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Mourning a Queer Aunty: Kinship, Creative Resilience and World-Making

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ABSTRACT

Indian queer and trans activist Agniva passed away in 2016. This article draws on memoir, anecdote, research interviews and digital ethnography to explore the impact that Agniva had on a range of queer and trans people. The author details experiences he shared with Agniva and analyses virtual memorials and obituaries for her in order to account for the emotional labour that queer aunts do for their kin. This article thus explores the aunty-niece relationships that exist as a form of queer kinship, especially in the context of heteronormative homo/transphobic social systems and structures. It is also a narration of queer grief, exploring creative resistance and public mourning for a person who was variously a mother, a trans activist, a human rights warrior and a *mashi* (aunt) to the author.

KEYWORDS

Creative resistance;
liveability; *mashi*; queer
kinship; queer mourning

Introduction: An unfinished conversation¹

Rohit to Agniva: *Mashi* [Aunty], how do you manage to carry on despite so much hate that you're currently being subjected to? How do we continue building alliances when we are constantly being attacked?

Agniva to R: *Mona* [Dear/term of endearment], if we run away at the first sign of an attack, how will we ever build a strong community? Who will look after my girls? Some of the stories they have told me are truly shocking. They have been sexually abused, left for dead, families that don't care about their lives, catcalled on the streets. It was never going to be easy. I have seen it with my own life—my effeminacy was not tolerated. Teachers, relatives, people in general would scold me or say a few harsh words but they never stopped to ask why I was behaving the way I was. If I don't look after my girls, who will?

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1. Most of the empirical material discussed in this article comes from the research funded project, 'Launda Dancers in Rural India', funded through the Sir Peter Holmes Memorial Award by the Royal Society for Asian Affairs in 2012 (ethics clearance provided by the University of the Arts, London) and a Wellcome Trust Humanities and Social Science Small Award for the project, 'Mobile-ising for Sexual Health', in 2016 (ethics clearance provided by the University of Southampton). All quotes from Agniva are based on meetings that took place between 2012 and 2016, but I have also relied on my memories of Agniva from 2006 onwards.

R: Is that why you set up *Prothoma*?

Agniva: *Prothoma* was very needed. My girls face daily humiliation. They can't express themselves at home. Many of them want to wear a sari and were changing in moving taxis which is both humiliating and dangerous. I wanted to give them a safe space where they could meet, where they could stay if they needed shelter, where they could change and where they can form communities.

The above is an excerpt of a conversation Agniva and I had in 2014 when I visited her at *Prothoma*, the transgender shelter home she set up in Kolkata. This article draws on interviews with Agniva and her nieces and daughters, as well as memorials to her after her passing, to explore the aunty-niece relationships that exist as a form of queer kinship necessitated by heteronormative homo/transphobic social systems and structures. It is also a narration of queer grief, exploring creative resistance and public mourning for a person who was variously a mother, a trans activist, human rights warrior and a *mashi* to me. By staging Agniva as *mashi*, I attempt to account for the under-documented labours of both aunties and trans activists from the Global South, and to offer an attempt at writing Agniva into public memory.

If, as Marcus Syrus Ware argues, global trans narratives of struggle and resistance are routed through whiteness, particularly in official LGBTQ archives,² this article attempts to disrupt the erasure of racialised and indigenous histories of trans life by relying on memory, anecdote and digital sources. In doing so, I create a phenomenological space to consider queer aunty figures who are often forgotten or even erased. As repositories of knowledge that provide a sense of authority and significance, archives have the powerful potential to legitimise and consolidate grand narratives of queer and trans life. This article attempts to displace this dominance altogether and imagine a different form of queer life-world where figures such as *mashi* can be examined on their own terms and not simply as a means of speaking back to the dominant queer archive.

The relationship between modernity, queer desires and the Indian state is marked by the removal of the colonial anti-sodomy provision (Section 377), positing the queer subject as a project of Indian modernity, and their capability to forge love and companionship as affective markers of modernity.³ In contrast to this, queer kinships forged through mother-daughter and aunty-niece relationships offer us a way of imagining alternatives to the existing hegemonic structures that privilege institutional forms of governance. The focus on legal rights for queer people often tends to privilege cis gay men, obscuring the struggles of trans people. Queer resistance is, after all, not just against oppression faced by those defined as queer but all forms of disenfranchisement.⁴ Structures of gay assimilation are not necessarily anti-capitalist and can often be reductive and uncritical about whether conferring rights in themselves would

2. Marcus Syrus Ware, 'All Power to All People? Black LGTTI2QQ Activism, Remembrance, and Archiving in Toronto', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (2017): 170–80, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3814961>.

3. Rohit K. Dasgupta and Debanuj Dasgupta, 'Intimate Subjects and Virtual Spaces: Rethinking Sexuality as a Category for Intimate Ethnographies', *Sexualities* 2, nos. 5–6 (2018): 932–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607166772>.

4. Ryan Conrad, *Against Equality: Queer Revolution, Not Mere Inclusion* (Oakland, CA: A.K. Press, 2014); also see Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit K. Dasgupta, *Queer Studies: Texts, Contexts, Praxis* (Hyderabad and New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2019).

remove all social stigma, especially when it comes to those disenfranchised due to religion, caste and class.

The disciplining of trans and hijra bodies in India can be traced all the way back to the colonial project where British officials saw trans bodies as representing a ‘moral, sexual and physical contagion’.⁵ Halberstam has argued that whilst heteronormativity equates success with (queer) family, capital and hope, a queer mode of thinking rejects these neoliberal values in favour of non-conformity and critique. According to Halberstam, queer modes of thinking are constructed through emotional labour and not success.⁶

I should note that I am aware that even though I position aunty-niece relationships in queer and trans Indian communities as a way of imagining radical alternatives to institutionalised forms of relations, I am also acutely aware that these relations are not immune to exploitation and can also be sources of anxiety and abuse.⁷ ‘Aunty power’, as the Feminist Critical Hindu Studies Collective argues, can be both an oppressive and creative force,⁸ and I am interested in understanding *mashi* in her complexity as she navigated the NGO (non-governmental organisation) industrial complex, international travel and funding, and interpersonal relationships. In an interview with anthropologist Martin Manalansan, trans activist and drag queen Tita Aida describes the lack of mentorship available to her as she came out as trans and as she aged as a trans woman of colour.⁹ It is in this context that she leans into the role of ‘tita’, not simply as a drag queen character, but as a caregiver and educator to young queer and trans people in the San Francisco Bay Area. Situating Agniva as an aunty, I demonstrate how aunty labour appears not only in informal care given to younger queer people, but also in the more structured contexts of NGOs and activist organising. I connect development studies to queer world-making by bringing queer theory to bear on the work of Niharika Banerjea and Kathe Browne, who consider what ‘liveable lives’ look like in times of global precarity.

