Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies, 2020
Vol. 4, No. 2, 2-9

From Indenture to Double Diaspora: Music, Film, and Visual Art of the Indian Caribbean

Christopher L. Ballengee
Anne Arundel Community College, Maryland
christopherballengee@gmail.com

Darrell Gerohn Baksh
University of the West Indies, St Augustine
darrell.baksh@alumni.utoronto.ca

This dossier seeks to make the Indian Caribbean more visible and more pertinent to critical debates within Caribbean discourses. Few studies have undertaken serious analyses of Indian Caribbean creative expression, and most ignore the newness and complex fusions that characterize music, dance, and visual cultures in the postindenture diaspora. We endeavor to nuance conversations around marginalized Caribbean cultural production and multilocal identity, understanding the arts as useful historical archives. An overview of Indian indentureship precedes the presentation of the articles, which provide deep analyses that critically address these issues: how Indian identity is expressed and debated in performative and artistic practices, including LGBTQ challenges to categories of race and gender; what comparative analyses reveal about continuity, change, and exchange across the Indian Caribbean diaspora; how racial and cultural alterities are resolved within an African "creole" and/or multicultural framework; and how orientations to India, citizenship, and transnational belonging are expressed and processed.

Keywords: Indo-Caribbean, creolization, LGBT studies, Indian, visual art, performing art

Este dossier busca hacer el Caribe indio más visible y más pertinente en los debates críticos en los discursos caribeños. Pocos estudios han realizado análisis serios de la expresión creativa del Caribe indio y la mayoría ignora la novedad y las complejas fusiones que caracterizan la música, la danza y las culturas visuales en la diáspora posterior al periodo de la mano de obra importada no abonada. Nos esforzamos por matizar las conversaciones en torno a la producción cultural caribeña marginada y la identidad multilocal, entendiendo las artes como archivos históricos útiles. Una visión general de la contratación de trabajadores de la India precede a la presentación de los artículos, los cuales proporcionan análisis profundos que abordan críticamente estos temas: cómo se expresa y se debate la identidad india en las prácticas performativas y artísticas, incluyendo los desafíos LGBTQ a las categorías de raza y género; qué revelan los análisis comparativos sobre la continuidad, el cambio y el intercambio en toda la diáspora india caribeña; cómo se resuelven las alteridades raciales y culturales dentro

DOI: 10.23870/marlas.345

de un "creole" africano y/o un marco multicultural; y cómo se expresan y procesan las orientaciones a la India, la ciudadanía y la pertenencia transnacional.

Palabras clave: Caribe indio, creolización, estudios LGBT, indio, arte visual, performance

In part to commemorate the one-hundred-year anniversary of the abolition of Indian indentureship, this special dossier in the *Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies* considers how Indianness finds expression in regional and diasporic Caribbean contexts through visual and performing arts. Art, dance, and music are frequently invoked in academic and public discourse as quintessential examples of Indian postindenture identities, however, few existing studies have undertaken serious structural analyses of Indian Caribbean creative expression. Moreover, much of the extant literature on Indian Caribbean culture focuses on continuities with India rather than the newness and complex fusions that characterize music, dance, and visual cultures in the post indenture diaspora.

The authors in this dossier provide thoughtful attention in this regard, creating space to legitimize the multifaceted and intertwined visual and sonic legacies of colonization, slavery, and indentureship. More specifically, we are concerned with nuancing conversations around Caribbean cultural production and multilocal identity. This endeavor is part of an ongoing effort to build on recent scholarship that has drawn attention to understanding and demarginalizing the place of the Indian Caribbean from a variety of artistic, feminist, and sociocultural perspectives (Gosine 2017; Gosine, Metzger, and Mohammed 2019; Hosein and Outar 2016; Munos and Pandurang 2018; Ramnarine 2019). Most articles in this issue are authored by underrepresented Caribbean and diasporic scholars who provide deep analyses of performative practices that critically address the following areas: the means through which Indian identity is expressed and debated by cultural stakeholders in the Caribbean and its diaspora; what comparative analyses of creative practices reveal about continuity, change, and exchange across the Indian Caribbean diaspora; how racial and cultural alterities are resolved within a "creole" and/or multicultural framework; and how orientations to India, citizenship in diaspora, and transnational belonging are expressed and processed through visual and performing arts.

