



# Queer Desires: Colonial Photographic Portraits of the Indentured Labourers of Mauritius.

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## Abstract

This Master of Fine Arts thesis investigates a photographic archive of indentured labourers whose portraits were taken for government record when photographic technology was in its nascency on the British colonial island of Mauritius. As a Mauritian-Canadian, queer, multidisciplinary artist-researcher, I will address ancestors through a unique cultural vantage point. I will use the method of research creation paired with post-colonial theory, intersectional feminism and queer theory to uncover the complex relationality hidden in the page of tome PG2 of the archive released to me by the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in Mauritius. The thesis includes three mixed media artworks which will provide a transtemporal link to the inhabitants of the archive.

## Acknowledgements

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With that said, I would like to thank the Indigenous, Black, the Racialized, the women, non-binary and trans community at OCAD University for inviting me to sit closer to their circles. Thank you to my partner Stephen for being there every step of the way. I am forever grateful to my Mother Lutchmeen, the first in her generation of women to go to medical school from the Island of Mauritius and to my big sister Rushmee who protected and nurtured my femininity.

I would also like to thank the people at The Mahatma Gandhi Institute and the National Archives in Mauritius for allowing access to the archives along with their guidance through the research process. Last and foremost to the ancestors who inspired this will to knowledge.

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## Illegitimate artis(t)an: A Prologue

The subject of the following thesis revolves around the indentured Indian photographs now called the Indian Immigration Archives housed at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in Mauritius. As I am claiming a personal connection to the people reflected in the photography, I must iterate that this connection is through oral histories passed down by my relatives through my mother's lineage. I was given access to the archives through the process of an application which outlined that this research was intended for academic purposes. Through an indirect process, I could also access this archive, to search for a photograph of a descendant. Yet, the latter is not within the scope of this thesis. This procedure uncovers questions as to the nature of seeking legitimacy within this archival record, whose original function was a tool of colonial surveillance. The act of individuals finding kin in the pages of these photographs has become a sort of family ritual of reclamation and private veneration of ancestors which I acknowledge and respect. Staking a legitimate claim to this archive would possibly find me closer, maybe too close, to the political nature of the document in the Mauritian context at present. As a queer person holding dual citizenship of Canada and Ireland, I would rather distance myself from the possibility that my research could be taken as a political act in the present in Mauritius. The claiming of this document is a claim that would be shared by my entire genealogical family, which begs the question of consent in doing this archival work. There are questions of class and status embedded in the sharing of this information and legitimizing it within the culture of my genealogical family and is something I need to consider fully and not within this thesis. As a queer Mauritian person the idea of family is not just based on descendancy. I am creolised, the other, searching for kinship in this document outside the ideals of a hegemony. Do I need to use the archive in order

to find my ancestors and validate myself to me, you or anyone? As you will see, the process of originally taking these photographs was to invalidate the full citizenship of the indentured worker. Do you see where it gets complicated to request validation from a document that solely sought to invalidate? I sit with this question at present.

Khal Torabully, probably the most famous Mauritian poet, spoke of the *Kala Pani* or Black Water in Hindu mythology where a Hindu would lose caste and identity if she travelled over the ocean. This represented a break from her heritage. In his epic poem, *Calle d' Étoiles: Coolitude* (1992), he uses language from the Dutch, French, African and Indian diasporas to unpack the creolised indentured coolie. This work does not essentialize Mother India or Hinduism. The poem is itself a reclamation and veneration of a people transformed. York University professor of Caribbean Sexualities and artist, Dr. Andil Gosine, goes further to question the Ganges as the essentialized body of Hindu holy water in his article *After Indenture*, written in *Small Axe* magazine, while describing his art performance entitled, *Holy Waters*.

In 2014, I (Andil Gosine) performed *Our Holy Waters, And Mine* at the Queens Museum in New York. The piece comprised an audio track that repeated the phrase “Our holy waters are not the Ganges” 108 times, interspersed with the names of twelve waterways: six crossed by indentureds on their way to the Caribbean (“Bay of Bengal,” “Indian Ocean,” “Atlantic Ocean,” “Gulf of Paria,” “Berbice River,” and “Caribbean Sea”) and six waterways from cities where I have lived (“La Seine,” “The Thames,” “Rio Manzanares,” “Lake Ontario,” “Potomac River,” and “Hudson River”)(Gosin 65).

My father’s family left India in similar circumstances to the indenture system of Mauritius to live in Kenya. My mother and father spoke English to each other because they did not share a common South Asian language. They spoke the language of the colonisers. He also speaks Swahili fluently, she Mauritian Creole. I come to this thesis bearing multiple crossings, multiple

break ups as Dr. Andil Gosine alludes to above. The post-colonial theorist, Gloria Anzaldúa<sup>1</sup> describes a similar happening to *Kala Pani*, “nepantla is the site of transformation, that place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures” (Anzaldua 540-577). It is an indigenous Nahuatl word. As a queer person, the process of being in this world has evolved in the formation of self-identity outside of genealogy, within a surrounding that was outside my original heritage, or land, which is South Asia. I still consider myself navigating Nepantla as I have no word to describe a person who looks like me, who is most comfortable in the company of women (I include everyone who self-identifies). At this moment I identify with the term non-binary. The complexity begins to build here and through researching the Indian Immigration Archives of Mauritius, I seek to engage with the complexity hidden in the photography. I am looking for transtemporal connections.

I am the illegitimate South Asian, the illegitimate Canadian, the illegitimate Mauritian artist navigating the *Kala Pani* (Black Water) of academia to find a language of complex relationality. I call the material practice shown in the fourth chapter in this thesis, artis(t)an. It describes my formation as an artisan of clothing and textiles. Coming from a former career in the fashion industry, I am trained in Parisienne Haute Couture, but cannot use the words Haute Couture to describe my work since that designation requires a designer to produce their garments in France. My hands can do the work, but I cannot claim the signifier for the expertise. As an artisan, my claim to art cannot be legitimized, although this thesis is in the pursuit of a Master of Fine Art. The word artis(t)an can be used as a noun identifying a person or place and holds the

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<sup>1</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria. Now let us shift...the path of conocimiento...inner work public acts. In Gloria Anzaldúa & A. Keating, *This bridge we call home: Radical visions for transformation*. New York: Routledge, 2022, pp. 540-577.



murky identity of a creolised practice- not art, not craft. Today, I am looking at the Indian Immigration Archive in Mauritius as a privileged person, reaching into the past to make connections to myself, but more importantly, to the migrants who are living the journey today.

Dr. Andil Gosine's sums up the need for communal research within the complex relationality of indenture and migration.

Drawing attention to the works of key indenture-descended artists will spur, I hope, deeper inquiries into the impact of the system on the constitution of our very humanities: How did it affect our desires, our sense of worth, our attitudes to each other, to ourselves? These questions, I believe, are a necessary but vastly under considered component of the social studies of problems that have dominated the field, including domestic violence, alcoholism, patriarchy, poverty, national-ism. In whispers and shouts, visual art practices broach difficult, and often understated, truths of the indentureship experience and reveal its contentious legacy, loaded as it is with ambivalence, contradiction, and possibility (Gosine 67).

## From Vernacular to Academy: An introduction



*Figure 1 Indentured labourers British Guyana*

I first discovered this photograph within a quick search while researching the word ‘coolie’ during the research-creation that explored the materiality of sugar. Before I get into the deep research I have undertaken into a photographic archive housed on the island of Mauritius, I would like to extrapolate from this picture the affect and the questions it has generated for me as a spectator of vernacular photography. I am a descendant from the island of Mauritius, and although this photo was taken in the Caribbean, the type of labour represented in this photo hails from India. This was part of the indentured labour<sup>2</sup> scheme drawn up by British private business

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<sup>2</sup> Indentured labour in the Indian context (1834-1920) developed after the abolishment of slavery in the British Empire in 1834. It began informally lead by the plantation owners in the British owned colonies to replace the slave labour which was now illegal. This informal system turned into a government lead practice when the abuses of the system became too flagrant to ignore. The Indian indenture system hinged on a contract between the

entities and then formalised through the British imperial crown as an efficient way of replacing slave labour on its international sugar estates, when slavery was abolished in 1834 in Britain.

Looking at this photo for the first time, I posited a sort of family portrait. As a South Asian descendant with roots in this indenture scheme, I felt a sort of pride in the work that these ancestors have done and the struggle they endured for me to live a privileged life. I felt an immediate connection. As an educated member of the diaspora in Northern Turtle Island (Canada), I imagined the ideas of poverty, undereducation, and misery often projected upon these people set against the banana plants behind them. Cut off from the modern world, this was a rural people set against the land they tilled. The white cotton of the dhotis (men's garments) and the sari (women's garment) in the photo are also markers of work and simplicity. I am close enough to my South Asian heritage to understand these cultural codes. Looking closer, the people in the photo do not seem to recognize their photographer. I am translating this as a tense outward gaze, a kind of wariness in their eyes. Their facial muscles are taught and the body posture is posed and formal as if they are acting on instruction. This was the first indication that the building nostalgia I was experiencing through affect might be misplaced. When I realized how many of these photos are circulating on the internet, with the same type of composition, I began to sense that a narrative might already have been fabricated for myself and the viewer. This was not a photo intended for me, it was not a family portrait. This was a survey of a type of people, a group of labourers, 'coolies', and most likely this picture was taken by a wealthy traveler for the purpose of procuring an exotic object, the photograph, to be taken as souvenir to his colonial metropole. This type of photo, and the concentration of the technology of

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labourer and the state whereby the labourer agreed to work for a renewable period of five years at the hands of their employers.

photography at the time was relegated to rich European men. The way these pictures have been arranged is fabricated from this gaze and the story the photograph portrays has already been thought out before the picture was taken. In this way, historian, Arriella Aïsha Azoulay<sup>3</sup>, describes the result as being pre-fabricated before the shutter closes.

The picture to be obtained is presumed to exist, even if for a brief moment, as a petty sovereign. The petty sovereign is not what is recorded in the photograph (in terms of its final content or image) but, rather, is a stand-alone photograph-to-be, the image that prefigures and conditions the closing and opening shutter. The petty sovereign asserts itself at the moment as preceding and separate from the photographic event, from the participants, and from the situation out of which a photograph is about to be extracted. It commands what sort of things have to be distanced, bracketed, removed, forgotten, suppressed, ignored, overcome, and made irrelevant for the shutter of the camera to function, as well as for a photograph to be taken and its meaning accepted. What is suppressed and made irrelevant by the shutter (Azoulay 2).

Azoulay is describing the petty sovereign<sup>4</sup> as an intentionality on the part of the photographer or orchestrator of the photograph, the wealthy man who hired the photographer. The orchestrator and/or photographer to her, and I agree, is the coloniser, making both the photographer and photography itself a tool of imperialism. As the orchestrator of photography works within this matrix of power and is doing its bidding. As I will be concentrating on the Mauritian Indentured Photographic Archive, which is now named the Indian Immigration Archives, I first would like to add this photograph to the larger archive Azoulay is alluding to. The archive first began in 1492, when colonisation began its death grip on both land and peoples. The petty sovereign that manipulated this photo into existence continued its path from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and in some

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<sup>3</sup> Azoulay, Ariella Aïsha. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. Brooklyn: Verso, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> The petty sovereign is an important term that the photography historian Ariella Aïsha Azoulay uses in her book, *Unlearning Imperialism*, to describe the preliminary thinking behind a photograph which removes details from the frame in order to manipulate the image to fit within the gaze of the photographer or person who is employing the photographer. She calls this person the orchestrator. This idea is central to this thesis as a photograph is always set up to portray a preconceived image. In the case of early photography, including the Indian Photographic Indentured Archive, the preconceived image was formulated by the coloniser. Azoulay then makes the leap to posit that this orchestration began at the dawn of European colonisation, in 1492.

respects, continues to create photos like this one in the present. What has been left out is intentional and the work of the shutter as a mechanism does not relinquish the responsibility of the orchestrator/photographer. Azoulay urges us to dig deeper into the circumstances around the taking of such photography and what the intentionality was behind the composition of the image. What is emphasised and what is left out and why?

We have to unlearn its seemingly obvious ties to previous and future modes of producing images and to problematize these ties that reduce photography to its products, its products to their visuality, and its scholars to specialists of images oblivious to the constitutive role of imperialism's major mechanism- the shutter. Unlearning photography as a field apart means first and foremost foregrounding the regime of imperial rights that made its emergence possible" (Azoulay 3).

