

In Nāki's Wake: Slavery and Caste Supremacy in the American Ceylon Mission

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Abstract

In 1832, a woman named Caṅkari Nāki died in Ceylon, and her descendants have been haunted by a curse ever since. One of the first converts of the American Ceylon Mission, Nāki was part of an enslaved caste community unique to the island, and one of the few oppressed-caste members of the mission. The circumstances of her death are unclear; the missionary archive is silent on an event that one can presume would have affected the small Christian community, while the family narrative passed through generations is that Nāki was murdered by members of the locally dominant Vellalar caste after marrying one of their own. In response to this archival erasure, this essay draws on historical methods developed by Saidiya Hartman and Gaiutra Bahadur to be accountable to enslaved and indentured lives and, in Hartman's words, to 'make visible the production of disposable lives.' These methods actively question what we can know from the archives of an oppressor and, for this essay, enable a reading of Nāki's life at the centre of a mission struggling over how to approach caste. Nāki's story, I argue, helps reveal an underexplored aspect of the interrelationship between caste and slavery in South Asia, and underlines the value of considering South Asian slave narratives as source material into historiographically- and archivally-obscured aspects of dominant caste identity.

Introduction

For nearly two centuries, a curse has haunted a family anchored to Sri Lanka's Jaffna Peninsula and flung out across the globe as part of the Tamil diaspora. 'This is one of the reasons my grandmother in Staten Island thinks my brother died as a baby,' Ponni Mann wrote to me by email (P. Mann, personal communication,

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May 10, 2013).¹ The family's sorrowful and hushed story-telling is the sole memorial to the 1832 death of one of the family's first two converts to Christianity, an event that, according to the family, initiated a curse that claims the life of an infant boy in each generation. Ponni's family believes the death was murder. 'The story,' Ponni continued, 'is that [Nāki] was beaten to death by other upper caste people in the community for aspiring to marry into a higher caste. For this there is a curse on the family.' Ponni's fourth-great grandmother, Caṅkari Nāki, was from an oppressed slave caste in Ceylon, and the reason the union caused social upheaval was that her husband was not. The family narrative states that members of Nāki's husband's dominant caste, the Veḷḷāḷar, were directly responsible for her death, a charge that archival evidence can neither dispute nor affirm. What we can say for certain, however, is that the death and the marriage are linked by an origin story entangled with Sri Lanka's relatively unknown history of caste and slavery, all found deep in the archive of an institution named the American Ceylon Mission (ACM).²

Direct details surrounding Nāki's life are few, and those we have were left by the white, male missionaries who—along with their missionary wives—crafted the environment in which Nāki lived for the majority of her life. As far as can be determined, none of her writings or other examples of her school labours, such as needlework, were preserved. The vast challenge that this archival silence represents—ethically, methodologically, and historiographically—is something Saidiya Hartman, Marisa Fuentes, Jennifer L. Morgan, and a group of interlocutors have spent a great deal of time considering. This group, along with several others, has led a re-imagining of how histories of slavery in the Atlantic world can be made accountable to enslaved lives by challenging dominant historical methodologies. The group has argued in various ways for writing a history of the present, a project described by Hartman as seeking 'to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a free state ... the anticipated future of this writing' (Hartman 2008, 13). That is to say, the group suggests both that histories of slavery in the Atlantic world cannot be disconnected from an ongoing American necropolitics, awash in racial violence and mass incarceration, and that they can assist in the imagining of alternative, free futures. Guided by a comparable project of imagining a caste-free state while remaining grounded in the intertwined historical genealogies of slavery, caste, and contemporary oppressions in South Asia, this article considers the life of Nāki, an enslaved and oppressed-caste, Ceylonese Tamil woman at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Her story, I argue, helps reveal an underexplored aspect of the relationship between caste and slavery in South Asia, and illustrates how new readings of South Asian slavery can transform the way we interpret nineteenth-century social life in the region.

While this article directly reflects and draws from the scholarly debates surrounding representation, archival limitations, and the value of poetics in the historical depiction of enslaved life noted above, my primary goal here is not to directly contribute to this theorization (e.g., Hartman, 2008, 2019; Fuentes, 2016; Morgan, 2016; and Smallwood, 2016). Rather, I am principally seeking to mobilise some of the techniques which Hartman and others are developing in order to continue thinking through the value of narratives surrounding enslavement for South Asian history. In so doing, I pick up a project that Anjali Arondekar (2016) has recently advanced that also runs through the work of Indrani Chatterjee and Richard Eaton (2006), and can be traced back to Dharma Kumar's *Land and Caste in South India* (1965), all of which consider the complexity of defining slavery in the context of South Asian history.

This complexity is especially important considering the dominant association of the word 'slavery' with the Caribbean plantation world and the antebellum American South, and the potential challenges associated with applying the word in other contexts. Arondekar, for instance, points to a problematic tendency to read slavery as a 'structural affiliation' beyond oceanic worlds that can collapse the vast heterogeneity of slavery in South Asian pasts (2016, 148). 'It is equally urgent' Arondekar cautions, 'that we not recuperate yet another stable history of slavery through its lost "Asiatic" form.' My reading of Nāki's life accords with Arondekar's point; enslavement varied considerably between slave communities in Jaffna (let alone across the Indian Ocean), and so we must be cautious about reading enslavement in South Asia as a kind of transnational or transoceanic affiliation.

By focusing on Nāki's life, this article seeks to underline an understudied link between slavery and caste in Sri Lanka's Jaffna Peninsula, particularly as it relates to the American Ceylon Mission, an institution of distinct significance for modern social life in the region. Despite having attracted previous scholarly interest, the ACM's connection to slavery and its impact on caste in Jaffna have never been cohesively discussed. Richard Fox Young and Subramaniam Jebanesan note the mission's overwhelming Vellālar (dominant caste) character, but the two fail to show that the mission's Vellālar affiliation was a deliberate choice, and thereby miss an opportunity to examine how American missionaries facilitated late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Vellālar dominance over the peninsula's economic, social, and political life (1995, pp. 103–104). Apart from setting the mission's caste policy for more than a hundred years, it was this decision that directly contributed to the entrenchment of Jaffna's Vellālar in the peninsula's thriving English-language education sector and the upward social mobility and economic stability it enabled. By exploring the links between the ACM, slavery, and caste, this essay underlines how the affiliation between the mission and Vellālar was forged, with Nāki at the centre of the story.

