Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

____________________________ __________________

Suzanne Caroline Persard **Date**

Queering Jahaji: An Indo-Caribbean Genealogy of Speculative Erotics

By Suzanne Caroline Persard

Doctor of Philosophy

Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies

____

Dr. Lynne Huffer
Advisor

____

Dr. Valérie Loichot
Committee Member

____

Dr. Sean Meighoo
Committee Member

Accepted:

____

Kimberly Jacob Arriola, PhD Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

____

Date

Queering Jahaji: An Indo-Caribbean Genealogy of Speculative Erotics

By

Suzanne Caroline Persard
Bachelor of Arts, Binghamton University, 2005

Advisor: Dr. Lynne Huffer, Ph.D.

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

2022

Abstract

Queering Jahaji: An Indo-Caribbean Genealogy of Speculative Erotics

By Suzanne Caroline Persard

On July 11, 1904, an indentured Indian woman lay among plantain trees in Guyana, nearly decapitated by her ex who followed her to work. On December 5, 2016, an Indo-Guyanese woman lay on a sidewalk in Queens, New York, nearly decapitated by her ex who followed her to work. My dissertation traces this intimacy between violence and queer kinship among indentured Indian women on sugarcane plantations (1838-1917) in the Caribbean. Reading colonial-era postcards from Trinidad and Tobago, lesbian film, drag queen performances and gender justice activism, I introduce a theory of speculative erotics to argue that queer kinship among these indentured Indian women or *jahaji* figures has endured as unarchived sites of survival amidst horrific gender-based violence, from the nineteenth-century sugarcane plantation to the sidewalks of present-day New York City.

Nearly two million Indians were trafficked throughout the British, French and Dutch empires from 1838-1917 to replace slave labor on plantations; yet these unrecorded bodies remain on the margins of South Asian history. Aboard ships transporting Indians from the port of Calcutta to ports throughout the Caribbean, Indians – nearly always separated from their biological families – referred to each other as *jahaji bhai* (ship brother) and *jahaji bahen* (ship sister). My dissertation upsets these heterosexual identifiers of kinship by considering queer intimacy from the site of the plantation to lesbian film, drag performance and gender justice activism. I document this underrepresented history by tracing an intergenerational legacy of violence against women on the site of these nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sugarcane plantations in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana to present-day murders of Indo-Caribbean women. I conduct a Foucauldian genealogy of the figure of the indentured Indian woman (*jahaji*) to argue that within this history, queer kinship has remained an unarchived site of survival within this intergenerational legacy of violence. Amidst sodomy between indentured Indian men, polyandrous women and cheating "wives," I argue that queer kinship – rather than the nuclear family – functioned as a site of survival for indentured descendants.

Queering Jahaji: An Indo-Caribbean Genealogy of Speculative Erotics

By

Suzanne Caroline Persard
Bachelor of Arts, Binghamton University, 2005

Advisor: Dr. Lynne Huffer, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies
2022

Table of Contents

Introduction …………………………………………………………………………… 1

Chapter 1 – Queering *Jahaji*: Visualizing Same-Sex Kinship………..…………….. 40

Chapter 2 – Indentured Sex Life: Becoming Wives…………………….…………..… 66

Chapter 3 – Coconut/Cane & Cutlass:
Queer Visuality in the Indo-Caribbean Lesbian Archive…………………………..…. 95

Chapter 4 – *Jahaji* in Drag: *Coolie*, Queens…………………………….…….……... 116

Coda – Jahajee Sisters: A Personal Prehistory ………………………..………..… 142

Bibliography

Introduction

Photographs of indentured Indian women appear everywhere in colonial photography. In black and white, women join hands – each anointed as the *Coolie Belle* of the colonial postcard; an object staged for the imperial photographer's gaze; their images will become the selling point of the tropics. Years after they are indentured to Caribbean colonies, their names will become the record of murder in the colonial office ledgers. These indentured Indian women – holding hands, bejeweled, faces covered by the veils of their *orhinis,* eyes sometimes glancing at each other – will be posed in perpetuity as a kind of plantation portraiture. The voices of these women will only appear in secondhand accounts of their lives, mediated through the voices of colonial officials or the men who murdered them. But despite the absence of their own testimonies, images of these women are plentiful. In gruesome archival records, they are raped by a ship captain; left in a sugarcane plantation for refusing a man; murdered on the floor of a barracks for refusing another. The colonial record archives these women alternating between discourses of sexual repression and liberation. The bodies of these women are archives of spectacular violence, animated by the physical, mental, and (hetero)sexual transgressions against them. They are marked by unruly sexuality: a problem for colonial authorities and plantation overseers alike, archival traces that produce an autopsy of their perceived sexual liberation.

In a hundred years, the names of these women will appear in American newspaper headlines, their nearly-decapitated corpses recorded as "crimes of passion" on a New York City sidewalk – similar to the stories of severed limbs strewn on sugarcane plantations. The narratives of these women will be recorded through a matrix of biological kinship family structures and heterosexual violence. Their deaths will be intimately bound and exclusively narrated as lost victims of men's jealousy. In 1881, a British colonial officer will write, "Chastity is almost

unknown to the class of woman indentured from India to this colony" (Mohapatra 235). The sexuality of these women will be constituted as the natural object of men's violence, an archival phenomenon that will follow these women from the sugarcane plantation to New York City sidewalks. This construction of the Indo-Caribbean woman subject not only inherits a legacy of intergenerational violence, but remains a contested site of subjectivity. As Lisa Outar and Gabrielle Jamela Hosein have argued:

> An examination of Indo-Caribbean feminisms is a fraught endeavor, burdened as the figure of the Indo-Caribbean woman is with the weight of historical stereotypes and with competing contemporary expectations of the role she must play in community identity and in protection of what is seen as the boundaries of Indianness in the Caribbean. While contemporary Indo-Caribbean literature and scholarship have done much to push against these flattened versions of what Caribbean Indian femininity is or should be, the dominant notions of the Indo-Caribbean woman as Hindu, as passive, as heterosexual, as conservative, as submissive, as guardian of Indian culture via her body and her morality continue to haunt us (1).

Outar and Hosein aptly summarize the fraught act of theorizing about gender and sexuality in relation to the historically contested subjectivity of the Indo-Caribbean woman. The figural *jahaji* woman is haunted by an archive of indentureship that scripts her as always already within relation to men, to a legacy of present-day gender-based violence plaguing Indo-Caribbean communities. A discourse of murder follows her death from the nineteenth-century plantation to the twenty-first century New York City sidewalk. Heterosexual kinship is the primary register through which her life is legible. Within historical approaches to Indian indentureship, feminist epistemologies and Caribbean historiography, however, queer intimacies between women are

eclipsed. In this dissertation, I conduct a genealogy of the figure of the indentured Indian woman to argue that within this history, queer kinship has remained an unarchived site of survival for women enduring this intergenerational legacy of violence. Although previous scholarship of indenture has focused on the nuclear family, my intervention reads sexuality speculatively to consider whether existing theories of sexuality about indentured Indian women should be recast within an archive saturated by heterosexual violence. My scholarship is situated within what Lisa Outar and Gabrielle Jamela Hosein have deemed "post-indentureship feminisms," which consider the distinct forms of activism and feminist consciousness of the indentured diaspora (6, 9). In this dissertation, I advance a theory of queer eroticism not only within this frame of post-indentureship feminisms, but considering the role of queer eroticism in the intimate sites of the plantation. I trace the figure of the *jahaji* not only within the archival materials of colonial postcards, photographs and records from the British Empire, but through sites of present-day drag performance, lesbian film and activism. My genealogy of the *jahaji* therefore considers this figure as what Michel Foucault has deemed a "history of the present" (*Discipline* 31).

The *jahaji* comes into being on the ocean, that vast abyss of water from which there is no certain origin, only an expansive gulf reorienting the limits of theorizing. The ocean, as Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley has declared, "obscures all origins" ("Black Atlantic" 192). But the abyss, as Edouard Glissant has declared, is also a beginning (6). From the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, ships of indenture or *jahaj* transported Indians across British, French and Dutch empires as plantation laborers. Following the abolition of slavery in the British Caribbean, Indians would become the new human labor in an empire sustained by sugar. The oceanic journey produced a different kind of Middle Passage for the indentured, one known as crossing the *Kala Pani* (black waters) of the Indian Ocean. Indians were kidnapped and misled,

told that there were riches and gold a short travel from their villages – unaware that the journeys they contracted their bodies to would lead them nearly to the other end of the world, to Caribbean islands like Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago; to South American territories like Guyana and Suriname; to nearer islands of Fiji and Reunion. The violent system of indenture was characterized by rape, sexual violence, flogging and other horrific violence common within systems of bonded labor. Historian Hugh Tinker famously called indentureship "a new system of slavery" (1974) in the first monograph about the transport of Indians throughout the British, French and Dutch empires. Indentureship, however, differed from slavery in several critical ways. Repatriation to India was offered in the early years of indentureship, although only one-third of labors embarked upon the return passage. Indians were entitled to ownership of land following the completion of their indentured contracts. Since indenture to the Caribbean commenced in 1838, technological advancements in the shipping industry due to the introduction of steam ships and the regulation of ship tonnage provided a significantly different experience at sea than was afforded to enslaved Africans (A. Kumar 77-80).

Nonetheless, the system of indenture was a form of human trafficking rife with sexual and physical violence meant to recreate the conditions necessary for the endurance of European empires. Aboard ships venturing an estimated six months to places across the globe like Guyana and Guadeloupe, indentured Indians endured widespread disease aboard ships, extraordinary high infant mortality rates, and rampant sexual and physical abuses on ships and plantations. Although their journeys to return home to the subcontinent were guaranteed in the earliest parts of indenture, only a third of Indians returned to the subcontinent; by 1929 the empire stopped sponsoring return ships to Calcutta (Shepherd, *Transients* 101). The majority of the indentured remained in these new colonial islands – in many cases, on the other side of the world. However,

unlike slavery, indentureship was barely catalogued as a system of violent labor. If it appeared at all, it was only in the footnotes of South Asian history. The epistemic omission of Indian indentureship from histories of Indian Ocean forced labor, as well as within the historical memory of the Indian subcontinent, therefore return descendants and scholars alike to the colonial archive to encounter the materiality of this historical lacuna.

This violent system of labor excluded from historical memory might be considered an epistemology of the Kala Pani, or the Indian Ocean crossing. To understand the complexity of sex and migration across the Kala Pani crossing, it is first necessary to attend to the assumptions about caste, gender and sex that scripted the odyssey from India to the Caribbean colonies as one of no return. According to Hindu lore, crossing the Indian Ocean was a taboo. Crossing any body of water would result in the loss of one's caste for Hindus, who were said to be deprived from reuniting with the holy waters of the Ganges and would enter an endless cycle of reincarnation (Mehta, *Diasporic* 4-5, 7; Mohammed, *Gender* 47). Although the taboo of Indian Ocean crossing is commonly rehearsed within scholarship on Indian indentureship, the myths surrounding Indian seafaring have outweighed the social realities and historical evidence of Hindus and Muslims traveling abroad (Vadarajan 1, 5; Fisher 26). During the seventeenth century, Indian mariners were contracted by the East India Company to replace European seamen who either died or abandoned the company (Fisher 26). Seafaring was therefore itself subject to its own discourse of defilement and contamination, but this discourse seemed to exist more as a mythic taboo than an actual prohibition. The crossing of the "black waters," however, persists within scholarship of Indian indentureship as a symbolic break with the Indian subcontinent for the rearticulation of a new diasporic identity (V. Mishra 432).

The trope of the *jahaji* or "of the ship" and its corresponding gendered signification in either *jahaji bhai* (ship brother) or *jahaji bahen* (ship sister) is arguably the most popular trope of kinship within the diaspora of indenture to the Caribbean. In the absence of blood kin, indentured Indians from different castes and classes formed communal ties aboard the ships of indenture during the treacherous oceanic journey known to each other as *jahaji.* Whereas castes within the subcontinent might have been segregated prior to indentureship, now all had embarked upon the colonial odyssey, sailing, eating, and sleeping alongside each other. For Hindus in particular, the myth of crossing the ominous Kala Pani was associated with loss of caste and alienation from the rites necessary for reincarnation by the holy river Ganges and the taboo of venturing far from one's home (Mehta 4-5, 7; Carter and Torabully 15, 163-164; Mohammed, "Symbols" 4, 10-11). In the 1950s, anthropologist Morton Klass observed that although the descendants of indentured Indians lived in Trinidad for more than one hundred years, large extended families were rare; instead, *jahaji* bonds persisted as the major identification of community networks among Indians (Mohammed, "Changing" 4). The *jahaji* kinship bonds were therefore intensified by the exilic nature as these shipmates endured crossing the Indian Ocean odyssey together to the backbreaking labor of the plantation, bodies that would be bonded for generations in new lands. This "kinship of the boat trumped all other descriptors of family, religion or caste" (Mohammed, "Changing" 4).

Although the trope of the "jahaji bhai" has interpellated a male Hindu-centric community of kinship, the origin of the very word *jahaji* inherits its own unstable genealogy. Although the *jahaj*, originating from the Hindi word for "ship" is commonly cited etymologically as a derivative of traditional Hindustani, the word is actually derived from the Urdu word *jahaz* with Persian linguistic roots ("*jahāz*"). From the *"jahaj"* or ship, the adjectival form of "*jahaji*" or "of

the ship" would accompany the indentured Indians throughout European empires, denoting either the "*jahaji bhai*" or "brother(hood) of the ship," or "*jahaji bahen*" or "sister(hood) of the ship." The *jahaj,* perceived as a stable signifier of a Hindu identity, then reveals its instability as a term that actually includes Muslim influences as constitutive of its Hindu cultural signification, as well as many instantiations of transliteration to the Roman alphabet: *jahaji, jehaji, jihaji, jehajee, jehagee, jihajee*, etc. (Mohammed, "Changing" 10-11). I emphasize the unruliness of this etymology to begin demonstrating the unruly roots of even tracing a linguistic genealogy of a kinship term, which possesses its own shifting meanings according to varying historical periods, nation-diaspora relations, and community configurations. There are, in other words, many routes to kinship.

The *jahaji* itself is therefore an unstable vessel, marked by a trajectory of genealogical crossings. The term *"jahaji bhai"* was used colloquially among the descendants of indentured Indians, prior to its entrance as a popular symbol within academic indentured Indian discourse. In the 1980s, the publication of the *Jahaji Bhai* anthology of Indo-Caribbean literature, followed by a wave of anthologized Indo-Caribbean writing including *Indenture and Exile* (1993), ushered the term into academic discourse as a recognizable trope for Indo-Caribbean identity (Lokaisingh-Meighoo 81-82). However, the term has re-emerged in the twenty-first century denoting a communal form of Indo-Caribbean diasporic kinship due to the founding of the popular New York City-based organization Jahajee Sisters in 2007 (Mohammed, "Changing" 10-11). The emergence of the Jahajee Sisters, as Patricia Mohammed has observed, signifies both a "continuity and transformation" of the *jahaji* trope that has historically interpellated a masculine trope (Mohammed, "Changing" 4, 10; Lokaisingh-Meighoo 80). Citing the *Jahaji Bhai* anthology edited by Frank Birbalsingh in 1988, Lokaisingh-Meighoo emphasized the absence of

women writers from the earliest anthologies of Indo-Caribbean writing as indicative of this *jahaji bhai* interpellation as a masculine formation of community (80).

Jahaji bhai culture, and by extension *jahaji* discourse, is stereotyped as doggedly heterosexual, Hindu-centric, male and ethnically Indian (Lokaisingh-Meighoo 80, 84, 86-87; A. Khan, "Voyages" 251-252). Aliyah Khan has continued this critique of the *jahaji bhai* discourse, arguing that not only has the construction of the *jahaji bhai* symbol excluded women but its heteronormative interpellation has excluded the possibility for inclusion of either the homosexual or the queer (A. Khan, "Voyages" 253). Feminist scholars like Patricia Mohammed, Rhoda Reddock and Rosanne Kanhai would publish some of the earliest scholarship on gender as a key analytic within Indo-Caribbean scholarship, countering the absence of women in the earlier edited volumes predominantly authored by men. Later, feminist texts such as Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin* would return to this figure of kinship by feminizing the term and adding "*-in"* to denote a plural and symbolic women's community (2007); Mariam Pirbhai's *Jahaji-Bahin* principle (2010); Kavita Ashana Singh's "Jahaji-bhain in Carnival" and Brinda Mehta's "*Jahajin Bahin* Feminism" (2020) follow similar trajectories.

In my formulation of the *jahaji* figure, however, I refrain from theorizing same-sex kinship as the feminized "*jahajin*"; instead, I approach the figure of the ship as a mode of queer kinship, which destabilizes the gendered resignification of the term to either *"bhai" (brother)* or *"bahen" (sister)* as part of the hetero-familial reproductive unit on the plantation. I, however, eliminate the gendered signification of the term by positioning the site of the ship as both the figurative and material site of intimacy between and among the indentured. These multiple, non-linear and various invocations of a feminized *jahajin* sisterhood have served to reproduce the blood-relations of genealogy through matrilineal descent, often focusing on women in terms of

their roles as mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers. These iterations of *jahaji* feminism are valuable for their contribution to gender in Indo-Caribbean history, particularly considering Lokaisingh-Meighoo's earlier critique that the diaspora was indeed structured according to male homosociality (79-80). Yet within these literary and scholarly feminized *jahajin* figurations, women are already mobilized as part of a heterosexual reproductive unit. Again, the legibility of kinship for Indo-Caribbean women is primarily through their role in relationship to each other through reproducing matrilineal genealogical lines; subsequently, these women are also, of course, *always-already* heterosexual.

This intention reflects a genealogy of the unstable *"jahaji"* that has now evolved through the reemergence and popularity of the term in activism among organizations such as Jahajee Sisters, who refer to each other as *"jahajees,"* creating an identification of kinship through diaspora from the original "*jahaj/jahaz*" through a series of genealogical linguistic shifts charting Hindustani, Urdu, Persian and English. Such alliances are inter-generational and cross-racial, indicating the concept of "*jahaji"* as one that has genealogically returned with different significations, and with indentureship as its primary signifier. Since my project also aims to unsettle ethnonationalist modes of belonging among the post-indentured diaspora, I espouse an unfaithfulness to this linguistic genealogy as a method that also queers the history of indenture within its refusal to be bound by binarized modes of kinship. But rather than treat this genealogical shift as one that is "progressive" and therefore capacious enough to encompass varying degrees of gendered, sexual and racial alliances in its present usage, I argue that this figure of kinship was already unstable from its very origin – despite the perception of the extended heterosexual family haunting the archives of indenture.

Such fictions of familial kinship were in fact produced by colonial officers and repeated by early texts on Indo-Caribbean scholarship written by men, attempting to ease the anxieties about women's sexuality on the indentured plantation. But even colonial officers were suspicious of the term "wife"— even as they used such language to refer to the indentured Indians in the context of gender-based murders. In an 1871 report concerning a dispute between a woman who left one man for another, the British Guiana Commission observed that the Immigration Commission referred to indentured Indian women as "'the *reputed* wife of a coolie'" (Tinker 205, emphasis mine). Such suspicion was corroborated at the site of the plantation census, revealing that the majority of indentured Indian women in Jamaica remained in significantly smaller numbers than men and birthrates remained low (Shepherd, "Gender" 241-242). This interrogation of the very concept of "family" as a stable signifier of indentured kinship is therefore central to my argument that circuits of kinship among the indentured were, in fact, unstable and shifting. As Amar Wahab and Shani Mootoo have noted, indentureship encompassed queerness at its core (Mootoo 83; Wahab 388). I argue that the family has remained an over-determined discourse within indentured Indian communities, neglecting other forms of queer intimacy and erotic kinship. As I will describe in Chapters 1 and 2, in particular, the family as an organizing principle of relations on the indentured plantation was bolstered by instruments of colonial photography, ethnonationalist assumptions about Indian life, and imperial taxonomies of kinship.

Queerness, as Michel Foucault proclaimed of madness, is the absence of an oeuvre within the archive of indenture. In the earliest accounts of Indo-Caribbean scholarship, a heteropatriarchal exemplar of *jahaji bhai* culture was reproduced (Lokaisingh-Meighoo 81-82). Yet correctives to the exclusion of gender within this heteropatriarchal scholarship still left

queers absent even within Indo-Caribbean feminist theory (A. Khan, "Voyages" 263). By reconsidering the terms of kinship, I ask, how might returning to the visual archive of indentureship produce possibilities for the kind of erotic allegiances that might have occurred among women? What effect does this orientation away from seemingly *straightened* configurations of kinship produce for examining sexuality upon the indentured plantation? Furthermore, how might feminist theory's attachment to a hetero-*jahaji* kinship be transformed through considering homosociality among women erotically? Finally, how might queer speculation as a mode of genealogy prove to be aligned with, rather than in opposition to, the archive of indenture? In my approach to an alternative genealogy of *jahaji* kinship, which I am calling a speculative erotics, I aim to disrupt the stability of language through the gender binaries of either "*jahaji bhai*" (ship *brother)* or "*jahaji bahen*" (ship *sister)* by formulating a mode of queer kinship that presents possibilities for reexamining existing configurations of gender and sexuality within the indentured Indian archive. I therefore abandon the linguistic determination of ethnonationalist forms of kinship that brand the indentured archive, reconfiguring the *jahaji* trope to speculate erotically about alternate forms of intimacy among women.

Genealogy as a method of indenture

Genealogy, as Michel Foucault has said, is gray ("Nietzsche" 369). Within the colonial archive, gray is simultaneously the color of proof and ambiguity: shades of gray that color ship arrival logs of the British Empire also appear as the color of the earliest tourist postcards featuring indentured Indians in the Caribbean. The material of empire operates "on a field of entangled and confused parchments" producing palimpsestic impressions upon each encounter with the archive (Foucault, "Nietzsche" 369). My genealogy of the *jahaji* is not interested in a utopian genealogy of the archival queer; instead, I am interested in attending to the speculative as

a mode of genealogy, which unmoors itself from the evidence of origins. By using a Foucauldian method of genealogy to work across archival objects of indenture, I aim to emphasize the framing of my approach to the indentured archive as tracing events even within their absence ("Nietzsche" 369). Although the queerness of speculation might seem unique to an archive of potential same-sex eroticism, speculation is itself a mode of theorizing indenture: the archive is marked by unstable genealogies. Queerness in the archive of Indian indentureship might therefore be approached as what Foucault once said about the pursuit of genealogy: that which we feel is without history ("Nietzsche" 369). But in approaching this archive through a Foucauldian genealogical method, which unsettles the linearity of descent marking origin stories, I must first emphasize the critical point of traditional heterosexual genealogies within archives and histories of Indian indentureship, as well as the epistemological attachments to origins undergirding theories of indenture.

Traditional genealogies, however, are bound to the bloodlines of origins. Before advancing a Foucauldian genealogy within this dissertation, I must first attend to the traditional use of genealogy within Indian indentureship and its affective attachments to the very search for kin and origins. To understand the reliance upon traditional genealogies within historical scholarship of Indian indentureship, it is first necessary to reiterate the striking omission of knowledge about Indian indentureship not only from histories of bonded labor, but among the descendants of indenture themselves. V.S. Naipaul has likened inheriting indentured ancestry as inheriting "absolute blankness… the area of darkness" (Rosen and Tejpal). He surmised this phenomenon as follows:

> When you're like me—born in a place where you don't know the history, and no one tells you the history, and the history, in fact, doesn't exist, or in fact exists only in

> documents—when you are born like that, you have to learn about where you came from. It takes a lot of time. You can't simply write about the world as though it is all there, all granted to you. If you are a French or an English writer, you are born to a great knowledge of your origins and your culture. When you are born like me, in an agricultural colony far away, you have to learn everything. The writing has been a process of inquiry and learning for me. (Rosen and Tejpal)

Naipaul's notion that indentured history "exists only in documents" denies access to the knowledge of one's origins, what Aliyah Khan has called "the never-ending Indo-Caribbean search for origins" (Rosen and Tejpal; Khan, "Voyages" 253). The imperative of descendants of indenture to search for origins, then, is not only a personal pursuit but one embedded within the desire to understand the lacunae of your blood. These searches generally situate the "origin" within the Indian subcontinent and seek geographic coordinates in India, names of ships or *jahajis*, and proof of ancestors' emigration passes within the colonial archive. Traditional genealogy within the indentured archive therefore consists of this excavation process, and a surprising number of scholars incorporate the personal as part of this historical knowledge and origins-seeking process.

This mark of the backwards-trace of genealogical texts written by indentured descendants includes Patricia Mohammed's *Gender Negotiations Among Indians in Trinidad: 1917-1947*, one of the most significant contributions to Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship, which incorporated Mohammed's own family photographs. The hybrid historical memoir *Coolie Woman* (2013) by Gaiutra Bahadur also employs genealogy as a method of engaging with the historical archive of Indian indentureship. Genealogy is arguably the auto-ethnographic mark of indentureship studies. Of all critical scholarship published within Caribbean Studies concerning

indenture, it is notable that several major texts published by descendants of indenture allude to or incorporate their own genealogy in the form of heterosexual family photographs (Mohammed, *Gender* 2002; Bahadur, *Coolie* 2013; A. Khan, *Mecca* 2020; Ellapen 2021). The intimacy of photography, then, within indentured history is closely bound to the concept of genealogy, and one's genealogical glances toward the Indian subcontinent are an authorization of rootedness – or following Paul Gilroy, *route*dness (28). To extend the metaphor of the genealogical "glance" as a way of "seeing" archival rootedness, heterosexuality becomes the route by which one is realized as indentured: the process of routes/roots-tracing relies upon locating one's indentured ancestors in the passenger lists of ships within the colonial archive – and specifically locating the names, castes and villages of one's *jahaji bhai* or *jahaji bahen* ancestors recorded on these indentured passenger ships. The figure of the *jahaji*, then, is not only a symbolic figure of kinship; the figure of the ship itself becomes *the* location of legitimizing one's origin. The ship – not the colonial depot in India, nor the plantation barracks – is the genealogical link to authorizing one's descent. The significant number of texts citing one's own ancestors within theories of Indian indentureship represent an effort to perhaps address the ambivalence that characterizes the diaspora to its homeland, situating oneself in an unbroken connection to India as authenticating the truth of an origin. These genealogies are therefore straight lines that quell the anxieties of indenture's unruly archives. In the case of Indian indentureship, the archive is also a site of repetition. The thumbprints of indentured contracts that served as "signatures" for illiterate Indians who could not sign their names on indentured contracts left their own smudged gray fingerprints as testimony to accomplish the messy work of its retrieval.

Traditional genealogies of indenture, however, are far from stable: in the first instance, names of the indentured were often mistranscribed – first by the British, then by the bureaucracy

of postcolonial governments. But names were also changed by the indentured themselves: indentured Indians, often traveling with a single name, sometimes adopted names aboard ships to position themselves in higher castes. Upon freedom from plantation contracts, some of the formerly indentured adopted names of the former plantation owners for social mobility and integration into British (post) colonial societies. The indentured therefore adopted names "Francis" from "Ramghulam," or "Williams," from "Maharaj." This is a sort of *queer* naming convention, as Hindus with Anglicized names masked traces of a violent system of indenture which one would otherwise not suspect. These queer digressions signify the brokenness of any reparative attempt to return to the unbroken, straight lines of descent. The genealogy of the indentured diaspora therefore already inherits its own erasures and instabilities, countering the perception of filial genealogical kinship that has structured approaches to sexuality on the plantation.

What then would it mean to espouse a Foucauldian genealogical method within an archive seemingly obsessed with the truth of origins? To embark upon a genealogy of the *jahaji* by abandoning traditional genealogies and turning toward "flash existences" that are irretrievably lost, rather than with the optimism of locating origins stories, is to audaciously begin from a place of abandoning origins – within an archive and a history that is already barely recorded. In one sense, traditional genealogies provide a personal and ethical satisfaction in filling the lacunae of this omission, a reparative form of history. But perhaps one of the tensions within what Aliyah Khan has called indentured history's "never-ending Indo-Caribbean search for origins" ("Voyages" 253) is the reality that the indentured archive is marked by its own inconsistencies, absent records, and dense ambiguities. The archive of indenture comes into being through its own disorienting matrix, marked by instabilities, inconsistencies and competing origin stories.

The encounter with the archival is that genealogical shade of gray that Foucault described as characteristic of history – a color that continues to produce its own shadows as it conceals, a discursive haze that counters the utopian backward-searches into the origins of history.

In my articulation of the *jahaji* throughout this Foucauldian genealogical project, I track the figure through unstable "scenes" of appearance and disappearance: on plantations, performing on New York City sidewalks, among gender justice activists and in lesbian film. In this alternative construction of kinship, my genealogy resists the desire to "restore an unbroken continuity" of indenture that leads to the Indian subcontinent by way of heterosexual filiation ("Nietzsche" 374). My formulation of the *jahaji* thus imagines queer kinship not only as an alternative model to that of the biological family – which *jahaji bahi* and *jahaji bahen* relations were – but as queer erotic relations. Citing Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo's formulation of the *jahaji* trope as a heteromasculinist formation, Aliyah Khan has argued that there is no equivalent of "*mati*" among women in Indo-Caribbean shipmate relations ("Voyages" 252). But I follow the work of scholars like Audre Lorde (1982), Gloria Wekker (2006) and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley (*Thiefing* 2010) to consider the erotic potential of *jahaji* shipmate relations as queer forms of sex, work and intimacy.

As Krystal Ghisyawan has noted in her ethnography of same-sex loving Indo-Caribbean women in Trinidad and Tobago, the word "friend" in Anglophone Caribbean vernacular actually means one's lover (25). This interesting play on "friend" produces the first opening for considering the possibilities of indentured erotics among women. Although *jahaji bhai* ("ship brother") and *jahaji bahen* ("ship sister") are translated as kin, these relations were actually symbolic kin. The erotic coding of "friend" – despite its seemingly neutral connotation –among Indo-Caribbean women might follow this genealogy of same-sex intimacy between women

charted by Lorde and Tinsley in configurations of *zamni* and *mati,* respectively. Ghisyawan also notes in her ethnography that among Indo-Trinidadian women queerness is marked by being both "insular and incestuous," attesting to the erotic relations among a sub-group of women (24). This emphasis on the "incestuous" nature of these Indo-Caribbean – or perhaps *jahaji bahen* – is interesting given that intermarriage among *jahaji bhai* and *jahaji bahen* was forbidden, since the kin of the ship were akin to blood. Furthermore, as Ghisyawan argues, the concept of these Indo-Caribbean same-sex loving women's perceived "invisibility" is imbricated within the neutralization of women's sexuality, as Rosamond King also argued in her famous essay on Caribbean lesbian invisibility (191).

The thread of Indo-Caribbean lesbian *invisibility i*s central to my argument, since indentured Indian women curiously occupy a hyper-visual place in the historical archive. Although oral testimonies of women are mediated in records where they are either accused of murder or reported as murdered, images of them are plentiful – a curious phenomenon given the colonial indenture system commenced in the British Caribbean in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Despite this visual archive of indentured women, however, *seeing* queerness is curiously omitted. Ghisyawan's ethnographic work is therefore a critical point of thinking together the concept of queer sexuality and insularity for indentured Indian women at the site of a planation that history has structured through the fiction of heterosexual kinship, as well as through the heterosexual genealogies that record the archive of indenture. Although Ghisyawan's fieldwork among same-sex loving Indo-Caribbean women in Trinidad was published in the twenty-first century, such ethnographies addressing queer relations between Indo-Caribbean women seem to be a temporal novelty rather than an archival instance.

A queer theory of visuality

I introduce a theory of intimacy between *jahaji* women in what I am calling a speculative erotics. At the nexus of engaging with an archive of indenture and queer theory is the mode of speculation. By orienting the indentured archive toward speculation – rather than the historical materiality of ship registers and emigration passes – I seek a mode of inquiry that counters indentureship's tendencies to seek out origins, unsettling the ease with which genealogies generally proceed in the backwards-glance toward the colonial archive. The intent of this orientation toward speculation thus destabilizes any authorizing truths for unmooring from attachments purely to historical records, while asking, how does speculation reorient our mode of thinking about the archives of indenture? Speculation, in queer theory, has often been concerned with a mode of wishful thinking to locate queers within the archive. In my proposal of the speculative, though, I am interested not in the locating of queer subjects but rather the production of "heterosexual" ones. In my queer theory of visuality, I therefore consider how knowledge and power become "seeable" (Rajchman 91).

A Foucauldian approach to the indentured archive must necessarily attend to the discursive production of categorical "facts" animating the "truths" of these women. Speculation, which I argue is a critical component of Foucauldian genealogy, must therefore unmoor the telos of finding proof within archives to consider the "proof" of the image as one of equal unreliability. Within the context of this queer kinship the figure of the indentured Indian woman in the Caribbean is significant, for she remains "doubly in the shadow" (Spivak, "Subaltern" 84): at the nexus of historical archives that trace her life through a fictive kinship of "wife murders," or by approaches to sexuality in the Caribbean that foreground sodomy between men as the primary register of queer legibility in the region. I therefore engage with a Foucauldian method

of genealogy that attends to the "gray" ("Nietzsche" 369) of the shades and shadows of sexuality within an archive of indenture. My genealogical approach emphasizes not only the limits of reliable origins within the indentured archive, but also the liberal tropes of "visibility," "silence," and "liberation," which remain central conceptual tropes in theorizing indentured Indian women's sexuality. I also attend to the significance of caste within this dissertation, which is commonly excluded in analyses of either gender or Indian indentureship. The discourse surrounding "loose" women on the plantation has historically interpellated women from low castes as so-called sexual deviants.

Queerness is subsequently conceived as ahistorical, absent or irrelevant to these theories of violence, sexuality and nation. This dissertation is an intervention into theoretically reading these absences – not as an act of recuperation, but as an alternative reading that emphasizes the absence of "queer" within the Indo-Caribbean archive while complicating traditional genealogies of queer liberation and sexual freedom as the teleological progression of the post-colonial Caribbean. The epistemic absence of queer approaches to the indentured archive has advanced what M. Jacqui Alexander observed: queer Caribbean bodies as presumably antithetical to the nation-state (5). The effects of these epistemic absences have also enabled a reading of Indo-Caribbean attentive to queerness – if at all – as a sexual *afterward,* propelling the trope of the Caribbean as a region of homophobic mob violence. In the case of Indo-Caribbean women, queer subjectivity does not register within the indentured archive. As such, feminist scholarship has also conceptualized the body of the Indo-Caribbean woman as a site upon which both Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean men competed (Gopinath, *Impossible* 162). The personhood of the *jahaji* is thus historically narrativized as intimately bound to her perceived heterosexuality.

