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Roadwork: Offstage with Special Drama Actresses in Tamil Nadu, South India

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The event was absolutely unique, and it was repeated every year. For the event (any event) unfolds simultaneously on two levels: as individual action and as collective representation; or better, as the relation between certain life histories and a history that is, over and above these, the existence of societies.

—Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (1985)

MISE-EN-SCÈNE

Roads and streets are a common *mise-en-scène* for enactments of the Tamil popular theater genre known as Special Drama. The obligatory opening comedy scene of these live performance events always begins with a young woman dancing in the middle of a road, a fantastic suspension of Tamil norms of conduct for women. The painted canvas backdrop for this scene displays a wide, generic road stretching off vertically into the horizon. The comic enactment that unfolds rapidly develops into an exploration of illicit love. An unknown young bachelor appears on the road, and all manner of shady business unspools between the young man and woman, including lewd banter, flirtatious spats, boasts laden with sexual innuendo, coy one-upmanship, cooing love songs, and, eventually, elopement.

This opening scene is a dramatization, in a comic mode, of the proverbial bad road for women. Its narrative content perpetuates and encourages a dominant association between public roads and the bad reputation of ac-

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tresses as public women. This essay concerns how such an association of ideas shapes Special Drama actresses' offstage lives, and in turn, how their practices "on the road" potentially refigure that dominant discourse.

"Special Drama" (*Special Nāṭakam*) is a contemporary Tamil theatrical genre that began around the turn of the twentieth century. Its hybrid English-Tamil name refers to the practice of hiring each artist "specially" for every performance event. Special Drama is performed outdoors in small towns or villages, either in the village commons or, equally often, at the intersection of two roads. In 1993, sixteen cities and towns throughout the state of Tamil Nadu had actors associations, run by the artists to facilitate a statewide network of Special Drama performers (see fig. 7.1).

The participants in Special Drama—performers as well as audience members—are predominately working class. In my interviews and conversations with artists, the explanation most performers gave for entering this line of work was "due to poverty." Some Special Drama artists begin performing in childhood, others as young adults; about half come from families that are already involved in some way in the drama world. Though the work is only seasonal, the pay is relatively high when available. For example, a woman who works as a cook or a maid might earn Rs 75 *per month*, whereas working as an actress she might earn Rs 300 *in one night*. Such relatively high wages are virtually the sole compensation, however, for the loss of social standing that results from entering this profession. And this cost, to be sure, most severely affects women.

Becoming a Special Drama actress generally means forfeiting any chance of a "normal" marriage (by which I mean a legally sanctioned marriage arranged between the bride's and groom's families), as no self-respecting groom's family will agree to have a son marry an actress (and this often includes families of male actors!) because of a standard view of actresses as public women, a.k.a. prostitutes. Indeed, several common Tamil words for "actress" simultaneously denote "whore" or "prostitute." *Kūtti*, *kūttiyāl*, *tāci*, and *tēvaṭṭiyāl* all mean "dancing girl or prostitute" (Fabricius 1972: 505), "(de-rogatorily) mistress; concubine" (Cre-A 1992: 349), or "dancing girl devoted to temple service, commonly a prostitute; harlot, whore" (Lexicon 1982: 1825). The combined effect of such stigmatizing terms and the discourses that fuel their existence is to keep most "good" Tamil women from daring or desiring to be actresses at all, and ensuring that most actresses will become "second wives," a euphemism for concubines or mistresses—a lived rather than a legal category.

At the core of this essay are five fieldwork narratives.¹ These retell specific experiences I had while on the road with Special Drama actresses. Each experience helped me to better understand actresses' actions offstage; these were the settings in which I learned, in particular, how and why actresses create private, exclusive spaces in the midst of the Tamil public sphere. Each narrative speaks of one leg in the journey to or from a Special Drama. To-