In the next section, I briefly explain and provide an example of the method I use in this article to write about Nāki's life, in order to demonstrate its historical and critical value. Following a description of Nāki's life-world (as much as can be confidently described), the article then turns to the vigorous caste debate within the American Ceylon Mission and its conclusion in the 1830s, which later enabled the missionaries to proclaim 'the Vellalas are emphatically our people' (Meigs, Poor, Howland, 1853, p. 41). In considering Nāki's story alongside the story of a caste preference in the mission, this article demonstrates the value of considering South Asian slave and oppressed-caste narratives as source material into historiographically- and archivally-obscured aspects of dominant caste identity.

Methods

In response to archival silences similar to those that conceal Nāki, Saidiya Hartman (2008) and Gaiutra Bahadur (2014) have developed methods to actively question what we can know about precarious, enslaved, and endangered lives from the archives of the oppressor. Their methods open space for questions, for possibilities, for the unknown to become the imagined. 'Critical fabulation,' a strategy Hartman first developed in her groundbreaking essay 'Venus in Two Acts,' refers to the re-arrangement of events from multiple fragmentary narratives to 'displace the received or authorized account' of an event and thus reveal the fiction that history written from archival sources can

provide transparent access to past lives (2008, p. 36). Critical fabulation relies upon the subjunctive mood (e.g., ‘she might have thought/done/seen/said’) to consider possibilities surrounding the subject, while also emphasizing ‘narrative restraint,’ foreclosing on the perhaps attractive tendency to neatly resolve narratives by filling in gaps where there is no archival evidence. In response to related challenges in writing about South Asian indentured servitude in the Caribbean, Bahadur has strategically deployed expansive lists of questions that help us think through what we *would* ask the archival materials were they to exist or to document the oppressed subject’s life in the same way they document white life. Following in the footsteps of these two scholars, this article combines critical fabulation with Bahadur’s interrogative approach in an attempt, in Hartman’s words, ‘to make visible the production of disposable lives’ (2008, 36).

To begin with an example of this method in action: what was the name of our eponymous protagonist? I have referred to her so far as Caṅkari Nāki, her Tamil name, which—like that of other members of the Kōviyar slave caste—records both her given name, Nāki, as well as her mother’s given name, Caṅkari. But perhaps it would be more appropriate to call her by the scholarship name she was given soon after becoming one of the first boarding students of the American Ceylon Mission in 1818: ‘Elizabeth Worcester.’³ Without more information, we can only guess her attachment to her two names, let alone the two identity worlds they conveyed. Was her Tamil name the only one she ever identified with? Did she go by both names depending on context, as did so many of Jaffna’s Protestants following her? Or might the missionary home where she lived, filled with lessons in a foreign gendered domesticity, have built for Nāki a sense of pride in her English name, stripped as it was of its caste connotation and reminiscent of the elite foreign names that had been common in the peninsula for two centuries? While some formulation of Nāki/Elizabeth—with its embedded recognition of a variegated, historically-located identity—would be most apt, I have used ‘Nāki’ here as shorthand for this complexity, erring on the side of the name that connected her with her birth mother. Despite this decision, her name should still be thought of as composite and multifaceted, as she too undoubtedly was.

Nāki’s Lifeworld

Though we do not know the day of her birth, Nāki was likely born in 1811 in a small mud and palm-leaf dwelling near what is now the town of Tellippaḷai, a village in Jaffna’s northwest. Tellippaḷai was, and continues to be, an agricultural community encircled by fields cyclically rotated between fruits and vegetables such as papaya and banana, onion, chili peppers, brinjal, okra, and cassava. Tobacco was also extensively cultivated in the area, especially where veins of deep red, iron-rich soil are found. In general, Jaffna’s wealth at the turn of the nineteenth century was in its market gardens, and particularly in its tobacco fields, the vast majority of which were owned by the dominant Veḷḷāḷar caste (Arasaratnam, 1986, pp. 32–34). Nāki was born into one of Jaffna’s three enslaved caste communities—later referred to as the Aṭimakaḷ, or slave people—on whom Jaffna’s economy depended: the Kōviyar (Balmforth 2016; Wickramasinghe and Schrikker 2019). Unlike the Naḷavar and the Paḷḷar—the other enslaved castes, whose labour was agricultural—the Kōviyar were a domestic labouring community. Today, the community’s origins are both unclear and contested, though consensus agrees that the Kōviyars are unique to Jaffna, in contrast to the

Naḷavar and the Paḷḷar, who are also found in other parts of Sri Lanka and South India.⁴ Veḷḷāḷar voices have had overwhelming control over depictions of Jaffna's past since at least the eighteenth century, and so for this reason and others, very little is known about so-called Aṭimakaḷ lives.⁵ Few writers, in Tamil or English, have incorporated representations originating from the community itself.⁶ In the next paragraphs, I filter through the available resources to provide a partial view of Nāki's lifeworld prior to joining the American Ceylon Mission in 1818.