Queering kin(ship)

Why engage with a historical archive where queerness is conspicuously absent or contested? This question animates the undertaking of this dissertation, which is, broadly, a queer, feminist genealogy of the *jahaji,* or the gendered figure of the Indo-Caribbean woman of the historical archive. The terms *jahaji bhai* (ship brother) and *jahaji bahen* (ship sister) were used by indentured Indians abroad ships transporting them throughout the British and French empires. Historically, the term was primarily associated with male sites of Indo-Caribbean sociality and community, essentially repeating the gendered interpellation of both the Indo-Caribbean subject and its diasporic configurations as male. *Jahajin* (2016)*,* a memoir-novel by author Peggy Mohan, represents a critical literary moment in orienting the figure from one of male signification to one that tells the story of the *jahajis* through inter-generational memoir-narratives among women. While the *jahaji* figure continues to circulate as a trope that is primarily male and implicitly heterosexual, in my theorization of this figure I conduct a queer genealogy of *jahaji* as a reading of same-sex desire among women – an area of both absence and under-theorization within Indo-Caribbean historiography and Caribbean feminist epistemologies. My genealogy is less interested in reclaiming the figure of the *jahaji* by replacing the gendered kinship from identification among men to identification among women. Rather, my intervention is focused on what possibilities for sexuality might emerge from casting the *jahaji* across time and space. Tracing this figure from the site of the plantation to that of the drag stage, how might the paradoxes scripting her body generate a radically different understanding of sexuality and indenture? Here I want to emphasize that the translation of "jahaji" by attending to the different transliterations of the very word: *jehagen-jahajee-jehaji-jihaji* (Mohammed, "Changing" 4) as a genealogical phenomenon which resists a stable subjectivity. According to Patricia Mohammed,

who cites the early work of Morton Klauss in Trinidad, families based on *jahaji* ties were even more encompassing than blood relations (*Gender* 293-294).

The concept of the *jahaji bahen* or "ship sister" has emerged as this desexualized trope of kinship. The shipmate bonds, which replaced blood-kin ties aboard the oceanic routes of the Kala Pani, served as imagined communities that would be established among a new definition of kin within the colonies. The woman setting off together at the Calcutta depot represent almost an unimaginable instance of kinship – the concept that women might have *wanted* to leave the subcontinent to be with each other, conspiring to abandon their roles as "wives" to be together perhaps on an unknown odyssey. Indentured women *queerly* ventured alone, outside of traditional structures of kinship across the ocean; in some cases, they carried illicit pregnancies, children or lovers. But in the overwhelming number of cases on the plantation, they were "single" women traveling alone. While the Kala Pani was itself a symbol courting deviance as widows, prostitutes, dancing girls, *launda ki nauch* (dancing boys) sought out the Indian Ocean journey. The *jahaji* kinship was queer, not only for its cross-caste positioning of bodies that would otherwise not meet in the holding rooms of depots and within the confined quarters of a ship, but because the oceanic crossing produced a new kind of sociality.

A genealogy of *jahaji*

Genealogy, Foucault writes, "is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself" ("Nietzsche" 374-375). In theorizing the queer genealogy of the *jahaji,* I attend to this mode of fragmentation that Foucault cites as part of an ongoing refusal to recognize any single origin story as the "truth" of indenture. In particular, I trace the construction of a heterosexual *jahaji* subject whose so-called liberation

is found within the indentured colony. I aim to unsettle attachments to liberal ideals of visibility, freedom and speech by considering the role of speculative erotics as an alternative mode of intimacy and survival among these *jahaji* figures. In this reconfiguration of the *jahaji* trope, I espouse a faithlessness to the linguistic determination of ethnonationalist forms of kinship and unsettle the limits of sexual kinship through a mode of queer erotic speculation.

In this dissertation, I introduce a theory of speculative erotics to argue that queer intimacy is the unarchived potential of *jahaji* shipmate bonds, which remain written out of the historical record – but in their omission serve as a means of reexamining the ways in which the fictive domestic indentured family became the biopolitical mechanism aimed at regulating sex and deviance at the site of the plantation. Using interdisciplinary methods including archival research, close readings of lesbian film and drag performance, I excavate Indian indentureship from the margins of Caribbean and South Asian history to foreground queer intimacy between women as a tactic of survival within a legacy of intergenerational violence. This dissertation subsequently conducts a queer feminist reading of the *jahaji* in colonial postcards, lesbian film and drag performance to offer a new hermeneutic of reading the gaps and silences within the archives of Indian indentureship. Rather than conduct a traditional genealogy of the figure of the *jahaji,* which would seek origins of queerness in the archive, I am more interested in the ways in which scenes of queerness, violence and sexuality appear and disappear like Foucault's description of scenes, figures and intensifications that "flicker" within the archive ("Nietzsche" 247). This dissertation, informed by Foucault's method of genealogy, aims to trouble some of the assumptions undergirding queer theory in the Caribbean, including asking the following questions: How does a speculative approach to queerness unsettle attachments to a liberated Indo-Caribbean subject? (Furthermore, what implications does such an unsettling produce for

queer activism and scholarship?) Finally, how have dominant theories of Caribbean sexualities foreclosed a queer hermeneutic, particularly with regard to Indo-Caribbean women's sexualities and violence?

Genealogy, as Michel Foucault observed, is "gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary" ("Nietzsche" 369). This archival practice, however, now exists alongside the proliferation of digital images and algorithms indexing infinite searches of photographs. On photography platforms like Flickr, hundreds of images of indentured Indians are available; postcards of *Coolie Belles* are sold on eBay; entire Instagram accounts are dedicated to photographs of indentured Indians. This archival shift from institutional repositories to Instagram accounts has perhaps ushered in what Tavia N'yongo observed: genealogy now exists "in vivid color, slapdash, and instantaneously aggregative" (217). The instant aggregation and proliferation of digital archives of Indian indentureship has satisfied a desire of descendants to document indenture as an omitted labor regime from South Asian history. The subsequent proliferation of images disorients the patience of genealogy. The evidence of the digital archive grants immediacy and an ease of access to depicting the lives of indentured laborers. Yet the instantaneous access to these images in the twenty-first century does not mean that the archival grays of indenture present any less ambiguity. In fact, ease of access to these archives only underscores the critical significance of a genealogical method. As technology renders these images more visible, one must consider what is still rendered "unseen" within this hyper-visual archive.

Queerness in the indentured archive, however, is the absence of an oeuvre[1]. Or, queerness is the unaccountable caesura[2]. How, then, to proceed without a framework of quantifying and qualifying queerness in the Indo-Caribbean archive? Following Foucault, I approach my archive – historical and living – through engaging with the "archaeology of that silence" (*Madness* xxxi). Rather than excavate the queer Indo-Caribbean woman from the archive and propel her figure into the present-day theorizing of queerness, my dissertation is oriented toward her archival impossibility through a speculative reading of her sexuality. In this sense, Foucault's particular genealogical method, articulated most clearly in *History of Madness* and described in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," is useful for my own approach to Indo-Caribbean archival objects. Whereby traditional genealogy proceeds with an origin story – and in the case of indentured descendants of the Caribbean, the primacy of origins is intensified by the ability to locate subcontinental ancestors – I approach my archive methodologically with a series of intentional discontinuities that reject the promises of an origin. I am interested in a reading of queerness through scenes of appearance and disappearance; flickers of intimacy within portraiture and performance; and ambiguous sites of queerness that court the speculative erotics of such intimacies, rather than a ventriloquism that "speaks" queerness into a lost past.

This dissertation then, is not one of recuperation or reparation. My method does not intend to illuminate, nor brandish a theoretical staff of teleology backwards in time seeking the pure origins and essential truths of Indo-Caribbean queerness. Rather than a traditional genealogy preoccupied with origins and locating essential truths, I am interested in an alternate reading of Indo-Caribbean queerness informed by Foucault's genealogical method. Following

---

[1] Madness, the absence of an oeuvre," is the title of Michel Foucault's 1972 Appendix to the *History of Madness,* reprinted in the 2006 edition of *History of Madness* by Routledge.

[2] The language of "caesura" figures prominently in Michel Foucault's *History of Madness.*

Nietzsche, Foucault writes, "Genealogy is gray" – ambiguous, shadowy, unresolved ("Nietzsche" 369). In a sense, the archive of queerness itself is an encounter that continues to efface as it promises to disclose. The shadow, like the archive, is the gray of a surface that is produced by partial or complete darkness, an area that is subject to change at any moment; like our epistemological engagement and the subjectivity of the indentured Indian woman, the shadow is also contingent depending at the angle from which we cast our gaze. I trace the figure of the *jahaji* as she appears in the slanted handwriting of British Empire records, as she reappears in headlines of her twenty-first century murder, as she is eclipsed by the language of "sodomy" reports in the Caribbean, as she appears in drag on New York City sidewalks.

Following Patricia Mohammed, who asks, "What does [Indo-Caribbean feminist] genealogy look like beyond the real or mythicized migrant 'coolie' female character of low morals and fierce independence that has occupied the Western mind as the blueprint for Indo-Caribbean femininity?" I conduct a genealogy that does not simply seek to *liberate* the Indo-Caribbean queer woman but attends to the gaps and silences informing her visual archive ("Vindication" 24). I select the particular figure of the *jahaji* rather than replicate the figural "*Coolie* woman" that circulates both archivally and within popular culture, since my emphasis is on queer intimacy through kinship relations. I also find that by repeating the term *Coolie,* which remains a contested term within indentured descendant communities, an emphasis on labor and gender assumes primacy as an analytic of theorizing this history. I am therefore interested instead in a queer feminist formulation of the *jahaji* figure as one that reorients the identification of Indo-Caribbean history not only through a lens of alternate queer kinships but as a tactic of surviving a legacy of intergenerational violence.

Speculative erotics

The site of queer kin(ship) is essential to reading the figurations of *jahaji* across the plantation, through the archive, in sites of activism and through drag queen portraiture. How is the absence of queer bodies narrated in the archive? How is sexual subversion narrated – and what is its relationship to queer legibility? “Absence” is a key word for Indo-Caribbean epistemologies, obsessed with the methods of search and retrieval – in other words, what Anjali Arondekar has rightfully observed to be the authorizing effects of an archive (*Record* 1). Indo-Caribbean Studies is arguably undergirded by what Jacques Derrida has termed “archive fever” – that recursive return to an obsession with origins. By orienting this dissertation toward a mode of the speculative, then, I want to unmoor the primacy of seeing as a kind of evidence. I court the ambiguities of archival grays and read the spaces between women’s bodies that are not-quite kin to emphasize the potential for deploying speculation as a powerful mode of reimagining not only kinship relations, but forms of survival among indentured Indian women.

In particular, the authorizing effects of an archive provide validation for present-day queer bodies, as when Arondekar asks, “Why does sexuality (still) seek its truth in the historical archive?” (*Record* 1). The archive of Indo-Caribbean history is also one of self-fulfilling affective newness – every missing document *feels* like a grand confirmation within an epistemically marginal history; every piece of scholarship *feels* like new knowledge confirming the presence of what one is seeking. What, then, might be the impact of orienting a project toward emphasizing absence? The speculative as a method of reading historical archives is most famously introduced by Saidiya Hartman in “Venus in Two Acts,” where she proposes a method of reading the violence of the archive as an act of “critical fabulation” (11). I find this engagement with the fabulatory potential of an archive generative, echoing Hartman’s

declaration that the lives of the indentured inhabit the impossibility of recovering a past (2). As Hartman reads Foucault's "Lives of Infamous Men" as a way to grapple with the macabre archive of slavery and the impossibility of recovering any subjects, my approach to the speculative follows Hartman's archival approach through Foucault "to imagine what cannot be verified… and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance" (12). I am most interested in reading the figures on the *jahaji* plantation as impossible sites of representation, following the impossibilities of representation articulated by Hartman. However, my mode of the speculative engages with a paradoxical archival object: the hyper-visible colonial photograph, that saturated image of colonial representation. To speculatively imagine eroticism between these women is to deploy an alternative archival method to existing genealogies that have naturalized heterosexuality within the indentured archive. Moving toward a speculative erotics of sexuality and away from a ventriloquizing approach to speaking truth into the past, I want to court silence as the archival gray – the vague spaces between these women, inside of barracks, in photographs and on cane fields that might speculatively offer another frame for conceiving of sexuality as shifting, contingent and unstable.

The indentured Indian woman of the colonial photograph, most famously materialized within early twentieth-century Caribbean postcards, produces an interesting counter-archive to indentured discourses of "absence" and "invisibility" that characterize women within indentured archival history. The trope of the "silenced" and "invisible" indentured Indian women remains a central conceptual frame for theorizing gender in the post-indentured Caribbean. The perception of these archival silences is largely based on the absence of the production of recorded narratives or testimonies by indentured Indian women during the indentured era. In imperial archive of the British Empire, indentured Indian women appear alternately as either prostitutes, "unfaithful

wives," accomplices to murder, or murdered themselves. These traces of sex and violence animate this curious archive, paradoxically marked by alternating tropes of "silence" and "invisibility." But interestingly, while indentured women remain characterized by this trope of "invisibility," their images are plentiful: in hundreds postcards produced in Trinidad, Suriname and Jamaica, women dominate the visual archive of indenture. These women appear more often within colonial postcards as single women or posed in pairs, and appear more frequently than single men, or families of indentured laborers. It is at this curious juncture of the historical archive that I begin an approach to considering a theory of speculative erotics, and therefore, problematizing attachments to "visibility" among indentured Indian women within this hyper-visual archive.

The spectacular details of their lives – mostly in the form of rape, murder or abuse – appear secondhand, in the slanted calligraphy of British colonial reports recording their murders by men on plantations. Yet their images are curiously plentiful alongside this curated archive of silence. Since the transport of indentured Indians throughout the Caribbean commenced in 1838, coinciding with the transition from the daguerreotype to the photograph. Of the archival silences that surround the *jahajis* of indenture, the advent of the colonial postcard produced a peculiar historical phenomenon: photographing the bodies of bonded laborers. Although the voices of women are seldom recorded in the archive, colonial postcards remain as the after-lives of their own bodies – staged by photographers in studios as *Coolie Belles or Coolie Types;* photographed preparing rice in the fields; holding hands in a plantation field. In the largest collections of postcards from the period of indentureship, more photographs of single women and women in pairs appear. The intimacy between them is produced by the proximity of their bodies, holding

hands while posing for the photographer's gaze, or engaged in some mundane activity that a colonial travelogue recorded.

By turning to the colonial postcard as a site of speculative erotics, I consider the archive as one that must necessarily be interrogated as a source of *evidence*. Reading the colonial postcard in the indentured archive, my approach to sexuality within an archive of indenture takes as its object the postcard to examine hyper-visible Indian woman of the colonial archive. The trope of the "invisible" and "silenced" indentured Indian woman in the historical archive is countered by the hundreds of images of indentured Indians who posed for photographers – or were posed – in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. The lens of the colonial photographer indisputably produces an image of the indentured Indian woman meant to portray "truth" (Campt 8) according to colonial and oriental logics. However, rather than repeat a criticism of the discourse of the colonial image and gender, I am more interested in attending to these archival figures with two key points: first, the performative role of the postcard and its role in producing "visible" heterosexual subjects; and second, the role of anti-colonial critique in producing a discourse of sexual piety that views these women as (heterosexual) subjects of sexual exploitation.

This dissertation therefore forms a queer theory of visuality by considering objects of a hyper-visible archive that is saturated by sight and considers what is still unable to be seen within an archive of scopic plentitude – and particularly, within an anti-colonial discourse. Orienting the speculative as a mode of *seeing* queerness between *jahaji* women at the site of the plantation, therefore, intervenes in a discourse that has until now only considered the possibilities of same-sex eroticism at the level of the archive either between men (Lokaisingh-Meighoo 2000; Ellapen 2018; Wahab 2020) or between Afro-Caribbean women (Lorde 1982; Silvera 1992; 2005;

Tinsley, *Thiefing* 2010). More interestingly, a speculative erotics at the site of the colonial postcard considers the most visible object of the indentured plantation and asks, How is sexuality *seen?* By selecting hyper-visible objects throughout my chapters – including colonial postcards from Jamaica, Trinidad and Suriname; lesbian film; and drag performance – I probe what is still unseen within the hyper-visual sites of indentured cultural production.

Notes on Queer

Since this project deploys the term "queer" within Caribbean scholarship – a site underscored by its tension for analysis in Western academic and political spheres as one of exceptional homophobic violence – I deploy this term while acknowledging this tension. Yet I proceed following other scholars of recent queer Caribbean scholarship who have acknowledged its Western origin within sexuality studies while simultaneously recognizing its rich potential for theoretical work (Nixon and King 2013). The trajectory of "queer" in Caribbean Studies emerged in the early 2000s, which departed from earlier scholars focused on "lesbian and gay" identities (Walcott 2009; Wahab and Plaza 2009). To date, transgender studies and Caribbean drag aesthetics is still a relatively nascent area of analysis within Queer Caribbean Studies, and is nearly absent within indentured Indian histories. This dissertation intends to expand this field. The use of "queer" with regard to Caribbean scholarship has also sought to challenge the homophobic Other as specifically external to Caribbean societies and diasporas – rather than being an integral component of them.

Most recently, queer Caribbean scholarship has defined itself as specifically *queer* through analyses of same-sex female desire in literary and cultural production; of rights-based LGBT movements in the Caribbean; and ethnographies of same-sex cultural icons – all of which challenge tropes of the Caribbean as a primarily "homophobic" landscape (Pragg 2012; A. Khan,

"Voyages" 2016; Gill 2018; Ghisyawan 2016; P. Kumar 2018; Persard 2018; Chin 2019; Wahab 2019). Despite emerging scholarship of queer Indo-Caribbean histories and cultural sites of production, the common invocation of Indo-Caribbean queer analysis has overwhelmingly centered on the novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* by Shani Mootoo. This emphasis on the literary as a site of scholarly analysis persists throughout Indo-Scholarship, in general, which primarily achieves legibility through the novels of V.S. Naipaul. Rather than repeat the selection of the novel as a primary analytic of queer Indo-Caribbean cultural productions, this project will turn to a different archive for its examination and interrogation of queer Indo-Caribbean epistemologies. The objects of this dissertation aim to unsettle the assumption of Indo-Caribbean queerness as simply temporally new or only available vis-à-vis the literary.

Despite a critical archive of Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship that has addressed the figural Indian indentured woman as victim and survivor, naïve and resourceful, or powerful and enterprising, in all of these iterations she is insistently heterosexual. In "Voyages Across Indenture," Aliyah Khan laments, "There is no Indo-Caribbean equivalent of the Afro-Surinamese and Afro-Caribbean *mati* sexual and emotional relationship between female shipmates as described by Tinsley" ("Voyages" 253). Khan cites the introduction to *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism Between Caribbean Women in Literature* by Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, which describes the linguistic translation of same-sex female desire circulating throughout the Caribbean: *mati* in Suriname, *zanmi* in Grenada (*Thiefing* 7). "These last terms can refer without distinction to female friends or lovers: *mi mati* is like *my girl* in African-American English, maybe my friend or maybe my lover" (*Thiefing* 7). In a sense, my articulation of the *jahaji* as an alternate form of queer kinship proposes that we might read indentured ship bonds beyond their signification as a male form of sociality.

Queer, in my articulation of this *jahaji* kinship, is not simply non-normative nor metaphorical but relies on a vast archive of historical documents, lesbian film, drag performance and political activism to consider the ways in which this kinship "of the boat" is not simply one situated among heterosexual men but among shifting figures throughout indenture. As Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo has argued, the *jahaji* trope has culturally circulated as a metonym of kinship among indentured Indians that interpellates a male figure (80). In my genealogy of the *jahaji,* I trace this figure through different flickering scenes oof appearance and disappearance, attending to the complexity of bodies and pleasures within sites of historiography and cultural production.

Queering *Jahaji*

The conceptualization of a queering *jahaji* therefore intervenes within an archive and an epistemology that has eclipsed eroticism between laborers as an intergenerational form of survival. As Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo radically asserts in the groundbreaking essay, "Jahaji Bhai: Notes on the Masculine Subject and Homoerotic Subtext of Indo-Caribbean Identity," "*jahaji bhai* already contains a queer quality, and always has" (89). Lokaisingh-Meighoo's assertion and critique that *jahaji* is the masculine-gendered subject of Indo-Caribbean indenture presents a critical archival opening to disrupt readings of Indo-Caribbean identity as necessarily patriarchal and subsequently heterosexual. My emphasis on the *jahaji* trope thus considers the speculative erotics of intimacies aboard ships during the Indian Ocean crossing, as well as at the site of the plantation, as a theoretical opening for conceptualizing labor, sex, pleasure and survival within an archive saturated by violence.

In selecting the figure of the *jahji* and reading it as a site of speculative erotics between women, my intervention follows a trajectory of queer feminist Caribbean scholarship that has

attended to the possibilities of intimate shipmate relations. The most prominent intervention in this field is arguably Gloria Wekker's 2006 ethnography, *The Politics of Passion,* tracing sexual relationships between Afro-Surinamese women. Wekker's work traces the etymological roots of the word *mati,* an ambiguous term meaning "friend," but also refers to someone who engages in same-sex sexual relations (178). *Mati* has several possible origin stories: one possibility is the *mati's* derivation from "maatje," the neutral Dutch word for close friend; the other, which resonates with Wekker, is the affectively charged term for shipmate, which later acquired a sexual meaning in the context of same-sex relationships in Suriname (174-178). Mati, according to Wekker, are "working-class women who typically have children and engage in sexual relationships with men and with women, either consecutively or simultaneously" (172). I find Wekker's emphasis on *mati* relations particularly useful to consider a speculative erotics between *jahaji* figures, as Wekker's work de-emphasizes homosexual "identity" but considers sexuality as an "activity" (174). Although the *mati* and *jahaji* are not equivalent kinship formulations, I read the *mati* within the same erotic genealogy of *jahaji,* extending the figure of queer kinship to the oceanic – prior to that of the plantation.

In theorizing the *jahaji* as a figure of eroticism, I refrain from repeating a discourse that overdetermines the sexual liberation of the indentured Indian women; sex, as Michel Foucault has written, becomes the answer for everything. My emphasis on "queer" erotic relations in this dissertation, then, is not to articulate eroticism between same-sex shipmates as a kind of truth of personhood. I am cautious of what Anjali Arondekar has asked about the scholarly impulse to "seek project . Instead, I aim to call attention to the complex ways in which erotic kinship relations occurred at the site of the plantation. My emphasis on the *jahaji* figure as an indentured Indian woman situates her as always already in relation to kinship. But more than continuing to

locate sex as an "answer" for everything, I want to attend to the ways in which the discourse of sex has been produced in the archives of indentureship – particularly with regard to women's (hetero) sexuality and perceived victimhood. In the sense that diasporic discourse if often narrated from the perspective of male heterosexuality, I find reorienting the focus toward an alternative frame of seeing women within this diasporic crossing as a more generative frame of thinking about eroticism and diaspora, as well as the limits of "seeing" women throughout various historical archives and sites of cultural production.

In "Voyages Across Indenture," Aliyah Khan writes that there seem to be no cases of recorded same-sex encounters between Indo-Caribbean women on ships of indenture, despite the presence of homoerotic *matikor* dances where women simulated sex with each other ("Voyages" 254). The very word *matikor* echoes the familiar "mate" of shipmate kinship, most famously articulated by Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley in her reading of Gloria Wekker's ethnography of *mati* or same-sex loving women (*Thiefing* 2010). However, the words *matikor* and *mati* are not etymological kin. In Chapter 4, I turn to the *matikor* and its role in generating chutney music as a form of "queer cover" (Puar "Global" 2). I therefore articulate my theory of speculative erotics by emphasizing the role of kinship at the site of the plantation, rather than as a phenomenon characterized by the liberal progress narratives of sexuality which narrativize the bodies of Indo-Caribbean women. I trace this genealogy of eroticism through various sites of archival and cultural production, subsequently advancing a theory of unarchived queer intimacy as a critical site of survival among the indentured.

The issue of language with regard to sexual minorities in the Caribbean inherits a fraught history within queer Caribbean scholarship. In the opening pages of the groundbreaking anthology, *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian & Gay Writing from the Antilles* (2008),

Thomas Glave discloses, “Language itself posed one of the most vexing questions at the center of this project’s development” (7). Glave, editing the first major collection of queer writing in the Caribbean, confesses that some of the authors who were asked to contribute to the volume refused due to an unwillingness to be associated with the terms “lesbian” or “gay” – despite their open participation in same-sex erotic relationships (9). The trajectory of “queer” in Caribbean Studies emerged in the early 2000s, which departed from earlier scholarship focused on “lesbian and gay” identities. A significant body of scholarship has subsequently emerged since Glave’s groundbreaking anthology, both resisting challenge the Caribbean as the regional site of the homophobic Other, while problematizing grand narratives of queerness external or exceptional within Caribbean societies and diasporas. Most recently, queer Caribbean scholarship has defined itself as specifically *queer* through analyses of same-sex female desire in literary and cultural production; of rights-based LGBT movements in the Caribbean; mapped LGBT liberation movements; and conducted ethnographies of same-sex cultural icons – all of which challenge what can only be known now as an anachronistic stereotyping of the Caribbean as a “homophobic” landscape (Pragg 2012; Nixon and King 2013; A. Khan, “Voyages” 2016; Ghisyawan 2016; Gill 2018; Persard 2018; Persadie 2020).

My dissertation is an interdisciplinary project that employs Foucauldian genealogy as its methodology, while also conducting a close reading of film and drag performance, and concluding with autoethnography. I consider lesbian film, drag performance and gender justice activism as “histor(ies) of the present,” following an impulse to consider the shifting temporalities within my archive. The dissertation first engages with the myth of the “invisible” indentured Indian woman through reading sites of colonial postcards from Trinidad, Jamaica and Suriname in my first chapter. In Chapter 2, I continue with an analysis of the colonial archive to

emphasize the role of the unruly sex lives that occurred at the site of the indentured plantation – upending the notion of the nuclear Indian family as an anchor of morality in the New World. In chapters 3 and 4, I turn to lesbian diasporic film and drag performance to consider more contemporary objects of queer intimacy between *jahaji* figures. In these last chapters, I offer the queer erotic lives of indentured descendants not simply map to a teleological *jahaji* that is queered throughout time but to emphasize the ways in which these present queer figures return to an archive of speculative erotics. In the Coda, I narrate an experimental autoethnography to explain the emergence of the *jahaji* in my own life as a scholar and activist, as well as a queer descendant of indenture.

In Chapter 1, "Visualizing Same-Sex Kinship," I conduct an analysis of the queer speculative potential for *jahaji* kinship relations by reading an archive of colonial-era postcards from Trinidad, Suriname and Jamaica. This chapter reads my speculative erotics of the archive between Indo-Caribbean women by examining the hyper-visual archive of images. While most scholarship about indentured Indian women has emphasized the "invisibility" of these women within the archives, I read this oeuvre of colonial photographs to consider the hyper-visual archive of the Indo-Caribbean woman against the discourse of invisibility. In these postcards, women pose erotically next to each other in a queer kind of visual portraiture. Although the photographs are indeed staged by colonial photographers at the time, I use the photographs as an example to consider the ways in which the archive visualizes sexuality – or counters such queer possibilities. In this chapter, I argue that these portraits of staged queer intimacy function as an optic for considering the speculative erotics between women within an archive of heterosexual violence.

In Chapter 2, "Becoming Wives: Indentured Sex Life," I continue emphasizing the unstable familial kinship relations at the site of the plantation by tracing construction of the category of "wife" among indentured Indians. I cite sodomy and "polyandry" at the site of the plantation as speculative sites of eroticism, while emphasizing the proliferating perversions of the plantation. Then, I attend to narratives surrounding indentured Indian women's sexuality by challenging the liberal conceptions of sexual repression and liberation within the indentured plantation system. I contend that ethnonationalist readings of Indian women's sexuality within the colonial archive and within feminist scholarship have produced a "repressed" Indian woman as an explanation for the high rates of murders upon the indentured plantation. I argue that caste is a critical – albeit egregiously neglected – factor within the Kala Pani crossing that has scripted the lives of these women through alternating frames of sexual repression/liberation. Finally, I argue that the insistence on categorizing indentured Indian women into the taxonomy of the heterosexual nuclear family using terms like "wife" has actually failed to consider the multiple shifting, varied and unstable sexual relationships at the site of the plantation.

In Chapter 3, "Coconut/Cane & Cutlass: Queer Visuality in the Indo-Caribbean Lesbian Archive," I read Michelle Mohabeer's classic film *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* (1994) as a visual genealogy of the *jahaji.* "Where do Indo-Caribbean lesbians learn how to be lesbian?" a woman's voice asks. Like the gray of Foucault's genealogy, scenes shift from black and white to gray to sienna – the present somehow both animated but entangled with the ambiguity of the past, rather than a black and white telos of queer sexuality that eventually ends in color. A woman speaks of her experience migrating from Guyana to Canada. A woman puts on different masks: half of one mask is the Guyanese flag, the other half is the Indian flag. The narrator intones a series of epithets: "… foreigner…. dyke… dirty Indian." The mask alternates as both

racial, national and sexual identities, representing not only the diasporic trajectory of the queer Indo-Caribbean body but the multiple layers of alterity within these varied identities. In this chapter, I focus on Mohabeer's film as a cinematic "history of the present" that deploys fragmentation and multiple temporalities to complicate and confound the legibility of gender and sexuality for the figural *jahaji.* I argue that Mohabeer's film presents speculative erotics between *jahaji* women from the site of the canescape to the present, introducing queer intimacy as a force of survival within a legacy of intergenerational violence.

In Chapter 4, "*Jahaji* in Drag: *Coolie*, Queens," I open with a vignette of an Instagram video performance from the famous Indo-Caribbean drag queen, Sundari Indian Goddess. Sundari's performances in Richmond Hill, Queens – the epicenter of the Indo-Caribbean community in the U.S. – have made her a well-known *jahaji* figure in drag. In the video, Sundari performs on the public space of the sidewalk, dancing to a series of chutney folk songs traditionally heard on the post-colonial plantation. In this chapter, I consider a genealogy of *jahajis* in drag to reconceptualize tropes of visibility and *seeing* queer figures within the Indo-Caribbean archive. I turn to an earlier ethnography of drag performance in Trinidad to consider questions about the limits of visibility with regard to queer figures. Then, I consider the hyper-visibility of the *nachaniya* folk dancer in drag as a *jahaji* that confounds traditional tropes of "invisible" queer subjectivity. I argue that both Sundari and the *nachaniya* occupy ordinary sites of speculative erotics within a genealogy of chutney performance.

In Coda, a conclusion to this project, I weave in a bit of my own personal narrative for an experiment in autoethnography about how the figure of the *jahaji* entered my own life through my role in founding the gender justice organization Jahajee Sisters. In noting the linguistic difference between "jahajee" and "*jahaji"* I call attention to the slippage of the *jahaji* figure and

the intersections of queerness and gender-based violence within the context of political activism. As an organization run by queer women, Jahajee Sisters itself has remained hyper-visible as a *straightened* space, because of its commitment to ending gender-based violence. I probe the assumption that we imagine queerness as out of proximity to this intergenerational legacy of violence. By considering the community of kinship built around ending a legacy of intergenerational violence, I ask, how might reimagining kinship in Jahajee Sisters serve as its own queer “history of the present”?

Chapter 1

Queering *Jahaji*: Visualizing Same-Sex Kinship

I suspect that once an Indian from India stepped foot on one of those boats in the nineteenth century, bound for the islands of the British Empire, in leaving behind language, family ties, community, the village, tradition in general, very specific religious rites, he or she was transitioning into a queerness of no return.
-Shani Mootoo

Figure 1. "East Indians Preparing Rice." Courtesy of National Library of Jamaica

Two bodies, shadowed in archival gray, perched together. A *jhumka* and necklace are visible on one woman, a gold bangle on her left hand and a white beaded necklace. She stirs a small pot as a second woman perched with a basket of rice stares at the photographer. The woman who has paused her hand mid-motion – perhaps to stare back into the lens of the colonial voyeur. Veils are draped over both of the women's heads. Their figures are nearly symmetrical.

In the middle of the frame, there is a space between the women where their elbows are inches apart. Without a description of the photograph's location, one might easily mistake the landscape for the Indian subcontinent – not the Caribbean. This space is ambiguous: an intimacy that exists between the archival grays of this photograph and the possibilities for the lives that these women lived, the intimacies that they might have shared – perhaps even together.

The photograph, which is housed in the National Library of Jamaica, is frequently circulated as one of the most famous images of indentured Indian women. The Indian women prepare rice, situating them as always-already within a domestic form of kinship. Cooking interpellates their existence as either wives or daughters – not simply preparing a meal for their own survival as time-bound laborers in a foreign land. The colonial photographer has situated their bodies in perpetuity within this domestic act. This particular photograph is frequently misattributed to other indentured colonies of Trinidad or British Guiana, one of the two major Caribbean sites of indentured plantation labor. Misattribution, however, is the norm – not the exception – in the archival approach to tracing the lives of these women. In alternate versions posted in the digital age of the archive, individuals reproduce the description as *Coolie girls;* mischaracterize the figures as Guyanese laborers; and in one instance declare the caption, "Two sisters."

I want to consider this last characterization as a starting point for considering a speculative erotics between the women in this photograph. Indeed, the two women in the photograph were *jahaji* sisters – but it is unclear whether the women were related. Alternating archival readings inaugurate indentured Indian women as the murdered "wives" of indentured men or victims of colonial officers, foreclosing any readings about the relationships between women themselves. As Gayatri Gopinath has observed of post-colonial ethnographies of Indo-

Caribbean women, women's sexuality is viewed as an object of competition between Indo- and Afro-Caribbean men – never as a possibility for considering intimacy outside of heterosex (*Impossible* 162). If we consider the photographic frame as purely an object of colonial violence, there is a tendency to abstract these women's lives as passive victims of the colonial gaze. Violence, as Donna Haraway argued, is implicit within our visualizing practices (585). However, a failure to speculate about another possibility of relationship between these women actually produces another kind of violence, whereby the truth of their subjectivity is situated as their legacy from the sugarcane plantation into the twenty-first century where their descendants are viewed again as victimized by jealous lovers, situating them once again in relation to the biological kinship produced by the domestic.

