

# “Meh Just Realize I’s Ah Coolie Bai”: Indo-Caribbean Masculinities, Chutney Genealogies, and Qoolie Subjectivities

Ryan Persadie  
Women and Gender Studies Institute  
University of Toronto  
ryan.persadie@mail.utoronto.ca

In the Anglophone Caribbean, nationalist discourses of sexual citizenship are inextricably linked to the afterlife of colonialism and its far-reaching and affective legacies, resonances, and continuities as it reinscribes alterity on the bodies of sexual and gendered “others.” Focusing our optics on the Indo-Caribbean, I explore how archives of chutney music offer disruptive methods, strategies, and praxes of transgression that trouble discourses of “normative” Creole (Afro-Caribbean) and heteronormative nationalisms as “authentic” ideologies of Indo-Caribbean gendering—notably, masculinity. Drawing upon historical genealogies of sexual-sacred erotics found within the Hindu, women-exclusive, pre-wedding Indo-Caribbean tradition of *matikor*, I interrogate how men artists in chutney music spaces perform what I conceptualize as “qoolie subjectivities,” or distinct embodied languages of self that operate through what I argue are long-standing entanglements of Indo-Caribbeanness and queerness that, when excavated via the body, cultivate critical forms of Indo-Caribbean knowing and living.

In this essay, I specifically focus on acts of remaking the pejorative term “coolie” from a grammar of harm to one of reclamation, and agentic potential. Such performances choreograph embodiments of erotic self-making, or “*qoolieness*,” as methods of pursuing transgressive Indo-Caribbean means of *doing* nonnormative gender and sexuality, offering us important vocalities that speak through genealogies of (post)indentureship chutney feminisms. My analysis of Indo-Guyanese chutney artist Mystic’s viral song and music video entitled “Coolie Bai” (2014) interrogates how such embodied articulations of *qoolieness* generate alternative forms of Indo-Caribbean citizenships, masculinities and strategies of remaking the self that move us beyond hegemonic ontological paradigms.

**Keywords:** sexual citizenship, Indo-Caribbean, Caribbean masculinities, queer Caribbean, chutney music, *matikor*, Indo-Caribbean feminism, coolie, Guyana

En el Caribe anglófono, los discursos nacionalistas de ciudadanía sexual están inextricablemente vinculados a las secuelas del colonialismo y sus legados, resonancias y continuidades afectivas y de largo alcance, ya que reinscribe la alteridad en los cuerpos de los “otros” sexuales y de género. Centrando nuestra óptica en el Indocaribe, exploro cómo los

archivos de la música chutney ofrecen métodos disruptivos, estrategias y praxis de transgresión que problematizan los discursos del creole (afrocaribeño) “normativo” y nacionalismos heteronormativos como ideologías “auténticas” para asignar géneros indocaribeños—en particular, la masculinidad. Basándome en las genealogías históricas de la erótica sexual-sagrada que se encuentra en la tradición hindú del *matikor*—exclusivamente de mujeres, prenupcial y indocaribeña—llego a interrogar cómo los artistas masculinos en los espacios de música chutney realizan lo que conceptualizo como “subjetividades qoolie”, o distintos lenguajes encarnados de uno mismo que operan a través de lo que postulo como entrelazamientos de larga duración del indocaribeñismo y el de ser queer que, cuando se excavan a través del cuerpo, cultivan formas críticas del saber y vivir indocaribeño.

En este ensayo, me concentro específicamente en los actos de rehacer el término peyorativo “coolie” de una gramática dañina a otra de reclamo y potencia activa. Tales interpretaciones coreografían las encarnaciones del auto-hacer erótico, o del ser “qoolie”, como métodos de perseguir los medios indocaribeños transgresores de *hacer* géneros y sexualidades no normativos, ofreciéndonos importantes vocalidades que hablan a través de genealogías de feminismos chutney después del período histórico del trabajo por contrato no abonado. Mi análisis de la canción viral y video musical del artista de chutney indoguyanés Mystic, titulados “Coolie Bai” (2014), interroga cómo tales articulaciones encarnadas de ser “qoolie” generan formas alternativas de ciudadanía indocaribeñas, masculinidades y estrategias de rehacer el yo que nos mueven más allá de paradigmas ontológicos hegemónicos.