In the photograph (Figure 1) six workers and one child are depicted against the backdrop of a banana plantation in British Guyana at the time on Indian indenture. In this black and white photograph the people are all wearing white cotton clothing. The men are depicted shirtless, except for one and the only woman is wearing a white cotton sari. The baby she carries in her arms does not look like it could be hers, due to her age. The young men squatting in the forefront lends an inflection of the humble nature of their lives. There are no markers of individuality except for the simple necklaces and a belt buckle which might be the only vestige of interculturality in the composition. The photograph, (Figure 1), is a staged scene and it is not the prowess of technique or the art form which this thesis aims to critique, it is the petty sovereign which makes it both a product of the past and present through the elements surrounding it which have brought its composition into fruition. Consider the orientalism<sup>5</sup> inherent in the photograph. Having no other trace of what would then be considered as modernity such as the white faces of the rich people behind the photograph or any indication of the multicultural nature of the

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<sup>5</sup> In this thesis paper I use the word Orientalism first taken from the work of historian Edward Said (Orientalism 1979) to refer to the exoticisation of the Eastern subject as a way to other the culture, work or individual themselves.

production sites of colonialism proves the work of cultural theorist Edward Said, that the East is a construction of the West as a way to keep the power residing in the West, therefore encasing the East in a sort of amber-sealed past like a relic. Edward Said's book, *Orientalism*, precedes the work of Azoulay as a foundational text on the inherent racism and exclusion of cultures. The shutter itself is the tool that permits the excision of the truth by omission. When the camera shutter closes in this case, it is also an eraser. This eraser is in the hands of the photographer and/or orchestrator of the photography which enforces the imperialistic othering of the subjects in this photo. Azoulay calls out the myth that continues as the legacy of imperialism as progress. This constant erasure of the past legitimizes and continues the crimes of imperialism in the present. Therefore, this thesis will question the idea of progress or modernity, in this case the technology of photography, as a tool to prop up the coloniser while casting the image of the primitive onto the groups of peoples it sought to exploit in order to maintain a hegemony of European/Western supremacy. The dominant subject and gaze during photography's nascency was the white colonial male, it is through his eyes photographic history in this document has been made. Therefore, it is through our gaze, the racialized descendants of the colonised, which we must question their narratives and our own, reading with and against the archives left for us to examine.

My aim in this essay is to uncover complexity in the inhabitants of the archive who were subjected to this excision both of place, body, temporality and relations, building beside the ethnographic and anthropological texts surrounding the Indian Immigration Archives in Mauritius. I am not speaking of a people from a supposed objectivity, I am speaking *with* our people exercising the strength of academic rigour to tell our stories. The three artistic case

studies in chapter 4 will help to illustrate the theory behind this test. The more complex the relationality of the indentured labourers are shown to possess, the closer they resemble the people we are in the present. Therefore, the goal is to expose the fiction in the photography of the other.



*Figure 2 Family photography in Northern Ontario (photograph copyright of the artist)*

But first, let me implicate myself in this process of unlearning imperialism, as a queer Canadian/Mauritian of South Asian descent who is a first-generation immigrant to Canada. In the above photo (Figure 2) five racialized children stand near the shore of a Northern Ontario lake. To the left, clear water washes up onto beige sand and to the right, a mix of deciduous and coniferous trees. The leaves are green which indicates spring. They are wearing coats and their tussled hair indicates a windy day. My sister and cousins are depicted in this scene. I am in the front right looking left and my sister is just behind me.

This photo (Figure 2) was taken in the mid- nineteen-seventies. It is part of my family album but it is also part of a larger national archive of immigrant photography. Photos like these do a similar job in nation-building as they circulate and lose their original purpose. They become

not unlike the photo (Figure 1), of the indentured labourers in Guyana. They express the notion of Canada as the welcoming nation it is portrayed to be, and the immigrant, us, in this case South Asians, thriving in a land of pure natural beauty and bounty. In the Canadian census document, there is a box for us to tick to describe who we are. The closest is South Asian. Therefore, in the mind of the nation this is the box that is ticked when anyone outside of our community looks at this photograph. The reduction perpetuates itself in such a way that we also come to reduce ourselves, and the other immigrant communities. Continuing the examination of vernacular photography, this is a souvenir, just like the first photo in this chapter where the petty sovereign is still intact. In this case the orchestrator of the photo or petty sovereign as Azoulay describes it, might be one of our parents producing the souvenir, not a coloniser, but a settler (and in this case a settler of colour). The shutter has done its job of fixing the elements chosen to display the will of the petty sovereign in this snapshot. If we study this in the Canadian multicultural context of the time, anyone outside the people in this photograph would deduce a nostalgic family photo of South Asian immigrants. Yet, it is a product of the archive of my then best friend, also a first-generation immigrant in Canada, but of Chinese descent. This connection to the plurality of cultures inherent in the photography would not be read into this photograph had I not told you of its author. Studying the faces of the subjects without an explanation might indicate a family. Brown faces, South Asian features, clothed in Western garments, these are immigrants, integrating into Canadian life. Unlike in Figure 1, the gazes in this photograph are relaxed, they know who is photographing them. The scene is only the scene, if you are not privy to the backstory.



Yet, if I ignore the faces now, and evaluate this image as a fashion designer, a trade in which I worked for many years, you will see that one of the boys is not dressed like the others, he is wearing a structured coat in a colour that does not fit the Canadian style of clothing. He is not dressed for this environment; he is an outsider. This subject within the photograph is my second cousin who lived in Great Britain. Now this picture takes on a more complex notion of the immigrant as not just following a linear path but a network both spatially and temporally existing within the genealogy of a family. I was not born in the country of my parent's birth, I am also a citizen of Ireland. One more layer of transnational complexity within my identity and subject position. My father brought us to Canada because Canada as a nation sought out immigrants with professional skills. Everyone in the photo except my British cousin benefitted from the Canadian immigration policy of the early seventies.

Azoulay compels us to look at how the petty sovereign, even in this photograph, continued to do the bidding of imperialism. The orchestration of this photograph can be seen in its author's attempt at conveying *terra nullius*<sup>6</sup>, the idea of Canada as an open land of nature, uninhabited and there for the taking. At the time of this photo, I would have understood First Nations peoples as ancient cultures. My education as a settler Canadian in the seventies included the forced indoctrination of British imperialism as gold standard progress, transcribing the land which the petty sovereign of this photo takes for granted as theirs. This romanticised notion of land and artistic composition would have probably stemmed from the popular ideals of accessible Canadian art such as The Group of Seven. Studying the adjacencies to the photo further, you

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<sup>6</sup> Terra Nullius is a latin word used to describe a land that can be taken by a European colonising country, often through a business entity with extractive trade agreements. This is done without consent of the local non-Christian inhabitants.

would find a mining town, a site of extraction, and that my father was there to replace the former European settlers, who would rather live in bigger modern cities such as Toronto. This is the story of the immigrant, as elements of the nation-state's economic framework. The target goal in which imperialism survives in the present is extraction, and my father's work in the periphery of this value system. In this way, we the immigrants of this photo, participate in the continued imperialism which persists today. "(The) citizen-perpetrator whose actions seem ordinary to herself or himself. Citizens are often born into the position of the perpetrator by the mere fact of being born citizens or privileged members of a differential body politic. They take part in or acquiesce to crimes they have learned to see as proper law enforcement or part of missions accomplished in their fields of expertise" (Azoulay 49). It is within this framework of both insider and outsider, victim and perpetrator in which I will investigate the Indian Immigration Archives in Mauritius. As I can trace lineage, as the author of this thesis, it is both historical archive and family album. And as you will see the reframing of this archive continues the work of the petty sovereign.

To further complicate the narrative of the picture of my family above, is to dig into the relationships which cannot be read through a vernacular reading of a photograph of this type. The personal excision in this photo and the ones subsequently taken and made into the political entity, which is the family photo album, is my sexuality. My queerness does not fit into the photographic field governed by the shutter within this picture. But the tomboyish nature of my sister and the knowing gaze of my up and coming queerness can be read in this photo if you know what to look for. Although the importance of queerness in terms of sexuality is not the defining impetus of this thesis, the minor histories uncovered in this photo of more nuanced and

nonnormative gestures can expand the complexity of its subjects outside the rule of the majority, even when this majority is a family. My intention is to use this lens to uncover the smaller details of history which remain under the radar of the hegemonic ideals written into the ethnographic investigation of a culture. As with my sister and my queerness we lived a culture within a culture. With the use of this lens in regard to the Mauritian archive I look to Gayathri Gopinath<sup>7</sup> who explains in her research, “This queer excavation of the past does not seek to identify or mourn lost origins; nor do queer visual aesthetic practices necessarily aim at visibility or coherence. Instead, the queer optic instantiated by these practices brings into focus and into the realm of the present the energy of those nonnormative desires, practices, bodies, and affiliations concealed within dominant historical narratives. The aesthetic practices of queer diaspora evoke history without a capital H, one that is ingrained in small acts and everyday gestures that play out not on the stage of the nation but in the space of the region” (Gopinath 8). And in the case of the photograph (Figure 2), the nation resides within the family which I will explain through the work of feminist theorist Sarah Ahmed in Chapter 2. My subject position and my experience in navigating the great complexity of my own identity is a compass I wish to use to read complexity into the subjects of the photography from the archive. I will expand on the expectations of queerness in this thesis later in the text. Queer theory can be used to unpack the Tom Boy attitude of my sister where history without a capital H is formed. There is a nascent intersectional feminism (gender x race) in the refusal of the gendered expectations of her dress. Wearing feminine clothing was part of our family’s culturally South Asian expectations at the time.

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<sup>7</sup> Gopinath, Gayatri. *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

Embodying the Tom Boy, refused both gender impositions and racial impositions mapped onto my sister's body.

There are three groups of photographs and non-photographs which will serve as starting points for explorations into the complexity of the subjects of the Indian Immigration Archives in Mauritius. The first resides in the page from the tome PG2 which was given to me for this thesis after a week studying the archives at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in Mauritius. The next will be from a secondary source which consists of men, mostly unclothed, that form a sort of larger archive of the 'coolie' in the vernacular sense. The third is a copy from a page of a ship's log describing the visible markings of the passengers as a precursor to the photographic archive, which reinforces the nature of the petty sovereign within photography.



*Figure 3 Three photographs from a page in the PG2 tome of the Indian Immigration Archives courtesy of MGI Mauritius*

I want to stress that this is a preliminary research into the Indian Immigration Archive in Mauritius and that I have concentrated my research on uncovering complex relationality in the building of a thesis and accompanying installation pertaining to a Master's in Interdisciplinary Art, Media and Design. In Chapter 1, I will give historical context to the Indian Immigration

Archives from which I draw one page to illustrate the themes of this thesis. In Chapter 2, I refer to the Indian Immigration Archives and the vernacular of family photography from the island as a way to pose the questions of the thesis through comparison. In Chapter 3, I delve into the queerness of the archive and turn the reduction of the original intention of the document outward to the possibility of an expansion of complex relationality. In Chapter 4, I produce three artis(t)an sculptures using the commodities of colonialism in the archive (sugar, textiles and the body) to materialise the expansion of relationality I have uncovered through my research activating the multi-faceted lens of post-colonialism, queer theory and intersectional feminism.

I intend to continue to study the archive in depth in my future research projects, some of which are already planned to extend the thinking from this thesis to new frameworks. In order to do justice to the findings at hand and to focus this document, I have concentrated my visual investigation outside of what we recognise as the gaze of the subject. As anthropologist, Katherine Harrington-Watt found out at a presentation of her findings leading up to her thesis of 2016, the emotions generated in the showing of a page from the Indian Immigration Archive of Mauritius was a reaction of abuse. Her French audience found the photos not in line with contemporary morality- and that the act of a European woman showing photographs taken as surveillance of a disenfranchised population was unacceptable. The reading of the photographs' subjects from the audience's point of view was of fear, the look to the side and not directly towards the aperture was read as the violence inherent within the photograph. Of course, this is true. This violence was real and a part of the Imperial master plan of subjugation and commodification of a people. Yet, Harrington Watt's thesis is an ethnographic study of the majority of the population in the archive. It is a study of what came next and how the population morphed the meaning of the archive in contemporary Mauritius. She even goes so far as to say

that it is an invitation for descendants of the archive to learn more about their roots. There is a grey zone in having Harrington-Watt's thesis be the de facto text of South Asian culture to non-Mauritian audiences as the nuances of relationality might continue to perpetuate a stagnated culture that is cut off from the cultural present. The ethnographic study of race occludes it from the transformational nature of migrancy and forecloses all diasporic and transnational interpretations of these photographs. Today shopping malls are a center of cultural convergence in Mauritius, it is within this present reality where I wonder if the study of ethnography can grasp the complexity through the isolation of specific cultures. My work, therefore, of delving into the complex relationality of the occupants of the Indian Immigration Archives will sit beside Harrington-Watt's work and add complexity to a narrative that we understand as the work of a community of academics. The archival photography in Harrington-Watt's document are generously made available to me if I cite the thesis, leaving Harrington-Watt's document as a third-party repository itself for academics, researchers, and descendants seeking to acquire photography from the Indian Immigration Archives. In one way, this makes the photographs accessible to those who cannot travel to Mauritius, in another, it becomes the petty sovereign in Azoulay's terms, and fixes the photographs within its parameters. Therefore, at this time, I choose not to use the photography from this document and only the photography that has been released directly to me from The Indian Immigration Archives. Since this thesis looks not at faces directly, nor needs the photography of the actual faces or names from within the archive, this makes Watt's license of the photography of no use to my text at this time.

