

ARTICLE

Caste as Performance: Ayyankali and the Caste Scripts of Colonial Kerala

Vivek V. Narayan

Department of English, Ashoka University, National Capital Region, India
Email: v.v.narayan@gmail.com

The crowded marketplace in Thiruvananthapuram (aka Trivandrum) thronged with people in the late nineteenth century. Men and women clad in white *mundu*¹ teemed about the busy street buying oil and salt, horseshoes and iron farm implements, coarse cloth, coir rope, jaggery, and palm toddy. The men were mostly bare-chested, though some, unmindful of the sweltering heat, wore white long shirts or an upper-body cloth. While a few young women wore printed blouses, many, particularly the older women, wore no upper-body clothes except for large, beaded necklaces made of red-colored stones. Most people, with the exception of the men who clothed their upper body, walked along the sides of the road, leaving the path clear for the occasional bullock cart. These bullock carts, also known as *villuvandi*, carried young men-about-town, almost exclusively landowning, upper-caste Nairs. Dressed in a spotless white shirt, white *mundu*, and matching white turban, the Nair riding his *villuvandi* assumed the haughty air of a master surveying his subjects; out to observe his inferiors as much as he was seen as a superior. These Nairs, and other upper-caste men and women, had the exclusive right of way, on bullock cart or on foot, the right to wear clean white clothes, and, of course, the right to ride a *villuvandi*. These rights were codified through caste-based rules or norms known as *jati maryada*, which governed all aspects of social behavior.

One day in 1893, a bullock cart wound through this busy market street, dragged by two enormous white bulls. The clangs from the large brass bells on their necks rang clear above the market's persistent din. The *villuvandi* carried a tall, dark, smartly turned out young man dressed in white clothes and matching turban. A Nair man, the scene suggested. A *villuvandi* was, after all, the mark of a *pramani*, a local man of prominence, as was the attire. It seemed a rather mundane scene that had been rehearsed thousands of times in colonial Thiruvananthapuram. If anything, the well-rehearsed familiarity of the scene obscured what made it possible: the absoluteness of the performance codes of *jati maryada*.

The appearance of this particular young man, though, caused turmoil. Upper-caste men seemed to go berserk. Enraged, they threatened him, and some

The author would like to thank the editors of *Theatre Survey*—Marlis Schweitzer, who received the article, and Brandi Wilkins Catanese, who saw it through to publication; two anonymous reviewers, whose insightful comments helped develop the work; and Michael Gnat, whose attention to detail made preparing this article for print a pleasure.

© The Authors, 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of American Society for Theatre Research, Inc.

even threw stones. As if in anticipation of this opposition, the young man had armed himself with a dagger. Mayhem ensued. What appeared at first to be an ordinary bullock cart ride turned out to be the beginning of one of the most important moments of anticaste struggle in modern Kerala history: Ayyankali's *villuvandi samaram* (or, Ayyankali's bullock cart protest).

My reconstruction is based on the historian T. H. P. Chentharassery's authoritative oral historical account.² Chentharassery writes:

The *savarna* decrees had it that the *avarnas* could not enter public streets.³ [Ayyankali] challenged those codes by purchasing a *villuvandi* [bullock cart]. . . . On the necks of two white bulls, he hung two loud brass bells. . . . He was clad in a white half-sleeve *banian* and a white upper-cloth wrapped around his head. Those clothes were the biggest violation of *jati maryada*.

The *villuvandi* galloped along the forbidden public streets. The bulls clamored with their bells and hooves. The *savarna pramanis*, who could not tolerate this sight, drew close with murderous weapons. It was only then that the cart slowed down a little.

"Hey you, how dare you wear an upper-cloth!"

A roar. Unfazed by that roar, [Ayyankali] drew the dagger tucked at his waist.

The young man, Ayyankali (1863–1941), belonged to the Pulaya caste of untouchables, who were prohibited from riding on bullock carts, wearing clean clothes, and walking on public roads. In one action, Ayyankali had violated nearly every aspect of *jati maryada*, claiming public space, riding bullock carts, and wearing new white clothes. He did not merely proclaim the need to access public space but performatively claimed it for the oppressed castes. His bullock cart *ride* became a *protest* only because it was commonplace for upper-caste men to ride in that fashion, and because this was an act forbidden to Pulayas. In other words, Ayyankali's appropriation and rehearsal of upper-caste behavior transgressed the performance codes of *jati maryada*.

If performance is understood in its widest sense as "twice-behaved behavior" or "restored behavior"⁴—that is, as something that is never for the first time—then caste may be meaningfully conceptualized as performance.⁵ My usage of performance here, and throughout, goes beyond aesthetic forms to include all forms of social behavior.

Caste shapes embodiment, choreographs movement, and establishes notions of linguistic propriety and social etiquette through codes of conduct that govern behavior by regulating everyday practices and rehearsing modes of self-presentation. These performative codes of conduct seek to order interaction in ways that makes castes legible and, ultimately, governable. These caste codes are performative in that they are, to borrow from Judith Butler, not "a singular or deliberate 'act,'" but rather a "reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names."⁶ Caste codes are reiterative citational practices whose identifications of castes produce, in effect, their social existence. Caste becomes, therefore, a product of social behaviors that embody performative codes of conduct. Ayyankali's *villuvandi samaram* shows that transgressing these

caste codes through forbidden behavior can initiate a struggle for change—even, as we shall see later, for equality.

Caste Scripts

Yet, caste is not, after all, simply a matter of prescriptive code and social behavior. Conceptualizing caste as performance must bear in mind the nonhuman aspects of caste: the world of things and institutions. The materiality of things and institutions embodies and encastes social behaviors, attempting to align them with, or resist, performative codes of conduct.

Let us return to Ayyankali. His *villuvandi samaram* would not have been possible, to state the obvious, without the bullock cart. Made of material that human labor turned from tree trunk to wooden yoke, the cart bears testimony to the entanglements of the human labor and nonhuman material. Moreover, a cart needs bullocks to power its movement, further entangling humans and animals. In short, owning a *villuvandi* meant that one could buy wood, direct human labor, and own animals. The material presence of the cart lies, therefore, at the center of this event that performatively claimed and reconstituted public space that caste-based codes of conduct denied the oppressed castes. Similarly, Ayyankali's spotless white clothes and turban defied codes that prescribed what material may adorn a Pulaya head. As with the *villuvandi*, here too materiality interacts with code and behavior in overdetermined ways. This interaction between performative codes of conduct, materiality, and social behavior I call "caste scripts."⁷

Caste scripts govern particular modes of self-presentation by dictating conduct, defining access to particular things, and mandating forms of social behavior. They are interactive in that their purview extends beyond the three discrete aspects I identified—code, material, and behavior—into the heterogeneous realms that lie between them. These scripts are also always relational in that castes, as B. R. Ambedkar points out, "exist only in the plural number." Their relationality is a constant reminder that "[t]here is no such thing as *a caste*: there are always *castes*."⁸ That is, caste scripts not only characterize particular modes of self-presentation but also govern encasted social interaction.

Although caste codes form only one part of the interactive triad of caste scripts, they occupy a position of particular significance, for they make castes legible and provide scriptural, "traditional,"⁹ or theological legitimization for humiliation, oppression, and appropriation. Caste codes are typically Brahminical in origin and tend to assert caste. They are encasted grammar in Ludwig Wittgenstein's sense that "essence is expressed in grammar."¹⁰ Like grammar, caste codes offer rules of right conduct: precepts, prescriptions, proscriptions, and examples of correct usage. Wittgenstein describes the essential grammatical function in a phrase that has deep resonance for caste codes; he calls it "Theology as grammar."¹¹ Similarly, caste codes comprise a theology-as-grammar revealing the fundamental objects of caste: legibility, ordered interaction, subjection, graded inequality,¹² and, ultimately, governance.

In contrast, caste scripts exist in the real world, and are typically the lived experience of caste iniquity and the forms of governance that make this possible. These scripts characterize those assumptions, judgments, substances, and practices that

encaste human experience and social meaning. By *encasted experience*, I mean that performative process through which the caste order ascribes values and attributes to human lives by blurring the boundaries between code, material, and behavior. They conceptualize encasted human experience by revealing the workings of this triangulated relationship of code, material, and behavior.¹³

Caste scripts map to social meaning and exist in a creative relationship with the grammar of caste codes. If caste scripts enable us to conceptualize the performative process of encasting in everyday life, it is because they are weighted in favor of social meaning even as they remain tethered to grammatical rules. Meaning, as Wittgenstein notes, lies in actual use, and takes primacy over rule; understanding it depends upon knowing something of the particular form of life within which it was born.¹⁴ The transaction of meaning is, therefore, not a dry trade in rules but a rich sharing of lived experience.

But meaning is not merely use. There exists, for Wittgenstein, “a correspondence between the concepts ‘rule’ and ‘meaning.’” Such play between rule and meaning, which forges and reforges the relationships between words and objects, he calls “language-games.”¹⁵ A language-game is a situated practice, for “the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.”¹⁶ Where caste codes offer the rules that correspond to an encasted grammar, caste scripts refer to actual lived experience and social meaning within particular forms of life.

