

Joanna Lin (aka JL): GO CHOPPY!

You're listening to Shifting Subjects: stories from Asian Australian life.

[Sound of training, balls being kicked, Jo running and puffed]

JL: [KICK, SEES IT GO INTO THE DISTANCE] AWWW FUCK!

I'm Lisa Divissi.

I can't make my mind up about football. I get whiplash from trying. I'm talking specifically about Australian Rules Football, you know: Aussie Rules, AFL, footy.

I like the idea of it, it seems appealing to me.

I'm naturally what you'd call a "joiner"... I'm a complete sucker for a big collective moment... and that makes it really hard not to be swept up in the excitement leading up to something like a grand final.

When the AFL began it's national women's competition, I thought, YES, here's my chance to get into footy. I even did a bit of reporting on it as a student journalist.

But just when I think I'm all in, something happens in the world of AFL to put me off, or shut me out.

Usually it's something racist, or sexist, or homophobic coming from high up in the institution, or from people with senior standing in the sport. And those remarks in turn might embolden fans and shit stirrers alike.

And then I'll feel like a loser for being drawn to it in the first place; like, why did I think there was a place for me here?

But then I think about how much I love eating chips at Whitten Oval while the sun goes down and two teams go head to head. I'll think about the glorious collection of sleeve tats the AFL seems to have amassed, arms and legs, all genders. The contagious joy of my friends when their teams win. And how, before I know it, I'm worried we're gonna lose cos it's a tight game.

It's got me interested in other Asian Australians' relationship to footy and the cultures surrounding it. So I spoke to three of them, in the hopes that it might help me make up my own mind.

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(Sound of birds in background)

SH: (singing antagonistically) Mommy Shark do do dod ododdoooo

This is my friend, Shamsiya Hussainpoor. She was nice enough to agree to an interview in the park, but mean enough to plague me with an earworm. And now you, listener, have to suffer with me.

Shamsiya Hussainpoor (aka SH): Instead of saying 123 I think we should all just sing baby shark

LD: just to ensure that every time someone opens a file...

SH: They don't know where it is. A unique way to start

Shamsiya's love of footy began when she was nine years old.

SH: So the first ever game of AFL that I've watched was the 2007 AFL Grand Final Geelong vs Port Adelaide. I was never a big fan of sports in general. But, you know, when I sat down on the couch, this was the very beginning.

That Saturday, her extended family came round. While Shamsiya's siblings and cousins ran wild through the backyard and in the house, the adults gathered in the lounge room, where the TV was on.

That's when the parade and pre-game festivities caught her eye.

SH: I sat down, it looked interesting to me, you know, how everyone dressed up in their own, you know, merchandise and team colours.

As the cameras panned across the crowd, Shamsiya saw hundreds of kids her age in beanies and scarves... squished in together at the edge of Swanston Street ... screaming their heads off.

Eight months earlier, Shamsiya and her family sought refuge in Australia from Afghanistan. There was so much that was new to her about Australian culture.

SH: And as the game started, I became even more intrigued about, you know, what this game is about, what this show is about.

To be a part of footy, you need to buy in. To buy in, you need to pick a team.

SH: When the game started, I asked my cousin I said, "Oh, which team is from where we are?" I didn't even know where we were, so I just said 'the place that we were in'. And she said the navy blue and white, they are the Victorian team.

A newly minted Cats supporter, she now had a stake in the game. Her cousins called to her to come play outside, but Shamsiya was like, no, this is more important.

(sound of Football siren)

Every near-miss, every mark, every tackle... every point scored and every goal brought about a thrill... and it was echoed by the roar of the crowd...

For someone still getting a grasp on the English language, the reaction of the fans was instructive, and made it easy to join in. Plus her newly adopted team was winning, and it was intoxicating.

SH: I was going for them from the very beginning, it wasn't because I chose that team because they won, that adrenaline kicked in. I was like, YES, you know, this is it. My team won. We won! Immediately there was the inclusive language as well. "We" won. You know. This is, you know, this is "our team" and you know, "us".

SH: This was the first time where I sort of subconsciously, I felt like I connected with the rest of the Australian community. Because I had the same joy as people in at the MCG had. And so I was like, I don't know, deep down, I felt like I belong here. Because I'm one of them.