I want to return to the image of these women that circulated online, labeling the women as *sisters.* The convention of naming, first, is critical in inaugurating these women. Early photographs of indentured Indians photographed together are labeled as "*Coolies"* or "*Coolie Labourers."* The Indians are not only interpellated and captured in relation to the production of their labor but defined in terms of it. Women, however, are often recorded in photographs as *Coolie Belles* or *Coolie girls* – their capacity of labor is eliminated on account of their gender – despite their role as wage earners within the plantation system. One might even venture as far as to say their entrepreneurial capacity throughout the British colonies of indenture situated them as economically enterprising, as they not only exchanged sex for money or lighter tasks on the plantation but saved wages at a greater rate compared to men. Images of these women, then, are visualized through the primary lens of gender bound to heterosexual kinship. By framing these women as *sisters,* kinship is the always-already framing of these subjects. But just as "family" is a code for queer, I want to consider the term "sister" as a misnomer here – and actually court the

confounding of the relationship between these two women perceived as *jahaji sisters.* In this chapter, I argue that speculative erotics is the unarchived potential of *jahaji* shipmate bonds, which remain written out of the record – but in their omission serve as a means of reexamining the ways in which the fictive domestic indentured family became the biopolitical mechanism aimed at regulating sex and deviance on the site of the indentured plantation.

In April 1919, the *Trinidad Guardian* reported an unusual detail in an otherwise common crime. An indentured Indian woman named Mukedah was murdered by her husband for deserting him; but she had not left him for another Indian man, but rather for a group of other indentured women (Mohammed, Gender 103). In one of the canonical feminist texts concerning Indian indentureship, *Gender Negotiations Among Indians in Trinidad, 1917-1947,* Patricia Mohammed considers the impact of gender-based violence in the post-indenture period of Trinidad and Tobago, citing several stories of murdered Indian women at the hands of intimate partners. Sometimes women like Mukedah had their throats slashed by jealous lovers and were left to die in the fields of sugarcane plantations or left to bleed to death on the floors of indentured barracks. The details of these gendered murders are mostly the same. Jealous men competed for women on plantations where initial ratios of men to women in British Caribbean colonies were significantly disproportionate, at the rate of over 400 men to 20 women. The Anti-Slavery Society called for a mandate increasing the ratio of men to women so as to avoid the sexual deviance of the laborers (Faruqee 61-62). Eventually, such anxieties around women's sexuality on these plantations led the British colonial government to undergo a series of attempts to mandate a 3:1 ratio of men to women (Reddock WS-80). This significant disparity of sex ratios would serve as evidence to establish a theory – by British colonial officers, historians of indentureship and feminist scholars alike – that linked violence against women to their (hyper)

sexuality. Reports in the colonial archive catalogue the existence of indentured Indian women who had sex with other men for money or in exchange for lighter tasks on plantations, who left partners as they wished, and who leveraged sex as an economic advantage on the site of the plantation. Colonial records also detail the indentured Indian men who subsequently murdered these women for leaving them, sometimes even killing themselves after the so-called "wife murders" (Reddock WS-86; Mohapatra 230; Faruqee 65, 67).

But despite the post-mortem category of "wife," these women – who were murdered at a rate almost a hundred times greater in colonies like British Guiana than in the Indian subcontinent – were not actually "wives" (Reddock WS82; Mohapatra 230, 255; Mohammed, "Gender" 94-96). Instead, they were women who had often left India as *nauch* (dancing) girls, "widows, runaways, prostitutes, bazaar girls, the unwanted of colonial Anglo-India" (A. Khan, "Voyages" 263). By the time these women arrived in the indentured colonies, the severe gender imbalance upon plantations offered these women greater sexual choices than they possessed in the Indian subcontinent. Women routinely switched sexual partners as they wished, sometimes cohabiting with up to three men at a time, resulting in remarks from by the Governor of British Guiana in 1885 lamenting the stain of "polyandry prevalent among the indentured class" (qtd. in Mohapatra, 253). The language of "polyandry" was the language of wishful kinship; there were no multiple "husbands," just multiple men – as women switched partners, had sex for pleasure, jewelry, or lighter workloads (Mangru, quoted in Faruqee 65; Mohammed, "Gender" 46; M. Mishra, "Emergence" 45; M. Mishra, "Woman" 76). Indentured Indian men would not be interrogated for switching sexual partners, but women practicing *polyandry* intensified colonial anxieties, resulting in a series of laws aimed at preventing women from cohabiting with multiple men. Despite the intent of laws implemented to address the skewed sex ratios among the

indentured, such laws failed to produce the figural nuclear family at the site of the plantation. But such laws did stop so-called jealous men from murdering their polyamorous partners (Mohapatra 254).

Was Mukedah, murdered for abandoning her husband, actually a "wife?" Or was her queer "flash existence" (Foucault, "Nietzsche" 159) in a nineteenth-century newspaper, like many other indentured Indian women who were murdered on plantations during the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries in the anglophone Caribbean, recorded according to a fictive post-mortem heterosexual kinship? Was Mukedah pretending to leave this man for another man, using a group of women as an alibi? Or was Mukedah's group of *jahaji* women an alibi for a single woman? Mukedah is a fragment within the colonial archive of indenture. The lives of indentured women like Mukedah are seldom catalogued except in the spectacular and simultaneously mundane instances of their murders at the hands of indentured Indian men. Murder was cited as almost always tied to sexual transgression. The peculiar archival detail of Mukedah's choice to leave her husband – not to live with another man, but to live with among other indentured Indian women – presents a fascinating theoretical opening to unsettle the widely-accepted paradigm of heterosexual kinship that has configured gender and sexuality on indentured plantations.

The indentured Indian woman of the colonial photograph, most famously materialized within early twentieth-century Caribbean postcards, produces an interesting counter-archive to discourses of "absence" and "invisibility" that characterize women within indentured archival histories. The trope of the "silenced" and "invisible" indentured Indian women remains a central conceptual frame for theorizing gender in the post-indentured Caribbean. The perception of these archival silences is largely based on the absence of recorded narratives or testimonies by indentured Indian women during the indentured era. The only known autobiography of an

indentured laborer born in India and settling in the Caribbean is the story of Munshi Rahman Khan, an indentured Muslim man who traveled to Suriname. Totoram Sanadhya, an indentured laborer to Fiji, published *My Twenty-one Years in the Fiji Islands* (1914). The only other known text by an indentured Indian woman is the unpublished autobiography of a Surinamese woman named Alice Bhagwanday Singh (1892-1965), mother of the famous poet and playwright Rajkumari Singh.

Singh's biography remains one of the rarest texts that exists of indentured women during this era. While the autobiographies of Totoram Sanadhya and Munshi Rahman Khan have been respectively published to much acclaim, the only copy of Singh's biography is housed in an archive at the University of Guyana. The autobiography is only available to the general public due to the transcription by Sushila Patil and Moses Seenarine, published online in 1997. To date, there is no critical analysis of Singh's autobiography does not contain the treacherous tales of violence and murder typical of indentured Indian women's stories. In fact, Singh's memoir is a tale of traveling from Paramaribo, where she was born; moving to British Guiana with her husband; then finally settling in the United Kingdom with her husband. Singh's story is atypical for that of an indentured Indian woman, with its whimsical tales of friendship with handsome sailors, suitors and even a comical note about her own mother, an indentured Indian to Suriname. Alice describes her mother as a stubborn character who coaxed her overseers out of working on the plantation:

> "Mai told us that … when she was told to go and work in the field and was handed a cutlass, she showed her soft small hands. She there and then sat down and refused to move, so here there was real trouble. And because she was young, pretty and a fighter,

the Barnett Lyon family were very lenient with her. She was made an assistant nurse in the estate's hospital. And so her indenture period passed." (Singh "Autobiography")

As Gaiutra Bahadur noted in her 2013 acclaimed memoir *Coolie Woman*, when women do appear in the historical archive of indenture, their voices are mediated through that of colonial officials or indentured Indian men. Alice's story would then appear as a kind of counter-archive to the typical narratives of women who were murdered and recorded as victims in perpetuity within the colonial record. But perhaps Alice's story might not be considered less an anomaly than an ordinary story within an imperial archive of the British Empire where indentured Indian women appear alternately as either prostitutes, "unfaithful wives," accomplices to murder, or murder victims themselves. Traces of sex and violence animate this curious archive, paradoxically marked by alternating tropes of "silence" and "invisibility.. But interestingly, while indentured women remain characterized by this trope of "invisibility," their images are plentiful: in hundreds of postcards produced in Trinidad, Suriname and Jamaica, women dominate the visual archive of indenture. These women appear more often within colonial postcards as single women or posed in pairs, and appear more frequently than single men or families of indentured laborers. It is at this curious juncture of the historical archive that I begin an approach to considering a theory of speculative erotics, problematizing attachments to "visibility" among indentured Indian women within this hyper-visual archive.

The spectacular details of their lives – mostly in the form of rape, murder or abuse – appear secondhand, in the slanted calligraphy of British colonial reports recording their murders by men on plantations. Yet their images are curiously plentiful alongside this curated archive of silence. The transport of indentured Indians to the British Caribbean commenced in 1838, coinciding with the transition from the daguerreotype to the photograph. Of the archival silences

that surround the *jahajis* of indenture, the advent of the colonial postcard produced a peculiar historical phenomenon: photographing the bodies of bonded laborers. Although the voices of women are seldom recorded in the archive, the colonial postcard remains as the after-lives of their own bodies – staged by photographers in studios as *Coolie Belles or Coolie Types;* photographed preparing rice in the fields; holding hands in a plantation field. In the largest collections of postcards from the period of indentureship, more photographs of single women and women in pairs appear. The intimacy between them is produced by the proximity of their bodies, holding hands while posing for the photographer's gaze, or engaged in some mundane activity that a colonial travelogue recorded.

Figure 1.2 "Coolies washing." Courtesy of the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives at Rare Book Library

Perhaps one of the most interesting and under-theorized occurrences coinciding with the period of Indian indentureship is modern photography *picturing* indentured Indians within stable

patterns of an extended family kinship. Colonial postcards featuring indentured Indians, which circulated most commonly in the early twentieth entury and coincided with the popularity of the Caribbean postcard, played a critical role in conceptualizing the indentured Indian family as a site of heteronormative kinship. Despite the scarcity of written literary texts produced by indentured laborers providing glimpses into their lives, colonial images of the laborers are plentiful. Among the most famed photographers of indentured Indians in the Caribbean was French-born lithographer Adolphe Duperly, who traveled to Jamaica about twenty years before the first ship transporting indentured Indians, the S.S. Blundell, arrived in 1845. Many of the famous postcards of indentured Indians were photographed by Duperly's studio[3] and remain in popular circulation today as some of the most visible images of indentured Indians from the turn of the twentieth century. Duperly's postcards were the visual reification of heteronormative family life among "coolies" at the site of the indentured plantation. Large extended families were often pictured in the photographs, most often in front of indentured dwellings, among banana trees or, like the postcard pictured above, in mundane tasks such as washing.

Although the postcards of familial groups of indentured Indians were made popular by Duperly's studio, the extent to which these postcards have configured the historical representations of kinship among indentured Indians is significant. The photographs of the indentured are framed as "first-contact scenes" (Arabindan-Kesson 409), attesting to the role of the indentured family at the site of the plantation as the figural representation of the indentured Indian at the time. In several photographs, indentured Indian women hold babies or are pictured in large groups, a visual effect that would have produced the concept of a "family." The visual

---

[3] Adolphe Duperly established a photography studio in Kingston, Jamaica known as "Duperly and Sons." However, as scholars Glory Robertson (1985) and David Boxer (2018) have noted, it is unknown which of Duperly's children actually photographed indentured Indians in the early twentieth century. Therefore, I refer to "Duperly's studio" rather than an individual photographer, since the photographs belonged to that studio.

representation of the family as a unit of kinship therefore configured both the colonial and post-colonial analyses as placing these women who had given birth to children within a perceived heteronormative kinship structure. The act of having sex and giving birth to children had transformed these women into so-called "wives." As I noted earlier, many indentured Indian women were not actually married upon embarkation to the colonies. Some participated in "depot marriages" (Tinker 140) whereby a woman and man would declare themselves married prior to the oceanic odyssey from Calcutta to the colonies. Individuals could declare themselves married without needing to furnish evidence of their union (Bahadur, *Coolie* 72).

In 1906, Protector of Immigrants in Calcutta C. Banks recorded about 4,000 women emigrating to colonies of the British Empire for indenture and approximately 1,000 women migrating with men (11). The report, published by the Bengal Secretariat, referred to the latter as migrating with "husbands" (Banks 11); however, this was an optimistic kinship classification on behalf of colonial authorities, meant to curb the contagion of sexual depravity at the site of the plantation. Indian indentureship famously recruited such disproportionate numbers of men to women, fueling imperial anxieties about the morally depraved laborers. In the early 1840s, for example, the governor of Mauritius and former governor of Jamaica and Barbados observed, "The Coolies [in the colonies] have given themselves up to a degree of licentiousness, which no person acquainted with their character and habits in India (dissolute as they are known to be) could possibly believe" (Persaud 43). Mohapatra importantly notes that colonial laws were enacted in the 1880s not merely to legislate sex on the indentured plantation through the institution of marriage, but as a response to the egregious number of murdered Indian women (230). As colonial officials continued attempts to legislate sex and murder through a series of laws that attempted to "restore" the family (Mohapatra 228, 256-257), photographs like *Coolies*

Washing (Fig 1.1) or *Coolies at Worship* (Fig 1.2) sought to present indentured life through the lens of biological and extended family kinship.

Figure 1.3 "Coolies at Worship." Personal collection of Suzanne Caroline Persard

Colonial photography, as a technology of power, therfore played a central role in consolidating the notion of the "coolie family" – despite historical records detailing murders on plantations, unfaithful wives and polyamorous women. This concept of the "family" emphasized within the frame of the indentured photograph was therefore a visual production of the orientalist trope of Asiatic extended kinship – despite the unstable and queer intimacies that existed otherwise. As Prabhu Mohapatra aptly observed, "What was represented was a trajectory – that of the creation of the family from an amorphous mass of coolies" (227). As Lisa Lowe notes, the "figure of the Chinese woman" indenturerd laborer was constituted "as a trope in the colonial imagination for the capacity of the colonized to develop into a reproductive, family community"

(30). Similarly, the figural indentured Indian woman was visualized by the lens of the colonial photographer as the "*seeable"* (Rajchman 91) signification of a particular notion of heteronormative kinship upon the plantation. The technology of the colonial lens was the descendant of earlier modes of visual production, depicting "types" of individuals – like the mad. The colonial photograph occupied the latest technological position within a "long dynasty of images" (Foucault*, Madness* 14) that would subsequently serve as a technique for visualizing the fictions of plantation families.

Colonial photographers like Duperly presumably encountered groups of indentured Indians together – rather than smaller, nuclear families or men and women together – and photographed these large groups. Among the most famous examples is the staged photograph in Jamaica, "Coolies at Worship," depicting a group of Muslims with an image of the *tajdah* or tomb of the sons of the Prophet Mohammed. Although this large group includes an intergenerational gathering of men, women, and children, the photographer from Duplery's studio captures an additional image with the same woman and baby in a separate photograph. It is unclear which photograph was captured first, the large extended group or the smaller group. What is significant is that in each instance, children were singled out and posed to be included in a separate photograph with mothers. The production of the "wife" and "mother" as subject therefore consolidated these images of indentured Indians as organized "families" in heteronormative configurations of kinship, creating fictional genealogical renderings of the imagined intimacies sustained by the fictions of a nuclear family.

These colonial photographs, which sometimes became postcards, also paradoxically presented the concept of a fictionalized regulated sexual economy, while murdered "wives," jealous husbands and low birth rates animated the historical archive during this same period. Indentured photography was therefore instrumental in producing a visual ordering of the colonial subject that *visualized* the family as the basis of the indentured plantation. The colonial postcard,

Figure 1.4 "East Indian Types. Trinidad, B.W.I." Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Indo-Caribbean Collection

as a Foucauldian technology of seeing (Rajchman 92), repeated an imagined reproductive family through these "visible" subjects of heteronormative kinship. In addition to producting a fiction of the extended family as the basis of indentureship, the popular and accepted notion that indentured Indians would self-segregate from emancipated Africans was contested by the photograph above. At least two African-descendant individuals appear in the Duperly studio photograph titled, "Coolies Washing," although it is unclear whether they are also of indentured descent or were involved in community or intimat relationships with indentured Indians. The title of the postcard, "*Coolies* Washing" (emphasis mine), therefore racializes the individuals as Asian laborers – despite the obvious. The inclusion of African-descendant Jamaicans in this partiuclar postcard also visually disrupts the insular racial trope of *jahaji bhai* and *jahaji bahen,* suggesting an interracial kinship within these networks of intimacy that were not necessarily emergent within the post-indenture period following 1917.

While Duplery's studio was photographing primarily indentured Indian families in Jamaica, in Trinidad Frenchman Felix Morin established a photography studio capturing perhaps the largest archive of indentured Indian women to date (Clover 3; Bahadur, "Dissent" 2015). The women, often photographed alone but sometimes in pairs, were titled in the colonial typological terms of "Coolie Belle," "Coolie Woman," and "Coolie Types" or "East Indian Types" (Clover 3-4; Bahadur, "Dissent" 2015). Posed to emphasize the jewelry accrued by the women in plantation labor, Gaiutra Bahadur has argued that these portraits of indentured Indian women were considered "soft porn" (Bahadur, "Dissent "2015). The women in these photographs are adorned gloriously – reminiscent of French-Greek Lafcadio Hearn's observations in *Two Years in the French West Indies* that the adornments of indentured Indian were a means of how "the coolies carry their savings… melting down silver or gold coin, and recasting it into bracelets,

ear-rings, and nose ornaments" (138). The economic savvy of indentured Indian women on plantations allowed a significant leverage in their ability to save wages – a significant detail that is often glossed over by British colonial officers detailing the murders of these same women. Although Morin's photographs and Hearn's travelogue concern Indian women in Trinidad and Guyana, indentured Indian women were reportedly fashioning necklaces for customers out of silver coins in the 1890s-1900s on the drive from Gordon Town to Papine (Robertson 20). This small economic detail is one of the few recorded instances of indentured Indian women selling jewelry; the other commodity she is recorded selling? Sex.

Perhaps more astonishing than the photographs of ornamented indentured women and their implicit economic earnings was the resemblance of some of these photographs to another kind of *jahaji* figure – that of the courtesan, a term famously synonymous with prostitute. Known at different points in history as "dancing and singing girls" or *tawai'fs*, these women were ornately apparelled. These courtesans were most common in the city of Lucknow, a city in the state of Uttar Pradesh – the same region from which an overwhelming number of indentured Indians hailed. When anthropologist Veena Oldenburg visited Lucknow in the 1970s, these women – once known as courtesans – were now known to each other as "*chapat baz"* or lesbians (276). Oldenburg's genealogy of the brothel revealed that from 1858-1877 in Lucknow – coinciding with the same years of Indian indenture – Indian women had assisted anti-colonial rebels in India and had hoarded loot in "female apartments" where groups of women lived together (Oldenburg 259). Oldenburg was astonished to discover that the Indian courtesans of Lucknow not only appeared in tax ledgers, but they marvelously occupied the highest tax bracket in the city (259). The women possessed gold, silver and other spoils estimated at about four million rupees (Oldenburg 260). Over three hundred of the courtesans were impacted by the

British takeover of the Kingdom of Awadh (Oudh) around 1860, which upended the income stream of these women (Oldenburg 259-261).

According to Vijay Prakash Singh, many former courtesans relocated from Lucknow to Calcutta following governmental efforts to manage venereal disease, resulting in the surveillance and mandatory registration of prostitutes (184-185). During this same period, Emigration Agents in Calcutta were actively recruiting Indian women to the colonies attempting to equalize the ratios of men to women. The abominable rates of murdered indentured Indian women on plantations fueled British anxieties, resulting in a governmental mandate of forty women per one hundred men in 1868 (Mohapatra 231). But the "class of women" being recruited disturbed the Crown; although "prostitutes" were supposed to be disqualified from emigrating, the disproportionate ratio of men to women kept this prohibition from full enforcement (Reddock WS-80). In the 1860s, sexual contagion was a whipping boy for the regulation of deviant female sexuality on the Indian subcontinent vis-à-vis colonial science (Mitra 78-86). As Durba Mitra critically argues, the category of the prostitute was one that "encompassed so-called dancing girls, widows, Vaishnav women, low-class Muslim married women, Kulin Brahman polygamous wives, women factory laborers, maidservants and many more" (78). What "kind" of single women, then, did actually migrate to these colonies? Or were these "single" women actually migrating to the colonies – together?

Although women remained in fewer numbers than men in the British Caribbean colonies, and men and women were photographed together at times, the number of indentured Indian women who were photographed vastly outnumber either photographs of single men, "couples" or families in Trinidad, British Guiana and Jamaica. The extravagance of their jewelry and conspicuous ornamentation reflects what Joy Mahabir has regarded as an attempt "to erase the

real conditions of poverty, labor exploitation, and hazardous working conditions on plantations that replicated those of slavery" (114). The popularity of these photographs surged during the advent of Caribbean tourism as these women were the earliest prototypes of exoticization for rich American and European tourists to consume (Bahadur, "Dissent" 2015). Indentured Indian women were fetishized for their "oriental" presence in the Anglophone Caribbean, entering what Donette Francis has called the "already existent sexual grammar of the tropics" (Francis 54).

Photography of indentured Indian women in the Caribbean therefore emerged alongside the popularity of the colonial Caribbean postcard in what Francis has called "a deliberate and

Figure 1.5 Suriname, Britsch Indische Koolivrouween Feestgewaad
University of Pennsylvania Indo-Caribbean Collection

orderly project of colonial racial classification through the modality of sex" (54). As Krista Thompson has argued, the lens of these photographers all produced the concept of the Caribbean "tropics" as a pleasurable paradise for a growing industry of tourism. By naming the indentured women "Coolie Belles" as these women were being murdered within a system of violent plantation labor, Morin produced a similar effect of propaganda wielded by the Voyage of the Sable Venus. Analyses of these photographs have subsequently remained within an anti-colonial frame of considering the fetishized Indian woman within a violent system of plantation labor – one whose sexuality is specifically marketed for the white European gaze.

But another dimension of these photographs fails to consider one conspicuous omission: the relationship of these women posed as lovers. In Trinidad, these photographs presented a stark contrast to the heteronormative kinship exemplified in Duplery's photos. Although Morin posed single Indian women, he also posed women in couples. In several portraits of Indian women in Trinidad, these *jahaji* figures are posed as nearly symmetrical – a photographic staging that produces the effect of a queer doubling. Over a thousand miles away in in Paramaribo, Suriname, during the same period of indentured plantation labor, women were curiously posed in nearly identical portraits to Morin's studio in Trinidad: veiled, touching each other. The photographs of coupled women above could be read as simply colonial ethnography, imaging the indentured laborer as documentary practice. But in scores of photographs in archival collections during the period of indentureship, the overwhelming majority of photographs are not of families or "married" couples but of single or coupled women – or *jahajis*. Images of coupled women, in particular, present an interesting object of analysis from which to consider the speculative erotics that I am proposing. These images of coupled women – often touching, often ornamented with *orhinis* or headscarves and elaborate jewelry – evoke the sapphic poses of the women captured

by French photographers in Algeria. These postcards of indentured Indian women actually find their visual kin in Malek Alloula's famous 1986 text, *The Colonial Harem.* Alloula argued these images were posed to resemble an oriental sapphic harem, with lesbianism as a fictive visual effect. Like many of the photographers posing Algerian women, Morin and Duperly were Frenchman. Similar to French photographers classifying photographs of indentured Indian women as "types," the images of semi-naked Algerian women were also classified as "types" – a taxonomic coincidence that Alloula argued demonstrated the colonial desire to both annihilate and rape the Other (103). Alloula's analyzed a series of black and white Algerian photographs where women were posed sometimes naked or semi-naked as fantasy objects of the oriental harem – that eternal theme of French literature (95). Alloula argued, "Bound up with this complex phantasm of the harem, the theme of sapphism could not be avoided by the postcard photographer. His treatment of it is *something else* altogether" (96, emphasis mine). It is not the sapphic posing of the colonial photographer that interests my speculative *jahaji;* rather, it is this space of *something else* that produces an opening for a theorization of speculative erotics.

The "something else" of Alloula's archival postcards is the articulation of the spatialization of alterity that at once marks and elides the queer archival *jahaji*. Although I have already alluded to the sexual non-normativity of the indentured archive, as well as the non-normative sexual relationships between Indian women and men on indentured plantations, Alloula's analysis is an important part of considering the knowledge-power nexus of the indentured archive that relegates sexual non-normativity to a mimetic *pose* – rather than a speculative possibility. In Alloula's anti-colonial critique of these Algerian postcards, he writes that the women, "posing as lesbians," become simultaneously anonymous and indicative of Algeria as a place of lustful sapphics running wild (103). Again, I want to emphasize Alloula's

chosen language of *posing.* To pose in the first sense is to be staged by a photographer for a portrait; in the second sense, it is to imitate – as in an im*pos*ter. *Posing as lesbians* seem to convey the sense that queerness would be mimetic within the photographic lens. In Morin's studio portraits (Fig. 2), women are indeed posed: holding hands, sometimes with one's arm around the other's back. But the anti-colonial impulse to unintentionally consider the queer effects of the visual colonial postcard preclude the performative nature of every colonial photograph – even the fictions of families staged by the photographer.

Mimicking *queerness* seems to be the anti-colonial critique of viewing these photographs. But mimesis is only possible once there is an original subject to mimic; the figural *jahaji* is queered by the lens of the colonial photographer posing indentured women in configurations of fetishized Orientalism as she is "straightened" just as easily by the same colonial lens. The "evidence" of sexuality, therefore, cannot be visually verified; but a speculative erotics opens the possibility for what Jordache Ellapen has called "flashes of the homoerotic" (Ellapen, "Brown") that penetrate these photographs. The poses of these women – queer-appearing, engaged in queer haptic archival moments – might be simply read as oriental fetishes that depicted women as Asiatic bejeweled beauties. But an important detail is absent from this reading: most of the photographers that traveled to the Caribbean during this time were from France, whose capital city in the nineteenth century to early twentieth century was flooded by a series of plays where Orientalist stereotypes were deployed as a means of "partially or semi-covertly outing sapphic love" (Apter 105). Although it is unclear whether photographers who captured indentured Indian women hailed specifically from Paris, Frenchmen like Duperly had traveled specifically to the Caribbean in the eighteenth century to teach lithography (Boxer 323). Emily Apter's observation that Orientalism was used "as an erotic cipher" deployed by French playwrights to emphatically

sensationalize non-European Eastern bodies as emblematic of cultural and sexual non-normativity (108-109) provides a speculative basis for considering the portraits of *Coolie Belles* posed as sapphic lovers by French photographers like Morin.

These women – posed as *jahaji bahan* or *jahaji sisters* – were therefore speculatively posed as queer. These sapphic photographs produce a fascinating counter-archive to the figure of the "single woman" that is often cited in British colonial accounts on the indentured plantation and a clear alternative notion of kinship to that presented by photographers like Duperly in Jamaica, as well as to the figural *jahaji* woman who, in British officers' narratives, are repeated victims of murder. In a sense, the photographs produce an image of these bejeweled (*queer?)* women in poses that magnify both the extent to which their Indian bodies were sites of non-normativity upon the Caribbean plantation and the extent to which framing intimacy is exuded from these photographs. Although these women are visually coupled in a speculative relationship to each other by the colonial lens, the photographs also produce the possibilities of a visual non-normativity between indentured Indian women. Queer sociality is subsequently *posed* by the French photographer – but is such posturing purely speculative?

A theory of speculative erotics might seem bizarre in a violent system of plantation labor – but these same women, recorded by British colonial officers as "loose in their habits" (Mohapatra 235; Reddock WS-80), were marked by an archive of non-normative sex that has been discounted to portray them as victims of both colonial photographers and indentured Indian men. The indentured Indian woman, it seems, remains overseen: as an oversexed archival heterosexual problem in imperial records; as a romanticized great-grandmother of her *jahaji* descendants; as the dead and lost property of a jealous man; as the subject of the colonial photographer. In these alternating tropes of the "overseen" representation of indentured Indian

women and that of their archival silences, there is a space for theorizing the role of the visual in producing the discourse around these women — but also, perhaps, for examining the surface of the postcard as a regime of representation that produces the paradox of hyper-visuality as it simultaneously occludes any singular truth about these women.

As these women posed for the lens of the colonial photographer, one must ask, who is imitating whom? Was the colonial photographer – himself oblivious to the kinship between these women – duped in a meta-moment of the queer? How do we *see* the relationship of these *jahaji* women to each other? The archive of indentureship presents its own archival grays with the ambiguity that the historical record holds; photography is a violent method of capturing – evoking Teju Cole's sentiment that photographs are *shot* – that "weapon of imperialism" obsessed with the visualizing and cataloguing of the Other (2019). The colonial gaze, however, looms within these photographs, as with travelogues describing encounters with East Indians. One recalls the words of Lafcadio Hearn observing East Indians sleeping in Trinidad, "While I am looking at these things, one coolie after another wakes up and observes me almost as curiously, and I fear much less kindly than I have been observing gods" (quoted in Loichot 13). As Valérie Loichot notes in Hearn's observations of the East Indians, "The violator becomes violated by the return of the gaze" (13).

Although these *jahaji* women were virtually made to be anonymous in the historical archive, their images remain – a colonial paradox in an archive otherwise haunted by silence. As much of the archive of indenture has focused on the absence of women's voices from the historical archive, the photographs of these women counter the narrative of absence – providing an abundant alternative to the notion of gendered absence. Yet liberal tropes of "silence" and "visibility" must be unsettled by the ultimate limits of the unrepresentable subject – continually

constructed and reconstructed, whether by the colonial lens or attachments to liberation that mark feminist theory. Rather than consider the site of labor on the plantation as a potential site of intimacy between these women, anti-colonial theorists, historians and feminist scholars alike have punctured the possibility for erotic kinship – even as these women were infamously characterized by discourses of deviant sexuality.

Postcards present, of course, a curated view: an image of a scene and a site of what remains unseen. The bodies of these *jahajis*, side-by-side, sometimes touching, represent a haptic eroticism that – although staged by the photographer – is a scene "among countless lost events" (Foucault, "Nietzsche" 381). Just like the "family portraits" of indentured Indians captured by Duperly in Jamaican landscapes, these sapphic portraits of indentured Indian women resist any single subjectivity; the fiction of indentured women's queerness might be as likely as the fiction of their heterosexuality. An anti-colonial reading, like that of Alloula, might dismiss the haptic eroticism between these women as purely posturing – a performative queerness that intensifies its alterity at the site of the Oriental fetishized women. But as an archival object, the postcard becomes an object used for dilation – magnifying the specular possibilities, erotic and otherwise, between these women, who fucked, labored and bore witness to the murders of their own kind by the hands of men and plantation overseers. What is it that prevents us from *seeing* queerness between women at the level of the archive? What kinds of truths about sexuality are produced by the archive of indenture? In the Foucauldian classificatory shift, these women were transformed in colonial archives from their role in sexual acts with indentured men to their classification on colonial photographs as a kind "species." Their lives, narrated through colonial reports of murder and sex, or censured for co-habiting with multiple partners in polyandrous living arrangements,

became simultaneously sanitized as “wives” through a colonial project of photography and simultaneously fetishized as lesbian deviants.

Mukedah’s case presents an erotic possibility within archives of indentureship to speculate about the homosocial life among women at the site of the plantation. In the hetero-archive of indenture, men become “husbands” and women become “wives” – a sort of Foucauldian moment of sexual acts between individuals transformed into the legibility of fictive kinship formations. How might Mukedah’s choice to live in in a kinship configuration apart from her husband serve as a trace of queerness eclipsed by a curated archive of heterosexuality? Most importantly, how might Mukedah’s case provides the possibility for considering the alternate forms of kinship and erotic possibilities occurring on plantations among Mukedah’s *jahaji bahen* or “ship-sisters”? Was Mukedah ever one of these women captured by the colonial lens of a French photographer? Or was the group of women she went to cohabit with photographed by his studio? Were the women who posed together in these portraits living together in a barrack like the one Mukedah left her husband for? Was Mukedah perhaps performing her sexuality at the site of the plantation as a mode of survival, similar to the courtesans of Lucknow who performed both meanings of sex?

As savvy and economic earners, did these women demand compensation for their studio photographs, or were they posed against their will? Did they journey to the photographer’s studio together? Would they surreptitiously share their wages with each other? Did they exchange jewelry with each other as a form of intimacy – or more? Considering the conditions of the indentured as bonded laborers during a system of violent plantation labor –violent both in the sense of coloniality and in the egregious numbers of murdered women by indentured Indian men – the photographs present a visual anomality: at the level of kinship, queerness and plantation

life. But perhaps more curious than the visual representation of these photographs as Oriental sapphic poses is the reluctance – or perhaps, refusal – to theorize about the erotic relationships between these women, even as they are queerly posed within this historical frame.

Chapter 2

Becoming Wives: A Story of Sex

On July 11, 1904, an indentured Indian woman lay among plantain trees in Guyana, nearly decapitated by her ex who followed her to work. On December 5, 2016, an Indo-Guyanese woman lay on a sidewalk in Queens, New York, nearly decapitated by her ex who followed her to work. For a long time, the story goes, indentured Indian women were murdered in great numbers on colonial plantations as a punishment for their sexual liberation. In India, these women had been bound to the social traditions of a centuries-old repressive patriarchy. Indian women who ventured to the Caribbean were scarce and subsequently became highly coveted sexual partners on indentured plantations. Men outnumbered women at extraordinary ratios throughout the colonies. For example, of the 173 indentured laborers aboard the ship *Eliza Stewart* to Trinidad in 1873, only eleven were women (Reddock WS-81). Of the 170 indentured laborers aboard *The Hesperus* traveling to British Guiana in 1838, only seven were women (Bahadur, *Coolie* 42). This disparate sex ratio bestowed upon these Indian indentured women an extraordinary opportunity: they became sexually liberated. This sexual liberation resulted in an unlikely effect: an outrageous yet recurring phenomenon of their murders that would follow them from the nineteenth-century plantation to the present-day gender-based murders of Indo-Caribbean women on the sidewalks of New York City.

In the paragraph above, I parody the opening of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* by ventriloquizing a "story" about indentured Indian women and the subsequent intergenerational reverberations about their sexuality. As Foucault parodied the Victorian story of sexual repression, I, too, parody the indentured woman's story of sexual repression as a figure whose sexual liberation in the colonies results in the inevitability of her death. This narrative of

sexual repression/liberation persists within the historical archive of indentureship and post-colonial Caribbean feminist scholarship alike. As Foucault observed of the story of Victorian sexual repression, this discourse of the sexual repression of Indian women "holds up well, owing no doubt to how easy it is to uphold" (*History* 5). The figure of the sexually liberated *jahaji* of the Caribbean is based upon ethnonationalist presumptions about gender and religion on the Indian subcontinent. Although Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship has critically examined gender in relation to women's new "freedom" on the plantation, I want to reconsider the polarized concepts of repression/liberation in this chapter to propose a more speculative theory about intimacy. In particular, I aim to demonstrate that both the colonial archive and feminist scholarship presume the same story about Indian women's sexuality. This story of sexual repression subsequently insists on scripting the body of the *jahaji* through a matrix of existing biological kinship – despite the plantation as a site of proliferating perversions: sodomy between men in indentured barracks, polyamorous women and interracial sex.

