spoken* Tamil, is a kind of aural competence. In performance, it is a way of speaking with writing in mind. In writing, it is that sentiment which demonstrates a kind of ethnographic authority. Caṅkam literature, Bhakti devotion, Tamil nationalism—indeed, the practice of *spoken* Tamil has been, and continues to be, a mode of organizing people in light of the state. Then and now, *spoken* Tamil has never been about how people really speak. Rather, it has always been a way of producing citizens by manufacturing aural competence.

KEYWORDS
locality, aurality, writing
THE PROBLEM OF LOCALITY

When Makāliṅkam’s Degeneracies first appeared in 1998, the questions it affected were concerned, not so much with what kind of novel it was; but rather with the confusion between the representation of space and the practice of locality: the front cover consists of a photograph describing tightly knit rows of young, and in phenotype West African, men standing. The faces of the young men in the first five rows are clearly visible. After this, the heads begin to blur. From what we can see, each young man is without clothes and standing with a wooden staff of about six to seven feet tall. Each staff appears to be distinctly crafted and tipped with orbicular arrangements. The heads and faces of these young men are shaven clean. Judging by the title and the angle of the light reflecting on that part of their faces which reaches upward from the right eyebrow to the natural line of the hair, we may infer that the sun is setting.

“The world that is revealed in the Nigerian novel Degeneracies,” remarks Kalam publishers on the back cover, “may also be reminiscent to a great extent of Indian life and Tamil life. This novel’s mode of representing our tradition, beliefs, customs and habits, wealth of oral literature, and desire for independence may stimulate the interest of Tamil readers.” In the preface to Degeneracies, Cuntara Rāmacāmi concurs that the many cultural and political problems of Africa may be compared with those of India and Tamil Nādu. For example, the postcolonial literature in Africa and India share similar themes in the way they discuss a moral decay of society during and after colonization. “When we assemble African life by way of the essence that lies in their rational creations,” asserts Rāmacāmi, “making comparisons with that might be of some use to us in understanding the critical times that are in our lives” (Āccipi 1998:10).

Our lives is a martial art. Though a coward, a musician, and a debtor, the wily Unoka is forever defending himself against the aggressions of his community. While relaxing at home playing a flute, his neighbor pays him a visit. Okoye is also a musician, though not a coward and not in debt. Today Okoye has come to collect on a loan he made to Unoka. Nevertheless, tradition commences. Greetings are exchanged, Okoye unrolls his goatskin and sits, Unoka retreats further into his dwelling, and after a moment, the advance:

‘நான் இந்த தலச் சீமையில் உயர்ந்து வருவேன். உன்னை நான் நானை தவிர்க்கிறேன். உன்னை நான் வறுகிறேன்.’
"Look at that door," he said while pointing out the door that was on the far end of his house that had been smeared with red earth. "Look at those visible lines of cunñāmpu...Each line that is there is equivalent to one hundred cowry. Look there. There, I have to give a thousand cowries. But that man did not come waking me up in the morning for that. I will give it
to you. Not today. Our elders have said ‘the sun shines late for those that are on their knee behind those that are standing.’ And then as if he was going first to give the big loans, Unoka took a whiff of snuff. Okoye folded his goat skin and left.

A debtor’s kōlā pākku technique succeeds in fending off, yet one more time, payment owed for a debt.

In Degeneracies, the martial arts are reinforced by grammar. The consistency of deictic constructions such as pronouns, case suffixes, and demonstratives indicate structures of social relating within which manipulations may occur. In the earlier passages citing the conversation between Unoka and Okoye, the conjugation of the copulate ‘have’ in ‘I have a kōlā pākku’ plays a dual role. First, it serves its grammatical purpose as a copulate. Second, ‘have’ is aural: ‘irukkutu’ (a copulate which, in this case, literally means 'exist', or 'being'--‘the kōlā pākku exists to me’) isn’t so much a codification of the oral form of the literary irukkiratu, as it is a reference to how people say irukkiratu. In other words, when we write irukkutu, we are creating a feel for a conversation. The pronoun ‘you’ presented here is in the familiar form of ‘you’ [un]. Thus, Makālininkam makes Unoka and Okoye out to be familiar friends. This familiarity highlights the breaking of the kōlā pākku as a ritual. Of course, Unoka passes the kōlā pākku to Okoye. Of course, Okoye passes it back. Of course, the two argue. These competing paradigms—the formality surrounding the kōlā pākku and the familiarity of two friends—allow the reader to appreciate the wit of Unoka and his ability to use the formality of kōlā pākku to avoid paying his defaulted loan.

The organization of demonstratives anticipate a Tamil locality, putting into perspective for us a whole set of categories, including habits, speech patterns, mores, that mediate the space of the characters. The use of ‘this’ and ‘that’ in the above passages are used to refer to kōlā pākku and the sources of Unoka’s debt. By positioning both referents as formalities, Unoka’s ascendancy is inevitable. Okoye’s deference in the kōlā pākku ritual is extended to his submission concerning his loan.

Of course, kōlā pākku is reminiscent of the ubiquity of paan in our lives. Having carefully glazed the betel leaf with cuṇṇāmpu, one’s favorite pākku is sprinkled, and the leaf is wrapped to become paan. Cuṇṇāmpu transforms paan, providing a spicy taste and turning the mouth red. Language about Africa allows us to see our way through India. For Rāmacāmi, the space created in Degeneracies refers to our lives as a sign of Tamil life.
When *Degeneracies* comes to Tamil, like the former ways of life that have been embraced in their life, those characters will come and join the readers that are familiar with another former way of life. Through the skill of the translator, this relationship may be very enjoyable for such characters. Through this translation, we are able to feel the eliminating of the livelihood befitting those people without teasing Tamil. The Tamil reader that reads *Degeneracies* will be unable to not feel the unity that looks like Indian life and Tamil life. Their beliefs, customs and habits, and traditions approximate our lives. This Tamil translation may provide an intimate experience to those that have grown disgusted looking at translations of the foreignness of western lifestyles.

In this way, the postcolonial is identical with locality. Amidst traditional techniques, between traditional and colonial practices lie the dissonance that refers to our memory of “the former ways of life.” Inconvenience defines locality by referring to practices of inconvenience, or the Third World novel, as instances of postcolonial memory.

*Degeneracies* becomes a device in which we store our dissonance. In storage, our folkways, religions, philosophies become interactive modes of limitation. Embedded in a paragraph on religious techniques will be links to numerous other paragraphs on the folk arts. For the user interested in sexuality, a passage on kōḷā pākku techniques may point her to a passage concerned with wrestling practices. For another user interested in philosophy, the very same citation of kōḷā pākku techniques might point her to another passage dealing with the concept of community. The martial arts refer to practices of defense as context-dependent formations while simultaneously projecting itself as a sign of the Third World.

It is not clear, though, how such a locality is compatible with lived spaces. In providing a global network of reference, the postcolonial locality disregards those very specific experiences that are attached to very specific spaces. The experience of imperialism in Tamil Nādu may differ from the experience of imperialism in Nigeria. Perhaps, suggests Civacēkaram in a review of *Degeneracies*, the decision by the Ibo to merge Ibo culture with that of the colonizers caused the degeneracy:
There are dangers in attaching a cultural milieu, that civil society which is associated with the coming of White people in Africa, with customs and the village milieu that we know. Africa’s tribal societies have had two major external influences. First, the coming of original Christianity and Islam. Second, after that time, was the coming of the colonial way with Western Christianity. Before the twentieth century, our tribal societies of today began to succumb to many ongoing changes. Moreover, Sanskrit culture had penetrated sections of Tamil society on many different levels in many different ways. Compared with our village society, there are different foreign features. Therefore, when we make sense of the time of colonial rule that Degeneracies presents, mistakes may arise through excessive assumptions about our fundamental milieu.