In 1811, the vast majority of Jaffna's enslaved population was corporately owned; that is, enslaved individuals owed their labour to multiple (primarily) Veḷḷāḷar families or individuals, as needed.⁷ As Nāki was born into the Kōvīyar caste, there is a good chance her mother worked in the homes of one or more Veḷḷāḷar families, cooking and cleaning, pounding rice, carrying water and fuel wood, and providing child care.⁸ One of the most striking distinctions between Kōvīyars and the other enslaved communities has to do with ritual pollution. Unlike the Naḷavar and Paḷḷar who were (and to some degree, still are) defined as ritually unclean, untouchable, and inadmissible to Veḷḷāḷar social spaces, Kōvīyars were understood to share ritual parity with Veḷḷāḷars, and were therefore allowed into their homes (Banks, 1960, p. 67; Perinbanayagam, 1988, p. 27). Even into the latter part of the nineteenth century—well after the formal abolition of slavery on the island in 1844—Kōvīyar families continued to live on land provided to them by the Veḷḷāḷar families to whom they owed labour, a relationship that undergirded Veḷḷāḷar authority.⁹

We know Nāki's mother, Caṅkari, was alive at the time of Nāki's 1818 acceptance into the family and homeschool of Susan and Daniel Poor, two of the first American missionaries to settle in Jaffna. What could the prospect of these two white foreigners taking her daughter into their home have meant?¹⁰ Was this an incomparable opportunity that outweighed the dangers? When Caṅkari communicated with the Pooors about the arrangement, their intention to teach Nāki to read and write was most likely at the centre of their argument for boarding her. Female literacy in Jaffna in 1818 was largely restricted to the European and Burgher communities, and the few literate Tamil women on the peninsula would have been the small number of *devadāsīs* connected to the larger Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava temples.¹¹ Elsewhere, I have pointed out that the American missionaries struggled against significant resistance to female literacy in this period, and had to resort to activities and favours recognised as valuable to the girls, such as teaching them to sew and giving gifts of gold necklaces, to compel the mission's first female students into the study of the written word (2018, pp. 72–73). Would literacy have seemed like something of value to Caṅkari?

In general, social and ritual restrictions according to caste and gender, as well as economic prohibitions, controlled who could access education in the region. In Jaffna, this meant that dominant caste boys were almost exclusively eligible for admission to and able to pay for access to the predominant Tamil educational space of the period, the *tiṅṅai paḷḷikkūṭam*, or veranda school.¹² Caṅkari would likely have known that these were the spaces where young Veḷḷāḷar boys were taught to memorise texts. But would she have associated Nāki's access to literacy with the sacred and temporal authority that marked literacy on the veranda school? Just as we cannot know what Caṅkari thought of the mission's literacy goals, we also cannot adequately judge her interpretation of the economics of allowing Nāki to live with the Pooors. At a time when food insecurity posed a regular danger to Jaffna's enslaved communities, and cholera and small pox regularly swept through the villages of the peninsula, allowing her child

to be raised by two foreigners of considerable wealth might have been considered a great boon, a rare opportunity, a risk, or all three. That same year, 1818, Daniel Poor purchased and emancipated two Kōviyar boys: ten-year-old Vīrakatti and his nine-year-old brother Katirkāman (Poor 1821, p. 183).¹³ Could Caṅkari have known about Vīrakatti and Katirkāman, and hoped Nāki might also be emancipated? We cannot know for certain, but it is possible Caṅkari thought the Poores represented the best chance Nāki had for a different future.

On April 13, 1822, four years after Nāki entered the homeschool, Daniel Poor recorded Caṅkari's death from cholera (1823, p. 210). Poor's entry also mentions that Caṅkari had for several years been attending church on Sundays and that she had expressed concern for her soul the night before her passing, when two of the Tellippaḷai Tamil mission staff, Nathaniel Niles and Onesimus, visited Caṅkari at her home near the mission. This type of narrative was common for a mission struggling to demonstrate the results of its labour to its funders back in the United States, so we cannot judge whether Poor's comment provides an insight into Caṅkari's opinion of the church and its teachings, or if attending church on Sundays was a rare opportunity to see Nāki. We do not know who informed ten-year-old Nāki of her mother's death, although it is possible it was the mission assistant Onesimus, or Vēlan, as he was known in Tamil. He was Nāki's cousin.

Though only little is known of Caṅkari, even less is known about Nāki's father. The legal structure that defined how slavery operated in Jaffna—Tēsavalamai (country, or customary code)—detailed how marriage between the enslaved was to occur and designated the ownership of children born of such unions. For instance, according to Tēsavalamai, enslaved persons needed the permission of their owners to marry (Mutukisna, 1862, p. 736). However, we cannot assume Caṅkari was ever married. One of the more complicated and disturbing aspects of Kōviyar-Veḷḷāḷar relations, with parallels to what Saidiya Hartman has described as 'the convergence of terror and pleasure in the libidinal economy of slavery,' was the frequency with which Veḷḷāḷar rights to Kōviyar labour included rights to bodies and sex (Hartman, 2008, p. 1; Perinbanayagam, 1988, p. 27). It is impossible to know what kind of control or choice Caṅkari had in her relationship to Nāki's biological father, or what his background was. The Tēsavalamai also stipulates that if a Veḷḷāḷar man has a child with his slave, the caste of the child always follows the mother's, and while the man may emancipate the child, such children are allowed to inherit no more than ten percent of their father's estate (Mutukisna, 1862, p. 736). The inheritance of caste and patrimony likely explains why the three communities of enslaved castes during the period all follow naming practices like Nāki's: her full name, Caṅkari Nāki, denoted her mother's given name followed by her own (female gendered) given name.¹⁴

At the age of about seven, Nāki was taken into Susan and Daniel Poor's home as one of the mission's first female students (Poor, 1823, p. 210). The home environment was a far cry from the one-room shelter with half-walls of mud and a low-hanging palmyra leaf roof where she would have lived with her mother. While we do not have a description of the Poor's house in Tellippaḷai where Nāki lived, we know quite a bit about the house in which American missionaries Harriet and Miron Winslow lived in the early 1820s, in nearby Uṭuvil. The Winslow house was a four-room, white-washed stone building roofed in palmyra leaves (later exchanged for tiles), with an extended veranda. The largest room had an unadorned but sturdy jackwood table surrounded by rattan-seated chairs for twelve, a small work table with Tamil and English bibles

on it, two globes on stands for the students, and two book cases for their small library with cupboards below for medicine and school records. The house also contained two bedrooms, and was largely unadorned and designed for practicality: 'I do not know that we have an article of furniture not useful or needed,' Harriet explained, 'or which is not as plain as could well be' (Winslow and Winslow, 1835, p. 304). The Winslows' austere approach to furnishing their home was a pattern followed by the American missionary families of the period, an aesthetic remnant of puritanism cultivated in the New England Congregationalist and Presbyterian communities from which the Poors and Winslows came. While the houses were not luxurious by their standards, they provided significantly more comfort and protection than the living arrangements of most of Jaffna's residents, especially its enslaved communities.