**Palabras clave:** ciudadanía sexual, Indo-Caribe, masculinidades caribeñas, caribeño queer, música chutney, matikor, feminismo indocaribeño, coolie, Guyana

## Introduction: Embodied Pedagogies of Caribbean Queerness and the Politics of *Proppaness*

“Nah proppa” exclaims my Indo-Trinidadian grandmother one summer afternoon as she pauses to examine the ongoing festivities of the 2014 Toronto Pride Parade on a local news outlet, CityTV. As she hears the sounds of soca and dancehall music played by queer Caribbean paraders—some of whom are adorned in Carnival mas costumes—other television shots begin to display wotless<sup>1</sup> bodies, a sea of rainbow flags, and acts of overt sexual unruliness as homonormative slogans and community sponsorships by Trojan, Grindr, and other similar LGBTQ+ companies are shown. “Are they Caribbean?” She poses this question evidencing not only how “non-normative” performances of Caribbean sexuality articulate stark disruptions towards Eurocentric rules of heteronormativity (especially within the public sphere) but also how they trouble dominant Caribbean legislations of “proppa”—read here as “moral,” “acceptable,” or “legitimate”—gendering. At the same time, her sentiments of surprise towards these Caribbean partygoers also work to reify, materialize, and circulate mythologies that queerness and (Indo-)Caribbeanness are both mutually-exclusive, contradictory, and incompatible ontological categories.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “wotless” is a common Anglophone Caribbean colloquialism, popularized by the 2011 hit soca song of the same name by Kes the Band, that refers to embodied acts of carefree looseness that reject and refuse to pay attention to the managing and regulatory forces of both material and figurative gazes of power.

Positioning “normative” codes of Caribbean (hetero)sexuality as moral law, her statements do not only speak to the historical conditions that cultivated dominant (colonial) ideologies of gender and sexual diversity in the region, but also reveal how (post?)colonial archives of sexual and gendered knowing, bound up in Caribbean nationalist struggles, politics, and history, continue to cultivate genres of acceptable sexual citizenships and bodies. The legitimate sexual citizen here can only be made through its conformity to a politics of “respectability,” “authenticity,” and “modernity” of cis- and heteronormativity. A “normal” Caribbean sexual citizen is a *proppa* one, so much so that the force of such sexual managing and heteropatriarchal power began to frame the mundane interactions between my grandmother and me for many years, presenting itself through the opening lines of our telephone conversations and front-door greetings as she came to visit our family: “Ryan, yuh actin’ proppa?”

Through the ubiquity of this greeting, which often became her replacement for “how yuh goin’?” or “how are you?,” this question of proppanness began to demonstrate more than a concern for my well-being, such as how a dichotomization of Caribbeanness/queerness is constructed through an oppositional binary that demarcates clear lines between “good,” “respectable,” and “legitimate” sexualities and their antithetical “bad,” “immoral,” and “illicit” forms. In particular, beyond making sure to confirm whether or not I had not fallen into the “traps” of sexual alterity, her questions drew attention to tropes of the un-Caribbeanness of queerness, amplifying and extending colonial epistemologies that have been fostered in the region since times of European conquest. In eras of postcoloniality, this dichotomy of queerness/Caribbeanness was extended to produce a heteronormative Caribbean consciousness, or what Amar Wahab (2012, 482) calls “homophobic nationalisms,” rewarding performances of sexual citizenship that adhere to regimes of heteropatriarchal state projects. For example, “traditional” paradigms of Indo-Caribbean thought such as *jahaji-bhai*<sup>2</sup> narratives work to suture heterosexuality to “normative” Indo-Caribbean culture and identity that, by extension, position queerness either as foreign or a recent viral pollutant to Indo-Caribbean community spaces (Lokaisingh-Meighoo 2000; Persard 2018).

Often in collaboration with emerging right-based political campaigns (Dixon 2020) and anti-LGBTQ+ religious organizing (Williams-Sambrano 2020) in Trinidad for example, homophobic nationalisms work to position the “degradation” of heteronormative gender and sexual performance as a consequence of “tolerating” queerness. Echoed through common exclamations, for example, that to be queer is a “white people ting,” enactments of nonheteronormative desire become pejoratively coded for their threatening potential towards systemic heteronormalities. For this reason, Caribbean states in particular have worked to position queerness in all of its forms to elsewhere and peripheries always outside the realm of “authentic” Caribbean sexual and gendered landscapes.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jahaji-bhai historiographies have been argued in the Indo-Caribbean literature as one of the foundational archives of Indo-Caribbean ontology and historical narratives based upon heterosexual, fraternal bonds made aboard indentureships in their crossings from colonial India to the Caribbean (Khan 2018; Lokaisingh-Meighoo 2000; Reddock 1999). I will return to this ideology later in this article.