A South Asian’s understanding of the Black race, says Civacēkaram, comes from the segregation experienced during colonial rule. South Asians side with the plight of black skin due to their sense of the ways in which their society has succumbed to the value of skin color. Verily, in America, Europe, Australia, black skinned people are grouped like a ‘caste’ (Civacēkaram 1999). In other words, the problem with the category ‘postcolonial’ is that it confuses spaces with localities. In the postcolonial locality, the martial arts in Nigeria are anchored in generic techniques of self-defense that anticipate a homologous relationship with the practice of caste.

Degeneracies, concludes Civacēkaram, is a kind of frustration. For example, the word “cat” in Tamil usually refers to a house cat. In Africa, however, the word “cat” nearly always refers to tigers, lions, panthers, etc. Thus for an African, writing “the one who threw four hundred cats” is the equivalent of “the one who defeated four hundred strong, agile men.” However, reading “the one who threw four hundred cats” in Tamil sounds somewhat silly. The English word “spoil” primarily has the meaning of “overripe” as in “the plantains are spoiled”; or “ruined” as in “due to the rain, my plans are ruined.” Of course, “spoil” may refer to that compulsion of showing excessive affection as is often the case with parents to their children: “you’re going to spoil that little boy.” In Degeneracies, the word “spoil” is never used to convey the concept of ruin. Because relationships between spaces and localities are dubious, meanings wane, unable to defend themselves against the reader: to wit; Makālinkam’s Degeneracies is always trying to be a text while never quite passing as a book—even the translation of the title as Degeneracies mutates the fundamental enterprise embedded in the original title of Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart.
PRACTICING LOCALITY

Arjun Appadurai (1995) also makes a clear distinction between locality and space, or what he refers to as neighborhood. For Appadurai, locality is a relational phenomenon, a mobilization of “the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity and the relativity of contexts.” A neighborhood, by contrast, is the “actually existing social forms in which locality...is realized” (Appadurai 1995:208). Local subjects take shape through the civilizing mission of the nation state. Locality, then, mediates neighborhoods in order to reinforce that sense of civil society that motivates nations.

Clearly, the practices of locality in Nigeria differ from those in Tamil Nādu. However, the techniques rendered in the civilizing project renders them identical and in prose, neighborhoods lose their distinction. To this, the question underlying Civacēkaram’s critique of Degeneracies still stands: is it possible for a neighborhood in Tamil Nādu to reflect upon and represent a neighborhood in Nigeria without absolving their distinctions? Though this discussion does not attempt to resolve this issue surrounding inter-neighborhood representation, it seeks to approach the issue with reference to the role that the feel for speech in Tamil has on the practice of locality in Tamil Nādu: to wit, what it is about the banal in Tamil that makes it civil?

There is a burden in Civacēkaram’s critique of Degeneracies that refers to feel for Tamil. That sense of locality to which Civacēkaram appeals is a dialogue between the art of writing and the practice of speech. This feeling, or spoken Tamil, is a form of aural competence. In performance, it is a way of speaking with writing in mind. In writing, it is that sentiment which demonstrates a kind of ethnographic authority. As spoken Tamil is concerned less with contrasting orality and literacy and more with manipulating the difference between neighborhoods and locality, Civacēkaram’s critique of Degeneracies assumes a praxis of manipulation in Tamil. Caṅkam literature, bhakti devotion, Tamil nationalism--indeed, the practice of spoken Tamil has been, and continues to be, a mode of organizing people in light of the state. Then and now, spoken Tamil has never been about how people really speak. Rather, it has always been a way of producing citizens by manufacturing aural competence.

MOTILITY: THE ESSENCE OF LOCALITY

Bernard Bate’s work on political speech in Tamil is one of the more recent discussions of the nature of language, citizenship and power in contemporary Tamil Nādu (Bate 2009). Bate presents a figure of heteroglossia in Tamil in order to present an outline of the context of democratic practice in Tamil Nādu. "The difference between cemmai [high] and kochai [low]… constitutes a phenomenological distinction of people, of epochs, of national space, and social processes within a massively heteroglossic situation" (Bates 2009:17). This difference, argues Bate, is a product of Dravidianist and nationalist politics.

But when George Hart (1975) notes that most of the classical poems that comprise Caṅkam literature are rooted in a low-status bardic tradition, clearly the difference between "high" and "low" registers in Tamil were tools of prosody in classical South India. Many older
texts, such as Kampan’s Rāmāyaṇa, contain interpolations that are clearly banal (Hart and Heifetz 1999:xxiii).

The 16th century Arwi text of Vaṇṇapparimalappulavar, Āyira Macală, or [The Book] of One Thousand Questions, was written, according to Shu’ayb ‘Ālim, with “all the basic forms of the finest spoken and grammatical Tamil” (Ālim 1993:89). Because writing Tamil in the Arabic script was also an effort by Muslims in Tamil Nādu to look like proper Muslims, manipulating the difference between high and low registers in Tamil was at once an act of propriety and at the same time a way of creating a context for Islam in Tamil Nādu (Ricci 2011).

And of course, manipulating the difference between high and low registers was the tool missionaries used to spread Christianity in South India. Cupraṅkī Kavitāyar wrote a piece in the early half of the eighteenth century entitled “Virali Viṭu Tūtu” (Pillai 1990:983). The piece was so raunchy, especially his explicit descriptions of sex, that performing it was banned by the government. This very same blind, vulgar, kinky old man taught Tamil to the famous Jesuit Constantine Joseph Beschi. Beschi’s grammars distinguishing high Tamil (centamiḻ) and low Tamil (koṭuntamiḻ) remains an influential analytic in understanding the Tamil language (Beschi 1917 and 1971; Britto 1986; Schiffman 1974). His Tēmpāvanī (1960) is as much a theory of high Tamil as it is a story about the life of St. John.

Somewhere amidst the difference between high and low registers in Tamil lies context--the essence of Bate’s argument is certainly profound. However, the difference that Bate speaks of is as old as Tamil itself. Moreover, I argue that producing this difference in Tamil is a distinctive feature of a low-status writing tradition that reinforces contemporary Dravidian politics as much as it did the figure of kingship in classical times.

George Hart (1975) has argued that the manipulation of difference in Tamil is related to low status and their patterns of movement in Tamil Nādu:

The Tamil poems were composed by a class of men called pulavāṇa, who included in their ranks Brahmans (perhaps ten percent), kings, the highest non Brahman castes, and a few women. There is some evidence that men of low birth could not be a pulavāṇa, but the poems of the pulavāṇa were often composed in imitation of songs sung by Pāṇaṅa, Kinaṅaṅa (also called Paraiyaṅs), and Tuṭiyaṅs, all of whom belonged to low castes and made their living wandering from the court of one king to another and singing of the king’s greatness, hoping to be rewarded (an occupation they shared with the pulavāṇa). These Pāṇaṅa, Kinaṅaṅa, and Tuṭiyaṅs were without question oral poets...(Hart 1975:46).