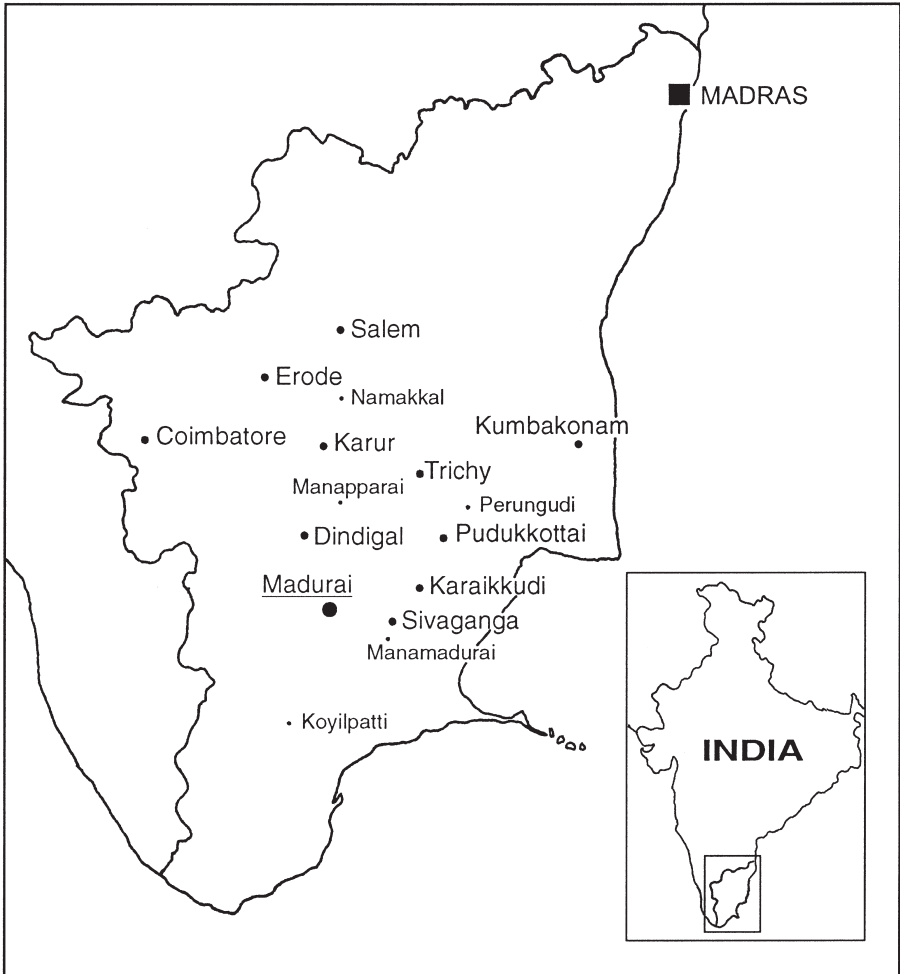


Figure 7.1. Map of the State of Tamil Nadu, showing the location of the sixteen towns and cities in which actors associations are located.

gether, the five narratives thus make up a single composite journey that begins in a calendar shop in town (the first narrative), then heads out by van (the second) or by bus (the third), to the site of a Special Drama stage and its backstage spaces (the fourth), and finally returns home, on foot, to town (the fifth and final narrative).

Through these narratives I aim to convey a sense of the actresses' *road-work* as a set of lived, adaptive practices that operate to foil the dominant notion of actresses as "bad women." When actresses manage to make their

behavior indistinguishable from that of good women—in other words, when they appear to comply with these dominant norms—might the norms be somewhat altered by being stretched to accommodate these women? With this question in mind, I suggest that actresses creatively *expand* the category of “good woman” to include themselves. I see this *expansion* of given, exclusive categories of social acceptability as a particular strategy for dealing with social stigma. The theoretical import of this study, then, concerns the larger issue of the effective redress of stigma: I detail a strategy that operates under the appearance of collaboration with social norms while simultaneously re-figuring the norms themselves.

THEORETICAL GROUNDS

In her preface to *Imaginary Maps*, Gayatri Spivak uses the metaphor of an intractable obstacle, a roadblock blocking women’s movements all over the world, to convey what she calls a “difficult truth”: that “internalized gendering perceived as ethical choice is the hardest roadblock for women the world over” (1995: xxviii). In Spivak’s vision, internalized gender norms and constraints block both the movement of individual women down particular roads and the progress of collective women’s movements worldwide.

Partha Chatterjee similarly stresses the historical importance women’s internalization of a properly gendered self-image has had in building the new Indian nation. He argues, however, that women’s ability to internalize gender constraints eased rather than blocked their travels out into the world. Chatterjee suggests that it is precisely through their internalization of a self-image of virtuous domesticity that middle-class women have been able to maintain respectability while venturing out into the public sphere; these good women were able to carry their “home” identities out into the “world” with them. This amounts to an ingenious nationalist strategy for resolving “the women’s question”: the middle-class woman had simply to become so identified with the spiritual and moral sphere of the home that it remained intact wherever she went. As Chatterjee writes: “Once the essential femininity of women was fixed in terms of certain culturally visible spiritual qualities, they could go to schools, travel in public conveyances, watch public entertainment programs, and in time even take up employment outside the home” (1993: 130). Moving in public, the respectable woman carries with her an inner strength forged indoors.