<sup>3</sup> For other examples and narrates of the myth of the incompatibility of Caribbean and queerness, see Agard-Jones 2012; Crichlow 2004; Elwin 1997; and Silvera 1992.

Despite the advocations of my grandmother for assimilations into heteronormativity as well as to regulate the *buller*<sup>4</sup> (gay) sensibilities I began to articulate throughout adolescence, it was also my grandmother who provided my first lessons in gendered transgression. Despite her conservative approaches to sexuality, the stories of erotic autonomy her Caribbeaness told simultaneously became the initial pedagogical center by which I began to understand the transgressive force of Caribbean queerness—not only as a sexual identity politic, but as a corporeal articulation of doing, moving, and embodying *against*. Notwithstanding tendencies to bifurcate Caribbeaness from nonnormative sexualities, her ongoing process of becoming told important stories about how histories of Indo-Caribbeaness and queerness in the region collide, intertwine, and constitute each other.

She often discussed her upbringing in San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago, and the archive of nonconformity the land offered, such as Carnival. As I came to learn more about the connections between who I understood as the older, respectable, and firm “Ma” and the younger bacchanalist Sheila, her latter expressions of “broughtupsy” seemed to subsume and attempt to silence the corporeal archive of gender and sexual transgression, resistance, and “free up” that she carried within her. In one instance, with a nostalgic smile and laugh at our dinner table one night, she explained that against the word of her “rough” Indo-Caribbean mother, she secretly took to the Carnival road at age nineteen and played mas for the first time, to the utter horror and dismay of her conservative Christian family.

During the mid- and late twentieth century, associations with Afro-Trinidadian and Creole culture have been largely held by Indo-Caribbean cultural vanguards as a bastardization of traditional Indo-Caribbean womanhood and furthermore, performance of queer gendering (Hosein 2012; Kanhai 1999; Niranjana 1999; Puri 1997; Reddock 1998).<sup>5</sup> Because Indo-Caribbean women, as nurturers and carriers of Indian<sup>6</sup> culture, were expected to conform to gender scripts that imagined them as “passive,” “docile,” “conservative,” “respectable,” “submissive,” and “moral” (Hosein and Outar 2012, 1), engagements with Afro-Caribbean embodiments of erotic autonomy, such as wining and playing mas in Carnival, provided them with pedagogical tools to reconfigure traditional notions of Indian womanhood and engage in new forms of self-making. As Kavita Raghunandan (2016) notes, the entry of Indo-Caribbean women in Carnival challenged dominant attachments of Indo-Caribbean women’s

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<sup>4</sup> The word “buller” is a common pejorative term for gay and same-sex desiring men in Trinidad and Tobago. However, despite its homophobic origins and connotations, in recent decades, it has been reclaimed by Trinidadian men as a language of erotic self and subjectivity to articulate a distinct Caribbean-based sexual identification that exists outside of Global North/homonormative positionings of gay men’s sexuality and queerness. See Crichlow 2004 and Attai 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Hosein (2012) notes that this anti-Black discourse was especially tied to Indo-Caribbean patriarchal fears that Indo-Caribbean women’s docile sexuality would be “tainted,” particularly by their intimacies with Afro-Caribbean men. She argues that Indo-Caribbean women’s racial-sexual purity was premised on a gendered division, regulation, and differentiation that was positioned as incompatible with Blackness, which came to occupy a “vulgar” and “immoral” imagining within the Indo-Caribbean patriarchal imagination. Although outside the scope of this article, it is important to note and contextualize how such framings of racial mixture within Indo-Caribbean femininity become rendered inferior and “viral” through long-standing legacies of racial purity politics and anti-Blackness in Indo-Caribbean communities. See Hosein 2016 and Barratt 2016.