The practice of mimicry that exists, for Hart, between orality and literacy, is the source of classical literature in Tamil. Though considering the presence of the bardic tradition today and the role such practices have in creating context, it seems more than probable that then and now there existed a tradition of manipulation in Tamil that created a sense of things oral and things literate.
I shall argue that the pulavan weren’t mimicking orality as much as they were in dialogue with and extensions of low status-bards. The Pāṇaṉ, for example, in comparison to the pulavan, is unschooled. He is not formally trained in the arts and literature as is the pulavay. From classical poetry, we know his troupe is itinerant. When they are not traveling and performing, they work on the land. They eat fish. Yet, the Pāṇaṉ creates verse with a clear understanding of difference in mind.

Auvaiyar’s fame is connected to her unschooled practices.1 She is known to have travelled from village to village, eating the food of poor farmers and composing songs for them. Moreover, the oppāri she wrote upon the death of Chief Atiyamāṉ Neṭumāṉ Añci is something unschooled artisans do:

May there be no morning anymore! May there be no evening anymore!
Let the days I have left in my life not have any more meaning!
As the feathers of peacocks adorn his memorial stone of a hero,
when the small cup of clear toddy filtered through fiber is poured
down upon it, will he accept it, he who would not
accept an entire country of high mountains with soaring summits? (Hart 2002:144)²

Gunasekaran has argued that scheduled caste practices are the essence of Tamil expression.³ As Gunasekaran knelt on the floor performing a scene of women grieving over a dead body, he explained that the feeling that loved ones have for the dearly departed is the basis of an oppāri. Beating his chest and moaning, he argued that the pauses, the crying, the rhythm must be understood in terms of this practice of grieving.

An oppāri is usually defined as a lamentation by women making doleful reference to the personal appearance and good qualities of the deceased. In Tamil Nādu, many of these lamentations for the dearly departed are also hired performances. Low-status artisans are hired to do the mourning. When Gunasekaran says that the oppāri is a Scheduled-Caste tradition, he is saying that "how women grieve" is a mode of unschooled writing that teaches women how to feel.

There exists in contemporary Tamil Nādu a troupe organized through Caṉtanam. Caṉtanam is a low-status, unschooled writer who travels from village to village to perform. Caṉtanam is actively part of a tradition of unschooled writing that has flourished without break in Tamil Nādu for over 2000 years. The following is an example of an oppāri written by M.P. Cāmikkaṉu that was in the possession of Caṉtanam.

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1. Auvaiyar is a famous court poet during the Caṉkam times. She wrote 53 poems in the Puṟanāṉūṟu
2. The Tamil from Puṟanāṉūṟu 232
3. interview year 2000

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1. A pair of earrings. You Lord who longed for me
Wearing a chained hairpin and writing this verse for me here
Is one M. P. Cāmikkaṇṇu.
I bow here to his end. Oh! Aiya! Has our existence become too far for you?

Wearing a kārākṣi shaped hairpin and writing this verse
is Ponnu Kaṇṭaṇi from Karucakulaṁ to whom I pay my respects.
The abode of Kailasam you have reached – is it far off?

3. Sparklers (which look like) coconut flakes.
You Lord who longed for me.
In front of the Vadapalinji library, Jeya kodi4 bursts.
Papers and documents arrive in the ship. In order to read these sheets wasn’t I born as a son to this unfortunate woman?

4. Sparklers (which look like) peanuts and puffed rice. The kadarkodi dais5 in front of the Vadapalinji library.
Papers and documents arrive in the ship. In order to read the paper, wasn’t I born as a son?

In this oppāri, writing is the ground of locality and the very essence of grief itself. It is a reference point for other writers and performers. This oppāri is divided in four sections. The repetition of phrases in each section helps to mark the section in order to emphasize the rhythm and also to suggest when to cry in the performance.

The wailing, the crying, the incoherent mumbling— in unschooled terms, the practice of grief is essentially a way of organizing concrete experiences into an aggregate such that one ‘wanders’ from one experience to the next. In this oppāri, we move, as if arbitrarily, from the sensation of kārākṣi shaped hairpins to the space of Karucakulaṁ; from the sensation of sparklers to the space of the library; from the space of the dais to the sensation of documents. This representation of wandering provides that sense of grief.

This oppāri doesn’t reflect Kaṇṭaṇi’s prestige as much as it creates it and reinforces it. Indeed, prestige isn’t an objective item that one owns. Rather it is a feeling that one invokes, caresses, and manipulates.

4. “Jeya Kodi” is a brand name of sparklers, or fire crackers
5. a small dais like construction on which a flag post is placed
Writing is a way of conveying the importance of the deceased, Poṇṇu Kaṇmanji from Karucaḳulam. One is reminded of a pānar/pulavar-patron relationship during Caṅkam times in which having a bard promoted the stature of the patron. Citing the author’s name in the grieving, and thereby proclaiming that someone wrote a piece specifically for this occasion, enhances the prestige of the deceased in the community. Historically, the manufacture of prestige has been motivated by the practice of unschooled writing.

During Caṅkam times, the primary form of wealth redistribution was gifting. Gifting was based on kinship and interpersonal relationships (such as a bard receiving gifts from patron), the latter being an important way of legitimizing the rule of chiefs. Champakalakshmi identifies three levels of gift redistribution: vēntar, vēḷir, and kilār (Champakalakshmi 1996). Gifts from the vēntar were gifts from kings. They provided subsistence items for people under their rule. They also provided prestigious gifts (such as gold coins and lotuses, gems, horses, elephants) to the pulavar. Gifts from the vēḷir were gifts from chieftains in the same manner though in lower scale as the vēntar. Gifts from the kilār were from landowning families/elders to this ‘constituency’.

Though economic surplus during Caṅkam times came from warfare/plunder and maritime trade, socioeconomies were based on a barter system within and between localities. An example of interlocal exchange might be wood and honey of the hill regions for milk from the pastoral region. The significance of barter existed in the subjective acts encoding the exchange. Because relationships, particularly the practices surrounding gifting, governed alliances, knowing how to give was just as important, if not more so, than the act of giving itself.

In a moving passage from the Purunāṅūru, a low-status pānar named Kōṇāṭṭu Ericcilūr Maturaik Kumaraṉār tells how he prefers the patronage of chiefs over kings as the former knew how to give:

When we think, "This king has chariots with banners fluttering at their heights, with horses that gallop like the rash of the wind!" and "That king has elephants which fight as if they were ramming mountains while his army glowing with weapons could as well be the ocean!" or "This is a conquering king, who triumphs in his wars with his drums that are as awesome as the roaring of thunder!" the wealth of such rulers does not astonish us, they who are shaded by white umbrellas, who wear bright ornaments, whose armies hold lands! But there is a kind of man who does astonish us, though he may only be king of a village that grows no more than millet from dry fields, the small leaves sprouting from the living joints of the tiny fragrant muṇṉai plants that sheep have grazed down within the enclosures fenced with thorns, if that man only shows the virtue of knowing how to treat us as we should be treated! Even when we are overwhelmed by suffering, we do not turn our minds
to the wealth of those who are utterly without awareness, but we think of the poverty, O greatness! of those who are truly aware, and over and over we feel happy! (Hart 2002:124)

Just as pāṇars were a source of establishing the legitimacy of kings and chiefs, unschooled writing created the conditions for the possibility of authority in Tamil. During Caṅkam times, the authority of kings and chiefs was subjective because authority was context dependent. They are as powerful as they are culturally aware. Knowing how to give is one example of this.

Maturaik Kumaraṇār’s “critique of the king” contrasts the objective king with the subjective chief. Though the king who controls space is impressive, it is the chief who manages localities that is truly magnificent.

