Michigan State University
MC 319 Oral History Project
Narrator: Dr. Divya Victor
Interviewer: Mary Carthew
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Narrator Sketch:

For my Oral History Project, I felt compelled to ask Dr. Divya Victor to be my narrator. She is my current professor for ENG 223 Creative Nonfiction. I was inspired to ask her after Professor Wake's discussion on the importance of representation. Weeks earlier, Dr. Victor had echoed similar thoughts about uplifting and amplifying Asian American experiences. I was particularly interested in interviewing Dr. Victor because of her intersecting experiences as an immigrant and as a woman. Being from India, then moving to Singapore, and finally immigrating to the US, her life has been full of movement and transition. As a child, she grew up in the India only forty years after its independence. In her nonfiction piece "Sugar on the Gash" for *Asian American Writers Workshop*. She discusses her parents' choice to send her to an Anglo-Indian English-speaking school. This caused a language barrier between generations that they became acutely aware of, but learning English was the key to transcending social barriers in a post-colonial country. I plan to ask her about her experience as a child and how it compares with her integration into the United States. There are a lot of parallels between her story and that of the Asian immigrant groups we have studied in class. Okada's *No-no Boy* discussed this generational disconnect caused by assimilation. As we only briefly read about South Asian American history, I am eager to hear her perspective and add her voice to the expanding Asian immigrant narrative. As an immigrant mother working in academia, I would like to know how her experiences as an Asian American affect her work and if she thinks they

can function separately. As a resident of Michigan, does she feel represented and welcomed? I am going to read some of her works in preparation for the interview and bring in relevant tests we have discussed in her class on colonialism and MC 319 on Asian American barriers to immigration, discriminatory public health policies, and Asian hate.

Oral History Project Transcript

Mary Carthew: Okay, it's started. Thank you for joining me. So, my name is Mary Carthew, and I will be interviewing Dr. Divya Victor today and the date is November 8, 2022, Eastern Standard Time. Okay, so for my first question, so your story begins in India. So, can you tell me what your childhood was like?

Dr. Divya Victor: Sure, um I was born in India in 1983 and I spent my first 10-11 years there. I migrated to Singapore in 1994. It was, I think in some ways are very idyllic childhood. We lived in a township, which meant that everybody that my parents knew worked for the same company. So, it was this strange. It was a strange place where class consciousness was not yet present. And so, I think when we think about ideals or Edens, it's before you recognize that class distinction exists. And then there's this fall from there. So, I think that was the place where I was able to form certain ideas around, you know, humanity. But I think they were very idealized. It was a very beautiful place and very safe. You know, as a child, I got to walk around through the neighborhoods, play hide and seek, in almost anyone's house. So, I had a real sense of freedom there, which of course was very much in contrast with the kinds of economic realities and social freedoms that the grown-ups were experiencing at the time. So, I think of that time as both idyllic and full of contradictions, you know, hidden ideas that children aren't often exposed to. But I loved it. I loved that childhood. And then I left to Singapore when I was 11.

MC: Okay, so would you say you had a happy childhood?

DV: Yes, I would, I would.

MC: And do remember a particular incident from your childhood that was especially happy?

DV: [Laughs] Oh gosh, I have so many happy memories of living in India. Some of the happiest memories for me are around I think, performing and practicing for performances. I was like a theater kid. And we put on these musicals and practicing and rehearsing in groups, the anticipation of the show, dressing up, washing your hair for it. You know really feeling like a performance, performing artist, to be taken seriously by an audience of essentially adults, I think was really exciting and made, made the stage a very natural space for me growing up, which offered me so much relief, I think from daily life. Yeah.

MC: And then what was your parent's role in your life?

DV: I mean, they parented me. You know, [both laugh] very, very nurturing people. My dad was away a lot, but he when he was in town, he was very present. My mom, um, did not work outside the home till I was ten. So, she was also a student, so she was doing her graduate work as an English major when I was in school. So, we, I think had this deep love of reading and storytelling, which she still carries out with my, my daughter now. So, they were very nurturing, very supportive. And I also lived with my grandmother, who really was my third parent. Yeah. So, they encouraged the artistic writerly self from a young age.

MC: Do you have a specific memory of writing with your grandmother?