I acknowledge that Agniva, as *mashi*, occupies many other roles, including mother—as Khubchandani notes, mother and aunty are not mutually exclusive, rather aunty becomes a way of seeing a mother figure through a more expansive lens.¹⁰ I take up the task of excavating Agniva’s emotional labour, through memory, interview and Facebook obituaries, because—like trans people of colour and indigenous trans people—aunty figures are often left at the periphery of grand narratives. Because aunts occupy minor positions, queer people’s grief for aunts too works in what Pavithra Prasad calls ‘a minor key’:

I share with my queer family, forms of grief that remain veiled; forms of grief that are minoritized, not just because they are the lived realities of queer minorities, but because they are made minor to queer people themselves. I think of queer grief as a response

5. Jessica Hinchy, ‘Obscenity, Moral Contagion and Masculinity: Hijras in Public Space in Colonial North India’, *Asian Studies Review* 38, no. 2 (2014): 274–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2014.901298>.

6. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

7. Rohit K. Dasgupta and Pawan Dhall, *Social Media, Sexuality and Sexual Health Advocacy in Kolkata, India: A Working Report* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2017).

8. Feminist Critical Hindu Studies Collective, ‘Auntlectuals: A Nonce Taxonomy of Aunty-Power’, *Text and Performance Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2022): 346–57.

9. Martin Manalansan and Nikki Calma, ‘Aunty in an Epidemic: A Conversation with Tita Aida’, *Critical Aunty Studies* (2020), accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.criticalauntystudies.com/08-drag>.

10. Kareem Khubchandani, ‘Between Aunts: Sexual Futures and Queer South Asian Aunty Porn’, *Porn Studies* 9, no. 3 (2022): 346–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2021.1969993>.

not just to death, but also to the violence of relational endings. For when we lose family as a queer person, for better or worse, we lose entire worlds that made us who we are.¹¹

Agniva's departure was a rupture in the queer world many of us have built. This article stages her creative resilience and 'kin labour'¹² in order to reconstitute, or at least remind us of, the worlds she made possible as an aunty figure.

The Bengali term *mashi*, which translates to aunt, connotes much more than an age difference: it conjures seniority, respect, endearment and the older woman figure. Whilst hailing heteronormative familial structures, it also circulates beyond that orbit, especially within queer and trans communities. Agniva *mashi* was a repository of emotional labour: as several respondents and obituaries written about her attest, she resisted hurt and criticism in order to create safe spaces for queer and trans people, often at great personal cost. This article offers these memories and patchwork ethnographies to think about liveability¹³ and queer kinship through the life of a queer aunt figure. The Indian nation renders caring for the immediate family as a primary responsibility for all citizen subjects in order to reify the heterosexual patriarchal family as its cornerstone.¹⁴ As such, queer chosen families forged as an alternative radical formulation to the biological family offer a new way to imagine belonging and care. These 'chosen families', whether in the *Prothoma* shelter or the hijra *gharana*, constitute strong networks of support and care holding the potential of utopia,¹⁵ creating new queer traditions that challenging hegemonic norms. However, as Agniva showed, sustaining chosen families also requires a kind of queer emotional labour.

Agniva Lahiri passed away on the morning of September 20, 2016, sending shock waves through Kolkata's queer and trans community. There was palpable grief on social media as activists around the world paid their respects to a brilliant trans activist who had until her very last day been a change-maker unafraid to challenge authority. Challenging authority is never easy. It often pushed Agniva to breaking point as she had to navigate all kinds of community and donor politics, which often led, as one obituary put it, to 'hungry days'. Though Agniva lived with many forms of financial and social precarity that included stress, addiction and physical violence, I am purposefully eschewing the (medicalised) circumstances of her death in line with queer critiques of mourning and death rituals.¹⁶

11. Pavithra Prasad, 'In a Minor Key: Queer Kinship in Times of Grief', *QED: A Journal of GLBTQ Worldmaking* 7, no. 1 (2020): 113–19; 114, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/754461>.

12. See Marlon Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013).

13. Niharika Banerjee and Kath Browne, 'Liveable Lives: A Transnational Queer-Feminist Reflection on Sexuality, Development and Governance', in *Routledge Handbook of Queer Development Studies*, ed. C.L. Mason (New York: Routledge, 2018): 169–80.

14. Nivedita Menon, 'Outing Heteronormativity: Nation, Citizen, Feminist Disruptions', in *Sexualities*, ed. Nivedita Menon (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2007).

15. Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); also see Paul Boyce and Rohit K. Dasgupta, 'Utopia or Elsewhere: Queer Modernities in Small Town West Bengal', in *Urban Utopias: Excess and Expulsion in Neoliberal South Asia*, ed. Tereza Kuldova and Mathew Varghese (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 209–26.

16. Marietta Radomska, Tara Mehrabi and Nina Lykke, 'Queer Death Studies: Death, Dying and Mourning from a Queerfeminist Perspective', *Australian Feminist Studies* 35, no. 104 (2020): 81–100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2020.1811952>.

In this act of remembering and grieving for my *mashi*, I engage with Judith Butler's question, 'What makes for a grievable life?'¹⁷ Butler explains that as humans and sexual minorities, our lives are marked by a sense of vulnerability and precarity, and that for us, mourning and grieving are not just about accepting someone's loss but, more importantly, accepting that something has fundamentally changed and undergone a transformation. Agniva's death left an indelible mark on Kolkata's queer community. As an academic and community activist who was close to Agniva, I am aware that maintaining objectivity and writing about *mashi* has at times been difficult. Can I be accused of hagiography? How do I address some of the contradictions that also filled my *mashi's* life? How does one write about their dead aunt?