Caste scripts characterize forms of life in that they define not only the vagaries of human experience, the forms it takes, but also grant and withhold recognition of the fact of human existence, or what makes a life. This tension between form and life constitutes, for Veena Das, the “distinction between the horizontal and the vertical axes of forms of life.”¹⁷ Das suggests here that the horizontal axis marks vagaries or differences in forms, whereas the vertical axis imposes limits on who is considered to have a human life. Such a reading of forms of life brings us to an appreciation of “not only the security provided by belonging to a community with shared agreements but also the dangers that human beings pose to each other. These dangers relate to not only disputations over *forms* but also disputations over what constitutes *life*.”¹⁸ Caste scripts constitute particular definitions in everyday life of what makes a human life. They provide a language within which particular struggles over what it means to be human are conceived, disputed, negotiated, fought. They offer, in short, a language within which to contend who is, and is not, considered to be human. Thus, the purview of caste scripts extends far beyond merely prescribing how one might appear, and what things one could use, and how one should behave. They offer nothing less than meaning in an encasted form of life.

My usage of “script” here refers not to a written document, or text, but rather to codified action and behaved imagination. In an influential formulation, Richard Schechner contrasts scripts with dramatic text and defines it as a “blueprint for the enactment.” For Schechner, scripts “pre-exist any given enactment” and “persist from enactment to enactment.”¹⁹ I do not share Schechner’s certainty in his temporal schema, asserting as he does that the script as blueprint always preexists the enactment. Scripts just as often follow performative phenomena, as surrogations, as acts of transfer, and as remembered, narrated, and restaged scenarios.²⁰ In this sense, scripts are fingerprints of the prior presence of a particular social

phenomenon.²¹ Caste scripts are, in short, both blueprints that preexist enactments and fingerprints of prior appearances. As codified action, they bear testimony to the cultural ideation or imagination of events before they take place, and also, equally, to the ghosted afterlives of embodied cultural behaviors.

In other words, caste scripts are culturally overdetermined and ontologically indeterminate, existing rarely, if ever, without fierce contestation. These contestations are akin to Wittgenstein's "language-games" in that what is critical is not the grammar but the actual performance of speaking within a form of life.²² The fractious relationship between rule and use—between grammar and meaning, or caste codes and caste scripts—within forms of life makes language-games an unstable practice of contestation. The friction resulting from the contentious performance of caste scripts within particular forms of life gives it the potential both to assert and to oppose caste.

Ayyankali's bullock cart bears two conflicting caste scripts: one asserting domination, and the other performing resistance. These conflicting caste scripts abrade to enact political claims: on public space, on embodiment, and ultimately, on equality. The Nair landlord riding the *villuvandi* was a master surveying his subjects, whereas Ayyankali rehearsing the same behavior was a rebel against caste. The first caste script performs domination through repetitive behavior whereas the second enacts anticaste resistance through political action.²³

The *villuvandi samaram* attested to the emergence of egalitarian discourses and concomitant genealogies of the human in Kerala, which burst open the closed world of subjection circumscribed by *jati maryada*.²⁴ Fully grasping the significance of Ayyankali's intervention and appreciating the magnitude of the genealogies of the human require taking a closer look at the caste codes of colonial Kerala. These caste codes were comprehensive, and governed social interactions in the domains of space, body, and language. They spatialized hierarchy by mandating distances between castes, made castes legible through prescribed modes of embodiment, and enforced linguistic proprieties. Taken together, these three domains of caste codes governed modes of self-presentation and ordered interaction. As with caste anywhere, the *jati maryada* of colonial Kerala rewarded those who followed its codes, and brought down harsh punishment upon those who dared to challenge it.²⁵ The remit of caste codes, however, went beyond governing discrete aspects such as space, body, and language, to cohering acceptable forms of personhood that ranged from abjection to reverence.

Moreover, caste codes formed only one aspect of the lived experience of caste, interacting with nonhuman materials to assert and contest the caste order through embodied behavior. This triangulated interaction of caste codes, materiality, and social behavior—caste scripts—reveals the actual lived experience of caste and cohered forms of personhood. The significance of Ayyankali's political actions lie not only in their contestation and refusal of the caste codes of *jati maryada*, but also in performing new caste scripts exemplifying a modern individual forming collectives to struggle toward a new egalitarian society. In the aftermath of the *villuvandi samaram*, Ayyankali emerged as a leader of the former enslaved communities and led more broad-based agitations against caste elsewhere across Travancore.²⁶ He continues to be the most widely recognized icon of the contemporary Dalit movement in Kerala. To this day, the *villuvandi samaram* continues to

inspire reenactments in Kerala in contexts ranging from Dalit women demanding entry to the Sabarimala temple in 2018 to Dalits agitating for right of way in 2021.²⁷ Ayyankali's transgressions of caste codes beginning with the *villuvandi samaram* offered new forms of personhood embodying self-respect that drew upon discourses of equality to perform new caste scripts challenging the caste order of abjection and reverence. In transforming self and society, these transgressive anti-caste actions ushered in political modernity to Kerala.

The performance framework of caste I theorize here accommodates both the modes of self-presentation that assert caste and the political actions that perform anticaste resistance. This framework allows us to look beyond the specific mandates codified by caste to the encasted forms of personhood that emerge through everyday performance. The significance of Ayyankali's *villuvandi samaram* was not merely transgressing caste codes but enacting new caste scripts that embodied a modern person and presented a vision of an egalitarian society. By conceptualizing caste as performance, this essay shows that Ayyankali's *villuvandi samaram* was not merely a protest against an unjust order but was, rather, a harbinger of political modernity in Kerala.

The *Jati Maryada* of Colonial Kerala

The caste codes of colonial Kerala mandated encasted self-presentation and governed interaction in the domains of space, body, and language. The spatial codes were especially remarkable for their intricate relational choreographies that not only decreed access and controlled mobility, but also directed proxemic relationships. Furthermore, these codes included prescriptions regarding embodiment, posture, clothes, hairstyles, and jewelry. Finally, language—understood as situated linguistic practices rather than as discrete codes—also fell under the purview of *jati maryada*, particularly by encasting self-referential terms that defined modes of self-presentation and forms of address that governed interaction. Analyzing the codes of *jati maryada* within a performance framework allows me, first, to reconceptualize caste-mandated distances as spatial codes that choreographed abjection and reverence; second, to rethink signifying objects representing a graded hierarchy as performative encasted things conscripting bodies; and third, to reframe caste-prescribed language customs as linguistic codes of self-presentation that constitute the social order through everyday performance.

These caste codes were also always gendered practices, since maintaining caste purity depends upon policing women's sexuality. Given that "endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to caste," preventing miscegenation through patriarchal regulation of women's sexuality is central to maintaining the caste order.²⁸ Caste codes must therefore be understood intersectionally, for their regulations were compounded by, and inseparable from, patriarchal norms in each domain. Spatial codes relegated women of even the most privileged castes to their homes,²⁹ and abolishing this caste patriarchal practice became a rallying point of upper-caste reformist organizations in the early twentieth century.³⁰ Embodied codes forbade *avarna* women from covering their breasts, and protests against this humiliating practice were an important aspect of modernity in Kerala.³¹ In the case of linguistic codes, I show below that practices of *aachara*

bhasha, or the encasted language ideologies related to *jati maryada*, were coconstitutive of social power structures. Such coconstitution of language and power provides one theoretical through line for feminist³² and Dalit³³ historians of Kerala.

These caste codes encompassed and arrayed all—across caste, across gender—in a hierarchical order. They performed within and across the domains of space, body, and language, the “ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt” that Ambedkar described as a key characteristic of caste.³⁴ The hegemony of caste codes was enforced through violence; numerous ethnographic and historical sources indicate that anyone found in violation of *jati maryada* could be killed by a caste superior.³⁵ Such binding of terror and performance is, as Rustom Bharucha points out, reiterative and citational.³⁶ The violent enactment of these performative codes of caste constituted the encasted society of colonial-era Kerala. If caste is performatively constituted through these iterative embodied practices spanning the domains of space, body, and language, then Ayyankali’s interventions constituted both an insurrection against the caste order and an assertion of the modern human.

Space

The history of colonial Kerala is, in a sense, the history of access to public spaces such as roads, schools, law courts, and temples.³⁷ Insurrectionary and reformist movements from the period before Ayyankali’s *villuvandi samaram*, such as the Channar Lahala (1822–59) or Narayana Guru’s temple consecration at Aruvippuram (1888), and after, such as the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924), lay claims to public space in direct contravention of *jati maryada*.³⁸

In the decades leading up to the *villuvandi samaram*, these political claims were not unheeded by power. The princely state of Travancore responded to the pressing demands for change by establishing new policy in devious and cynical ways. Under the stewardship of Dewan T. Madhava Rao (1828–91), the state government perfected the art of appearing to concede demands as a way to contain further political protests. In 1870, Madhava Rao signed a proclamation that gave the slave castes open access to all roads designated by the government as “public.” This proclamation was a direct response to a potentially damaging report on caste disabilities filed by Travancore Resident G. A. Ballard to the Madras Presidency, and was intended to reassure the British rulers that immediate measures were being adopted to contain political uprisings.³⁹

However, the *Travancore Government Gazette* reported in May 1870 that a drummer employed by the state announced that all Pulayas were to disregard the recent proclamation, and to stay off the public roads as before. Madhava Rao dismissed the drummer from service, only to see him reinstated by the Maharaja Ayilyam Thirunal Rama Varma III (1832–80) with a fine of a month’s salary. That the proclamation was reissued in 1884—a good fourteen years after the first time and nearly a decade before Ayyankali’s *villuvandi samaram*—shows that such periodic concessions of access to public space remained a mere administrative sleight of hand intended to reassure the British rulers of the Madras Presidency rather than to recognize the political demands of the slave castes.⁴⁰ Repeated proclamations notwithstanding, public roads continued to be inaccessible to the slave castes.