There is a notable difference between space and locality. Sivathamby notes what he considers a discrepancy between the tuṇaṅkai ritual mentioned in the Caṅkam works Akanāṅṟu’ and Maturaikkāṇci with the explanation of tuṇaṅkai given by 15th century commentator Nacciṟkkiṉār (Sivathamby 1981). In the Caṅkam works, the tuṇaṅkai refers to a battlefield dance of demons and goblins that was performed by the victors in battle. Nacciṟkkiṉār explains that this dance is part of an agricultural ritual that takes place after harvest. Sivathamby dismisses Nacciṟkkiṉār’s explanation thus: “the ritual is too martial to allow an equation with the agricultural ceremonies” (Sivathamby 1981:187).

But Sivathamby is confusing space of the agricultural ritual with the practice of locality invoked through that ritual in war. As an agricultural ritual, the tuṇaṅkai refers to events in a specific space. The celebration of harvest in, say, village A is not related to the harvest in village

6. in Tamil from Pūranāṅṟu 197:

7. Akanāṅṟu: 142
8. Maturaikkāṇci: 27
B. The tuṇāṅkai in battle may be understood as the generic form of the agricultural ritual. Just as soldiers are from various villages, their rituals are generalized. In battle, the tuṇāṅkai ritual unites war and kingship with the peasant. This unity is a reflection of unschooled wandering. And this reflection of wandering is that feeling of locality.

The transformation of these rituals into expressions of war renders them pan-spatial and the essence of subjectivity. Through war, a place is transformed from an objective neighborhood into an instance in a circulatory flow between neighborhoods. Through war, neighborhoods are mobilized into a generalized aggregate, or a locality. In this way, we may recall that the poetess Auvaliayar’s writing is portrayed as a reflection of her wandering among common people. In this way, the fundamental significance of war in ancient South India is not so much about the loot acquired from plundering as it is the medium through which localities were created.

When we consider the motility of unschooled writers, what Hart characterizes as “wandering from the court of one king to another and singing of the king’s greatness, hoping to be rewarded”, along with the content of unschooled texts; unschooled writing appears to be less a reflection of a specific neighborhood and more a representation of the movement between neighborhoods.

For some time now, understanding motilities in South Asia has been a way of making sense of the relationship between people and the land. In an effort to discipline tax revenue, the British colonial administration mapped pilgrimage routes in order to better understand economic zones. The work of Sopher (1967, 1968) and Bhardwaj (1973, 1988) used motility in order to delineate spiritual regions in South Asia. Stein (1977, 1980) and Mines (2005, 2008) have used motility to understand those contestations and practices of concession that distinguish a place.

Clearly, how people actually move about is important. This paper, however, is concerned with the representation of moving about. From the wandering about during Caṅkam times to the commuting of the present, the motility of unschooled artisans has been evolving.9 In what began as a source of kingship, I argue that this tradition of representing movement exists today as the essence of the state.

THE NĀDU: THE POLITICS OF LOCALITY

From the medieval times through the present, spoken Tamil played an essential role in reinforcing emerging socioeconomic practices by converting contested geographies into configurations of belonging, or a nādu. According to Burton Stein (1977), the nādu is a motility, a kind of existential gait, that has existed through Caṅkam times to the present. Though shifting, morphing and evolving, the nādu retains at its core a dialogue between production and representation.

In a sense, therefore, the nādu itself, during the pre- and early Chola periods, can be seen as a micro circulatory region leading to changes in the

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9. By the term “commuting,” I mean movement motivated by contracts and payment for labor rendered
character of these small, frequently isolated localities. According to Classical poems, which reflected a very early point in this transforming process, the nādu was a clan or tribal territory over which a warrior chief (celebrated in the puram-type poems) held sway. During Chola times, partly as a result of the movement of and the inclusion within each nādu of learned and ritually proficient Brahmans, the hundreds of nādis of Tamil country had become complex and pluralistic settings of peasant society. However, each nādu also retained a "tribe-like" or "segmentary" character, local dominance over resources being vested in the peasant folk of each locality-persons usually identified as "men of the nādu" (nāṭṭār). Up to the thirteenth century, each locality was to a high degree separate and autonomous-except in the most populous parts of the Kaveri basin, where interlocality integration resulted from the supralocal power of the Chola kings whose domain this was (Stein 1977:16).

Interestingly, “tribe-like” and “segmentary” are synonyms of the same feeling that refers to the practice of locality in Tamil. It is a fractal that expressed new combinations when the brahmans arrived. These emerging combinations during Chola times became the order of things. However, scholars have pointed out that Stein’s nādu is not unlike centrality of the village in colonialist prose (Veluthat 2010, Champalakshmi 1996). According to Veluthat (2009) and Champalakshmi (1996), the fractal approach presents the nādu as an instance of an a priori Tamil Nādu much like the village was an instance of Indic civilization.

But the nādu as fractal anticipates the art of imagination. Be it the colonial program of attaching people to places (Irschick 1994) or the Tamil nationalists’ proclamation of Saiva Siddhanta as the original Tamil religion (Ishimatsu 1999), that tribe-like feeling of a nādu underscores how the political configuration of space never quite matches the organic practice of locality. I agree with Stein’s position that the practice of locality in Tamil is as old as Tamil itself. However problematic the nādu-as-fractal may appear, the practice of locality in Tamil persists through socio economic paradigms.

For Veluthat, the nādu refers to a grouping of agricultural settlements, and a corporate group of spokesmen of that locality (Veluthat 2009:110). The act of locality was in fact a mode of mediation between the designs of the state and the aspirations of neighborhoods.

For Veluthat, the nādu exists in the defensive, as a way of mitigating, though often conceding to, the centralizing efforts of the state and brahmins. In this way, the nādu is a martial art. From at least the fifth century, the Vellālas were extending their agricultural influence in the agricultural localities, while the brahmedeyas began articulating an agrarian order in non agricultural, most likely pastoral, localities (Champalakshmi 1996:38).

Brahmadeyas, those land grants given to groups of brahman settlers, introduced new socioeconomies. It brought in new farming methods such as irrigation techniques and seasonal regulation of cultivation. The Brahmadeyas encouraged new forms of social integration by facilitating new relationships between peasants and ruling entities.
Beginning in the medieval times, land relations began to be organized around the brahmedeya and the temple giving rise to three types of landowners--the brahmana, the vēḷāḷa, and the temple. Space was being contextualized according to the varṇa system that categorized society in accordance with four tiers: Brahmins (priestly or scholarly group), Kṣatriya (martial or royal group), Vaiśyas (merchant group) and Sūdras (laborers). Even so, practically, space was mobilized through the two broad categories of brāhmaṇa and non-brāhmaṇa.

From a formal perspective, brahmadeyas made sense. The brahmadeyas were a mechanism for cultivating virgin land. The varna framework that the Brahmins brought with them was a way of accommodating and ordering the emerging diversity of occupations.

In a way, the distinctive feature of medieval South India is the creating and contesting of localities. Whereas brahmadeyas played a central role in expanding the codifying rule of the state, at least three types of supralocal agrarian configurations emerged in medieval South India, in large part, as a response to that effort. Vēḷāḷas formed “periyanādus” in order to defend themselves against the oppression of the state (Rajukumar 1974). A number of hill tribes who were recruited into the Cola army became peasants, organized themselves as nādus, and began forming periyanādus to confront the nādus dominated by the Vēḷāḷas. Tenant farmers cultivating the land in brahmadeyas formed pērilamai-nādus to confront the impositions of Brahmins and the state (Karashima and Subbarayalu 2004)

Converting these neighborhoods into localities is the distinctive feature of unschooled writing. Thus, from an unschooled perspective, the brahmedeyas was good business. Unschooled writing laminated preexisting practices and deities onto the varna framework. Unschooled writing grounded the expanding configurations of nādus, periyanādus, and supralocal mercantile guilds. Kambar’s twelfth century Ėreṟupatu, a piece which glorifies the Vēḷāḷar caste, forges linkages between the Chola kingdom, puranic episodes and the agricultural practices in order to mobilize various spaces into a locality under the direction of a Vēḷāḷar community (Pillai 1991:149).