SH: Even though I didn't know people, even though, you know, I guess the physical part of my world didn't really change. But deep down on the inside, I had friends, anyone that wore Geelong merchandise, I was friends with them, that I connected with them, even though I didn't even - we didn't even interact. But there was that connection that we go for the same team. You know, we chant for the same team.

Winning felt good. But that sense of belonging was something else altogether. And it kept her going back for more.

SH: I knew every player name. I knew every player's number. And I knew the game like as if I watched this my whole life.

LD: Wow, where are you getting information from?

SH: Just TV. The the way I picked up the rules the way I picked up people's name, and what position they played.

LD: And you learnt the positions just by watching?

SH: Yeah.

LD: They came up on screen and it identified them and you just filed that away?

SH: 100%

People don't talk enough about what it takes to be a fan. Learning names, numbers, positions, rules, only from watching TV? That's intensive study. That's deep emotional and intellectual investment. Especially for someone new to the sport, and to Australian cultures.

Some people grow up with footy watching families. They might even inherit a team, and have a parent or older sibling who will indoctrinate them in THE WAYS. You know,

it's a weeknight, it's after dinner, "Hey come sit with me, see that guy there? He's a ruckman," that kind of thing. You can soak up the knowledge without even really trying.

But AFL is a sport with its own history, lexicon, subcultures and whatnot. And if you're starting from scratch by yourself, you really have your work cut out for you.

Hearing Shamsiya's story, some might say that she was obsessed. I'd add that crucially, she was committed.

SH: So whenever Geelong was playing, the only time that I was, you know, going away or getting snack or something was when there was a commercial break. I remember once my mum asked me to go and pray, to do the evening praying, and it normally takes 15 minutes to complete the whole praying. I remember I finished the whole prayer just within one commercial break [laughs]. And I came in I sat down. And mum just looked at me, [laughing uncontrollably] she was like [laughing] did you pray...? I was like I swear I did! Did you?? I said to one of my sisters, I'm like, go ask her! She saw me praying! But it was one of the most quickest [prayers]. I think I didn't even my head didn't even touch the floor [laughs]. So it just goes to show!

Soon enough, she was winning footy tipping competitions at school.

SH: I could even tell based on the weather. How we're going to play. You're not going to believe it, but that's insane. Whenever it was wet, we always played a really good game. I was like yes, it's raining. We're gonna play a good game.

She was beginning to get a reputation.

SH: Anything that I sort of talked about with my friends or classmates or teacher, it was just footy related. And I felt like... That's when I started seeing it physically, that, oh, the only way that I sort of connect with people right now is through footy.

Every time I would sit in the public space, whether that was bus stop train station, if I'm sitting next to someone, I would just, you know, it would they would start with a smile, so I would smile at them. And then if I see them wearing, you know, the footy merchandise that I'm like, oh, yeah, I go for this team. And that's how the conversation started.

[SHIFT]

Shamsiya had achieved something that I've always wished I could do: talk footy.

Because if you can do that, chances are you'll be able to strike up a conversation with just about anyone, at least in Melbourne anyway.

If you board a train after a game has finished, you'll see people shuffling on, wearing their team colours. And then some time will pass and you'll go, *hang on ... something's different*. The rich people are talking to the poor people, the goths are talking to the grandmas ... sometimes they all burst into song and the club anthem

will fill the carriage, and you'll be like, "come on guys, it's been a long day and I just want to listen to my podcast...!"

In other words, being able to connect over footy can so quickly transport you to the world of an in-crowd.

And having done the work, Shamsiya was in.

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(Sounds of footy training in the distance)

I'm at a Collingwood Football Club AFLW training session on a Wednesday evening. It's on a field at the edge of the city, with a highway wrapped around it. In the distance, I can see the steady shuffle of commuter traffic making its way out.

I'm here to talk to Joanna Lin, who plays through the midfield. She's Taiwanese Australian. Earlier that day we did a sit-down interview, and now we're back in the fading daylight to record her in action.

Jon: We'll clip this... this is going to look even worse, I'm sorry.

My colleague Jon has brought these wireless mics that Jo can wear while she trains.

We've clipped one of them to a bright red headband... and to make it windproof the mic is covered in a fluffy material. It sticks out and looks silly, but she's going with it.