If spatial caste codes put these spaces beyond the reach of the untouchable slave castes, they also simultaneously identified those who were denied access as untouchable. This was, in other words, a coconstitutive process that marked both spaces and bodies.⁴¹ Moreover, reserving access to spaces such as roads, schools, and temples facilitated *savarna* appropriation of commons. Seen in this context, Ayyankali's *villuvandi samaram* can be readily understood as a transgressive political action that enacted anticaste resistance.

But this was not all: for strict and absolute though these spatial caste codes were, they were not unique to Kerala.⁴² What was unique to Kerala was the complex choreography scored by the relational codes that governed proxemic relations.⁴³ This phenomenon, known as "distance pollution" in missionary ethnographies and scholarly literature,⁴⁴ is understood to have choreographed proxemic relations between various castes, and thereby spatialized the caste order.⁴⁵ When viewed through the lens of performance, however, these spatial codes of *jati maryada* reveal more than what prevailing theories of distance pollution can accommodate. Situating Ayyankali's *villuvandi samaram* within a performance frame shows that he enacted more than merely a transgression of spatial *jati maryada*.

These spatial codes were organized under three broad categories: "untouchability," "unapproachability," and "unseeability." A Nair could, for instance, approach, but not touch, a Namboodiri.⁴⁶ Between them existed a relationship of untouchability.⁴⁷ These norms regarding pollution imposed varying distances of unapproachability across castes.⁴⁸ An Ezhava or Thiyya must keep thirty-six feet from a Namboodiri and twelve feet from a Nair. Pulayas, who were considered unseeable by the Namboodiris, had to maintain a distance of at least ninety-six feet from a Namboodiri.⁴⁹ The practice was so well-established that the distances mandated by *jati maryada* between castes became, in popular parlance, units of spatial measurement: a *tiyyapad* refers to thirty-six feet, the distance between a Thiyya or Ezhava and a Namboodiri; while a *cherumapad* refers to sixty-four feet, the distance between a Cheruma and a Nair.⁵⁰

But how was this distance maintained when all parties were on the move? The anthropologist Joan Mencher points out that these prescribed distances corresponded to standard architectural features, such as the distance from the doorway of a Namboodiri home (*illam*) to the main gate, to the courtyard, or to the first step of the veranda.⁵¹ While this distance could be precisely imposed within the home, on open grounds or public roads, they had to be roughly assessed by sight. Thus, the typical distance from the *illam* to the main gate—ninety-six feet—was applied between the two extreme ends of the caste order, Namboodiris and Pulayas. This distance became roughly equated to unseeability. The other mandated distances were calculated in similar fashion, through rough assessment. These spatial codes were, in other words, highly uncertain.

Uncertain though they were, violating these norms attracted extreme punishment, even death. The combination of uncertain codes and extreme punishment in the spatial codes gave precarious terror to tyrannical power. The proper observance of these codes meant willing participation, which was rewarded (rather poorly, one might add: by being allowed to remain alive!), whereas any aberration was punished (severely: with death). Therefore, the slave castes were obliged not only to follow these choreographic prompts, but also to appear to be willingly

adhering to these caste codes by abjecting and debasing themselves. For the upper castes were on the watch for any transgression: anyone who appeared not to be subjecting themselves to these caste codes, who dared to presume to be a fellow human, acting with self-respect and autonomy, was to be “cut down” like an “animal.”⁵²

In other words, the spatial codes of *jati maryada* effected much more than what the concept of “distance pollution” accommodates: they not only spatially positioned the slave castes, but also mandated performances of abjection and humility. Anything less was seen as a violation of *jati maryada*, for the object of spatial codes was never merely distance but an abjected form of personhood. These spatial caste codes provided choreographic prompts that went beyond governing space to regulating particular encasted modes of self-presentation. This relational choreography is, therefore, central to understanding the performative constitution of caste. This distinctive feature of Kerala’s caste order has been understood thus far as either curiosity or survival, as odd expressions of caste.⁵³ However, in a performance-centric view, spatial codes become an essential part of the caste scripts that governed behavior, and may be considered a form of caste choreography. In this view, Ayyankali’s appearance reimagined caste scripts of abjection choreographed by spatial *jati maryada* to embody a new self-respecting modern individual.

Caste codes configured bodies in space. In order to do this effectively, caste had to be made legible from a distance through embodied codes.

Body

In Chentharassery’s vivid re-creation of the *villuvandi samaram*, he imagines a *savarna* man outraged that Ayyankali had dared to wear an upper cloth. Humiliating practices such as not being allowed to wear upper-body clothes served the purposes of easily visible identification necessary to maintain the codified distance. In other words, the embodied codes of *jati maryada* made caste legible and enabled encasted emplacement. In colonial Kerala, bodies were encasted through things such as clothing, accessories, hair and makeup, and jewelry.⁵⁴ These caste-marked bodies enacted caste scripts that were born of the interaction among performative caste codes of *jati maryada*, the materiality of encasted things, and everyday social behavior.

The materials that encasted bodies became assertive and agential entities through social performance. These encasted things constituted entangled relationships between the human and the nonhuman, exhibiting the kind of agency that Martin Heidegger identified as the hallmark of a thing, as opposed to an object.⁵⁵ A thing, in Robin Bernstein’s words, invites us to dance.⁵⁶ These encasted things not only made castes legible and identifiable for the purpose of maintaining the codified distance, but also formed insignia that arrayed human bodies on a graded hierarchy from abjection to reverence. Understanding the everyday performance of reverence and abjection enacted by the dance of encasted things and caste-marked bodies is necessary to grasp the significance of Ayyankali’s violation of the *jati maryada* for slave castes and appropriation of Nair costume.

Namboodiri men and women wore their hair in a distinctive topknot arranged in front of the forehead. They covered their upper bodies with a cloth, and carried palm-leaf umbrellas that were visible from a considerable distance. They had right of way, barring none, and the right to use palanquins and bullock carts (such as the

villuvandi). Namboodiri women rarely ventured outside their homes, and when they did, they went with an entourage and were shrouded neck to toe in unstitched white cloth (*cheloputha*) and protected by an umbrella. This practice of being hidden from view gave Namboodiri women the name of *Antarjanam* or *Agathamma* (literally, the woman or mother of the interior). Both men and women were entitled to gold jewelry encrusted with precious stones—and the lavish incomes from their vast lands, with its enslaved or indentured labor, ensured that they could afford it. The men wore a white, sacred, multistrand thread over their left shoulders and across their torsos (*poonol*).⁵⁷ They often wore gold rings and a gold waist string with an amulet (*elassu*), whereas women wore the wedding ornament (*tali*) and often a smaller halter necklace made of gold coins (*cherutali*). Ornaments helped stratify within the caste as well: not merely in economic terms, but in terms of finer ritual subdivisions. For instance, high-ranked priests among the Namboodiris (*akkithiris* or *somathiris*) often wore bell-shaped earrings (*kundalam*), whereas other Namboodiri men had their ears pierced but rarely wore earrings. The makeup for Namboodiris consisted of three lines of sacred ash (*bhasmam*) on the forehead, often with a vertical or crescent-shaped mark drawn with sandal paste. Turmeric (*manjal*) and vermilion (*kumkumam*), by virtue of their use in worship by *avarna* castes, were prohibited for Namboodiris.⁵⁸ In all, a Namboodiri was obliged to follow sixty-four finely defined codes of conduct that ordered their everyday behavior.⁵⁹ Much of these caste codes prescribe norms of purity and pollution, leading to the common understanding that, as the gazetteer Nagam Aiya noted, “A Nambudiri only wants an excuse for bathing. . . [and his] . . . thirst for bathing very often takes the form of a mania.”⁶⁰

Nair men and women wore around their waists a single piece of unstitched white cloth, the *mundu*, which stretched below their knees.⁶¹ They were entitled to cover their upper bodies, though the men rarely did. Men wore instead a thin piece of white cloth (*neriyathu*) over the left shoulder, or occasionally tied it around their forehead like a turban. Turbans were especially the norm for Nairs on ceremonial occasions.⁶² The women covered their upper bodies with a single cloth, which they tucked into the *mundu* at their waist and wound around their right shoulders. They also wore an additional garment called the *onnara*—literally, the one and a half—which, when paired with the *mundu*, was known as the *onnarayum mundum*. The colloquial name for this costume leaves no doubt of its caste significance: it was known as the *achchipudava*, or literally, the costume of the Nair woman.⁶³ Women were obliged to take off their upper-body cloth when approached by a Namboodiri or royalty.⁶⁴ Nagam Aiya records in the early twentieth century that although most Nair women continued to remain topless at home, the more modern among them had begun wearing a blouse modeled on the English corset (*ravikkai*).⁶⁵ Both men and women kept a tuft of hair (*kuduma*). Men tied theirs in a knot and let it hang behind their head; women kept their well-oiled hair knotted loosely on the left side of their head.⁶⁶ The men eschewed jewelry, and almost always carried a sword or long-handled sickle. Women wore an array of necklaces, a nose stud set with rubies or diamonds (*mookkuthi*), anklets (*padasaram* or *kolusu*), waistbands (*odyanam*), and earrings (*takka* or *toda*).⁶⁷

These codes affected not only the *savarnas* and the slave castes, but also intermediate castes who were faced with the problem of struggling against their caste

disabilities while preserving their caste privilege. The caste known variously as Channars, Shanars, or Nadars⁶⁸ is an example: they agitated against the humiliation imposed on them by the embodied codes of *jati maryada* even as they worked to maintain the spatial codes asserting their superiority over the slave castes.⁶⁹ Embodied *jati maryada* codified the dress of Channar men similar to the Nairs, including keeping a *kuduma*, although, unlike Nairs, they often sported tattoos. Channar women did not wear nose studs, and neither did they, till the first half of the nineteenth century, cover their upper bodies.