DV: With my grandmother? Oh, you know, what I remember is that when she would travel for long periods away from the home to visit her siblings or like take care of a sibling who was ill or something. She would send me letters. But of course, I was like, a child, so I didn't know how to read. And she would send me these drawings, these really rudimentary drawings of like spiders and dogs and ducks. And of course, hilariously, she's not a very good artist [both laugh] And so we laugh a lot about how rudimentary kind of hieroglyphic drawings that she used to send me.

MC: I love that. And then, what is your relationship with your parents now?

DV: Oh, [sighs] well, [laughs] what is any adult's relationship with their parents now? It's full of interesting layers. We try very hard to work on our relationships at all times. And it's a supportive relationship. We're very close. They live just four miles away from me and they are they've always been there for me. I mean, really, I mean when we say thick and thin, really, that's it. We are very small crew on this boat, this migrant boat, so we really, really stick together and try to make each other better. Some of us are doing better at it than others [laughs].

MC: And then, what was your economic situation like as a child?

DV: Hmm, I think every person in my family might have a different answer to this question. But I would say that I felt like a middle-class child but didn't know that my dad was really working class, or like was raised as a working-class person. And my mom was raised as an upper middle-class person from a political family. And so there were a lot of contradictions between my parents and how we identified. I think, in terms of economic class, but I think I felt middle-class. I'd never, we were never hungry we didn't feel like we had to scrape by for resources. Um, but I also know that we had very little like I had like two or three new dresses a year. And that was about it. You know, and now when I compare how I was raised to how we are raising our child, I see that maybe I was barely middle-class at that time.

MC: And then also, why did you immigrate to Singapore?

DV: Again, a question with many answers. I didn't know why we immigrated at the time. I wish I had known, might've helped the trauma of migration to have known. I think it was because we were a religious minority, so we were Catholic. We are Catholic, though I'm an atheist. And there are various cost and religion related reasons why my father, who's a very brilliant engineer, would have not made it very far in his career, I think, or I suspect, and if I were to

speak to him about it now, he might reflect similarly. And I think there's this real painful grief around unspoken discrimination in India, which is now we're talking about religious discrimination more. But back then, I don't think we were. And I think they knew that if they stayed there, he just wouldn't be promoted. He wouldn't get very far. And so we wanted to seek out a safer and more economically secure place, but that meant leaving everything behind, of course.

MC: Okay, did you notice any specific differences in your childhood in India versus in Singapore?

DV: Yes. It's all difference. It's all differences there. There's, it's like a big slab or a crack in the middle of my childhood. Um, when you leave a place where you sort of racially identify and linguistically identify with a group of people and you're not in a minority. And suddenly I discovered what it was to become a minority when I was 11 and it came as a real, you know, shock to the system when that happened [laughs]. Yeah. It's [pauses] yeah. It introduced loneliness into my life. It's something I had never experienced, like, you know, it's just not a phenomena I experienced. And then suddenly, I was a very lonely person. Yeah.

MC: Did you find that you developed any methods to deal with loneliness in your childhood?

DV: Yes. I think I started storytelling. I had a long period of time when we migrated because of the difference in school years when school starts and Singapore and also because they wouldn't admit me based on my qualifications. And so, I had to train for these entrance exams, which essentially felt to me like the exam that would determine whether I could stay with my family. And in doing that, which was, as you can imagine, extremely traumatizing, during those very lonely six months where I didn't meet anyone else who was a child, I would tell these stories to the fan in my room, like a literal fan and just talk [both laugh] and just like talk to this

pretend friend. And I think it gave me a real sense of confidence in my voice, in my narrative voice.

MC: And also, I read your piece, "Sugar on the Gash" before this.

DV: Oh.

MC: For fun, and I loved it by the way. But I was reading about how you mentioned attending back in India, an Anglicized school.

DV: Mhm.

MC: And I wanted to ask you, do you have a different perception of attending the school now than you did as a child?

DV: I do. That's a great question. That's a, it's a very intuitive question. Um, yes. I wasn't aware of colonialism as a child. I was aware of it only as a kind of contour of history. I, the [pauses] the education in history and geography did not emphasize that the ravages and the devastation of colonization, what it offered us was a kind of much more utopian narrative about like the railways and the English language and modernization. While excluding Indians from that story, the story of modernization. So yeah, learning about the impact of that pillage really reshaped how both Anglicization and the kind of missionary frame of my own identity. How that would come to shape me. I went through a lot, many, many years of struggle with that to land where I am. Yeah.