The year 2017 marked the centenary anniversary of the end of the British indentureship system, a scheme meant to sustain agricultural and industrial colonies after the abolition of slavery. While laborers were recruited from Europe, Africa, and Asia, the majority came from prepartition India, primarily Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Bengal, though significant numbers were also recruited from Madras in the south. As part of this system, around 1.4 million Indians were sent to work in territories around the world. They were first imported into the Indian Ocean islands of Réunion and Mauritius as early as 1826. However, indentureship as an institutionalized scheme of bound labor would only begin in earnest in the years leading to the abolition of slavery in the British Empire (which took place in stages in the 1830s), when indentured Indians were taken to the Mascarenes, parts of east and south Africa, Fiji, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. The Caribbean was a major beneficiary of the indentureship system; about 500,000 Indians were imported in this way. The first shipload arrived in Guyana in 1838,

MARLAS 4(2), 2020, DOI: 10.23870/marlas.345

Trinidad and Jamaica in 1845, and other locales in the decades to follow. Related schemes of indenture also carried Indians to non-British colonies in the region, especially Suriname, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guiana (Northrup 2000; Hassankhan 2014; Roopnarine 2016).

This system of migrant labor continued until 1917, generally acknowledged as the "end" of Indian indenture. Several factors brought about its termination, including political pressure from Mahatma Gandhi (Persaud 2019) and members of Indian expatriate communities, the rise of Indian nationalism, the repercussions of World War I, flaws in indenture's framework, and the negligence and maltreatment of indentured laborers by the planter class (Roopnarine 2017). However, the contracts of the last indentured laborers were not in fact fulfilled (or otherwise negated) until 1920, at which time the British and Indian governments officially abolished the practice of indenture (Roopnarine 2017).

Repatriation to India was usually guaranteed after a period of continuous work in the colonies, yet about two-thirds of the laborers chose to forego return passage and settle in the Caribbean (Roopnarine 2017). Entering an already-creolizing colonial system, also already stratified and hierarchized by race and class, Indians were regarded as outsiders, a status compounded by their segregation on estates outside centers of political power and on the periphery of cultural visibility (Brereton 1979, 176–77). This notion persisted as Caribbean colonies edged toward independence beginning in the early 1960s when Indian Caribbeans were largely excluded from participating in nationalist projects. As just one example, national belonging in Trinidad and Tobago at the moment of independence in 1962 was largely configured according to an "Afro-Creole nationalist narrative" in which "people of African or part-African descent—Creoles in local terminology—were the most important constituent group in the nation, the core Trinidadians . . . who had the historical 'right' to succeed the British in the governance of the new nation" (Brereton 2010, 221). Where numbers were relatively few, in islands like Jamaica, Martinique, and Guadeloupe, Indian Caribbean communities were largely subsumed into the general population. In places like Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Suriname, where the demographic was much greater, Indian Caribbean communities were more cohesive, maintaining and reinventing their own cultural traditions without much expectation of state support or recognition. The postindependence period also marked increased migrations from the Caribbean to the global north, driven by factors such as political turbulence, ethnic rivalries, and economic hardships and aided by special colonial relations and modified immigration laws in Canada, the United States, and Europe (Roopnarine 2003, 48). These migrations established significant Indian Caribbean communities in New York City, Toronto, central and south Florida, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands.