The slave castes endured the most humiliating embodied codes. Neither men nor women of the Pulaya and Paraya castes were allowed to cover their upper bodies. The women wore brass bangles and a red-stone bead necklace known as *kallu mala*.⁷⁰ They were denied the right to wear any precious ornaments, and given that they largely subsisted on daily wages measured out in paddy (unthreshed rice), they could not afford any gold jewelry. The bodies of men, women, and children were treated as part of the land: they were most often traded along with the land, though occasionally, slaves—especially children—were bought and sold on their own.⁷¹

From the most revered to the most abject, these codes of embodiment did not merely mark bodies to make caste legible but interacted with bodies to encaste modes of self-presentation. As with spatial choreography earlier, here too bodies were governed through posture and comportment once their caste was made legible. For instance, when approaching a Namboodiri, a Nair had to stand slightly bent with his right hand covering his mouth (*ochchanam*). Channars and other intermediate castes had to bend even further when addressing Nairs (and were, of course, forbidden from addressing Namboodiris).⁷² For the slave castes, the sight of a Namboodiri's palm-leaf umbrella in the distance meant having to leave the road and hide in the fields.

Be it the Namboodiri's palm-leaf umbrella, or the Nair woman's *achchipudava*, or the Pulaya woman's *kallu mala*, or a *villuvandi*, encasted things further conscripted human bodies and entangled them in the relational choreography of caste in colonial Kerala. They caste-marked bodies in order to array them in a graded hierarchy. Embodiment, spanning caste-marked human bodies and encasted nonhuman things, became another domain in which caste codes governed encasted forms of personhood and social interaction in colonial Kerala. Ayyankali's white clothes and *villuvandi* bore testimony to the ways in which caste scripts encasted bodies through the interaction of code, material, and behavior.

Language

These spatial and embodied codes played directly into linguistic caste codes that formed a third domain that *jati maryada* governed, adding speech to choreography and embodiment. In Chentharassery's description of the *villuvandi samaram*, the outraged *savarna* man screams, "Hey you, how dare you wear an upper-cloth!" In the original Malayalam, he merely says, "Eda, melmundu!" ("Eda, upper-cloth!")⁷³ The Malayalam word "eda" is a masculine second-person pronoun used to address a social inferior. This was only one of the many ways in which language was codified to govern encasted social interaction. Speech extended in language the spatial choreography of encasted bodies in nineteenth-century

Kerala. All castes—from *savarnas* to the slave castes—shouted particular phrases to announce their presence as they walked, so that they would not violate the spatial codes of *jati maryada*.⁷⁴ *Savarnas* such as Namboodiris and Nairs shouted “ho ho” to announce their arrival, whereas Ezhavas shouted “theendaley theendaley” and slave castes were forced to shout “eezhokkida.”⁷⁵ This practice of announcing oneself caused considerable consternation to the British Protestant missionaries, for they held it responsible for “the habit of shouting aloud in conversation, which,” one of them noted with barely concealed exasperation, “many respectable men have acquired.”⁷⁶

Caste codes enforced linguistic conventions that rehearsed modes of self-presentation. Linguistic practices, like those mandated by spatial and embodied codes, were encasted and relational: a Nair speaking to a Namboodiri differed considerably from a Nair addressing a Pulaya. These linguistic practices gave voice to social actors in the hierarchical role-play of reverence and contempt that characterizes caste.⁷⁷ The caste codes that govern linguistic practices and associated modes of self-presentation are known as *aachara bhasha* (language customs), and the dominant approach in studies of *aachara bhasha* is to point to the linguistic stylization by caste and argue for a reflectionist approach. In this view, if society is unequal, then language would quite naturally reflect these inequalities. Here, social bonds and power structures exist prior to, and somewhat independent of, language.⁷⁸

In contrast to this reflectionist perspective, I adopt a Goffmanian approach in which language forms but one critical aspect of social performance. Here, linguistic formations and social power structures are coconstitutive, and the one maps onto the other. Central to my approach to linguistic performance is the concept of *language ideologies*, which emphasizes “how languages become enregistered as racialized [here, encasted] objects, how linguistic differences are created and mapped onto social differences, including race, gender, class, and sexuality [as well as caste], and how these webs of social meaning are mapped onto interactions.”⁷⁹ The key concept of *enregisterment*, which denotes the “processes whereby distinct forms of speech come to be socially recognized (or enregistered) as indexical of speaker attributes by a population of language users,” is also relevant to my understanding of encasted language in nineteenth-century Kerala.⁸⁰ In the always-relational field of communicative practices, enregisterment led to complex role-playing of caste identities, where social actors spoke in what Asif Agha influentially termed “enregistered voices.”⁸¹

This relational role-play meant that social actors often adopted different parts. For example, a Nair spoke differently to a Namboodiri and to a Pulaya: his voice is enregistered as a slave when addressing the Namboodiri, and as a master when addressing the Pulaya. All three players are already choreographed spatially, and their bodies are encasted in various ways through proxemics, posture, bearing, dress, accoutrements, and gestural vocabularies. Language forms, therefore, the third key component in the performative constitution of caste. The enregisterment enacted by the language ideology of *aachara bhasha* contributed another significant aspect to the caste scripts of colonial Kerala.

Aachara bhasha is distinguished by the graded hierarchy that stretches between respect and humility. As Sunny M. Kapikkad points out, value dyads such as humility–impertinence are always undergirded by caste.⁸² The aggrandizing effect

of words indicating reverence (*aadara soochaka padam*) and the belittling effect of words indicating humility (*vinaya soochaka padam*) is the basic principle upon which the language ideology of *aachara bhasha* is organized. This spectrum between self-aggrandizement or reverence, and self-effacement or humility, constitutes another caste script that extends to all aspects of communicative practices and refers to people (nouns, pronouns, and forms of address), things (nouns), and everyday practices (verbs). This relational spectrum is referred to in everyday parlance through its endpoints: *uchchabhasha*, or the higher language, refers to the language an inferior adopts to their superior, whereas *neechabhasha*, or the lower language, refers to a superior addressing their inferior.

Language encastes human bodies within particular modes of self-presentation that personify the graded hierarchies of *uchchabhasha* and *neechabhasha*. These encasted modes of self-presentation are not merely outcroppings of an already existing entity, or the expressive manifestations of caste that existed, somehow, out there. Rather, *aachara bhasha* was one critical aspect of the performative codes of *jati maryada* that defined a closed world of subjection in colonial Kerala. The forms of personhood available in colonial Kerala were inflected by language, in addition to the spatial and embodied codes of *jati maryada*.

Contesting Forms of Personhood Governed by *Jati Maryada*

The object of *jati maryada* was, in short, always more than the particular domain it governed, be it space, body, or language. *Jati maryada* mandated performances of encasted forms of personhood and hierarchically graded them on a scale that ranged from abjection to reverence. In doing so, *jati maryada* constituted a governing theology-as-grammar making caste legible, ordering interaction, maintaining graded inequality, and enforcing subjection.

Such were the moral certitudes of the old world of *jati maryada* that the concept of equality broke open. If the encasted forms of personhood within this closed world of subjection ranged between abjection and reverence, then discourses of equality and the concomitant notion of the human opened up new horizons within which these certitudes were interrogated, challenged, and fundamentally reimagined. Ayyankali's *villuvandi samaram* was more than merely an appropriation of *savarna* appearance or a transgression of caste codes, for it enacted claims to equality that reimagined conceptions of life and what it meant to be human. In the collision between egalitarian notions and *jati maryada*, Ayyankali's action interrogated and challenged these codes in the domains of space, body, and language, while embodying a new modern individual demanding respect in a modern society that was, at least in principle, egalitarian. It made available, in short, new forms of personhood based on what we have come to recognize as modern values: respect, autonomy, inwardness, and a sense of self-possession.