MC: Do you remember an instance where you kind of were aware of colonization as a child, or was it more of a reflection later of the standards that were put onto the school?

DV: Yeah. It was very, I think I recognize that most linguistically, my mother's family, we still spoke Tamil, which is the mother tongue. And we were much more traditional in the sense that we were attached to Tamil traditions and in our dress and in our practices or weddings and rituals

and all that. But my dad's side was so Anglicized. They only spoke English, and sometimes ate with forks and spoons, their Indian food. And they didn't even listen to like popular Tamil music. And so I had this kind of very split familial like extended family identification. And I would remember how it felt to go over to my dad's side because I didn't feel like all of me was there are or all of me was seen. And because I was so good at being like like an English speaker and also English was my strongest subject. I think I was just sort of proved off in that form in this little baby, you know, post-colonial subject. And I don't know that I always loved that. I think I love this whole other part of me. That wore long silk scarves and big earrings and ran around and bangles and singing songs. I don't think those two girls ever really met. Well, if they did, only I knew them together.

MC: Mhm, that's when interesting. You mentioned in the piece, and as you just did now sort of generational differences. And did you feel like going to an Anglicized school created more within your family?

DV: Absolutely. Yeah, I think so. I mean, I just didn't learn the same histories that my grandmother learned, or my dad learned for that matter. You know, my dad is a very strong Tamil speaker and he's literate in Tamil and English and he has just a whole competency around Indian and pre-Indian history that I don't. And that means sometimes I feel that my identity in this generation is hanging by a thread or like I feel I have to often research my way into feeling Indian. So, I envy people who had that education, which I don't think I did at least till age 11, right? Yeah.

MC: In what ways do you think that you research or try to maintain heritage now?

DV: I do it around rituals, so like for when I got married. We didn't want a Catholic ceremony and we didn't want a secular ceremony either. And we wanted to maintain certain non-Hindu but

Tamil rituals. and so we adapted some of those into our wedding, for example. So I think I do it around rituals that I want to maintain, that I want our child to understand. They're usually rituals that help us feel more grounded as participants within a bigger ecology, you know, living on this planet, making relationships with each other, but also with the earth. That's, I think that's when it comes up for me. But of course, I research all the time for my writing, which is often about South Asian culture.

MC: And what made you decide to leave Singapore and ultimately moved to United States?

DV: Hmm, gosh, um Singapore is an autocratic state with very little freedom of press and expression. [pauses] And I felt that my training as a poet as it was, was really [pauses] would only really help me if I had certain civil liberties, which I felt as somebody who had migrated again to Singapore, I did not have, I was always operating under the threat of deportation. I also felt that I was very limited in how I could help, particularly my queer students, and my students of Indian and Malay descent. I did not feel empowered by the institution there to support them. And so, I wanted to be in a country where I would have many more constitutional freedoms and where the institution that I worked in would be obliged to help me support my queer and minority students. Or minorized students, that's so that my work could feel complete. Yeah, so I didn't want to like support the building of a state, which is really what institutions do they support the building of states. I did not want to contribute to the building of that state anymore.

MC: And then is there a perception of immigrating to America in India? And is it different from a perception in Singapore if there is one?

DV: I don't know. I mean, yes. [laughs] The perceptions are distinct because they have such different GDPs, right. They have very, very different global economic positionalities as

nations. And even though both nations have the massive income disparities between the top 2% and the remaining 98%. Their location in the global economy is so different. And Singapore, ironically, is still being built by, like built on the backs of Indian and Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan laborers. And they're in very real ways are still very indentured there. So, the positioning is so different. And therefore, their relative positioning when pointed towards the United States, is also different. I think, in Singapore, the younger generation is certainly seeing the United States as one destination for education. But I think there is far less appeal for long-term migration because Singapore has raised several challenges for deracination. So, leaving is hard because coming back as hard. And they incentivize staying in some ways that India, of course does not.

MC: Okay, and then you mentioned that your parents immigrated with you here, do you have any other family or friends that also did?

DV: My grandma.

MC: Okay.

DV: Yeah. So, all four of us, we always move everywhere together [laughs].

MC: Do you have any memories of sort of like a physical memory, a kinesthetic memory of you moving and migrating either to Singapore or to the US?