Jo (JL): hello! Hello! Hello! Hello! Hello! Hello! Hello!

Teammate: What a we got here? What have we got?

Another teammate: I think you've got something growing out of your ear???

JL: I think so!

Different teammate: I'm sorry. What is that.

JL: what are you talking about?

Lisa: If it's uncomfortable at any time, just like -

JL: Nah yeah I just have to cop the schmackfest, when I cop all the schmack I'll be -

Teammate: I don't know what's going on!

Another teammate: Look at you! I can't believe they picked you to do this!

Teammate: What's it for mate?

JL: I don't know

Jon and I watch as they run out onto the field. I want to run out with them, but I'm a professional, so I remain on the periphery. The sound is transmitted wirelessly back to Jon's recording kit.

He lifts one headphone off and says, a little guiltily, "I can hear everything."

Another teammate: nah you know, you know

Different teammate: what is it for?

JL: I'm doing a podcast for a magazine/

Teammate: is that a microphone??

JL: /and they want to mic me up for it

Different teammate: oh that's shit, do you get paid?

JL: um

Another teammate: are they listening?

JL: yes HAHAHA

Different teammate: who's the magazine?

JL: uuuuummm I-

Teammate: Uh, Tennis Pro?

JL: HAHAHAHA I love my friends

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JL: What I love about football is just the camaraderie like everyone is like you're basically sisters. We're together every second day. You turn into a big family and I feel like, no matter what, I feel like I could go to anyone in the club for anything if I needed help, or just to chat.

More sounds from on the field, exchanges with teammates, coach instructions etc.

JL: It's a feeling that's hard to explain. Because it's just like, you're out there with, like, 20 your other best mates and you're just having fun laughing picking each other up. So whenever I play my best footy, I feel like I'm always connected with every single one that's on the field. And they are having a good time, really.

JL: Keep going Soph! You're good! Awfffft!!!

JL: In our squad, we have 32 girls so you kind of have to go out of your shell like I'm a very introverted person, because everyone's from different backgrounds, everyone's going through different, you know, everyone's in different phases of their life like the more you talk to them, like you find out more things, and I think that makes you grow as a person yourself.

Coach: Drive drive drive!

[sounds of a scuffle]

JL: I'd say that, like, at home, it was very, you know, like, like Asian culture, you know, that stuff. And then when I leave the house, essentially, and I go to school, or whatever it is, go to footy. So very, like Australian. And it's the culture is quite the opposite.

JL: Some girls, if we're like out for brunch or something like that, though. Like, come over, or like when we're just chatting, they'll ask a lot about it because like, they really haven't been around many like Asian people, I'd say. So they kind of asked me questions just to learn about like, my background and the differences because like, they all know there's differences in different cultures that just never knew it until, you know, they actually started asking about it, which is something I don't mind talking about. Because it's also funny seeing their reaction sometimes. [laughs]

Like my family don't celebrate Christmas and whenever I tell them that they're like their mind is blown. It's like the most confusing thing ever. I'm like, Yeah, but we have like different celebrations like Chinese New Year and stuff like that. Like we're that's when that's like our equivalent Christmas or whatever the case is and then that kind of like oh my god like really? [laughs] Yeah.

It was the Lunar New Year, early this year and then I did a little presentation to the girls with the kind of the background of the new year and how it kind of, you know, the stuff you learn when you're a kid. And then I showed them the like the red pockets and like and kind of told them this significance of that where you know when the elders are the ones giving it to the children and so on stuff like that. And then suddenly, I think none of them would have known beforehand. And then as a stitch up I gave one to our Captain Steph the red pocket saying that she was the oldest because we always give it a bit of smack about being older but she's not our oldest in the team, but we just love giving a bit of schmack so I got her the red pocket. [laughs]

Lisa: How much money did you give out that day?

JL: Oh, absolutely none, it was empty [laughs]

Lisa: I don't know if it's a full cultural experience unless you really shelled out.

JL: Ah, I think it's the thought that counts. [laughs]

I'm listening to all this and feeling really glad. Glad that Jo gets to train and work with her favourite people in the world. Glad that her talent is being recognised. Kind of weird that the team learned about Lunar New Year via a presentation, but I've definitely seen weirder, so I don't mind it.