Equality may be seen, in this sense, as what Charles Taylor calls a "hypergood," which refers to notions of the good that are not only more important but provide the standpoint from which other life goods are "strongly" evaluated.⁸³ They orient human life by providing a kind of moral horizon within which to place other values. Hypergoods are generally a "source of conflict," notes Taylor, for conceptions of the self depend upon the moral horizons established by these higher-order

goods.⁸⁴ Conflict over equality was inevitable, for the governance remit of *jati maryada* went beyond movement, appearance, and speech to conceptions of selfhood. Hypergoods not only offer a reason for moral thinking and acting, but also fundamentally define identity.⁸⁵

Though Taylor holds that a vision of the good is necessary to any understanding of moral agency, he points out that hypergoods have the disadvantage of leading to decontextualized theories of obligatory action.⁸⁶ Here, the Ayyankali story would go something like this: equality appeared in Travancore and inspired an insurrection against the caste order. While there is a kernel of truth in this formulation, the argument I have been making here emphasizes a thick description of Ayyankali's *villuvandi samaram* that takes egalitarianism as a "constitutive good," which Taylor defines as "something the love of which empowers us to do and to be good."⁸⁷ Constitutive goods always enable action in a situated manner inclusive of other ordinary life goods. They never quite override other goods but offer moral sources that inspire and guide action without ever making them obligatory or mechanistic. Seen as such, Ayyankali and his organization undertook political actions inspired by egalitarianism as a constitutive good, which led to a transformation of self and society in modern Kerala. For to accommodate a constitutive good such as equality into an old world stifled by caste was to lay claim to a new, and distinctly modern, self, and to contest fundamentally what it meant to be human. Moreover, it meant transforming a caste-ridden society, built with the logic of dehumanization along the scale from abjection to reverence, to one in which it was conceivable to speak of the shared humanity of individuals and communities. In other words, the adoption of this constitutive good provided new caste scripts that militated against the caste code of subjection, and lay claims to material resources, and enacted self-possessed forms of behavior. In doing so, the concept of equality empowered contestation of forms of personhood mandated by *jati maryada*. The significance of Ayyankali's *villuvandi samaram*—coming as it did in the wake of the genealogies of the human that brought the concept of equality and concomitant notions of the human to colonial Kerala—lies in fundamentally calling into question the closed world of subjection circumscribed by *jati maryada*.

Transgression and Modernity

In his reconstruction of the *villuvandi samaram*, Chentharassery pays particular attention to the clanging brass bells attached to the necks of the bulls pulling the *villuvandi*. The bells signified a determined insubordination, and their sonorous clangs suggested a new confidence that not only dared to transgress caste codes of subjection but proudly announced it. The figure at the center of this scene, Ayyankali, was acting with assertive autonomy: he was starting something new, and he demanded respect. He was, in fact, willing to fight for it. This scene was truly epoch-making in that it serves as a watershed event that can highlight the striving for modernity among the former slave castes. To this day, the Dalit movement in Kerala stages reenactments of the *villuvandi samaram* scene to construct a performance genealogy of radical action for their political causes.⁸⁸ Ayyankali's actions and their consequences endure because they exemplify what Anupama Rao calls "caste radicalism," which moves from "an epistemology of caste" toward

a “critique of everyday life” articulated by situated experiences of “stigmatized selfhood.”⁸⁹ In other words, the caste radicalism of anticaste leaders, such as Ayyankali, performed emancipatory acts through a situated practice that brought together encasted lifeworlds and radical concepts of political modernity. They performed acts of strong evaluation demonstrating the emergence of a modern individual committed to changing the old, closed world of caste subjection. For to be modern is, as Michael Gillespie points out, “not merely to define one’s being in terms of time,” that is, to be *in* history, but “also to define time in terms of one’s being,” or to *make* history.⁹⁰

In caste-bound colonial Kerala, to be modern was to transgress the dehumanizing codes of *jati maryada*. By “to be modern,” I refer to a self-conscious attempt to break from the past and claim to be new—and, above all, to seek the values of equality, individual autonomy or selfhood, and respect. As Taylor points out, “To talk of universal, natural, or human rights is to connect respect for human life and integrity with the notion of autonomy.”⁹¹ In colonial Kerala, radical claims to modernity asserted that to be human means to struggle for these rights.⁹²

In the world of Ayyankali’s *villuvandi samaram*, the reiterative nature of social behaviors and the imposition of caste codes upon them certainly made subjection an ambivalent process that both subordinated and constituted.⁹³ However, this is not all: the explosively unstable concept of equality, and other attendant universals such as autonomy and respect, brought a new consciousness that could, and did, call into question the closed loop of subjection.⁹⁴ With the growing acceptance of these concepts associated with political modernity, agency could now include a Pulaya making a daring claim to play the part of a Nair: to be, in fact, an equal. In doing so, this transgressive act introduced the figure of a modern individual whose emancipatory methods were insurrectionary. Ayyankali’s insurrectionary political action performed a claim to, in Hannah Arendt’s influential formulation, “the right to have rights.”⁹⁵

Transgressing the codes of subjection was integral to the assertion of common humanity: to have the right to have rights, one had to stop acting as a slave of the caste order. This was, as Ambedkar noted in the context of untouchable subjection in eighteenth-century Maharashtra, a “necessary preliminary” en route to political subjecthood.⁹⁶

• • •

I have argued in this essay that understanding Ayyankali’s *villuvandi samaram* requires situating it within the world of *jati maryada* in colonial Kerala and recognizing that the explosive indeterminacy of the concept of equality split open that closed world of subjection. Constitutive goods such as equality not only challenge existing forms of injustice and oppression but also make available new forms of personhood and reveal a new vision of society. The performative framework of caste I proposed in this essay accommodates both conceptualizations of the encasted self governed by caste codes and the significance of political actions making claims to equality. In enacting a defiant new beginning against the performance codes of the old caste order, Ayyankali’s transgressive actions offered a vision of a new form of personhood, and an articulation—or at the very least, a hope—of new freedom.

Endnotes

1 A *mundu* is a kind of unstitched cloth worn by both men and women like a sarong over the lower part of the body in Kerala.

2 T. H. P. Chentharassery, *Ayyankali* (Trivandrum: Prabhath Book House, 1979), 16, my translation of the Malayalam. Chentharassery's authoritative oral history has been the foundation for subsequent scholarship on Ayyankali. Although parts of it have been translated into English, no complete version exists yet. See T. H. P. Chentharassery, "Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham: The Story of a Freedom Struggle," and "Struggles of Freedom," trans. T. M. Yesudasana, in *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India*, ed. K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011), 380–4 and 385–9. See also M. Nisar and Meena Kandasamy, *Ayyankali: Dalit Leader of Organic Protest* (Calicut, Kerala: Other Books, 2007).

3 *Savarnas* are caste Hindus, also referred to as "upper-caste" Hindus. The untouchable castes are the *avarnas*, or those without caste. In Kerala, Namboodiris and Nairs and other comparable castes constitute *savarnas*, whereas Nadars, Ezhavas, and all former slave castes like Pulayas, Parayas, and Cherumas are *avarnas*. Of these, the former slave castes are roughly analogous to today's Dalits.

4 See Richard Schechner, *Between Theater & Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 36. See also Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), 34–6.

5 I engage with and build on the work of Sharmila Rege, Shailaja Paik, and Davesh Soneji, who have written about the ways in which performance aesthetics and caste hierarchies have been coconstitutive in traditions as diverse as Ambedkarite *gayan parties* (singing troupes), *lavani-tamasha* (Marathi musical theatre), and Bharatanatyam classical dance. Their work has theoretically informed my thinking about caste scripts and methodologically shown ways to do intellectual histories of caste assertion and anticaste resistance in the repertoire of embodiment. Sharmila Rege, "Conceptualising Popular Culture: 'Lavani' and 'Powada' in Maharashtra," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37.11 (2002): 1038–47; Sharmila Rege, "Introduction: Towards a Feminist Reclamation of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar," in B. R. Ambedkar, *Against the Madness of Manu: B. R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahminical Patriarchy*, ed. Sharmila Rege (New Delhi: Navayana, 2013), 13–56, esp. 42–56; Shailaja Paik, "Mangala Bansode and the Social Life of Tamasha: Caste, Sexuality, and Discrimination in Modern Maharashtra," *Biography* 40.1 (2017): 170–98; and Devesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadāsīs, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

The historian Sanal Mohan's pathbreaking rereading of colonial missionary ethnographies to access encasted lifeworlds of the slave castes of Travancore has opened up new ways of thinking of caste and the performance of everyday life. P. Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), esp. 4–8, 121, 214–309. I also share with Debjani Ganguly an interest in the everyday experience of caste and in thinking not so much about the caste of performance in aesthetic forms but about the performance of caste in everyday life. Debjani Ganguly, *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds: Postcolonial Perspectives* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2008). My differences with Ganguly's work are too numerous to elaborate here, but four important points stand out:

- (1) My theoretical framework is rooted in transnational Dalit studies, whose criticisms of postcolonial theory are by now well-established: G. Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); *Dalit Studies*, ed. Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Gajendran Ayyathurai, "The Making of the Postcolonial Theory and Practice Brahminical and Transnational," *South Asian History and Culture* 5.1 (2014): 133–40; Chinnaiah Jangam, "Politics of Identity and the Project of Writing History in Postcolonial India: A Dalit Critique," *Economic and Political Weekly* 50.40 (2015): 63–70.
- (2) The methods I adopt include archival research informed by historical anthropology, ethnographic history, and performance historiography rather than literary analysis: Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), esp. 1–48, 198–251; Mohan, 4–8, 121, 214–309.
- (3) I view caste through the analytical lens of performance and performativity, as opposed to representational analysis of discourse.
- (4) Finally, my understanding of colonial modernity contrasts considerably with the postcolonial view, particularly in relation to the political use-value of the universal, which I see not as melancholy

indicators of the limits of encompassment but as incendiary sparks that ignited insurrectionary flames—as I argue here and in greater detail in Vivek V. Narayan, “Mirrors of the Soul: Performative Egalitarianisms and Genealogies of the Human in Colonial-Era Travancore, 1854–1927,” *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* 1.1 (2020): 125–54.