I turn to Derrida's *The Work of Mourning*, where he makes clear that the death of a loved one is singular, unique and incomparable, making it almost impossible to synthesise or dialectise. For Derrida, mourning is both an act of loyalty and disloyalty which begins not at the point of death but rather from the very beginning with the first trace.¹⁸ As I sat down to write this article, I embraced the contradictory impulses of mourning that Derrida insists upon, allowing Agniva to become presence and absence as I surrounded myself with digital archives of our photographs, emails, instant messages and recorded conversations. Our affective connections permeate this article, and our collaborative work remains unfinished.

Queer world-making: Mashi and her nieces

Agniva was a queer aunt for many of us. Her accomplishments are prolific. She worked with several gender and sexuality rights-based organisations in Kolkata till she set up her own NGO, PLUS (People Like Us), to help trans and *kothi* individuals who were victims of abuse and violence. It was never an easy path, especially given the often-fractious nature of LGBTQ organising in Kolkata and the funding politics that forced organisations and individuals to compete with each other. Pawan Dhall notes that the HIV epidemic provided a breakthrough in terms of breaking the silence around a public discourse on sex and sexuality in India, leading to large-scale resource mobilisation largely driven by international donor support.¹⁹ This also led to all forms of tension between different organisations who were developing intervention approaches and trying to target similar—and often the same—funds. I should note that there are several trans/hijra/*kothi* community groups who work with mostly poor or lower-middle-class individuals, and PLUS was one amongst them. Dutta and Roy discuss their own experiences as community members who organised within several of these groups, noting that their experiences indicated the existence and emergence of a translocal and transregional network 'that enabled us to find shelter within a range of overlapping languages and communities'.²⁰

I found such a shelter with Agniva when I first came out in 2006. I was just getting involved in community organising and LGBTQ activism in Kolkata. I still

17. Judith Butler, *Precarious Lives: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

18. Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

19. Pawan Dhall, interviewed by author in Kolkata, January 25, 2016.

20. Ani Dutta and Raina Roy, 'Decolonising Transgender in India: Some Reflections', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (2014): 320–37; 321, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2685615>.

remember the very confident Agniva at a peer outreach programme who came up to me and asked, ‘*Eije tumi ke* (Hey, who are you)?’ We subsequently met at events, rallies and other peer outreach activities. It was only in 2009 when we both travelled to the IGLYO International Summit (International Gay and Lesbian Youth and Student Organisation) in Amsterdam and later to Copenhagen for the World Outgames that we became very close. It was my first trip out of India. I was nervous. I had no idea how to navigate international travel, how to behave with border security or even what to tell immigration officers. Agniva touched my back in comfort and told me to breathe deeply before talking to the officer, explaining I should possibly take off visible markers of ‘otherness’—‘take off your scarf [*keffiyeh*]’, ‘rub off the kohl from your eyes’—if only to gain entry into this foreign country. From telling me how to cruise safely to standing beside me as I nervously tried to convince the immigration officer at Schiphol that I was only a temporary visitor, Agniva was there throughout. As a brown man with an accent moving across borders, Agniva gave me the tools to navigate structural racism, Islamophobia and international immigration in specific everyday ways. It was during this trip that Agniva became *mashi*—‘*Aami tomar mashi* (I am your aunt)’—and just like that I became her niece.

August 2015, Paul and I were in Kolkata. We had just finished a long day of writing and I was planning to go for a walk to Dhakuria Lake. He mentioned he was meeting you in CCD. I had thought of joining you both but ultimately I did not. I knew Paul was back after many years and you both would have lots to catch up on. I messaged you Mashi saying we would meet next time and asked if you would come to London any time soon. As usual you were acerbic in your response—loving and admonishing me at the same time. I still have that text:

Biye kore ghor kor bilete. Maa mashi ra gele jatno niyo. Ekhuni London jawar plan nei. Gele janabo (Getting married and making a life in a foreign land ... when mothers and aunts come to visit make sure you take care of us ... no plans to visit London right now but will let you know when I do) (Figure 1).

In one of many obituaries written about Agniva, lawyer and activist Aditya Bandyopadhyay recalls an expression that she used often: ‘*Nijey kay kete kete bili kore diyechi* (I have cut out pieces of me and distributed it)’.²¹ This captures the Agniva I knew. Relentless in the pursuit of social justice, Agniva quite literally sacrificed her own well-being for the young trans women she cared for.

Agniva’s labour can be described as queer world-making. Queer world-making is a useful conceptual device to understand how queer people navigate and survive everyday reality co-creating new worlds of communities and family lineages. These quotidian creative tactics can often be ‘messy’, as Manalansan reminds us.²² I’m interested in ‘world-making’ as a framework because it challenges and pushes against the urban-centric and ‘global’ framing of what it means to be queer, a framing that privileges fixed spaces, centres and practices. I don’t want to suggest that aspirations of gay globality do not exist within the makeshift and emergent worlds around Agniva,

21. Aditya Bandyopadhyay, ‘A Tribute to Trans Activist Agniva Lahiri’, *Gaylaxy Mag*, September 21, 2016, accessed August 28, 2021, <https://www.gaylaxymag.com/blogs/tribute-trans-activist-agniva-lahiri/>.

22. Martin Manalansan, ‘Queer Worldings; The Messy Art of Being Global in Manila and New York’, *Antipode* 47, no. 3 (2021): 566–79, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12061>.

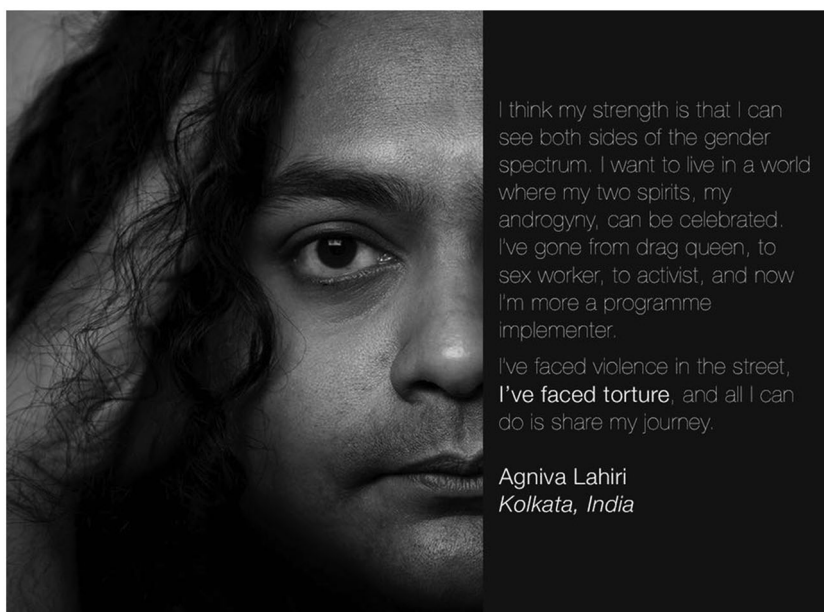


Figure 1. An infographic on Agniva that circulated on social media after her death.