<sup>6</sup> “Indian” in the Caribbean and its diasporas is commonly used to refer to Indo-Caribbean culture. I note this distinction to not cause confusion with continental Indianness rooted in South Asia.

subjectivity to modesty, domesticity, and docility as the douglarization<sup>7</sup> of their femininity became “underscored with notions of pollution, impurity, . . . and vulgarity” (198).

Yet such heteronormative ideologies of Indo-Caribbean racial-sexual formation not only reveal to us the ways in which Indo-Caribbean sexuality has been policed and surveilled by the continuities of heteropatriarchal power, but also demonstrate tactics and technologies of historical revisionism that seek to erase nonnormative archives—which I read here as “queer”—embedded in the land, cultural expressions, and bodies of Indo-Caribbean communities. By “queer,” I am not only concerned with nonnormative, trans, and same-sex desiring sexual practices and acts (as the term often implies in the West). Rather, I situate Caribbean queerness through embodied grammars of disruptive epistemological and ontological praxis (Ellis 2011), and its specific nonconformities to Eurocentric modes of sexual behaviour and emplacement, or that which becomes the very archive that positions the region as the antithesis of colonial logics of normality, order, and rationality.

What I mean by this is that constructions of harmful heterogeneologies have not only worked to erase the materiality and realness of Indo-Caribbean histories of revolution, resistance, and radicality, but also emplace Indo-Caribbeanness and Indo-Caribbean sexuality to an immobile, fixed, and rigid mythology of insular history, memory, geography, and identity (particularly as it bifurcates the intimacies, mixtures, and crossings between Caribbean Indianness, Blackness, and Indigenities). Framing Indo-Caribbean historiographies as monolithic realities separate from any form of multiplicity erases the material *queer* conditions of Caribbean life that have operated and been made possible through relational zones of migration, mixture, encounter, and diasporization. In extending the work of Gayatri Gopinath (2018), we must read the region through what she terms a “queer regional imaginary,” or that which exists in “contradistinction to a dominant national imaginary that effaces nonconforming bodies, desires, and affiliations” (15).

Such a queer approach to ontology defies the rules of homogeneity and asks us to think beyond colonial discourses and flattened essentialisms of Indo-Caribbean living and being. Thus, when has the Caribbean ever been a site of normalcy or, in my grandmother’s words, proppaness? The queerness of the Caribbean, and Indo-Caribbean specifically, has always been a site of transgression that has defied prescribed forms of hegemonic gendering and sexual practice, furthermore providing its communities with corporeal methods, tools, and strategies to free (up) themselves from heteropatriarchal norms of sexuality and gender in addition to other articulations of internalized colonial epistemological indoctrinations.

I began with the personal vignette of my grandmother to reflect upon how queer-exclusionary Caribbean nationalisms built upon a politics of proppaness not only work to frame sexual citizenship through the erasure of the queer and trans subject but furthermore, engage in acts of selective

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<sup>7</sup> Douglarization refers to distinct processes of syncretism, mixture, and hybridity Africanness and Indianness in Caribbean and Caribbean diasporic geographies. It carries multiple functions in Caribbean feminist literatures that include an identity politic, subjectivity, poetic, method of inquiry, and analytic. See Barratt 2016, Puri, 2004, Rahim 2010, and Reddock 1999.

forgetting<sup>8</sup> of how the Indo-Caribbean is and has always been a site of queerness, the interstices of which, when activated, produce performative arenas of what I call *qoolieness*. Specifically, for Indo-Caribbean communities, the queerness of our racial-sexual formation is further exacerbated by national politics in the region that position the Caribbean as only a space of and for Blackness, further rendering Indo-Caribbean gender and sexuality as always-already nonnormative. What then would it mean for Indo-Caribbeanness to think through and excavate the queer ontological underpinnings that have shaped our histories and contemporary modes of living? What archives does the heterosexualization of Indo-Caribbean studies and bodies forget? Deploying and cultivating approaches to the Indo-Caribbean that engage in this excavation and *rememory* work help us to build epistemologies and vocalities that have always been there. Drowned out through the echoes of heteronormative managing, a listening and reading practice that allows us to rearticulate and resurge the sensations of these submerged sensoria allow us to learn from and work through the important queer dynamics, histories, and archives housed in our bodies. Working through such a sensing practice—or a “theory in the flesh”<sup>9</sup>—helps us to reflect upon the Indo-Caribbean body as a site of critical pedagogy whereby flattened categories of race, gender, sexuality, masculinity, and sexual citizenship can be troubled, agitated, and challenged.