Though the Indian immigrants are now generations removed from bound labor on the plantation, as the articles in this issue demonstrate, the circumstances of indenture continue to impact Indian Caribbean creative expression. Many of the works analyzed by this issue's authors specifically foreground "the evacuated Plantation" (Kabir in this issue) as a foundational point of remembering. It is from the context of the plantation, for example, that the epithet "coolie" emerged in the colonial past, normalized in historical and archival accounts to describe both Indian and Chinese immigrant

labor. In the postcolonial Caribbean, the term took on a derogatory connotation in reference to Indians in particular. While there have been concerted efforts to reclaim "coolie" in academic (Carter and Torabully 2002) and popular (see Persadie in this issue) discourse, the term still evokes deep histories of intergenerational trauma and violence.

Adopted and normalized by colonialists, "coolie" was replaced in the postcolonial era by descriptors like "East Indian," "Zindiens," and "Hindoestaan" in the English, French, and Dutch Caribbean respectively. These remain enduring but contested labels emerging from plantation-era inheritances that fostered division and difference. Implying not just ethnic identifications but also apparent foreign allegiances, the labels work to reinforce notions of the Indian Caribbean body as Other and therefore outside the limits of sociocultural inclusion and more broadly "creole" citizenship. In this way, "East Indian" has historically been perceived in opposition to "West Indian," and this struggle has produced a politics of racial and ethnic purity that continues to play out despite processes of mixing that have occurred across time and space.

As an alternative, "Indo-Caribbean" has gained traction in recent years and seems to more assertively anchor Indian identity to a Caribbean context. The usefulness of "Indo-Caribbean" may lie in the way it responds more relevantly to a postindenture, postcolonial, and diasporic present where living within creolized cultures and societies, and in proximity to African Caribbeanness, is an undeniable reality even when resistance to cultural mixing persists. Indeed, "creole" has acquired racial connotations in reference to Caribbean peoples of primarily African descent. As such, "Indo-Caribbean" may serve separatist motives as a polarizing term where race and ethnicity are deployed to trump nationality, particularly in the arena of state governance (as in Trinidad and Tobago where racial tensions endure [Premdas 2004; Baboolal 2020] and in Guyana where political unrest has in the past and as recently as this year led to outbursts of racial violence [Smith 1995; Yahya-Sakur and Kurmanaev 2020]).

"Indo-Caribbean" works, however, to challenge monolithic definitions and perceptions of Caribbean identity—often understood as exclusively "black" and/or "African"—as it fosters the need for wider representations of the ethnic diversities that comprise postindependence Caribbean populations while speaking to the specific experiences, evolutions, and enduring legacies of Indian Caribbean indenture. For these reasons, we acknowledge how "Indo-Caribbean" has been increasingly adopted both within academic spaces and amongst Caribbean populations to combat cultural marginalizations and erasures of Indian Caribbean identity, and we call attention to the fact that "Indo-Caribbean" rather than "Indian Caribbean" appears throughout most of the contributions to this special dossier. This preference does not neutralize our recommendation of "Indian Caribbean" but, in fact, emphasizes just how equivocal the issue of identity formation remains for Indian postindenture communities. In proposing "Indian Caribbean," we suggest an alternative means of meditating and expanding on the transnational possibilities and reenvisionings of Indian postindenture identity across multiple spaces that have long been characterized by both creative retention and (re)invention of Indian cultural practices.

MARLAS 4(2), 2020, DOI: 10.23870/marlas.345

The ways in which the Caribbean cultural archive is performed marks a common point of departure for these essays. They respond to Deborah A. Thomas' reflections on the Caribbean archive as a means of unfolding an array of possible futures within and beyond the spaces of the nation-state (2013, 42) that serves different purposes within different geopolitical and historical moments (28), even as this archive has traditionally been a creative "process of black memory making" (27). The essays herein work to investigate and reexamine the cultural archive by providing counter- and even co-narratives that diversify and complicate canonical readings of the Caribbean which encompass Indian postindenture cultures, concurrently turning from India to spotlight the Caribbean region and its diasporas.