In this chapter, I scrutinize this theory of sexual repression through the colonial archive and feminist scholarship alike, unsettling the acceptance of murdered Indian women on the indentured plantation as an inevitable consequence of heterosexuality. Rather than speculate about sexuality, my speculative erotics considers alternate forms of *jahaji* kinship emerging from the holding depots of Calcutta to the barracks of the plantation among the indentured. By focusing on these alternate sites of kinship among laborers, I aim to unsettle the continued scholarly emphasis on the heterosexual domesticity as the only register for understanding kinship relations. I begin this chapter by first considering the ways in which cases of peculiar living arrangements and "unnatural acts" at the site of the plantation were commonplace due to the disproportionate ratio of men to women. Then, I consider the ways in which rejecting the

narrative of sexual liberation actually produces alternative possibilities for considering a speculative erotics between *jahaji* figures.

Despite the recruitment of prostitutes, single women and widowed women within the indentured labor regime, historical approaches to gender and sexuality within the indentured archive have foregrounded the role of domesticity. This culturally deterministic approach to gender and sexuality has foreclosed possibilities for envisioning these communities of kinship beyond the fiction of the conjugal family. As I argue in Chapter 1, approaches to indentured Indian women that locate their sexuality as solely within the nuclear family fail to recognize the extent to which unstable and varied sexual arrangements occurred at – and prior to – the site of the plantation. Sexual arrangements on the indentured plantation did not emerge according to the role of the family; in fact, the family was an incidental consequence of non-normative sexual and living arrangements (Mohapatra 238; M. Mishra, "Woman" 74; Bahadur, *Coolie* 87-88). Since the British Empire did not conceive of indenture as a labor scheme involving the Indian family, the severely disproportionate ratio of men to women persisted throughout the entirety of indentureship in the Caribbean. In this chapter, I want to denaturalize an epistemic approach that presumes murder is an inevitable consequence of sexual liberation, which is historically linked to the idea of a fictive categories like "wife" for family. Instead, I argue that a theory of speculative erotics attends to intimacy between *jahaji* figures that provides a possibility for unmooring the family unit as the only legible register of an approach to kinship on the plantation.

There can be no single truth of indentured Indian women's sexuality. Yet the figure of the sexually repressed and subsequently "silenced" – if not mute – Indian women pervades approaches to studies of present-day Indo-Caribbean sexuality. To borrow from Foucault's observations of sexual repression, the discourse of indentured Indian women's sexuality as

repressed "holds up well, owing no doubt to how easy it is to uphold" (*History* 5). This theory of sexual repression commences at the Kala Pani crossing, that chasm of migration and metaphorical loss of caste. In this story of sex, Indian women are sexually conservative on the Indian subcontinent. In Foucauldian terms, these women were regarded as "restrained, mute" (*History* 3). After these women are indentured to the colonies, they are sexually liberated – or so the story goes. This "story" is one that commences first at the site of the colonial archive, where it emerges as a form of truth about indentured Indian women's sexuality. This story continues in the form of early writing on indenture by men claiming to vindicate the immorality attached to these women. Finally, it is unexpectedly – if not unwittingly – repeated by feminist scholarship. All the while, the sexual repression of Indian women is spoken about *ad infinitum* while insisting that her own voice is silent.

Like Foucault's ventriloquizing of the "story" of sexual repression by the Victorian era, my emphasis on the "story" of Indian women's sexuality emphasizes the role of ventriloquizing – both by the colonial archive and feminist scholarship. In a sense, this story of sexuality is uncritically accepted as proof of the inevitability of murdered women on the indentured plantation. In this chapter, I want to unsettle the discourse of sexual repression that has structured lives of indentured Indian women in the colonies. I first trace the concept of the sexually repressed woman – bound to domesticity – as an inheritance of culturally deterministic assumptions about Indian women's sexuality. I argue that situating and insisting on Indian women's sexuality as primarily legible within the domestic sphere has neglected the range of unstable and non-nuclear familial sexual arrangements that pervaded the plantation. My aim is to problematize notions of sexual "repression" and "freedom" to reconsider the ways in which Indian women's sexuality is mapped between these alternating conceptual frames. In this

chapter, I emphasize the instability of sexual arrangements on the plantation among indentured Indians to emphasize that the biological family unit – which is used as a legible register of sexuality – was actually an accidental phenomenon throughout indentureship.

Proliferating perversions

Sex on the indentured plantation was always already a semi-public act. The British Empire recruited single men as the majority of the first shipments of labor supply to the Caribbean colonies in the 1840s. In a shipment of over 400 men to British Guiana, women comprised only two dozen of the laborers. Following a series of high-profile murders of Indian women, the empire subsequently recruited women in an attempt to reduce the disproportionate ratio of men to women which resulted in competition for women often ending in murder. In the famous diary *The Coolie: His Rights and Wrongs,* Edward Jenkins was horrified to find indentured emigration agents dressed as government officials to fool Indian women into migrating to the colonies (374-375). In 1868, the British Empire imposed a quota of 40 women per 100 men in an attempt to reduce the rate of murder; such efforts were futile (Mohapatra, 231). Despite the attempts by the empire to redress the early sex ratio disparity, however, the proportion of men to women remained skewed.

The extreme sex imbalance on the indentured plantation resulted in an alarming number of murdered Indian women in the colonies. In 1881, the rates of violence against indentured Indian were alarming enough for the colonial governor to estimate that 'wife murders' in British Guiana were 142 times greater in the colonies than in the provinces in India from which indentured hailed (Mohapatra 235). Twenty years prior, the severity and frequency of murders of indentured Indian women prompted the Governor of British Guiana to enact "the highest penalty and no pleas of previous provocation" for the crime (Mohapatra 237). These disciplinary

measures throughout the colonies did little to mitigate the incidences of gender-based murders. The disproportionate ratio would continue throughout the entirety of indentureship, despite attempts by the colonial government to introduce more women to the colonies, eventually mandating a ratio of 40 women to every 100 men (Tinker 204; Lal, "Veil" 139; Mohammed, *Gender* 38). As the unequal sex ratio played out across indentured colonies in the form of murdering women, colonial officials regarded murder as the "'natural' and 'inevitable'" (Mohapatra 236) fate of women in the colonies who refused to remain with one man – or sometimes chose to live in barracks of women. The story was always the same: a woman murdered for her transgressive sexual acts, for choosing a man or refusing another. In 1881, the Protector of Immigrants to Trinidad famously declared, "Chastity is almost unknown to the class of woman indentured from India to this colony" (quoted in Mohapatra 235). The natural explanation of murder was almost always cited as sexual liberation. By 1916, a year before the official "end" of indentureship in the British colonies, the Protector of Immigrants to Trinidad cited the cases of murdered indentured women with the casual addendum: "as usual the cause was jealousy" (quoted in Mohammed, *Gender* 203).

The sex ratio disparity persisted throughout the entirety of Indian indentureship, resulting in a variety of unusual living and sexual arrangements. Among the different household arrangements included several men living with each other in a woman's home; a woman passing from the home of one man to another; and a combination of three or more men and women living together (Bahadur, *Coolie* 87). In British Guiana, a horrified magistrate who ruled from the 1870s to 1892 wrote, "Polyandry is often practiced, three to four men living with one woman in apparent contentment" (quoted in Faruqee 63). *Polyandry* was a term deployed as a nicety; the men with whom these women cohabited were not "husbands." They were, however, possibly

lovers and more than probably, customers. These "abnormal" domestic arrangements were common in all of the indentured colonies, including territories like Fiji. Sukhrania, a twenty-year-old Brahman woman in Fiji, had sex with other men on the plantation in exchange for lighter work (M. Mishra, "Woman" 75). According to Margaret Mishra, Sukhrania consciously chose "sexual labor over plantation labor," an act that complicates the very conception of "freedom" in the indentured colonies ("Woman" 76). Sukhrania was not alone: on Orange Grove Estate in Trinidad, some women exchanged sex for lighter tasks (Mohammed, *Gender* 46). The domestic was already disrupted by a system of multiple men cohabiting with one woman at a time (Tinker 204; M. Mishra, "Woman" 70). The sheer disproportionate number of men to women forced multiple men into living arrangements with women who were not exclusively available to them. Furthermore, it is well known that due to the shortage of women on plantation and incidences of venereal disease, birth rates remained low throughout the entire period of Indian indentureship in the Caribbean (Shepherd, "Gender" 241; Bahadur, *Coolie* 87).

Unnatural crimes of *jahaji bhai*

Considering the degree to which sexual perversity and discourses of deviance characterized the annals of Indian indentureship – nearly exclusively defined through the particular *deviance* of women – instances of homosexuality among indentured Indians have largely been excluded from the study of indentureship. Yet the exclusion of substantive scholarship considering the role of queer sex as part of a discourse of sexual deviance is curious for several reasons. The first monograph on Indian indentureship, *A New System of Slavery* by Hugh Tinker, mentions several colonial observations of sodomy between men among the indentured. Sir John Anderson thought it best to differentiate between those Indians more prone to this illicit sex: "Not amongst the Tamils; amongst the northern Indians there is a good deal of

unnatural crime" (Tinker 204-205). The majority of the indentured to British colonies such as Jamaica, Trinidad and Guiana were these "northern Indians" hailing from territories such as present-day Uttar Pradesh. Sodomy – not flogging of laborers, sexual violence, or "wife" murders – was cited by the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society as urgently contributing to the need to end indenture. "Out of the 19,050 *Coolies* introduced, of which we have any account in the papers before us, only 205 were women! It is easy to conceive, that, from this frightful disparity of the sexes, the most horrible and revolting depravity and demoralization must necessarily ensue; and that such large masses of ignorant and degraded beings must carry with them a most corrupting influence on others" (quoted in Persaud 40). It is interesting that in the BFASS' concerns about the disparate sex ratio on the plantation, even the British abolitionists conceived of sodomy and speculated about its possibilities in a way that Indo-Caribbean scholarship has, historically, failed.

The failure of scholars and historians to take seriously these instances of queer sex among the indentured has reinforced a story of sex that has produced heterosexuals even in the midst of sodomites. Queer sex among indentured Indian men in Mauritius was cited by the abolitionists as a reason for ending the entire system of indenture (Persaud 33). The "horrible practice" of queer sex – not the system of bonded labor instituted to replace slavery – was the culprit. The former governor to Mauritius, Jamaica and Barbados argued that the indentured Indians were distinctly different from the Indians of the subcontinent – and subsequently more prone to perverse acts (Persaud 43). In Jamaica, BFASS alleged cases of sodomy among indentured Indian men, while cases of alleged sodomy were so great in Mauritius that the BFASS was horrified about the impact of *unnatural* sex and sexually transmitted diseases resulting in no offspring for the plantation economy (Persaud 32, 43-44). In 1875, the Report on the Conditions of Indians in

Mauritius revealed the colony had failed to improve the "moral" advancement of Indians (Faruqee 63).

According to the British Consul in Réunion in 1874, sodomy, however, was a *natural* consequence of the disparate sex ratio: "The disproportionate number of women gives rise to other acts of depravity of so disgusting a nature they cannot be referred to" (Tinker 204). Sir John Anderson observed that "amongst the northern Indians there is a good deal of *unnatural* crime" (Tinker 205, emphasis mine). Hugh Tinker has alluded to the consequence of "men being cooped up and crammed together in barracks without women," despite the reluctance of the colonial government to recognize such cases (204-205). Gaiutra Bahadur follows the argument for explaining cases of sodomy in *Coolie Woman,* remarking that "some immigrants did what men in cramped quarters, including British soldiers in India during the same era, have historically done without women" (*Coolie* 88). Perhaps, however, sodomy as a lack of sexual options on the plantation, however, might not explain the night of September 25th, 1898 aboard the SS Mersey bound for British Guiana between two *jahaji* brothers. That evening, a twenty-year-old young man named Nabi Baksh[4] confessed to seducing a twenty-two-year-old man named Mohangoo (CO 575/27). In the report from the Immigration Agent General, Nabi Baksh confessed "that for the last ten years, he had allowed men to commit acts of beastliness: he had no doubt induced Mohangu to do this criminal act" (CO 27/575).

The act of sodomy between Mohangoo and Nabi Baksh is assessed by the ship surgeon, Dr. Arthur Harrison. Further interrogation is conducted by a *Sirdar* or overseer named Salikram, who asks the men the reason for committing their unnatural crime; for pleasure, the men confess

[4] In the original archival document, the Immigration Agent General records the names of these men in English as "Mohangu" and "Nabibux". Scholars reading this case have alternately referred to these men as "Mohangoo" and "Nabi Baksh", most likely providing a more accurate transliteration of these men's names. I also refer to them using this naming convention.

(CO 27/575). In reading an account of this sodomy case, Amar Wahab notes that "it is unclear whether this act actually happened or whether the men were threatened into confessing sodomy" ("Retracing" 390). Did these men meet aboard the SS Mersey, or did they plan to board the ship together – embarking far away from the subcontinent on a new odyssey together? Would they continue these "unnatural practices" with each other *for pleasure* after working alongside each other in the barracks? Would they become "husbands" to wives who would eventually leave them? Would they be men accused of murdering these wives?

Long before the details of sodomy aboard the SS Mersey were discovered, Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo speculated about these erotic possibilities between indentured Indian men in "Jahaji Bhai: Notes on the Masculine Subject and Homoerotic Subtext of Indo-Caribbean Identity." Lokaisingh-Meighoo argued that the Indo-Caribbean trope of the "brotherhood of the boat" was actually indicative of the possibilities of the Kala Pani as a homosocial sea voyage (80-82). Given the extraordinarily high numbers of men aboard each of the voyages to the British, Dutch and French colonies during Indian indentureship, it is likely that there were indeed more than one Mohangoo and Baksh. There is also the queerest case of Munshi Rahman Khan, whose autobiography remains one of the only known manuscript-length texts written by an indentured laborer, traveling to Suriname in 1898 (Khan, *Autobiography* xiii). Khan, also known as Jeevan Prakash, recorded in detail the stunning intimacy between him and his beloved friend Subhan, a man whom he met in the Calcutta depot.

Khan writes that he and Subhan live like *jahaji* brothers, but the arresting details of their relationship echo Lokaisingh-Meighoo's suggestion of the homoerotic *jahaji* bonds (88-89). In Suriname, Khan and Subhan live together like husband and wife; Khan describes his *jahaji* brother as working "like a woman in the house," including tasks like cooking and cleaning

(Khan, *Autobiography* 96). In the absence of the biological family, Khan and Subhan seem to establish a new kind of *jahaji* kinship where the stereotypical roles of husband and wife are played by each man. In one of the most memorable lines in Khan's autobiography, Subhan cooks for Khan, who writes that his "nice and soft *rotis* [were] good enough to shame many ladies" (Khan 113). When Subhan becomes ill, Khan nurses him each day, bathing him, bringing him coffee and remaining by his side (M. Khan, *Autobiography* 115-119). When Subhan dies, Khan dreams of him and awakes crying, unable to fall back asleep (120). Khan continues to dream about meeting Subhan in the jungle and begins wandering in the jungle alone each day for hours, waiting for Subhan to appear (119). A grief-stricken Khan remembers:

> In fact, the death of Subhan posed greater problems than my being separated from my family and homeland, because Subhan was my right hand in an alien land… Subhan had promised to meet me at least once after his death. I started thinking about this all the time. I wondered where and how we would encounter each other (119).

The intensity of the relationship between Khan and Subhan is evident in the actual *jahaji* kinship: when Khan writes that Subhan's death "posed greater problems than my being separated from my family and homeland, because Subhan was my right hand in an alien land" (119), one considers the power of exile on intensifying intimacy among the indentured Indians. In the introduction to Rahman's autobiography, the authors note that Rahman, a learned man, had not left any clues about his marriages with women or his daughters. According to the editors of Khan's autobiography, "His world was clearly a men's world" (xxxi). Indeed the "men's world" was the world of Khan and Subhan, intimacies occurring in the holds of the ship, barracks and on the plantations as Lokaisingh-Meighoo first suggested (88-89).

Speculations of erotic relations between women, however, have remained a theoretical lacuna within scholarship of indenture. Considering the degree to which sexual perversity and deviant discourses characterized the annals of Indian indentureship, particularly with regard to "deviant women," the instances of homosexuality among indentured Indians have – for the most part – been excluded from study of indentureship on plantations. Khan and Subhan must have visibly appeared as *jahaji* brothers on the plantation, none the wiser for any speculative erotics shared between the men. Since the overwhelming majority of the indentured were disproportionately men, homosociality was actually an arrangement embedded within indentured living. Khan's autobiography provides one example of the ways in which the familial trope of the *jahaji* could speculatively be read as an erotic form of kinship. By calling each other "brothers" – as in *jahaji* brothers – Khan demonstrates what Lokaisingh-Meighoo first proposed about the shipmate bond as one of erotic possibilities among indentured Indian men.

It is curious that in an archive characterized by the general lack of "chastity" among indentured women within a plantation structured by sexual promiscuity and "perversions" that sexual relations among women would be incomprehensible. Despite the recorded acts of sodomy aboard the *SS Mersey,* as well as reports of sodomy documented among indentured Indian men, it seems that the possibility of sex between indentured Indian women on the plantation, as Annamarie Jagose says, was "not able to be thought" (1). As Aliyah Khan has observed, the details of the sodomy case aboard the *SS Mersey* "were scrupulously recorded by the British, though that nation of shopkeepers and their meticulous accounts never acknowledged the possibility of women loving women aboard ship" ("Voyages" 252). Men like Khan and Subhan, who lived entangled and intimate lives, or men like Mohangoo and Baksh, who might or might not have committed sodomy not for the first time, might have all also "fathered" children, had

multiple "wives," and perhaps even murdered indentured Indian women. This hermeneutic demands unsettling neat readings of the sexual lives of the indentured that approach these archives oriented toward a theory of biological and familial kinship. But amidst the proliferating perversions on the site of the plantation, first it is critical to understand the colonial tactics which introduced and consolidated the fictive kinship of the biological family.

Becoming wives

"A wife is a matter for huckstering and bargaining, for fighting and suicides, for jealousy and murder," wrote C. F. Andrews, the famous English missionary and companion to Mohandas K. Gandhi (quoted in Lal, "*Veil"* 137). In 1909, an indentured Indian woman in British Guiana who refused to choose between two men was murdered by one of them (Bahadur, *Coolie* 119). That same year in a colony on the other side of the world, an indentured man in Fiji reportedly screamed at his wife before murdering her, "Whore! Where are you going now?" (Mishra, "Woman" 77). In reports from the British Empire, this phenomenon was famously classified as "wife murders" – except these women were not actually "wives" (Mohapatra 231). Prior to departing for the colonies at the Calcutta holding depots, women sometimes declared men as "husbands" as a strategic move: women perhaps received less attention for traveling alone while men might have claimed them despite leaving wives in villages back home (Tinker 140; Mohammed, *Gender* 40-41). The fiction of "husbands" and "wives" therefore commenced at the depot as these individuals would be joined by what was deemed a "depot marriage" (Tinker 140). British officials, who did not initially conceive of Indian indentureship as a self-sustaining system that would generate a new workforce through reproduction, wavered on their attitudes toward these marriages. Despite the obvious whims and convenience of depot marriages, the Chief Justice of British Guiana claimed that indentured Indians "are married by the Immigration

Agent General and are indentured to the same plantation and settle there as man and wife" until the woman is seduced by another Indian man in the colonies who can offer her more wealth than her "husband" (Mohapatra 233-234). The Chief Justice was sympathetic toward these men, who were sexually humiliated by their so-called "wives" (Mohapatra 234).

The classification of "wife" thus functioned as a colonial tactic in recording the livability of the lives of these women, who had sex outside the boundaries of acceptable colonial parameters of kinship. The fictive categorization of the Indian indentured Indian woman as "married" would serve as a liberal signpost that deemed her death worthy of recording. As Prabhu Mohapatra has argued, the language of "wife" assigned to these women obscured the fact that *women*, not only wives, were being murdered at alarming rates (233). In a ten-year period ending in 1870, British Guiana reported that the rate of wife murders in the colonies was nearly a hundred times greater than in the Indian subcontinent (Mohapatra 235). Compared to the northeastern provinces of the Indian subcontinent from which the majority of indentured laborers hailed, the rate of murdered women in the British colonies was 142 times higher (Mohapatra 235). The post-mortem taxonomy of "wife" was therefore an ordering of sexuality that demonstrated the lives of these women were only worthy of record in relation to biological parameters of kinship. Recording these women as "wives" in death allowed accusations of *adultery* more acceptable to conceive of sex as strictly enjoyed between indentured Indian men and women – rather than the simple concession that sex was everywhere.

Kala pani: a sexual crossing

Before producing the indentured woman as a sexually liberated subject in the Caribbean colony, however, it was necessary to produce her sexual repression on the Indian subcontinent. Feminist scholarship of Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality has theorized the Kala Pani (Indian

Ocean) crossing as a critical juncture for Indian women fleeing oppressive structures on the subcontinent. As I noted in the Introduction to this dissertation, crossing of the Indian Ocean was then a symbolic passage of defilement for indentured Indians but this discourse of defilement was undergirded by the concept of the Kala Pani as a kind of sexual crossing for women. Patricia Mohammed has argued that women subsequently suffered a greater loss of caste and status in the Indian Ocean crossing compared to men (*Gender* 53). In *Diasporic Dislocations,* Brinda Mehta similarly argued that the Kala Pani crossing was an opportunity for women to exercise a kind of sexual agency that was similarly impossible in the Indian subcontinent (7). Feminist scholarship has theorized that the sexual agency of women in the colonies was a kind of freedom, resulting in women cohabiting with several sexual partners due to their status as the coveted yet scarce sex. I extend Mohammed's suggestion that indentured Indian women endured the most significant impact of caste-based violence from crossing the Indian Ocean, evident through the continued disputes about their sexual character during and after the period of indentureship.

I want to consider the particular role of sexual contamination and its relationship to accepted theories of sexual liberation among supposedly "loose" women. This specific narrative of "loss" of caste is a critical dimension of the theory of sexual repression/liberation that has marked the discourse of the indentured Indian woman. Although the myth of the loss of caste has remained a central symbol marking the bodies of the indentured, this "loss" has been scripted in terms of women's repressive sexuality. "Loss" of caste, then, does not simply mean the chaos of intermingling castes and alienation from Hinduism, but is the coded language of linking caste to sexually liberated – and subsequently low-caste – women. I want to suggest, then, that the discourse of contamination of Indian Ocean crossing has actually generated – rather than simply reflected – the murdered Indian woman as a natural consequence of sexual liberation.

The figural sexually promiscuous Indian woman has almost exclusively, as well as implicitly, alluded to the low-caste or caste-less Indian indentured woman as naturally sexually licentious. Caste, which continues to animate historical assumptions about indentureship, remains one critically neglected aspect of this theory of the sexually liberated indentured Indian woman on the plantation. Caste was the implicit dimension of assumed blame conveyed in the discourse of the "wrong kind" of woman emigrating to the Caribbean. However, prostitutes in the nineteenth-century included women from all kinds of castes (Bahadur, *Coolie* 36), an often-overlooked fact within the theorization of sexuality on the plantation. Rhoda Reddock has argued that Indian men specifically desired "a docile, secluded and controllable woman as befitted their aspirations for higher caste status" (WS-81). The stereotyping of the submissive woman here is particularly interesting, since women are not presented as laborers but as a means of entering into a form of heterosexual kinship with men. But what I want to call attention to in an otherwise critical and groundbreaking piece of scholarship are the lines following Reddock's argument that Indian men desired submissive women: "The effect of this latter contradiction was manifested in the increasing violence among Indian men over women and towards women in all recruiting territories during the latter half of the nineteenth century" (WS-81).

The uneasy conclusion that scripts low-caste women as somehow possessing an inherently unruly sexuality advances the stigmatization of non-Brahmin women as sexually unruly. If Indian women's lack of morality was the reason for the disproportionate rates of their murders, her caste was nearly always in question. The accepted notion of the concept of women led astray to the colonies presents gendered migration as courting a specific typology of character, rather than attending to the biopolitical production of specific kinds of deviant bodies under colonial rule, which was bolstered by existing caste prejudices. Reddock, citing Maria

Mies' *Indian Women and Patriarchy,* reiterates that women of a higher caste and class status were subject to increasingly repressed social, sexual and economic freedom, and that the "restricted wife was/is a sign of high caste" (WS-85). Conceptualizing sex upon the indentured Indian plantation has generally emphasized the scarcity of women and the jealousy of men, as well as the role of domesticity within the barracks. The "restricted wife" braids sexual repression within the confines of monogamous marriage, a cultural stereotype which was upended by the system of indentureship. Domesticity was therefore a fictive characterization by the colonial government as a form of disciplining of bodies and unruly sexual arrangements. Despite a shift in caste prohibitions and inter-caste communing that was prompted by indentureship, caste did not simply disappear from the social realities of indenture. Instead, caste was inextricable from the concept of the sexually promiscuous and implicitly liberated woman.

If, as Mies has suggested, that restriction or sexually repressed wife was a sign of high caste, then the lower-caste Indian woman was a sign of sexual promiscuity – or perhaps, sexually *liberated.* The significance of caste within scholarship on indenture has generally served to emphasize the heterogeneity of castes among the indentured populations across the British, French and Dutch colonies as a means of refuting the assumption that only the lowest castes emigrated. But such refutations are bound within ethnonationalist notions of purity, chastity and romanticized cultural resilience. Instead, scholarship on indenture and gender must attend to the ways in which murder was not simply a matter of gender-based violence but sanctioned caste-based violence. Low caste women were not perceived as only sexually "loose" – but their deaths were presented as both inevitable and justifiable. The Kala Pani crossing therefore was perhaps not *the* moment of sexual crossing but rather laid bare all kinds of proliferating sex that was already not uncommon among these women on the plantation, as well as the caste-based

assumptions about such proliferating sex. But it was not only so-called "lower-caste" women who engaged in sex with men on plantations; instead, plantation sex was characterized by *all* kinds of sexual arrangements – including participation from upper-caste Brahmin women.

In one of the most cited testimonies of missionary work in Trinidad, the wife of the first Canadian Presbyterian missionary to Trinidad was stunned by the blasé attitudes of women on the indentured plantations (Mohammed, *Gender* 75, 183). Sarah Morton, who arrived with her husband on the island before 1870, recalled speaking to a widowed Brahman woman about her readiness to switch lovers: "[W]hen the last immigrant ship came I took a 'papa.' I will keep him as long as he treats me well. If he does not treat me well I shall send him off at once; that's the right way, is it not?" (Mohammed, *Gender* 183). In Morton's account of the Brahmin woman who "took a papa," the stereotypical upper-caste Brahmin woman as devoted to her husband – fashioned in the oft-cited image of the Hindu goddess Sita – disappears. The indentured Indian woman's declaration that she will "take" another man as a lover, and replace him as necessary, upends the traditional stereotypes of Brahminical womanhood as upholding an allegiance to sexual purity. Furthermore, this Brahmin woman does not state that she "married" a husband; in the translation of this testimony, she "took a 'papa'" or acquired him as a possession.

But historically, all castes of women migrated to the colonies – and all castes of women *took* sexual partners. While the impossibility of upholding caste prohibitions was encountered at the emigrant depots on the subcontinent, Indian Ocean history has nonetheless been haunted by the specter of Brahmin exceptionalism. In these accounts, an attempt to prove the *Indianness* of the indentured is the lens through which women's sexuality is scripted. Furthermore, the relationship between presumably "pure" subcontinental Indian women and their "contaminated" indentured counterparts in the colonies is evident through a judgment made by Gandhi himself,

who could not believe the depravity of indentured Indian women in the colonies compared to the subcontinent: “Women, who in India would never touch wine, are sometimes found lying dead-drunk on the roads” (quoted in Niranjana 79). The immoral indentured Indian woman was shamelessly lustful compared to her pure subcontinental counterpart.

I include the significance of this Presbyterian missionary’s anecdote from indentureship in Trinidad to consider the attitudes toward supposedly “low-caste” loose women in colonial reports and a self-proclaimed Brahmin woman who was unhesitant about switching partners. Despite the stereotyping of polyandrous women as solely hailing from the “lowest” of castes, Morton’s account introduces the fact that women, in general, of all backgrounds were leveraging sex in different ways on the plantation. It is not only, as Michel Foucault writes, “the prohibition of sex is a ruse” (*History* 12), but that the presumed prohibition of all kinds of women engaging in all kinds of sexual arrangements was a ruse. Ideas of post-indenture conservatism find origin stories in the dubious myth that only the lowest castes of women were sexually promiscuous at the site of the plantation. Accounting for this complexity of caste with respect to sex, however, has been undermined in favor of culturally deterministic accounts of murdered Indian women. Furthermore, the slippage between a discourse of sexual morality without an emphasis of the relationship between sexual “liberation” and caste has generated an uneasy conclusion that equates promiscuity with caste status.

This culturally deterministic discourse seems to appear again in “Freedom Denied” as Reddock maps the trajectory of women’s sexuality from the Indian subcontinent (repressive) to the Caribbean colonies (liberated). Reddock importantly argues that indentured Indian women migrated to the colonies not as daughters or wives but as individuals who “were hardly the type of women who would fall back into the oppressive life patterns from which they had fled” (WS-

81, WS-84). This observation that women were both single and unattached to existing heterosexual kinship systems remains one of the key contributions throughout Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship. Advancing a theory of independently emigrating women, Reddock argued that "many Indian women probably for the first time in their lives, got an opportunity to exercise a degree of control over their social and sexual lives which they had never had before" (84). Yet the idea of a repressive patriarchy emerges through the very phrase: "oppressive life patterns from which they had fled" (WS-84). Sexual repression, then, is understood as near-universal within the subcontinent; the Caribbean thus represents a geographic boundary that enables a certain kind of sexual freedom.

The concept of the "submissive" Indian woman is a genealogy that is routed back to the subcontinent and perhaps as stereotypically ubiquitous as that of an Indian arranged marriage. While some Indian women were surely subject to repressive patriarchal power in the subcontinent, inferring a universal Indian patriarchy easily shifts from simply a slippage to a rule. Traces of the perceived sexual repression of Indian women emerge in Reddock's analysis in the language of "oppressive life patterns" (WS-81, WS-84). The notion that Indian women have been "regulated by patriarchy" (Goluch 20) takes hold as a fact in many texts examining Indo-Caribbean women. Scholars like Madhavi Kale have challenged the proposition of indentured Indian women as subject to a universalizing "pre-migration condition of domestic-patriarchal and rural-agrarian bondage" (142-143). Such claims, however, when bolstered by the culturally deterministic slippage of gender roles among Indian women, become the rule when considering violence on the indentured plantation.

An assumption of the sexually chaste Indian woman is perhaps as old as the assumption of the ubiquity of arranged Hindu marriages. Religious texts have historically promulgated the

presumed moral righteousness of Indians – and particularly, the presumed moral righteousness of the Hindu woman. In the case of the Caribbean, no other text is hailed as a moral compass for Hindu life than the oft-cited epic tale of the *Ramayana.* The *Ramayana* details a kidnapping of the goddess Sita, wife of the god Ram, who must demonstrate her purity to him by purifying herself in fire upon her return to him. Patricia Mohammed emphasized the significance of the *Ramayana* in delineating gender roles through the public theatre festival known as the *Ramleela* in Trinidad (*Gender* 144-145). In *Coolie Woman*, Gaiutra Bahadur emphasizes the importance of the epic among indentured Indians, suggesting that murdered (or mutilated) Indian women were images of *Sitas* or devoted wives (106). Indian men thus viewed themselves as the heroic *Ram,* the protagonist of the *Ramayana* who demands proof of his wife's purity by forcing her to walk through fire (Bahadur, *Coolie* 106). The significance and near ubiquity of the *Ramayana* among the indentured cannot be understated, especially as cultural practices provided a sense of survival throughout this system of bonded labor. However, Bahadur relies upon this discourse of marital heterosexual monogamous fidelity as a paradigm for understanding plantation murders, writing that the murdered woman was "trying to be faithful" (*Coolie* 119). In an otherwise extraordinary account of Indian indentureship that incorporates memoir and history, the repeated invocation as the *Ramayana* again returns to murdered women as the inevitable fate of an entrenched and culturally determined patriarchy.

Furthermore, a slippage of the language of "faithfulness" in these stories of indentured Indian women reinforces the fiction of heterosexual marriage which orients the varying degrees of women's sexuality toward the truth claims of her sex. Such conclusions also attempt to bind these women yet again within the biological parameters of biological heterosexual kinship that was, for the overwhelming majority, a fiction during the era of indenture. Within this theoretical

gulf, murder unintentionally becomes the logical explanation for women led astray from monogamous partnership. A repressive theory of Indian women's sexuality subsequently unfolds through ethnonationalist arguments that script her body as an alternating victim of "culture" or of patriarchy – always predestined for domesticity. In, *Chalo Jahaji,* one of the earliest monographs about Indian indentureship in Fiji, Brij V. Lal attempts to vindicate women from their status as "generally single, broken creatures… [who] ruthlessly exploited their 'scarcity value' by using marriages as expedient financial transactions, marrying men, obtaining jewelry and money in the process, and then discarding them for some other lucrative financial prospect" (54). Lal continues, "The colonial officials thought them devoid of maternal instincts. The veil of dishonour foisted on indentured women has been lifted by recent research" (54). Lal's efforts to lift the "veil of dishonour" therefore not only presume an indentured Indian woman in need of moral redemption, but more interestingly, suspect that there must be some façade to the concept of "single women" who were enterprising and traded sex for money or in exchange for labor.

Widow, prostitute or woman?