6 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), xii. See also J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

7 My conceptualization of “caste scripts” is influenced by Robin Bernstein’s “scriptive things” and Natalia Molina’s “racial scripts”: Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood and Race from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 8–13; Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 6–10. Also relevant is Kwame Anthony Appiah’s formulation of collective identities as “scripts,” which he defines as “narratives that people can use in shaping their projects and in telling their life stories”; Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 22.

8 Ambedkar, *Madness of Manu*, 104, my emphasis.

9 I use “traditional” here quite self-consciously in Hobsbawm and Ranger’s sense that traditions are always invented; *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). I mean here that these “traditional” legitimizations are often nonscriptural and are simply accepted as commonsense everyday practice. The contrast between scriptural and traditional is not so much that one is true and the other false, or that one is more legitimate than the other but, rather, that the scriptural is textual whereas the traditional is invented in narratives that codify what Malinowski called “the imponderabilia of actual life”; Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922; repr. Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2002), 16. My usage of “traditional” here maps onto Pierre Bourdieu’s “doxa,” by which he means the unquestioned common sense through which every established order produces “the naturalization of its own arbitrariness”; Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 164–71, quote at 164.

10 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Blackwell Publishing, 2009), ¶371. Henceforth cited as “PI” and paragraph (¶) or page number.

11 PI ¶373.

12 See B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*, ed. S. Anand (New Delhi: Navayana, 2014). I am thinking of Ambedkar’s influential theorization in which caste is “not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers” (233, ¶4.1, original emphasis). As “a hierarchy in which the division of labourers are graded one above the other,” caste systematizes graded inequality (234, ¶4.1; 294–6, ¶¶21.15–17).

13 My conception of encasted experience as a performative process is influenced—in form, if not in substance—by similar theories of race. Two important works have been formative in my thinking: *Doing Race: 21 Essays for the 21st Century*, ed. Hazel R. Markus and Paula M. L. Moya (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2010); and Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London and New York: Verso, 2012).

14 PI ¶43; PI ¶¶19–23; and PI, 235. See also Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 15–16.

15 PI ¶¶7, 23.

16 PI ¶23.

17 Das, 16.

18 *Ibid.*, original emphasis.

19 See Richard Schechner, “Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 17.3 (1973): 5–36, at 6.

20 I am thinking specifically of Joseph Roach’s formulation of surrogation and Diana Taylor’s theorization of acts of transfer and scenarios; Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

21 My usage of “fingerprints” here, and, more generally, my thinking that caste scripts can also follow and bear evidence of prior enactment—in contrast to Schechner’s blueprint that preexists enactment—is influenced by Fields and Fields. They suggest that “racecraft” exists in “human action and imagination” as “collective yet individual, day-to-day yet historical, and consequential even though nested in mundane routine.” Racecraft is, ultimately, “a kind of fingerprint evidence that *racism* has been on the scene” (18–19, original emphasis).

22 *PI* ¶23.

23 I use political action in Hannah Arendt’s sense of that which mediates between humans to give birth to history. Moreover, action bears a close connection to the “human condition of natality”: that is, the ability to act is inseparable from the ability to make something new. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2d ed., trans. Margaret Canovan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 8–9. In the context of Ayyankali’s long political career, the *villuvandi samaram* and those that follow are political actions in that they organized new forms of association based on shared experience and solidarity, and created new ways of being. See also Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

24 Although I focus here on Ayyankali and the *jati maryada* of colonial-era Kerala in order to make a case for understanding caste as performance, I do not mean to suggest that his political actions were autochthonous. On the contrary, Ayyankali’s transgressions were in dialogue with egalitarian discourses circulating at the time. I refer to these transnational flows of egalitarian discourses as the “genealogies of the human.” In nineteenth-century Travancore, the genealogies of the human include Enlightenment universal values that came via British Protestant missionaries; discourses and practices of nondualistic equality in Narayana Guru’s reinterpretation of Advaita Vedanta; and the Tamil Yogic tradition of Saiva Siddhanta, with its threefold conceptual framework of *Pati-pasu-pasam* (or, godhead-soul/spirit-substance/matter). For a longer discussion, see my “Mirrors of the Soul.”

25 The period following the *villuvandi samaram* was especially marked by violent conflict between the *savarna* communities led by the Nairs, and the Pulayas led by Ayyankali. In fact, every major milestone of Ayyankali’s political career that I list in the next note was met with *savarna* violence asserting caste. The reward–punishment spectrum maintained by the caste order is not unique to Kerala. For a comparative discussion elsewhere in twenty-first-century India, see Anand Teltumbde’s study of the Khairlanji massacre, *Khairlanji: A Strange and Bitter Crop* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2008). The “reward,” now as then, may be as little as a measure of rice for the day’s only meal handed out to those who worked in the fields from dawn till dusk. I am also thinking here of Ambedkar’s analysis in *Annihilation of Caste*, where he points out that the caste system “must perpetually face the problem of the transgressor. Unless there is a penalty attached to the act of transgression, . . . [the] system will break down” (268, ¶16.6).

26 Other struggles against the caste order codes followed the *villuvandi samaram* and the agitations for freedom of movement. The yearlong strike for education (1904–5) that Ayyankali organized is widely regarded as the first-ever labor strike in Kerala, in which agricultural workers of the Pulaya caste struck work to demand access to schools. These organizational efforts resulted in the formation of the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS, the Association for the Welfare of the Poor People) in 1907, following which he established a community law court that signaled the emergence of a modern political subject. The *kallu mala samaram* (stone bead necklace protest) of 1915 was another significant political effort organized by Ayyankali and the SJPS, in which women of the Pulaya caste discarded the humiliating stone bead necklaces forced upon them by *jati maryada*. Finally, Ayyankali represented the Pulaya community in the citizen’s council of Travancore, the Sree Moolam Praja Sabha (Sree Moolam Popular Assembly) during 1911–32.

27 These are only two notable recent reenactments apart from the hundreds of performances that occur on Ayyankali’s birthday, 28 August. To know more about the demonstration by Dalit women for right of entry to Sabarimala, see TNM Staff, “Kerala Dalit Women to Ride on Bullock Carts to Fight for Rights to Enter Sabarimala,” 14 December 2018, *The News Minute*, www.thenewsminute.com/article/kerala-dalit-women-ride-bullock-carts-fight-rights-enter-sabarimala-93329, accessed 2 June 2021. The recent dispute over the “caste gate” in the Malankara Estate in Thodupuzha referenced the *villuvandi samaram* as Bhim Army activists demolished the gate that barred their right of way; see Dool News Desk, “Bhim Army pravarthakar enthinu aa gate polichu, Malankarayile vivadamaya ‘jati gate’ enthanu?” [What is the controversial ‘caste gate’ in Malankara and why did Bhim Army workers tear it down?], www.doolnews.com/what-is-malankara-caste-gate-issue-and-why-it-was-demolished-by-bhim-army-workers.html and “26 varshamayi

sanchara swathantharyam nishedichcha Malankara jati gate polichchu mattiya Bhim Army” [Bhim Army tears down the caste gate that denied freedom of movement for 26 years], www.doolnews.com/bhim-army-malankara-caste-gate-idukki-132.html, both (in Malayalam) at *Dool News*, 16 March 2021, accessed 2 June 2021. Note especially the poster in the background depicting the *villuvandi samaram*.

28 Ambedkar, *Madness of Manu*, 84. See also Uma Chakravarti, “Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 28.14 (1993): 579–85; and Uma Chakravarti, “Gender, Caste and Labour: Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 30.36 (1995): 2248–56.

29 The practice of relegating Namboodiri women to their homes through spatial codes, for instance, also informed embodied codes that governed their forays into the outside world, requiring them to be hidden from view with veils and umbrellas.

30 The Namboodiri reformist collective, the Yogakshema Sabha, which emerged in the early twentieth century, was particularly engaged in these efforts. The classic statements of the lives of Namboodiri women and the social reform movement are Lalithambika Antaranam’s 1976 novel *Agnisakshi: Fire, My Witness*, [1980], trans. Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press with DC Books, 2015), and V. T. Bhattathiripad’s 1929 play, *Adukkalayil ninnum arangathekku* [From the kitchen to the stage] (in Malayalam) (Kottayam: DC Books, 1994).

31 The Channar Lahala of 1822–59 began as a demand by Channar women to be allowed to cover their upper bodies, and later evolved to include protests against forced caste labor. These protests inaugurated a century of social upheaval that is somewhat contentiously referred to as Kerala Navothanam, or Kerala Renaissance. For a detailed discussion, see N. V. Sheeju, “The Shanar Revolts, 1822–99: Towards a Figural Cartography of the Pretender,” *South Asia Research* 35.3 (2015): 298–317. Also see Robert L. Hardgrave Jr., “The Breast-Cloth Controversy: Caste Consciousness and Social Change in Southern Travancore,” *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 5.2 (1968): 171–87.

32 The noted feminist historian J. Devika discusses the ways in which the modern individual was engendered in Kerala through the language of reforms, in particular the patriarchal elisions of public–masculine, and private–feminine. J. Devika, *En-gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Twentieth Century Keralam* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007).