In this essay, I specifically explore the politics of proppaness by turning to performances of queer Indo-Caribbean masculinities in chutney music geographies. Again, my reading of “queer” here is not meant to articulate sexual and gender difference as a category of absolute being—as used often in Global North LGBTQ+ mainstream organizing and activism—but as a practice, method, and a “doing” of transgressive and erotic self-making. As conceptualized by Jafari S. Allen (2011), erotic self-making refers to practices and performances of self that imagine and rehearse a subjectivity outside of dominant state exclusions and limits. In his arguments, an engagement with the erotic specifically “allows us to look into ourselves, and other spaces otherwise closed, to work toward interventions in political and cultural doctrine previously unimagined” (99). Erotic self-making works through the resources of the body to rehearse queer afterlives of normative ideologies, whereby the borders, contours, and edges of heteronormativity can be disaggregated and diffused.

Rather than positioning queerness through identity logics, or “the privileged site in which the truth about ourselves and our social relationships is to be found” (Wekker 1999, 120), I investigate how Indo-Caribbean men chutney performers draw upon, articulate, and excavate queer Indo-Caribbean embodied archives that move through genealogies of postindentureship feminisms to cultivate critical forms of transgressive masculinities. In particular, I explore how the chutney performance arena offers critical queer methods, strategies, embodiments, and praxis of disruption

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<sup>8</sup> I extend this term from its original uses in the work of M. Jacqui Alexander (2002). In her work, selective forgetting is used to explain how “minoritarian” histories become burned out of memory through colonial violence and archive building. Specifically, erasures of queer and racialized living and resilience work to always situate them to outside elsewhere. Alexander cautions us that vision work, a daily practice of remembering, seeing and hearing, will allow us to heal the wounds of fragmentation and dismemberment produced through colonialism histories and its running traces through our contemporary world.

<sup>9</sup> I deploy this term from the original work of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) in their canonical collection of radical transnational feminist thought *This Bridge Called My Back*.

towards “normative” Creole (Afro-Caribbean) and traditional heteronormative Indo-Caribbean ideologies of sexuality that develop, as well as engender, both new and extant forms of *qoolie* knowing.

My initial interest in this work was inspired by Indo-Caribbean celebratory spaces I have attended over the course of my life. Despite the governing heteronormative rules of Indo-Caribbean masculinity, I have witnessed how acts of qoolieness have occurred in spaces where chutney music is played, albeit for ephemeral moments. In the wedding space, in the chutney fête, in the rum shop, in our basements, backyards, and kitchens, there is something that happens. Moving through sound, dance, and our bodies, there is a powerful force behind chutney music that causes Indo-Caribbean masculinity to be loosened, freed, and transgressed. It is this erotic energy that carries a visceral archive of queer Indo-Caribbeanness in need of our attention. What forms of feminist masculinities does the aural and felt force of chutney carry? What pedagogies of queer resurgence can chutney instruct us to through acts of listening, moving, and dancing together?

Drawing upon historical genealogies of sexual-sacred erotics found within the Hindu, female-exclusive, prewedding Indo-Caribbean tradition of *matikor*, male artists in chutney music spaces perform what I conceptualize as “qoolie subjectivities,” or distinct Indo-Caribbean embodied languages and pedagogies of self that work through queer Indo-Caribbean embodiments, particularly the remaking of the pejorative term “coolie” from a grammar of harm to one of reclamation and agentive potential. In particular, I investigate how long-standing entanglements of Indo-Caribbeanness and queerness, or what I again call *qoolieness*, evidence transgressive Indo-Caribbean gender performances that move through such genealogies of (post)indentureship (and chutney) feminisms to cultivate new means of erotic self-making. In offering this grammar, I rework the historically pejorative, although often reclaimed identification of “coolie” with the letter ‘q’ to theorize the transgressive potentials of these performances of racialized sexuality. My analysis of Indo-Guyanese chutney artist Mystic’s viral song and music video entitled “Coolie Bai” (2014) interrogates how embodied articulations of queer/Indo-Caribbean archives generate alternative pedagogies for qoolie ways of being.