but, rather, that these non-elite queer spaces provide a critical ‘counter reaction to the oppressive workings of global capital’.²³

Creating new forms of queer relationalities and solidarities takes time and a great amount of labour. The creation of PLUS, and later *Prothoma*, was not easy. Within the landscape of NGO funding where everyone is competing for dwindling funds, Agniva took a courageous step setting something up from the grass roots with just a dream and very little money. In 2013, as Agniva and I sat down in *Prothoma*, she recounted the messiness of Kolkata queer politics and the conditional solidarity of certain organisations and individuals who, according to her, operated within a hierarchy of causes often privileging a neoliberal lens more interested in legal issues of decriminalising homosexuality rather than dealing with the day-to-day support of trans people involved in exploitative and unregulated sex work, facing penury and social ostracism. Queer world-making can be used to describe embodied practices and relationships that contest heteronormativity, but it goes beyond that. World-making sustains different ways of imagining queer spaces through visible and invisible acts of resistance, creative collective possibilities and also survival itself within a compulsory neoliberal order that sees queer and trans lives as not worth existing.

Rishik and Anjani, two young *launda* dancers I interviewed in *Prothoma* in 2013, described their struggle for survival in a neoliberal world where bodies such as theirs are marked already for ‘slow death’, to borrow Lauren Berlant’s term.²⁴ Rishik and Anjani are *launda* dancers whose primary source of income was through dance and

23. Manalansan, ‘Queer Worldings’, 570.

24. Lauren Berlant, ‘Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)’, *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 754–80, <https://doi.org/10.1086/521568>.

performance in the rural belt of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where *launda naach* is seen as a cheaper substitute for dancing girls.²⁵ It is in fact an integral part of the entertainment barometer in this Hindi-speaking rural belt and an essential part of wedding ceremonies and public functions. The dancers usually come from very poor families and an exceptionally high number, including Rishik and Anjani, hail from West Bengal. Rishik and Anjani are well aware of the dangers of *launda naach* and described various dangerous situations: being forced to run away, having their earnings stolen, and being threatened with physical and sexual violence. But as Anjani remarked, '*Naachbo na toh khabo ki kore. Tumi khabar ene debe bujhi* (If I don't dance, how will I eat? Will you get me food?)' Anjani's remark is a profound reminder of how precarity and survival are interconnected for trans lives in West Bengal.

Speaking to Rishik and Anjani also suggested that the mother/aunt–daughter/niece kinship was far from temporal. In fact, it was one of the most important bonds forged even over trans sisterhood as Rishik mentioned: '*O toh amader maa* (She is our mother)'. Anjani said, '*Mashi amake shari porte shikchieche* (Aunty taught me to wear a sari)'. Anjani also told me how Agniva taught her how to deal with the hostility that young trans people faced within the legal and social system. Aunts are repositories of knowledge, teaching us how to cope, how to be safe from homo/transphobic hate, how to be safe when cruising. These forms of 'queer knowledge' are passed down to avoid further discrimination. A simple act of how to drape a sari is extremely profound given its firm association with respectable femininity; Anjani explained further that Agniva not only taught her that, she also provided that safe space to try on and experiment with gender.

Anthropologist Dilara Caliskan draws on her ten years of trans activism in Turkey to reveal how queer kinships formed through mother-daughter relationships also transmit intergenerational memory, what she calls queer post-memory, to navigate the difficult terrains of violence, neglect and support.²⁶ In a similar fashion, Agniva, who was experienced and had navigated these issues herself, provided the wisdom and knowledge to her young proteges.

2008: I am cruising the Swabhumi area close to Prothoma one evening. Agniva comes striding up to me. '*Ki re meye ki korchis ekhane* (Hey girl/niece, what are you doing here)?' she shouted admonishingly. As I tried to make excuses, Mashi heard none of it. '*Eto rate parikh khoja hochche. Shabdthane thak* (You're looking for a lover so late at night? Be careful)'. I hastily retraced my steps.

Agniva could be very judgemental just as family members are. Acutely observant, she understood the difficulties faced by queer and trans people in Kolkata. In the usual manner of an overbearing aunt, she pushed herself to find out what was happening in your life and offered advice. Having *mashi* in my life was one of the many reasons that made it bearable and safe, especially during difficult times.

25. Rohit K. Dasgupta, 'Launda Dancers: The Dancing Boys of India', *Asian Affairs* 44, no. 3 (2013): 442–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2013.826025>.

26. Dilara Caliskan, 'Queer Postmemory', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 26, no. 3 (2019): 261–73; 263, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505068198601>.

PLUS under Agniva's leadership was actively involved in the business of self-empowerment of the individual. Through counselling services, safe sex campaigns, condom distribution, training and mentorship programmes, and creating networks of peer supporters, Agniva sought to 'transform' those who came to PLUS and *Prothoma* for support. Agniva was, as Srila Roy so aptly puts it, an 'active [instrument] of queer feminist governmentality, incited to empower the self for governing-empowering-others'.²⁷ There is room to interpret Agniva's intervention in Rishik and Anjani's lives as merely part of 'doing good' and creating liberal queer subjects. But I choose to read her advice-giving and sheltering as 'aunty-ing'—stepping into the vacuum that the mother figure has left, sharing knowledge and showing unconditional solidarity with trans young people facing economic and social discrimination.

A liveable life?

Naming the limits of state and parastatal institutions to provide care and inclusion for gender and sexual minorities, Banerjea and Browne ask what makes life bearable or worth living. They argue that the space one inhabits and feels comfortable in is critically tied to this idea of liveability.²⁸ This need not be a geographically-bound space but can also be an abstract or fluid space that is conceived to be caring, nurturing and safe. This flexibility accommodates context and difference: what might feel normative to one might seem non-normative to another due to class, caste or religious reasons. *Prothoma* was such an example of a liveable space that, according to Rishik and Anjani, nurtured them and helped them stand up to societal stigma and norms. This was a space where, as Anjani describes, she learnt to wear a sari properly because her queer aunt taught her how to. This was the space Rishik could run to and seek shelter when he faced the possibility of violence or where they could celebrate the reading down of Section 377—even though, as Rishik and Anjani both recall, the legal change made no real material difference to their everyday lives.

