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

Suzanne C. Persard
Emory University
suzanne.c.persard@emory.edu

Michelle Mohabeer's groundbreaking Indo-Caribbean queer film, *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* (1994) remains one of the earliest works of queer Indo-Caribbean visual art. Mohabeer scripts the lesbian body cinematically through an iconography of indenture: coconut, cane, cutlass. This article returns to *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* nearly three decades after its release to examine the radical ways in which Mohabeer's visual aesthetics posits the canescape as a site of Indo-Caribbean lesbian subjectivity, reconfigures the cutlass from its status of violence to one of desire, and examines the poetics of fragmentation as a queer feminist genealogical approach. In our reading of *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* as a visual text of rewriting diasporic subjectivity, Mohabeer produces a radical visual genealogy that narrates diasporic Indo-Caribbean identity through a primary site of queerness, upending historical approaches to gender and sexuality within traditional configurations of the indentured diasporas.

Keywords: queer, Indo-Caribbean, lesbian, diaspora, sexuality, aesthetics

La innovadora película indocaribeña queer de Michelle Mohabeer, *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* (1994), sigue siendo una de las primeras obras de arte visual indocaribeño queer. Mohabeer escribe el cuerpo lésbico cinemáticamente a través de una iconografía de la mano de obra importada no abonada: coco, caña, alfanje. Este artículo regresa a *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* casi tres décadas después de su estreno para examinar las formas radicales en que la estética visual de Mohabeer plantea el lugar del cañaveral como un sitio de subjetividad lesbiana indocaribeña, reconfigura el alfanje desde su connotación de violencia a otra de deseo y examina la poética de la fragmentación como un enfoque genealógico feminista queer. En nuestra lectura de *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* como un texto visual de la reescritura de la subjetividad diaspórica, Mohabeer produce una genealogía visual radical que narra la identidad indocaribeña diaspórica a través de un sitio primario de lo queer, trastornando los enfoques históricos al género y a la sexualidad dentro de las configuraciones tradicionales de las diásporas de la mano de obra importada no abonada.

Palabras clave: queer, Indo-Caribe, lesbiana, diáspora, sexualidad, estética

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

Coconut/Cane & Cutlass (1994)
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 by the visual, aesthetic, and sense of queer possibility, this is how 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 a short 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 to Manhattan that night. The scene that I remembered the most—the same shot captured on that e-mailed flyer—is the still 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, for 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

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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 article, 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 (2010, 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.

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In the film's opening scene, cane stalks blow in the wind as a sienna tint that colors the fields, evokimg 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 whether the absence is 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 2002; Bahadur 2014**)**. 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 transformed into the image of a woman. Mohabeer's 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 1999, 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?" (2010, 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" (qtd. in Tinsley 2010, 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 rather, 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" (Das 1977). The voice continues reciting the poem as two women praying side by side appear on a ship. The poem continues with verses about the Fatel Rozack and Hesperus, two

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ships that transported indentured Indians to Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana. During the crossing of the Kala Pani or Indian Ocean, the terms *jahaji bhai* (ship brother) and *jahaji bahen* (ship sister) were used by indentured Indians aboard those ships to signify bonds of kinship during the oceanic passage to the indentured colonies (Mohammed 2012, 4).

Mohabeer therefore materializes the lyricism of the *jahaji* poetry of indenture to recreate a scene of *jahaji* women together. Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo has argued that the *jahaji bhai* trope of indenture has historically interpellated a masculine subject, which has often excluded women from its sociocultural and scholarly formations (2000, 80). But 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. In this approach to an alternative genealogy of kinship, which I am calling a speculative erotics, I aim to disrupt 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. 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.

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 2009, 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 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 postindentureship period as a feminine object of "Indianness" (Ollivierre 2019, 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

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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" (1999, 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 2002, 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 counteraesthetic to the traditional portrayal of indentured Indian women on plantations. In one scene, a figure that could be androgynous holds a stalk of cane, begins stripping its leaves, and continues, 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 1990).

If, as Judith Butler (1990) 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" (1999, 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 aloneness does not lead to the inevitability (and risk of violence) of the heterosexual conjugal bond" (1999, 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.

The performativity of the cane cutter through the object of the cutlass, furthermore, 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

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number of deaths on plantations (Reddock 1985; Mohammed 2002; Bahadur 2014). 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 (2016) 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: "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" (2016, 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.[1] Shalini Puri notes that the language of murders of Indian women by their partners has constituted the "cultural vocabulary" of Indo-Caribbean identity (1997, 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" (2016, 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 2010, 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 "&

[1] The language of "chop" figures prominently in Caribbean newspaper headlines describing women's murders or attempted murders by husbands and intimate partners. See *Starbroek News*, March 31, 2019: https://www.stabroeknews.com/2019/03/31/news/guyana/murdered-corentyne-woman-didnt-believe-husband-would-harm-her/; *Trinidad & Tobago Guardian*, November 2019: https://www.guardian.co.tt/news/woman-chopped-to-death-in-st-helena-6.2.976423.bed2bb60be.

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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" (2010, 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 2004, 145). Atluri notes that Mohabeer disrupts the "ethnographic spectacles of the Other" by embracing a kind of fluid subjectivity through an aesthetics of autoethnography (2009, 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" (Sappho 1994). 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 2020, 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. 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

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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 2010, 4). For indentured Indian women, transposing the bodies of women into the cane field imagines queer eroticism as an alternative to, or even alongside, 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 1995), 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 2009, 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 (2005, 22), and that the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora attend to "the fragmentary and the discarded" (2018, 175). These queer aesthetic practices are not only archival, but necessarily disorient objects, spaces, and temporalities (Gopinath 2018, 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

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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 2009). For Tara Atluri, Mohabeer portrays postcolonial sexual identities as "untranslatable fragments of memory, sensory experience and desire" (2009, 7), while Rosanne Kanhai has argued that the scene of performance with multiple masks "reconstructs the fragmented self" (1999, 231). Although the fragmented methodology of the film presents the complexity of postindenture 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 postindentured 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" (2007, 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, according to Sapphic scholar Anne Carson: "All the rest are fragments" (qtd. in Huffer 2020, 36). As Lynne Huffer notes, translators of Sappho mark the "incompleteness of her poems with brackets, diacritical devices that designate absence" (2020, 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" (2020, 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 2012; Mishra 1996; Carter and Torabully 2002; Mehta 2004; Bahadur 2014; 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 2002, Mehta 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

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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 to places like the United States, Europe, and Canada as part of a second diaspora (Mishra 1996), 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 (2009, 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" (2012, 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 postindenture 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 2009, 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

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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" (Gopinath 2018, 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 2003, 133).

Mohabeer subsequently presents queerness as a central conceptual frame for theorizing postindentured 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 in 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 sexual violence done to them. 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 2018, 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 scripting of lesbian eroticism produces the queerness through focusing on the intentional intimacy between women, imagined at the site of not only the bedroom but the barracks. 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*

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space and the tenor of its provocative homosociality, as well as in the sphere of chutney performance (Lokaisingh-Meighoo 2000; Gopinath 2005; Pragg 2012; Persard 2018).

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 2010, 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?

Conclusion

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?

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Suzanne C. Persard is a scholar of queer and feminist theory whose work centralizes the formations of gender and sexualities in the post-indenture Caribbean and its diasporas.

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