"Indians have progressed far beyond the nostalgic sentiments of arrival," writes Patricia Mohammed in the opening essay in this volume. In her analysis of Indianness in Caribbean visual art, Mohammed explores the histories and genealogies of an Indian Caribbean aesthetic that has nuanced and persistently imprinted upon the existing Caribbean cultural archive. She concludes that the visual work of Indian Caribbean culture "remains a work in progress" in concert with other diasporic traditions. In this way, Mohammed echoes other authors in this issue who similarly suggest that Indian Trinidadian creative expression can only be understood in relation to and as a product of the variegated processes of creolization and diasporic creativity.

Several authors engage with the queer Indian Caribbean, revealing and rehabilitating the invisibility of and hostility towards queerness in popular discourse. Suzanne C. Persard provides a counterdiscursive reading of the Caribbean archive that has long been framed through heteronormative practices and African Caribbean cultural memory. She does so through critique of Michelle Mohabeer's 1994 film *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* that enfolds and reimagines the intersections of Caribbean, Indian, Hindu, lesbian, and postplantation identities as constituting an archive of indenture. In their contributions, Ryan Persadie and Krystal N. Ghisyawan and Preity R. Kumar provide queer analyses of soca and chutney-soca music videos. Persadie argues for a queer appropriation of "coolie" in offering "qoolie potentials" as a way to reconsider the diasporic possibilities and relationalities of race, gender, and sexuality through a close reading of Indian Caribbean popular music performance. Meanwhile, Ghisyawan and Kumar engage with African Caribbean and Indian Caribbean music video performances to theorize an affective framework of queer tactility that considers what possibilities can exist for reimagining the intimacies of race, gender, and sexuality.

The Indian Caribbean has long been linked with a substantial secondary diaspora in Europe and North America. Vanessa Anne Godden and Tarika Sankar center their writings on creative expression that emerges from this "double diaspora," specifically focusing on works that resonate with the troubled legacies of the historic traumas of indenture and more recent displacements associated with transnational migration. Writing from a Caribbean-Canadian context, Godden reflects on the past coming to bear on the present in their innovative performance art that considers how the physical Indian Caribbean body, the idea of "home," and the practice of culture are intricately entangled with historic and ongoing experiences of trauma. In describing three of their own performances, Godden

MARLAS 4(2), 2020, DOI: 10.23870/marlas.345

processes the ancestral trauma of indenture alongside the racism they experienced growing up Brown in Canada and the US and their own personal trauma of sexual assault. These painful experiences are processed through artistic expression bound up in the myriad entanglements of decolonization. Sankar critiques work by New York-based Indian Caribbean artists whose creative practice emerges from the invisibility of Indian Caribbeanness in the racial discourse of the United States, which "triggers a revisiting of the historical legacies of migration and indenture" that leads to new conceptions of self and community. Such a process, Sankar argues, allows diasporic communities to elide the "reified categories of race and ethnicity" that dominate sociopolitical nationalist discourse in the Caribbean.

Christopher L. Ballengee further develops the sociocultural politics of Caribbean nationalist discourse via structural analyses of Trinidadian musical styles. He shows how music functions as both sonic and archival practice, conveying colonial and postcolonial relationships between music makers while providing new and useful ways of understanding the creativity and performative aspects of creolization. In the issue's concluding article, Ananya Jahanara Kabir offers a transnational perspective that considers alternate routes to processes of Indian Caribbean creolization by exploring the ways in which Indian Caribbean artistic praxis in Guadeloupe exemplifies a postplantation memorialization and transformation that brings the Atlantic and Indian Oceans in diasporic dialogue with each other. To understand these creative practices through a transoceanic lens, she argues, means participating in a continuous process of decreolization as an attempt to transfer Indian Caribbean identity "out of a differentially creolized cultural landscape and to affiliate across that landscape" which must then be embodied into a "fractal understanding of creolization within which recreolization is necessarily enfolded."