"I have cut a woman," the policeman heard (Bahadur, *Coolie* 110). But the Indian man who had killed his ex had not said "woman" (Bahadur, *Coolie* 110). The man had actually uttered, "I have cut a *randi",* a term meant widow or prostitute on Caribbean plantations among the indentured Indians (Bahadur, *Coolie* 110). A *randi* was not just any prostitute but the lowest rank (Chatterjee 21).The excessive documentation of the figural prostitute within the historical archive reflects an obsession with the sexual deviance of indentured Indian women. In particular, the notion of "single" women caused particular suspicion. On the subcontinent, single women's backgrounds sometimes demanded an investigation to determine whether or not they were abandoning existing husbands (Reddock WS-80). Speculating on the number of prostitutes that

had emigrated to the colonies became its own guessing game. In 1915, the colonial commissioners James McNeill and Lala Chimman Lal were compelled to disprove the immorality of indentured Indian women:

> A small percentage are ordinary prostitutes. Of the women who emigrate otherwise than with their husbands and parents the great majority are not, as they are frequently represented to be, shamelessly immoral. They are women who have got into trouble and apparently emigrate to escape from a life of promiscuous prostitution which seems to be the alternative to emigration… (quoted in Reddock WS-81).

McNeill and Lal's observations were not meant to empathize with the status of indentured Indian women but served to solidify indentureship as a system with "advantages [that] have far outweighed its disadvantages" (Harvard 1854). Within these signifying terms – *widow, prostitute* and *woman* – was the violent deployment of a knowledge-power paradigm indicating that the truth of women's sexuality could indeed be known. The discourse of sexual freedom and deviance governing these women – single and otherwise – obsessively marked colonial reports of the time. Wesleyan missionaries, anti-imperial nationalists, ethnographers, linguists, abolitionists and chief justices could not refrain from speaking about women's sexuality. Even the great Mahatma Gandhi himself, scandalized by the indentured in South Africa, proclaimed, "Whether [indentured Indians] are Hindus or Mahommedans, they are absolutely without any moral or religious instruction worthy of the name" (quoted in Roy 67). The Indian Ocean crossing of the Kala Pani, then, was regarded as not only a geographic crossing but as a sexual crossing.

Despite the perception of the Victorian prude, colonial officers did not abstain from speaking about the prostitute of indenture – in fact, quite the opposite: her story was a never-

ending tale of sex, deviations from chastity, polyandry and murder catalogued in hundreds of pages by the British Empire. In Calcutta, the port through which most of the indentured Indians departed to British colonies, a discourse of sex about Oriental people emerging in the seventeenth century would eventually produce the ever-expanding category of the prostitute (Chatterjee 5). The prostitute subsequently emerged as an ambiguous but all-encompassing category made legible through the juridical, medical and political discourses of criminality (Chatterjee 3, 5, 13). This endless category would include widowed women; religious subsects of upper-caste women; laboring women; ill-treated Hindu and Muslim runaways; mendicants; religious minorities; actors; saleswomen; domestic servants; wives of Muslim sailors; wives of conniving men; and eventually, women indentured to the colonies (Mitra 4, 62-63, 69, 82).

The classification of a prostitute, like that of the sodomite, was therefore an "utterly confused category" (Foucault, *History* 101). In the late nineteenth-century India, any woman existing outside of the parameters of upper-caste Brahmin womanhood was at risk of classification as a prostitute (Mitra 4). In the context of Indian indentureship, however, I want to propose that this figural prostitute – or *jahaji* – was actually posthumously constructed according to her identity as a sexually liberated figure. As Durba Mitra has demonstrated in *Indian Sex Life,* the concept of the single woman was naturally embedded within the unstable and shifting production of the term "prostitute." Naturally, *single* women emigrating to the colonies proved to be of more suspicious character than married women. The class of women recruited to the colonies therefore endured a ubiquitous profile as morally suspect (Kempadoo 38-39). According to Madhavi Kale, historians believed that women migrating to the colonies "were either respectable women led astray – kidnapped, seduced, or possibly widows escaping unbearable conditions at home – or (already) fallen women, prostitutes, the 'sweeping of bazaars' and lock

hospitals" (Kale 141-142). Lock hospitals, of course, were dedicated to treating venereal disease. Indentured Indian women were thus produced through a discourse of sexual and moral contagion, as the figural prostitute informed colonial reports about social life in the colonies – similar to the specter of the prostitute that was structuring social life on the Indian subcontinent during the same era.

As I argued in Chapter 1, the overwhelming majority of scholarship on Indian indentureship has emphasized the extent to which structures of family and gender were transformed upon the new plantation that was bolstered by colonial photography of the era. Nearly all scholarship on Indian indentureship is attentive to family life, both during and after the plantation – despite the overwhelming evidence that "family" life was produced by the colonial government as an attempt to reduce reporting the number of single murdered Indian women (Mohapatra 231, 233-234). The plantation effectively created a fictive domesticity as colonial officers sought to regulate the number of murdered women by instituting laws that sought to transform the indentured into "husbands" and "wives" (Mohapatra 228, 231, 233). But interestingly, despite the theme of indentureship as social possibility, particularly for lower-caste Indians and women, the role of "sexuality" among indentured Indians has almost always meant heterosexuality. Given the migration patterns from Calcutta brothels, as well as the notable yet common instances of single women traveling pregnant or with small children, the possibilities for considering queer sexuality as a motivating factor in this migration have been largely unexplored. The prevalence of "unnatural practices" (Persaud 42) observed during Indian indentureship was perhaps more common than either colonial officers, Christian missionaries or scholars of indentureship invested in heterosexuality could admit.

Sex and violence haunt the archives of murdered indentured Indian women. As I began this chapter mimicking Foucault's introduction to the repressive hypothesis, I want to emphasize the "story" of sex within indentureship as a kind of truth that is narrated into discourse. The *story* of the sexuality of these women is an account, a tale; yet a story also narrates, explains and produces a particular version of truth. The story of indentured Indian women's sexuality on plantations has emphasized their tethering between the repressive forces of coloniality and patriarchy. Sex seems to cast a truth about these women that is historically transcendental – their propensity for sex somehow becomes their propensity for death. How does this story of sexuality come to discursively script the sexuality of the figural Indian women of indentureship? Where else do we find more of an "incitement to speak" about sex than on the sugarcane plantation of indenture? This power of professing sexual truths subsequently functions to insist upon defining "the relationship between sex and power in terms of repression" (Foucault, *History* 6). In the case of Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality, the speaker's benefit has resulted in the discursive production of two consequences: an unrelenting discourse on the "immorality" of the indentured Indian woman that has also paradoxically – in detail – described a colonial archive obsessed with her liberation-turned-murder.

Her sex is written all over an archive of documents scratched over and over, recording and discursively marking her body to "secretly animate the present" truth of her murder (Foucault, "Nietzsche" 374). Regardless of her archival etchings – deleted, removed, obliterated – the speaker's benefit scripts her body through competing discourses to present her as a repository of truth awaiting discovery. In a sense, we search the archive attempting to find her "original" condition: pre-colonial and pure, her body an artifact of history waiting for the

salacious details of her disclosure. Far from silenced, the autopsy of these women is saturated by a discourse "speaking" the truth of their sex.

Yet the power-knowledge paradigm that Foucault describes furthers a discourse that seemingly – albeit unintentionally – writes a script of her murder. Reddock writes that "the violence [against indentured Indian women] had the much more lasting and important effect of placing Indian women once more firmly under the control of men… through the patriarchal family system" (WS-86). In tracing the origin of present-day gender-based violence to that of the plantation, one observes a slippage in ascribing repressive power to the abstraction of the patriarchy, rather than to the actual man murdering his wife. In a paradoxical twist, the emphasis on the grotesque and rising instances of gender-based violence actually serve to obscure gender by situating repressive power *elsewhere.* I am not suggesting that repressive gendered dynamics of power do not exist within the family and/or site of the plantation. Rather, my argument aims to disrupt an overreliance upon the concept of a patriarchy as the totalizing "general system of domination" that results in the inevitability of the deaths of Indo-Caribbean women (*History* 92).

I am therefore arguing that in a strange way, this widely accepted theory of sexual repression serves to absolve the phenomenon of gendered violence by locating it within the inheritance of a colonial and patriarchal system. To reiterate what Foucault has already observed of repression: "To say that sex is not repressed, or that the relationship between sex and power is not characterized by repression, is to risk falling into a sterile paradox" (*History* 8). Sex is placed on the agenda for the future (Foucault, *History* 6). The narrative of "jealous" husbands and "victim" wives is perpetuated in present-day headlines of murdered Indo-Caribbean women. These women – alternately portrayed as sexually provocative or fiercely independent – are also memorialized according to their roles as "mothers" and "wives," grotesquely way, tracing

backwards the violence of the plantation to "animate the present" (Foucault, "Nietzsche" 374). Far from the perception of a reticence on sex, colonial records detail the sexual escapes and murders of these women. These records of proliferating sexuality foreground Indian women's sexuality to script their ghosts through a narrative of repression and murder. Such dangerous correlations have resulted in present-day justifications for the murders of Indo-Caribbean women. An effect of over-reliance upon the repressive hypothesis of sexuality in the case of Indo-Caribbean women has also produced an obsession with sex beyond her death. This desire to read *backwards* the historical truths within the discursive production of Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality produces a "will to knowledge" that continues to bolster and instrumentalize Indo-Caribbean women as passive repositories of violent colonial and patriarchal repression (Foucault, *History* 11-12). To recognize the theory of repressive power does not eliminate the existence of the penal prohibition; instead, to recognize the acceptance of a theory of repression is Foucault's *incitement* to examine the discursive production of the truth of sex that we seemingly accept.

In 1906, a nearly imperceptible but odd detail appeared in a two-hundred-page report from the Emigration Agencies in Calcutta. Among the reasons for cancelled licenses to the indentured colonies that year included the illegal detainment of men in the holding depots; bureaucratic errors; violations of the Indian Penal Code; and registering indentured Indian men under false names (7). But the agency had also refused the request of two indentured Indian women traveling together to the colonies, citing the following reason: "Two licenses were cancelled because the licenses enticed two married women to emigrate without the knowledge and consent of their respective husbands" (Annual Report on Emigration from the Port of Calcutta to British and Foreign Colonies 1906). Of the nearly 4,000 Indian women indentured to the colonies listed in the 1906 report, nearly 2,600 were categorized as "single" (11). C. Banks,

the report's author, notes that women remained in shortage during the respective journeys throughout the empire, from Mauritius and Natal to the British Caribbean colonies of Trinidad and Jamaica. Of those women traveling "with husbands" (Banks 11), the arrangement of depot marriages might have presented the artificial guise of a marital bond to recruiting agencies.

Did these women attempt to become *jahaji* sisters together? Would they have pretended to be sisters in order to evade the suspicion of the emigration agent? Were they attempting to run away together to the colonies, knowing of the ships leaving from Calcutta and plotting an escape from their husbands? By 1906, Indian indentureship to the Caribbean was nearly seventy years old. Although only a third of Indians returned to the subcontinent, those who made "return passages" to Calcutta would have shared stories about their time in the colonies, and perhaps those stories had reached villages seeking another life. The women whose licenses were cancelled never arrived in the indentured colonies. But in the colonial record, that document of enduring historical time, they are recorded in perpetuity as "wives."

Chapter 3

Coconut/Cane & Cutlass: Queer Visuality in the Indo-Caribbean Lesbian Archive

so they pelt me with river rock
for repeating Sappho's words
-Lelawattee Manoo-Rahming

Figure 3.1 Coconut/Cane & Cutlass. Courtesy of Michelle Mohabeer

Introduction

A screen with silhouettes flickering – two bodies of Indo-Caribbean women on a bed, consuming each other, in diffused light. Mesmerized both by the visual, aesthetic and sense of queer possibility, I encountered the film, *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass.* Somewhere in New York City, on a street deserted by the evening retreat of bankers and tourists, I sat in a small crowded room of diasporic bodies on a small block off Broadway. There I witnessed the scene that I first saw on the flyer e-circulated by the South Asian Gay & Lesbian Association of New York (SALGA) that prompted my urgency to drive from the Bronx to Manhattan that night. The scene that I remember the most – the same scene on that e-mail flyer – is the still-shot of two Indo-

Caribbean women, naked sienna figures on a bed with light creeping in from the curtains behind them, casting somewhat of a halo behind their bodies. The scene was visually subversive for its daring sensuality – but more than that, the affective promise of an Indo-Caribbean lesbian film.

Nearly a decade has elapsed since I first encountered *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*, yet no other film has emerged in the twenty-five years since its release that conveys the visually rich, autotheoretical Indo-Caribbean lesbian archive and its diasporic contours. Michelle Mohabeer produces an alternative archive to the historical absence of queer indentured women by staging a speculative erotics at the site of the colonial record. Mohabeer thus expands the notion of the "archive" of indenture from one of purely colonial records to an autoethnographic film that configures the queer body from the ships of indenture to the sugarcane plantation. In the experimental film, Mohabeer positions the shadow of indenture through diasporic framings that resist reading the bodies of Indo-Caribbean women through the discourses of racial purity, authenticity, or "dilution." But perhaps what is most remarkable in Mohabeer's rendering of (post)indenture identity is the complexity with which queer aesthetics arrives at the scene of the plantation; queerness is not simply paraded with a post-Stonewall flag, but rather its presence is enunciated in the cinematic grammar of cane.

In this chapter, I read Mohabeer's work as a queering of the canescape and the cutlass, which I argue presents the possibility of queer eroticism alongside the narratives of heterosexual victimhood and violence encountered by Indo-Caribbean women on the plantation. In my analysis, I argue that *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* presents a cinematic genealogy of sexuality, which operates as a mode of the Indo-Caribbean lesbian archive. I read the audiovisual sequencing of the film as generating a textual rewriting of Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality, which has historically precluded queerness at the site of the cane field. *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*

is not only extraordinary for its striking visual portrayal of lesbian desire between Indo-Caribbean women, but its visual genealogy produces a radically new narrative of queer Indo-Caribbean kinship through what I am calling a queering of the jahaji figure (defined below) which has traditionally signified heterosexual kinship. Reading the film through the iconography of canescape, cutlass, and cinematic fragment, I argue that Mohabeer produces a visual genealogy of the queer jahaji figure as a mode of articulating the archival lesbian absence(s) of indenture.

Queer Cane Aesthetics

A scene of canescape slowly unfolds as the film opens. The camera is still as cane stalks blow on either side of a river. The scene is filtered by a sienna-like lens, producing the effect of the sugarcane and river as archival footage evoking a kind of visual nostalgia. But as the camera continues almost imperceptibly increasing the optical focus, the cane stalks and river also appear as the metaphorical landscape of a vagina. The subtle eroticism in this opening scene is amplified by the slow panning across the stalks of cane, evoking Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's reading of the Caribbean canescape as a site of women's sexuality (*Thiefing* 2). The bodies of indentured Indian women are historically recorded within colonial archives as victims of heterosexual violence, a historical genealogy that has cast Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality as both insistently heterosexual and simultaneously doomed. The trope of the canescape and its relationship to the queer sexuality of Indo-Caribbean women undergirds *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*, reconfiguring the cane field as a site of eroticism. In spatializing the erotic at the site of the canescape, Mohabeer radically queers the site of the (post)indenture plantation from its configuration as a site primarily of heterosexual violence against Indo-Caribbean women to one where queer eroticism is a possibility. Whether one is lashed by cane, cutting cane, or found

dead in the cane fields, cane itself occupies a privileged site of metonymy within the indentured diaspora. The indentured historical archive proceeds by narrating the bodies of Indians within their relationship to cane: cane cutters, cane planters, cane carriers. Perhaps, there is no coolie whose identity is not haunted by the specters of cane.

In the film's opening scene, cane stalks blow in the wind as a sienna tint that colors the fields evoke a sense of the backwards glance, the shading itself somewhere between the rawness of earth's materiality and perhaps, nipples, vagina, skin. A woman's voice begins: "I have felt your absence for the last twenty years… but yet I long for some connection with you;" the voice is lowered. It is unclear if the absence is either that of her homeland or a (queer) lover. "I want to still claim you as home," the voice echoes. The cane stalks blow with a river in between them, a metonym of a woman's body and a cinematic opening for queerness. In this invocation of "home," even the object of the woman's desires is unclear: is home a lover? A nation? There is an eroticism for home – whether "home" is indeed a person, a nation, or both. This eroticism haunts the film as cane stalks are transformed visually into the metaphor of a (queer) lover. Historically, cane fields inherit an affectively fraught spatialization, not only as a site of manual indentured labor, but also as the scene of violence in the colonial archive of murdered indentured Indian women (Reddock 1985; Mohapatra 1995; Mohammed, *Gender* 2002; Bahadur, *Coolie* 2013). But the cane field of Mohabeer's film opening is not the ominous visual landscape haunted by murdered women; instead, Mohabeer produces a visual doubling of the landscape in the opening scene as the cane is visually transformed into the image of a woman. Mohabeer's visual intervention resists narrativizing the Indo-Caribbean woman's body purely through the tragic narratives of the cane field, rendering her only legible as a heterosexual victim of men's desires.

Mohabeer configures queer sexuality as intimately woven into the indentured canescape. By imagining queer sexuality at the site of the cane field, Mohabeer "effectively rewrites the history of Indo-Caribbeans to include the figure and experience of the lesbian" (Kanhai 229). In this rewriting of the indentured Indian landscape, Mohabeer collapses queerness, the body of a woman, and the landscape, introducing a question posed by Tinsley: "What happens when the beloved/landscape and the poet/lover are both women?" (*Thiefing* 2). Situating the canescape as the opening of Mohabeer's film evokes the violent landscape of Indian indentured labor. But rather than repeating an archive of heterosexual violence, Mohabeer presents an erotic rewriting through a visual aesthetic that transforms the very stalks of cane – or the site of queer possibility– into the figure of a woman's body. This cinematic metonym introduces the possibility for queer eroticism even within a geographical archive of violence.

A queer Caribbean film beginning with the trope of sugarcane and specificity of place echoes the question Michelle Cliff once asked: "What would it mean for a woman to love another woman in the Caribbean? Not in a room in the Mediterranean, not in a Paris bar, not on an estate in England" (quoted in Tinsley, *Thiefing* 15). In Mohabeer's visual genealogy, eroticism between woman is not scripted abroad but at the site of the plantation. More interesting, perhaps, is that queer relations between Indo-Caribbean women do not simply appear as the product of women leaving the plantation – but Mohabeer speculates about eroticism at the very site of the commencement of indenture. In one scene of the film, a voice begins to recite the poem "They Came in Ships," Mahadai Das's canonical text that marks the elegiac lyricism of the indenture: "They came in ships/from across the seas/far from across the seas/Britain colonizing India/transporting her chains from Chota Nagpur and the Ganges Plain." The voice continues reciting the poem as two women praying side by side appear on a ship. The poet continues

reciting lines about the Fatel Rozack and Hesperus, two ships that transported indentured Indians to Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana.

Mohabeer therefore materializes the lyricism of the *jahaji* poetry of indenture to recreate a scene of *jahaji* women together. In my formulation of the *jahaji* figure, which I extend not as the feminized "*jahajin*" but as an extension of the figure of the ship as a mode of queer kinship, I read eroticism between women speculatively at the site of the cane field. Mohabeer's film allows me to read this alternative genealogy of kinship of speculative erotics, which relies upon disrupting the stability of language through the gender binaries of either "*bhai*" or "*bahen*" by formulating a mode of queer kinship that is capacious enough for varied genders and sexualities. Mohabeer's film is an example of this alternative speculative reading of the *jahaji* trope by presenting eroticism between women "in sensuous proximity while travelling through the Middle Passage" (Atluri 12), rather than as simply a postcolonial phenomenon. This reading of the jahaji figure is more than counterhegemonic, since Mohabeer does not present eroticism between women as simply a counter to an existing male sociality. In the film, there is no male homosocial community that defines Indo-Caribbean community formations, as in Lokaisingh-Meighoo's assertion, but history and kinship are narrated through explicitly queer women and/or androgynous figures. In the brief scene, the relation between the women on the ship is unclear: Are they sisters? Friends? Lovers? Although the relation between the women is ambiguous, the ship becomes a site of queer possibility. Since the crossing of the Kala Pani overwhelmingly narrates the bodies of indentured Indian women as heterosexual, Mohabeer scripts queer possibility at the homosocial site of the ship, which has long been portrayed as a site of (hetero)sexual possibility.

In one of the film's most sexually evocative scenes, two Indo-Caribbean women, in bed, reach for each other in dim light. The half-naked women are partly shrouded by a curtain that appears to be made of the translucent material of an *orhni,* or veil/shawl, typically worn by Indo-Caribbean women. Mohabeer plays with the utility of the *orhni* as a headscarf for covering a woman's head at Muslim or Hindu places of worship, as well as its symbolic materiality in the post-indentureship period as a feminine object of "Indianness" (Ollivierre 86). In the shot, light passes through the sheer *orhni*, which is red; the bedsheets the women lie on are green and gold. Mohabeer, a Guyanese-Canadian filmmaker, has constructed the scene of red, green and gold: the colors of Guyana's national flag. If queerness is veiled through the translucence of the *orhni*, these women make love on the bed of the nation. Queerness is symbolically enacted upon the nation through the intimacy of these Indo-Caribbean women, a queering of *jahaji*. Within larger Caribbean discourses of pathologizing queerness, this eroticism establishes its own queering of the nation vis-à-vis a literal queering of the Guyanese flag. Rosanne Kanhai has described this scene "without comment or explanation – forever changing what has not been recorded in the history of indentureship. To see the lesbian in such a landscape is itself revolutionary" (229). This affective power of the erotic within the visual register of film disorients the discursive preoccupation with the queer-or-not Caribbean subject, choosing instead eroticism as its primary register of legibility.

Queering Cutlass

The alliterative title of Mohabeer's film also presents a succession of objects that constitute Indo-Caribbean history: coconut, cutlass, and cane. The cutlass evokes the violence of the plantation: the cutlass is not only an object used by indentured Indians to chop sugarcane, but frequently appears in the colonial archive as the weapon men used to murder Indo-Caribbean

women (Mohammed, *Gender*, 99;103–104). The cutlass features prominently in the film's title as a recognizable object of Indian indenture, as well as within specific scenes that present a counter-aesthetic to the traditional portrayal of indentured Indian women on plantations. In one scene, a figure that could be androgynous holds a stalk of cane and begins stripping its branches, stalk by stalk. This performative cane stripping and its subsequent repetitions evoke the labor of the cane field that indentured descendants inherit, yet the repetition of the performance by this androgynous figure also evokes the centrality of repetition to the queer theory of performativity (Butler xv-xvi).

If, as Judith Butler argues, repetition is the mode of discursively producing gender, Mohabeer denaturalizes the act of cane cutting as solely an act by indentured men; women and queers cut cane, too. Yet, is the figure cutting the cane indeed androgynous? Or, is the figure a cane cutter in drag? Mohabeer's aesthetic portrayal of gendered ambiguity is the radical visual disruption of the male-dominated canescapes of indenture that narrate women's bodies as victims of the cutlass. This avant-garde scene of androgynous performance is also significant since, as Rosanne Kanhai observes, Mohabeer intervenes within the "heterosexual tradition of Indian dance, in which the female dancer either dances with or for a male partner" (230). Kanhai reads this figure as a woman, whereas I read the figure as more ambiguously gendered, yet the significance of the figure remains: "her alone-ness does not lead to the inevitability (and risk of violence) of the heterosexual conjugal bond" (230). Although indentured Indian women performed the work of cutting cane, their labor is overshadowed in the colonial archive by the evocation of the cutlass as a tool for their murders. By reconfiguring the iconography of the cane cutter as a queer figure, Mohabeer presents an alternative archive of indenture that unmoors its gendered significations and plays with the possibility of its queerness.

Furthermore, the performativity of the cane cutter through the object of the cutlass disrupts the production of the cutlass and its object status as solely a tool of male heterosexual violence. The evocative power of the very word “cutlass” produces an affective phenomenon that transports its interlocutor to the gruesome site of the cane field, a space that has archived the deaths of women’s bodies during indenture. Although the deaths of indentured Indian women were recorded as murders by the “chopping” of cutlass, women also wielded the cutlass. Their labor was integral to the system of colonial indentureship, a system of labor which was ultimately linked to the disproportionate number of deaths on plantations (Reddock 1985; Mohammed, *Gender* 2002; Bahadur, *Coolie* 2013). In imagined histories of indenture, men wield both power and the cutlass; but in Mohabeer’s cane field, women chop, too. The figure continues the performance, gesturing wildly and repetitively, mimicking the slashing of stalks as cane fields appear on the projection in the background. In this wild repetition, the figure is at once cane cutter, diasporic subject, and—in my reading—queer. The queer performance is both one of gender subversion, countering the imaginary preeminence of the male cane-cutter, as he is the one who does the chopping.

Kaneesha C. Parsard describes this iconography of the male cane cutter, as well as the ominous power inscribed within the cutlass-as-object by tracing the cutlass as a tool of plantation labor to one of violence against Indo-Caribbean women. Parsard writes: “In the workshop (in this case the field) the worker perfects the act of swinging and cutting through repetition. The indentured man then brings the cutlass outside this workshop in order to injure or kill a woman, who is also a worker” (248). The archival records of ghastly violence against Indo-Caribbean women cite the language of “chopping,” which continues to function as a metonym for the present-day murders of Indo-Caribbean women. Shalini Puri notes that the language of murders

of Indian women by their partners has constituted the "cultural vocabulary" of Indo-Caribbean identity (150). Yet within this figuration of intimacy between Indo-Caribbean women and the cutlass, Parsard laments the ways in which texts about Indo-Caribbean women continue "to write Indian women as victims of culture" (250). In challenging the normative narrative of Indo-Caribbean culture as inevitably violent, Parsard intervenes within an archival and epistemic tendency to script Indo-Caribbean bodies as destined toward victimhood. In the archive that scripts the Indo-Caribbean women's body, it is she who is chopped, but in Mohabeer's film, such chopping is done not only by a woman, but perhaps a queer one. The cutlass, then, becomes an object that is reconfigured from a site of violence to one of a queer canescape.

Queering the cutlass thus transforms the narrative of the Indo-Caribbean woman's body as one simply narrated through alternating spectacles of violence and death. What might it mean to think about queerness through the cutlass of the canescape? If the canescape is the intimacy of the spatialization between women, the very economy of bodies is reconfigured through a radically new visual lens. Mohabeer plays with the cutlass—the cane cutter is indeed thiefing sugar (Tinsley, *Thiefing* 3). The most radical act of queering the cutlass not only transforms the canescape into a site of queer desire but situates a queer erotics even within a geography of violence. Reading the cutlass within the film's alliterative title evokes its own sort of "cutting" within Mohabeer's visual modes of fragmentation. Scenes and origin stories are chopped, visually disorienting the viewer. This aesthetic mode emphasizes the role of cutting as constitutive of Indo-Caribbean subject formation. The "& Cutlass" in the film's title serves as a reminder that the cutlass is inextricable from the landscape of indenture – even within the midst of queer eroticism.

Queer Consumption of Self/Other

In *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*, woman-as-trope thus becomes woman-as-tropics. The exoticized landscape(s) of the Other is replaced by the intimacy of lesbian desire that rewrites the cane field as a site of excessive violence to one of potential desire. The "coconut/cane" relation reinscribes the trope of the tropics, whereby such flora characterizes the geographic terrain of the Caribbean. But the coconut is also an object of particularly Caribbean lesbian sexuality, evident through literary texts such as Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*. Tinsley notes that coconut is deployed as a trope in Cliff as an object that "resist(s) capture by plantocrats" (*Thiefing* 188). Coconuts also "symbolize a particular village ethos" in Caribbean literature, an object of many purposes that offers sustenance and an intimacy with the earth (Mehta, *Diasporic* 145). Atluri notes that Mohabeer disrupts the "ethnographic spectacles of the Other" by embracing a kind of fluid subjectivity through an aesthetics of autoethnography (6–7). The exotic, historically invoked as a site of woman-as-object, is inverted in Mohabeer's script; the coconut, an object used in Hindu prayers, is subsistence for Indian bodies. The Indo-Caribbean resonance with coconut rewrites the object from one at the foot of the altar of the deity, to one of queer consumption. This rewriting of erotic consumption is not sacrilege but perhaps another kind of religion.

The trope of the coconut functions not only as a significant icon within Indo-Caribbean Hindu rituals, but coconut is also as a metaphor of female flesh. The eroticism of sucking the flesh of coconut jelly and its very ability to be consumed—perhaps, devoured—is echoed within the film's title. Tropes of food as metaphors of eroticism between women are also evident in a poem Mohabeer reads, titled "Star-Apple." Two Indo-Caribbean women have sex as a woman's voice reads: ". . . ambrosia cream filled luscious purple flesh/my lips . . .I suck the sweet essence

of you.” The poem continues as the women have sex, the erotic consumption of a woman by her lover. The star apple is the erotic site of queer consumption, as its purple flesh reorients the imperial gaze of exoticism back to the erotic exchange between the two queer lovers. The very title of the poem, “Star-Apple,” written by Mohabeer, evokes the title of Sappho’s own Fragment 105(a): “You: an Achilles’ apple…. You escaped those who would pluck/your fruit” (quoted in Huffer, 1, 4-5. The erotic enjambment of “your fruit” intensifies this queer desire. Unlike the biblical tale of Eve’s fall from grace, here it is the queer woman who possesses the fruit. This Sapphic “dangling” of the apple (Huffer 156) is not unlike the desire that is suspended across the arc of Mohabeer’s film. If the tropics is narrated by the imperial desire for consumption, the Indo-Caribbean lesbian is tasting the Caribbean literally, or, in the words of poet Dionne Brand by way of Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, she is *thiefing* sugar.

At the film’s conclusion, two women make love in a room during daylight. A transparent sheet—or perhaps, an *orhini*—blows behind them. The scene then morphs into the cane field, where the stalks merge with the figures of the women’s silhouettes as the film fades out. This visual transformation of the queer women’s bodies into stalks of sugar cane collapses the violent landscape of sugar into the materiality of women’s bodies. The women become the landscape of indenture in a cinematic ending; but Mohabeer is also inscribing the place of eroticism between women into this violent landscape. Here, the metaphoric *thiefing* of sugar elicits an alternative narrative to “Caribbean feminism’s plotting of male-female cane field alliances” (Tinsley, *Thiefing* 4). For indentured Indian women, transposing the bodies of women into the cane field imagines queer eroticism as an alternative, or even alongside, to the heterosexual narratives of murdered women within the archives of indenture. This *thiefing* then, is not only an act of eroticism between women, but a symbolic subversion at the site of the plantation, that landscape

of violence meant for the exploitation of enslaved and indentured bodies. In Caribbean popular culture and discourse, the language of "sweetness" is commonly deployed as metaphor for women's bodies (Cooper 23), as well as an invocation of heterosexual eroticism within dancehall, calypso, soca and chutney songs. Mohabeer queers this sweetness at the site of the very sugarcane field, extending the parameters of metaphorical and literal consumption of Indo-Caribbean women's bodies. The final transposition of queer bodies into the stalks of the cane field also visually gestures to the film's beginning, as the stalks of sugarcane blowing cinematically emerge as the figure of a woman's body. As the landscape of the lovers is visually transformed into the lovers themselves, Mohabeer reimagines the production and consumption of sweetness by collapsing queerness and cane into each other in this speculative genealogy of erotic consumption.

Queer archival fragments of indenture

Fragments: the mode of the archival, the mode of the queer. The cinematic ruptures that characterize *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* evoke this queer aesthetic mode of fragmentation, following a cinematic genealogy of "disruptions and discontinuities" that mark the genre of queer autoethnography (Pidduck 461). In *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*, the very structure of fragmentation is apparent in the film's title, which emphasizes a series of objects from indentured iconography. The fragmented title of Mohabeer's film evokes the fragmented archive of indenture, as well as a queer mode of diasporic aesthetics. On this latter point, Gayatri Gopinath has argued that the very archive of queer diaspora is that of the fragment (*Impossible* 22), and that the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora attend to "the fragmentary and the discarded" (*Unruly* 175). These queer aesthetic practices are not only archival, but necessarily disorient objects, spaces, and temporalities (Gopinath, *Unruly* 174–175). I want to attend to this

cinematic mode of fragmentation, not only as an aesthetic mode of queer diaspora, but also as a mode of specifically encountering the Indo-Caribbean lesbian archive.

"Where do Indo-Caribbean lesbians learn how to be lesbian?" a woman's voice asks in one scene. Two figures' silhouettes face each other as the canescape cascades in the background like a mobile. The voice of a woman speaking about her experience migrating from Guyana to Canada begins as a figure puts on different masks: a half of one mask is the Guyanese flag, the other half is the Indian flag. The voice recites a series of epithets: "foreigner … dyke … dirty Indian." The masks signal alternating racial, national, and sexual identities, each mask corresponding to the voice of the fragmented epithets. In this formulation of unbelonging, the foreigner is the dyke is the dirty Indian; separately and all at once, these different identities become equivalent sites of exclusion. The woman's voice continues: "Sometimes it feels like there's no time or place where we can be all that we are… fragments." Scholarly exegesis of *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* has cited the trope of fragmentation in the film. The film's aesthetic emphasis on fragmentation reflects the complexities of sexual, national, and diasporic identities, rendering any one "truth" about these multiple subjectivities impossible (Atluri 7). For Tara Atluri, Mohabeer portrays postcolonial sexual identities as "untranslatable fragments of memory, sensory experience and desire" (7), while Rosanne Kanhai has argued that the scene of performance with multiple masks "reconstructs the fragmented self" (231). Although the fragmented methodology of the film presents the complexity of post-indenture diasporic identities, fragmentation is a critical trope within queer theory, particularly in the mode of lesbian archival absence.

In the Caribbean, the earliest theorizations of queerness cited the trope of lesbian invisibility (Silvera 1992; King 2008). The lamentation that "there's no time or place where we

can be all that we are" might not only be an identification of multiple ethic and national belonging in the diaspora, but perhaps also speaks to the archival failure of the recording of queer indentured and post-indentured bodies. In the absence of the colonial historical record and Indo-Caribbean scholarship that for years refused to engage with same-sex sexuality, there is no literal "place" for the queer body. In the absence of lesbian bodies from the archives of indenture, Mohabeer offers a cinematic archive of queer performance, kinship, and poetry. Rather than solely seeking the Indo-Caribbean lesbian in the historical colonial archives, Mohabeer presents figures of *jahajis* throughout shifting temporalities. The ambiguity that necessarily saturates the archive of indenture is consequently punctured by the affective desire to seek out unambiguous truths or origins. If, as Kara Keeling writes, "cinema is a mode of thinking" (5), Mohabeer offers a radical reconceptualization of thinking about both the lesbian archive and the indentured diaspora through the mode of visual fragmentation. A lesbian film emphasizing the trope of fragments also evokes the lesbian Greek poet Sappho, whose oeuvre has been marked by the very trope of absence and fragment. Only one complete poem of the ancient poet survives: "All the rest are fragments" (quoted in Huffer 36). As Lynne Huffer notes, Ann Carson's translations of Sappho mark the "incompleteness of her poems with brackets, diacritical devices that designate absence" (*Eros* 36). The textual bracketing of the Sapphic poem represents the fragmented absence, much like the cinematic flickering of visual fragments that Mohabeer's film exhibits. For Huffer, these "Sapphic brackets" are an opportunity to approach the "aesthetic renderings of history's lacunae" (38).