DV: Yes. I have several of those memories [pauses]. One of the most strong physical memories I have of moving to Singapore was how the air felt and how humid it was right away the first day. And the scent of durian and fruit so ripe. But also, the scent of like air freshener and air conditioning and like all of these artificial scents So I think the first memories are for me, like olfactory and they're like tactile. I felt so much more submerged in water because it is an

island and I used to live so much further inland in a very dry, relatively dry climate in Trichy, in India. So that's what I remember of that early memory.

MC: And then what was your first impression of America?

DV: Oh my God [laughs] Well, I really wanted to come to the United States. I was working towards it. Like it was part of a fantasy for me of being an artist, I think. Yeah, and when we landed here, it was on the West Coast and the first place I really saw was Lake Tahoe. I don't know if you've ever been there?

MC: I haven't but it's famously really beautiful.

DV: It's famously really beautiful. And I remember sitting on this boat being like, "This is America." And there was this huge American flag flying overhead and clear blue sky. That was my first memory. And my second memory was being in an Old Navy store because it was so cold, I had to buy a sweatshirt. I still have that sweatshirt somewhere. Yeah. It was so blissful and peaceful. I had no idea that within months the Twin Towers would fall and that, that shit would just fall apart so quickly for us as brown people in the country. It was just a very blissful summer before things got real.

MC: I was going to ask you, was it what you expected, but that kind of leads into what you just said where you can't really expect anything.

DV: Yeah. You don't expect.

MC: Was there anything surprising to you?

DV: Could you repeat that, Mary?

MC: Sorry, was there anything surprising to you based on your expectation of the US?

DV: Yeah. I mean, I think the pitch that the United States makes in the late 90s to the rest of the world is that it is the land of fun, freedom, and friskiness. It's just this constant environment of

indulgence and pleasure and joy and consumption. And it is of course, a land of consumption, but it is not the land of joy, not always. And I think I very quickly realized how difficult it would be to make a living here. How, how few and sparse and scant the social protections are, that if we made one mistake, like your life is wrecked forever. And that was the big shock to me. Medically or socially, or in terms of how the insurance industry operates. All of those were huge shocks to our system because we were suddenly without any protections because we had nobody here. Like one driving accident we were like one driving accident between having something and having absolutely nothing. Which is scary.

MC: Yeah.

DV: Yeah.

MC: How did you and your family achieve citizenship?

DV: Oh my God, um we went through the usual paths. My dad was here on an H1 B visa. I was an H1 dependent. So was my mother, my grandmother actually had her sponsorship from like the late eighties. She was sponsored by her sister who was living in Sacramento. So she had a very different migration journey than us, even though we were always together, she was always on a different paper route than me. Mhm. And then, then we applied for the Green Card. Waited for years, got the Green Card, waited for years and finally got our citizenship. [paused] I don't remember the exact dates of everything there, but that was the route. It was a conventional route in some ways. But, you know, equally conventional is the undocumented route that many South Asians go through, but nobody really talks about.

MC: And did you feel like a deeper connection to the United States when you received citizenship, or did it feel sort of like an unnecessary paper?

DV: Yeah. It was a necessary paper. It was very necessary because I needed it to receive scholarships so that I could study and have any kind of access to this education and my training, which now I'm benefiting from that I teach based on. But I had a lot of bad feelings and big feelings about it. Because at that point I still felt very attached to my Indian identity, not even my Singaporean identity. Like I had no trouble giving up my Singaporean identity, but I was still attached to this notion of origin, which I have since given up. I really don't think of myself as someone with origins. Or I think of myself as like simultaneously being co-created by many places I guess, or images of many places, fantasies of many places. I wrote a book about my feelings about naturalization, that's called "Natural Subjects." And it's about the artifice of naturalization. It's just giant fake ritual that tests us and puts us through the ringer and just offers opportunities for retraumatization for anybody who has lost anything in their life. It's really tough to go through. Yeah, and it remains tough when you think about it.

MC: And it's always interesting, the word natural.

DV: Yeah.

MC: When I worked in immigration was that it was ironically named natural. But now that you're talking about writing, how would you describe your relationship with writing?

DV: It's the last bastion. It's the place where I hold out. It is the most protected sanctum of my life. And when was the first time that you can remember that you felt like a writer? I thought it was gonna be a songwriter when I was young [laughs]. Because I was not a musician. am not a musician but felt like I had to do something with these feelings and like opinions. But the songwriting career lasted only like six months with my best friend at the time. And I was like 17. And then I realized, oh, wait, I'm writing poems. And I'm actually writing poems because I remember my friend being like, we can arrange this like there's no way that you can put this to

music. So, I think around 17, 18, I knew that there was something about language that made me feel so much more like myself than any other action or choice that I was making. It felt like breath. Right. So that's when I knew.