The early mission homeschools used several cross-pollinating educational models in concert.¹⁵ Until deep into the nineteenth century, everything from the structure and schedule of study to the subjects taught was under constant experimentation and alteration. The one consistent thread was the presumed relationship between conversion and proximity to missionary ways of being. The principal goal of the mission homeschool was thus to remove children from what were seen as the corrupting influences of society in general, and the children's parents and family in particular. The most advanced educational techniques thus required boarding, such that the school children were completely immersed in a Western, Christian environment.

In these early years, the subjects studied by mission students were limited to the English and Tamil alphabets, and Christian teachings through Bible recitation; girls were introduced early on to a gendered domesticity based on an American Christian ideal that included cooking and an introduction to sewing (de Alwis, 1997; Balmforth, 2018). In 1821, arithmetic was added to the homeschool curriculum. Each day ran on a tight schedule, the basic structure which Miron Winslow described as:

5:00 am - Wake up at the first bell
6:00 am - Attend prayers
7:00 am - Breakfast
7:30 am to 11:30 am - Study English in the verandah
1:00 pm - Dinner
2:00 pm to 5:00 pm - Tamil study, dismissed with prayers
5:00 pm to 7:00 pm - Play or work
7:00 pm - Supper
8:00 pm - All assemble in the verandah for prayers
The older boys study in the evening but the younger go to bed after prayers
(Winslow, 1824, p. 206).

How did Nāki navigate the restrictions that were key to the homeschool system? We know Caṅkari, Nāki's mother, lived near the mission until she died when Nāki was about ten, but did they see each other more than on Sundays at church? In what ways were the two kept at a distance? How well did Nāki adapt to life with the Poors? And as she got older, did her learning, literacy, and new sense of Christian decorum increase the distance between her and the rest of her family? If so, how did she navigate that dislocation?

As her descendant Ponni tells the story, when the American Ceylon Mission learned of an extra-conjugal relationship between Nāki and a Veļļālar man named

Cyrus Mann (Tamil name: Irāmanāṭaṅ), the Mission compelled them to marry. As we will see below, archival evidence suggests Nāki had more agency in the choice than the family narrative implies, but the archival record otherwise accords with the family story that the two were married. Nāki was at the time the oldest student of marriageable age in the ACM's Oodooville (Uṭuvil) Girls' Boarding School, and Cyrus had recently graduated from Batticotta Seminary, the ACM's premier institution of higher education, and gained a prestigious position as a mission assistant.¹⁶ Nāki and Cyrus' marriage lasted three years and five months before its end at Nāki's death. The date of death, listed in only one location by the mission, was recorded as February 4, 1832 (American Ceylon Mission, 1839, p. 4). In the otherwise meticulous journals kept at each of the ACM's mission stations, no entries are recorded for the days immediately leading to and following Nāki's death. There is no evidence her death was ever investigated by the British colonial state, and no court case resulted from the incident.

Before Nāki died, Ponni explained to me by email, she delivered a baby boy, but soon after losing his mother, 'the child was neglected and became very sick, getting bad sores all over his body. Then Cyrus married a second time, this time [to] an upper caste lady' (P. Mann, personal communication, May 10, 2013). According to the mission archive, Cyrus did indeed marry a Vellālar student named Ann Bates (Tamil name: Pūtar Cīṭevaṅ) on July 13, 1835 (American Ceylon Mission, 1839, p. 10). 'Apparently, the very next day after getting married,' Ponni continued, 'some well-meaning busybodies from the town came and told her that Cyrus had a child from his first marriage. But she seems like a nice lady, because she went and found the child and adopted him.' The baby was named Daniel Poor Mann, and went on to become one of the first Tamil allopathic medical graduates, studying under Samuel Fisk Green between 1856 and 1859 (Green, 1891, p. 454). Everything that we know about Cyrus' marriage to Ann Bates points to the social acceptance of the marriage, a fact that only underlines the rupture caused by his marriage to Nāki and the birth of their child. In order to understand the full context of Nāki's marriage to Cyrus and the implications of her death, I now turn to the American Ceylon Mission's unsteady relationship to caste.

Caste in the American Ceylon Mission, 1816–1853

In the previous section, I introduced the social and educational spaces that Nāki inhabited and the lifeworld in which she was raised, and eventually died. I also relayed the Mann family narrative that Nāki's life ended in fatal violence because her marriage crossed caste boundaries. This section provides background on how and why this highly unusual inter-caste marriage occurred, which I argue is directly tied to the American Ceylon Mission's shifting policies on caste in its schools and churches in the years following 1816.¹⁷ As we will see, leaders in the mission moved from an initial tendency toward flexibility and the conciliation of caste to an openly hostile position in which Nāki became implicated, before eventually settling on an accommodation of caste that solely benefited Vellālar. In order to understand how this came about, I begin where the American missionaries began, in a seminary in Andover, Massachusetts.

The missionaries that contributed to the ACM's approach to caste arrived in Ceylon with knowledge gleaned from the extensive missionary networks present in South Asia from the fifteenth century. Among the company, Miron Winslow's grasp of caste was probably the most sophisticated upon arrival. For his graduate studies at Andover Theological Seminary, Winslow had written a four hundred page dissertation on the history of Christian missions in which he cited a range of materials, including popular American histories of mission and Christianity in Asia that discuss Roberto Nobili's and Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg's varied methodological approaches to caste and their relative levels of success.¹⁸ Based on more than a century of accumulated missionary knowledge, Winslow likely understood that the American Ceylon Mission's success hinged on the way it addressed caste.