The gaze in the photos through my week in the archive are not homogeneous, there are front facing looks and even in one instance a woman is laughing. But to adhere to the majority of the photographs I was offered as examples, the look to the side was a big part of the communal

gaze, a part of the petty sovereign's set up. Therefore, since the facial expressions could be more or less staged and the majority of the population is South Asian as in my family photo above, I don't believe at this time that my aim to add complexity is served by a strait reflection of the photographs, like taking artistic licence to copy the image verbatim in another media. If affect starts with a false interpretation of the gaze of the subject (a staged one), then what could I gain from repeating this? Therefore, my intention is to read the photographs and the accompanying data for their details, even in the faces, and extrapolate new complexities from there. I also interrogate our idea of the gaze as racialized people, how we are aware of the colonial gaze and navigate this both in the past and in the present.

The double consciousness was first described by W.E.B. Du Bois<sup>8</sup> in his anthology of essays, *The Souls of Black Folks*, written in 1903, where the internal conflict experienced by subordinated or colonized groups in an oppressive society does hold meaning for racialized people today as it would have at the time of indenture in Mauritius. The slave experience in Mauritius in relationship to the indentured cannot be fully uncovered in this text, yet in the next chapter I will describe the making of the island into distinct police states as a result of the banishing of slavery in the British Empire. A new surveillance system for the existing black population of Mauritius preceded the photographic apparatus of the Indian Immigration Archives. This double consciousness manifests today in everyday life in the vernacular of code switching. Creole, the language invented through the commodification of sugar, bridges some of the rigid divisions surrounding identity on the island. This is why it is important for this thesis to have moments where I write in the vernacular, where I write to my people, whoever they may be.

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<sup>8</sup> Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co, 1903.

Today, I still navigate in and out of communities within this island through a network of queerness which works in parallel with the community that I inherited. I do the same in Canada as an immigrant. Can the uncovering of details within the Indian Immigration Archives help to add complexity to the migrant through the indentured population's experience?

There are approximately 100 million migrants roaming the world today, there will need to be a change in the consciousness of citizens entrenched in the value systems of their nations, in order for these people not to face the disaster that seems imminent. Azoulay describes this change in consciousness, co-citizenship (Azoulay 37). Since the French Revolution, the idea of citizenship involved the stripping of groups of people from the protection of the new nation-state. The migrant in the vernacular sense was born. A redactor of rights. A reduction in humanity. The ambiguous other. Adjacent to both slavery, indenture, and still within Canada's migrant policies today, we see played out in the apple fields around this country, there remains the archaic notion of the second citizen, the worker zombie. Today we see billionaires in space making their exit from a dying planet, yesterday we saw photography as a tool for democracy, and before that the mechanised plantation of Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie*<sup>9</sup> of the 1700's imagined machinery, not slaves, as the workforce of a Republic in their far flung colonies. This juxtaposition of technology and consciousness, advancement and stagnation, pervades in our imagining of modernity or progress and is the tension which this thesis and its accompanying installation aims to address.

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<sup>9</sup> Libby, Susan H. "The Mechanical Plantation: Picturing Sugar Production in the *Encyclopédie*," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*: John Hopkins University Press, Vol.47, 2018, pp.71-88.



## Chapter 1

### Location: Historical Site, Institutional Site, Political Site

The Island of Mauritius was discovered by Arab sailors who first recorded the island they called *Dina Arobi* at around 900 AD<sup>10</sup>. Contemporary Mauritius was colonized by the Portuguese, then the Dutch, then the French, who called it Isle de France. Later, the British used a version of the Dutch name when they acquired it after the treaty of Paris in 1814. What should be noted between the lines is that Mauritius was developed by successive European private business entities until the British Government intervened due to the excessive abuses during the sea crossings from India to Mauritius and thus an indentured labour archive was put in place to more formalise the flow of the then British Colonial subjects: from a colony of India to the colony of Mauritius. In historian Shashi Tharoor's book *Inglorious Empire* (2017), he notes that the loss of life from India to the sugar plantations in the colonies was percentagewise greater than the loss of life on the Atlantic crossing. Yet, it must also be noted that slavery extended over a period of nearly two hundred years and the hardest work to till the virgin soil of Mauritius was left to the Black slaves until slavery was abolished in Britain in 1834. This does temper the argument that the British government took over the administration of indentured labourers as an act of mercy and not as sheer economic imperative. If the slaves of Mauritius were about to be freed, then it was only in the British Colonial machine's interest to find a quick and ready labour force to meet the open demand.

There are few historical texts about Mauritius and its history that were not written by the colonisers. Therefore, it was necessary to find books written elsewhere, sometimes outside of the

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<sup>10</sup> Retrieved from the Stanford University Webpage, *Mauritian Archeology*.

Western academy. *Indian Emigrants to Sugar Colonies*, is a book written in India with an Indian perspective on the indentureship system which helps to set the scene of that time outside the obvious subjectivity of the coloniser. The critical discussion in the book written by Indian economics and labour development specialists Dhar and Ghosh is how the indentureship of India's nationals (then British subjects) effected the country. There was a double bind that existed for the majority of indentured labourers: starve on agrarian Indian land (owned now by Britain) or sail to the colonies to face the hardship of indenture. Also, it pinpoints historically the subject matter through the lens of people versus nation and agriculture versus industrialisation. Dhar and Ghosh sum up the affair, "Labour emigration is the transportation of the most valuable economic resource – human capital- across the seas. The family, local community, and state bear the cost of raising a migrant to young adulthood and the immigration country reaps the benefit of this investment" (Dhar and Ghosh 77).

This trade off of human capital was formalised by the British government for the British Crown within the extractive process of European colonisation in 1843, which had been privately led from 1826 to 1842. The scale of this flow of human capital only ramped up after the British government stepped in. In the book, *They Came to Mauritian Shores* by historian Satyendra Peerthum, he notes that less than one percent of the overall total of nearly half a million indentured labourers on record landed in Mauritius before the British Government took over the system. Their port of entry to the sugar producing Island was the Aapravasi Ghat, the port of Port Louis, Mauritius' capital, where the indentured labour archives were housed until they were transferred after a long stint sitting, decaying unnoticed. It was after independence in 1968 that they were transferred to the National Archives and, "following a cultural agreement between the

Government of India and the Government of Mauritius, the Indian Immigration records were transferred from the National Archives Department to the MGI (Mahatma Gandhi Institute) in 1978. The MGI has been the custodian of the Indian Immigration records since 1978. The Institute has restored and continues to preserve these precious and unique records for posterity. The Indian Immigration Archives, falls under the jurisdiction of the National Archives Act 1999, subject to Section 13 of the Act and Government Notice 28 of 2002<sup>11</sup>”

Although I will be concentrating on the photographic portion of the now called, Indian Immigration Archives, it does hold older ship records, vagrant tickets and marriage certificates within its walls. The MGI houses a school and exhibition space, a system of white washed concrete buildings set within a sprawling, well-manicured lawn. Its location is in the temperate area of Moka and the records are now housed in a well climatized cold room. The access to these documents are well guarded as the public is only welcome to visit the front desk if they are looking to trace an ancestor from within the records. A rigorous background check has been put in place in order to divulge just one photo. As for me, it took an official letter from my institution to peruse the records, having two full time staff only a meter away from me while I flipped through the red bound books of photographs with white gloves. After a week of taking notes, I submitted my request only to be given one page in digital copy from the tome PG2.

What I take from the experience will be the basis of the artistic portion of this thesis. There is not only the visual aspect which I will draw on but also the affect of being a descendant of its pages and a visitor to its house, perusing the documentation. For the context of this thesis, I would like to make it clear that although the Indian Immigration Archives are contextualised

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<sup>11</sup> Retrieved from the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Mauritius, website (2022).

now as Indian, just as the island's makeup from its colonial beginnings, it is cosmopolitan in nature, and the people reflected in both text and photography descend from China, Africa, Syria and Europe amongst other places, although in minority. Marina Carter and Saloni Deerpalsingh elaborate on the context of diaspora in the book, *Organisation and Evaluations of the Indenture System*.

Unlike the West, Mauritius was a relatively young and expanding plantation colony in the 1830's and was therefore particularly hit by British plans for the gradual extinction of slavery. When slaves were converted into apprentices in 1834, with a proposed final liberation date set for 1839, the planters of Mauritius were already looking to supplement the existing labour force with imported workers. India was the obvious choice for a number of reasons. There was the negative factor: European immigrants were not considered efficient labour in tropical climes; experiments with Chinese workers had not proved successful, and the immigration of Africans was avoided so as not to provoke accusations of a renewed slave trade. On the other hand, Mauritius had considerable experience of Indian labour (having played host to a variety of free and unfree worker immigrations), and there were considerable commercial links with the Indian subcontinent. It was in fact through the commercial agents of the Mauritian planters in India that the first instructions to recruit labour was transmitted (Carter and Deerpalsingh1).

If we go back to the beginning of this chapter, before Mauritius was a British Colony, it was French. As I have seen in the National Archives, situated close to the Mauritian capital, Port Louis, there were Indians in Mauritius before indenture. France had colonies in India at the time and there are first hand records describing the activities of free merchants and servants who came to Mauritius. This is noted in the book, *Indian Immigrants and their descendants in Mauritius*, by historian Moovindranath Varma.

The years from 1731 to 1735 were very hard for the French. The settlement which they had made required organisation which in its turn, depended on the agricultural work. But French colonists of that time were not good at it. This explains the reasons why they brought in slaves and Coolies on several occasions. French influence had already spread in Chandernagar and Pondicherry by 1765. There was no problem to get workers from those places. Therefore, a good number of skilled labourers and artisans were brought in from time to time. On February 14, 1729 the French Government of Pondicherry wrote the following to the Conseil Supérieure of Bourbon. "*Nous avons fait embarquer sur la*

*Sirene quatre-vingt-neuf ouvriers malabars pour le service des Isles don't nous vous remettons les engagements et vous nous informerez du travail qu'ils auraient fait et si vous êtes contents.*" A report of their work was forwarded and satisfaction expressed. Following that more Indians were brought in 1731 (Varma 12).

Before I was made aware of the photography at MGI, I sat in the National Archives in awe of the first-hand accounts of the people of Mauritius negotiating their lives through official correspondence. But no matter whether you were free or indentured, as a racialized person in Mauritius during colonisation you would have been navigating what critical theorist Mary Louise Pratt has named a contact zone, "I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 34). Mauritius did not have human inhabitants before colonisation like many of the Caribbean counterparts, yet the extinction of the Dodo bird bears witness to the lethal, extractive and unbalanced power on the island at first contact. This negotiation continued to the slaves and the indentured labourers and today we can see the unequal power dynamics which can be traced through capitalism and the identity politics navigated on this multi-racial island. A multi-racial island from its conception through colonisation.

The shift of the location of the Indentured Labour Photographic Archives from the National Archives to the MGI and its new signification as the Indian Immigration Archives shows not just a will to house the documentation in a more technically sound environment due to conservation concerns, but also a will from the majority of the descendants of this archive to re-imagine its purpose. In the words of Mary Louise Pratt:

Ethnographers have used the term transculturation to describe processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture. The term, originally coined by Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s, aimed to replace overly reductive concepts of acculturation and assimilation used to characterize culture under conquest. While subordinate peoples do not usually control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what gets absorbed into their own and what it gets used for.

Transculturation, like autoethnography, is a phenomenon of the contact zone (Pratt 36).

The meaning of transculturation here in the context of Mauritius might not be expansive enough to capture what has happened in the migration of the archive to the MGI, as the dominant population politically today is South Asian and represented in the majority in the photographic archive. If I interrogate the colonisation of Mauritius within Pratt's concept of a modern contact zone centering the islands majority of wealth in the beach resorts still dominated by European descendant's interests, then the will to change or at least imagine another purpose for this archive does fit the intention of transculturation. The South Asian population could be seen as participating in an act of self-determination by changing the word indenture to immigration. From migrant to immigrant, the word immigrant would be a term to denote citizenship and legitimacy to the island. This act would leave behind the ½ citizenship of a migrant labour force without their full rights and integrate them within a naturalized population. I believe the complexity that resides in this archive and in Mauritius both past and present needs a further stage of enunciation. Resituating the mostly South Asian population located within the archive from colonised to citizen does not capture the ever present heterogenous nature of the South Asian demographic. Varying religions, regional differences, tribal distinctions and class structures remain. Although the staff at the MGI are very quick to agree to the obvious heterogeneity of the archive, the nomenclature indicates a sort of decentering the Mauritian majority as a product of India, when Mauritius has never been East or West, since its human occupation, it has always been a mix of the two proving cultural theorist Edward Said's claims

that, to paraphrase, the East was constructed by the West. As we can see from this archive, it has been constructed within the contact zone of colonialism and has been transformed within the contact zone of a modern nation. It is within this malleable structure, that I would like to address the people in the photographic archive and pull out traces to further increase its complex human relationality. The borders of our identity are porous, we can see that in the food that is eaten in Mauritius and the creole language spoken by all races. We also know that culture continues to transform and is negotiated in the present. In writing this text, I employ the theories of feminist and postcolonial theorists from the global south to create adjacent and counter narratives in the present. Postcolonial cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha has theorised a Third Space where these negotiations can take place outside the political present. It is in the artis(t)an works related to this thesis where I will posit this space.