Then and now, spoken Tamil helped create the epistemological ground within which socio political power is anchored. One of the ways to follow the politics of conversion during classical and medieval times is to understand the manner in which spoken Tamil is being practiced today: "I am unlearned," begins the 70-year old Caṉtanam to my question about his background in relation to his profession. "I am SC (Scheduled-Caste). There was no work...So I became a singer...The songs come from my head." I had come to Caṉtanam in order that I might understand something about the famous folk song concerning the murder of Maṉikkuṟavan.

Scholars and just plain folk, both are quick to point out that this song is part of an oral tradition. It is an example of an untouchable critique of society: Maṉikkuṟavan was an untouchable, he was a hooligan, he used to steal from the rich and give to the poor, etcetera. From what I had gathered, Maṉikkuṟavan was indeed an extraordinary rowdy who was murdered in 1953 at the age of 22. Soon afterwards a statue was built in a cemetery in Tataneeri, Madurai in his honor. Every year around January 15, many Scheduled-Caste folk make offerings to him at the place where the statue is erected. This song tells the story of Maṉikkuṟavan’s exploits, how he died, and how people grieved for him. "Maṉikkuṟavan was SC!" someone sitting next to me
volunteers. During this interview with Caṇṭanam, men, women, and children from the neighborhood would casually enter Caṇṭanam’s two room hut and take part in the conversation. After some time, some would leave and others would come. "Ah yes, the song by Paccaiyappan," says Caṇṭanam, "I have the text."

"He wrote it?" I asked.
"Of course."
"And you have it?"
"Isn’t that what I said?"
"I don’t understand. How is it that you have his writings?"
"He would leave some of his writings with me. Sometimes I would make amendments."
"Was Paccaiyappan SC?"
"No, he was upper-caste"
"May I see that song he wrote?"
"Now?"
"Yes, now." Caṇṭanam withdraws to the other room and opens a wooden trunk. He pulls out heaps of paper. After a few moments of looking through the piles, he casually hands me the original manuscript of the murder ballad of Maṇikkuravān. Pointing to the oodles of paper now scattered throughout the room I ask, "what are those?"

"These are other songs."
"Who wrote them?"
"Many people. Mostly from me."
"You write your songs?"
"Of course."
"I didn’t know you wrote songs."
"You didn’t ask." Caṇṭanam shows me a song.
"This song about smoking marijuana, is this your song?"
"Yes."
"No!" Someone else in the room volunteers, "you got that from Cinnāṇṭi."
"Yes and no," Caṇṭanam rejoins, "some of the lines come from Cinnāṇṭi, but the overall arrangement and meter is mine."
"What did your father do?" I asked.
"He," replied Caṇṭanam "was a song writer."
"Does each troupe write their own songs?"
"There is a leader in the troupe. He writes the songs."
"But people say folk singers are unlearned."
"This is true."
"Yet you write."
"Little brother, learning is one thing, writing is another."
"Big brother, but people say you can’t write."
"Who says this?"
"Everyone."
"Who’s everyone?"
"The mechanics say so, the professors say so, the government officials—"
"Those people don’t understand our work. Listen, everyone in the troupe must have completed at least Fifth Standard. We don’t finish Secondary School or go to college, but we must know how to read and write. Sometimes, there are one or two people in the troupe who do not read. Okay, but it is difficult. You have to teach them the songs line by line and it takes too much time. If everyone reads, they can take a copy of the song and memorize it quickly."
"But—"
"No writing, no kaccēri..."

The term kaccēri is used to describe a wide range of performances that fall under the category of entertainment. Many religious rituals—such as the karakatam—are now often referred to as kaccēri. Even political rallies are referred to as kaccēri. The kaccēri that Caṭtānam speaks of takes place in the villages. It consists of songs, dances, and small skits lasting upwards to ten hours. Perhaps the defining characteristic about the kaccēri in which Caṭtānam used to perform is that it is considered a medium for authentic speech.

In the kaccēri, however, authentic speech is a way of writing. It organizes verse, troupes, and traditions of writing. It is that sentiment in writing that creates locality as a different space. When Caṭtānam writes, he is producing a difference between the speech in performance and the speech outside of performance; between his troupe and other troupes; between this particular piece (the song about marijuana) and that piece (the writings of Cinnāṇṭi). Writing makes difference local.

S. Perumal Konar and T.V.S. Paccaiyanpan are two unschooled writers from Madurai who maintained a successful career writing through the kaccēri. The latter moved to Chennai and wrote songs for Tamil movies. S. Perumal Konar was a supporter of the Congress Party. His writings would often include support for the Congress Party. He was also illiterate. He would recite his songs to his wife and his wife would transcribe them. Each time one of his songs were performed, he would get a fee. T.V.S. Paccaiyanpan was a supporter of the DMK party. Paccaiyanpan, however, charged a one time fee of Rs. 1000 to sing his songs. Word has it that S. Perumal Konar had a mind for melody but was lacking in terms of prosody. Artists would
usually rework his wording according to the melody he envisioned. T.V.S. Paccaiyappan was said to be the opposite. Not known for his ear for melody, he is remembered as one of the outstanding lyricists of Madurai.

Paccaiyappan's account of Maṇikkuravan is generally considered to be one of the best murder ballads ever written. The following text of Paccaiyappan’s Maṇikkuravan murder ballad is an example of how space is converted into locality through the manipulation of difference:

1. Elder brothers, younger brothers, persons of distinction
   I come to tell the news of Maṇikkuravan’s death
   I think like the people
   You should forgive me and indulge any mistakes (aiya)

2. Concerning the great roughneck of the Kurava jāti,
   There are two things:
   first, performing all that pomp and grandeur as he did,
   second, in the year 1953, he perished in the month of Appiya\(^\text{\text{ii}}\)

3. The date of the 29th is the news of Maṇikkuravan’s transcendence.
   Within sixty nāḷikai\(^\text{\text{ii}}\), everyone knew aiyya
   It was Saturday, and for Maṇikkuravan it was an unfortunate day to be hurt by a weapon (aiya)

4. With the cash, he was the preeminent one
   In a fight, he was the excessive one
   And though he was brought under the influence of a tumultuous crowd,
   It was KD\(^\text{\text{iii}}\) Maṇikkuravan dance
   Listen to his fate, and listen to his plight before the end of the case (aiya)

10. month of October
11. the word "aiyā" is used here as an instruction. "aiyā" tells the performer/reader to repeat the last line
12. A nāḷikai is a measure time used mostly in astrology. One nāḷikai is equivalent to 24 minutes. 60 nāḷikai is 24 hours.
13. "KD" means “known deliquent”
5 Boarding the city bus, Manikkuravan stabbed the T.V.S. driver and ran off. "Seven years" the judge sentenced (aiya)

6 Thinking it would be difficult in the lower courts Manikkuravan’s mother appealed in the high court. She paid 500 rupees and saved her son (aiya)

