Acknowledgments

This book is the product of many conversations and exchanges with family, friends, activists, and colleagues. I thank the friends and families who have made me feel at home in Pudukkottai. S. A. Karuppiah, an activist whom readers will come to know well through the course of this book invited me to come live with his family in Kovilpatti. Karuppiah remains a lifelong friend and his interpretations of the Arivoli Iyakkam and life in Tamil Nadu more broadly have played a very large role in shaping my own. I thank him and everyone in Kovilpatti, especially S. Arangulavan, S. A. Tangavelu, K. Rajalakshmi, N. Nadiyammai, and D. Minakshi for their care, companionship, and affection. K. Amutha and her sisters, D. Nadiyammai and T. Sridevi, helped me with survey work. In Katrampatti Colony, N. Velan and V. Rajalakshmi taught me about the pasts of a village. Many thanks to A. Chithra, A. Govindammal, K. Kuttaiyamman, V. Marakatham, K. Nadimuthu, S. Nalayini, K. Palaniyayi, N. Parimala, N. Racamani, A. Santhi, S. Santhi, K. Sudha, K. Sumathi, T. Vinitha, and all those who opened their hearts to me in
Katrampatti. Poets R. Neela, Subi, and family in Mangalapuram provided not only generous doses of affection and sustenance but these friends and fellow writers also provided a space, along with the room in Alangudi, to discuss literature, philosophy, and politics. Nothing I can write could possibly convey the gratitude I feel for those who have welcomed me as part of their ăr.

Conversations with Senthil Babu first convinced me that this was a story worth telling. His own work inside and outside the academy continues to inspire, as does his desire to interrogate the gap between the production of scholarly knowledge and politically effective activist praxis. I thank him and the TNSF and PSF leadership, especially Dr. V. B. Athreya, who took the time to help in developing a historical and regional perspective on the events I saw happening before me in Pudukkottai. Poet Muttu Nilavan and other members of the Progressive Writers and Artists Association in Pudukkottai and Alangudi consistently engaged with my work at a number of meetings, formal and informal. I continue to reflect on these discussions over the years and I look forward to many more. I also thank Usha Nandini and the Vidiyal Kalai Kulu of the Alangudi region and R. Rajkumar, the former district coordinator of the Arivoli Iyakkam in Pudukkottai, as well as Arokiyarani, Arumugam, Chitra, and Naga-rattinam, at the literacy office, and especially the block coordinators, Abu Bakar, Chinnalagan, Ilango, Megala, Paramasivam, Ramalingam, Sivakumar, Sheik Muhammad, Sundari, and Vallal. Their ceaseless reflection upon their own work contributed greatly to the shape of my research in Pudukkottai.

In Chennai, I benefited greatly from frequent meetings with my guide at the Madras Institute of Development Studies, A. R. Venkatachalapathy, during my fieldwork. The friendship continues, now across continents. V. Geetha has been a model of intellectual courage and generosity. Aruna Rathnam’s insights and friendship have been critical to this project. François Gros and M. Kannan of the French Institute in Pondicherry also provided stimulating discussion of this work and of a related research project on village history.

In the United States, I thank Webb Keane, Judith T. Irvine, Gloria Goodwin Raheja, and Sumathi Ramaswamy for their contributions and generous support in helping me formulate and execute the research for this book. Others at the University of Michigan who deserve special
mention include Fernando Coronil, Alaina Lemon, Bruce Mannheim, Barbara Metcalf, Thomas Trautmann, and Katherine Verdery for their parts in building the atmosphere of engagement that contributed to this work. Fernando is dearly missed by so many who had the good fortune to study with him. Sharad Chari deserves perhaps the most immediate credit for helping me to think about the relationship between political activism and the materialities of language. Lee Schlesinger has been a mentor since I first arrived at Michigan. I am indebted to Professor K. Karunakaran for introducing me to Tamil and to South Asian sociolinguistics. Friends Laura Brown, Naisargi Dave, Karen Hébert, Olivera Jokić, Emil Kerenji, Jonathan Larson, Edward Murphy, and John Thiels provided an amazing community in Ann Arbor. William Nelson and Eliot Trettter have been my brothers and intellectual companions since childhood, and Aparna Balachandran and Chandan Gowda have been dear friends and fellow researchers both in India and in the United States.