Pushing this idea of liveability even further, it is important to ask which kinds of queer bodies are 'worthy of saving' and 'survival'. Drawing on Achille Mbembe, I want to interrogate the classic biopolitical and necropolitical questions of who gets to live, and who must die for new queer lives—those being moulded through global capital restructuring—to survive.²⁹ Rishik and Anjani and the queer/trans communities that Agniva had been tirelessly protecting as worthy of survival are those marked for failure and carceral violence. Haritaworn, Kuntsman and Posocco note that queer necropolitics 'refer to regimes of attribution of liveliness and deadliness of subjects, bodies, communities and populations and their instantiation through performatives of gender, sexuality and kinship, as well as through processes of confinement, removal and exhaustion'.³⁰ Queer necropolitics offers a lens to query the global queer

27. Srila Roy, *Changing the Subject: Feminist and Queer Politics in Neoliberal India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022): 28.

28. Banerjea and Browne, 'Liveable Lives', 169.

29. Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

30. Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman and Silvia Posocco, 'Introduction', in *Queer Necropolitics*, ed. Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman and Silvia Posocco (London: Routledge, 2014): 1–27; 4.

assimilation politics that leaves Rishik, Anjani and Agniva as abject bodies marked for failure and slow death.

Butler argues that liveability is about figuring ways to survive and persist and to become possible.³¹ Speaking to Agniva it was clear that survival and persistence were intimately connected with struggle. Agniva recalled a sombre image of going into battle without any weapons to ensure trans and queer survival. She found it difficult to give concrete examples of these fights but mentioned the ‘donor world’, ‘fellow activists’ and the heteronormative world which wanted people like her to fail and perish—to merely survive but not live. It was important for Agniva to make this distinction. Kath Browne et al. note that liveability is connected to the support structures that one has that allows one to live a life. According to them, liveable lives are fluid and contingent but also precarious through recognition. One of the important interventions made by the researchers is recognising the limits of juridico-legal measures which aren’t sufficient to understand what makes lives liveable. Their empirical work in India and the UK demonstrates that liveability is not determined by legislative contexts alone, but is about experiencing joy, pleasure, friendship and access to spaces where people can create networks of support and kinship. Queer liveable lives thus involve engaging with the everyday and ordinary towards a ‘life worth living’.³² Rishik and Anjani make a similar observation, noting the importance of queer kinships and access to supportive spaces. Agniva was a mother/aunt figure for Rishik and Anjani, creating conditions and liveable spaces that allowed them to ‘ease some of the struggle’ or, as Rishik put it, to combat the debility put on our lives by society—‘*amader ke khora kore dieche shomaj* (society has imposed debility on us)’. Jasbir Puar argues that debility ‘addresses injury and bodily exclusion that are endemic rather than epidemic or exceptional’.³³ Rishik’s hailing of their condition as debilitating is an implicit recognition of trans lives as constitutive of the disenfranchisement faced by the community in their precarious everyday lived existence.

Slow death is after all not based on temporal events, as Berlant has argued, but ‘identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself’.³⁴ The ordinariness of the lives led by Rishik and Anjani is gripped by the precarious need for survival determining the tangible encounters of everyday which increase and decrease their liveability. Balancing survival and societal pressures marks their slow death punctuated through the queer family kinships established which allows ‘life to go on’, in Anjani’s words. *Mashi* was part of the emotional structure of maintaining a queer family that made life worth living.

Digital afterlives

Stay well wherever you have gone to Agniva Lahiri. I know you cannot rest in peace. So just stay well, and give hell to all the idiots you meet up there.

31. Butler, *Prearious Lives*.

32. Kath Browne et al., ‘The Limits of Legislative Change: Moving beyond Inclusion/Exclusion to Create “A Life Worth Living”’, *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 39, no. 1 (2019): 30–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654419845910>; also see Niharika Banerjee and Kath Browne, *Liveable Lives: Living and Surviving LGBTQ Equalities in India and the UK* (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming); Niharika Banerjee et al., *Friendship as Social Justice Activism: Critical Solidarities in a Global Perspective* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

33. Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017): xvii.

34. Berlant, ‘Slow Death’, 759.

I have known you since you were a kid of 16. It feels a bit unreal to acknowledge that you are no more.

You were often exasperating. But I have always known that your heart was in the right place. And in my own way I have always loved you and respected the grit with which you did the work that you did.

Goodbye!!!

PS: Remember to wear that Queen Victoria Gown, the one you wore while cruising the railway yards in Melbourne, along with that ostrich plume hat. That should create an impression there (Aditya Bandyopadhyay, Facebook)³⁵

Today in my Gender & Globalization class I taught about the North-South debates in transnational feminist activism during the UN Decade of Women and Beijing gathering. I could not but help think about the passing of Agniva Lahiri, one of the first peer-educators to be volunteering for the Naz Kolkata Project. I discussed the politics of Global AIDS philanthropy as a way of showing how global/local tensions are productive sites for queer/feminist organizing. Later on the phone with Ronica Shmonica we recalled about our transnational activist/friendship networks. As Ronica put it, 'Debanuj, Agniva had hungry days'. This is the stark global inequality that feeds into insecurity and competition of the global NGO complex. How does one teach and live with these imbalances? #sad #loss #globalinequality. (Debanuj Dasgupta, Facebook)³⁶

The posts above are just a few of many that mourned Agniva's untimely death. They hail her life as one 'worth living' and one that was always marked for failure. As Aditya Bandyopadhyay points out, Agniva's activism started at the age of 16. From an early age Agniva was aware of the homophobia and transphobia which she had to navigate to survive. Her own non-metropolitan and non-elite background exacerbated the need for intersectional queer organising catering especially to those in the non-urban and peri-urban areas of Bengal. Agniva was not without her detractors. Another queer activist from Bengal I interviewed for this article recalled the ways in which Agniva often made her case for funding by pushing out other organisations and activists. Debanuj, in the post above, also notes that the stark global inequality and insecurity of funding often made it difficult and competitive for activists who were all vying for the same pot of money to serve their community. Agniva did what many others did. As she once told me, she was doing this 'for my girls'.