Theories of the indentured diaspora have emphasized the metonym of the Kala Pani lacuna as a material and symbolic reconfiguration of sexual, national, and cultural identities in crossing the Indian Ocean to the Caribbean and other imperial colonies (Mohammed,

"Changing" 2012; V. Mishra 1996; Carter and Torabully 2002; Mehta, *Diasporic* 2004; Bahadur, *Coolie* 2013; Hosein and Outar 2016). Feminist scholars, in particular, have cited the trope of the Kala Pani as a literal oceanic crossing that produced transgressive possibilities for Indo-Caribbean feminist agency, reconfiguring their relationship to patriarchal structures of domesticity and gendered marginalization (Reddock 1985; Mohammed, *Gender* 2002; Mehta, *Diasporic* 2004). Coconut/Cane & Cutlass begins where the legacy of indenture often begins, at the juncture of the Indian Ocean crossing. In the opening scenes of the film, a quote from postcolonial scholar Edward Said appears, defining exile as "the unbearable rift . . . between the self and its true home." Indo-Caribbean identity has been characterized primarily through the devastation of the Kala Pani crossing as a primary trope of rupture. But the nostalgic contours of the film resist the one-directional longing in relation to the Indian subcontinent. Mohabeer is part of an indentured diaspora that migrated onto places like the United States, Europe and Canada as part of a second diaspora (V. Mishra 432) and the film reflects this additional diasporic experience. Crossing the Kala Pani is as much of a rupture as crossing from Guyana to Canada; or perhaps, a sexual crossing that also marks queer bodies as internal exiles.

Yet the diasporic mobility of the queer subject also produces questions of geopolitical positioning; Tara Atluri has cautioned that the "diasporic subject can and often does enact a violating gaze," as the stakes of theorizing queerness in the Caribbean remain a fraught endeavor (20). In one of the earliest engagements with *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*, Rosanne Kanhai suggested that such a queer film might only be possible within the parameters of the diaspora (1999). But I would argue that the queer autoethnographic fragmentation that structures Coconut/Cane & Cutlass accounts for the complexity of nation and diaspora, reconfiguring the very definition of primacy of "home" country, as well as challenging the stable discourses of

sexuality, whether in the Caribbean or its diasporas. On this latter point, Vanessa Agard-Jones has argued with regard to discourses of mobility and Caribbean queerness that there is an imperative to resist the notion that "it is only through diasporic movement that people gain their capacity to be legible, visible, and politically viable subjects" (327). The trope of the rift, as well as the concept of home, resist static signification within Mohabeer's film. The Kala Pani, regarded as the formative rift for the indentured diaspora, is no longer the formative site of diasporic identity. By alternating frames of the colors of the Guyanese and Trinidadian flags, signs for Stabroek Market, sequences of erotic lesbian poetry, androgynous figures, and same-sex copulating, Mohabeer's visual aesthetics produces post-indenture art contingent upon disrupting the sites of national identity, the plantation, and sexuality.

The enunciation of a cinematic palimpsest of indenture through the queer body is among the most compelling aesthetic contributions of *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*. This nonlinearity "disrupts colonial ideals of 'progress' that define both international developmental thinking as well as mainstream ideas of sexuality" (Atluri 2). By producing postmodern aesthetics of rapid cinematic sequences and flickering scenes, Mohabeer actually disorients the historical visual archive of indenture. In this sense, *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* emphasizes fragmentation, rather than continuity, as a central mode of identity. This approach counters earlier scholarship on Indian indentureship which was invested in diasporic cultural continuity, ethnonationalism and tracing ancestral relationships to India as a primary site of ethnic belonging. In Mohabeer's film, it is not India that the Indo-Caribbean subject longs for, it is Guyana. Crossing the Kala Pani is therefore not simply the event of indenture, but the point of departure for sexual, national, and temporal genealogies that resist any single origin story.

Following this conceptual frame, Mohabeer departs from a tradition of historicizing the "Indo-Caribbean" experience through an engagement with traditional colonial archives or historical records which characterize much of the earliest scholarship of Indian indentureship. Instead, Mohabeer focuses on visually disorienting scenes of poetry, cutlass performance, and queer copulating. I read Mohabeer's aesthetics as a queer intervention, which configures her approach to the (post)indentured diasporic narrative. The absence of the Indo-Caribbean lesbian in the historical archive of indenture generates the possibility for imagining "queer counterarchives" (10). *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* resists an engagement with the limits of the colonial archive of indenture, which retains a primacy of place within the scholarship of the indentured diaspora. Instead, Mohabeer offers another form of visual archive to record the lesbian body. Mohabeer deploys the visual form of nonlinearity, emphasizing the queer aesthetic of fragmentation, to write the queer body through a nexus of complexities and entanglements. By interrupting the very linearity of the narrative form, the film produces affective contours that enable a different kind of archive to emerge. In this sense, *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* not only represents the queer Indo-Caribbean lesbian archive, but by its very existence, brings it "into being" (Cvetkovich 133).

Mohabeer subsequently presents queerness as a central conceptual frame for theorizing post-indentured identity rather than relegating its nonnormative status to a site of marginality. Coconut/Cane & Cutlass generates a speculative archive from which to imagine the queer jahaji as a formative kinship bond. In one of the most erotic scenes in the film, Mohabeer visually produces a striking contrast of spatialization between the half-naked bodies of two women together within a room as the camera pans to barbed wire outside. The motion of the lens surveying the landscape outside counters the stillness of their bodies inside of the room. Texts

approaching Indo-Caribbean women's subjectivity nearly universally narrated women's bodies through the primary sphere of the domestic, with nearly universal attention to their heterosexual relationships with Indo-Caribbean men. Archives of indenture contain the gruesome records of women murdered by subverting sexual arrangements with men on plantations, as women's perceived sexual subversiveness was connected to the direct rates of their sexual violence. In reorienting the shift from the heterosexual violence of the plantation to the queer space of the domestic, Mohabeer subsequently challenges this "heteronormative paradigm of Indo-Caribbean intimacy" (Persard 33) by producing a film in which the primary mode of sexuality is queerness. In the scene of two women kissing and having sex, the landscape of barbed wire outside juxtaposed with the lesbian couple produces multiple theoretical readings. I read this scene as a different kind of enclosure that rewrites the history of indentured domesticity through the queer body. The domesticity of interior space emphasizes the intimacy between women even within a system of violence, represented by the nation-state and the plantation system of indentureship.

In this radical rewriting of Indo-Caribbean domesticity, Mohabeer constructs queerness within the space of the domestic, offering an alternative reading of (post) indentured identity that centers eroticism between women. The violence of the archive of indenture cannot be effaced; but perhaps, we might ask, what other forms of queer kinship might have been made possible alongside this violence? How might we reimagine the past relations between indentured Indian women without neutralizing erotic bonds that could have transpired? This queer eroticism expands to already queer readings of sexuality among Indo-Caribbean women that have been invoked through the context of the all-women *matikor* space and the tenor of its provocative homosociality, as well as in the sphere of chutney performance (Lokaisingh-Meighoo 2000;

Gopinath, *Impossible* 2005; Pragg 2012; Persard 2018; Ghisyawan and Kumar 2020; Persadie 2020).

An emphasis on eroticism between Indo-Caribbean women enables an archival scripting of identity that does not rely upon the inheritance of the traumatic past of the canescape, or the instances of recorded violence that emerge in the colonial records of indenture. There are no catalogues of her murder, no harrowed descriptions of her death. As the canescape is juxtaposed with Indo-Caribbean queer women making love on the colors of the Guyanese flag, the very site of "home" is reconfigured. A woman-becomes-landscape-becomes-woman-becomes-lover-becomes-home. Similarly to Dionne Brand, Mohabeer "traces Caribbean space in which desire between women is not only part of a return to the poet's native land but is the way through" (emphasis mine, Tinsley *Thiefing* 218). In this space of the "through," queer erotics between women forges a new cartographic terrain, both physical and metaphorical. This space of "through" echoes the canescape resembling a vagina at the film's opening sequence. In her semiautobiographical film, Mohabeer critically presents this path of desire as the foremost way through which the queer jahaji can ultimately access home; and what is a jahaji if not a vessel?

In this visually sensual, poignant, and ruminative film, *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* rescripts the Indo-Caribbean woman from the narrow confines of the archive to an aesthetic plenitude of lesbian eroticism. What might be the affective potentials of revitalizing and reviving Indo-Caribbean Studies toward a queer hermeneutic? How might queer visual archives radically rewrite the archival histories of indenture from the vantage of the colonial archive? Mohabeer transforms the canescape from a site of determinedly heteronormative violence, both in its imagination and erotics, to a site of queer eroticism. In this alternative genealogy of indenture, Mohabeer produces a new diasporic history of the Indo-Caribbean woman that is not necessarily

heterosexual or doomed by her desire(s). *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* produces not only an archival autoethnography, but also speculatively imagines queerness at the site of the indentured canescape. Furthermore, as a queer autoethnography, Coconut/Cane & Cutlass generates a visual erotics of diaspora that complicates earlier narratives of Indo-Caribbean Studies as one of constant longing in the direction of the Indian subcontinent; such longing, instead, is replaced by both the Guyanese nation-state and queer desire between women. In this sense, the queer visual diasporics of Coconut/Cane & Cutlass disrupt notions of "belonging" as primarily available through a long-lost engagement with India. Notions of belonging are complicated through queerness as well as diasporic formations, which serve as their own starting points of "crossing" complicating modes of identity, citizenship and the (trans)national. If we rephrase Michelle Cliff's question, we ask: What might it mean for an Indo-Caribbean woman to love another woman?

Chapter 4

Jahaji in Drag: *Coolie* Queens

On a sidewalk in Queens, New York, a figure appears: sari-clad, dancing to chutney music. Sundari is not simply a drag queen: she is eponymously known as *the Indian goddess.* The celestial invocation elevates this *jahaji* figure on the Queens sidewalk into an otherworldly realm. In the borough of *coolie queens*, Sundari traverses temporal and geographic coordinates: she has embodied "India in the Caribbean" on a New York City sidewalk. In Sundari's Instagram video, titled "Indo-Caribbean Drag Queen Breaking the Heteronormative Boundaries," chutney music begins blaring as a frame pans to the sign: *Welcome to Richmond Hill.* As the video begins, the voice of the South Asian chutney cover duo blares: "*Bansi bajaike, kaha chhupayo, karti hai tumse pyaar Radha Kanhaiya* (*After playing the flute/where did you hide? Radha is in love with you, Krishna*). The opening scene is temporally transporting. The folk music of chutney – that plantation music of indenture – emerges against the backdrop of a New York City sidewalk, as Sundari dances underneath an elevated train with a SUBWAY sandwich shop sign visible in the background. Gliding like Madhuri or Aishwarya across the pavement, Sundari is flanked by the stairs of the Lefferts Boulevard subway stop and traffic lights. Unlike Madhuri or Aishwarya, however, her dancing is not the Bollywood music of the item girls; instead, she performs to the quintessential Indo-Caribbean folk genre of chutney music. In a white midriff top, red-heeled boots and bedazzled jewelry, Sundari the Indian goddess reconfigures the *jahaji*. The drag queen is a *coolie woman,* too.

I open this chapter with this scene from Sundari the Indian Goddess as a way to begin considering the complex ways in which visibility functions within queer Indo-Caribbean legibility. Sundari, who is the alter ego of Zaman Amin, is a well-known Indo-Caribbean drag

performer in Queens, New York. I probe Sundari's emphasis on "breaking" heteronormative boundaries through conducting a genealogy of *jahajis* in drag through various sites of chutney music. In this chapter, I consider the speculative erotics of chutney music through its "cover" as a queer genre of folk performance offered by Indo-Caribbean drag by turning to several sites of performance and historical analysis: first, an early 1990s ethnography conducted by Jasbir Puar in Trinidad; then, one of the most famous forms of drag performance within Indo-Caribbean communities known as *nachaniya* which does not necessarily register as queer. Finally, I return to Sundari's public chutney performance on the Queens sidewalk. Rather than dispute the political power of visibility within queer Caribbean communities, however, I want instead to conduct a genealogy of the drag figure of this *jahaji,* by positing the limits to which visibility might function within my theorizing of the speculative. A theory of speculative erotics must attend to the gaps and silences in the archival record as well as to the sites of intensification where bodies might be hyper-visible. In my conclusion, I turn to return to Sundari's drag performance to consider how visibility might be provincialized within my articulation of a speculative erotics of the *jahaji.*

Visibility, as Didier Eribon has suggested, is an escape path from the terrible interior ghetto that is experienced by a soul that has been subjected by shame (101). Michael Warner has argued that the queer body suffers a "pathologized visibility" (52) since heterosexuals do not experience the injunction to be publicly known. And yet, in Foucauldian terms, visibility is the *dispositif* of managing abnormality. For queers, visibility – and perhaps, hyper-visibility — is another mode of allowing queers to enter the logic of normalization vis-à-vis the biopolitical legitimizing of sexuality. Like Foucault observed of the Catholic confession, the will to disclose produces its own set of discursive effects – which include the "truth" of sexuality. There is,

perhaps, a certain way to be visible, since the optics of identity relies upon the ability to be *seen*. To be “visible” or to render something visible must also mean that in a sense, there is something that is present but hidden. Visibility, then, is not only about performance but is its own form of confession. The effects of rendering some bodies hyper-visible ushers them into what John Gilliom has deemed “compulsory visibility” (quoted in Puar, *Terrorist* 124), a technique of hyper-surveillance. Visibility, however, has always operated within Caribbean discourses of sexuality in ways that neither register within sexual rights discourse nor simply as a tactic of surveillance. Visibility, in my readings of the texts, figures and objects that follow, is not the hyper-visible queer touting rainbow flags within global pride parades; in fact, visibility is quite unremarkable.

Within queer theory, in general, and Caribbean Studies, in particular, visibility has remained a powerful trope for sexuality and political activism. For Caribbean queer bodies, visibility has remained an operative trope fraught with social and political assumptions about queer Antillean subjects who are viewed as “unrealized” within dominant frames of coming out and public visibility (Agard-Jones 11). Theorizing Caribbean sexuality is almost impossible without simultaneously addressing the discourse of homophobia that the region is subject to, as well as rights-based frameworks of Caribbean LGBT activism. The international flow of capital that ushers in the very language of “gay” and “lesbian” as recognizable terms for LGBT human rights funding in the Caribbean bolsters frameworks for visibility (Tinsley, *Thiefing* 8). Although visibility is realized most often within Euro-American frames of LGBT organizing as a means of achieving liberal subjecthood, it cannot be discounted that LGBT groups in the Caribbean like EqualityJA (formerly known as J-FLAG or the Jamaica Forum for Lesbian All-Sexuals and

Gays) or CAISO in Trinidad and Tobago have espoused this liberal framework as a political means of advancing acceptance of queer bodies and LGBT human rights.

Any theorization of a liberal, arguably Western paradigm of "visibility" evokes the question Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley asked of theorizing the Caribbean queer within a matrix of Euro-American coming out paradigms: "And for how many Caribbeans is a closet a standard feature of houses?" (*Thiefing* 27). Tinsley thus engages with a question of the totalizing effects of liberal concepts like "coming out," as Vanessa Agard-Jones observes, as well as the limits of such discourses. The links between the queer Caribbean and its queer diaspora, however, are deeply entangled; sexuality studies, then, cannot entirely be conceptualized as a one-way directional traffic from North America to global South. As Jasbir Puar observed while speaking to LGBT organizers in Trinidad and Tobago in 1996, "Activist organizations were fully embedded in normative neoliberal gay and lesbian human rights discourses which insisted on modernist visibility in order to grieve on behalf of Other subjects, yet simultaneously required the oppression of these very subjects of visibility" ("Chutney" 3). It is important to note that the transnational impact of "visibility" within Caribbean local and diaspora communities is rhizomic: as LGBT Caribbean activists employ the trope of visibility as a tactic for advancing human rights-based agendas, so do North American-based LGBT groups like Caribbean Equality Project invoke the "back home" nature of what Rinaldo Walcott has deemed the "homopoetics" of entanglement between rights discourse and diaspora while theorizing the queer Caribbean (3-4). Thus any examination of Caribbean queer politics, activism and regimes of visibility are always already entangled within a diasporic network of sexual citizenship, global capital and the hegemony of LGBT rights discourse.

Indian or drag?

The paradoxes of visibility with regard to queer Caribbean subjectivity evoke an ethnography conducted by Jasbir Puar in 1990s Trinidad and Tobago. The ethnography problematizes Indo-Caribbean queer subjectivity and tropes of visibility in Trinidad through the popular drag competition Diva. Puar interviewed a queer Indo-Trinidadian couple, Vik and Sasha, who were visibly "out" in Trinidad but who displayed a general apathy toward discussing sexual orientation or sexual politics ("Global" 1057-1058). As an Indo-Trinidadian couple, however, Vik and Sasha were marginal within the Diva competition, which hosts mostly Afro-Trinidadian performers.[5] The ethnography thus reveals the complexity of queer visibility between Indo-Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean queers in Trinidad, as well as the ways in which Indo-Caribbean identity in some ways is regarded as inherently *queer.* Although the trope of the "homophobic" Caribbean emerged in the 1990s and continued throughout the early 2000s, Puar observed a mixed reaction from her respondents: "those who considered homophobia to be rampantly active and debilitating in Trinidad and those who had never given their gay, lesbian or bisexual desires a second thought and challenged the relevance of my project" ("Chutney" 2). These paradoxical reactions are a critical part of situating the queer drag performers within the landscape of queer "visibility" in Trinidad.

The predominant performers of Diva are Afro-Trinidadian men (Puar, "Global" 1046), so Vik and Sasha appear not only as performers in a drag contest but as *performing* a kind of Indian-ness. Vik and Sasha dance to an elaborately staged Bollywood film number at Diva, instead of the typical pop songs by Whitney Houston or Tina Turner commonly associated with

[5] Trinidad and Tobago includes several ethnic groups beyond "Indo-Trinidadian" and "Afro-Trinidadian," but these are the dominant frames in which Puar discusses the nation-state in her essay. Such terminology naturally excludes the complexity of race and mixed-race politics in the region.

drag performance (Puar, "Global" 1054). In the typical overly sentimentalized choreography of heterosexual Bollywood couples, Puar writes that Vik and Sasha perform with a cinematic nostalgia so palpable, "[o]ne could even imagine the rain so typical of Bollywood films" ("Global" 1054). Vik and Sasha are not very popular as Indo-Trinidadian performers within a largely Afro-Caribbean drag contest, but as one respondent remarks: "You could tell some of those contestants were staring, thinking, 'What are you doing here?' An Indian contestant could never be a Diva" (Puar, "Global" 1056). In a sense, the Indian-ness of Vik and Sasha's performance seemed to eliminate any possibility of Indo-Trinidadians in drag. As another respondent remarked: "It's an Indian dance because we can classify it like that – it's easy to classify. It's not drag though" (Puar, "Global" 1055). Despite Vik and Sasha's donning of Indian film costumes to mimic the "boy-and-girl" falling in love sequence of a Bollywood film, their hyper-visibility as drag performers was still invisible due to their identity as Indo-Trinidadians.

During the period of Indian indentureship and within the post-indenture period, Indo-Caribbean women were regarded as cultural repositories for sustaining Indian culture in the Caribbean (Mohammed, *Gender* 11-12). Vik and Sasha's decision to perform a Bollywood-styled performance evokes the contemporary song and dance competitions of the Caribbean where young girls and young women commonly perform to elaborately choreographed Hindi film songs. In an interesting reversal, it is Vik and Sasha – not communities of troupes of young dancing girls – who are responsible for the *visible* profile of Indian culture in Trinidad. As one of Puar's respondents observes, Vik and Sasha are not indexed by their gender identity but on account of their Indianness. Even their inclusion in the Diva competition appears tokenized, as the producer of the show tells Puar: "I've always had an East Indian act…. I like variety" ("Global" 1054). The "variety" of the *jahaji* drag performers attest to the complex racialization

of sexuality on the island, particularly through historical and political tensions between Indo- and Afro-Trinidadian communities. The "variety" offered by Vik and Sasha situate the queer Indo-Trinidadian couple in almost a state of racial alterity compared to the construction of queer Trinidadian identity.

The apparent stigmatization of Vik and Sasha from the mainstream acceptance of the Trinidadian drag contest recalls Puar's observations about queer citizenship in Trinidad and Tobago excluding Indo-Caribbean communities ("Chutney" 5).In an interesting counterpoint to M. Jacqui Alexander's argument about sexual citizenship, Puar contends that Alexander naturalizes the nation-state as Afro-Caribbean – to the exclusion of Indo-Caribbean queers ("Chutney" 5). Although Alexander's essay was published four years before Puar's fieldwork, this short span of time reveals Trinidad and Tobago – as is the case in the U.S. and many other countries – as a site of paradoxical sexual politics. Puar notes that the drag contest has operated since 1992, which dates Diva as occurring at the same time that Alexander's 1994 essay was published. If Alexander is disappointed by the lack of "*visible* gay and lesbian movements" (21, emphasis mine) in Trinidad and Tobago, Puar presents a visible site of queerness in the country's capital, not only through the Diva competition but through the hyper-visible identities of Vik and Sasha. But perhaps Vik and Sasha are not really *visible* as queer – or perhaps they are invisible as Indian *and* queer.

"We sat in Pizza Hut. [Sasha] was still in drag. She/he had long painted nails, wore lipstick, and had pinned up his/her long dark hair into a high ponytail" (Puar, "Global" 1057). The passing detail of Puar and the queer couple sitting in Pizza Hut – a quotidian yet hyper-public space – is remarkable given the sexual discourse of the 1990s surrounding Caribbean sexuality. In the middle of Pizza Hut in Trinidad, the most public and ordinary of places, Vik and

Sasha exist aside from rehearsed Caribbean tropes of queer criminality and excluded citizenship, most famously articulated by M. Jacqui Alexander's 1994 essay, "Not Just (Any)Body Can Be a Citizen." Perhaps, as Puar argues, the perception of the Caribbean nation-state continues the "representational elision of Indo-Trinidadians" within a Caribbean sexual rights framework (Puar, "Chutney" 5). The *queer* figures of Vik and Sasha, then, might not only be viewed as bodies evading a gendered grid of intelligibility but also as figures excluded from even pro-LGBT rights discourse, since gender identity within Indo-Caribbean communities was already often stereotyped as effeminate men.

The paradox of this queer couple existing in Trinidad neither as "closeted" nor "out" offers a generative site of analysis for considering the ways in which sexual identities need not necessarily register through exceptional frames of visibility politics. The reluctance of Vik and Sasha to discuss queer liberatory politics confounded Puar, who observed that for the first two hours of her interview, neither Vik nor Sasha spoke about "drag, sexuality, homosexuality, gays, lesbians, or gendered roles" ("Global" 1057). And yet Puar writes that in Chagaunas, a predominantly Indian area of Trinidad, Vik and Sasha were most legible as an opposite-sex couple rather than as a queer couple ("Global" 1057). Even Puar's descriptions of the couple intensify the tensions of queer visibility: "They were still in drag, or in costume, or neither, depending on one's reading of their subject positionings" ("Global" 1056). Here, Puar is confounded by the ability of Vik and Sasha to traverse several areas of Trinidad without any seeming uneasiness. Vik and Sasha therefore intervene within a discourse of public/private "visibility" debates that are often the focus of scholars of Caribbean sexuality, exposing not only the limited usefulness of these terms but the deceptive parameters that structure them. As Puar observes, Vik and Sasha might be "in/visible, but is it in/visibility?" ("Global" 1059).

"The best dance you could ever see"

Analyses of performance within the Indo-Caribbean diaspora have generally centered on the role of Indo-Caribbean men as musicians and subsequently considered the realm of dance performance as occupied by exclusively women. The subsequent queer cultural practices of folk traditions like *nachaniya* have been neglected, while the folk music of indentureship has centered on the evolution of chutney as an exclusive domain of women performers. Within several major texts of Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship, the emphasis on women's performance and their presumed sexual liberation post-indenture remains an overwhelming theme. I want to turn to a few texts where Indo-Caribbean men in drag appear as part of cultural analyses about gender and performance. In these texts, drag is mentioned in passing: it is as though the scarce scholarly inclusion of queer chutney dancers might register as an epistemic omission, in one sense, while in another, the history of indentured Indians in drag might actually present what Anjali Arondekar has deemed an "ordinary surplus" ("Absence" 111). The inclusion of these citations about drag, then, is rather unremarkable in the texts that follow; feminist scholars do not pursue further analysis. I emphasize that feminist scholars do not continue to pursue drag as a site of analysis in the following examples not as a criticism of these scholarly texts, but to consider the ordinary ways in which drag is seemingly a quotidian part of indentured and post-indentured performance and culture.

Mobilizing India: Women, Music and Migration between India and Trinidad by Tejaswini Niranjana remains one of the most authoritative monographs about gendered performance chutney music in Trinidad. In one scene, Niranjana interviews Hardeo Ramsingh, a man from the village of Felicity. Ramsingh tells Niranjana that male dance troupes performed at weddings and other festivals, in addition to court dances and "caste dances, such as *Ahir,*

Kaharwaa, Dhobi, but none of these had female dancers" (97). Niranjana does not pursue or probe this passing mention about the inclusion of female dancers or the genealogy of men-only dance performances. In the summer of 1998, Niranjana attends a chutney show in Arranguez, writing: "Hindi film songs and bhangra; chutney with dancing, including a *hijra* [trans-gendered person]; romantic American pop; Jamaican dancehall" (109). Niranjana's account of this detail of the presence of a *hijra* is unexplored in the rest of the monograph – a curious omission, considering the focus of the monography is almost exclusively on women's sexual freedom and the role of chutney within this discourse of sexual liberation. The subcontinental language of *hijra,* which is not in popular usage in the present-day Caribbean as a category of gender identity, is also a peculiar inclusion. One recalls Puar's ethnography in the 1990s and wonders whether the "*hijra"* was in fact a misreading, or perhaps a legible reading, of the Bollywood Diva duo Sasha. Yet in Puar's own ethnography, she confesses that without any explicit discussion about Sasha and Vik's sexual identities, registering their gendered identities was a difficult task ("Global" 1059).

In Patricia Mohammed's groundbreaking *Gender Negotiations Among Indians in Trinidad: 1917-1947,* Mohammed notes that until the 1950s, women's roles in the famous Trinidadian epic play of the *Ramleela,* were exclusively played by men. These respondents' details of men participating in public dancing are seemingly unremarkable, and Mohammed does not dwell on the gender impersonation beyond its matter-of-fact status among the post-indentureship community in Trinidad. Mohammed recounts an oral history with a woman named Rupanee, who describes Indian wedding rituals. "People will sing and dance the whole night. A set of dancers you order – you have to pay a little money for this, is male dancers only, not no ladies – and the best dance you could ever see" (Mohammed, *Gender* 149-150). Rupanee's

emphatic praise for the men dancing in drag is also an unremarkable detail in *Gender Negotiations.* Although Rupanee expresses praise for the male drag dancers, one is curious about Rupanee's comment that male performers were "the best dance you could ever see" (Mohammed, *Gender* 149-150). Mohammed's respondents throughout the text were either indentured laborers or one generation beyond the plantation, as the system of Indian indentureship concluded technically in 1917, with the phasing-out of the system continuing until the early1920s. Rupanee's unremarkable attitude toward men dancing at celebrations – and apparently serving as quite the entertainment – offers another lens for considering visibility within the queer Indo-Caribbean performance archive as one limited to merely silence and repression. Although Mohammed writes about the gender negotiations between men and women, queer bodies or other sexualities are not analyzed within this post-indentureship articulation of gender roles.

Figure 4.1 "Group of East Indian musicians playing musical instruments."
Courtesy of the National Library of Jamaica

In another chapter, Mohammed alludes to the prohibition of women dancing in public: "Only men were allowed to dance publicly and they danced female parts by dressing up as women, to the accompaniment of drums, accordion, *majira* and sometimes songs" (*Gender* 198). This final description of men in drag to the "accompaniment of drums" – the Indian drums of the table and/or dholak; "accordion" – known as the harmonium; *"majira"* – cymbals echo Sundari's chutney performance on the sidewalks of Queens, New York. As I opened this chapter describing Sundari's dancing, I emphasized that Sundari – appearing as a gorgeous Bollywood-esque drag queen – was not dancing to popular film songs like Vik and Sasha, but instead opted for the indentured plantation folk music of chutney. Mohammed's note about men dressed in drag dancing to traditional Indian folk instruments evokes the obscure male drag known throughout the indentured diaspora as *nachaniya.*

Nachaniya

Nachaniya is virtually absent within academic texts detailing genealogies of Indo-Caribbean folk music and performance. Due to the relative obscurity of the practice and its popularity among indentured Indian descendants in territories such as Jamaica, Suriname and Fiji – sites often excluded in analyses of chutney (like Niranjana's) – documentation of this performance is nearly absent from major ethnographies of folk music in the region. In Jamaica, *nachaniya* is heralded among indentured Indian descendants as one of the last living forms of cultural visibility. *Nachaniya* is an elaborate, seductive and sometimes acrobatic performance that entails a (sometimes heterosexual) man dressing in woman's clothing. The folk practice, of which little scholarship has been written, is known and still practiced by indentured Indian descendants of Jamaica, South Africa, Suriname and Fiji and its corresponding diasporas. *Nachaniya*, however, has remained a practice of relative obscurity outside of these communities.

The obscure form of dancing, which entails a man donning an ornate outfit colloquially known as a *dancing frock*, jewelry and sometimes makeup, is revered for its aura of cultural preservation a century after Indian indentureship. The *nachaniya* dancer is not a site of queer exception but an ordinary part of cultural performance among these segments of the indentured diaspora.

The figure of the *nachaniya* dancer upsets modes of queer identification that rely upon liberal modes of "visibility." *Nachaniya* dancers are not only highly visible figures in drag, but perhaps offer a site of "ordinary surplus" (Arondekar, "Absence" 111) from which to index queer bodies within the indentured archive. The perception of the sexually repressed or invisible queer of indenture, then, or the "invisible" Caribbean queer is complicated by the history of this common cultural practice. I would argue that *nachaniya* is not only hyper-visible as a form of indentured Indian diaspora drag performance, but actually revered for serving as a form of cultural preservation among descendants. *Nachaniya* thus importantly demands a reconceptualization of the trope of "invisibility" for queers and gender non-normative practices among the indentured diaspora. The cultural performance of *nachaniya* as a legacy of hyper-visible and yet ordinary form of drag among the indentured diaspora demonstrates the limits of the trope of visibility on queer bodies within the indentured archive.

In 1900, a version of the word *nachaniya* appears in *The Royal Dictionary* published in Lucknow: '*Nachniya:* a dancer, *m*.' (391). The anglophone transliteration specifies a masculine noun as its definition, anchoring its genealogy as historically a male dancing figure. Throughout the indentured diaspora, varying linguistic configurations of the specific terminology of *nachaniya* are known as *launda ke nach/nachaniya* (Suriname), *lahanga nach/nachaniya* (Fiji) and *nachaniya* (Jamaica/South Africa). Its origin story, however, is a bit more ambiguous – as

are most origin stories. According to a mix of lore from present-day *launda naach* dancers in India and *nachaniya* dancers within the Indo-Caribbean diaspora, women were not allowed to perform in public spaces so men were made to dress and perform in their place. In accounts by other dancers, poor families hired men to dance since they could not afford hire a female dancer. In Fiji or Suriname, *nachaniya* dancers might be openly known as gay men or transgender women, whereas in Jamaica, *nachaniya* dancers are often exclusively known as heterosexual men. While *nachaniya* dancers might still be hired for auspicious occasions within certain parts of the indentured diaspora, in Jamaica such a case is no longer a tradition; instead, these performers mostly take the stage at Indo-Jamaican festival events on the island or within its multiple diasporas.

The unstable genealogy of the *nachaniya* dancer might easily be traced to the ancestor of the present-day *hijra,* but genealogies are rarely that *straight*. It is more likely that present-day *nachaniya* dancers in the indentured diaspora can be traced to a tradition of male impersonation that was prevalent in Uttar Pradesh. In the Northwest Provinces of colonial India, the territory from which a significant number of indentured Indians hailed, government officials sought to regulate clothing in an endeavor to curb the contagion of sodomy (Hinchy 58). Colonial officials prevented *hijras* from wearing women's clothing and performing in public, as these individuals were assigned to the status of "dangerous individual" and classified as a "criminal caste" (Hinchy 58; Reddy 26). In 1874, the Inspector-General of Police claimed, "'so long as these creatures are allowed to go about singing and dancing in women's clothes it [sodomy] will not be put a stop to'" (Hinchy 58). *Hijras,* however, are not simply male impersonators but communities of gender-variant individuals who live intentionally within specific kinship structures, undergo specific rites of passage to enter these communities, and inhabit a highly

marginalized segment of Indian society – despite their glamorous positioning within Western queer discourse as the exemplar "third gender" (Reddy 2006).

The colonial magistrates' interdiction of cross-dressing was not only about clothing, but about the supposed identity of sodomy that cross-dressing spawned. Although the ability to *see* hijras was a critical part of the ability to surveille and criminalize their bodies, a colonial magistrate differentiated between *hijras* and *nachaniya* dancers. As colonial officials considered controlling the dress of *hijras* and continuing the criminalizing of their bodies as gender variant individuals, a number of north Indian district officials remarked that "cross-dressing in theatrical contexts was generally unproblematic" (Hinchy 59). The performative quality of cross-dressing was therefore not as dangerous as the intent to practice sodomy. The Magistrate of Shahjahanpur argued, "It is the commonest practice… among the lower castes… to perform at *nautches* dressed up as women" (Hinchy 59). "*Nautches"* in this instance means perhaps plays or performances, serving etymologically as the basis for *nachaniya.* The magistrate continued that the poorer classes could not "afford the luxury of female dancers" (Hinchy 59). This observation of the "poorer classes" cross-dressing due to economic limitations, rather than sexual proclivity, is an interesting distinction. Queerness for these magistrates, then, was an economic consequence rather than a case of sexual orientation.