The language of critique is effective not because it keeps forever separate the terms of master and the slave, the mercantilist and the Marxist, but to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither one nor the other*, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics. The challenge lies in conceiving of the time of political action and understanding as opening up a space that can accept and regulate the differential structure of the moment of intervention without rushing to produce a unity of the social antagonism or contradiction. This is a sign that history is *happening* – within the pages of theory, within systems and structures we construct to figure the passage of the historical (Bhabha 37).

The Indian Immigration Archive is an animate structure, malleable, capable as you have seen to enunciate itself differently through time. Homi K. Bhabha's definition of Third Space in this thesis relates to another dimension which does not yet exist. The installation that accompanies this document will enunciate visually what the hybrid space, artis(t)an, could look like by also enacting a hybridization of the people already existing in the Indian Immigration Archives of Mauritius. As an artist, the material data which I have retrieved will be used in the iteration of

the symbols and affect this imagined Third Space could produce. The archive in this thesis is the location in which, the photographed people, the extraneous content captured in the photos, the documentation and the traces around these elements can be extrapolated as materials for the iteration of history becoming or as Bhabha explains, happening. Queer theory can now be used to decenter ethnicity as there is no nation named queer. Integrating intersectional feminism complicates the imported class structures such as caste and tribal distinction from India as indicators of social hierarchy, commonly known in Canada as class.

Since the 1700's South Asian people have been free people and slaves, indentured and merchants often at the same time. Therefore, there is a need to make sure that my study of the Indian Immigration Archives is an investigation within a specific place, The Mahatma Gandhi Institute. The other site of Mauritian photographic documentation on Indian Immigration is the museum at the Appravasi Ghat which I will be drawing less of my information for this thesis, and the museum will be a site of future inquiry. To continue with Third Space theory, Mauritius is having a dialogue today of what should be made public and what should remain private in regard to the people who inhabit the Indian Immigration Archives. Working in a diasporic context, I am not yet attuned to the nuances of the political climate in contemporary Mauritius so I would not venture a guess as to the full dynamics in play. I do not promote any view on the topic as it does not effect the course of this thesis. My concentration is on the details of the photography within its frame, the book in which it sits, the documents which surround it, and the room of its residence. This is the location of my investigation. It is through the invitation of Bhabha to imagine a third space where he makes it clear that, "Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be



appropriated, translated, historicized and read anew” (Bhabha 55). Later, I will elaborate and use the materiality of the case studies in Chapter 4 to illustrate a third space through the formation of three artis(t)an works. In the next chapter, Chapter 2, I will complicate the colonial narrative of indenture by uncovering the complex relationships the people of the island navigated during the implementation of this photographic documentation. I will also contrast the privilege acquired by my family after indenture and its limits in a Eurocentric global economy.

## CHAPTER 2

### PG2: Colonial Reduction meet Queer Desires

Wart under right eye. Black mark near outside corner of right eye. Scar on right arm. Scar on back of right thigh. Scar on right arm. Two scars on outside of right knee. Mark on shin of right leg. Wart under right eyebrow. Face much pock marked. Scar on forehead. Wart on left jaw. Small scar on left side of forehead. Mole on belly. Scar on left side of forehead. Mole on belly. Scar on right of head. Blind left eye, mole on chin. Face pocked a small mole on left cheek. Wart on right cheek. Scar on forehead. Spec in right eye. Mole on right side of nose. Mol on left temple. Mole on left side of throat. Scar on left thigh. Wart under left eye. Large mark on back of right arm. Large scar on back of left foot. Face and all over the body pock marked. Scar under right knee. Mole under left jaw/ Scar outside of right thigh. Wart near outside corner of right eye. Scar on forehead. Scar on right side of forehead. Mole under left collar bone. Mole under lower lip. Wart on right nostril. Small scar on back of left thigh. Scar on right side of forehead, scar near outside corner of left eye. Scar over right eyebrow. Mole on left collarbone. Face much pockmarked. Face much pockmarked. Wart under left jaw. Mole on right side of nose. Face pock marked a mole on back of left neck. Scar under left eye. Wart on left jaw. Scar on left arm. Scar on right arm. Wart under left eye. Scar on right side of back. Scar over left brow. Scar on left chest. Face much pockmarked. Two warts on left cheek. Scar on left shoulder. Scar on left elbow. A mole under right collar bones, scar on left arm. Mole under right eye. Mole over left eyebrow. Long scar on right forearm. Scar on right thigh, mole on right ear. Scar on right elbow. Face pockmarked, a small mole on throat. Mole on throat. Face all over heavily pockmarked. Scar on left arm. Scar on left side of back, scar on left cheek. Scar over left eyebrow. Mole over left eyebrow. Three moles on right shoulder. Small wart under left eye. Face and all over the body pockmarked. Two moles over right side of neck. Scar under right ear. Scar on belly. Mole over left jaw. Mole over right cheek. Mole on right collar. Several scar on belly. Small round scar on right side. Four scars on left arm. Scar on right face. Face much pockmarked. Scar on left side of forehead. Scar near outside corner of left eye. Scar on bridge of nose. Face pock marked a mole near outside corner of left eyes. Scar near outside right thigh...<sup>12</sup>

How did the colonisers read a human being in the wake of the first draft of the universal rights of man? Above is an excerpt from file 1007, it is within the document of landing of a ship named Astronomer which docked in Mauritius carrying indentured labourers in 1861. This is a good indication of how the second-class citizens of the imperial British Crown were identified to the legitimate citizens, the colonisers, mainly farmers. Imagine a frame where only your scars

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<sup>12</sup> Excerpt from file:1007 “Astronomer Ship” 1861 in the document of landing in Mauritius accessed at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Mauritius.

and markings represented your portrait? As Azoulay indicated in her book *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, the shutter of a camera is only the function of the technology and not the driver of the actual content within the photographic frame. This content captured by the shutter has already been calculated by the petty sovereign (footnote 4) and what has been left out is deliberate according to photographic Historian Ariella Aïsha Azoulay. Therefore, there is a picture before the picture. The set up. Above, is the precursor to the photographic petty sovereign. In the document of landing, nothing remains except the markers of surveillance regarding the indentured labourers who docked at the Port Louis harbour in 1861, before the institutionalisation of photography replaced it. The excision in this case is the blatant reduction in humanity of the cargo. They are not people here in this document, but a second class of citizens recognized by the state through the scars on their bodies. It must be clear for history to help us understand the present, that the intentions of this document relate more to the passengers as a commodity to be surveyed. This, in the time of the transition from black slaves to indentured Indian labour on the island directly relates to the implementation of police states developed in the wake of the anti-slavery laws of Great Britain to surveil the Black former slaves of the island before the Astronomer ship docked in Mauritius.

#### Ordonnance No. 11 de 1834. W. Nicolay<sup>13</sup>

Arrêtée par le Gouverneur de l'île Maurice, de l'avis et avec le consentement du Conseil du  
Gouvernement.

*A l'effet de diviser la colonie en arrondissement pour la formation des établissemens de police spéciaux ordonnés par l'article 14 de l'Acte d'abolition du 28 Août 1833, et de déterminer les formalités pour opérer la classification des apprentis conformément aux articles 4 et 16 dudit Acte.*

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<sup>13</sup> This bill was published in the Mauritius Government Gazette in 1834 as directed by the Governor of Mauritius, William Nicolay, who was a former British Army Lieutenant. It is available in full at the National Archives of Mauritius.

Attendu que parmi les mesures prescrites par L'Acte d'abolition de l'esclavage dans toutes les possessions britannique, et pour en assurer l'exécution, celles concernant la formation des établissemens de police... (1er Supplément a la Gazette Officielle du Samedi 29 Novembre, 1834, No 139)

The above describes the arrangement made through the Governor of Mauritius in 1834, to split the island into police precincts which have become the municipal regions marked on the map today. It describes this as an urgent measure to ensure the new title of the African diaspora as not slaves but apprentices. This occurred just before the Indian indentureship was formalised as a direct failure of the apprenticeship. The adjacency to slavery will come up again in this thesis as these overlapping extractive labour tactics of European colonisation butt up against each other and are touted today as historical dinosaurs which are meant to lull us into the idea that progress has been made. Yet, the second-class migrant remains within nation-states as non-citizens over a hundred years after the French revolution. In Canada today, migrant workers live on contract without any path to Canadian citizenship. Journalist, Desmond Cole<sup>14</sup> fought to gain public visibility of the police force using the tactic of carding: the systematic demand of documents of identification from Black people in Toronto through no provocation on their part. Which is wildly parallel to the logic of this thesis where photography then was a means to a democratic art form for one population, and used at the same moment in time as a tool for mass surveillance of a second class citizen, the indentured labourer. Today in Toronto, the driver's license can be weaponised against the racialized Black citizenry. The card is also important here as I lead up to the photographs within the Indian Immigration Archive in Mauritius. It is the card (document) that the indentured migrants were forced to buy during this ordeal after being photographed by

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<sup>14</sup> Cole, Desmond. *The Skin we're In: A Year of Black Resistance and Power*. Toronto, Doubleday, 2020.

the state as commodities. This identification card needed to be carried at all times to ensure the migrant bodies were in the place that the colonisers had predetermined. Similarly, in the way migrant fruit pickers in Canada are handed to the farmers to deliver the services needed, including care. This is where these facts of Mauritius past and the facts of postcolonial states like Canada collide. The past is not the past. Azoulay, Said and contemporary writers such as Arundhati Roy<sup>15</sup> warn, imperialism still exists. The reduction in the rights of migrant workers in the record below continue to be institutionally upheld today within the construct of the modern/progressive nation-state.

The above paragraph may seem too complex for a focussed thesis yet as Edward Said posits, in his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, “Are there ways we can reconceive the Imperial experience in other than compartmentalized terms, so as to transform our understanding of both the past, the present, and our attitude toward the future” (Said 17)? This is why I must ask you to look at the below panel of photography in the context of what it was meant to be, a reduction. As I mentioned, I cannot parse out the full complexity of the paragraph above in this thesis so I will confine my investigation through the optics of the page below, the documentation surrounding it and my subject position in this thesis as both researcher, artis(t)san and descendant.

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<sup>15</sup> Roy, Arundhati. *Capitalism a Ghost Story*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014.



*Figure 4 Left, a page from the tome PG2 of the Indian Immigration Archives courtesy of MGI Mauritius*

Figure 4 above, is a page from the PG2 tome of the Indian Immigration Archives. As you can see from the size of the file I have attached, it is not in this thesis' interest to divulge the faces or information of the individual people reflected in this page. I realise this is a public document and I do not have the right to publish this page anywhere else than in this thesis. This page of photographs has migrated from the hands of the British Colonisers who took the photographs to be left rotting in a room at the point of the indentured labourers' embarkation at the time of self-rule. This page was transferred to the National Archives of The Republic of Mauritius and is now the resident of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in Mauritius. The people of this page have gone from indentured labour to citizens to potential Indian ancestors. As Harriet-Watt has delved into the ethnography of this archive in her 2016 PhD work, she summed up the relationship of the people of Indian origin of contemporary Mauritius as using these photos to venerate ancestors. I make no attempt in this thesis to build on this place of ethnographic arrival. I also mentioned that there is a polemic in the distribution and copy of the photographs and information held within this archive, in which I must remain neutral. This is the only primary source of photography in this document from the Indian Immigration Archives. Following Said's ground breaking theory,

there is no East and West, these people, when captured in image, were both and neither. I posit this from the original source of the page of the tome PG2 as imperialist construction and the petty sovereign set-up.

Concentrating on the original and primary function of this document, colonialism and extraction through a subjugated work force, my aim through the artis(t)an work accompanied in this thesis is to represent the liberatory complications in identity and relationality that are inherent within the body of a page from the tome PG2 of this archive. What has not been excised? I argue that concentrating on the faces as markers of identity, primarily the gaze and expression, will not achieve the goal of this thesis. Therefore, I ask, how can the use of the mixed media of sugar, textiles and the materiality of this document create an installation which creates an expansion of identity through complex relationality that existed before and during the implementation of the Indian Immigration Archive in Mauritius? This is in direct response to Azoulay's concept of a co-citizen and how that complex relationality can be voiced materially.



*Figure 5 Left, my mother standing in the courtyard of the family house in Mauritius circa 1960 copyright of the artist. Right, a daguerreotype photograph of a colonial European Mauritian taken in studio in Mauritius in the 1800's at the time of Indenture.*

The pictures of my mother on the left was taken on the island of Mauritius while she visited from Ireland as a medical student. As scholar of Feminist Studies and Culture, Jordache Ellapen,

expounds in the photo essay, *The Brown Photo Album*. He questions the positionality of the post indentured Indo-African woman in South Africa. “How do we read the photo-archive of an Indian woman born to parents who were wards of the colonial state? A woman one generation removed from the sugar-cane plantations and coal mines where her parents were indentured? What do her photographs reveal about ‘the nature of the conditions under which [she] lived’ and about her labour of imagining freedom in a context where black, brown and black-ened women’s lives were severely curtailed by the violence of the apartheid state and the heteropatriarchal family” (Ellapen 94)?