In the years between the mission's establishment in 1816 and the 1823 founding of Batticotta Seminary, there was no settled approach to who the mission should train. Early on, the ideal students the mission homeschools intended to attract were from economically-precarious families or oppressed castes. In his journal of September 1818, Benjamin C. Meigs wrote that 'It has always been principally to the poor that the Gospel is preached. So it is among this people. It is from this class that we must look for boys to be supported and educated in our families' (1819, p. 228). In October of the same year, the mission was still under the impression that it was possible to successfully run schools composed entirely of the poor, that is, at least partially made up of oppressed caste students (1819, p. 230). However, during the same period, the mission also systematically allowed the operation of caste privileges demanded by the few Vellālar members of its churches and schools, to ensure they remained. Examples of this are found in the missionary journals and reports of the period, such as Daniel Poor's willingness to allow some of the first students that lived with his family to abide by the dietary habits of their Tamil Śaiva relatives (Poor, 1820, p. 279).

By 1823, a shift occurred in the views of mission leaders, and caste accommodation was no longer approached with the same flexibility. While no clear single event appears to have provoked this turn, it should not come as a surprise as the zeitgeist of European mission itself was in transition, with a new generation of British and German missionaries zealously testing new methods in nearby India. D. Dennis Hudson (2000) has tracked a similar transition in the English-Halle mission at Tranquebar in the first decades of the nineteenth century, where a new guard of missionaries threw out the accumulated approaches to ceremony, music, decoration, and caste developed over a hundred years by their German predecessors. In particular, we know that C.T.E. Rhenius, one of these 'new' missionaries who exhibited a more rigid approach to caste in his South Indian congregation, was in correspondence with the American missionaries in Jaffna regarding his approaches to eradicating caste in his own mission.

From the early 1820s, the American Ceylon Mission leadership also began to note a flexibility in the operation of caste—which they had previously believed to be rigid—and as a result tested their own ways to 'break' caste among their students. For instance, shortly after the commencement of classes at Batticotta Seminary, the students collectively refused to eat on the mission premises due to its ritual impurity, and asked that a separate cook house be built on land next to the seminary owned by a

Śaiva Veḷḷāḷar (American Ceylon Mission, 1834, pp. 292–293). Immediately following the event, the following response was recorded in the Mission’s meeting minutes:

_____ Batticotta July 22, 1823 _____

After the opening of the Central School, the Brethren adjourned for business and the first subject discussed was the importance of using all proper means for the suppression of caste.

After a long discussion (during most which Br. Knight was also present) it was Voted. That no boy refusing to eat on the premises on the ground of caste shall be allowed to remain in any of the Boarding Schools or in the School at Batticotta, also,

Voted. That no distinction of caste be allowed in the School at Batticotta (*Minutes 1815–1844*, p. 48, underline in original).

Despite the rigid tone of the entry, reports indicate that the mission acquiesced to the students’ demand, and for more than a year they were allowed to cook and eat their meals in the new location. By 1825 however, the cook house had been removed, and though several of the boys left the school in protest, most remained. The mission’s leaders later explained that they interpreted such responses to caste challenges as malleability. From the leadership’s perspective, this quality differentiated caste in Jaffna from its operation in India, a difference attributed to centuries of foreign colonial intervention in Jaffna’s social life (Meigs et al., 1853). It appears that such experiences initially provoked a sense of optimism among the missionaries that the end of caste in the mission was in fact possible. By 1824, this strict approach was enforced by a stark new mission policy which stated that ‘we know no distinction of caste at the Lord’s table’ (*Minutes 1815–1844*, p. 52).

In addition to the restriction of consumption practices and other types of caste-based privileges (such as preferential seating), several entries in the ACM’s minute book for the period point to another experimental method of breaking caste, which brings Nāki back to the centre of our story:

_____ February 1, 1826 _____

Brother Woodward was requested to redeem Elizabeth Worcester (நாகி) from slavery and also to endeavour to have her married to Sautio (*Minutes 1815–1844*, p. 74).

Henry Woodward was, at the time, stationed at Nāki’s home village of Tellippalāi. Though her mother had died four years earlier, the mission was likely aware of Nāki’s owner, who would need to permit her emancipation.¹⁹ For reasons that are not listed in the mission minutes or Woodward’s journal, Nāki did not marry Sautio, though evidence suggests that she directly refused the match.²⁰ Two years would pass before, in August of 1828, Nāki accepted an offer to marry Cyrus Mann, a Veḷḷāḷar. As mentioned above, by the time of the wedding Cyrus had successfully completed his studies at Batticotta Seminary, had been hired by the mission as an assistant, and was well on his way to a stable and prosperous future. What then might this marriage have to do with the mission’s attempts to break caste?

Between 1822 and February 4, 1832, the day of Nāki’s death, there were a total of thirteen marriages in the mission. Of these, at least eight were inter-caste marriages.²¹

The actual number may be higher, but complete caste data for every mission member is unavailable, as the mission stopped maintaining caste records related to school and church membership from approximately 1825.²² The mission's first inter-caste wedding, between Daniel Smead (Tamil name: Vīrakatti, a Veḷḷāḷar) and Miranda Safford (Tamil name: Cēllāttai, a Caṅṅāḷar), was recorded as a great success: 'This marriage has, for several reasons, produced considerable excitement among the people. The parties are of different casts [sic]. ... According to the custom of the people an individual of one of these casts [sic] cannot marry nor even eat with an individual of the other. But at this time, prejudice and custom lost their influence and all united in partaking of a feast prepared for the occasion *on our premises*' (American Ceylon Mission, 1823, p. 7, emphasis in original). On October 13, 1830, Elias Cornelius (Tamil name: Vīrakatti)—a Kōvīyar and one of the two boys Daniel Poor purchased and emancipated in 1818—was married to Elizabeth Appleton, a dominant caste Maṭaippaḷli (Winslow, 1831, p. 269). Following Nāki's death, however, the mission's direct attempts to break caste, through marriage or any other means, appear to have stopped. Not a single inter-caste marriage was pursued by the mission after her death.