Agniva literally had hungry days. In an interview with Subhash Chandra, she recalled that even within trans organising, she was often sidelined and told, 'You are not a *pakka kothi*', meaning she was somehow not 'authentic' enough to represent the voice of trans and queer people in the NGO sector. She contested and redefined the many ways in which identity categories were employed, especially within the donor world of sexual health organising and advocacy programmes.³⁷ It is also important to state that Agniva was very critical of how she was often perceived by other

35. Aditya Bandyopadhyay, 'Stay Well Wherever You Have Gone', Facebook, September 20, 2016, Private Facebook post, accessed November 1, 2020.

36. Debanuj Dasgupta, 'Today in My Gender and Globalisation Class', Facebook, September 21, 2016, Private Facebook post, accessed November 1, 2020.

37. Subhash Chandra, 'An Interview with Agniva Lahiri', *Intersections*, October 2009, accessed November 1, 2022, http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue22/chandra_interview.htm.

(elite) queer activists for not always following the model of respectability politics and doing what she needed to secure funds and provide for her queer children and nieces. She was always clear that success need not be measured by Western neoliberal standards, and that she was not competing to be the best. She often said, ‘*Ami jemon achi bhalo* (I am okay as I am)’. Though other queer activists in West Bengal may push back on my interpretation, I was witness to the persistent labour she put into creating safe spaces for queer and trans young people, however messy or complicated.

Support groups and spaces were in many ways a lifeline for the communities that Agniva served. As Dutta notes, these non-metropolitan community spaces have been a lifeline in crisis situations, providing shelter to those forced to leave their homes at a time when communities are compelled to take up the responsibility of social welfare when the neoliberal regimes of the state have cut public expenditure.³⁸ Debanuj, in their obituary for Agniva, mentions the politics of the global AIDS philanthropy and the NGO complex-neoliberal developmental initiatives reconfiguring an acceptable global aspirational queer category, one which people like Agniva were desperately pushing back against.³⁹

I am scrolling furiously through our conversations, Mashi as I try to remember. I come across your Facebook profile. You still have our picture as your header image even after so many years, it was one of our favourite trips abroad. It was my first-time leaving, India. You held my hand at immigration and warned me to take off my *keffiyeh*—‘immigration officer *ra khub* Islamophobic/racist *hoi* (immigration officers can be racist and Islamophobic)’, you whispered in my ears but why does your profile say ‘Remembering’ Agniva Lahiri now? (Figure 2)

Jean Baudrillard, in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, argues that death is not an endpoint—life and death are in fact coextensive forms of presence.⁴⁰ Through festivals and rituals, the living make them part of the present inhabiting the same space. Baudrillard argues that capitalism, and by extension neoliberalism, has destroyed alternatives thus making death no longer a component of life but its opposite—unproductive in the creation of capital value.

Queer deaths are often forgotten, but remembrance and chosen family ties are elicited through acts of public mourning and establishing that queer lives are worthy and productive. Butler argues that our vulnerability to loss and the mourning that follows creates a condition through which a basis for community can be found.⁴¹ Mourning and public display of loss serves a two-fold purpose—on the one hand, it is the acknowledgement that something has changed forever, and on the other, it is an acceptance of the transformation that is about to follow. Scott Church describes Facebook memorialisation and mourning as ‘an aesthetic identity gravescape

38. Ani Dutta, ‘Beyond Prides and Cafes: Exploring Queer Spaces in Non Metropolitan Bengal’, *Ground Xero*, February 5, 2020, accessed November 1, 2022, <https://www.groundxero.in/2020/02/05/beyond-prides-and-cafes-exploring-queer-spaces-in-non-metropolitan-bengal/>.

39. Also see Svati Shah, *Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work and Migration in the City of Mumbai* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Gowri Vijaykumar, *At Risk: Indian Sexual Politics and the Global AIDS Crisis* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021); Paul Boyce, ‘Properties, Substance, Queer Effects: Ethnographic Perspective and HIV in India’, in *Queering Knowledge: Analytics, Devices and Investments after Marilyn Strathern*, ed. Paul Boyce, E.J. Gonzalez-Polledo and Silvia Posocco (London: Routledge, 2019): 92–111.

40. Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1993).

41. Butler, *Precarious Lives*, 19.

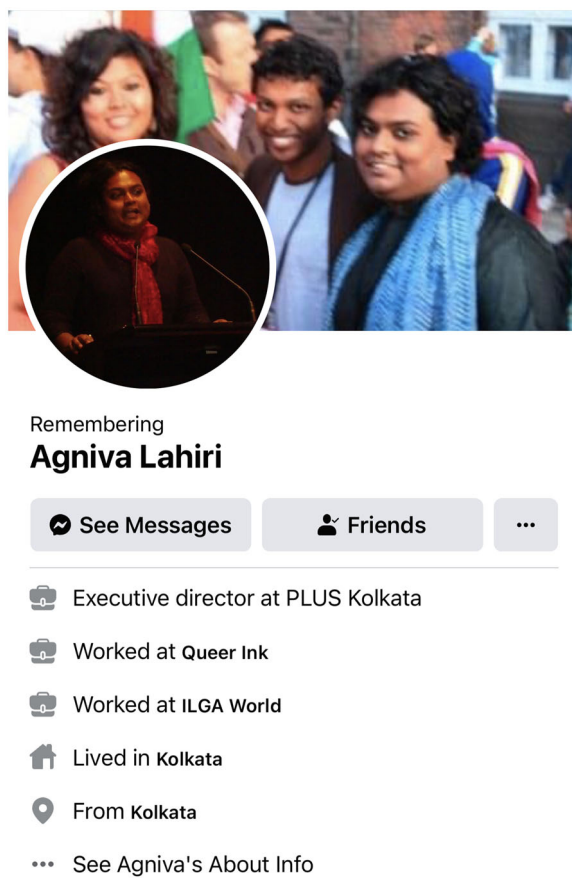


Figure 2. Agniva's public Facebook page.

whereupon future members of the community may come to observe traces of that presence'.⁴² Through the public acts of mourning for a trans mother and aunt, the community was not just creating archives for a life that had been taken too soon, but also affording the queer community the opportunity to pay their respects in a public way and forge new forms of kinship and friendship with other mourners. Spade reminds us that trans people are told that they cannot fit properly, be seen or understood, and thus cannot exist.⁴³ The socio-legal system routinely discriminates against trans people in health care, employment, housing and education.