As you can see from my mother’s clothing, she is negotiating what is deemed Western culture in post indentured Mauritius within a context similar to what Ellapen has described. Later, my sister and I will be born Irish citizens, about to become Canadian citizens along with my mother who is our Mauritian connector.

The excision in the photographs within my family album, according to Azoulay, has been orchestrated by the petty sovereign. In this case it is the family. We are generating images of binary heteronormativity. In Figure 5 left, her gaze is directly toward the aperture and it looks as if she is free from PG2. As you can see in the photo beside hers, the picture taken during the time of PG2 of European colonisers are very much in line with ours. Beside my mother (Figure 5) is a daguerreotype photograph taken in the 1800’s. Behind my mother is the house of my grandfather, a land owner. The style of my mother and the European photograph are fashionable, evoking wealth and status. This might give one the sense that through the modernity and the progress of a Republic, we have outgrown our subjugation. Yet, as I mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, our family immigrated to Canada, that was forcibly taken from its



people. The state-full-ness of my family, inherently puts us into the category Azoulay would deem citizen-perpetrator<sup>16</sup> as our immigration and ascendance to Canadian citizenship continues to blur the issues of Indigenous rights through the promotion of multiculturalism; Canada as a modern state as opposed to the product of a brutal imperial imaginary. In these photographs above of my family and I, we are still caught in the web of an imperialism that has morphed through the magical obfuscation of progress which in Azoulay's terms erases the crimes of the past to be able to perpetrate them in the present- potentially by us. Mauritius is now a jewel in the global corporate crown of sandy white beaches and blue water. The question is, who owns these resorts and the land around them? The majority of the citizens of Mauritius are of South Asian origin, technically influencing the political makeup. But who owns the economy? I leave the first photographic portraits of free people in Mauritius to speak for themselves.

This thesis does not attempt to unpack modern capitalism or neo-liberalism within what we call globalization (which seems an illogical word in regard to this thesis since trade between cultures began before colonialism). To seek complexity from within PG2 is to abandon the idea that the indentureship of the people in its grasp was necessary as a progression both monetarily and culturally. If I can show you the extreme complexity both in identity and relationality already inherent in the people of PG2, will it help to chip away at the assumption that technology and progress is the answer to the migrant tsunami of today through wars, climate change, food insecurity and political instability? Therefore, can there be agency over what is deemed progress, and can it be translated as complex relationality? If this complex relationality existed during the

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<sup>16</sup> "(The) citizen-perpetrator whose actions seem ordinary to herself or himself. Citizens are often born into the position of the perpetrator by the mere fact of being born citizens or privileged members of a differential body politic. They take part in or acquiesce to crimes they have learned to see as proper law enforcement or part of missions accomplished in their fields of expertise (*Potential History* 49)."

indentureship in Mauritius, then what is the point of the suffering of workers in the banana plantations of Honduras<sup>17</sup> today (Clarahan et al., 2022)? If I can prove there is no evolution culturally from the island of Mauritius during the manufacturing of PG2, as Edward Said insists, no East nor West, perhaps we can stop holding our breath waiting for a future that will never come. Is this the way of Azoulay's co-citizenship? Is this the higher consciousness I am seeking?



Figure 6 Left and Center photographs from the page of tome PG2 of the Indian Immigration Archive and Right a composite of the people in that page layered through Adobe Photoshop (Image copyright of the artist)

Referencing three elements from within the portraits of PG2 (Figure 6). The first, on the left, is the clothing that is worn in the pages of the archive. As I come from a textile background, I would like to bring the identification and disidentification of the subjects of PG2 into question through the clothing they are wearing- and not wearing. I will address the temporal disjunction of the photo and the participants' arrival in the next pages of this thesis. There is a complex network of indicators of privilege, community interaction and interculturality<sup>18</sup> that can be parsed from the chosen and unchosen clothing of the people of PG2. For example, in this picture we see a

<sup>17</sup> *The LoopHole: voices from the archives* (2022) is a student publication that was facilitated by Marton Robinson, our professor at OCAD University in the summer semester of the Interdisciplinary Art, Media and Design Program. It was published, edited and conceived by seven students (including myself) who also created the curriculum of the course within which this publication came to fruition.

<sup>18</sup> McMaster, Gerald. *Entangled Gaze Conference*. OCAD University and the Art Gallery of Ontario, 2017.

traditional sari, not the simple white cotton sari, (Figure 1) from the first photo of this thesis. The woman's dress does represent the majority of the South Asian women in the archive as I have seen during my week consulting the tomes and I will broach the nature of the dress code through the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw in the next chapter. The intersectionality of this woman and those like her can be unpacked through this choice. Crenshaw first publicly laid out her theory of intersectionality in 1989, when she published a paper in the University of Chicago Legal Forum titled, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*. It is the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination. In this case the women of PG2 bare the markers of their family's wealth through their dress and not just a worker to the state. There is a double bind for a South Asian woman that is also apparent. She must navigate the patriarchy of her own imported culture as well as the states imposition on her body and the body politic.

The second photo, in the middle, (Figure 6) is a representative of the type of photo taken when a ship docked and was quarantined. Here we have a closer approximation of when the subjects of this archival photography landed in Mauritius. Throughout the Indian Immigration Archives are pages of photos of unclothed and shaven-headed men. If you were to type in coolie in any search engine or database, you would find that your search would lead to a plethora of this kind of photo. Taken out of context, there are many assumptions one can take from a migrant (mostly) male workers. The deliberate stripping of the passengers and their subsequent documentation through photography exemplifies the brutality of this colonial archive, originating in violence and a forced reduction of these inhabitants in the eyes of the state. The body itself is an archive which I will unpack theoretically through the artis(t)an works of the accompanying installation which will open up the direct resource of our history: blood memory.

The bare chest of a coolie, the pectoral anchor of the swinging arm cutting cane, can be read as the heart of the machine of indenture. In the accompanying installation referred to in chapter 4, I will use the moulding of sugar to bring attention to the body of indenture and its potentiality, fluidity, and complexity outside of the colonizers gaze. This disidentification according to queer theorist, José Esteban Muñoz<sup>19</sup> are, “the ways in which one situates oneself both within and against the various discourses through which we are called to identify,” and can be found in clues left unexcised in the tomes of the archive.

The third photo of (Figure 6), on the right, is a composite of the people of PG2. As I have mentioned I am resisting the gaze of the individual in this thesis as I believe the veneration of ancestors is the primary function of the Indian Immigration Archives today and the tracing of individual heritage goes forward as a new tradition. I cannot, at the moment, build on this phenomenon which I hope to understand more fully in further research. Building beside this reality, I look to the group of people from the page of PG2 as a document given to me to relate the most accurate representation in makeup of the majority of the whole archive. I will be working on the materiality of the contents of this composite to question the reduction inherent in a group or an individual photograph. This leads back to Homi Bhabha’s Third Space theory, using the dialogue of past representation in The Indian Immigration Archives and present representation within my own family album, through artistic practice, to integrate that which cannot be signified. “Which gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning” (Bhabha 211). It is vital to the evolution of consciousness of this planet to develop complex collectivity(s) which can withstand the social

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<sup>19</sup> Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

tension that a hundred million migrants (and counting) will have on our imagined national borders. Human rights law, unions and NGO's do an important part in present global labour dynamics, and were first implemented as a reaction to the imperialism of business structures and the earliest iterations of capitalism. I imagine this as the work done in the political turbulence of the present. This still leaves the system which these organisations work within flawed. My research is in addition to the work of NGO's and Unions under the present Human Rights laws. Can a complex relationality and the ability to see each other in our full complexity cause a paradigm shift enough to change the system itself? I am hoping as a returning student, academia can provide a space to imagine another way of living. "Nepantla is the site of transformation, that place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures" (Anzaldua 548). Gloria Anzaldua uses this indigenous Nahuatl word, which describes the intention in the act of uncovering this complexity.

There are markers of complexity that exist vividly in Mauritius today. For example, the language of creole which indicates the interculturality of the people of the island, including the people represented in the Indian Immigration Archive. This is ground zero of double consciousness that W.E.B. Dubois describes in his illustrated book, *The Ways of Black Folks* written in 1903 and is inherent in the people of PG2 functioning through communal communication, through language. Creole exists in the culture of today in the writings of Khal Torabully who takes Aimé Césaire's book, *Cahier d'un retour au Pays natale* (1939), in which he speaks of La Negritude (a communal Black colonial experience in the French Caribbean) and riffs off of it, inventing a *same same, but different* poetry of the Other. The concept of la Coolitude (*Cale d'Étoiles*) is a

reflection of the dichotomies of the migrant indentured labourer. The author, Torabully, a Mauritian poet, speaks of the journey of a people on the sea as the liminal space of destruction and reconstruction. He uses the Hindu concept of *Kala Pani* (black water) which in ancient Hindu scripture is the uncrossable sea surrounding Hindustan/India/South Asia. The sea, it is written, excises the Hindu religion from a body and leaves it casteless, outside of society if it is crossed. It is clear in the writings around Torabully's work that using this term does not denote an essentialism of a Hindu past. Yet as you can see, even in the poetry of Mauritius, there is always an intercultural node, a tie to Others. In 2014 Andil Gosine performed, *Our Holy Waters, and Mine*, at Queens Museum in New York with Sur Rodney (Sur). This performance drew on water from rivers both artists have crossed, rather than following the Kala Pani logic of the Holy Hindu Ganges. These two Caribbean individuals enacted the desire of Torabully to grow new meaning of identity through the practice of art as dialogue. This is an excellent example of how African and Indian descendants are always in relation to each other both in the past and in the present on former British colonial sugar plantations. Torabully's expression of Coolitude precedes a relatively new ritual in which individual photos of The Indian Immigration Archive are copied and placed in the homes of the descendants as objects of veneration. Through further research, I would be interested in his ideas surrounding this practice. Is it within these no man's lands, these porous borders of artistic endeavour in poetry, fiction, performance and making, where we fall into the Nepantla and supercharge our own complexities and relational bonds?

The female body of the Indian Immigration Archives bears a double scrutiny from the violence of a colonial binary to the assumed container of traditional culture from South Asia. To complicate the narrative of PG2, I need to become what cultural theorist Sarah Ahmed calls the

feminist killjoy<sup>20</sup> (Ahmed 571). I will need to speak from the family table as both a site of relationality and enforcement of the state. As a queer person, along with my sister, we hold another passport to another country that has no border, queer space. In the next chapter, I will delve into the markers of my sister's Tom Boyishness to use queer theory to approach PG2 through the work of Gayatri Gopinath and my precursor artis(t)an work. By using a transtemporal bridge of my sister's photo next to the archival photography, I aim to build a bridge. This also incorporates the indigenous knowledge acquired through the conversations with assistant professor Julia Rose-Sutherland with women leading societal conversations.

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<sup>20</sup> Sarah Ahmed relates the feminist killjoy as the act of bringing down the room when she refuses to meet over happiness. She also relates this to her own family table when she begins to question the status quo which is met with rolling eyes. She uses the descriptor: we become a problem when we describe a problem.

### CHAPTER 3

#### Process- Symbols-Journey: Mapping Complexity

“The archive is the storing house for those “clandestine countermemories...” Gayatri Gopinath



Figure 7 Left, a school photograph of my sister taken in the early 1970s (photograph copyright of the artist). Middle a portrait from the page of the tome PG2 in the Indian Immigration Archives (courtesy of MGI Mauritius). Right, highlighted section of Figure 1

“I desire Sita.” The I in this sentence is the character Radha in the film, *Fire* (1998) by Deepa Mehta and the object of her desire is her daughter-in-law Sita. As Mehta iterated in her translation of this sentence, the lesbian nature of this desire is second in importance to the impossibility that a South Asian woman could even express desire, much less for another woman without the input of a man. In *Fire*, Mehta uses the Hindu fable of Sita providing proof of her purity to her husband by a test of fire, *sati*, after her capture and imprisonment by a villain. The story works on so many levels today, yet here in the context of the photography above it is the spectrum of gender expectations which is incredibly limited in a female double bind on the island of Mauritius during indenture: one, through colonial binary policing and two, the importation of limitations of a woman’s gender expression from South Asia. Here I use the queering of the narrative in this chapter as a way to open up a spectrum that lies hidden in a



recorded history that can't help but obfuscate what could have been. This spectrum of desire does not necessarily have to be linked to sexuality; it is the desire outside of societal normativity, the yearning for a more complex sense of oneself -I, in relation to another -desire, outside of a predetermined object of desire – Sita.