The case is quite the opposite for those worldly women against whom nationalism’s model middle-class women were explicitly defined—those women, that is, whom Chatterjee calls “sex objects” for the nationalist male, precisely *because* they are seen as “other” than his mother/sister/wife/daughter. Likewise, in Tamil Nadu today, while middle-class women are able to displace the boundaries of the home from its physical confines onto a more flex-

ible psychic domain, Special Drama actresses, who hail from among the urban poor in Tamil Nadu, never had such a proper middle-class home in the first place. For these actresses, the task of attaining the qualities of the good woman—still defined by the virtues of domesticity—requires that they constantly, vigilantly strive in their daily practice to erect those very physical confines the new middle-class woman has left behind. Actresses attempt to better their reputation as women by acting on the dominant script quite literally, throughout their public journeys, by seeking to recreate domesticity in its material form.

In this essay I focus on the problematic mobility of women who do *not* properly internalize gender constraints. I write here about stage actresses in Tamil Nadu, women stigmatized precisely for being too public, and for moving out into the world beyond the bounds of proper, modest feminine behavior. As such, this essay is literally about women and roads; more specifically, it is about my own experiences traveling certain roads, and encountering certain roadblocks, with certain women.

In these travels I began to develop my own embodied sense of actresses' roadwork, of its system of signs and dispositions, indeed of the "imaginative universe within which their acts are signs" (Geertz 1973: 13). I now understand my feelings during our travels as a set of diagnostic signs, signifying to me that I had begun to understand viscerally something of what is at stake for actresses when traveling through the public sphere. I was engaging in the famous ethnographic work of "deep hanging-out" (Rosaldo, quoted in Clifford 1997: 188), through which I began to understand "the character of lived experience" among actresses. That is, I treat examining my own experiences moving with Special Drama actresses on their turf and in their terms as a classically ethnographic way of gaining insight into their experiences of being "other" in the context of the contemporary Tamil public sphere. "Ethnography . . . has always meant the attempt to understand another life world using the self—as much of it as possible—as the instrument of knowing" (Ortner 1995: 173).

THE STIGMA OF INAPPROPRIATE MOBILITY

Throughout India, as elsewhere, theater actresses have long been the very definition of "bad" women. Unlike the chaste loyalty of the good wife, who reveals herself to only one man, the actress's profession requires that she willingly expose herself to the gaze of many unfamiliar men. This blatant step into the limelight of such mobile relations is largely what brands actresses as bad.

There are three highly interconnected dimensions to the stigma of mobility accruing to actresses in Tamil Nadu. The first is a problem with acting itself, the fact of mimetic fluidity—that acting involves illusion and not reality, and offers false selves, making mobile things that ought to be fixed.

The second involves the overly fluid offstage behavior of actors in employing fictive kin networks, rather than maintaining normal, orderly, sanctioned kin relations. Actors use kin terms across caste, class, religious, and ethnic boundaries, creating socially expedient relations between them where in reality no blood or marriage relations exist. Such identity shifts onstage (mimetic) and off (in kin relations)—both of which concern normative relations between men and women—taint the reputation of the acting community as a whole, and stigmatize it as excessively mobile and uncontainable.

I restrict my focus here to the third dimension of the stigma that accrues to actresses, their publicity and mobility as they move about conducting their business. The form of this mobility—the very public nature of the actress's line of work—threatens to expose the fragility of the culturally naturalized division of gendered spheres into home and world, as actresses move onto public stages to enact what are meant to be the most private of relations. While the other two dimensions of stigma haunt the acting community as a whole, this third dimension of stigma affects actresses far more than actors, as men have the freedom to move outside publicly without censure in Tamil Nadu. Stigma hits the actress hardest, as it is she, finally, who is most unsettling precisely in her unsettledness. Her battle for reputation against this unsettledness is constant, since the very organization of Special Drama depends on performers' mobility. Each artist is contracted individually for each performance. There is no troupe or director for Special Drama. Instead, there are repertory roles, such as Hero and Heroine, Buffoon and Dancer, in a set repertory of plays. It is each artist's responsibility to get to and from each venue on time. During the drama season, the hot summer months of March through August, actresses may appear on a different stage in a different town or village every night. These women travel all across the state to perform night-long shows that begin at 10 PM and end at dawn. The primary challenge for these women is how to accomplish their public artistic business with as little tainting publicness as possible.