## **“Breaking Silences”: Mapping the Field of Caribbean Sexual Citizenships and Masculinities**

In September of 2018, I coorganized a community conference entitled “Breaking Silences” in Toronto in collaboration with a local New York City-based nonprofit organization called the Caribbean Equality Project. The aim of this conference was to foster a collective space for community conversations related to issues affecting queer Caribbeans in diaspora. In particular, the conference worked to unsettle and problematize universalizing logics of homonormativity that continue to erase queer of color ontologies and epistemologies through their whitening and homogenizing tendencies.

Through centering queer Caribbean narratives, this conference sought to disrupt “economies of affirmation” that have developed freedoms for privileged (white) bodies in the “modern” Global North, while continually positioning subjects of the Global South (and their diasporic descendants) to “geographical and temporal spaces that are constituted as backward, uncivilized and unfree” (Lowe

2015, 3). Through similar processes, homonormative discourses of sexual citizenship also demonstrate how queer of color bodies can only access a peripheral status within its hegemonic sexual epistemology (Silvera 1992; Agard-Jones 2012; Khan 2016; Gill 2018; Afi Quinn 2018) and describe, as Rinaldo Walcott (2001) articulates, a politic of how to belong to the nation-state as “not-quite-citizens” (127). Continuously performing the “cultural labour of visibility” (Livermon 2012), spaces such as *Breaking Silences* brought “nonnormative” sexualities to the forefront of awareness and attention, in which queer of color subjectivities make themselves known as “legible” and “legitimate” queer bodies and subjects in their own right.

Further complicating access to sexual citizenship in the contemporary context of a putatively sovereign Caribbean is the afterlife of colonialism and its far-reaching and affective traces, legacies, resonances and continuities. In reinscribing alterity on the bodies of sexual and gendered “others,” institutional regimes of normalcy in the Caribbean have striven to uphold and defend the naturalization of conjugal heterosexuality, marriage and procreative sex (Alexander 1994, 2005); norms of male and female reputation and respectability (Ghisyan 2016b; Wilson 2013; Hosein 2012), and the maintenance of heteromasculinities as compulsory to achieving ideal citizenship (Barriteau 2003; Lokaisingh-Meighoo 2000; Crichlow 2004). Such dissident gender identities and sexualities are surveilled through disciplinary technologies of control that seek to criminalize those that cause “moral panic” within heteronormative populations and thus threaten formations of the “ideal” family, nation, and national citizen.

Harmful and violent colonial legislations continue to police and regulate those who, both publicly and/or privately, perform their queerness and/or same-sex desires in the region. This can be observed in legalities such as Section 153 of the Summary Jurisdiction Offences Act in Guyana, established in 1893, that criminalizes and outlaws “cross-dressing” among men and women (*Stabroek News* 2018); Sections 13 and 16 of the Sexual Offences Act in Trinidad and Tobago that legislates lesbian and gay sex as punishable under offences of “serious indecency” and “buggery” (Alexander 1994); and other managerial practices of surveilling queer and same-sex desiring sexualities through upholding criminal charges including “carnal intercourse against the order of nature” (Robinson and Bulkan 2017); “improper purposes” (Paton and Romain 2014); “cross-dressing” (Wiltshire 2018; Hereman 2018); and “sodomy” (J. Scott 2015).<sup>10</sup> Evidently, as M. Jacqui Alexander (1994) famously stated, it is still widely apparent that even despite the important queer organizing and advancement of LGBTQI+ rights in the Caribbean region: “not just any *body* can be a citizen.”

The refusal and inability of queer and same-sex desiring bodies to conform to regulations of hegemonic and compulsory heterosexuality raises paranoias and anxieties within the state as the “health,” “sustainability,” and “moral sanctity” of the nation is threatened (Lazarus 2015, 134). In the state’s imagination, managerial policing and regulation is mandatory to control and “fix” the issue of “incompatible,” “pathological,” “foreign,” “perverted,” “abnormal,” “deviant,” and “unnatural”

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that this law has used broad and nondefined qualifiers of “improper purposes” to maintain strict heteronormative gender roles among its population (Paton and Romain 2014) that have specifically been used to police and target Trans women of colour in Guyana.