What could Nāki's death have meant for the small Christian community of only about 250 people? Given the frequency of epidemics such as cholera and small pox, deaths in the ACM were not irregular occurrences.²³ Instances of mistreatment or harassment against church members were also not rare, but generally took the form of verbal abuse or thrown rocks and had never led to a death. We know that stories of such attacks against members of the mission churches became important content for the mission's writings. A significant aspect of the mission's effort to ensure its economic stability was to maintain a rapt audience back in America that was aware of the state of the mission and invested in its continuation, literally and figuratively. Persecution was a trope the missionaries could and did rely upon and monetize by appealing for funds to, for instance, repair buildings devastated by arson. Nāki's death should have precipitated a deluge of written documentation, especially if her death was caused by non-Christians. Martyrdom could very well have become a remembered narrative: the collected letters of Harriet Newell, the young American missionary who died on route to South Asia in 1812, were turned into a best-selling memoir that inspired generations of young American Christian women. Yet, for Nāki, there was no public memorialisation, and no surviving written documentation of the circumstances surrounding her death.

What could have caused the mission not to draw attention to her death? If she was killed by dominant caste members for attempting to be upwardly mobile, as the Mann family narrative indicates, is it possible the missionaries felt in some way responsible for the death? Would the thousands of American Christian readers who regularly followed the mission's progress have withheld their support if Nāki's death was interpreted as connected to the mission? It is worth noting that Nāki's death came at a time of great struggle for the ACM. For ten years, the mission had been partially suppressed by a British Governor who was suspicious of Americans and unwilling to grant the mission's requests to expand their size and establish a printing press. Might the mission have wanted to avoid any threat to its position on the island, which a scandal or embarrassment of this scale might have precipitated? Answers are not readily available, but we can say for certain that, in the wake of Nāki's death, the ACM gradually began to accept the operation of Veḷḷāḷar caste privilege. This slow transformation eventually became a vigorous stance for an exclusive affiliation with

the dominant caste community, at the expense of building a mixed-caste church, set of schools, and community.

One place where we see the maturation of this policy is in an extended response to dozens of questions sent to the mission in 1838 (American Ceylon Mission, 1838). In the questionnaire, a group of mission leaders provided blunt appraisals of their collective methods relating to caste in response to the question, 'If one caste must prevail [in the boarding school], which one is most desirable to get?' The replies by Daniel Poor and Levi Spaulding are striking:

I think we are right in this particular in Jaffna. We have to do chiefly with the higher castes [which] constitute the mass of society. Bro. Poor says [']The castes which prevails as a general thing. But high caste as far as possible, not to exclude the predominant caste of the country.['] Mr [C.T.E.] Rhenius Seminary was once entirely broken broken [sic] up on account of admitting [oppressed caste] Shanars. Afterwards one or two of his old scholars returned. The probability is that hereafter they will be generally low caste. I think Mr R made a great mistake. It is much easier working down than up. L Spaulding (American Ceylon Mission, 1838).

Here, Levi Spaulding echoes Roberto Nobili's famous contention that if one converts the dominant sections of a society, all others will follow, and describes C.T.E. Rhenius' experiments for breaking caste by educating oppressed caste students as 'a great mistake' (Županov, 1999, p. 30). Though by the mid-1830s this argument was circulating among mission leaders in Jaffna, the argument would not be made public in the United States until 1853, when three of the mission's leaders published an extended analysis of caste entitled *Caste, in the Island of Ceylon*.

By the time this treatise was written, the American Ceylon Mission was at the centre of a regional disagreement between Protestant missionaries over caste in the church in South Asia, pitted against what has been described as a nineteenth-century Indian missionary consensus against caste (Forrester, 1980).²⁴ In the process of their analysis, the ACM leadership produced the first extended foreign consideration of caste in Jaffna, a work that has influenced every subsequent scholarly analysis of caste among the Tamil population of Sri Lanka.²⁵ In addition to advancing an argument that caste is substantively different in Ceylon than in India and that the ACM's alliance with the Vellālar was deeply productive, there are two key aspects of the treatise which bear on the interests of this article. First, while the ACM leaders agree with the larger missionary appraisal that caste 'is a great evil' and 'the very cement of Hindooism,' they emphasize that attempting to break caste had led to calamity: 'all compulsory means used for this purpose,' they note, '...are generally disastrous to the assailants and the assailed; to the Christian church, and to the heathen population at large' (Meigs, et al., 1853 pp. 20–21). Second, the authors argue that the 'appropriate' method for abolishing caste is 'light and love on the part of the missionaries, docility and growth in piety on the part of the native converts, together with the promised influences of the Holy Spirit' (Meigs, et al 1853 p. 21). These two arguments reveal the settled result of the mission's struggle to determine an approach to caste: trying to directly attack caste had failed and had been 'disastrous' in some notably unspecified way, and the most efficacious response should be patience and trust in God for a solution.

Though this policy can be dated at least to the 1830s, *Caste, in the Island of Ceylon* represents the public articulation of a position on caste from which the ACM would not alter over the course of the nineteenth century.²⁶ Accepting caste in the mission while attempting to attract the diversity of Jaffna's population had been found impracticable, especially as the majority of those interested in joining the mission schools had come from the dominant Veḷḷāḷar caste. When it was initially decided in 1824 that caste had become an obstacle incompatible with Christian theology, many attempts to stamp out its vestiges were made, from removing students unwilling to eat on mission land and requiring that church members of different castes sit together, to eventually marrying a group of students across caste lines. No detailed explanation is provided in the mission minutes or the missionary journals as to why breaking caste was determined to be a failed enterprise. And despite a thorough description of the mission's attempts to break caste in their pamphlet *Caste, in the Island of Ceylon*, references to inter-caste marriage are conspicuously absent. In my conclusion, I would like to suggest that the mission leadership's admission that the effort was 'generally disastrous to the assailants and the assailed,' should be taken seriously and literally, bringing Nāki's life to centre stage once again.

Conclusion

In the decade preceding Nāki's death, the ACM pursued the spread of Christianity by attempting to knock down the pillars on which they thought 'Hindooism' rested. Among these pillars, caste was considered the most important practice to undermine, and so to break caste the mission arranged a number of mixed-caste activities, from dining and seating, to schooling and marriage. We cannot affirm or deny the Mann family narrative that Nāki was murdered, but we can place her life, marriage, and death at the centre of an institution seeking to use every tool at its disposal to expand its community and spread its message.