In moving with Special Drama actresses through the streets of Tamil Nadu, I experienced how they created structures of enclosure even in the most public of places. I experienced viscerally how a dominant "inside/outside" dichotomy of "good/bad" morality informs their every journey. And I grew to appreciate their patient, understated, and expansive response to this oppressive climate. As we traveled, actresses erected enclosures that were their own exclusive, interior spaces, spaces that slyly appropriated for themselves a dominant strategy of exclusion everywhere we went. They strung together little islands, havens of familiarity, and hopped from one to the next as a means of remaining protected while moving through the outside.

Narrative One: Regarding the Gender Dimensions of Booking a Drama

The arrangement of bookings and dates for Special Drama is a side of their business from which actresses often distance themselves, especially because such negotiations concern their own public mobility. Instead of taking book-

ings directly, an actress hangs her calendar in a booking shop. In 1993, there were five such shops in the city of Madurai, the long-established center for Special Drama.² All were very male public spaces; several were printing shops in which booking artists' calendars were a side business, while for others such calendars were the main business. While the calendars of both male and female artists hang in these shops, only men are present physically—in the flesh, that is—sitting around talking, checking on the dates of their next performances, or drumming up business for new bookings. Male representatives from a village or town interested in booking a drama come to the city of Madurai to peruse the posted calendars, check on the availability of specific drama artists, and converse with those in the know about the current crop of artists.

Men who, for a living, help these local sponsors make their drama arrangements are known as drama agents. Together, drama agents, drama sponsors, and male drama actors regularly hang out in and around the five booking shops in Madurai, all of which are located within a small two-block radius in the center of town, a little business district in which actors are kings of the road but through which actresses only briskly pass on their way to and from performance venues.

Inside the shops, the walls are lined with individual artist's calendars. These calendars have a separate thin page for each day of the year. The pages make a square packet, which is stapled onto a cardboard backing where the artist's name is pasted as a heading, and beneath which the artist's bust photo provides further identification and allure. Every artist's calendar provides a book of days that opens out under its personalized headboard like a skirt—or so it appeared to me.

Men interested in hiring an actress do not approach her directly, but rather approach her calendar. An actress's calendar is in this way a material stand-in for her. It provides sponsors with a way to contract an actress without direct interaction, and simultaneously allows the actress to absent herself from the negotiations. Similar to the process by which good Indian girls become brides, here men engage in negotiations in which a woman's person is implicated, but not dialogically involved.³ While he books an actress, she stays at home; an effigy of her (her personalized calendar) circulates in her stead.

Any man approaching an actress's calendar to book a drama may pick her effigy off the wall, handle it, peruse it, flip through its skirt, and read therein the unfolding story of the actress's public life: where she will be when in the coming days, where she has been in the recent past, how busy this season looks, how in demand (or not) she is this season. Penned onto the back side of her calendar is the actress's performance fee, which is a private note from her, hidden from public view. If he selects her, he pens his name, and his place name, directly onto the front of her calendar. Without her ever having to meet with him, he has arranged for her to come to his place, when he chooses, for a fee.

The shop owner, who functions as a booking agent, has a certain financial stake in these negotiations, as he earns a fee (three rupees was the going rate in 1993) every time an artist whose calendar he posts is booked for a drama. Being financially implicated in this way, the shop owner wants the calendars of popular artists in his shop. He needs to know whether or not a particular artist will actually attract sponsors' bookings; he needs to know each artist's value and reputation. When I asked one shop owner, Mr. Jeyaraman, how he ascertains this, he answered: "I'll ask them to sing. 'Show me how you sing,' I'll say, and they'll sing right here in the shop. I ask many people to sing before I put their calendar up." This surprised me because it was the first I had heard of such a practice. Our conversation continued:

Susan: Really? So, imagine that I want to hang my calendar here. Would you ask me to sing?

Jeyaraman: Oh no! No I won't. I won't ask this of women.

S: Why is that?

J: We can't ask a woman to come here and sing. Can we ask a woman to come sing in a public place? If this was a house, we might ask her; here we can't.