The essays remind us that Indian Caribbean peoples have significantly shaped the fabric of their respective Caribbean and diasporic societies. However, even one hundred years postindenture, relatively little attention has been accorded Indian Caribbean visual and performing arts toward understandings of how these contributions reflect and register upon complex processes involved in formations and potentialities of Caribbean identity. It is our wish then that we meaningfully add to the existing body of scholarly research that engenders sustainable interest in making the Indian Caribbean more visible, more vocal, and more pertinent to the necessary and critical debates taking place within public and academic Caribbean discourses in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Christopher L. Ballengee is an ethnomusicologist and Associate Professor of music at Anne Arundel Community College (Maryland, USA), who has researched Indian Caribbean music since 2007. As a Diego Carpitella Visual Ethnomusicology fellow at the Giorgio Cini Foundation (2018–2019), he completed a feature-length documentary film *Sweet Tassa: Music of the Indian Caribbean Diaspora* that has been screened at numerous conferences and festivals. His current research centers on dhol-tasha drumming and related genres throughout the South Asian postindenture diaspora.

Darrell Gerohn Baksh is a PhD candidate in the Cultural Studies program at The University of the West Indies (St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad), who researches Indian Caribbean popular music culture. His work explores the evolution and reinvention of Trinidadian chutney-soca to consider what possibilities and reimaginings of Indian Caribbean identity exist through musical mixings and remixings.

References

Baboolal, Yvonne
2020 "Politicians Blamed for Racial Tensions." *Trinidad Express*, 30 Aug.

Brereton, Bridget
1979 *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad 1870-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2010 "'All ah we is not one': Historical and Ethnic Narratives in Pluralist Trinidad." *The Global South* 4 (2): 218–238.

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

Gosine, Andil, ed.
2017 "Art after Indenture" [Special issue]. *Small Axe* 21 (2).

Gosine, Andil, Sean Metzer, and Patricia Mohammed, eds.
2019 "Expressions of Asian Caribbeanness" [Special issue]. *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* 5 (1–2).

Hassankhan, Maurits S.
2014 "The Indian Indentured Experience in Suriname: Control, Accommodation and Resistance." In *Resistance and Indian Indenture Experience: Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Hassankhan, Brij V. Lal, and Doug Munro, 199–240. New Delhi: Manohar.

Hosein, Gabrielle Jamela, and Lisa Outar, eds.
2017 *Indo-Caribbean Feminist Thought: Genealogies, Theories, Enactments*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Munos, Delphine, and Mala Pandurang, eds.
2018 "Race Relations and the South Asian Diasporic Imaginary" [Special issue]. *South Asian Diaspora* 10 (2).

Northrup, David
2000 "Indentured Indians in the French Antilles." *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 87 (326–327): 245–271. https://doi.org/10.3406/outre.2000.3777

Persaud, Alexander
2019 "Escaping Local Risk by Entering Indentureship: Evidence from Nineteenth-Century Indian Migration." *The Journal of Economic History* 79 (2): 447–476.

Premdas, Ralph R.
2004 "Elections, Identity and Ethnic Conflict in the Caribbean." *Pouvoirs dans la Caraïbe* 14: 17–61. https://doi.org/10.4000/plc.246

Ramnarine, Tina K., ed.
2019 "Dance, Music and Cultures of Decolonisation in the Indian Diaspora" [Special issue]. *South Asian Diaspora* 11 (2).

Roopnarine, Lomarsh
2003 "Indo-Caribbean Migration: From Periphery to Core." *Caribbean Quarterly* 49 (3): 30–60.
2016 *Indian Indenture in the Danish West Indies, 1863–1873*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-30710-7
2017 "Indian Indentured Servitude in the Atlantic World." *Oxford Bibliographies in Atlantic History*. https://doi.org/10.1093/OBO/9780199730414-0210

Smith, Raymond T.
1995 "'Living in the Gun Mouth': Race, Class, and Political Violence in Guyana." *New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 69 (3/4): 223–252.

Thomas, Deborah A.
2013 "Caribbean Studies, Archive Building, and the Problem of Violence." *Small Axe* 17 (2): 27–42.

Yahya-Sakur, Nafeeza, and Anatoly Kurmanaev
2020 "Killings Reignite Racial Tensions in Guyana." *New York Times*, 10 Sept. Online: https://nyti.ms/3bI1lGg