bodies who “infect” the nation. By enacting forms of regulation through the judicial system, the state offers a promise of protection to its “normative” cisgender heterosexual citizens against the viral penetrability and white “importation” of queerness that has been mobilized by the West.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the maintenance of rigid dichotomies of natural/unnatural, moral/immoral, decent/indecent, and inside/outside are strategies of regulation in the Caribbean that reify invisible boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable members of society (Ghisyan 2016a, 159) and, through its tyranny, obstruct racial-sexual “others” from accessing the status of official citizenship. However, these politics of citizenship have unquestionably also been complicated by queer and same-sex desiring Indo-Caribbean bodies who are rendered improperly Caribbean, queer and Indo-Caribbean through their raced, gendered and sexed nonnormative subjectivities.

Once the Breaking Silences conference had ended, I received a striking influx of positive online messages from queer Indo-Caribbean participants who expressed feelings of belonging, representation, validation, visibility and arguably alternative forms of kinship, and community from this ephemeral space, seemingly inaccessible to them in other heteronormative Caribbean spaces in Toronto. In particular, their sentiments reflect the invisibility and underrepresentation of queerness within nationalist and cultural discourses of Indo-Caribbeanness. As they expressed to me:

Us queer West Indians are really struggling out here. I’m so grateful that people . . . are making spaces for us to feel proud of who we are. I’m honestly so overwhelmed by the existence of this event you don’t even know eh.<sup>12</sup>

I cannot express how I felt being around other queer Caribbean people. It was the first time I finally felt like I was not alone, like there are other Indo-Caribbean queer people out there.

Their yearning to find space as queer Indo-Caribbeans point us to two major gaps within the Anglophone Caribbean scholarship. First, we must acknowledge how discourses of “normative” sexual citizenship in the region have been constructed through the erasure and elisions of same-sex desiring, trans and queer-identifying bodies (Persard 2018; Ghisyan 2016a; King 2014; Sheller 2012; Glave 2008; Alexander 2005, 1994; Silvera 1992). This is further exacerbated by the ways in which vernacular Caribbean vocabularies for queer identities have become oversaturated with descriptive yet, pejorative terms of homo- and transphobia such as bullerman, batty bwoy, anti-man, zami, chi-chi man, man royal, etc. The use of such language has appeared as complex parts of a regional and diasporic cultural lexicon that starkly sound and echo antipathies held towards forms of “intolerable,” “illicit,” and “unacceptable” sexualities that many Anglophone Caribbean states assert cannot be

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<sup>10</sup> As I have mentioned earlier, sexual difference has often been branded as antithetical to the region and thus, “un-Caribbean.” In the Anglophone Caribbean, queerness is often positioned as an anomaly whose origins and locations are purely bound to the European and North American diasporas rather than carrying a long-standing presence and history in the region itself (Persard 2018; Khan 2016; Agard-Jones 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Personal communications. For the protection of these informants’ identities, I have omitted their names.

rendered as “visible” or “legible,” or produce “official” citizens (Alexander 1994), or constitute national identities (R. Lewis and Carr 2009).

In addition, we can also attribute the invisibility and erasure of queer, trans and same-sex desiring bodies within discourses of Caribbean citizenship through Aaron Kamugisha’s arguments (2007) of the “coloniality of citizenship.” He suggests that one’s access to citizenship in the Caribbean is not solely limited to legal and judicial obstacles and parameters, but is mediated via a variety of mundane practices, public discourses, ideologies, attitudes, nationalist tropes of belonging as well as forces of elite domination and legacies of colonial authoritarianism (21) that must be held accountable for maintaining continuities of queerphobic legalities in the Caribbean.

On the other hand, when Anglophone Caribbean scholarship does discuss queerness in relation to Caribbean identity, it is predominantly focused on Blackness (Bain 2017; Wekker 2006; King 2014). If national images of the Caribbean continue to be disseminated as inherently creole or “African,” any rights-based claims made vis-à-vis the state on behalf of queers will also only acknowledge forms of queerness that neatly fit within Afrocreole epistemologies (Puar 2009, 5).<sup>13</sup> “Legitimate” citizenship in the Anglophone-Caribbean and its diasporas thus only becomes achievable through upholding Afrocreole nationalisms (Wahab 2012; Kamugisha 2007; Reddock 1999, 2014; Yelvington 1993) that reproduce the ideal citizen as Afro-Caribbean and heterosexual. How then do queer Indo-Caribbeans access forms of community, belonging, and self that recognize the intersections of their sexual and racial difference?