33 The renowned Dalit intellectual and historian K. K. Kochu holds the devolution of language to “varna language” responsible for the failure of communities/castes in Kerala to integrate culturally or assimilate in Kerala. K. K. Kochu, “Language and People,” in *The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing*, ed. M. Dasan et al. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 248–55, at 250.

34 B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, 17 vols. (in 20), ed. Vasant Moon et al. (Bombay: Education Dept., Government of Maharashtra, 1957–2003) [henceforth cited as BAWs], 2: 506.

35 Samuel Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1883), 291, 334; James Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs: A Narrative of Seventeen Years Residence in India*, 2 vols., 2d ed., ed. Countess de Montalembert (London: Richard Bentley, New Burlington Street, 1834), 1: 254; Abbe J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, 3d ed., trans. Henry K. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), 61.

36 Rustom Bharucha, *Terror and Performance* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 28.

37 Although I say “temples” here, they were not the only places of worship governed by spatial caste codes. Access to other places of worship, especially churches, also inspired anti-caste struggle. But temples outweighed churches in their zealotry commitment to caste codes, and temple entry became a more celebrated cause among the *avarna* communities than admission to church congregations.

38 For the Channar Lahala, see note 31 above. Sree Narayana Guru (1856–1928) is a towering presence in Kerala history whose numerous spiritual–political actions protesting caste included consecrating a temple at Aruvippuram. Being an Ezhava himself, the consecration violated caste codes that decreed that only Brahmins could perform this ritual. Guru’s response when confronted by a group of *savarnas* is now legendary; he said, “I have only installed an Ezhava Siva.” M. K. Sanoo, *Sree Narayana Guru—Life and Times* [1976] (in Malayalam), trans. P. R. Mukundan, ed. O. V. Usha (Kochi [Cochin]: Open Door Media, 2017), 59. The Vaikom (or Vykom) Satyagraha of 1924–5 was a temple entry movement organized by Narayana Guru’s disciple T. K. Madhavan (1885–1930) under M. K. Gandhi’s leadership. The anticaste protest began with a dispute about the use of public roads around the temple; see Mary Elizabeth King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India: The 1924–25 Vykom Satyagraha and the Mechanisms of Change* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

39 Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847–1908* [1976, with spelling *Nayar*], 2d ed. (1994; repr. New Delhi: Manohar, 2014), 78, 275 n. 55.

40 *Ibid.*, 79, 275 n. 60.

41 The prohibition on slave castes using public roads was enforced through violence. Jonathan Duncan, “Historical Remarks on the Coast of Malabar, with Some Description of the Manners of Its Inhabitants,” *Asiatic Researches* 5 (1799): 1–36, at 5; Forbes, 253; J. H. Hutton, *Caste in India: Its Nature, Function and Origins* [1946], 4th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 80; Mateer, *Native Life*, 291; Dubois, 61. See also analyses by C. J. Fuller, *The Nayars Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 44–5; Jeffrey, 78; P. Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala: Narayana Guru, SNDP Yogam, and Social Reform* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2016), 11–12, 155–6; and Udaya Kumar, *Writing the First Person: Literature, History, and Autobiography in Modern Kerala* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2016), 4.

A Nair *pramani*, who was usually armed with a sword or dagger, may, upon encountering a slave caste such as a Pulaya or a Cheruma, stab and kill him. When the slave castes had something to sell—palm-leaf umbrellas carried by Namboodiri women, for example—they set them by the roadside and hid in the fields when they saw their Namboodiri customers approaching. Similarly, the slave castes were forbidden entry into temples, palaces, and upper-caste residences. Mateer, *Native Life*, 291, 308–9, 334; Samuel Mateer, *The Land of Charity: A Descriptive Account of Travancore and Its People with Special Reference to Missionary Labour* (London: John Snow & Co., 1871), 46; Forbes, 254; Dubois, 61.

42 Similar spatial caste codes existed—and continue to exist—in other parts of India. Two examples separated by nearly a century—early twentieth-century Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu two years ago—will suffice to show that these absolute spatial codes were, and remain, commonplace across India. The Kalaram Temple Satyagraha in Nashik, Maharashtra, challenged the caste codes that denied access to the “Depressed Classes” (Ambedkar’s favored term for the then-untouchable castes). Ambedkar was deeply involved in organizing this agitation, though he noted in a letter to Bhauroo Gaikwad on 3 March 1934 that “I didn’t launch the temple entry movement because I wanted the Depressed Classes to become worshippers of idols which they were prevented from worshipping or because I believed temple entry would make them equal members in and an integral part of the Hindu Society.” It was, his letter goes on to note, to assert their humanity and rights (*BAWS*, 17, pt. 1: 202; more generally, see 181–207). Ambedkar, like Ayyankali, saw transgressing caste codes as integral to his emancipatory project. More recently, reports emerged from Tamil Nadu of Dalit communities—a self-adopted political term for the ex-untouchable castes—not being allowed to carry their dead to cremation through public roads. I do not mean to imply that things are unchanged, but rather that they are not safely in the past. TNM Staff, “Denied Road Access, Dalits in Vellore Forced to Lower Body from Bridge for Cremation,” *The News Minute*, 22 August 2019, www.thenewsminute.com/article/denied-road-access-dalits-vellore-forced-lower-body-bridge-cremation-107621, accessed 2 June 2021.

43 I understand “choreography” here and throughout not so much as the work of an authorial individual, whether as a sole creator, or as a facilitator of collaborative artistic enterprise, but in Daisuke Muto’s sense of “meshwork,” which emphasizes “lines of movement or growth” that are realized collectively within particular social contexts. Daisuke Muto, “Choreography as Meshwork: The Production of Motion and the Vernacular,” in *Choreography and Corporeality: Relay in Motion*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Philipa Rothfield (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 31–50, at 42. For Muto, meshwork choreography “is not the realisation of individual intent or vision” but, rather, is a means to “bring about motions and changes in a collaborative way, but without the need to move in unison” (45). For a genealogy of choreographic authorship, see Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2011). Muto’s meshwork choreography is helpful in thinking about caste, as its spatial choreography has neither a sole author nor a facilitator; it is instead a dense meshwork choreography that constitutes encasted experience. While challenging those encasted norms can be, and often was, the work of individuals—Ayyankali’s *villuvandi samaram*, for example—its political significance almost invariably involves changes in the meshwork. Muto’s theorization of choreography, then, helps contextualize these radical acts within a dense meshwork rather than overestimating the effect of individual acts. In short, my usage of “choreography” here and throughout is in the sense of a performative realization and representational approximation of repetitive meaningful action.

44 The critical attention paid to “distance pollution” has extended from nineteenth-century missionaries to contemporary scholars: Duncan; Forbes; Mateer, *Native Life*; Hutton; Fuller; Jeffrey; M. R. Raghava Varier and Rajan Gurukkal, *Kerala Charithram (Randam Bhagam)* [Kerala history (volume two)] (in Malayalam) (Sukapuram: Vallathol Vidyapeetham, 2012); Mohan; Chandramohan; and Kumar.

45 In an excellent turn of phrase, the British Protestant missionary Samuel Mateer noted that the caste system extended from the Brahmins to the slave castes in a “nicely graduated scale” (*Land of Charity*, 28). Ambedkar formulated this thought with characteristic rigor in what has since become its most fundamental definition; he called caste a system of “graded” inequality (*Annihilation of Caste*, 234, ¶4.1; 294–6, ¶¶21.15–17).

46 Mateer, *Land of Charity*, 32.

47 A relationship of untouchability existed between Namboodiris and Nairs and provides a good example of the contradictions that constitute caste oppression. Namboodiris and Nairs engaged in the practice of *sambandham*, a polyandrous and polygamous system of marriage that was inextricably linked to the matrilineal *tharavad* system of Nair inheritance. The relationship of untouchability was, then, to belabor the point, performed only in public. K. Saradmoni, *Matriliney Transformed: Family, Law, and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore* (New Delhi: Sage, 1999).

48 Dubois, 61, 188.

49 Mateer, *Native Life*, 334; Mateer, *Land of Charity*, 32; Francis Day, *The Land of the Permauls, or Cochin, its Past and its Present* (Madras: Gantz Brothers, 1863), 322.

50 Mateer, *Native Life*, 309; Hutton, 78–81; Joan P. Mencher, “Kerala and Madras: A Comparative Study of Ecology and Social Structure,” *Ethnology* 5.2 (1966): 135–71, at 154; Chandramohan, 11. Since the *tiyyapad* and the *cherumapad* derive from spatial caste codes, they must have been approximate. Such “spatial measurement must be anything but exact,” notes Hutton, “as not only is the polluting distance less for a Nayar [Nair], for instance, than for a Brahman [Namboodiri], but different standards are mentioned by different authorities” (79). The *tiyyapad*, in particular was highly contingent upon the speaker—referring to about thirty-six feet when spoken by a Namboodiri, and around twelve feet when used by a Nair—since Ezhavas and Thiyyas had social interaction with Namboodiris as well as Nairs. There is some consensus that, given the Pulayas/Cherumas were not allowed to interact with Namboodiris, the *cherumapad* refers to the distance between Pulayas/Cherumas and Nairs, which is variously reported as sixty-four or sixty-six feet.