7 The next morning at ten o'clock, please listen to the details: riding on his bicycle like an aeroplane, he came and hoisted the flag of the Hindu Mahāsabhā. (aiya)

8 Rowdies roaming everywhere In a rage, the Tipavali festival continued. before long, the zeal ebbed off of this man who dwelt in the Titinakaram – a locality in Madurai (aiya)

9 Saturday night, drinking cārayam. It is a time of intoxication. Manikkuravan was vexed with guile. He dragged another woman, and the mother who gave birth to him was furious. (aiya)

14. Hindu Mahāsabhā (All-Indian Hindu Assembly) is a Hindu nationalist political party in India. It was founded in 1915 as an alternative to Indian National Congress and sought to oppose the Muslim separatism of the Muslim League.
15. Festive celebration on the night of the 14th day of the dark fortnight at moon-rise in the month of Aippaci (between October and November). Aippaci is the same month that Manikkuravan is killed.
16. Locally brewed liquor.
10 putting his hands around her neck, and without doing anything peaceful to the woman he trapped, carried her across Railway Road. Forgetting what Gandhi said, he consumed his last wasteful feast. (aiya)

11 He was snared on Railway Road next to the 'palaiyur' car shed.
"he was cut down from the teppam, in a rice paddy," thus said Valluvar, his dynasty is over. (aiya)

12 Upon seeing the mangled body, someone called the police.
"It's a sure bet" said the Subinspector who came running.
He summoned Maṇikkuravan’s mother and made a few inquiries. (aiya)

13 They say the inspector wrote asking about the mother of the one who died.
The Kurava lady wept all the way to the hospital; the doctors said that they will have to cut the body for postmortem. (aiya)

14 Punctually at six the doctor came and conducted an autopsy, He told the mother all the details frankly.
"The funeral palanquin is ready for Maṇikkuravan;

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17. a decorated float which carries the deity and is floated during temple festival in the temple tank
18. the author of the Tirukkūṟal
Look at the people who have come.” (aiya)

15 Maniikkuravan’s native village was Marutacalam
But his presence was felt up to Kambam.
The hubbub was like the gathering in a marketplace
The night rooster crowed in arbitration, and the chariot went to Tattanari. (aiya)

16 All of the family gathered crossing the Vaikai river
In catharsis, they were delirious losing their minds.
There the folk were wailing, digging the pit and constructing a grave like a chair

17 The tumult that happened in Madurai in our India is finished
All understanding and all knowing South India’s Muttaiya
Kavi tells you that now we have a National Government--so don’t fool around!

This particular ballad is written according to the maraatu. A maraatu is the meetu used in oppari. Organizing references to caste (Kuravan jati), astrology (nālikai), month (Appiya), Political party (Hindu Mahāsabā), generate a generic, Tamil society. But it is the distinction of these references, the significance, say, of the Hindu Mahāsabā in Madurai (implicitly contrasting it with Congress and the DMK), that make these generic references local.

In addition to being a source of income for unschooled writers, manufacturing locality had the effect of organizing artisans along political lines. For example, both S. Perumal Konar and T.V.S. Paccaiyappan wrote separate murder ballads about Maniikkuravan. Those troupes

19. referring to the funeral palanquin
20. an area in Madurai where the cemetery is located
21. this reference to 'chair' is describing a special kind of burial, also referred to as a 'camātikkuḷi', a grave for interring the remains of an ascetic in an erect sitting posture
performing S. Perumal Konar’s version tended to be supporters of Congress. Those performing T.V.S. Paccaiyappan's version tended to be supporters of the DMK. This sense of difference underscored the identity of political consciousness with spoken Tamil.

The story of Maṇikkuravaṇan is a way of making Madurai local. The Maṇikkuravaṇan murder ballad links distinct experiences into an interilluminating aggregate, or a feeling. In popular culture, this feel for experience is the essence of political power. The political alliance of unschooled writing needs to be understood in this manner. The writing and performance of the Maṇikkuravaṇan murder ballad is an example of how political entities such as Congress and DMK were actively making themselves local in order to be relevant. Certainly there are unschooled writings that are explicitly written for political parties. But the significance of the Maṇikkuravaṇan murder ballads, to my mind, is in the associations. Meṭṭu, prosody, and content are associated with a political party. Indeed, part of knowing unschooled writers is knowing their political affiliation.

As we begin to focus on writing proper in Tamil, then the practice of spoken Tamil becomes an essential criteria for making sense of texts in Tamil. The fundamental difference between, say, Caṅkam writing and Bhakti writing, then, is not so much that the former is humanistic compared to the religious aspirations of the latter. Using spoken Tamil as an analytic clarifies the fundamental difference between Caṅkam and Bhakti as the difference between differing practices of locality. The tensions between nādus, periyānadus, brahmadeyas, and mercantile guilds that characterize the medieval period produced localities that were epistemologically distinct from those being practiced during Caṅkam times.

Given the centrality of unschooled writing to the practice of spoken Tamil, I distinguish Tamil writing, following Zvelebil (1975), into two categories: Caṅkam and Devotion. Caṅkam writing accounts for the establishment of localities in Tamil. I define devotional writing in Tamil as a renewed call for localities. Devotional writing begins with Bhakti and continues through the present day. The writings that occurred under the heyday of the self respect/Tamil devotion movements, for example, are in essence a renewed call for locality. Renewed calls for locality are not present in Caṅkam writing. This is due in large part, I believe, to the nature of socioeconomic. The wealth from long distant and maritime trade was second in importance to social mores and gift giving in the determination of social integration. It is from around the sixth century onwards that we begin seeing the accumulation of wealth determining the nature of social integration, a phenomenon that we see existing through the present time.

In a way, devotional writing in Tamil, by converting folk traditions into vedic format, reflect growing contests over localities. The deity of the hills locality, Murukan, is transformed into Subrahmanyas (son of Siva). The pastoral deity, Māyōn, is transformed into Vishnu. The attempt here is to mobilize pastoral and hilly spaces into a larger aggregate. The periyānadus formed in retaliation to these efforts are essentially a competing aggregate.

In another way, the representation of wandering that is at the heart of unschooled writing was a source of reflection during medieval South India. For example, Nampi Antar Nampi, the hagiographer during the period of Rajaraja, rediscovered some forgotten hymns that were preserved in the family of a low-caste artisans. It was the female member of this household who
helped the hagiographer put the hymns to music (Champakalakshi 1994:210). Mānikkavācakar, the author of the Tiruvācakam, noted that upon seeing women playing the game called ‘ammānai’ and singing songs that accompanied it, wrote hymns incorporating this meṭṭu (Pope 1900:117). The ‘Ānantakkallippu’ meṭṭu attributed to the 18th century Tāyumānavar is a popular folk meṭṭu with which one can see pandarams singing on the street while selling flowers and medicinal items. Representing the movement between places has the effect of codifying practices and thereby creating a sense of intimacy that homologizes an aggregate of places, or a nādu, with a feel for the language, or spoken Tamil.

**AURALITY: THE FEEL FOR LOCALITY**

The homology between locality and spoken continues a medium through which history, especially the history of writing, in Tamil is created. Formally, the first Tamil novel is Story of Piratāp Mutaliyār [Piratāp Mutaliyār Carittiram] written by Māyūram Vētanāyakam Piḷḷai in 1879. However, P. K. Cuntarājan, the well-known writer and literary and film critic, argues that T. V. Ĉēsaiyāṅkār’s The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village [Ātiyūr Avatāni Caritiram] published in 1875 is the first Tamil novel. Cuntarājan’s argument anticipates the fundamental significance that aurality has in the life of Tamil.