I was intrigued. We were talking about professional performers, stage actresses, the very women who *do* sing in public places—public women par excellence—were we not? I sat there in my sari with my black box of a tape recorder, asking him endless questions, feeling like a gender freak and a bit of a boor. Actresses might be public women professionally and by night, but in their local day-to-day lives, close to home, they tried to maintain a reputation as proper women.⁴ In the daytime, in their daily local life, actresses would not come out to a public shop—the very shop where I currently sat and quite publicly acted the anthropologist, asking questions about these very gendered norms and practices—and perform publicly. I realized belatedly and somewhat sheepishly that, when he spoke about asking them to sing, Jeyaraman had been referring only to male artists, the kind of people who *should be* in shops like his.

Before I could even ask how it was, then, that he did ascertain the talents of an actress without asking her to sing, he volunteered the following: "Regarding women, if we want a critical assessment, that's easy: many people will be going to see her and will be knowing about her. We can learn from so many people: they'll be saying, 'this is how she talks; this is how she acts.' So therefore I can guarantee her to any town."

Even her booking agent, then, learns of an actress's talents only indirectly, through the eyes, ears, and words of other men who have seen and heard her onstage. Other men speak to him directly about her voice, or else they speak in and around his shop to other men hanging out in and around his shop. It is men, speaking among each other, who determine an actress's reputation, while she sits, quietly or not, at home.



Figure 7.2. Jeyaraman's calendar shop, Madurai, February 10, 1992, near the beginning of the drama season. (Mr. Jeyaraman standing at left.)

Narrative Two: Regarding Traveling to a Drama in a Private Conveyance

Whenever they can, Special Drama artists travel to their performance venues in private rather than public vehicles. Older artists recall with nostalgia the days when they traveled in the pinnacle of secluded, enclosed, and luxurious worlds: they rode in “pleasures.” “Pleasure” is the English word artists still use to refer to the private automobile, the rented Ambassador “pleasure car” that used to pick up actresses at their own door and take them directly to the performance site.⁵

Very rarely are “pleasures” used by drama parties today. Instead, quite often artists pool their resources to hire a private van, the current means of avoiding public buses. Such drama vans are crowded. Sometimes sixteen people squeeze into a space designed for ten, where in addition the back seat is entirely taken up with artistic provisions: a large wooden foot-pedal harmonium, several drums, multiple rolls of painted canvas backdrops for scene settings, not to mention each actor's costume-filled suitcase. People have to sit practically on top of each other in these vans, often for many hours.

Nevertheless, the question of why artists adamantly prefer crowded private vans to public buses is obvious: public-private distinctions as markers of prestige and social status in Tamil Nadu long predate both vans and

buses. The reigning logic is familiar: more prestigious persons occupy both more (and more private) personal space, while less prestigious persons occupy both less (and less private) space.

To me, traveling with drama artists in a van always felt risqué. Suddenly the strict women's side/men's side rules of public conveyances were lifted. The two requisite actresses in any Special Drama party would often sit side by side in the van in a two-person seat, but equally often they did not. My own presence could easily instigate multiple shifts: a woman certainly had to be seated next to me for reasons of propriety (so that I would not be forced to sit beside an unknown man), but then what about the other actress? She suddenly had increased mobility, without ever seeming to ask for it. Inside a van, other sorts of allegiances and alliances, even intimacies, emerged easily.

Van interiors provide drama artists a means of moving through and across public roads while carrying a collective interiority, a protective group cohesiveness, with them. The world internal to the drama community creates a bubble of familiarity that stretches to the contours of every space they fill together, and in these cases it was the size of the interior of a van. I felt included in that "inside" familiarity when I rode with them. I felt freer there than almost anywhere else in Tamil Nadu, engaged in a daring squeeze of closeness that was largely invisible to the outside world. I felt inside a family, of sorts, and it was a pleasure too.

Narrative Three: Regarding Traveling to a Drama in a Public Conveyance

Bakkiyalakshmi and I had finally settled on a date for me to accompany her to a drama. Bakkiya is a seasoned actress in her fifties, and we were going to a village in an area well known to her from decades of performing throughout the region.

As this village was accessible by main road, we were traveling by public bus (as there is less excuse for the luxury of hiring a van when a venue can be reached by bus). All Tamil town buses, like those we took that night, have a women's side and a men's side. The words indicating which side is which are stenciled directly onto the walls of the bus. When traveling in a pair, two women need have very little interaction with unknown persons on a public bus, least of all with unknown men. We had none.