Agniva was widely mourned by a range of people, from individuals whose lives she had personally changed to organisations who acknowledged the role she played in queer and trans youth organising in India.

42. Scott Church, 'Digital Gravesapes: Digital Memorializing on Facebook', *The Information Society: An International Journal* 29, no. 3 (2013): 184–89; 188, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2013.777309>.

43. Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

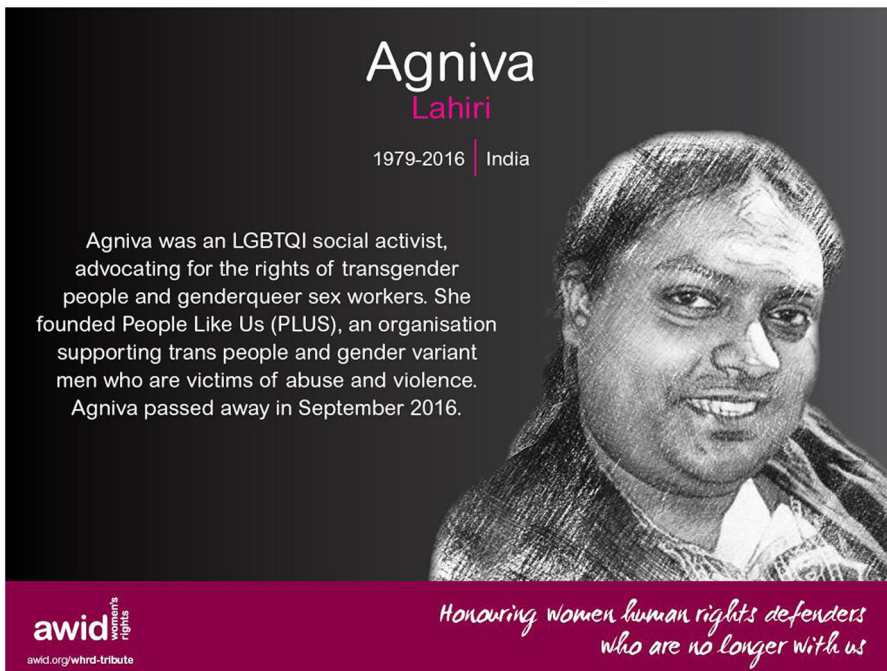


Figure 3. A second infographic on Agniva created by AWID (the Association for Women's Rights in Development), which circulated on social media after her death.

The digital walls of Facebook were filled with stories about how Agniva taught so many young queer and trans people to feel safe and offered them a home when many were homeless (Figure 3). Many mentioned finding the courage to wear a sari and walk on the streets of Kolkata because *mashi* provided that strength. Many queer and trans people talked of how integral Agniva was to their own queer journeys. Queer origin stories such as being taught how to wear a sari and walk confidently are important and matter, as does intergenerational memory transmission. Queer and trans people have historically been erased and these forms of queer myth- and kin-making offer critical strategies for examining queer pasts and knowledge exchange—a way of relating, fashioning haptic connections and queer world-making.

Reflecting on their origin stories, Khubchandani traces their own queer politics to the formative years spent with aunts whose strength and sacrifice provided their own growth as a queer person.⁴⁴ Similarly, Agniva was the queer aunty whose sacrifice (*nijeke bili kore diechi*—I have distributed myself) and life story paved the way for many queer and trans youth to form communities of safety and care. Anjani and I reconnected in 2016 again when she spotted my Facebook tribute to Agniva. We met near Swabhumi, a heritage plaza close to *Prothoma* off the Bypass Road. It was fitting to meet where our journeys began. We decided to take a walk around Subash Sarovar (lake). We had both spent countless hours there previously—Anjani as a peer outreach worker or just cruising. Anjani and I gripped hands tightly, consoling each

44. Kareem Khubchandani, 'Aunty Fever: A Queer Impression', in *Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings*, ed. Clare Croft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 199–204.

other and holding each other in care. We spoke of how important *mashi* had been in our lives. For Anjani she had been a lifeline who helped her out of penury and provided her with a chosen family that she had never had.

Creative care and resilience

Mashi we sat by the lake and listened to Srabani Sen. The words of Tagore filled our heads as we looked at the horizon and contemplated what next for our movement. We wanted to change the lives of our friends, we wanted to travel the world. You kept asking me about my domestic life and told me not to neglect that. There was a beautiful sunset that evening. Soon it was time for us to leave. If I knew that was the last time we would speak I would have held on to every word you said.

ওরে রে ওরে মাঝি, কোথায় মাঝি
 প্রাণপণে ভাই ডাক দে আজি,
 তোরা সবাই মিলে বৈঠা নে রে
 খুলে ফেল সব দড়াদড়ি,

Oh boatman, where is he, clamour for him
 Call me brother today, let us sit together
 And loosen all the ropes

Sexual health advocacy and safeguarding young trans service users have been a core component of the work PLUS has been doing. ‘It is important my girls understand safe sex’, Agniva told me. Like many, Agniva was critical of the ways in which sexual health education was being provided. Sexual health was also one of the many employment opportunities for PLUS’ service users, many of whom were employed as field workers going into cruising areas around the city to distribute condoms and sexual health pamphlets. Rather than focusing on the ‘big numbers’, as Agniva called it, she wanted to focus on ‘everyday experiences’ as a way to encourage safe sexual practices. Darts has argued that critical pedagogies and art should be harnessed to expose oppression and encourage social transformation:

By situating resistance within the educative realm of daily visual experiences, students and teachers can begin to meaningfully assess, interpret, and attend to the social, political, psychological, and cultural struggles that occur within the multiple sites of the everyday.⁴⁵

Agniva gave me the example of the mirror (Figure 4), an innovative object that was created specifically for trans women and sex workers who used PLUS’ services. It combines a mirror on one side with a booklet on staying safe on the other. Instead of lengthy notes, it uses infographics and cartoons to demonstrate how trans women can stay safe. Agniva said:

These girls all need mirrors. So I give them a mirror with an inbuilt safe sex booklet. (laughing) Now they can’t throw it away. Most of them can’t read so why provide written sheets which they won’t understand. The illustrations are self explanatory and a creative way to get the message out using an object of beauty they actually need all the time.