Friends and colleagues who have generously engaged with this work, sharing encouragement and insights over the years, include Shaid Amin, Barney Bate, Ruchi Chaturvedi, Val Daniel, Ujala Dhaka, Susan Gal, Matthew Hull, John Kelly, William Mazzarella, Lisa Mitchell, Anand Pandian, Nate Roberts, Ravi Sriramachandran, Ajantha Subramaniam, and Anand Vaidya. Michael Silverstein has been a long-time interlocutor who saw big things in small signatures early on in my research. Cornell University’s Society for the Humanities and Department of Anthropology provided the perfect environment in which think about how to develop the manuscript for this book. Thanks to everyone at the society’s seminar for feedback on an early formulation, and I especially express my gratitude to Paul Nadasdy and Marina Welker for their friendship and gracious hospitality in Ithaca. Toronto has proven to be an inspirational place to work because of the people I have come to know there. Darshan Ambalavanar, Ponni Arasu, R. Cheran, Sudharshan Duraiyappah, Chelva Kanaganayakam, Srilata Raman, and Aparna Sundar have become friends and fellow travelers in the field of Tamil studies. Friends and colleagues in Toronto who have helped me refine the story I tell include Joshua Barker, Ritu Birla, Girish Daswani, Naisargi Dave, Christoph Emmrich, Andrew Gilbert, Jennifer Jackson, Kajri Jain, Michael Lambek, Tania Li, Paul Manning, Bonnie McElhinny, Andrea Muehlebach, Natalie Rothman,
Jack Sidnell, and especially Alejandro Paz, who read through the entire manuscript. I have been very fortunate to teach a remarkable set of graduate and undergraduate students whose questions and comments have helped define the writing of this book.

I learned much from comments and critiques made by workshop, seminar, and colloquium participants in a wide range of venues, including the Stockholm University Department of Anthropology, Princeton University South Asia Colloquium, Harvard University South Asia across Disciplines Colloquium, Cornell University Anthropology Colloquium, University of Chicago Anthropology Seminar, Yale University Vernacular Public Spheres in South Asia Workshop, Madras Institute of Development Studies Seminar Series, and Johns Hopkins University conference on Signatures. I have also benefited from presenting my work at meetings held by the American Anthropological Association, American Ethnological Society, Association for Asian Studies, American Comparative Literature Association, Canadian Anthropology Society, Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, Wisconsin, Annual Tamil Studies Conference in Toronto, and Michicagoan Linguistic Anthropology Conference. Portions of chapter 5 were previously published in 2009 as “Inscribing Subjects to Citizenship: Petitions, Literacy Activism, and the Performativity of Signature in Rural Tamil India,” Cultural Anthropology 24(3): 347–80, and parts of chapter 1 in 2011 as “Arivoli’s Humanism: Literacy Activism and the Senses of Enlightenment,” in World without Walls: Being Human, Being Tamil, edited by C. Kanaganayakam, R. Cheran, S. Duraiyappah, and D. Singh (Toronto: TSAR). I thank the reviewers of these pieces and the editors, especially Kim and Mike Fortun, for their suggestions.

The research for this book was funded by the Connaught Foundation at the University of Toronto, the Mellon Foundation and Society for the Humanities at Cornell University, a Fulbright-Hays Dissertation Research Grant, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and a Rackham Fellowship from the University of Michigan. In India, institutional affiliation was kindly extended by K. Nagaraj and A. R. Venkatachalapathy of the The Madras Institute of Development Studies.
Dominic Boyer and Peter Potter at the Cornell University Press have been exemplary editors. I thank them for their expert guidance, and I thank Susan Specter, who saw the manuscript through production, and Lisa DeBoer, who created the index. I also extend my gratitude to Barney Bate for an extremely useful set of comments on the manuscript and to the second reviewer at Cornell for providing important contributions as well.

My mother and stepfather, Ariane and Ron Thompson, raised me in a house full of books, helped me first go to India, and have supported me every step of the way. They and my sister, Melinda Cody, my father, Edward Cody, and my nieces, Lola and Chloe, have put up with a lot while I conducted research and wrote this book. My grandparents, Andrée and Gaston Espinasse, who passed away during my research, were perhaps my most important role models. No expression of gratitude could begin to repay the debt I owe them. The Ramans and the Ramachandrans have given me yet another home in Chennai. Uma and Mohan Raman have followed my work in Pudukkottai with curiosity and encouragement. They gave me a place to rest and reflect, and they have become family. I would like to acknowledge Mr. M. Ramachandran, whose great heart and love of Tamil touched everyone who met him. And finally, Bhavani Raman has acted as my eyes through this entire process. This book could not have been written without her care and critique. Her love and intellectual companionship have made this work what it is, and me who I am.