51 Mencher, 154; Fuller, 43–5.

52 More than one nineteenth-century ethnographer notes that violators were punished by being “cut down.” See Mateer, *Native Life*, 291; Forbes, 254. Dubois notes that if a Nair encounters a Pulaya on the road, he is “entitled to stab him on the spot” (61).

53 This understanding applies to most existing accounts I have seen so far: Duncan; Forbes; Mateer, *Native Life*; Hutton; Fuller; Jeffrey; Warriar and Gurukkal; Chandramohan. A few recent works (esp. Mohan; Kumar) theorize spatial mobility and aspects of embodiment as ways in which caste is constituted.

54 Bhaskaran Unni, *Patthompatham Noottandile Keralam* [Kerala in the nineteenth century] (in Malayalam) (Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1988), 59–70.

55 Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (1971; New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), 161–84.

56 Bernstein, 73.

57 The sacred thread of the Brahmins, the *poonol*, is perhaps the paradigmatic example of an encasted thing. It marks the wearer as Brahmin though it is little more than knotted strands of white thread, and costs nearly nothing.

58 Unni, 63–4. See also V. Nagam Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual*, vol. 2 (Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1906), 253.

59 Aiya, 2: 266–7.

60 *Ibid.*, 267.

61 Unni, 62.

62 *Ibid.*

63 *Ibid.*, 63.

64 Mateer, *Land of Charity*, 61.

65 Aiya, 2: 351.

66 If his loving description of the “long black hair growing luxuriantly” on the heads of Nair women did not reveal how he felt about them, Nagam Aiya clarifies, presumably without irony, that the topknot among Nair women is “a very pretty observance and one that is worth imitation in more civilized countries” (2: 350). The language of Nagam Aiya’s ethnographic descriptions, caught in the vortices of contempt and desire toward various castes—from the “savage” Pulayas to the lovingly described Nair women and the awestruck descriptions of the Namboodiris—is a reminder of both the dangers and possibilities of inter-subjectivity in the ethnography of caste.

67 *Ibid.*, 2: 350–1.

68 While this caste is self-described as Nadars—indeed, that continues to be their name in contemporary times—I refer to them as Channars because this caste name is associated with a major political event: the Channar Lahala.

69 Two historical incidents will serve to illustrate the ambivalent position of the intermediate castes such as the Channars. Christian converts were prominent in the agitation led by Channar women for the right to cover their upper bodies in the Channar Lahala; N. V. Sheeju, “The Shanar Revolts, 1822–99: Towards a Figural Cartography of the Pretender,” *South Asia Research* 35.3 (2015): 298–317. However, these protests against encasted humiliation did not exactly expand into an emancipatory zeal: Channar Christians resisted the admission of slave-caste converts to their churches and even attempted to build separate churches for slave-caste congregations; Samuel Mateer, “The Malayalam Country. XIV—London Missionary Society: North Travancore,” in *The Missionary Conference: South India and Ceylon, 1879*, vol. II (Madras: Addison & Co., Mount Road, 1880), 147–63, at 155.

70 See Dubois, 341; *Mitavadi* (1.4), January 1916; Aiya, 2: 404; Mateer, *Land of Charity*, 60. These necklaces have an important place in Kerala history, for they inspired a landmark agitation led by Ayyankali in 1915, in which Pulaya women discarded the humiliating practice of wearing these encasted things. Today, this historic event is known as the *kallu mala samaram*, or the stone bead necklace protest.

71 For extensive discussions on the slave trade in Kerala, see Mohan; K. K. Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore* (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1973); Adoor K. K. Ramachandran Nair, *Slavery in Kerala* (Delhi: Mittal, 1986); Mateer, *Land of Charity*, 28, 32, 42–8; Mateer, *Native Life*, 32, 42–4, 82, 297–318; John Abbs, *Twenty-Two Years' Missionary Experience in Travancore* (John Snow & Co., 1870), 149–69, esp. 150; Aiya, 2: 402–7.

72 P. M. Gireesh, *Keralathile Achara Bhasha* [Kerala's language customs] (in Malayalam) (Thiruvananthapuram [Trivandrum]: Kerala Bhasha Institute, 1998), 7.

73 Chentharassery, 16, my translation.

74 Gireesh, 7.

75 *Ibid.*, 7–8.

76 Mateer, *Native Life*, 334–5.

77 BAWs, 2: 506.

78 While Gireesh notes that language is both product and instrument of society, he adopts a reflectionist approach that conceives social inequities as being out there beyond language (1–2). See also P. K. Balakrishnan, *Jathiyavasthithiyum Keralacharithravum* [The caste system and Kerala history] (in Malayalam) (1983; Kottayam: DC Books, 2008), 269; and Kumaran Vayaleri, *Bhashayum Samoohavum* [Language and society] (in Malayalam) (Payyannur, Kerala: Pusthaka Bhavan, 2010), 27.

79 Elaine W. Chun and Adrienne Lo, “Language and Racialization,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Nancy Bonvillian (New York: Routledge, 2016), 220–33, at 223. See also Jonathan Rosa and Christa Burdick, “Language Ideologies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Society*, ed. Ofelia García, Nelson Flores, and Massimiliano Spotti (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 102–23.

80 Asif Agha, “Voice, Footing, Enregisterment,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15.1 (2005): 38–59, at 38.

81 *Ibid.*, 39.

82 Kapikkad is echoing Ambedkar's formulation that caste puts in place an “ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt” (BAWS, 2: 506). Sunny M. Kapikkad, “The Dalit Presence in Malayalam Literature,” in *Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing*, 249–66, at 260.

83 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 63. “Strong evaluation” refers to distinctions of “right and wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desire, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged” (4). In other words, strong evaluation distinguishes between desires and goods. Given that moral interpretations of the good always involve affirming “a given ontology of the human” (5), strong evaluation undergirds human agency and identity by defining what makes life worth living.

84 *Ibid.*, 64.

85 *Ibid.*, 76; more generally, see 25–90.

86 *Ibid.*, 79–82, 85.

87 *Ibid.*, 93.

88 For an illuminating discussion of “genealogies of performance,” see Roach, 25–31.

89 Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 9.

90 Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 2.

91 Taylor, 12.

92 The historian Sanal Mohan has argued that the emergence of the concept of equality characterizes modernity for the slave castes. “[T]he project of modernity,” he points out, “entailed equality” (121).

93 I am drawing upon the work of Althusser, Foucault, and Butler in making this assertion. See, for instance, Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85–126; Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8.4 (1982): 777–95; and Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

94 The slave castes adopted and deployed universals such as equality in their struggles against caste. These contingent and historical appropriations, which articulated particular claims in universalistic language for strategic purposes, I call “repurposing universals.” The political action of repurposing universals refers to the double process of bringing the weight of universals to bear upon particular political struggles, and of elevating particular struggles to universal proportions. I describe the situated practice of repurposing universals in Travancore in “Mirrors of the Soul.”

95 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new ed. (New York: Harvest Books, 1976), 296–8, quote at 298.

96 Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 226, ¶2.22. In Ambedkar’s work, the process of transgressing caste codes of subjection accompanies and constitutes modernity. Discussing caste subjection in eighteenth-century Peshwa-ruled Pune, Ambedkar notes that discarding those dehumanizing practices, and adopting the emancipatory logic of anticaste social reform, was a “necessary preliminary” to political change. As Ambedkar famously pointed out, given that caste subjection has a “divine basis” (289, ¶21.3), the only way to effect this notional change is “to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the shastras” (*Annihilation of Caste*, 287, ¶ 20.9). Ambedkar asserts that it is impossible to destroy caste without also destroying the Hindu scriptures, whose tenets espouse and legitimize the caste order, eventually concluding that the task at hand was to “destroy the sacredness and divinity with which caste has become invested. In the last analysis, this means you must destroy the authority of the shastras and the Vedas” (289). Throughout, while Ambedkar retains a textual emphasis, his examples include humiliating social performances: from the pots and brooms that Peshwa rule imposed on Mahars (213–14, ¶2.8) to practices such as widow remarriage (251–2, ¶¶9.1–3). In Ambedkar’s words: “Under the rule of the Peshwas in the Maratha country the untouchable was not allowed to use the public streets if a Hindu was coming along lest he should pollute the Hindu by his shadow. The untouchable was required to have a black thread either on his wrist or in his neck as a sign or a mark to prevent the Hindus from getting themselves polluted by his touch through mistake. In Poona, the capital of the Peshwa, the untouchable was required to carry, strung from his waist, a broom to sweep away from behind the dust he treaded on lest a Hindu walking on the same should be polluted. In Poona, the untouchable was required to carry an earthen pot, hung in his neck wherever he went, for holding his spit lest his spit falling on earth should pollute a Hindu who might unknowingly happen to tread on it.” (213–14, ¶2.8). He goes on to conclude that “the emancipation of the mind and the soul [i.e., anticaste social reform that discards such humiliating practices] is a necessary preliminary for the political expansion of the people” (226, ¶2.22).

Vivek V. Narayan is Assistant Professor of English, Theatre, and Performance Studies in the Department of English, and, by courtesy, the Department of Performing Arts at Ashoka University, where he teaches courses on theatre history, performance studies, critical race theory, Dalit studies, and postcolonial theory.

Cite this article: Vivek V. Narayan, “Caste as Performance: Ayyankali and the Caste Scripts of Colonial Kerala,” *Theatre Survey* 62.3 (2021): 272–294. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S004055742100020X>.