In fact, this detail prompts me to think about Shamsiya and how much learning she took on to be able to feel at home in a footy setting.

Speaking with Jo is showing me that there's some reciprocity happening... that this anglo and eurocentric sport is finally developing an awareness of other non-anglo, non-euro parts of Australia, among other things.

Or... is that just me being grateful for scraps?

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Lisa: well first of all, thank you Jamie for talking to me. Do you want to introduce yourself for the tape?

Jamie (aka JP): Yeah look, my name is Jamie Pi, and I'm Chinese Australian...

Jamie Pi is an AFL player manager. In fact, Jo, is one of his clients.

JP: Fundamentally you are a player's agent you represent the player on a number of fronts. A simple way of looking at it is that you help the player negotiate their playing contracts, help the player with their, professional development, you help the player with, you know, with any career related matters.

As I look around the walls of his office, I see a signed guernsey, some framed pictures of his clients, and photos from big moments in the St Kilda Football club's history. Football is something that's become a large part of his identity. It's a fandom that was born out of pragmatism.

JP: We talk about icebreakers as salespeople, you know, you jump in front of a meeting, you know, strange customer, you don't know who they are, you find commonalities. And that's exactly why you have you go into the office, there's memorabilia, there's all that sort of stuff, because you're seeking commonalities you're seeking somewhere to start a conversation.

Jamie and his parents migrated from Xinjiang province in China, to the outer suburbs of Melbourne in the early 90s. After three terms of intensive English language classes, 12 year old Jamie was put into mainstream schooling.

JP: My first ever lunchtime I saw the boys kicking the football. And, you know, as you do you try to join in, though that was my first foray with football, first touch point.

A class mate suggested he join the local footy club. Jamie's parents worked long hours running a restaurant, which left him to his own devices on weekends and school holidays. So he figured, why not?

JP: Playing at that young age in in a place like Dandenong, when you play around, you know, Hampton Park, Hallam, it's all fairly diverse areas, socio-economically.

And I think the tolerance for my teammates, about different people from different cultures were very, very high. And my club was very good. You know, we have people from all sorts of diverse cultures. And, you know, we did play some places where it's mainly predominantly, you know, Caucasian, and we had some troubles in that, you know, against those teams, but the way that you see your teammates back you up, just affirmed what the sport can do for you and what belonging in a club means and all of that sort of stuff.

I love it, because it brought me into society - into our society - at a very young age, and gave me that bridge from where I was as a someone that's new to the country to be accepted and um and thrive in our community. So that's why I love it, obviously everyone's got a different point of view with the game but that's my vision and my point of view where I come from.

This positive and formative experience led Jamie to ensure footy would always be a part of his life.

JP: I think when I was younger I wanted to be an AFL player, but that was nonsense [laughs]. I had no skills nor the you know, physicality that become an AFL player, but I was never far away from football. You know, I worked very closely with the league with AFL on a number of things, especially in the multicultural space, I'm always around to help the league to further their interest or the game's interest into newcomers into the country. I just wanted to open that door for more people, you know, almost convince more people to understand that you can gain something from it.

Jamie Pi's contributions to AFL are quite extraordinary. Not only did he assist with bringing Auskick programs to kids in Chinese communities, but there were actual exhibition matches held in China.

JP: We had games in Shanghai, we've had, you know, exhibition games. I've done commentary in Mandarin for the AFL. So things are progressing, progressing well, we just got to keep going. And interestingly, the Australian Chinese community, we have an influx of Chinese students and business people, migrants in the early to mid 2000s. And so that community has changed a lot, a lot more Mandarin speakers, a lot more Mandarin speakers with native language, Mandarin skills. And so a lot of the, you know, my listeners, their language is a lot better than mine. But I know footy, so, so that's, that's my, my thing.

In fact, the reason the exhibition matches went ahead in the first place, was thanks in large part to a diplomatic visit made in 2010, by China's then Vice President - now president - Xi Jinping.

Mr Xi was invited to a match at Etihad stadium, and Jamie was engaged to introduce and explain the game to him.

LD: How did you get involved in that? Was that sort of in a work capacity? Was that in a volunteer capacity?