In a macro sense, the ACM's decision to affiliate with the Veḷḷāḷar directly contributed to that group's social and economic control over Jaffna's oppressed communities. However, it also cannot be ignored that the American Christian project provided a temporary space for Nāki to rewrite certain aspects of her own lifeworld, from her cultivation of a foreign, Christian domesticity to her choice of a marital and sexual partner. In other words, while overall the ACM made life for Jaffna's enslaved communities more difficult by restricting means for social advancement solely to the dominant caste, it also allowed a limited number of opportunities to challenge caste hegemony. Nāki's story is a reminder of the ambiguous historical interaction between Christian mission, slavery, and caste in South Asia, one that could and did facilitate both oppressed-caste social mobility, as well as provide tools that could be leveraged as sophisticated weapons of oppression.

One result of this article is the demonstration of how the history of the American Ceylon Mission is inextricably linked to caste and slavery. The mission's determination to align with the slave-holding Veḷḷāḷar caste followed a decade-long attempt to compel a mixed-caste community through mixed seating, dining, and marriage that endeavoured to bind people from dominant, oppressed, and enslaved castes. The

ACM's Veļļālar affiliation had far-reaching effects that include the caste community's multi-generational control over English language education and its promise of social mobility. This control facilitated ongoing and durable caste divisions on the peninsula that can still be seen among some Jaffna Tamils. In other words, the story of how the American Ceylon Mission chose to identify with and support the Veļļālar, a decision made in the context of slavery and elucidated through a reading of Nāki's story, is central to the operation of caste in Jaffna's modern period.

Finally, at the opening of this article I pointed to Saidiya Hartman's method of critical fabulation and her goal 'to make visible the production of disposable lives' (2008, 36). I would argue that Nāki's story also helps us to think about human disposability in South Asia, how it came to be, how it is perpetuated, and how it has been concealed, archivally and otherwise. Had I relied solely upon the received colonial and missionary archives for the research from which this article is drawn, it is unlikely that the few direct references to Nāki would have provoked sustained consideration. Instead, my reading of those archives was utterly perhaps, altered? by my emotional and academic investment in and friendships with families connected to the American Ceylon Mission. It is through these relationships that I was allowed to learn of the haunting that the Mann family is still burdened with, and given permission to explore the narrative's significance for South Asian history. These lessons radically perhaps, altered? the way I interacted with the archival materials of the American Ceylon Mission, and offer the possibility for new ways to read and write South Asian history in Nāki's wake.

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Endnotes

1. “Ponni Mann” is a pseudonym.
2. Scholars have only recently started to explore the connection between slavery and caste in Sri Lanka's past. E.g., Balmforth 2016; Wickramasinghe and Schrikker 2019.
3. The name “Elizabeth Worcester” was the result of a \$20 donation from the Ladies' Association of Peacham, Vermont in 1820. Thousands of similar donations were given, each paying for the education, room, and board of an ACM mission student for one year. In the first seventeen years of the scholarship programme alone, more than \$40,000 was donated, providing upwards of 2,000 funded years of education to several hundred young men and women. The programme continued until 1855 and resulted in dozens of Jaffna Tamil families with American surnames like Breckenridge, Mills, Tappan, and Mann.
4. The predominant explanation for the origin of the Kōviyar relies upon an etymological argument linking the community's name with the dominant Sinhalese cultivating caste, the Goyigama. This similarity is cited as evidence that at one

point the Kōviyar were Sinhalese Goyigamas captured in battle or purchased as slaves. M.D. Raghavan has an alternative approach that explains the Kōviyar's name based on a traditional occupation as cowherds linked to the monarchy. See Raghavan 1954. Unlike many members of the other two previously-enslaved communities, many Kōviyars continue to self-identify as such today. Thanks to Pathmanesan Sanmugeswaran for this detail.

5. The authors of foundational texts of Jaffna history, the Yālp̄pāṇa Vaipavamālai (1736?) and the Kailāya Mālai, as well as the peninsula's subsequent modern historians have with one exception—Kārttikēcu Civattampi—been Veļļālar.
6. One valuable exception to this exists: Arasaratnam (1982) highlighted early eighteenth-century Cāṇār petitions to the Dutch governor that detail their origin story and its implications for taxation at odds with the taxation requirements required of them under the Dutch (pp. 377–92).
7. In 1818, corporate ownership of slaves on the island was abolished by order of the British colonial government. The same command ordered the creation of an island-wide registry for all slaves, and refusal to participate carried the punishment of the slave's emancipation. During periods of employment, slaves received a meagre payment in kind from their owners. When not working for an owner, slaves were required to provide for themselves.
8. Miron Winslow (1825) provided a small description of such labour in a published letter to his brother (p. 825).
9. Rupa Viswanath (2014) notes the use of land ownership and the threat of eviction as a principal method of landlords in South India to maintain positions of dominance over those in their employ and living on their land (p. 98).
10. Karen Valgård (2009) has written about coercion in the encounter between oppressed-caste Tamil parents and the Danish missionaries seeking their children for boarding schools in the 1860s and 1870s South Arcot district.
11. For insight into the Sri Lankan *devadāsī* world, see Soneji 2010.
12. For more on the world of *tiṇṇai paļļikkūṭam* education, see Raman 2010 and Balmforth 2019.
13. Soon after joining the American mission, Vīrakatti was given the name Elias Cornelius and his brother Katirakāman was renamed Danvers. Vīrakatti and Katirakāman were supported by the Female Society for Educating Heathen Children of Salem, Massachusetts and the Masonic Jordan Lodge of Danvers, Massachusetts, respectively (Poor, 1821, p. 197).
14. This is an unheard-of practice in Jaffna today, where naming conventions for nearly all communities (except Protestant Christians) follow the pattern of a child's father's (or after marriage, husband's) given name followed by the child's gendered given name.
15. The models at work here are numerous, including the famous Bell-Lancastrian, Madras, or Monitorial system, the common Tamil *tiṇṇai paļļikkūṭam* model, Christoph Samuel John's pedagogical innovations as part of his work as a missionary at the Halle-Tranquebar mission in South India, and local Jaffna innovations produced by John's Tamil student and collaborator Christian David. For more on the ACM's pedagogical inheritance, see Balmforth 2019 and Balmforth 2020.