These "caste dances" are more than likely the *nachaniya* of the lower-caste dance troupes that Niranjana cites in her ethnography of chutney music in Trinidad or the *jhatke ki nach* among the chamars in Guyana recounted by Gora Singh (Niranjana 97; Manuel 171). The connection between dancers in drag and caste also emerges in Peter Manuel's ethnomusicology text tracing the genre of chutney music to its Indian subcontinental origins. Manuel writes that during weddings, men would often dance with one another "or with male transvestite dancers *(launda*)"

(171). He follows this line with a citation of an interview by Guyanese dancer Gora Singh, who notes that the *chamars* or lower castes "were famous for their *jhatke ki nach* [jerky (hip) dancing]" (Manuel 171). But in the descriptive paragraphs explaining men dancing chutney songs together – as if in a paranoid observation of these men – Manuel writes, "Male partners should not be assumed to be gay lovers" (174). This odd anxiety about sexuality continues as Manuel states that although "male dance partners need not be assumed to be homosexual, the Trinidad chutney scene has opened space for a small but flamboyant gay subculture, which includes a popular semiprofessional transvestite film-style dancer" (175).

The emphatic caution to *not* label men dancing together as queer and to yet cite a gay man as an authoritative ethnographic account of performance signals an impulse to produce straight subjects – despite the well-known fact that within the Indo-Caribbean community (and perhaps many other communities), gay men are often dance instructors. Perhaps even more interesting in Manuel's assessment of the chutney genre is the discounting of gay men as a formative part of modern chutney performance culture, rather than the "small but flamboyant gay subculture" (Manuel 175) which has supposedly emerged on account of chutney music's popularity. According to Manuel, the teleological progression of women's sexual liberation through the genre of chutney music has now resulted in the pathway for both the gay subculture of Trinidad and Tobago, as well as a trans-identified chutney dancer. Manuel's decision to characterize the "gay subculture" as "flamboyant" establishes the perceptible queer subject as both attention-seeking and hyper-visible. But interestingly, Manuel marks chutney as a site that allows a teleological progress for queer and gender liberation – instead of a cultural site of performance with roots in the quotidian visibility of homoerotic and queer dancing.

The chutney space therefore generates and indexes its participants within an ordinary site of homoeroticism. But as Gayatri Gopinath has argued, such homoeroticism has been punctured as non-sexual by scholars seeking to *straighten* the queer contours of chutney's very genealogy (*Impossible* 162-163). Manuel's caution that men dancing together should not be assumed to be "gay lovers" aims to eliminate the possibility that men participating in chutney dancing could be queer men. Yet chutney precisely provides a "cover" (Puar "Chutney" 2) for queer bodies due to the gestures one makes while dancing, particularly with the hands and hips. Chutney dancing can be individual, with a group or partnered – although partnered dancing generally emphasis the gyration of hips and sexual mimicry. Although the performance space of chutney is historically dominated by analyses about gendered liberation and women's sexuality, chutney also provides a queer "cover" for men. For example, the site of the rum shop – that homosocial *jahaji bhai* space – is also a site in which men drunkenly "enact homoerotic behaviors" and "compete with each other to see who can wine better, who can wine lower, encouraged by alcohol, and interestingly, female spectators" (Persadie 72). It is fascinating that within discourses of alcoholism and male homosociality of the rum shop, chutney dancing is seldom considered as a site of queerness.

Chutney as cover for *queer*

One of the most interesting accounts of Puar's ethnographic work in Trinidad is her comment that "chutney music inadvertently became a 'cover' (and ironically, a closet as well) for my socializing in gay and lesbian circles" ("Chutney" 2). As Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo first proposed in "Jahaji Bhai: Notes on the Masculine Subject and Homoerotic Subtext of Indo-Caribbean Identity," chutney is a trope that has "does not interpellate a subject that is sexualized heterosexual only: it also allows for a multiplicity of sexualized subjects – again, 'hot' is for everyone" (81). The erotically charged space of *matikor* and its offspring, the folk music of

chutney, are natural sites of queer investigation – not only between women, but also between people of all orientations and genders (Gopinath, *Impossible* 2005; Pragg 2012; Persard 2018; Ghisyawan and Kumar 2020). As Lauren Pragg (2012), Krystal Ghisyawan and Preity Kumar (2020) and Ryan Persadie (2020) have argued, and as I have argued elsewhere (2018), the queer potential of chutney as a site of erotic possibility remains an important theoretical juncture within Indo-Caribbean and Indian indentureship studies. Puar's observation that chutney is a cover evokes the homosocial roots of chutney in the all-women Hindu pre-wedding ritual of the *matikor* tradition. The *matikor,* or all-women pre-wedding song and dance night among Hindus, has long been cited as a (hetero)sexually transgressive space (Kanhai 6-7). This ritual serves as a kind of education about sex for the bride, where women dance erotically with each other and mimic sexual poses teaching the bride about the wedding night. Despite post-indenture stereotypes of Indian culture in the Caribbean as sexually conservative, the *matikor* was a site of uninhibited sexuality (Mohammed, *Gender* 237-238).

The *matikor* ritual was not only about imparting sexual knowledge about the bride's wedding night but also served as a fertility blessing for the new couple. Brinda Mehta has argued that although the *matikor* is an important ceremony that serves as a "legacy of feminist cultural resistance to sexual subordination," the ritual remains within a heterosexual paradigm (*Diasporic* 220). However, Manual, revealing anxieties about women's queerness, has warned that the *matikor* should not be confused with "lesbianism" (quoted in Gopinath, *Impossible* 163). The tensions over whether the space is "heterosexual" or "not lesbian" therefore establish the critical frames that Manuel's anxieties return to Puar's observations of chutney as a kind of queer "cover," that space in which erotic possibilities *visibly* surface. Rather than contend whether the space of the *matikor is* or *is not*, the generative discourse here is the anxieties on both ends to

foreclose the speculative "cover" for bodies participating in a cultural dance performance and its multiple paradoxes. Of all the Indo-Caribbean cultural spaces, *matikor* and by extension chutney is perhaps is *the* most queer: straight women *wine* closely with each other, grinding body parts to the intensity of *tassa* drums; (heterosexual) drunken (or sober) men dance together as queer partners; queers participating in each of these dances and rituals register to the naked eye as *straight.*

In one of the first pieces of writing exclusively theorizing queer desire between Indo-Caribbean women, Lauren Pragg proposed that the homosocial, sexually ribald space of the *matikor* served as an allegory for queer potential (3). The meta-space of the *matikor* is interesting for its queer mimicry among (presumably) heterosexual women. As Rosanne Kanhai boldly asked during a time when the word "lesbian" remained absent from the grammar of Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship, "How can we not see *Matikor* as an outlet for lesbian desire? How can we not wonder how many *Bhowjees*[6] at the masala stone are repressed lesbians?" (230). I want to extend Kanhai's suggestion about *matikor* and propose that chutney actually offers a space of hyper-visibility that somehow registers as the quotidian for queer eroticism. Chutney spaces are the ultimate site of speculative erotics: not only does chutney serve as a *cover* for queer, but actually renders ordinary the spectacle of queer performance by the genre's iterations as both quotidian and parochial. Chutney is not a glamorous genre: its lyrics, which range from the plantation folk songs about everyday life to contemporary songs about rum drinking and *liming*[7], culturally enable a "freedom in commenting on kinship relations that would not be acceptable in ordinary discourse" (Ramnarine 19). But chutney has also allowed a visualizing of homosocial practices that do not necessarily register as queer.

[6] Caribbean Hindustani term for sisters-in-law (specifically, the wives of one's brother(s)

[7] Trinidadian vernacular translated loosely to the U.S. vernacular of "hanging out" or "partying"

Pre-wedding sites like the *matikor* present women a chance to sexually dance with each other without suspicion. Like *nachaniya,* chutney is a meta-moment where performance and performativity collide: the *nachaniya* dancer might be a heterosexual or queer; those *wining* to chutney songs mimic queerness without registering as such. In the *matikor,* women are hyper-visible actors of same-sex eroticism. Since the purpose of the *matikor* is to instruct the new bride about sex as a newlywed, this intergenerational space includes older women – typically aunts – instructing younger women about how to have sex. The incestuous nature of the *jahaji sister* is present in these spaces of eroticism that also involve related women "wining" or dancing erotically with one other. During the matikor, married women play particular roles in the Hindu fertility rituals; married women are also tasked with instructing the new bride about sex in theatrical and comical ways. Noting the intergenerational erotic all-women space of the *matikor*, one cannot help but also visualize the anagram of *mati wroko,* the intergenerational kinship paradigm studied by Gloria Wekker among Afro-Surinamese women.

Within Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship and ethnomusicology, analyses of chutney continue to consider the role of Indo-Caribbean women as "sexually liberated" through engaging in performances in the genre. The association of the genre with predominantly male singers and female performers is curious since the genre originates within the tradition of the all-women's *matikor* tradition. Chutney itself has remained largely within heterosexual sites of analysis, situating the genre as one of women's sexual "liberation" from the Indo-Caribbean domestic sphere. The so-called sexually repressed Indian woman is liberated via the salacious performance of chutney. As the genre implies, chutney is a "hot and spicy" mixture of "hybridized, uneasy syncretistic fusion of words, secular and sacred symbols, and folk and popular cultural mythologies gleaned from memories of [India] and adapted to Caribbean context" (Rajan 129

quoted in Baksh 153). Scholarly analysis of chutney music is almost synonymous with Indo-Caribbean women's sexual "agency."

Since the *matikor* tradition, from which the genre of chutney emerges, is an all-women's space, the site of chutney has been cited as a paradigm of women's sexual agency. But like the concept of women's sexual "liberation" on the plantation, analyses of chutney and gender follow a logic of repressed/liberated that fails to account for the existing nuances of intimacy and complexities of eroticism between bodies engaged in these cultural practices. Since scholarly approaches to gender have continued to situate women in relation to an "oppressive" domestic sphere, Indian women performing chutney-sooca music was seen as both transgressive and liberatory. The popular song, "Roll Up De Tassa," by Drupatee Ramgoonai, is heralded as a pivotal symbolic moment for Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality (Ramnarine 15-16; Puri 133; Sankeralli 207-208). As Tina Ramnarine notes, Drupatee Ramgoonai was a former housewife who not only crossed the boundary from the domestic to the public space as a major performance artist, but also entered the space of calypso/soca music, a space historically dominated by Afro-Trinidadian men (15-16). This symbolic "crossing" is not unlike the same readings of sexuality that apply to indentured Indian women who "cross" the Kala Pani. Drupatee's single, "Roll Up de Tassa," featured the prominent *tassa* drums typical of chutney music, but also included instrumentals typical of soca music. Drupatee's entrance as an Indo-Caribbean woman into the public performance space of soca, rather than solely within the Indo-Caribbean space of chutney, was a symbolic passage that also generated a discourse about the availability of Indian women's sexuality within the predominantly Afro-Trinidadian sphere of calypso and soca music. As Shalini Puri notes, Drupateee was condemned for entering the Afro-Trinidadian space of the calypso-soca – a sexual "contamination" of sorts (133-134). Chutney music therefore intensified

the racialized history of sexuality in the Caribbean, as well as intensified taboos of Indo- and Afro- interracial intimacies.

Chutney music as a terrain of sexual crossing continues to occupy a significant place within analyses of Indo-Caribbean gender and sexuality, although more scholarship is necessary for theorizing of queer intimacies within these spaces. I want to continue unsettling the concept of chutney music as transforming women's sexuality from a "private" domestic sphere to a public sexuality through performance. Rather than repeat the stereotypical notions of "domesticated" Indian women's sexuality, which I have aimed to unsettle throughout this dissertation, I want to turn toward the false binary of public/private advanced by Krystal Ghisyawan and Preity Kumar. In the lesbian chutney song, "Tek Sunita [Nadia's Reply]" by Princess Anisa, a woman steals a man's girlfriend and the women have sex in the boyfriend's car. In the song, Princess Anissa croons, "If yuh know what went on in yuh bruk up Corolla," as an ominous warning to the boyfriend. In my reading of the song from an article published in 2018, I proposed that the Corolla represented the "bruk up" or broken paradigm of heterosexual domesticity (Persard 33). However, Ghisyawan and Kumar advance my reading further by writing that the car is both a public and private space, since access to private spaces for sex are not always an option for queer subjects (Ghisyawan and Kumar 97). Like Puar observed in 1990s Trinidad, Ghisyawan and Kumar contend that Indo-Caribbean queers in rural settings occupy a "different kind of queer visibility" in relation to dominant frames of queer visibility discourse (101).

***Coolie,* Queens**

It is in this spirit of a "different kind of queer visibility" that I return to Sundari's chutney performance on the sidewalk of Queens. As the Instagram video begins, the voice of Kanchan –

half of the husband and wife duo Babla and Kanchan – resounds. A song like the chutney song "Kanhaiya, Kahnaiya" is about the goddess Radha's love for Krishna. The dancing accompanying such a song would generally feature Indo-Caribbean girls or women in a sort of folk performance. But Sundari, lip-syncing about Radha's love for Krishna, presents herself as another kind of *jahaji* figure whose body becomes the landscape of Richmond Hill, known in New York City as "Little Guyana." In the first seconds of the opening scene, the "Welcome to Richmond Hill" sign appears: Sundari's body *is* Richmond Hill. Sundari inhabits that geographical space that is home to the largest Indo-Caribbean diaspora in North America. She is a *coolie* queen in a geographic area that might be also known as *Coolie,* Queens. Sundari is not the *jahaji* figure of murder found within archives nor the victim of twenty-first newspaper headlines. But her body occupies the very space of Richmond Hill, that site of deaths of Indo-Caribbean murdered women. In a geography of gender-based and sexual violence, Sundari performs in drag. Across streets – less than a few miles from where Indo-Caribbean women have been slain – Sundari unfolds frame by frame as a *jahaji* figure scripting herself into this landscape of culture and violence.

Encountering Liberty Avenue, one encounters the Caribbean diaspora in an extraordinarily disorienting and simultaneously familiar way: vegetable stalls occupy prime currency on the sidewalk, Bollywood CDs blare from the open doors of DVD/CD shops and families edge past each other for Sunday market shopping. Sensing Liberty Avenue, one senses the Caribbean. In one frame, Sundari performs in front Singh's Roti Shop, a popular local hangout for Indo-Caribbean food and live music. Singh's is known for its generous servings of food, deejays blaring chutney music and rum drinking by groups of drunken men. In the terms of Lokaisingh-Meighoo, Singh's is a typical *jahaji bhai* spot of homosociality. Sundari's body

appears, then, as a hyper-visible incursion within this space. Another scene cuts to Sundari performing in front of Sybil's, another most famous local spot for the Trinidadian snack *doubles,* and arguably the most common geographic marker of identification for the Indo-Caribbean community in Queens. In front of Sybli's, the music in the video changes: *harmonium, manjeera, table* – the traditional musical instruments of Indian indentureship, can be heard. The music is temporally transporting, since the instruments animating Sundari's choreography were brought to the Caribbean and other indentured diasporas nearly two centuries ago.

Sundari is therefore her own "history of the present": as a *jahaji* figure on a Queens sidewalk, her body is both inside and outside of time. Sundari is glamorous: like the item girls of Bollywood films or the perfect synchronicity of the dancing girls of chutney competitions, Sundari lip syncs to the lyrics: "*Shyam sundar gagari uthawe*/*hamar gale munge ke mala* (I lift the beautiful dark earthen pot / On my neck the ruby chain). Like the woman whose voice she lip syncs to, Sundari adorns the ruby chain about which she sings. In the video, Sundari lip syncs to a famous *matikor* song, which would traditionally be reserved for women in a Hindu pre-wedding ceremony. Her gestures mime the act of *parching the lawa* (parching the rice), a task generally granted to women as a symbolic fertility blessing for the bride. In fact, *parching the lawa* is a practice reserved for married Hindu women during the bride's *matikor* rituals. Like Vik and Sasha, Sundari does not choose pop music for her drag montage. Instead, she returns to the post-plantation music of chutney.

On the sidewalks of Richmond Hill, Sundari stages her body as a kind of queer public theater. Sundari is performing, then, a scene of queer sexual liberation. In this scene, drag is a kind of public "confession" (Foucault, *History* 59) that her body performs upon the street. The title of the Instagram video, "Indo-Caribbean Drag Queen Breaking the Heteronormative

Boundaries," deploys the language of "boundary" in a fascinating way. The very title of the video is an act of queer opposition to "heteronormative boundaries" implicit within both the geography of Richmond Hill's presumably heteronormative public space and major community establishments that otherwise might be construed as heteronormative. Sundari therefore performs as a kind of queer incursion within this space. In true New York fashion, Sundari dances as passersby stream past her, crossing Liberty Avenue on their way to the Lefferts Avenue A subway stop. For some, her body does not register as extraordinary – any moreso than other extraordinary events could register in a city of over eight million people. In one scene filmed in front of Singh's Roti Shop, one of the most famous sites of *jahaji bhai* culture for rum drinking, chutney music and watching cricket, Sundari dances to "Shyam Sundar" by Pritivi. As she performs in front of Singh's, it is her voyeurs who actually look *out* at her from the inside – they are the ones boxed in. There is no boundary for Sundari, only for her spectators.

As the video concludes, Sundari twirls into the sunset at the corner of 121st Street, the sea-green New York City street sign visible with a "one-way" sign traffic anchored in one of the frames. The plantation-era chutney music resounds against the brick walls of a tax and accounting sign, as the white painted lines of the sidewalk crossing appear in the background. A small child riding a bicycle is accidentally captured in the frame. Sundari concludes her dance in front of the *Saree Duniya* storefront. The video ends, the chutney music is silent. A scene pans to Sundari posed in a still image in front of the "Welcome to Richmond Hill" sign. Richmond Hill: that site of murdered Indo-Caribbean women, newspaper headlines of incest and violence, coconuts on concrete in front of elevated subway stops. Richmond Hill: that place of temporal contradictions, both inside and outside of time. This caption appears underneath the Instagram video: "For many years we have performed and organized underground. We deserve the same

respect, inclusion, and acceptance and should feel SAFE as heterosexuals do in our communities." With knowledge of the liberal limits of visibility and its surveillance-like apparatus, I recall again the sentiments of Didier Eribon who deemed visibility "an escape path from the terrible interior ghetto that is experienced by a soul that has been subjected by shame" (101). How can one dispute the contradictory power of someone like Sundari gliding across the Richmond Hill sidewalk, that place of blood and rum drinking and violence?

In this chapter, I have conducted a genealogy of various *jahaji* figures in drag to complicate an understanding of the "invisible" queer Indo-Caribbean subject. I contend that a theory of speculative erotics enables a different frame that is neither "visible" or "invisible," but interrogates the very usefulness of these parameters. By turning to the very queer site of chutney, I have demonstrated that eroticism between *jahaji* figures in these spaces is not necessarily a guise or façade. By framing this chapter through the public performance of Sundari the Indian Goddess dancing to the music of chutney, which is the offspring of indentured Indian plantation folk songs, I find a critical power in visibility while remaining critical of its liberal framework and its function as a *dispositif* of surveillance. For a culture already barely registered in South Asian and Indian Ocean histories, a critique of visibility must consider the affective power and sentimental value that sometimes counts as its own form of survival. Sundari has reconfigured the *coolie* woman from the plantation as a *jahaji* figure who can *patch di lawa* as any other Indo-Caribbean woman. When Sundari says that for many years queers have performed underground, perhaps that metaphorical and literal site is not as concealed as one might think. Perhaps all *coolie* women are in drag.

Coda
Jahajee: a personal prehistory

"…so when we are looking for a "queer theory," it may be that we can find it precisely as a presupposition of activism."
-Judith Butler, "Queer Bonds"

In a way, this dissertation ends with the emergence of how the figure of the *jahaji* entered my own life. Despite my own history as the great-grandchild of indentured laborers from India to Jamaica, I never even heard the word *jahaji* until 2008, when a group of Indo-Caribbean women entered my life. On a sidewalk in Queens, New York in 2007, 22-year-old Guiatree Hardat stood on a sidewalk a mile and a half from the same streets of Sundari's drag performances. Hardat was in an argument with her ex-fiancé, a New York City Police Department transit officer; after she ended their engagement, her ex-fiancé stalked her that day in Queens and shot her at point blank range. The first lines of the *New York Post* article, "Cop Put His Love Through Hell, Then He Took Her Life," described the man who killed Guiatree as "jealous, controlling and domineering" (Mongelli, "Cop"). A few lines later, the article described Guiatree as "beautiful" and "stunning," qualities that appear to be relevant with the mournability of her as a twenty-two-year-old woman gunned down by her ex (Mongelli, "Cop"). The *Post* described Guiatree as his "love" in the headlines – but she had already ended their relationship. Guiatree's life would somehow be memorialized in perpetual relation to this man who had killed her – a man who she had already disavowed multiple times.

A few months later, twenty-year-old Natasha Ramen was murdered by her rapist, whom she had an existing restraining order against. The deaths of these young women did not provoke any outrage in the Indo-Caribbean community of Queens, New York. In fact, their deaths did not register as extraordinary – just as violence on the site of the plantation was not necessarily extraordinary. There were no protests, nor vigils for the young women whose lives were claimed

by men who felt entitled to them. Their murders were grotesquely ordinary in a community where even the taxonomy of "domestic" violence seemed a gross and sanitized mitigation of horrific things that would happen to young girls. The lack of community response prompted a group of Indo-Caribbean women to convene the first Indo-Caribbean Women's Empowerment Summit (ICWES) in Queens, New York. By 2008, the second annual ICWES would change both the political and scholarly trajectory of my life. In a basement full of grandmothers, aunts, mothers and children, we shared countless stories about the violence, abuse and trauma experienced in our families. There was no culture of silence; we could not stop speaking. We needed to sustain the momentum of activism beyond a single annual summit.

What began as a group of organizers, activists, writers, poets and artists meeting in basement libraries, roti shops and each other's homes would evolve, in a few years, into the first staffed non-profit organization in the U.S. for Indo-Caribbean women aimed at ending gender-based violence. As survivors and inheritors of an intergenerational legacy of violence, we realized that the work of survival was not a one-time event: we needed build a movement. We would call ourselves *Jahajee Sisters,* as an homage to our ancestors who made the ship crossing across the Kala Pani. At the time, we did not know that we were producing a new wave of visibility about both the exclusion of the indentured diaspora and the paradoxical invisibility and hyper-visibility of gender-based violence. Within academic discourse, "*jahaji*" was a term that was circulated in the 1980s scholarship of Indo-Caribbean men like Frank Birbalsingh or Brij V. Lal. "*Jahaj*i" was not only a heteromasculinist affiliation that symbolized the entire culture but also, as Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo once observed, indisputably a boys' club of indentured Indian history. We, however, were an intergenerational group of women – feminists and queers – reclaiming the trope that perhaps was never meant for us. Fifteen years after our founding, I

would contend that among Caribbean communities in North America, the term "*jahaji"* is now most commonly associated with the activism of Jahajee Sisters.

In 2018, the first homicide in New York City occurred on January 1. Stacy Singh, a twenty-six-year-old Guyanese woman, was murdered by her husband, who then hung himself in a park. Her neighbors reported cops present at the property so many times; once, Stacy was abused so badly she left her home in an ambulance. She had two small children at the time of her death: a one-year-old and a five-year-old. During the writing of my prospectus, Donne Dojoy was murdered. As I worked on my application into the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies doctoral program at Emory University, Rajwantie Baldeo was murdered. Rajwantie's death – like all of these women's deaths – haunted me. She was murdered in Richmond Hill, the site of Sundari's drag performance, and nearly decapitated. In 1904, a woman named Lutchminia was slain in the same manner. Neither Rajwantie, nor Lutchminia were wives of the men who murdered them. As I continued working in the archives and reading stories of slain Indo-Caribbean women, I could not help but trace the backwards teleological glance that scripted the lives of these women somehow destined for murder. But something about this fated origin story of murder unsettled me.

Violence, as D. Alissa Trotz has argued, was central to the making of the *coolie* woman (222). The earliest ships transporting gravely disproportionate numbers of indentured Indian men to women is often cited as an inter-generational reverberation of gender-based violence. The so-called "scarcity" thesis of murdered women, as well as their sexual power on the site of the plantation, is repeatedly cited as the motive for the present-day murder rates. Yet like so many women whose lives are only legible and solely defined through biological heterosexual kinship, this historical conclusion always disturbed me. In the twenty-first century, these murdered young

women were memorialized as "ex-fiancées", "wives" or "daughters." In a sense, their personhood was defined always already within kinship – even when the complexity of their lives revealed that motherhood was accidental or "wife" was a misnomer. Their sexualities were always already heterosexual, as well, even when the details of their lives might have revealed otherwise. Their lives were only of value in relation to kinship – heterosexual, monogamous familial kinship.

As a queer descendant of indenture, I could not have imagined – or speculated – about the possibilities of kinship with other queers of indentured descent, much less within the historical archive of Indian indentureship. The narrative from the plantation to the present day was one of heterosexual violence. But during the earliest convenings of Jahajee Sisters, I was joined by lesbians and gender-queers and non-binary individuals and cis-women and straight women and questioning women and bisexual women. We repeated the same stories of *chopping,* rape, incest and murder. We all knew someone – or we *were* the someone. We lived the lives that appeared in the British colonial record, that appeared in the New York City newspaper headlines or the headlines of Jamaica, Trinidad or Guyana. We were not theorizing about an archive that we had access to; in a sense, we *were* the archive. Our stories with their spectacular rape, incest and violence were not unique: these incidences resided in that "emphatic theater of the quotidian" (Foucault, "Lives" 155).

Like the women in the colonial postcards, however, our proximity to queerness and violence was both hyper-visible and simultaneously invisibilized. The organization, comprised of queer and straight women alike, is still *seen* as straight. On one Sunday in Richmond Hill, walking along the same streets of Sundari's drag performance, I walked in blinding sunlight on the sidewalk alongside another queer Indo-Caribbean woman – a fellow *jahaji* and a fellow

Jahajee Sister. During our walk together, we strolled alongside DVD sellers blaring Bollywood music from open store fronts; vegetable and fruit stalls featuring vats of okra, *baigan and koriala*; chutney and dancehall alternatively blaring through tricked out BMWs on Liberty Avenue. Sundays in Richmond Hill are a kind of diorama of the markets of the Caribbean, where the rhythm of routine was seemingly inhabited by an entire community: parents dropping children to Indian classical dance lessons and shopping for Elephant Curry Powder to kill the time; lines snaking out the door for doubles at Singh's or Sybil's, the same restaurants where Sundari danced; men huddled watching cricket matches streaming in the local bars. On that particular day, I remember the sunlight casting a kind of spotlight on us. We walked enjoying each other's company until that feeling of hyper-visibility came to fruition as a car filled with four or five Indo-Caribbean men slowed down alongside us. The men began speaking to us from their car with rolled-down windows – but we kept walking and ignored them. We soon realized that the men were not deterred: we were being followed. Since they drove down the congested street of Liberty Avenue, the men could not slow the car sufficiently for enough time to engage with us, so they needed to keep driving – *thankfully*, we thought. A few moments later, we turned around on the sidewalk to several voices: the men had parked and found us, proceeding to follow us on foot until we responded to them. The details of the rest are a bit blurry, but eventually we managed to somehow walk away unscathed – shielded perhaps by the Sunday bustle of Richmond Hill or the broad daylight, or maybe luck or fate. We will never know.

As two queer women, we were invisible. But as two *jahaji sisters*, we were both hyper-visible and interpellated as heterosexual. We were not outside of these structures of violence that claimed the lives of women whose lives we started an organization to memorialize; instead, we were intimately implicated within these structures. We were not visiting Richmond Hill; we were

walking on a sidewalk inside of our community – and we were community leaders, at that. Our queerness was eclipsed – even as two women who were Jahajee Sisters, *jahaji sisters,* and once lovers. To the group of men who followed us, we were invisible as two queer bodies. As I recall the frame of us from that day, I imagined that we could have been the women of Morin's portrait studio in Trinidad; we could have been Mukedah in her group of *jahaji* sisters, with whom she tried to escape her ex-lover; we could have been catalogued as someone's "wives" in another time. Despite that incidence – as ordinary and, somehow, also horrifying as it was – we remained queer women who chose to politically organize against gender-based violence in a community-based setting in an immigrant, working-class community. Our activism was not that of the Human Rights Campaign – even though our sisterhood of the boat was always already queer. In the NGO language of "gender-based violence" and "gender justice," our activism was not exclusive to heterosexuality; we were the queers whose lives had been impacted by the intergenerational trauma of our ancestors, and we chose to organize as a form of survival.

The crisis of interpellation that I and the other queer Indo-Caribbean woman experienced on the sidewalk that day is a paradigm for the ways in which we understand the indentured legacies of queerness and proximities to violence. As I have articulated throughout this dissertation, the colonial misnomer of "wife murder" importantly neglected the fact that many of the women killed were not actually *wives.* Instead, they were often sexual partners in a variety of living arrangements on a plantation where the concept of a stereotypical Indian family was virtually absent. By considering gender-based violence as solely situated within the domestic, then, this legacy of tracing present-day violence against Indo-Caribbean women back to the plantation has actually produced an archival production of domesticity and bound it within gender-based violence. Other intimacies remain eclipsed within the colonial archive. While

neglecting other intimate and sexual relationships, women are most always memorialized in relation to their role in a fictive or accidental family unit. Reading the sexual autopsies of these Indo-Caribbean women, the lens of the domestic violence is nearly always examined as the cause of death. Violence, and particularly intimate partner violence, subsequently situates these women always-already within heteronormative relation to men.

As Tonya Haynes and Hamilah DeShong have argued, approaching gender-based violence against Caribbean women has historically gestured to the proprietary nature of heterosexual men – implicitly justifying murder through a discourse of men's ownership and women's subsequent abandonment (121-122). Violence, then, is confirmation of the assumed heterosexual kinship within these women's lives. Analyzing Caribbean newspaper headlines from countries including Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Belize, Barbados, the Bahamas and the Virgin Islands, the authors noted that women's roles as mothers were often recounted within narratives of their death; by comparison, men were narrativized according to their employment status (Haynes and DeShong 111-112; 120-121). Haynes and DeShong contend that such framings of gender-based violence have obscured violence against queer and transgender subjects, as gender-based violence appears only as authorized through the lens of heterosexual domesticity (105).

Queering Jahajee Sisters

As Krystal Ghisyawan has noted in her ethnography of same-sex loving Indo-Caribbean women in Trinidad and Tobago, the word "friend" in Anglophone Caribbean vernacular actually means one's lover (25). This interesting play on "friend" produces the first opening for considering the possibilities of indentured erotics among women. The erotic coding of "friend" – despite its seemingly neutral connotation – among Indo-Caribbean women might follow this

genealogy of same-sex intimacy between women charted by Lorde and Tinsley in configurations of *zamni* and *mati,* respectively. As Ghisyawan also notes in her ethnography, among Indo-Trinidadian women queerness is marked by being both "insular and incestuous," attesting to the erotic relations among a sub-group of women (24). This emphasis on the "incestuous" nature of these Indo-Caribbean – or perhaps, *jahaji bahen* – is interesting given the taboo against inter-marriage among *jahaji bhai* and *jahaji bahen* since the kin of the ship were akin to blood. Furthermore, as Ghisyawan argues, the concept of these Indo-Caribbean same-sex loving women's perceived "invisibility" is imbricated within the neutralization of women's sexuality, as Rosamond King argued in her famous essay on Caribbean lesbian invisibility (191).

I return here to an ethnography conducted in Trinidad by Ghisyawan, whose scholarship emphasizes the ambiguity of sexual and intimate relationships between women. As I noted in the Introduction, the word "friend" can also mean romantic interest, as in other parts of the Caribbean (25). The sexual ambiguity that is built into these friendships among women is a generative starting point for unsettling the bonds between Indo-Caribbean women as purely platonic. Ghisyawan notes that these same-sex loving women describe their communities as both "insular and incestuous" (24). What more adequate term is there for not only the queer community but the *jahaj?* Like the woman I walked alongside that day in Richmond Hill, who was my queer Jahajee Sister, the sisterhood of our boat was always-already queer. The sexuality of Indo-Caribbean women, however, has historically been theorized through the phenomenon of heterosexual murder. This approach has foreclosed possibilities for alternative forms of kinship between and among women, as well as the complexity of intimacies that might have emerged from the earliest ships leaving Calcutta for Caribbean colonies. In a sense, this *straightening* of

Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality, focusing on the trope of the victimized heterosexual woman, has eliminated the unruly sexualities that emerged at the site of the nineteenth-century plantation.

I want to consider the concept of the *sister,* then, as Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo has considered the term *jahaji bhai*, to function as a misnomer. While this terminology of biological kinship has survived as a form of community, the networks of women and gender non-binary individuals within Jahajee Sisters might provide a glimpse into the ways in which violence is always-already in proximity to queerness. Perhaps the most striking phenomenon in all of my years of activism in Jahajee Sisters was that we were not prioritizing the agenda of the Human Rights Campaign; we were doing the intersectional work of fighting against gender-based violence within a framework that understood sexual identity as intimately bound to that violence. Presuming our straightness has also obscured the extent to which queer women are impacted by gender-based violence. Like the group of men who stalked my fellow *jahaji sister* and myself on that Sunday in Richmond Hill, we were straightened on account of our gender presentation – two women together – our bodies' meanings only legible in relation to men.

I want to consider the anecdote of that Sunday walking in Richmond Hill as a paradigm for considering the stakes of how we read kinship networks like Jahajee Sisters as sites of organizing against gender-based violence. I ask, what are the stakes of theorizing kinship in the misnomer of the *sister,* and how might we consider networks of queers organizing against the primary goal of ending violence, rather than organizing solely within a framework to advance LGBT rights? What does it mean to have queerness in proximity to violence in the indentured archive? If, as Lokaisingh-Meighoo proposed, homosociality has remained an untapped mark of the indentured archive, we might speculatively imagine alternative possibilities to this historically *straightening* of intimacy.

Although this dissertation turns toward the archive of Indian indentureship to theorize queerness, a series of scholar-artists have produced visual art at the nexus of the archive and queer omission. Scholars like Jordache Ellapen have reconceptualized the figural *coolie* of the indentured archive in his work "Sugarcane Coolies, Family Portrait II, 2017" by juxtaposing photographs of indentured ancestors overlaid with erotic photographs of gay men. Amar Wahab has created a series of queer art pieces titled *Postcards from the Perineum,* incorporating into his art printed text of the sodomy report aboard the SS Mersey that I cited in Chapter 2. From the evocative lesbian paintings of Shalini Seereeram's "The Promise" and the lesbian poetry of Shivanee Ramlochan in Trinidad, to the reimagining of queer intimacies in the work of Surinamese artist Nazrina Rodjan in the Netherlands, queering legacies of indenture is no longer the impossibility of an aporia.