JP: Volunteer, volunteer. It was more people, that I knew that knew how much I love football. And you know, and one person gets a story, then they've spread the story to others. And then, you know...

I didn't say it at the time, but I wanted to: wait a minute, you carried out a high level cultural diplomacy for free?

Or as one wise player said earlier...

Player: Oh, that's shit. Do you get paid?

I called Jamie back later and asked him about it, and he said he was really happy to do it. He looks back on the experience fondly. He's proud to have been able to contribute.

I accept Jamie's feelings on this, though for my part, I think the AFL should have paid him. I mean, what was everyone else in the room getting paid?

But anyway. The idea to go into player management came about during his time as an intern coach with St Kilda Football Club.

JP: The coaches association had a programme to promote diverse cultured background coaches. So I was in that programme, I joined a professional club in St Kilda footy club and got to know, real behind the scenes about what a footy club looks like. I was already a financial planner, a mortgage broker, I had my own business. I got to know the football players at a very personal level – some, you know, just starting with with that footy career. And with my financial planning skills, and profession, you tend to then, you know, start to join the dots. I started my management business, what, three years ago now? Fast forward a couple of years now I've got 32 AFLW players under management and then so yeah, it's progressed. I'm not, you know, knocking the doors down and you know, being a big shot in the industry, but I have my little space in there that I'm really comfortable and happy with.

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I'm aware that I sound like a bit of a knit-picky grump.

If you're listening to this and you don't know much about AFL, you're probably thinking "nothing's ever gonna be enough for this lady".

But if you have just a passing interest in what goes on in the world of football, you'll know my gripes so far are just the tip of the iceberg.

The history of race relations in the AFL often mirrors the history of race relations in Australia.

And just as there are conflicting narratives about Australia's success as a multicultural nation... so too are there mixed messages about footy being a sport for everyone.

Here's me and Shamsiya chatting in the park again:

LD: That is the thing about football as well. Like, I mean, it's funny to me, because it's so... yes, you can pick a team and you can jump in straightaway. And it's really inclusive in that way, but then it's still quite a white sport. It's very blokey. The men's football is very blokey. As you were growing up, did you ever come up against that kind of thing in the in the, like, fandom and spectators and stuff? Did anyone sort of make you feel like you couldn't be a part of things or?

SH: Absolutely.

At 16 years old, Shamsiya got the train with friends to the MCG, to see her first live game.

SH: I can't tell you Lisa how happy I felt that day leaving home in my Geelong merchandise.

Shamsiya wasn't naive to the way popular culture and news media distorted the image of muslim people, in particular hijabi women, by using their image to represent Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists. And she wasn't naive to the ways in which it affected how she was perceived.

SH: And even though that day, one of my friends team, her team wasn't even playing, but because she was a white person, a white woman, I took her as a shield, just to protect myself from encountering racism, or discrimination because I was, uh, you know, non white, or, you know, I didn't look like everyone else, because I had an extra piece of clothing on my head.

She got a few stares as she entered the stadium, a few more as she took her seat.

SH: And I was like, you know, what, I don't care what people say, or think of me or the way they look at me. I'm here to see, you know, the players live. And this is my first time, I'm not going to let anyone ruin it for me. For the first quarter. I was like everyone else getting up, whenever we scored a goal. You know, chanted really loudly.

During a lull in the game, she sat down.

SH: And I heard someone say something along the lines of 'tea towel head'. here were a few younger boys sitting behind us. And they were like, I'm assuming they were over 18 because they were drinking. And I didn't even I wasn't even familiar with that name calling or that phrase, 'teatowel head', and I looked around me, I was like, Oh, I didn't even care. And then they said something along the lines of she could blow up the stadium, something around that, so terrorism. And I ... that was a term that I was very familiar with. That moment when I heard that, I've never felt so alone in that 16 years of my life than I did that day.

LD: What was it about hearing that in that particular context? 'Cause I'm sure you would have heard that before, it wouldn't have been the first time that somebody hurled something insulting at you.