We left from Madurai in the early evening and traveled into the night. To reach the sponsoring village we had to change buses at two different stations. In the first station our change was quick and easy, as the next bus was already loading when we arrived. We simply got up from our two-person seat on the women's side of the bus from Madurai, and switched to another two-person seat on the women's side of the bus from Sivaganga.

At the second station our bus was not waiting. Bakkiya told me it would not come for another half an hour. We got off the bus and she led me to a little food stall, one among many lining the road on the side of the bus station. There a man was making a common flamboyant dish, a specialty

of the region called “egg parota” (parota is a deliciously thin bread layered in a flat spiral). Its preparation involves terrific energy on the part of the chef. He holds two metal tools—they are shaped more like axes than knives—and bangs them down onto a wide, flat metal skillet, over and over, rhythmically mixing and chopping parota and egg. It is the noisiest manner of food preparation I have ever encountered, entrancing as only an intensely loud barrage of sound can be, starting for a spell of deafening decibels at each new order and abruptly stopping again in equally deafening silence.

The chef at the stall we approached flashed a big smile at Bakkiyalakshmi. They knew each other, though I didn’t catch exactly how. He was at least twenty years her junior. She introduced me and he immediately put down his tools and led us back through his stall into a small back room. In it was a desk, a chair, and a cot. The walls were painted royal blue. He made sure I was comfortably seated in the chair and returned to his metal axes and metal skillet. Bakkiya asked me whether I would like to eat, encouraging me to do so here rather than wait for whatever food the villagers had prepared. I agreed. She left the room, and I was alone.

I sat in that little room for what felt like a long time but couldn’t have been more than fifteen minutes. The wall of sound just beyond unmistakably delimited inside from outside. Where I was sitting was inside: blue walls swimming around me, a tide of deafening sound reaching me in waves. The other noises and voices and commerce beyond the walls of that room were all outside.

I realized that even on this most public of routes, taking a public bus from a public bus stand two towns away from home, Bakkiya had secured a little private space, which that night she lent to me so that I could disappear into a respite of invisibility. I sat there feeling safe and tiny, and simultaneously out of the loop and bored. How, I wondered, does Bakkiya feel when she sits there?

Narrative Four: Regarding Spatial Arrangements at a Drama Site

When artists reach their performance venue, an outdoor stage has already been erected at the site. The stage is a raised rectangular platform, often with a dirt floor, with palm-frond thatching for three walls and the ceiling. Specifications for the stage require a large playing area and an equally roomy backstage to which the actors may retire when they are not onstage. Actors call the playing space onstage “outside” (*veliyē*) and the backstage resting space “inside” (*uḷḷē*).

A central feature of all Special Drama venues is thus that there is a definite demarcation between inside and outside, between a public space where actors are visible to all, and a private space into which they may disappear. This demarcation is provided by the painted canvases known as “scene settings” that stretch from ceiling to floor and are rolled and unrolled for scene changes throughout the night.

Actors change costumes, touch up their faces and hair, sleep in catnaps between scenes, chat, and snack together “inside” throughout the night. They prepare themselves in this collective space of inside before each stint outside. Inside, they generally maintain the decorum of women’s side and men’s side arrangements, though not rigidly; inside feels, in short, much like being in a privately relaxed Tamil domestic space, a home, where gender determines behavior somewhat more flexibly than in public.⁶ This ability to create a familiar domestic place in the midst of the otherwise unknown and unfamiliar, an inside place where they are shielded from the public gaze and can feel and act in familiar ways, is a skill actresses employ everywhere they go.

Even inside the inside itself, for example, actresses maintain these familiar distinctions. Backstage, they carve out a private space by tying a string across one corner and hanging a sari over it, creating a modest one-woman changing corner.

I found out just how useful a shield from the outside such an inside place could be one night when I needed to empty my bladder and my actress friends directed me to their changing corner. Squatting inside that little triangular women’s space, I realized the other obvious resonance of the terms “inside” and “outside,” at least in the rural context. Where there is no restroom—and the majority of people living in rural India have none—“going outside” (*veliyē pōka*) means literally that. To have to go outside to relieve themselves would have put the actresses on par with the lower-class rural women in the audience, rather than allying them in bodily practice with middle-class women’s use of an indoor toilet. Creating inside spaces such as changing corners that double as privies enables actresses to avoid all variety of unsavory outside experiences, and exposures to inclement outside environments, by fashioning inside spaces to meet their private needs.