45. David Darts, ‘Visual Culture Jam: Art, Pedagogy, and Creative Resistance’, *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research* 45, no. 4 (2004): 313–27; 318, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393541.2004.11651778>.



Figure 4. The mirror/sexual health booklet created for sexual health awareness.

Gayatri Reddy describes the importance of care and beauty regimens amongst hijras and trans people in India as a way of accentuating their femininity as well as their hijra identity.⁴⁶ Agniva choosing to use the mirror as a pedagogical tool for sexual health awareness was thus not only a smart move, but was based on her long-term understanding and commitment towards her community.

Care is an essential part of queering and queer kinships. Queer care offers an alternative to the limitations imposed through the neoliberal discourse of productivity and individualism. Niharika Banerjea argues that the ethics of care can be problematic even from a feminist standpoint—reinforcing gender roles and legitimising socio-economic hierarchies. Banerjea calls for an ‘ordinary ethics of care’—one that involves ‘sustained engagement with forms of everyday actions, speech and practices that may exceed intelligible and/or formalised vocabularies.’⁴⁷ Care can also be quite ambivalent—affection, moral duty, a burden, work and joy. De la Bellacasa argues that ‘while ways of caring can be identified, researched, and understood concretely and empirically, care remains ambivalent in significance and ontology.’⁴⁸ I would

46. Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

47. Niharika Banerjea, ‘Revisiting Ethics of Care in Academic Lives’, *Economic & Political Weekly* 52, no. 50 (2017), accessed November 1, 2022, <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/revisiting-ethics-care-academic-lives>.

48. María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017): 1.

push this even further to argue that queer care is produced through multiple understandings of oppression, kinship and celebration, which consider how we look after each other and sustain those relationships in informal ways.⁴⁹ As *mashi* showed us, this could be through pushing developmental agendas, providing a safe space, teaching how to wear a sari, intergenerational memory-sharing or even just providing (unsolicited) opinions in her usual acerbic way! This means that Agniva's care could also be complicit in neoliberal agendas or gender-binary logics, but it does not discount the material and emotional work she did to extend queer life.

Banerjea's deployment of care work is important especially in the context of queer activism and development work. Whilst there has rightfully been a critique of the developmentalist agenda which prioritises quantitative-based work, Agniva and PLUS took the ethics of care very seriously, even translating them into aesthetics, such as in the mirror example cited above. Noske-Turner wryly points out that 'donors love numbers'.⁵⁰ For Agniva, it wasn't simply about making an intervention, spreading the message and ticking a funder's box. The trans women Agniva worked with were her daughters, sisters and nieces. They were part of a family, and care and intervention happened on a sustained and everyday basis.

Agniva pushed the expectations of her donors and used creative interventions which often led to all forms of tension, as Agniva told me in one of our conversations:

All they want from us is numbers. I really don't have time always to write these reports. What is actually important is the health and safety of these girls which cannot be measured by numbers.

People's lived experiences often only play a scant role when intervention programmes are being planned, with development organisations focusing on impact, outcomes and evaluation techniques which might not neatly cohere with the creative means that often need to be deployed in order to create the basic spaces of safety.⁵¹ The mirror example above is just one of the many ways in which Agniva pushed health intervention. I have attended events organised by PLUS in *Prothoma* where song and dance were used in creative ways to spread messages about safe sex, the dangers of cruising in certain areas, and ways to remain safe when soliciting sex work. Being a queer *mashi* came with a lot of emotional labour. It mustn't have been easy for Agniva to tread institutionalised boundaries and categorisations and, instead of accepting these normative modalities, creatively pushing them for the betterment of her queer family.

Mourning mashi

The act of mourning Agniva is not just personal, but a pain carried by our community. The queer family Agniva created around her through caregiving, friendship,

49. Also see Rohit K. Dasgupta, 'Viral Assemblages and Witnessing Extraordinary Times: Queer Patchworks of Intimacy, Precarity and Affect in an Indian City', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 43, no. 6 (2022): 880–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2022.2128086>.

50. Jessica Noske-Turner, *Rethinking Media Development through Evaluation: Beyond Freedom* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 33.

51. Rohit K. Dasgupta, *Digital Queer Cultures in India: Politics, Intimacies and Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2017).

mothering and aunty-ing was a form of queer labour to offer us hope and help us form chosen families within a hostile world. Prasad notes that queer grief is a response to not just death but also the ‘violence of relational endings’.⁵² Losing family as a queer person, Prasad further points out, is also losing ‘entire worlds that made us who we are’. Through invoking and citing our history in this article, I am not just memorialising my queer aunty’s story, but also thinking of how queer traces remain beyond the digital.

Aditya Bandyopadhyay, in his tribute to Agniva, remembers her as the diva cruising the railway tracks of Melbourne. I remember *mashi* as the aunt who first warned me about Islamophobia and how to ‘behave’ in front of immigration officers, as the overbearing aunt who wished me a blissful domestic life but also warned me against being exploited by my lovers. Her crude jokes as we travelled with a contingent of Indian queer activists on a bus from Amsterdam to Copenhagen will remain firmly etched in my mind. Without warning she had already adopted me as her niece—adding me to her queer family.

As we walked down proudly with the Indian flag in Copenhagen, we were like divas sashaying the catwalk to cheers from the crowd. As the only Indians at the Outgames that year Mashi was overwhelmed with the attention and whistles. She told me and Ritu to put on our best performance after all we were representing our country. We may or may not have winked back at the Irish volleyball team as we walked down the stage.

I don’t grieve for *mashi* any more. The last message we shared was in July 2016, a couple of months before her death. True to form, it was sharing a fundraiser for *Prothoma*. She desperately needed funds to keep the shelter home running. As a queer person growing up in India, the queer kinship I created with Agniva was one of many that helped me cope with systematic state and societal discrimination. Butler questions if there is something to be gained from grieving and tarrying with grief.⁵³ Considering the struggle for recognition, she explains that it is an exchange: each partner needs to recognise and realise that the other needs and deserves recognition. This was something I learnt from Agniva—recognition was not just about acceptance, but working to change the material conditions of liveability itself.

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52. Prasad, ‘In a Minor Key’, 114.

53. Butler, *Precarious Lives*, 30.