SH: I thought, you know, people, I guess there's white people, when they saw a hijabi woman wearing the Geelong merchandise and, you know, integrating into their society integrating into their games, you know, have that phrase, like, oh, you know, they changed it, they don't follow our way of life or things like that, you know, you've heard phrases like that. I was like, 'But I am, I am adjusting to your way of life, I am part of your society. I speak the same language as you and I, you know, most of the same phrases as you. I am, I'm Australian.' And so when I went there, I was like, Yeah, surely this is my space. People were even like, like, glad to see me there. Because they're like, oh, you know, they are following our way of life in sec, I thought they might see me as a positive person in there rather than their own stereotype. And it was completely the opposite.

Up until now Shamsiya's footy fandom had been a non-stop, exhilarating journey down a wide open road, with no end in sight.

But this experience brought things to a halt... it seemed she'd reached the limit.

SH: You could be you could be the most craziest and most passionate, footy lover. And you could wear from head to toe, the same merchandise as someone else. But if you're not white, and if you don't follow in that if you don't fall in that category of, you know, like a non ethnic category, then you will face discrimination regardless. And, you know, and then later on, a lot of things became even more visible when I started to learn about how the Indigenous players, they've coped with racism, even though it's their land. And so I thought to myself, if, if they, in their own land is encountering racism, then what good do I have not to face racism?

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Around the time I was doing these interviews, a story broke about Hawthorn Football Club and its treatment of First Nations players and their families.

An external review commissioned by the club revealed allegations that senior staff had pressured players to cut ties with their families and culture... even going so far as to urge one player's partner to terminate her pregnancy. Why? Apparently it was a distraction from playing winning football.

I asked Jamie how he felt when he heard that story.

Jamie: Disappointed. Sometimes you sit back and you feel really hollow. You feel sad for the people who are affected. And then you want justice for them because instances have different levels. Those instances with Hawthorn were quite deep, they hurt deep because they have you know, they have more consequences as people's lives in mental health involved and everything else. You just hope that that doesn't go anymore and doesn't happen again.

And I asked Jo, too.

JL: When I saw the Hawthorn stuff... Like, I try to avoid seeing it, like, more just so it does make me more upset than I actually think it does. I think it's good, though, on the point of that, it opens other people's eyes to know that, like, not everyone's the same. And people actually do get treated differently based on the culture or their race.

And what did I think? I was disgusted by it. I thought, this game is meant to be fun. Instead it's been twisted into a cruel, life altering, racist experience. Why did I think for a second this sport was redeemable? Why do I fall for it every time?

Soon after, I read about Hawthorn supporters who cancelled their memberships in reaction to the story... I listened to a podcast where someone said they didn't think they could watch another game after hearing those allegations. I don't blame them.

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Back to Shamsiya. Her first real life experience at the footy was deeply upsetting.

In fact, she gave up on the idea of attending a match for a long time... but an important conversation gave her the confidence to try again.

SH: I think I had a chat with one of my teachers and he said to me, don't worry about what people think of you. If you know who you are, then you shouldn't focus on what others assume of you. Those words hit me really hard. And I said, That's right. Like, I feel like sometimes you need to hear things from someone else in order to understand it. Like even though I knew that I knew who I was, like we talked about Islam. Like I knew what Islam was. I didn't hate Islam, I didn't hate, like, my hijab, I hated the way people perceived Islam, the way people saw me as a hijabi woman.

And after almost three years of you know, thinking and overthinking and that again and again. ... That's when I was like, you know what? I don't care what they say. I'm just gonna go, if they say anything I'll say things back to them

So Shamsiya attended her second live game, three years later on her birthday, this time with her brother and cousin. It was Geelong vs Hawthorn. Geelong lost by one point.

SH: I lost my voice that day. And like I always do, every time I go into a live game. We lost by one point. And I think I think at the end of it, I'm glad that I went because I not only got to experience that feeling again in the stadium, but I also provided a few entertainment to the fans who were sitting around me so by the end of it, I sat down and I put my hands on my face and with the disappointment and just sighed, and one of the Geelong – he was also a Geelong supporter – he tapped me on the shoulder and he goes 'I enjoyed watching you watching the game more than I enjoyed watching the game.' And you know, me who can barely speak, like, 'ahhh Thank you!'

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Shifting Subjects is a LIMINAL podcast and a proud member of the Broadwave podcast network.

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If you liked this podcast, tell your friends about it - especially if you have thoughts on what you just heard. Better out than in, as they say.

I'm Lisa Divissi, see you next time.