16. Levi Spaulding created a table tracking the graduates from Oodooville Girl's College and the professions of their husbands between 1824 and 1840 (Mission Letter for 1864, 1864). 'Missionary assistant' was described alongside 'lawyer,' 'Mudaliyar' (village headman), and 'writer in a government office.'
17. For a review of literature on caste in Jaffna, see Kuganathan 2014.
18. These histories included Lord (1813), Brown (1816), and Buchanan (1811).
19. In 1826, emancipation could be granted after the value of the slave was determined by several parties separately nominated by both the owner and slave. The amount was then paid to the owner, and a stamp tax was paid to the colonial state. No further reference to Nāki's enslavement is made in the minutes or Woodward's journal, and so we do not know how much was paid to Nāki's owner, if indeed such a payment was made. Nāki was never entered into the slave registry required by law from 1818, and so we do not even know if in fact a payment would have been required, since, at least legally, statutory emancipation resulted from an owner failing to register his or her slave.
20. Sautio was at the time employed in the house of Daniel Poor. It is not possible to determine his caste, as there are indications that he was from an oppressed caste—namely, he worked in a labouring position, he was never a student, and his name is frequently given simply as 'Sautio,' the simplicity of which could indicate he was oppressed caste—and also indications of dominant caste status. In another entry in the ACM minute book, Sautio is referred to as 'Sautiapillai.' In the second half of the nineteenth century, the suffix 'pillai' became a Veḷḷāḷar marker and was increasingly added to names. It is unclear whether this first effort to arrange a marriage for Nāki was to be an inter-caste marriage.
21. Of the thirteen marriages that took place within the mission between 1822 and Nāki's death on February 4, 1832, eight can be confirmed to be inter-caste, four were between parties of the same caste, and one cannot be identified. The following marriages can be identified as inter-caste: April 3, 1822 - Daniel Smead (Veḷḷāḷar) and Miranda Safford (Caṇṭāḷar), 1825 - Jordan Lodge (Ciṭṭiyar) and Susanna Hopkins (Veḷḷāḷar), June 19, 1828 - Asa McFarland (Maṭaippaḷḷi) and Fanny Hall (Veḷḷāḷar), August 27, 1828 - Cyrus Mann (Veḷḷāḷar) and Elizabeth Worcester (Nāki, Kōviyar), October 13, 1830 - Elias Cornelius (Vīrakatti, Kōviyar) and Elizabeth Appleton (Maṭaippaḷḷi), October 13, 1830 - Seth Payson (Ciṭṭiyar) and Louisa Hawes (Veḷḷāḷar), May 3, 1831 - Thomas Adams (Veḷḷāḷar) and Susan Huntington (Maṭaippaḷḷi), May 3, 1831 - Philip (Caraiyār) and Joanna Lathrup (Ciṭṭiyar). The following same caste marriages can be confirmed: March 13, 1824 - Ebenezer Porter (Veḷḷāḷar) and Mary Poor (Veḷḷāḷar), June 21, 1826 - Samuel Davis (Veḷḷāḷar) and Betsey C. Pomeroy (Veḷḷāḷar), September 2, 1830 - John B. Lawrence (Veḷḷāḷar) and Mary Sweetser (Veḷḷāḷar), November 8, 1831 - Cyrus Kingsbury (Veḷḷāḷar) and Mary Dayton (Veḷḷāḷar). The January 9, 1828 marriage of Samuel Ambrose (likely Veḷḷāḷar, Ciṭṭiyar, or Maṭaippaḷḷi) and Harriet Newell (Veḷḷāḷar) cannot be labeled as inter-caste or same caste because Samuel Ambrose's caste affiliation cannot be identified from available records.
22. No reason is given for this abrupt change, although given the general movement toward an entirely Veḷḷāḷar student body and an overwhelmingly Veḷḷāḷar church membership, it is perhaps not a surprising decision thanks to Richard Fox Young for this point. Excising the castes of church and school members had the added

benefit of not highlighting just how dramatically Veḷḷāḷar the American Ceylon Mission had become, a fact that readers in Boston might have questioned and that the mission might not have been ready to publicly address. The Veḷḷāḷar-ization of the mission would not be cohesively explained in any public format until 1853.

23. The ACM journals from the first half of the nineteenth century are filled with cyclical waves of epidemic, and in the years before the establishment of mission hospitals, community members of all types repeatedly turned to the missionaries for medical care. Over and over, adults and children from the nearby communities were brought to the mission stations with serious health emergencies, from bleeding compound fractures to starvation. E.g., Winslow, 1835, p. 207.
24. Rupa Viswanath (2014) has recently pushed against this cohesiveness by highlighting ways in which missionaries in South India accepted caste divisions when strategically convenient, a flexibility that accords with the ACM's activity in Jaffna.
25. Several Dutch descriptions of caste in Jaffna have survived, although they generally are limited to lists of castes, and none match the depth of analysis found in *Caste, in the Island of Ceylon*. In the work, Meigs, et al. (1853) provide an early proto-anthropological description of Jaffna's caste paradigm as dominated by a tripartite, monarchical model, headed by Veḷḷāḷar landowners who employ a set of artisan castes called Kuṭimakaḷ and own slaves (p. 17). This is the same model later described in Rasanayagam [1926] 1984 (p. 383) and Hocart 1968 (p. 7).
26. Even well into the twentieth century the ACM remained ambivalent regarding the plight of oppressed caste education. In 1915, Dr. J. L. Barton, then Secretary of the ABCFM, received the ACM's support for a plan to open a school specifically targeting 'the depressed classes' that, the mission admitted, had so long been ignored. The plan never came to fruition (American Ceylon Mission, 1914–1915).