MC: And then do you feel similarly about being in academia as a professor, or what kind of drew you into becoming a professor?

DV: Hmm, my training as a poet and scholar always walked alongside my training as a teacher. So those two things never were separate. And so in some ways, my identity as a writer is wrapped up very much in my identity as a teacher. And I think it's important that those who do teach, what they do. Because I learned, as I've said to your peers in our class, I learn a lot about the generation I'm ushering when I teach that generation. And I think I have, as a writer, a real obligation to stay in tune with the emergent needs and emergent political concerns that I see all of you expressing in your writing. So, so I get to be a kind of voyeur and a witness to those emergent conditions. Emergent worries and sadnesses, all of that. Um, I don't know that I always see teaching as the last bastion in the same way I see my own writing because it's mediated by the institution, right. We talk about this all the time in our class. And institution is separate from me, and I want it to remain separate from me. Right. Yeah. Yeah, but there is a mediator, and I don't think there's a mediator in my writing. I think it's the direct access to me.

MC: And also do you, did you experience any obstacles when joining the profession of being a professor?

DV: Only structural racism and sexism [laughs] You know, yeah, of course, of course you're like never seen as the smart person in the room. You have to fight your way into being seen that way. And yeah, it's really hard. And we've talked about imposter syndrome in our class together. But there are structural reasons why that's amplified for folks like me.

MC: And obviously this is a difficult question to answer, but do you feel that there are ways that representation can be improved in academia and nonfiction writing that could try to remove these type of institutions?

DV: Do I think representation matters and academia? Absolutely. I think it does. Creative writing as a field has begun to recognize greater diversity and what we call Excellence in Diversity at MSU. I think in general; we are absolutely moving in the right direction. I think publishing can catch up with that. So that it mirrors the kind of success that we might be seeing in institutions like MSU. But there's a long way for us to go. Most students like you and your peers don't have as their English professor, a writer of color, until they come to school, until they come to college or grad school sometimes. Um, I didn't for the longest time, you know, and I've lived in Singapore, right? So, I think it really matters that those who are minorized are given opportunities to teach as writers earlier and earlier in students careers.

MC: And what values would you say are integral to your life?

DV: [Laughs] Oh my gosh. Freedom of choice, right, to have bodily and ideological freedom is central, I mean today is election day. I'm thinking a lot about that. [pauses] Freedom, yeah. Freedom from religious oppressions. Also, very important to me. I take it for granted now, but it's so important, it's fundamental. Freedom of expression, also fundamental for me. But beyond that, I mean, what would you like to learn Mary? [laughs]

MC: That's pretty much it.

DV: Okay.

MC: Just do you feel like you've developed as a person, any really strong things that are authentically you throughout your life? And just like qualities about yourself?

DV: Courage, I think courage, that is the defining, the defining quality. I would say courage born out of the fight for freedom.

MC: And how would you say that you balance your identities?

DV: I don't, [laughs] I don't. It's a dance, you know, it's a dance in which I sometimes trip and fall on my face. And sometimes it's a fugue and there's no dancing at all. It's the constant work. I think the balancing is the constant work, is trying to find a way to move forward without falling. That's the work.

MC: And have you returned to India or Singapore since immigrating?

DV: Yes. Yes, I have frequently as often as I can. Now with the pandemic, it's a bit slower, but I try to go back every few years. I miss the food and I miss the people, and I miss how my body feels when I'm in warm weather.

MC: And then do you have any advice that you would give immigrants coming to the US today?

DV: Plenty, um, [laughs] remember your history. Keep learning it. Keep reminding yourself of the many, many forces that create us so that we don't attach to chauvinistic and reductive ideas of what we are supposed to be and who we are supposed to be. So, I guess I'm hoping that everyone keeps their research up to find out who they are and also, you know, write. Write about all the memories, hold onto them. It's the only way to hold onto them, to tell our stories again and again. And not just as reversals, but as ways to discover the stories we haven't told yet.

MC: Okay, well, that's actually all my questions, so thank you so much for your time and your insights. It's been a pleasure to interview you.

DV: Most, most welcome. My pleasure too.