In this dissertation I have advanced a theory of queer kinship that is unmoored from the stereotypical association of the biological family on the indentured plantation. By advancing a theory of speculative erotics through different archival sites – colonial documents, lesbian film, drag and political activism – I aim to provide scholars of Caribbean and Indian Ocean labor history with an approach that considers intimacies beyond the heterosexual family as sites of survival within an archive of intergenerational violence. The murders of Indo-Caribbean women in the twenty-first century evoke what Prabhu Mohapatra first observed in his research on indentureship concerning "unfaithful wives and jealous husbands" (231). Feminist scholars and writers including Patricia Mohammed, Brinda Mehta, Rhoda Reddock, Rosanne Kanhai, Shalini Puri, Gabrielle Jamela Hosein, Lisa Outar and Gaiutra Bahadur have all reimagined possibilities for the lives of indentured Indian women beyond the limits of the historical archive. But the queer intimacies within the lives of these same women remain a speculative possibility.

The memories of these women haunt the entirety of this dissertation. Even in death, words like “beautiful” and “jealous” transport the lives of these women back to an archive on the plantation where their lives were documented only in relationship to men. The economic impact of present-day immigrant Indo-Caribbean women working multiple jobs to survive, the carceral fears governing the undocumented status of their lives and their roles as breadwinners are seldom catalogued. The inevitable death of the figural Indo-Caribbean woman slain by her jealous lover on the plantation has propelled itself into the twenty-first century: her current murder is traced as only legible through heterosexual kinship, where her body seems destined for death at the hands of a jealous lover. Such headlines produce a present archive confirming the truth of the past: sex kills these women. The memories of their bodies are excavated to reveal varying degrees of *fidelity* within an endless discourse of speculation about these women’s sexual lives and their varying proximity to promiscuity. A post-mortem reconstruction of their lives sketches their relationship to indentured Indian men, offering truths that their deaths supposedly revealed. This shadow of history casts its glance backwards to the plantation with the teleological impulse to create an invisible trajectory onto the future, mapping the sexual fates of these women a hundred years later.

Despite these rich feminist theories of gender-based violence within Indo-Caribbean scholarship, the intersection of gender-based violence has remained conceptually out of proximity to queerness. This is only a theoretical opening to consider Jahajee Sisters as a site of political activism to consider how proximities of intimacy, violence, and queerness are intertwined. By reading kinship networks within the present-day site of Jahajee Sisters’ political activism as a site of queer intimacy, we must be able complicate the notion of the figural heterosexual Indo-Caribbean woman within the archive of Indian indentureship, as well the

present-day feminist activist counterpart of this figure, to consider ways in which queerness has remained within intimate proximity to the violence of Indian indentureship.

Queer x Indenture

It is curious that within an archive of violence and perversity, queer relations were never considered an object of study among descendants of Indian indentureship. During the spring of 2021, I produced a series called *Queer x Indenture,* which was a virtual public symposia convening visual artists, scholars, writers, drag performers and poets from across the indentured diaspora. Individuals from The Netherlands, Fiji, South Africa and Mauritius participated in this virtual queer diasporic project. In the middle of a COVID-19 pandemic, participants Zoomed in from Europe, Africa, South America, Australia and Canada. During the first event featuring Dutch-Surinamese performers Fazle Shairmahommed and Devika Chotoe, Fazle remarked that perhaps we might not want to identify with our ancestors at all. Kama LaMackerel, who spoke as part of the series with Dr. Natasha Bissonauth, had created a poem in their signature collection *ZOM-FAM* about an imaginary figure named *Kum Kum,* a trans Mauritian descendant of indenture who kept several lovers.

As I began historical research within the indentured archive, I could hardly believe the stories I encountered that I had never known about: sodomy on the plantation among indentured Indian men; homes filled with women living together; men living together as *jahaji bhais* but referring to each other as man and wife; women attempting to escape India and emigrate to the colonies. In thousands of pages of scholarship on Indian indentureship – including feminist scholarship – I was in awe that scarcely any critical theory existed despite multiple cases of queer relations existing within the archive. It seemed that my theory of speculative erotics was not only possible – *but probable*.

But as I considered my own role in the formation of Jahajee Sisters, I understood the possibilities for queer kinship within our communities and the speculative possibilities for the ancestors who survived before us. Our community was one in which intergenerational survival was more important than intergenerational violence. In my experience as an activist organizing within my own community, I somehow found the queers most desperate to, as the elders would say, "*Keep the culture alive.*" The queers in our community did not seem alienated or closeted in the ways that we had read about in U.S. coming-out stories or seen on television; queers were the dance teachers at the schools teaching Indian classical dancing and chutney; queers were singing *bhajans* at mandirs; queers were everywhere. We *were* that "emphatic theater of the quotidian" (Foucault, "Lives" 155).

Jahajee Sisters has emerged as the new signification not only for a "sisterhood of the boat" but, in its gender-inclusive and queer reimagining of community, as kins of the ship. Our sisterhood of the boat was always already queer. Arguably, Jahajee Sisters has revived the term from its masculine roots and presented it as a trope that is perhaps now legible through feminist and queer organizing and activism. Among Indo-Caribbean community organizers and leaders throughout the U.S. and Canada, the twenty-first century utterance of *jahaji* is arguably associated more strongly with the activism of Jahajee Sisters than the original trope interpellating a masculine brotherhood of the boat. It is even curious that in an article published in 2020 by Brinda Mehta, whose critical work *Diasporic Dislocations* presented a feminist analysis of Indo-Caribbean women's literature, her examination of the "*jahaji-bahin* consciousness as a form of decolonial feminist thought" did not include the activism of Jahajee Sisters (Mehta, "Jahaji" 1). Mehta raises important questions in her essay by reconsidering the *jahaji-bahin* through a decolonial lens but misses the critical fact that the reemergence of the very *jahaji* trope in its

present-day circulation has primarily been through the feminist queer activism of Jahajee Sisters. But curious, too, is Note 1 at the end of Mehta's essay where she announces: "This paper does not engage with the experiences of *kala pani's* queer men and women" ("Jahaji" 14).

The impossible subjectivity articulated by Mehta's footnote is what I have attempted to present throughout this dissertation – this moment of uttering an impossible Indian Ocean subject, one whose archive can scarcely even be imagined. *This* is the work of speculative erotics. This is the moment of reimagining, or perhaps beginning to imagine, the speculative possibilities for intimacies and kinship that transcend the historical archive – even when such moments are indeed documented. Rather than perhaps contend with the impossibility of imagining queerness within an archive of violence, we might consider the ways in which proximities to violence already implicate the queer. Furthermore, what other possibilities can be generated by considering queer erotics within a history of Indian Ocean labor? How might one consider alternative forms of intergenerational survival beyond that of the family? How might queer intimacies provide alternative demands for examining legacies of colonial violence? How might we also reconsider tropes that characterize the indentured archive, like "visibility," "freedom" and "silence," to reexamine the limits of conceiving of Caribbean queer sexualities?

On silence

Silence, then, is operative in considering the alternative possibilities for an archive obsessed with documentation and proof. Like the archive of indenture, the archival traces of queer often return to the theme of silence. But perhaps an orientation toward re-imagining a privileging of speech might recast the ways in which silence functions within the indentured archive. Rather than rehearse the silences of an archive of violence, we might ask, what truths do we afford to the privileged trope of speech? Furthermore, how might this archive of silence

further reinforce a (hetero)sexuality that condemn the bodies of indentured Indian women to death in the guise of a romanticized sexual liberation? Must silence and death be explained away? Speech, it seems, functions as a truth of sex.

Accounts of single women carrying children – either in utero or by the hand – are very common within the ship registers of indenture. Pregnant women and single women traveling alone with small children to the colonies were not uncommon (Mohammed, *Gender* 49). These women are retroactively read within existing biological kinship: mothers with children following the romanticized family of Hindu, Muslim and Christian religions. But not all women who bear children do so willingly; and not all mothers who have sex with men do so with men in mind. Moving toward a speculative erotics of sexuality and away from a ventriloquizing approach to speaking truth into the past, I want to court silence as the archival gray – the vague spaces between these women, inside of barracks, in photographs and on cane fields that might speculatively offer another frame for conceiving of sexuality as anything other than heterosexual, or as anything other than doomed. To speculatively imagine eroticism between these women is to deploy an alternative archival method to existing genealogies that have produced heterosexuality as a normative part of the archive.

The trope of the silenced indentured Indian women almost exclusively animates the narrative of Indian indentureship. The trope of silence cast a shadow across archival record of these frequent and gruesome murders, which reveal alternating frames of silence and repression structuring the lives of these women. As Gaiutra Bahadur writes in *Coolie Woman,* "Rarely do women get to talk back to official history to challenge its view of them" (*Coolie* 119). The figural *jahaji* as silenced subject is a common trope that characterizes the indentured archive to present-day stories of indentured descendants who rely on oral histories to provide a speaking

subject into these silenced pasts (RbOS 63, 67). It is only in death that a post-mortem ventriloquism reveals the sexual truths of these women – famously "silenced." I want to depart from repeating the trope of the silenced indentured Indian woman to reconsider the privileging of speech within the indentured archive. Rather than rehearse the silences of an archive of violence, I ask, what truths do we afford to the privileged trope of speech? Furthermore, how might this archive of silence further reinforce a (hetero)sexuality that condemn the bodies of indentured Indian women to death in the guise of a romanticized sexual liberation? Must silence and death be explained away? Resisting this "incitement to speak," then, as Foucault has said, I approach this archive of sexuality speculatively through examining the conceptual repression of silence. An emphasis on the continued trope of speech throughout the archive of indenture thus asks, whom does speaking benefit?

The paradoxes of speech – and the agency afforded to speaking subjects – is evident in these conflicting and alternating figures of silenced and murdered *jahaji* women and their vocal and sexually liberated kin. Rather than center the role of silence within the archival record and its complicity in muting the voices of these women, more scholarship is necessary to consider instead the power afforded to the spectral speaking subject and the perceived liberation of conflating sex with speech within the archive of indentureship. A theory of speculative erotics therefore destabilizes an emphasis on the binaries of silence/speech and repression/liberation to consider the critical power afforded to the truth of sex on the plantation during indentureship. A speculative case for reading the potential erotics between women might seem bizarre given the violence of the plantation and the overwhelming heterosex that seems to animate the colonial archive. But the speculative potential of eroticism also reexamines the figural *jahaji* on the plantation as a body scripted through colonial discourses, over-determined fictions of the

"family" and biopolitical characterizations of deviance. Reading cases of women like the Presbyterian missionary Sarah Morton stunned by the Brahmin woman who "took a papa" in Trinidad might not signal a peculiar aberration within the colonial record, but perhaps the opening for destabilizing the tenuous categorizations of "single" and "married" women, or even "straight" and "queer." A theory of speculative erotics thus problematizes the *jahaji bahen* trope as one not bound to the bloodlines of heterosexual kin and introduces the archival possibilities for considering the limits of speech – rather than its liberatory effects – within the archival record.

The case of an overwhelming attention concerning women's voices might have demonstrated that silence is not perhaps an archival accident – but might function as a tactic of survival. As Hugh Tinker observed, testimonies given by the indentured were already mediated by a system of translators in a language that was not their own (205). The British Guiana Commission was often confounded listening to stories of men competing over women, attempting to decipher the "real husband" within a quarrelling couple (Tinker 205). This "confusion," however, might have served a greater purpose: the act of purposefully offering inaccurate testimony or evading questions (Tinker 205). Such tactics might have been a form of survival for the indentured – to be spared from disciplinary action, to live as "freely" as possible under a repressive system of labor, to evade penal consequences. Brinda Mehta has proposed the resistance of silence among Indo-Caribbean women as not "necessarily a sign of passive acquiescence but, rather, a latent form of resistance to show displeasure or disagreement" (*Diasporic* 76). Mehta proposes that this tactical silence is perceived as docile or passive, but that within the domestic sphere women controlled and managed the household after indenture (*Diasporic*75-76). Conceptualizing power within the household returns Indo-Caribbean women

to subjects who can only be articulated through the realm of the domestic, , while formulating their legibility only within the parameters of biological kinship. I want to continue probing silence as a speculative mode that resists the neat frames of sexual liberation or repression, again interrogating the story of sex as one that can indeed be *voiced.*

Silence, a personal prehistory

My great-grandmother was kidnapped from India at the age of twelve. In stories about her arrival to Jamaica, I wondered how she could have managed to survive as a young girl – with no family, no idea of the thumb print that she inevitably "signed" binding her to a life of plantation labor in the middle of scorching heat on the other side of the world. I wondered if the British colonial officers who entrapped her had mistaken her for an older girl, or if they did in fact traffic her suspecting her barely emerging into adolescence. Did the vicious recruiters ruminate: *Hindus marry girls as young as six years old, so why will shipping this one off to the Caribbean be any different?* Our family figured the kidnapping was folklore, *she must have imagined it*, they would say. Indenture was barely recorded in any textbooks we read – kidnapping, of course, must have been a figment of her imagination. When I became a graduate student, I learned that kidnappings were not only common but well-documented – even the kidnapping of young girls. No one in our family knew much of her story – except that she hailed from a place that she pronounced *gora-pour,* a city we could not find on the plastic globes detailing only familiar cities like New Delhi and Bombay. Decades after her death, I would learn that Gorakphur was one of the major cities from which many Indians were trafficked. As I conducted archival research, I felt a sense of shame each time I saw the British calligraphy *Gorakphur* logged as a city of origin by Emigration Agents – knowing that for years, no one in

our family could understand where in the world *gora-pour* was, or if it was a place that even existed.

The details of her life elapse into a series of ellipses, with nothing before her arrival in Jamaica recorded and only vague memories of her as a small, dark-skinned woman smoking a chillum pipe. Her language was the language of *Hindustani,* with a lacuna between her and her descendants; she had no words to share with her grandchildren, who instead learned the Queen's English. I chuckled when I learned that she drank Red Stripe beer, preferring to add salt to send the foam into a tidal wave spilling over for her to gulp. A drunken *nani,* I imagined, not unlike those tales of submissive Hindu wives that I had read about in books. I imagined her drinking Red Stripe and smoking in a land on the other side of the world, an old woman who seemed to have rid herself of any repressive powers – colonial, patriarchal or otherwise – despite the stories I encountered in feminist texts or in newspaper headlines. My great-grandmother was no image of the wifely paragon *Sita*; instead, she was a devotee of *Kali,* that menacing dark goddess whose rituals required sprinkling the blood of goats and the fearful fervor of speaking in tongues. When her indenture ended, her husband and elder son returned to India while she remained in Jamaica. No one knows why. After half a century on a plantation on the other side of the world, she became a *single woman* again. When I asked my father for more stories of her, he had none. I asked him why she remained behind. He did not know. The Old Indians were like that, my father told me. You could ask them question upon question, he said, but they would only smile. *They refused to speak*.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Figure 1.1 "East Indian Girls Preparing Rice." National Library of Jamaica. Kingston, Jamaica.

Figure 1.2 "Coolies Washing." Robert Langmuir Collection, Stuart A. Rose Rare Manuscript Library. Emory University.

Figure 1.3 "Coolies At Worship." Personal Collection of Suzanne Caroline Persard

Figure 1.4 "East Indian Types, Trinidad B.W.I." University of Pennsylvania Indo-Caribbean Collection. Print Collection 40.

Figure 1.5 "Suriname, Britsch indische Koolivrouwen in Feestgewaa." University of Pennsylvania Indo-Caribbean Collection. Print Collection 40.

Figure 3.1 *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*. Image courtesy of Michelle Mohabeer.

Figure 4.1 "Group of East Indian Musicians Playing Musical Instruments" Courtesy of the National Library of Jamaica.

CO 27/575. SS Mersey. Punishment for sodomy meted out to Nabi Baksh and Mohangoo on the Mersey. Report from the Governor to the Colonial Office. Digital Library of the Caribbean. http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00007501/00001

Banks, C. "Emigration from the Port of Calcutta to British and Foreign Colonies." Protector of Emigrants, Calcutta. Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1907.

Morton, Sarah E. "John Morton of Trinidad: Pioneer Missionary of the Presbyterian Church in Canada to the East Indians in the West Indies." Edited by Sarah E. Morton. Westminster Company, Toronto. 1916. Digital Library of the Caribbean. https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00013940/00001

Coconut/Cane & Cutlass. Directed by Michelle Mohabeer, Third Eye Productions, 1994.

Secondary Sources

Agard-Jones, Vanessa. "What the Sands Remember." *GLQ,* vol. 18, no. 2-3, 2012, pp. 325-346.

Alexander, M. Jacqui. "Not Just Any (Body) Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcolonialty in Trinidad and Tobago in the Bahamas." *Feminist Review* no. 48, 1994, pp. 5-23.

Alloula, Malek. *The Colonial Harem.* University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

Apter, Emily. "Acting Out Orientalism: Sapphic Theatricality in Turn-of-the-Centruy Paris." *L'Esprit Créateur,* vol. 34, no. 2, 1994, pp. 102-116.

Arondekar, Anjali. *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*. Duke University Press, 2009.

-----. "Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive." *Journal of the History of Sexuality, vol. 14, no. 1-2, Special Issue: Studying the History of Sexuality: Theory, Methods, Praxis*, 2005, pp. 10-27.

------. "In the Absence of Reliable Ghosts: Sexuality, Historiography, South Asia." *differences,* vol. 25, no. 3, 2015, pp. 98-122.

Arabindan-Kesson, Anna. "Picturing South Asians in Victorian Jamaica." *Victorian Jamaica,* edited by Tim Barrenger and Wayne Modest, Duke University Press, 2018, pp. 395-419,

Atluri, Tara. "Putting the Cool in Coolie: Disidentification, desire and dissent in the work of filmmaker Michelle Mohabeer." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies,* no. 3, 2009, pp. 1-25.

Bahadur, Gaiutra. *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

-----. "Postcards from Empire." *Dissent Magazine.* Spring 2015: https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/postcards-from-empire. Accessed 18 February 2021.

Baksh, Darrell Gerohn. "Jep Sting Radica With Rum and Roti: Trinidadian Social Dynamics in Chutney Music." *Popular Music and Society,* vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 152-168.

Boxer, David. "The Duperly Family and Photography in Victorian Jamaica." *Victorian Jamaica,* edited by Tim Barrenger and Wayne Modest. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. pp. 322-356.

Butler, Judith. 'Critically Queer', *GLQ*, vol. 1, 1993, pp. 17-32.

-------. *Gender Trouble.* Routledge, 2006.

Campt, Tina. *Listening to Images.* Duke University Press, 2017.

Carter, Marina and Torabully, Khal. *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora.* Anthem Press, 2002.

Chatterjee, Ratnabali. "The Queens' Daughters: Prostitutes as an Outcast Group in Colonial India." Chr. Michelsen Institute, Department of Social Science and Development. 1992.

Chin, Matthew. "Tracing 'Gay Liberation' Through Postindependence Jamaica." *Public Culture,* vol. 31, no. 2, 2019, pp. 323-341.

Clover, David. "Visions of the Caribbean: Exploring Photographs in the West India Committee Collections." *The Society for Caribbean Studies Conference*, edited by Sandra Courtman, vol. 7, 2006.

Cole, Teju. When the Camera Was a Weapon of Imperialism (And When It Still Is). *New York Times,* 6 February 2019,

https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/magazine/when-the- camera-was-a-weapon-of-imperialism-and-when-it-still-is.html. Accessed 28 March 2021.

Cooper, Carolyn. *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the "Vulgar" Body of Jamaican Popular Culture.* Duke University Press, 1995.

Craven, Rev. Thomas. *The Royal Dictionary: in Two Parts, English and Hindustani and Hindustani and English.* Methodist Publishing House: Lucknow, 1902.

Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures.* Duke University Press, 2003.

Das, Mahadai. "They Came in Ships." *I Want to Be a Poetess to My People*. Georgetown: Guyana National Service Publishing Centre, 1977.

Ellapen, Jordache. "Queering the Archive. Brown Bodies in Ecstasy: Visual Assemblages, and the Pleasures of Transgressive Erotics." *Scholar and Feminist Online,* no. 14.3, 2018. https://sfonline.barnard.edu/feminist-and-queer-afro-asian-formations/queering-the-archive-brown-bodies-in-ecstasy-visual-assemblages-and-the-pleasures-of-transgressive-erotics/. Accessed 29 May 2021.

Eribon, Didier. *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self.* Translated by Michael Lucy, Duke University Press, 2004.

Faruqee, Ashrufa. "Conceiving the Coolie Woman." *South Asia Research,* vol. 16, no. 1, 1996, pp. 61-76.

Fisher, Michael H. "Working Across the Seas: Indian Maritime Labourers in India, Britain, and in Between, 1600-1857." *International Review of Social History,* vol. 51, 2006, pp. 21-45. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26405450. Accessed 14 January 2021.

Foucault, Michel. “Lives of Infamous Men.” *Power.* Edited by James D. Faubion. Translated by Robert Hurley et al. New York: The New Press, 1967.

------. *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction.* Translated by Robert Hurley. Vintage, 1990.

------. “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” *Aesthetics, Methods, and Epistemology.* Edited by James D. Faubion. Translated by Robert Hurley and others. New York: The New Press, 1994.

------. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* Translated by Alan Sheridan. Vintage, 1995.

------. *History of Madness.* Translated by Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa. Routledge, 2006.

Francis, Donette. *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean Literature.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Ghisyawan, Krystal Nandini. “Unsettling the Politics of Identity and Sexuality Among Indo-Trinidadian Same-Sex Loving Women.” *Indo-Caribbean Feminist Thought: Genealogies, Thoughts, Enactments*, edited by Gabrielle Hosein and Lisa Outar. Palgrave, 2016, pp. 153–70.

Ghisyawan, Krystal Nandini and Kumar, Preity. “Queer Tactility: Same-Sex Intimacies Between Women in Chutney and Soca Music.” *Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies,* vol. 4, no. 2, 2020, pp. 87-105.

Gill, Lyndon K. *Erotic Islands: Art and Activism in the Caribbean*. Duke University Press, 2018.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness.* Harvard University Press, 1993.

Glave, Thomas. Introduction. *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles,* edited by Glave, Duke University Press, 2008, pp. 1-12.

Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation.* Translated by Betsy Wing, University of Michigan Press, 1990.

Goluch, Dorota. *I Rather Dead: A Spivakian Reading of Indo-Caribbean Women's Narratives.* Roman Books, 2011.

Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Duke University Press, 2005.

------. *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*. Duke University Press, 2018.

Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe,* vol. 12, no. 2, 2008, pp. 1-14.

Harvard Law Review. "The Agreement and the Grimitya." vol. 134, 2021, pp. 1826-1858. https://harvardlawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/134-Harv.-L.-Rev.-1826.pdf, Accessed 30 November 2021.

Haynes, Tonya and Deshong, Halimah. "Queering Feminist Approaches to Gender-Based Violence in the Anglophone Caribbean." *Social and Economic Studies,* vol. 66, no. 1-2, 2017, pp. 105-131.

Hearn, Lafcadio. *Two Years in the French West Indies.* 1890. Project Gutenburg, 2004.

Hinchy, Jessica. *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c. 1850-1900.* Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Hosein, Gabrielle Jameela and Lisa Outar. "Indo-Caribbean Feminisms: Charting Crossings in Geography, Discourse, and Politics." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies,* no. 6, 2012, pp. 1-10.

Huffer, Lynne. *Foucault's Strange Eros.* Columbia University Press, 2020.

Jenkins, Edward. *The Coolie, His Rights And Wrongs*. Author's edition. New York: George Routledge and Sons, 1871.

Kale, Madhavi. *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean.* University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.

Kanhai, Rosanne. "The Masala Stone Sings: Poetry, Performance and Film by Indo-Caribbean Women." *Matikor,* edited by Rosanne Kanhai, University of West Indies, 1999, pp. 209-237.

Keeling, Kara. *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femmee, and the Image of Common Sense.* Duke University Press, 2007.

Kempadoo, Kamala. *Sexing the Caribbean: Gendeer, Race and Sexual Labor.* Routledge, 2004.

Khan, Aliyah. "Voyages Across Indenture: From Ship Sister to Mannish Woman." *GLQ,* vol. 22, no. 2, 2016, pp. 249-280.

Khan, Munshi Rahman. *Autobiography of an Indian Indentured Laborer (1874-1972).* Delhi: Shipra Publications, 2005.

King, Rosamond. "More Notes on the Invisibility of Caribbean Lesbians (2005)." *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles,* edited by Thomas Glave, 2008, pp. 191-196.

Kumar, Ashutosh. *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920.* Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Kumar, Preity R. "Women Lovin' Women: An Exploration of Identities, Belonging, and Communities in Urban and Rural Guyana." 2018. York University, PhD dissertation.

Lal, Brij V. *Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey Through Indenture in Fiji.* ANU Press, 2012.

Loichot, Valérie. “Cooking Creoleness: Lafcadio Hearn in New Orleans and Martinique.” *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy,* vol. xx, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-21.

Lokaisingh-Meighoo, Sean. “Jahaji Bhai: Notes on the Masculine Subject and Homoerotic Subtext of Indo-Caribbean Identity.” *Small Axe,* no. 7 (March 2000): pp. 77-92.

Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name.* Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1982.

Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents.* Duke University Press, 2015.

Mahabir, Joy. “Communal Style: Indo-Caribbean Women’s Jewelry.” *Small Axe* 21, no. 2, 8, 2017, pp. 112–22.

Manuel, Peter. *East Indian Music in the West Indies: Tan-Singing, Chutney, and the Making of Indo-Caribbean Culture.* Temple University Press, 2000.

Mehta, Brinda J. *Diasporic Dis(locations): Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the “Kala Pani.”* University of the West Indies Press, 2004.

-------. “Jahaji-bahin Feminism: a De-colonial Indo-Caribbean Consciousness.” *South Asian Diaspora,* 2020, pp. 1-17.

Mishra, Margaret. “The Emergence of Feminism in Fiji.” *Women’s History Review,* vol. 17, no. 1, 2008, pp. 39-55.

------. “Your Woman Is a Very Bad Woman.” *Journal of International Women’s Studies,* vol. 17, no. 4, 2016, pp. 67-78.

Mishra, Vijay. “The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora.” *Textual Practice*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1996, pp. 421-447.

Mitra, Durba. *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought.* Princeton University Press, 2020.

Mohammed, Patricia. "A Vindication for Indo-Caribbean Feminism." *Indo-Caribbean Feminist Thought: Genealogies, Theories, Enactments,* edited by Gabrielle Hosein and Lisa Outar, Palgrave, 2016, pp. 23-36.

------. *Gender Negotiations Among Indians in Trinidad. 1917-1947.* Palgrave, 2002.

------. "Gender as a Primary Signifier in the Construction of Community and State among Indians in Trinidad. *Caribbean Quarterly,* vol. 40, no. 3-4, 1994, pp. 32-43.

------. "Changing Symbols of Indo-Caribbean Femininity." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies.* no. 6, 2012, pp. 1-16.

Mohan, Peggy. *Jahajin.* Harper Collins, 2007.

Mohapatra. Prabhu P. "Restoring the Family: Wife Murders and the Making of a Sexual Contract for Indian Immigrant Labour in the British Caribbean Colonies, 1860-1920." *Studies in History,* vol. 11, no. 2, 1995, pp. 227-260.

Mongelli, Lorena. "Cop put his love through hell, then he took her life." 12 May 2007. Accessed 19 November 2021. https://nypost.com/2007/05/12/cop-put-his-love-through-hell-then-he-took-her-life-kin/

Mootoo, Shani. "On Becoming an Indian Starboy." *Canadian Literature,* vol. 196, 2008, pp. 83-94.

Nyong'o, Tavia, et al. "Queering Archives: A Roundtable Discussion." *Radical History Review,* no. 122, 2015, pp. 211-231.

Niranjana, Tejaswini. *Mobilizing India: Women, Music and Migration Between India and Trinidad.* Duke University Press, 2006.

Nixon, Angelique V., and Rosamond S. King, "Embodied Theories: Local Knowledge(s),

Community Organizing, and Feminist Methodologies in Caribbean Sexuality Studies." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, no. 7, 2013, pp. 1–16.

Oldenburg, Veena Talwar. "The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India." *Feminist Studies,* vol. 16, no. 2, 1990, pp. 259-287.

Ollivierre, Jillian. "(Un)Veiling 'Tradition': Fashioning Multifaceted *Orhni* and *Hijab* Assemblages in Trinidad." *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures,* vol. 5, no. 1–2, 2019, pp. 79–104.

Parsard, Kaneesha Cherelle. "Cutlass: Objects Toward a Theory of Representation." *Indo-Caribbean Feminist Thought: Genealogies, Theories, Enactments,* edited by Gabrielle Jamela Hosein and Lisa Outar, Palgrave, 2016, pp. 241-260.

Persadie, Ryan. "'Meh Jus Realize I's Ah Coolie Bai': Indo-Caribbean Masculinities, Chutney Genealogies, and Qoolie Subjectivities." *Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies,* vol. 4, no. 2, 2020, pp. 56-86.

Persard, Suzanne C. "Queering Chutney: Disrupting Heteronormative Paradigms of Indo-Caribbean Epistemology." *Journal of West Indian Literature,* vol. 26, no. 1, 2018, pp. 25-37.

Persaud, Anil. "The Civility of Things: 'Unnatural Practices' and the Making of Value(s) in the British Sugar Colonies." *Wadabagei,* vol. 10, no. 3, 2007, pp. 32-52.

Pidduck, Julianne. "Queer Kinship and Ambivalence: Video Autoethnographies by Jean Carlomusto and Richard Fung." *GLQ,* vol. 15, no. 3, 2009, pp. 441–468.

Pragg, Lauren. "The Queer Potential: (Indo-)Caribbean Feminisms and Heteronormativity." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, no. 6, 2012, pp. 1–14.

Puar, Jasbir K. "Global Circuits: Transnational Sexualities and Trinidad." *Signs,* vol. 26, no. 4,

2001, pp. 1039-1065.

------. "Chutney to Queer and Back: Trinidad 1995." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies,* vol. 3, 2009, pp. 1-10.

------. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times.* Duke University Press, 2007.

Puri, Shalini. "Race, Rape and Representation: Indo-Caribbean Women and Cultural Nationalism." *Cultural Critique,* no. 36, 1997, pp. 119-163.

Rajchman, John. "Foucault's Art of Seeing." *October,* vol. 44, 1988, pp. 88-117.

Ramnarine, Tina K. "Historical Representations, Performance Spaces, and Kinship Themes in Indian-Caribbean Popular Song Texts. *Asian Music,* vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 1998-1999, pp, 1-33.

Reddock, Rhoda. "Freedom Denied: Indian Women and Indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845-1917. *Economic and Political Weekly,* vol. 20, no. 43, 1985, pp. WS79-WS87. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4374974. Accessed 4 December 2019.

Robertson, Glory. "Some early Jamaican postcards, their photographers and publishers." *Jamaica Journal,* vol. 18, no. 1 (February – April 1985), pp. 13-22. Digital Library of the Caribbean. Accessed 10 March 2021. https://www.dloc.com//UF00090030/00046

Reddy, Gayatri. *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India.* University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Rosen, Jonathan and Tejpal, Taun. "V.S. Naipaul: "he Art of Fiction No. 154." The *Paris Review,* no. 148, 1998, https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1069/the-art-of-fiction-no-154-v-s-naipaul. Accessed 7 February 2022.

Ro(u)ted by Our Stories Collective. "Stories the Mangroves Hold: Reflections on Indo-Caribbean Feminist Community Archiving." *The Journal for the Study of Indentureship and Its Legacies,* vol. 1, no. 1, 2021, pp. 63-83.

Roy, Arundhati. “The Doctor and the Saint.” *The Annihilation of Caste.* Edited and annotated by S. Anand Verso, 2014

Sankeralli, Burton. “Indian Presence in Carnival.” *TDR,* vol. 42, no. 3, 1998, pp. 203-212.

Sappho. “Fragment 105(a).” Translated by Anita George. *Poetry,* vol. 164, no. 3, 1994, 140.

Shepherd, Verene A. “Constructing Visibility: Indian Women in the Jamaican Segment of the Indian Diaspora.” *Gendered Realities: Essays in Caribbean Feminist Thought,* edited by Patricia Mohammed, University of the West Indies Press, 2002, pp. 107-128.

-------. *Transients to Settlers: The Experience of Indians in Jamaica 1845-1950.* Peepal Tree Press, 1994.

------. “Gender, Migration and Settlement: The Indentureship and Post-Indentureship Experience of Indian Females in Jamaica 1845-1943.” *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective,* edited by Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton and Barbara Bailey, St. Martin’s Press, 1995, pp. 233-257.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, edited by Rosalind Morris, Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 21-78; 227-291.

Surajbali. Preia D. “Indo-Caribbean Feminist Epistemology: A Personal and Scholarly Journey.” *Indo-Caribbean Feminist Thought: Genealogies, Thoughts, Enactments*, edited by Gabrielle Hosein and Lisa Outar, Palgrave, 2016, pp. 37-48.

Tambiah, Yasmin. “Creating (Im)moral Citizens: Gender, Sexuality and Lawmaking in Trinidad and Tobago, 1986.” *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies,* no. 3, 2009, pp. 1-19.

Singh, Vijay Prakash. “From Tawaif to Nautch Girl: the Transition of the Lucknow Courtesan.” *South Asia Review,* vol. 35, no. 2, 2014, pp. 177-194.

Thompson, Krista. *An Eye for the Tropics.* Duke University Press, 2006.

Tinker, Hugh. *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920.* Institute of Race Relations. London: Oxford University Press, 1974.

Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature*. Duke University Press, 2010.

------. "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage." *GLQ,* vol. 14, no. 2-3, pp. 191-215.

Tracy, Thomas; Burke, Kerry; McShane, Larry. "Woman fatally stabled in Queens home, abusive husband found hanging from tree in suspected murder-suicide." *New York Daily News.* 1 January 2018, https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/queens/queens-woman-found-stabbed-death-home-article-1.3731590. Accessed 19 November 2021.

Trotz, D. Alissa. "Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*: Intimacies, Proximities, Relationalities." *Small Axe,* vol. 56 (2018), pp. 219-231.

Vadarajan, Latika. "Indian Seafaring: The Precept and Reality of Kalivarjya." *Australian Association for Maritime History,* vol. 5, no. 1, 1983, pp. 1-12. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42562422. Accessed 15 January 2021.

Wahab, Amar. (Re)tracing Queerness: Archiving Indentureship's 'Coolie Homo/Erotic'. *Visual Studies,* no. 34, vol. 4, 2019, pp. 388-394.

Wahab, Amar and Plaza, Duaine. "Queerness in the Transnational Caribbean-Canadian Diaspora." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies,* no. 3, 2009, pp. 1-34.

Walcott, Rinaldo. "Queer Returns." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies,* vol. 3, 2009, pp. 1–19.

Wekker, Gloria. The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.