Critical Race theorist Gayatri Gopinath<sup>21</sup> posits, “A queer diasporic framework insists on the imbrication of nation and diaspora through the production of hetero- and homosexuality, particularly as they are mapped onto the bodies of women” (Gopinath 10). As Mehta has opened up the word queer in her description of Radha and Sita's relationship there are multiple levels of overlap of domination in the narrative of desire mapped onto an indentured woman, this mapping is done as both colonial violence and tradition from the Motherland. The indentured woman is then queered two ways in society, “If within heteronormative logic the queer is seen as the debased and inadequate copy of the heterosexual, so too is diaspora within nationalist logic positioned as the queer Other of the nation, its inauthentic imitation” (Gopinath 11). The women next to my sister's picture above are queer in the sense of being othered in her female-ness and othered on the island being indentured. Therefore, The Indian Immigration Archives began as a queering of a group of people within the island state, where the woman is the ultimate imitation. Wonderfully adjacent to the Sita and Radha narrative is Bhabha's explanation of the futility of purity, “It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchal claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures (and here people) are

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<sup>21</sup> Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity” (Bhabha 55). The pureness of the idyllic female Sita, mirrors the cultural purity that a ‘coolie’ or migrant can never attain within the nation-state. As Gopinath broaches the movie, *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985), where the two main characters are male homosexuals, she makes clear, “Kureishi’s excavation of the legacies of colonialism and racism as they are mapped onto queer (male) bodies crucially depends on a particular fixing of the female diasporic subjectivity” (Gopinath 4). Again, this is a muffling of half of society. According to Queer Indenture Studies scholar, Susan Persard, “Queer theory and indentureship studies first appear as unlikely bedfellows. The earliest scholarship of Indian indentureship provoked fantasies of the nuclear family at the site of the colonial plantation, despite the historical record that the plantation economy was anything but an order of traditional heteronormative paradigms of kinship. From its inception, the indentured plantation was a site of the queer, as sexual relations among the indentured veered far from their disciplining of monogamy and heteronormativity. From cases of sodomy to polyandrous women, the Indian indentured labourer occupied the plantation effectively throwing (Persard 17) *any claim to normative gender and sexual regimes in crisis*” (Ellapen 104). Persard’s work builds on a photograph of a gender non-conforming man performing theatrically during indentureship and opens up the present inflection of drag. As with Gopinath she is reading into the archive. But what if the photograph does not exist? How can I posit a map of female un-purity, gender non-conformity, social complexity without a photographic record? The answer is in the details.

To explain, I have taken a photo of my sister at around 12 years old (left Figure 7) and placed it by a photo of a woman from PG2 (middle in Figure 7) next to the woman from the very first

photograph of this thesis, the ‘coolie’ woman from Guyana. Within this transtemporal collective is a spectrum of potential gender expression through dress. As I mentioned in the last chapter, it is through the clothing that I will demonstrate the complexity of the women in these photos. The, “coolie” woman in the white sari has been documented probably by a white traveler or business man and here she is reduced to her working status, dressed in a plain white cotton sari, denoting in conjunction with her dhoti wearing counterparts as colonial labour. The perfect reductionist, exoticized photography to take back to Europe as the definition of a South Asian family on a plantation. But there is more to a white sari than a reflection of labour. Here this elderly lady is also performing a Hindu tradition of wearing white after her husband’s death. In this picture we are also witnessing the South Asian societal imposition that a woman stops wearing her finery after the death of her husband. The woman in the picture in the middle wears a silk sari, and jewellery, which I can attest is more prevalent in the photographic documentation of The Indian Immigration Archives than the white sari.

I had thought that it would be the opposite, but these pictures were not taken at the time of arrival in Mauritius. They were taken sometimes years after the worker had been a resident of the island. A couple of realities could be in play here, one, the document card with photograph was an expense on the worker, therefore money had to be saved to buy one, and two, that the photographic surveillance had not been put in place at the time of landing. Therefore, as with South Asian tradition, the woman would not only be saddled with indentured labour, she would still have had to represent the wealth of the family as both mother or mother-to-be, and a primary object of family value. Turning to my sister’s photograph, you can see she is wearing a seventies plaid shirt and has the luxury of being able to slide the scale of her gender expression towards the masculine. Yet, even in Canada, and even when we now trace our lineage to South Asia back at

least three generations, my sister would have had to conform to female standards at any official Hindu function such as a wedding. She continued to live under that policed state of mind for years to come. It is of no consequence to this thesis if my sister is a lesbian, because it is the spectrum of desire and its complexity that I would like to address in this chapter. And it is the objective of the artistic portion of this thesis to find a solution to complicate the identity and relationality of the people of the archive. There still is desire without signification, there is still non-conformity without photographic proof.

In the movie *Fire* (1998), the fictional characters Sita and Radha are able to fill in by proxy, a desire, or an act of desire to satisfy the gap in the record. Here my sister offers a transtemporal stand in for the photographs that could never have been taken at the time of indenture. The two indentured women above lived at a time when casual photos were either staged by a coloniser or produced in documentation to reduce their status as non-citizen worker, the formality of these photographs conforming to the petty sovereign both colonial and patriarchal. Therefore, The Indian Immigration Archive cannot reveal a convincing counternarrative of the hyperfeminine female subject. But, for now, the picture of my sister can provide a missing link. The what if? What would a non-conforming indentured woman look like? No one batted an eye at my Tom Boy sister until wedding season. No matter the clothing, even if there was total conformity in gender expression in Mauritius at the time of indenture, the desire-to would still have been there. And with desire there would have been codes.

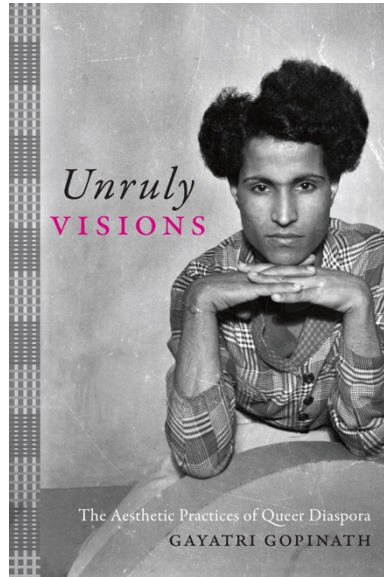


Figure 8 Abed the tailor from the book *Unruly Visions* (Gopinath 2)

Referring to Figure 8, Gopinath writes in her book, *Unruly Visions*, “Zaatari’s re-presentation of El Madani’s images activates transtemporal relays of affective relationality between the subjects in the photographs, Zaatari and other contemporary viewers (such as myself) that produce new meanings for these images as they circulate in the present (Gopinath 3). In Artist and curator, Zaatari’s work, he is navigating a studio archive in Lebanon after the indentureship in Mauritius. It is rich with people coming in and being photographed by El Madani as their own petty sovereign. These photographs, unlike the ones of indenture, are free of the type of surveillance in the Indian Immigration Archives but they are not free of the cultural imposition of colonialism. As Zaatari uncovers the visual hints of queerness translated in today’s vernacular, such as an “effeminate (written in the photographer’s ledger)” tailor. Gopinath must deconstruct the notion of queer to afford the existence of a queerness in Lebanon long before the Stonewall LGBTQ queerness came to fruition. Here she is not saying, “look at the Western construct of gayness,” here she is saying, “this picture exists outside the Western construction of queerness.” In my

work in this thesis, I am using my families' photographs as proxy for this type of resurrection.

As an artis(t)an, my work to reproduce the affect of this gaze by the tailor named Abed, is to find a way to trace a map outside of the constraints of the forced gaze of the subjects in the two photos to the right of my sister. My sister's photograph has been taken in the same situation as Abed the tailor. She is sitting for a photograph of her own volition. As I was there, I can attest to her choice of look to be her own. Abed and my sister stand outside of the heteronormative majority of the society(s) they live within. Abed and my Sister create queer histories which are quietly transgressive in choosing to perform their counternarrative to a third party photographer. They are pushing back against the reduction of the frame of nation and culture. She is named a Tom Boy, he, effeminate. As this thesis cannot delve into the entirety of The Indian Immigration Archives, and it is not the will of the institution to divulge the entirety of the photography to me just yet, I can only attest to seeing some hints of this gender non-conformity mostly in the male counterparts. As an artis(t)an my role is to find a method to bring the same affect to my materiality that I, Gopinath, Zaatari and the contemporaries of Abed the tailor have witnessed and felt. As I mentioned, the idea of queer in this text is expansive, it is the non-normative. Therefore, developing new meaning and transtemporal relationalities, as Gopinath explains above, works in the relationship the three subjects above have to each other. In her book *Impossible Desires*, "A consideration of queerness, in other words, becomes a way to challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora" (Gopinath 11). How impure is it to place a contemporary photograph beside colonial surveillance? How nonreproductive is it to imagine a family outside the bonds of genealogy? This complexity of the actual essence of being oneself in relation to others is impossible to photograph, therefore when I stumbled upon the computer embroidery program that produced

map-like images of photographs, I looked to the cartographic allusion to identity mapped onto the diasporic queer as posited by Gopinath and produced an imagined transtemporal image by materially embroidering the complex essence of desire of the (queer) diasporic migrant. A returning of the gaze. I did this through feeling, through research-creation, before the investigative research of this thesis. In this way my artis(t)an work described in the next chapter is closer to fiction, not unlike the movies I have cited above. As the composite photo of PG2 represents, I am not looking at the photographs, I am attempting to look through them. I illustrate this process in the preliminary artistic endeavour below.



Figure 9 Still capture from, "The Journey," a video shot on an iphone (photograph copyright of the artist)

In this two-minute video (Figure 9), entitled, *The Journey*, my sister holds out a piece of handwoven cotton cloth cut from a dhoti (wrapped Indian worker's garment) to the Toronto skyline. It is computer embroidered and dipped in cane sugar syrup. The wind is moving the panel back and forth denoting perpetual motion. Notice the gold bangles (Figure 9) which recall the earlier texts of Marina Carter, historian, who has written about South Asian women of

Mauritius bearing the culture of their foremothers. This agency my sister has in the present (to take the best from the past and leave the rest to others) is constantly being negotiated within the diaspora. The best and most poignant performance I have witnessed of this idea, related to religion, is Grace Jones at a concert in Detroit in 2019, where she sings the hymn, *Amazing Grace*, while being carried through the audience topless. Her disidentification with the present pudor surrounding her faith allowed her agency over the hymn and subsequently the practicing of her faith. Figure 9 is a culmination of a research-creation that preceded this thesis. The following case study, artis(t)an, works in the next chapter are all made after my research trip to the Indian Immigration Archives in Mauritius and are a part of the final thesis installation.



## Chapter 4

### Sugar- Textile- Body: The artis(t)an Case Studies

“Love is the core of certain forms of my labour. But make no mistake, even though I am extending, bending and defending, my love remains uncompromising, unfaltering, and absolute. My love creates the boundaries of what I will not tolerate. In all of its ferocity, but, most of all, in its refusal to falter or be altered in any way, my love becomes unsettling, threatening, unreadable. I am no longer the palatable source of extractable labour and I am quickly cast as deviant and rebellious.” Quill Violet Christie-Peters

Through the research of this thesis, I have come to the conclusion that I am surveying three commodities and providing indications of the elements after commodification. The elements are sugar, textiles and body. These elements have a history before imperial/colonial commodification. For example, the first iteration of granulated sugar exists in the now known region of Bengal around 400 BCE according to journalist Lainy Malkani<sup>22</sup> and the finest cotton woven in history can be found in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the region of today’s Dhaka. Therefore, the future and the past converge here in a space I term artis(t)an. This place is similar to the space queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz describes as a queer utopia in his book, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. “To some extent Cruising Utopia is a polemic that argues against antirelationality by insisting on the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity” (Muñoz 11). To this I add lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality as a feminist of colour underpinning through space opened up by the artis(t)an works presented below. In class, Art Historian Dr. Andrew Gayed explained intersectionality through the metaphor of a birdcage, with each bar representing one element of a person’s identity, compounding the oppression within their subject position to create a literal and metaphoric cage.

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<sup>22</sup> Malkani, Lainy. “*Sugar-coated World*,” The Compass: BBC, September 22, 2021. In this documentary Malkani follows sugar from its origins in Papua New Guinea around 8000 BCE to its role in American health today. Important to this thesis is the way in which she traces the extraction of sugar as colonial commodification in tropical colonies through indenture and relates it to the wealth that is still visible in the infrastructure of modern London, England.

These elements converge at the top where the bars meet, joining together to create the oppression. In the creation of artis(t)an, I imagine sawing the base off the cage, allowing the end of each bar to touch similarly identified bars from other open cages. This is complex relationality as I see it at present. As Muñoz continues, “Queer feminist and queer of color critiques are the powerful counterweight to the antirelational. I situate my work squarely in those quarters” (Muñoz 17). Critical race theorist Gayatri Gopinath, mentioned earlier in this text, expands queerness to the diaspora, the migrant. Personally, meditating on my migrant ancestors has allowed the possibility of this space, and the potentiality of it to be a communal one. The transtemporal space opens up as these research-creation lead artis(t)an works are engaged with, speak to each other and transform, creating infinite possibilities of connection. “These pages have described aesthetic and political practices that need to be seen as necessary modes of stepping out of this place and time to something fuller, vaster, more sensual, and brighter. From shared critical dissatisfaction we arrive at collective potentiality” (Muñoz 189).