Narrative Five: Regarding Traveling Home in the Morning

In Madurai I lived with an actress named Jansirani. The apartment building where we lived was smack in the middle of that little two-block radius of a Special Drama business district. Most Madurai actresses try to live as near as possible to this center, which minimizes the distance of their daily travels between home and a van, or home and the central bus stand.⁷ Living in the center of town reduces their traversal of outsides, and shortens the distance between insides.

The majority of male actors, on the other hand, still live in their natal villages most of the year and only stay in Madurai during the drama season, when they rent rooms in lodges in the center of town. Lodges are notorious “bad” nightlife spots, such that for a woman with an eye to her reputation, being seen in one (let alone actually staying the night in one) is not a viable option.

Jansi and I returned together from a drama one morning by bus, sleeping against each other in our seat. We arrived at the Madurai station just

before 7 AM, tried surreptitiously to unrumple ourselves, smoothed down our saris, and began walking from the central bus stand to home, a distance of about five blocks.

We walked briskly through the streets. Jansi was moving very purposefully toward home. I stepped outside myself for a moment to wonder what we looked like: Does Jansi look like a woman who simply rose early this morning? Do I? (Not that I ever look simply like any woman here.) Tamil women rising early at home do things around their house, sacred ritual things, the most visible to passersby being making *kolams*, geometric patterns in rice powder that are negotiations of light lines and dark ground at the entranceway of the houses, where street touches home. Kolams are one of so many respectable female daily efforts to keep the street from contaminating the home, to order and purify inner space and separate it from the disorderly outside.⁸ Were we, at that moment, the embodiment of the chaotic, disorderly, outside element? The very fact that we weren't at home making kolams suddenly seemed yet another proof of this same distinction. Was it obvious that we had been riding a bus, sitting up all night, our faces bearing as many pressed wrinkles as our saris? What did people think when they saw us?

This felt to me like a particularly vulnerable moment, though at the time I couldn't understand why. Rationally, the kind of danger I was familiar with from generic travels as a woman was over: night was over, we were back on familiar territory, and it was a properly respectable hour of the morning to be out and about. But I saw too how tired Jansi was, and how she had that barely containable kind of morning giddiness that comes from staying up all night. I felt scared that everything we'd gone through was apparent on us—or was I perhaps picking up her fear, as she walked, fast, not stopping to say anything to anyone? I realize now that this was a particularly vulnerable moment for her, a moment of separation from the group: we were no longer in that cocoon of sorts created by all the actors together, inside the inside spaces of their night world and their street-side network of known people. Suddenly we were two tired women alone on the street in the broad daylight that glinted off the stray specks of green and pink glitter still stuck to Jansi's eyelids, and I felt exposed and confused, hurrying after Jansi, who was heading home so fast.

CONCLUSION

My own feelings when traveling with actresses reveal an unexpected sense of relief bordering on euphoria at finding havens of invisibility and familiar interiority, as well as a concomitant growing trepidation at being caught alone in public, day or night. In narrating these tales from the circuit of actresses' travels between booking shops, vans, buses, backstage spaces, and

roads home, I have spoken of instances where I felt uncomfortably “other,” as well as of times where I felt included like family; occasions when I felt invisible but somehow safe, and still others where I felt exposed and confused. While some of the sense of marginality and dislocation that pervaded my travels with actresses may have stemmed from my own psychology and cultural baggage, I have been interested here in how I began to experience their roadwork as a sensible embodied practice.⁹

My main aim for the narratives, however, has been to use them to illustrate the artistry of actresses’ roadwork. Actresses attempt to resignify and resituate their own social position within a dominant system that persistently casts them as stigmatized other. I have attempted to show how Special Drama actresses struggle to conform to the dominant terms of gendered respectability while also suggesting that in so doing, they subtly alter—by refiguring—these organizing terms themselves. Their struggle readily exposes the extent to which the internalization of a model of femininity based on domestic virtues affects women differently in respect to their class and social status. Femininity based unproblematically on a securely domestic identity is a class-based privilege to which actresses by definition do not have access. Their roadwork is a response to that reality, simultaneously complicitous and resistant: in figuring themselves as “good women,” actresses begin to throw that category itself into question.