Ĉēsaiyāṅkār’s text is a moment in spoken Tamil. According to Cuntarājan (1994), the aurality that The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village evokes situates the text as an act of locality within a bazaar of such practices:

During the [mid 19th century] when the printing press was pervasive through society, literate people could publish traditional Tamil hero stories as songs for the betterment of illiterate people. These pamphlets would be sold in the marketplace and during festivals. Those
who knew how to write would put a meṭṭu to these songs, and those who didn’t know how to read would gather, listen and enjoy. Tēcinkurācan story, the Alli Aracāni Mālai, the Kaṭṭapomman story-song--indeed, heroic stories helped enlighten ordinary folk while passing the time. The professor named Cēşaiyāṅkār, from the Puracaivākkam area of Chennai, wrote a novel entitled “The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village” [Ātiyūr Avatāni Caritiram] in which the social practices, the good and evil of Hindus at the end of the nineteenth century are elaborately described through the ammānai meṭṭu (Cuntarārājan 1994).]

The practice of locality is that epistemological ground upon which Cēşaiyāṅkār makes sense. The printing press codified patterns of movement, movement between literate and illiterate, amongst the circulation of the marketplace and festivals. Thus, before Cēşaiyāṅkār wrote his novel, printing presses were commonplace. Printing folk songs were commonplace. Indeed, the printing press was a tool that helped reinforce the difference between space and locality.

Cēşaiyāṅkār’s invocation of the ammānai meṭṭu, the rationale of which is similar to that of Māṇikkavācakar’s 9th century Tiruvācakam, is a method making The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village local. As the language of narration, it is a generalization of specific feminine practices in specific places. This generalization produces the sentiment that disciplines the story.

As a sentiment, femininity is also used to convey a kind of “word of mouth” sensation. Just as the famous folk songs were printed to reinforce locality; ammānai refers to the practices and speech of innocent girls as something the reader has heard before. The lived experiences of the reader, an individual who is part of a neighborhood, confirms the aurality of the text.

Stuart Blackburn (2003) has argued that the printing press in the nineteenth century helped to bridge the gap between orality and literacy through the printing of folklore. However, as I have tried to show, “orality” and “literacy” is an effect of the production of aurality. I would argue that just as the pulavar is an extension of the pāṇar, the printing press is an extension of unschooled writing.

In this way, we may understand why The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village was, in Cēşaiyāṅkār’s own words, an act of speech:
As someone from this nādu searching for joy and learning through the Tamil language, there is one language that I speak to any foreigner. Nota bene: those stories and epics, in embracing the contemporary state of affairs in order to make sense of current or historical events, say nothing about the author’s experiences. For example, we may see moral and character differences in the descriptions of nations and people between the Ramayana that Valmiki wrote in the northern language and the Ramayana that Kamban had composed in the southern language. This fusion is strange for a few among the experts who speak of the flaws in the poems. With fiction, there are times when one gives joy, other times he does not; he provides joy for children, but he does not for adults, he makes the ignorant happy but not the educated. Those of our countrymen who have studied western books insult our ancient stories. They slander our elders who do not know these new academic departments. Human temperament is like this. As for me, while our scholars abandon the cultural harbors, I have set foot on a new path embracing the spirit of the times (Cēṣaiyaṅkār 1875).

In his own words, this novel is a renewed call for locality by reinforcing the significance of spoken Tamil. Contemporary scholars are aloof. They don’t write in light of common folk. They inevitably slander the elders because they don’t engage the folk in classical texts.

*The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village* is essentially about the trials concerning widow remarriage. Despite its relevance, Cuntararājan notes that very little has been written about the novel. There was one professor, a Dr. Pāṛtacārati, who wrote an article in 1976 concerning the novel. In this article, Dr. Pāṛtacārati noted the two lines where the author Cēṣaiyaṅkār writes, “Nelvēli Cēṣaiyaṅkār said to his adorable daughter/it is not a crime to speak of remarriage” as an example of the author’s subjectivity. Dr. Pāṛtacārati concluded that those lines are an example of how the author used his own name in the story in order to relate his experiences to those of the common man.

But Dr. Pāṛtacārati is looking at this novel as literature, an abstraction that anticipates its own set of references. As we approach this novel as an act of spoken Tamil, a representation of wandering, Cuntararājan’s insights make sense. Cuntararājan remarks that two years before this novel was published, 19th May 1873, a lawyer from Tirunelvēli named Cēṣaiyaṅkār wrote a
piece in the *Athenium and Daily News*, an English medium newspaper out of Madras. “I am a Vatakalai Vaishnava Brahmin from Tirunelvēli,” he wrote. “I work as a lawyer in the Tiruvitānkūr court. I was shocked to hear the news that my one and only daughter lost her husband after three years of marriage. I became tormented knowing that my lovely daughter, having become a widow, will now begin a life of grief and contempt.”

Tirunelvēli Ėsaiyaṅkār was aware that the British government made widow remarriage legal in Bengal. Using that law as a precedent, he decided to have his daughter remarried. He consulted with many of his associates regarding this matter. After some negotiations, the chief minister of Tiruvitānkūr gave his blessing for the marriage of Tirunelvēli Ėsaiyaṅkār’s daughter.

However, a number of people opposed this and tried to kill Tirunelvēli Ėsaiyaṅkār on the day of the wedding. A group of Brahmins and non Brahmins gathered and set fire to the marriage hall. After the incident, the offenders were fined 50 rupees and released. As word of Tirunelvēli Ėsaiyaṅkār’s cultural transgression spread, things continued to get worse for him. The man who was maintaining his village house quit. His butler quit. His barber and his dhobi refused to work for him. Moreover, a few of his associates who worked in government began ignoring him. Furthermore, a few of his associates succeeded in getting an exclusive government edict expelling Tirunelvēli Ėsaiyaṅkār from his caste. Because Tirunelvēli Ėsaiyaṅkār had remarried his widowed daughter, they argued, he had transgressed the very essence of his caste. Therefore, having left his caste of his own accord, he was forbidden from entering the temple.

Common sense exists somewhere between writing and speech. The author Ėsaiyaṅkār knew about the lawyer Tirunelvēli Ėsaiyaṅkār. Perhaps more importantly, the general public knew about Tirunelvēli Ėsaiyaṅkār. That the names of the leading characters in the *The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village* come from the trials of Tirunelvēli Ėsaiyaṅkār is an example of how the author was linking spaces and forging localities. Much like Pacciayappan’s Maṇikkūravān Murder ballad, Ėsaiyaṅkār is creating localities in order to laminate common sense onto the socio-political aspirations of the Dravidian Movement.

Cuntararājan’s argument for the *The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village* being the first novel in Tamil is more than a matter of the date of publication. It is a matter of feeling. Ėsaiyaṅkār’s novel is as much a product of the local as it is a creating of the local.