## STUDY 1

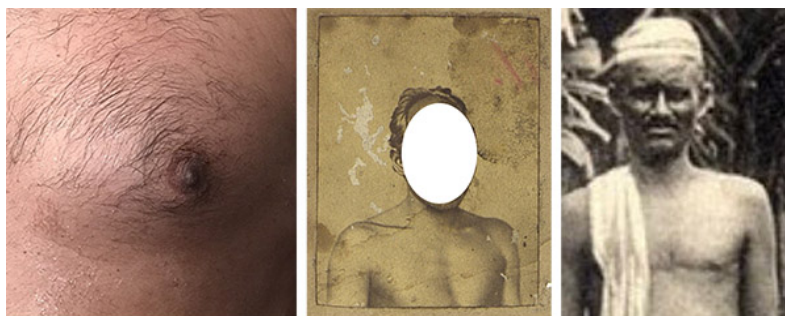


Figure 10 Left, picture of my pectoral after a sugar moulding (photograph copyright of the artist). Center, portrait from the page of tome PG2 (courtesy of MGI Mauritius). Right, highlight from Figure 1 photograph of coolies.

In the *Civil Contract of Photography* (2016), post-colonial theorist and photographic historian, Ariella Azoulay, considers her approach to the research of photography. “It takes into account all participants in photographic acts – camera, photographer, photographed subject, and spectator-

approaching the photograph (and its meaning) as an unintentional effect of the encounter between all of these. None of these have the capacity to seal off this effect and determine its sole meaning” (Azoulay 23). This is a crucial factor in the artis(t)an works I will be revealing in this chapter. This complex relationality of people and meaning can give rise to new understandings of photographs which were taken as a form of violence and reduction of (in the case of the Indian Immigration Archives) citizenship and can be treated in the present as an object to decipher new knowledge. This building beside of the archive is the main objective of these artworks. In Figure 10, from right to left you have a section of the original photograph from the introduction of this thesis (Figure1) to a member of the PG2 page from the Indian Immigration Archives, in addition to my selfie. It is this area I wish to concentrate on for the first of three artworks produced through a combination of research within the archive and research-creation. In the photograph on the far right, I remind you that I am taking this photograph verbatim in the vernacular sense. It was downloaded from the internet under the search, ‘coolie’. It is of field workers in Guyana at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it is most likely staged for a rich gentleman photographer who will be showing to his peers as a souvenir. In this staged photograph the family has been imagined and created by either the photographer or the spectator or a combination of both. The man I show in the right-hand photograph provides the ‘coolie’ image of a labourer, loin-clothed and bare chested. In the middle photograph above, we see the subject seated bare-chested as a part of the Indian Immigration Archives. Although this photo might not be completely indicative (as I am pulling only from one page), there are pages and pages of bare-chested men in the record which would continue the ‘coolie’ imaginary through the coloniser’s vernacular photography. But...there is a twist. During a conversation with the staff at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, I was corrected and made aware that these pages of unclothed men represent ships

quarantined at port. They had been made to disrobe for purposes of hygiene. I had therefore been reinforcing a stereotype which was handed to me through a skewed resource of colonial vernacular photography. I can assure you most of the photographs which I have looked at show clothed individuals. Both the middle and the right photograph represent a real person in history and in present day South Asia. The loincloth (dhoti) is still a common garment, and bare-chested men do abound in the labour force, yet the bare chest as a fetish symbol of the colonial hegemony suggests that all indentured men were bare-chested coolies, which is not the case. The symbol of the pectoral muscle exposed, is a reduction of a person to a mechanical fulcrum enabling the swing of an arm towards a cane stalk. In concentrating on the nipple as the center of the fulcrum, the machine of the cane fields, and the central purpose of the indentured labour through the eyes of a coloniser is revealed. Unintentionally, the photographer of the Indian Immigration Archives has shown us a better focal point as opposed to the eyes of the subject which were not allowed a direct gaze. The photography of my own nipple and pectoral at rest, returns the gaze cross-temporally. What does it mean to be at rest? Can the chest of a man only denote a masculinity? As I mentioned in the last chapter, queerness can be defined in the wanting of something outside the hegemony. Therefore, can these bare chests of the archive dream of other functions? There is a history of colonial depictions of young men denuded as objects of desire by colonial men which Edward Said explains in his book, *Orientalism* (1979). In Art Historian Andrew Gayed's article, *Queering Archives of Photography: Imperialism, homoeroticism in middle eastern contemporary art*, Gayed brings this past into the present through contemporary art, "This interesting flux and flow of historicised sexual bodies and the contemporary artist brings pre-modern sexual discourses out of the archives and into the lived reality of queer diasporic subjects of today" (Gayed 83). This orientalism is quite striking in the

pages of the Vagrant Archive, at the Indian Immigration Archives in Mauritius, where young men are recorded as routinely stripped, and markings noted on the register. Of course this can be read as a further stripping of humanity, yet as a racialized (once) young man, I can attest to the pressure that I and my friends have had under the patriarchy of the LGBT banner which was policed by privileged white men. Our orientalising continues today. As a queer man who still feels the sting of (sexual) harassment, being at rest does not only mean not working. I am rarely at rest in the company of men, they have been my worst tormentors, yet in the company of women my body is able to put down its guard. It was in the presence of women that the molds were made for the work below. Artist Vivek Shraya, explains this phenomenon in her book, *I'm Afraid of Men* (2018) where she unravels the misogyny of the heteronormative hegemony within gay male culture before and after her transition. As I mentioned before, queerness as a form of complex relationality does not need to dwell within the spectrum of sexuality. Homi Bhabha explains the political nature of this intersection which rings true to my own queer diasporic experiences, “my illustration attempts to display the importance of the hybrid moment of political change. Here the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One* (unitary working class) *nor the Other* (the politics of gender) *but something besides*, which contests the terms and territories of both. (Bhabha 41).” In the context of the indentured man, can he dream outside the realm of muscle, virility, and masculinity? Can he imagine himself outside the very machine of colonialism? Whatever the dream, it would fall outside the preconceived idea of himself (the politics of gender) and thus would be a queer desire. As Azoulay posits in her book, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, “The photograph is out there, an object in the world, and anyone, always (at least in principal), can pull at one of its threads and negotiate what it shows, possibly even completely

overturning what was seen in it before” (Azoulay 13). In this case, I concentrate on the sleeping pectoral muscles.



Figure 11 swing theory: archive of the *pectoralis somniantes/mo doodoo pe reve* (Photographs copyright of the artist)

In the above artwork (Figure 11), swing theory: archive of the *pectoralis somniantes/mo doodoo pe reve*. I have molded my own breast or pectoral muscle in cast hard sugar candy and embedded textiles within some of them. They are laying on a lightbox beside packed brown sugar molds in the same form. The cardboard which they sit on is the loom I used to make the quilt in the work *kot mo palto/coat check: the archive of complex relationality* (Figure 12). The cardboard box underneath is the container the light pad was delivered in. The piece sits on a carpet that has been at the entrance of my apartment which alludes to the oriental(ist) carpet and the type of carpet that can be taken easily from one location to another. During the thesis show it has also been said that it signals prayer. The gesture in this piece is set in motion through time as the moisture in the air seeps back into the cast sugar and it begins to melt on the lightbox. Earth is evoked here by the packed sugar molds and topography. This scene portrays the work we do as racialized people to discover (uncover) ourselves outside the violence of the history of so-called objective (colonial) ethnography. This is where blood memory comes into play as a way to circumvent the colonial archive. As indigenous playwright and dramturg Monique Mojica from the Guna and

Rappahannock nations explains, “our bodies are our libraries- fully referenced in memory, an endless resource, a giant database of stories. Some we lived, some were passed on, some dreamt, some forgotten, some we are unaware of, dormant, awaiting the key that will release them” (Wilmer 97).

There is a fluidity to the sugar castings (figure 11) as they can potentially decompose leaving their traces of textiles behind as they melt. This can be seen as perpetual motion inherent in the body as well as its natural state of fluidity and constant transformation. I have made a few attempts towards this piece, first using strips of cotton muslin fabric dipped in sugar syrup and molded on my chest. The photograph of myself (Figure 10 left), could have been a photographic creative endeavour in its own right, yet when I met artist Julia Rose Sutherland and she taught me how to build silicone moulds, I was able to offer the pectoral muscle as a vessel to hold other objects. This is the moment where I realised as an artist, my comfort zone is in the company of women. While Sutherland was helping to make the molds, my colleagues and members of my cohort, artist Susan Clarahan and artist Aydan Hasanova, came over to discuss the process, offering their insights to the weight changes in the female breast during menstruation when I noted how heavy the silicon felt on my chest. This space of comfort, where I hugged the boundary between male and female imbues this artwork with care and the acknowledgment of the women who I turn to for strength and comfort and in whose company I do my best work. Although, in this work I am breaking down the masculinity inherent in the male pectoral, I am not considering the female breast as destination. I am offering a huge area of complexity between the two and an invitation to explore. This sugar cast of my chest can hold more than muscle. And looking at it from an intersectional feminist perspective, it reveals the muscle hidden in the work of the women indentured labourers as well. When the sugar begins to melt again the embroidery

and metal sequins are revealed as traces. These molded forms transmogrify, they shift and can hold both past, present and future. They are journeys and the traveler. They are masculine and feminine.

During my research in Mauritius, younger Mauritian scholars often lamented on the fact that there are two types of Mauritius, the playground for tourists on the beaches and the sites of mourning, Le Morne (official UNESCO site of Slavery and the Maroon republic) and The Indian Immigration Archives (also a UNESCO site). The lament did not refute this reality, the lament was that Mauritius was a cosmopolitan region at the time of indenture and there was not only trade but important embassies as well as a two-hundred-year-old botanical garden sought after by the world, Pamplemousses Gardens, cited in Amitav Ghosh's novel, *River of Smoke* (2011). The topographical nature of the artis(t)an work above is meant to represent a sort of terra nullius made of sugar ripe for extraction. Hidden within the sugar are the traces of the complex civilizations who were also commodified to build the imperial machine beginning in 1492. When the cast sugar melts, the riches of the migrant culture is revealed. I represent the wealth and culture in fragments of textiles, metal sequins and embroideries.

As discussed above, Terra Nullius (a location ripe for extraction) can also be represented as the body, depicted in the pectoral muscle of the male indentured labourer, cast as machine as well as Eastern fetish. Using my own body to make the transtemporal link, I carry the muddled journey from the cane fields to the city of Toronto. Although, now I am looking from the perspective of the privileged. It is in this liminal space of the once liquid, soon to be liquid form I am able to perform a disidentification, "the ways in which one situates oneself both within and against the various discourses through which we are called to identify" (Muñoz), of the narrative of



indentured labourer as simple worker and tease out the relational complexity that was inherent in their reality which mirrors my present. The artis(t)an work above invites the spectator to ponder such (im)possibilities the privilege of multiple migrations has offered. The sugar cast of my pectoral muscle can also speak to the sweetness of the queer body, the body that performs outside the realm of hegemonic heterosexual experience.

In Aliyah Khan's article of 2016, *Voyages across Indenture: From Ship Sister to Mannish Woman*, she refers to the practice of *jahaji bhai*, a buddy system when men would pair up on ships during indentureship. Although the bulk of the article posits the existence of women doing the same through the literature of writer, Shani Mootoo, the article presents a case that acts of male-on-male homosexuality not only occurred on ships on their way from India to the sugar islands but were so common that they were rarely reported. In the case of Mohangoo and Nabi Baksh, they were, "caught in flagrante delicto in 1898 while being transported aboard the British ship *Mersey* to the cane fields of British Guiana" (Khan 253). Khan alludes to the double bind that indentured men faced within both Victorian standards and the burgeoning Caribbean population both enforcing binary sexuality within the African and Indian diasporas which did not exist in their respective native lands.

The historical record suggests that these men were not heterosexuals who engaged in same-sex acts because they were isolated from women and desperate; they chose to do so because they derived pleasure from it, and Baksh at least had had sex with men when women had been available to him. Any claim that either of the two men had some sort of gay or queer *identity* would be improbable and anachronistic; what is worth noting, though, is that these Indo-Caribbean *kala pani* ancestors construed sex with each other as affectively positive (Khan 260).

What is important to the artis(t)an work in (Figure 10) and to this thesis is the fluidity of sexuality documented in the male indentured population, outside of the Western construct of

queer sexuality after Stone Wall. In this way, the artwork above captures a transtemporal fluidity in sexuality that crystalizes, then melts, then recrystalises with the addition of energy. In this case it is the energy of the researcher, finding the clues to complex sexuality in the archives as well as in the body. The results of this energy is depicted in this artis(t)an work by the light box. The work invites a shifting in consciousness predicated on transtemporal relational complexities.

## STUDY 2

In this artwork, *kot mo palto/coat check: the archive of complex relationality*, I use the textiles within the frame of the Indian Immigration Archives in PG2 and in the various records I have researched in Mauritius, to create an artis(t)an work with the potential to grasp the relational complexity of the indentured labourers of yesterday through the textiles of the present.