NOTES

1. These narratives represent the “raw data” of my participant-observation. In a longer version of this essay (Seizer 2000) I have analyzed these experiences in light of the Tamil classificatory schemes that inform them, and it is only through such analysis that I came to the conclusions I offer here. The actresses’ roadwork must be understood within the context and in the light of these broader classificatory schemes, especially that key distinction between complementary spheres of life—known as *akam* and *puram* in Tamil classical literature (Ramanujan 1975, 1985)—that shapes the distinctions interior/exterior, domestic/public, inside/outside, known/unknown, and invisible/visible (cf. Dickey 2000). I urge readers interested in understanding how I reached my conclusions here to read the longer essay in which I develop these arguments.

2. Madurai is an inland city in the south of Tamil Nadu. It is an ancient temple city that still figures largely as a Hindu pilgrimage site. Ramanujan coined the term “rurban” to describe the notion, emergent in both classical and modern Tamil literature, of “a center continuous with the countryside” (Ramanujan 1970: 242). Madurai, a city frequently described as “an overgrown village,” is the paradigmatic example of such a Tamil rurban center.

3. In marital negotiations, mothers actively participate. In drama negotiations, as this narrative seeks to illustrate, only men participate. Nevertheless, in both cases the woman whose life is at the center of the negotiation is markedly silent.

4. As the remainder of this essay should make clear, even these women who are the apotheosis of public women care intensely that they not be seen as such, especially locally *where they live*, as is the case for this shop in Madurai for actresses who live in Madurai. For example, many actresses will not perform unless the venue is considered far enough away—generally, at least ten kilometers—from their domestic lives, from where they are known, local women.

Why should women who perform publicly, whose reputations for modesty have already largely been shattered, nevertheless attempt to conform to normative codes of gendered virtue? It seems these are the only codes that matter and that a woman must deal with these in some way. For many actresses, the public sphere seems to be divided into a differentiated continuum of publicness, either relatively more or relatively less proximate to her domestic sphere. Thus there is a proximate public sphere, relatively close to home, wherein a woman's reputation is reflected directly in her domestic life as well as affected by it. In that more proximate sphere a woman attempts to be seen as not an actress at all. In the less proximate public sphere where the woman is known primarily as an actress, she will then attempt to stave off the bad reputation through all the "roadwork" techniques and strategies I speak of in this essay. Thus, the same principles of womanly virtue affect her wherever she goes, though distancing herself from her own home allows her to more easily create a fictive self "on the road" whose modesty is then signaled by her "on the road" actions.

5. Ambassador is the brand name of the first model of automobile manufactured in India.

6. Some gender separations are also maintained in most Tamil homes; for example, women eat separately, after men. Likewise, backstage at a Special Drama event, women and men arrange their suitcases of costumes on separate sides of the available space, and sit behind their open suitcases, each with a hand mirror propped in its lid, to apply their makeup.

7. The towns and cities in which Special Drama artists live function as regional centers for the dense population of villages that surround them. Artists invariably live, and establish their actors associations, near central bus stations so that they can easily be contacted by villagers who travel to these regional centers, on public buses, to engage their services. The occupational need to live close to the central bus stations means that Special Drama artists generally live in the "first" postal code area of their respective cities: the oldest urban neighborhoods, those established around public transportation lines. Ramanujan's term "rurban" (see note 2 above) captures well the way artists live in urban settings precisely because they are continuous with their rural surroundings. Likewise, Oscar Lewis's description of the network of human exchange and interconnection that links persons in different villages in India as "a kind of rural cosmopolitanism" (Lewis 1955: 167) captures the centrality of links repeatedly forged and secured through the continued exchange of services between village, town, and city roads.

8. One account of the function of kolams stresses how they mark the threshold of the house as a boundary between the pure and the chaotic: "The mistress of the house, or a daughter, or perhaps a trusted servant, has laid out this pattern upon arising in the morning: she may have selected a traditional design of geometric shapes intertwined, or, if her intentions are more elaborate, two peacocks, perhaps, emerging from a maze. One cannot enter the house without passing through this man-made [*sic*] focus of auspicious forces, which sets up a protective screen before

the home. Of course, one cannot see the screen itself, but only its focal point at the threshold, the point at which it emerges into form—a complex form at that, carefully planned and executed, a reflection of some inner labyrinth externalized here at the boundary, the line dividing the inner and the outer, the pure from the chaotic” (Shulman 1985: 3).

9. I have written about certain of the complexities of my own subject position and identity in Tamil Nadu in an earlier essay (Seizer 1995).