Journalism was another implication of using the printing press as a tool to practice locality. When Aditanar established the daily newspaper *Thinathanthi* in 1943, he did so with an understanding of locality writing in mind. One current editor of *Thinathanthi* half jokingly suggested that the *Thinathanthi* of old wrote the news around the movies. One reading, say, an

22. நான் கொண்டாடுவர் விழாவின் மேற்றை நாயகர் பையண்ட். கொண்டாட்டு விழாவின் மேற்றை நாயகன் பையண்ட். ரக்ஷணக விழாவின் மேற்றை நாயகன் பையண்ட். ரக்ஷணத்து மேற்றை நாயகன் பையண்ட். குர்மநாயக விழாவின் மேற்றை பையண்ட். குர்மநாயக விழாவின் மேற்றை பையண்ட். ரக்ஷணத்து மேற்றை நாயகன் பையண்ட். 23 personal interview
article on the latest events concerning politics, will come upon a clipping from a currently popular movie. The clipping will consist of some random scene. Under the clipping would be an excerpt from the actress in the picture. These words would be in quotations, a cue instructing the reader that these lines were authentic speech. Another cue presented to the reader was the spelling. These words were spelled according to how it might sound if the given actress were actually pronouncing the words. In the Thinathanthi of the 1940s, "the movie scene" was one of the main venues for expressing authentic speech.

Through time, and certainly by the 1970s, spoken Tamil became the medium for Thinathanthi. Articles are to be written with an idea of an illiterate listener in mind, the value of information is to be located in adverbial phrases, objectivity is to be intimately linked with narrative flow--as spoken became a way of knowing, the writing of the news became the writing of common sense. Moreover, spoken is lucrative. Today, Thinathanthi is the largest circulating newspaper of any language in India with a readership of over 10 million. The readers of Thinathanthi are the "uneducated" in Tamil Nadu. This is the daily of choice among rickshaw drivers, bus conductors, and motorcycle mechanics.

In contrast to Thinathanthi, Thinamalar is a Tamil daily that caters to the well educated. Thinamalar has become the daily of choice among the bourgeois or those aspiring to be bourgeois in Tamil Nadu who continue to read Tamil. On page four of Thinamalar is the popular column "Tea Shop Bench". There are many like Krishnan who believe that the spelling for the word shop, ‘kāṭā’, is purposefully different from the formal ‘kaṭai’.24 Krishnan proceeded to explain to me that if the word were to be used anywhere else in the newspaper, it would certainly be spelled in the manner of the latter. In addition, the title is presented in two lines. The first line reads "ṭī kāṭ" followed by "āpencu." In this first line, we see the word for tea [ṭī], a space, and part of the word for store [kāṭ]. The vowel that concludes the word for shop begins the second line juxtaposed by the word "bench."

The formatting of the title suggests that the rhythm of the title reads differently from what would be pronounced in the formal. According to Krishnan, the long “a” is one of the ways in this column that the slow paced world of the Tamil village will be composed. The different rhythm invokes the different modes of expression. In this generic 24 personal interview with Krishnan, the mechanic
village, people are practical and the world outside of the village is understood in terms of the village.

And of course, there are those who understand the title “Tea Shop Bench” to be spelled correctly. For them, it is a matter of fonts that carry the sense of unfined. Dilip Kumar reminds us that there are no misspelled words here. The formatting is a stylistic that publishers use to spice up Tamil. Though, according to Kumar, not all embellishments are legible. I think both Dilip and Krishnan would agree that "Tea Shop Bench" presents a theory of politics through interlocutors that represent the common elders of a common village.

Another mode of authentic speech is that "Tea Shop Bench" is presented as a dialogue. In "Tea Bench Shop," each conversant is equally as important as the next. Equality imagines a world of village life as a place of diversity. The diversity is represented in the diversity of interlocutors. There is always a conversation among a Christian, a Muslim, and a Hindu, each trying to make a point that would be obvious to the others involved if only they could just say it. The wit of "Tea Shop Bench" is anchored, not in its fidelity to real speech, but rather in the manner in which it continually creates frustration. The beginning of each editorial introduces the interlocutors in the middle of a conversation:

"இவர் கூறினார் என்னை விளக்கம் செய்தார்! முன்னேறுவது யாராவும்...?" காண்டு அவரைக்கு கூறினார் என்னை விளக்கம் செய்தார்! முன்னேறுவது யாராவும்...?" காண்டு கூறினார்.

"உள்ளே என்ன என்னைருக்கொண்டு வரவு செய்தார்..?" காண்டு அவரைக்கு கூறினார்.

"What sort of justice is there," asked Anthoniswamy suddenly glancing at nearby Kuppanna, "making Annaacci a sacrificial goat in the quarrel between us now..."

"What are you saying?" Kuppanna became belligerent, "Is there a fight between us?"

Annaacci leaped forward in a frenzy, "You can settle all that later..tell me why did you say that I should be sacrificed in the bargain?"

The reader has to play "catch up." This catching up is linked to the manner in which the dialogue unfolds. The interlocutors are conversing. Anthony suddenly asks for tea, Kuppannaa interrupts, Annaacci angrily leaps forward—the reader is peeking in on an ongoing, normal conversation, the kind of conversation that takes place at a tea shop in a village where folks are always interrupting, acting abruptly and being affective.

25 personal conversation with the Tamil writer Dilip Kumar

26Tinamalar June 14, 1999.
Earlier in this conversation, Anna is the accidental victim in a fight between Kuppanna and Anthony. Anthony was suggesting to Kuppanna that Anna has been unjustly sacrificed. In the passage above, the generic village is transformed into Tamil Nadu. The sacrificial lamb Anna is soon transposed onto the political party TMC [Congress Party of Tamil Nadu]. Moopanar, who at the time of this article was leader of the TMC, is suggesting that his party is being used as a sacrificial lamb.

The discussion concerning the sacrificial lamb has evolved into the political jousting of the ADMK’s leader Jayalalitha. In common parlance, Jayalalitha’s fame as a movie star is commonly associated with her political power. The conversation concludes by presenting a model of film. Kuppanaa raises the issue of the changing roles that members in Jayalalitha’s cabinet perform. How is it that someone who was once a policeman is now a Deputy Commissioner? As is the case with the movies, Kuppanaa asserts, an actor plays the role he is given. The differences among folk sayings, movies, politics, and the internal arguments of the interlocutors is a feel for the language of the column.

This sentiment is also the substance of community. The cartoon that comes along with the column presents eight middle aged men. Of these eight men, one is smoking a cigarette. Five are wearing the sacred ash on their foreheads signifying that they are Hindu. One is wearing the traditional Muslim cap and beard signifying that he is Muslim. The other two have no visible marks thereby signifying the possibility that they are Christian. Four men are presented in the background sitting around a table. The other four men are in the foreground. The man on the bench is talking with the man directly to his right. Behind the man on the bench is another man who appears to be interrupting. To the left of the cartoon is the Muslim. His body is positioned away from the conversation and yet he is leaning into the conversation. In the Village, there is no right way to criticize. The men pictured are eavesdropping, interrupting, and being silent.

There is the matter of the picture of the woman in the upper right-hand corner of the cartoon. The fact that the artist makes prominent the nipples on her breasts and bottled beverage on the lower right of the picture suggests that the woman in the picture is naked, or at least partially so. The naked woman also encourages a sense of community. These men are from different backgrounds; and yet they are brought together by common concerns. Between things writing and speech, a Christian and a Muslim and a Hindu, the village and the city, a naked young woman and clothed old men, proverbs and politicians, is writing. In-between is the place of spoken Tamil.

This paper is about aural competence and the localities it creates. Tendencies such as "orality and literacy," be they conceptual (Lord 1960; Ong 1982; Goody 1987) or practical (Finnegan 1988) or hopeful (Havelock 1963), are beside the point (Biakolo 1999). Spoken is not about how people really speak, it’s about how real people write. In Tamil Nadu, writing comprehends speech. In Tamil Nadu, this comprehension is a feeling that governs the practice of locality.
REFERENCES