Figure 12 *kot mo palto/coat check: the archive of complex relationality* (photographs copyright of the artist)

A black velvet jacket hangs in front of a white tunic, both have been enhanced with 40 cotton twill tapes in the colour of the clothing. In between these garments hovers a woven carpet/quilt held together in beige twill tapes. The fabric of this textile includes madras checks, a caramel coloured sari and small checks which are call *Vichy* in French. The two hanging garments are

attached to the flying quilt with red paper clips. The velvet coat was designed by me and made in India by a small cluster of women who were being trained to develop higher tailoring skills as an economic empowerment through a company that does not exist anymore. The fabric was made in Europe, the buttons perhaps India, the thread perhaps China. The white tunic which references the Indian tunic or kurta, was made by a Japanese retailer and sewn in China but designed by a French designer. Both symbolise, paraphrase Edward Said, that East and West do not exist. This flying carpet quilt is a cross temporal time machine reflecting the relationships of the indentured labourers in the Indian Immigration Archives as a mirror of our own.

Through the research of Mauritius from the 1700's you have seen that there were many cultures mixing to form the Dutch, then French, then British colony. The madras plaid in quilt/carpet hints at the businessmen who came to the island from India as free people to sell their textiles in towns such as Port Louis. This reclaimed textile from my partner's shirt was bought in Canada at an American retailer, made in India. India is the site of the first recorded emanation of crystallised sugar outside the colonial consumptive paradigm. The past is mixed into the present here. Within the logic of relationality in the artis(t)an work, it wouldn't be hard to imagine that a field worker could buy a yard or scarf in the madras fabric of a free Indian merchant immigrant. I use the caramel coloured sari fabric in the weave to hint to the sugar and also to provide the crossover of coolie depicted in the vernacular in a white cotton sari, to the photographed women in their silk finery in the pages of the Indian Immigration Archive. This network of complexity and relationality crosses over to the contacts the indentured labourers (who I have re-iterated were not just sugar cane cutters but church workers, domestics and nurses amongst other professions) with the colonisers. Cultures were exchanged in this contact zone (Pratt 34) and

through this flying quilt I return the gaze as a Canadian Mauritian. As Azoulay posits of the coloniser photographer, the petty sovereign, in this case could not erase the multi-cultural nature of the indentured worker in the archive. This also counters the idea that cosmopolitanism is modern. In Mauritius it began in the 1700's. And as Edward Said would likely concur, cosmopolitanism happened a long time before Europe and its institutions became the bellwether with which scholars like me would have to vet their ideas.

The two garments can be worn by two individuals and the tapes connected by red paper clips. This turns the activation of this work into a communal event. In the search for the history obscured by colonisation, this group work of connecting the disparate pieces of research information is embodied in the labour of the group connecting the two individuals to the flying quilt. Looking at the work connected without the bodies, speaks to the impossibility of splitting East and West from the migrant experience, they are both and none. I hope that by animating this artis(t)an piece we can evoke a transtemporal meditation on the migrant worker.

This is the artis(t)an work that caught the most buzz while on exhibition. It held the most attention by the way it floated and how the garments acted as proxies to human beings. One professor read the paperclips as bureaucracy which lead me to experiment in a dismantling ceremony whereby the participants were able to unhook the twill tapes and liberate the garments.

## STUDY 3



*Figure 13 rooz mo langaz/ my language is red: archive of our understanding (photographs copyright of the artist)*

In this artis(t)an work, rooz mo langaz/my language is red: Archive of Our Understanding (Figure 13), I write a sentence in a language conjured between my ancestors and I. The material I write on is the plain cotton weave of a dhoti and sari which have their roots before colonial commodification in Dhaka during the 1600s. The finest of cotton ever spun by hand was made there and was a luxury known globally before the rise of Western colonialism and the reduction of cotton to the humble textile used in the artis(t)an works (Figure 12 and 13). The implement I write with is a computer embroidery machine with an old commercial program that recognizes the faces. In this case I have used the photographs from my family album and the page from PG2 of the Indentured Labour Archive. The embroidery thread is red, symbolising life and celebration. Each embroidery has been made in a process of meditating on the photograph while

starting and stopping the embroidery program. In the process of creating these embroideries, I selected ten embroidery panels, which are sewn together by hand to form a sentence. This nonlinear script transcends time, oral translation and is a composite of traces from the faces in these photographs. I dip the sentence in sugar syrup and lay it between the open frames. As it dries, the sentence takes on a concrete sculptural shape as if it will always be there, or has always been there. Spectators are invited to look at each embroidery and engage with each other between the frames. While gazing at the embroideries and themselves, affect is generated, and the language begins to take shape in their minds and bodies. Beside the sculpture I have laid down other embroideries which have gone through the process of being stitched together, sugared, then dipped in water and unstitched. This indicates the ephemerality of language and the possibilities for other reformations of these repositories of knowledge. The relationship that the sculpture has with water, mirrors the relationship that Mauritian poet Khal Torrabully speaks of in the term *Kala Pani*, where the black ocean water breaks a person from their social structure, to be reformed anew. This is the language of the migrant. Therefore, the black frames can also stand in for the *Kala Pani*, representing multiple crossings. In the installation for this thesis I played a video on loop of a vortex created in a black volcanic rock river that flows in the region of Mauritius where my family began life on the island.

In NourbeSe Philips' poem, *Discourse on the Logic of Language*, she writes, "English is my foreign anguish" (She Tries her Tongue, Her Language Softly Breaks 30-33)" She is writing about losing the language of her ancestors and having it replaced through the language of the coloniser and through the unspeakable horror of slavery<sup>23</sup>. It is an intricate poem filled with

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<sup>23</sup> During this exhibition an artist and friend of mine divulged that the artwork Figure 13, was too painful to engage with. Being of African-Jamaican descendancy, he told me he could not help but imagine the horrors of slavery while in the presence of the work. The idea of a scene of a crime was also mentioned by another colleague. I will

historic context and works on many levels which I cannot fully articulate in this brief text. The importance of the poem to this thesis is the language of poetry as a way to articulate the cultural loss of one's ancestral tongue, a Mother tongue. I am also writing this thesis in a foreign language unknown to my ancestors. I mentioned in the prologue of this thesis, my mother and father did not have a common South Asian language. Although, I do have access to Mauritian Creole and at five years old I did speak the language fluently, English is the Mother tongue I would need to indicate on an application for further studies. The loss of a certain portion of my culture is more an ambivalent loss in my case compared to Philips, as my parents' generation and the generation before them reformulated their identities to align with the coloniser in hopes for inclusion to a higher status in the contact zone of a colonised state. Not to mention, as a defense mechanism for survival under a brutal regime. For me and my family, ours was a tactical elision as well as a reformulation of history fed to us by the coloniser. My connection in this artis(t)an work above converses directly with the ancestors, thus connecting to culture in a nonlinear way. Sitting at the computer embroidery machine, I became the petty sovereign able to hold back the data, and stitches the program put forth. Could this be read as a coloniser's move? Now that it is I who is holding back the full picture? The title of this thesis, *Queer Desires: Colonial portraits of the indentured labourers of Mauritius*, answers the question in two ways. First, I am referring to the original context of the photographs pertaining to the migrant labourers. Therefore, this type of photography was outside of their agency. Stopping and starting the machine, is a way for me to perform a disidentification with the colonial machine and commune with ancestors through my present agency as a privileged person today. Secondly, Queer Desires is the intentionality of this thesis to posit something new, a bridge, a Nepantla towards a much more

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be evoking more iterations of this creation as I continue to evolve the work and research. I am caught at present between the reality of the horrors of the system and the peaceful intention of a meditation with ancestors.

complex relationship not only to ancestors but to the migrants of today. Queer in this context expands to include the migrant as queer theorist Gayatri Gopinath explains in her book, *Impossible Desires*, “If within heteronormative logic the queer is seen as the debased and inadequate copy of the heterosexual, so too is diaspora within nationalist logic positioned as the queer Other of the nation, its inauthentic imitation” (Gopinath 11). I convened with the diaspora in a small room devoted to a computerised embroidery machine and through the process of stopping and starting the machine, cutting pieces of dhoti and sari cloth, engaging the cloth on the looms, extrapolating the photographic data from my computer to the machine, I created a third (diasporic) space outside of linear time to imagine a language. To continue the thoughts of historian Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, “Unlearning imperialism is asking not how it could be opposed tomorrow but rather how was it opposed yesterday, such that the fragmented many can stand together outside of the temporality of progress that shapes the violence inflicted upon them as a condition (Azoulay, 20). In this case I am writing to the diaspora to convene on these very questions. Is the tension between progress through technology and the labour behind it left mute when the vocabulary is generated by computer embroidery? Can the further studies of my ancestral cosmologies help to inform the process of knowledge creation in the present?

Academic and English literature scholar, Michelle La Flamme, in her article, *Understanding Aboriginal Arts Today*, reflects on the indigenous meaning of language, “For First Nations People, the mother tongue is often linked to the land, as Native language groups represent and codify cosmologies based upon traditional relationships with a specific territory. Across Canada, within traditional Native cosmologies, despite the specificities of language groups, the land is represented as an embodiment of the Great Spirit (La Flamme 23). While sitting with assistant professor Julia Rose Sutherland and discussing our practices, the gaps in my knowledge of my



own cosmologies were left as a question mark. Both of us can trace traditions of making in textiles as fundamental to our cultures (ancestors) and it was in the communal making that came naturally amongst women, that I was able to cross into the territory of the artis(t)an both in object and place. This is the center of much indigenous knowledge creation- women first. Therefore, going forward, the artis(t)an projects above might benefit from a further research into my own cosmology, to uncover ontological tools of creation and communication.

As a queer person, I know there is a rich history waiting to be revealed through further research after this thesis. Kama La Mackerel, an interdisciplinary non-binary Mauritian artist uses language in her poetry anthology *ZOM-FAM* to push against the hegemonic English language, incorporating Creole without explanations throughout the work. *to lekor se to lakaz, to lekor se enn zill, to lekor se to lacaz, to lekor se losean* (Mackerel 67). Your body is your home, your body is an island, your body is your home, your body is the ocean. This beginning stanza of the poem, *your body is the ocean* connects to the artis(t)an work in (Figure 11). Here my body is the source of language I seek to impart in the work *swing theory: archive of the pectoralis somniantes/mo doodoo pe reve*, sugar is used as the material proxy of flesh to convey a queer language outside of signification.

In the artis(t)an work, *kot mo palto/coat check: archive of complex relationality*, I use the language of textiles to convey the complex relationality of the indentured labourers in the archive to parallel our relationships today. The language is rich and lives outside of time, holding infinite possibilities of communication. The colonial gaze attempted to confine the indentured labourers to a simple narrative, yet through the research of this thesis paper I offer a counternarrative in both past and present.

## Epilogue: The End is the Beginning



*Figure 14 A Gesture of Reciprocity (photograph copyright of the artist)*

What's next? Through the cyclical nature of research-creation and academic research, I believe the societal alienation I have felt personally through colonialism has been shattered by the exercise of this thesis and the above installation. Since the beginning of this Master of Fine Art Thesis I have not wanted to perform my identity, yet it is evident that the installation work in the last chapter centers the body using sugar and textiles as its material proxy. The work is both my body and our body and it wants and deserves to be addressed. As described by playwright Monique Mojica, the body I have alluded to in the artis(t)an works in the last chapter is a library and infinite repository of blood memory (Wilmer 97). Dr. Andil Gosine speaks of contradictions inherent to the study of indenture (Gosine 67) which leads to the question of essentialism in blood memory, as descendants from India in general have categorised this through genealogy and caste. This categorisation worries me as a non-binary person who relates to queer intersectional theorist Gayatri Gopinath's attempt to untie womanhood and reproductivity in a quest for liberation (Gopinath 11). It is through queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz I am beginning to see the power of disidentification as a device to work through the contradictions of this complex relationality. In my thesis installation poster, I made it clear that I hadn't made

everything in the space. Hundreds of people had laboured in many ways before I held the sugar, textiles or the tools in my hands, even though I ordered some of the materials through the most modern method of an application on my hand-held digital device. This work of questioning the system we live in today by uncovering the hidden truths in the Indian Immigration Archives of Mauritius is inherently community based. The community of my ancestors are tied to the communities of migrant workers today within a contact zone (Pratt 34) of colonialism yesterday and the postcolonial systems of today. I hope to translate more of these threads of transtemporal knowledge materially and academically as a way to continue to build on the kinship I have found in the women, the post-indentured, the racialized, the Black, Indigenous, Queer, Trans, Femmes, and non-binary academics, artists, craftspeople and designers. This thesis began with the unpacking of my own settler relationship with the indigenous lands I have lived and worked on and upon which my university campus is built. In the image above (Figure 14) I have placed an apple on a handful of earth and inserted an incense stick. Four of these composites were placed in the room in four corners with the artis(t)an work *rooz mo langaz/my language is red: archive of our understanding* (Figure 13) as a gesture towards reciprocity amongst migrants in Canada and the indigenous peoples. The apple is a migrant from Kazakhstan and is not native to Canada. The earth symbolises the land which has been tended by indigenous peoples for thousands of years. The incense, when lit, completes a ceremonial gesture within the context of the place in which I have worked. The nature of Mauritian indenture cannot be studied separately from the realities of my present existence if I am to truly hold space for a complexity which rises above essentialism, expressed as co-citizenship by the photography historian, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (Azoulay 37). Therefore, my task is to decenter the violence of the colonial archive as I continue my journey. I am grateful and energised by the horizons this endeavour will bring.

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