The second gap in the scholarly literature can be seen through the limited, yet developing epistemological approaches within Indo-Caribbean queer masculinity scholarship. A large majority of the field continues to privilege heteronormativity as its dominant ontological framework (Persard 2018; Reddock 2016) and reproduce ontological theorizations that construct divisive boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable members of society and emphasize the status of “tolerable” citizens (Ghisyan 2016a). While there are emerging discussions of Indo-Caribbean queerness, most do not theorize sexual difference beyond identity politics.

This essay intervenes in the gap created by these scholarly accounts, by offering an ontological exploration of the qoolie potentials for Indo-Caribbean masculinities that transgress hegemonic Creole and heteronormative paradigms. It responds to a call for further queer analysis of Indo-

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to acknowledge that contemporary iterations of creole hegemonies, and the historical intimacies and encounters from which they emerge, are not monolithic or insular but contextual and speak to a particular reading of Caribbean blackness in the region and its diasporas. For instance, within Trinidad and Tobago, dominant representations of the nation and the ideal citizen are imagined through creolization, which has largely come to stand for and represent blackness in the country. As a result, throughout the late twentieth century, Indo-Caribbeans struggled to cultivate a sense of belonging within the hegemonic space of the creole nation (Munasighe 2001). It is only with tokenistic and often stereotypical forms of national opticalities of Indianness in Trinidad and Tobago that Indo-Caribbeanness is made visible within the nationalist imagination. In the Trinidadian popular culture archive, this can be seen through sonic and lyrical representations of an imagined Indo-Afro unity and togetherness within popular soca and soca-chutney texts wherein a “rum and roti politics,” as defined by Lise Winer (2008), invoked the imagery of stereotypical archetypes of Indo-Caribbeanness such as food and drink “in order to sell cultural unity between Afro[-] and Indo[-Caribbean] communities” (Baksh 2014, 156) and enforce a nationalist mythology that racial marginalization does not exist within the nation.

Caribbeanness raised by Lauren Pragg (2012) in “The Queer Potential: (Indo-)Caribbean Feminisms and Heteronormativity.” As they suggest, reading Indo-Caribbean spaces through queerness offers us a “discursive tool that is rooted in the erotic emancipation, sacred elements . . . as well as the non-normative embodiments, behaviours, and imaginings it can create for Indo-Caribbean[s]” (4). Extending emerging theorizations of queer Indo-Caribbean thought (as in Persard 2018; Ghisyawan 2016a, 2016b; Khan 2016; Pragg 2012; Gopinath 2005; Lokaisingh-Meighoo 2000), I suggest that Indo-Caribbeanness has always contained a queer quality that extant ontological discussions have rarely acknowledged.

In relation to Afro-Caribbean masculinities that have been imagined as “dominant,” “assertive,” “hypermasculine,” and “carnal,” orientalist tropes of difference have been assigned to Indo-Caribbean men that have rendered them as “submissive,” “passive,” “backwards,” “weak,” “effeminate,” “criminal,” “morally degenerate,” “clannish,” “heathen,” “traditional,” “miserly,” and “obsequious” (Wahab 2006, 143–44; Mohammed 2009). Indeed, Indo-Caribbean men have always been read as queer bodies in the context of Caribbean society, where a subtext of nonnormativity has underpinned the social construction of their racialization and gender. Polarized against and in relation to dominant Afrocreole masculinities, their Indian difference renders them always-already queer to the hyperbolic excess of Afrocreole heteromascuities.

Queer of color theorists have discussed the ways in which racialized sexualities, and in particular “Asian”<sup>14</sup> masculinities, have been historically and psychically bound by the orientalist imagination (Nguyen 2014; Eng 2001), often being represented as possessing an intrinsic “feminine penetrability” (Said 1978). These “lowered” tropes of Asian masculinities have also acquired a host of negative associations including weakness, emasculation, shame, humiliation, abjection, submission, and femininity (Nguyen 2014; Scott 2010; Eng 2001). As a result, dominant (Afro-)creole masculinities have been inaccessible to Indo-Caribbean men.

Lewis and Ramsaran (2018), Niels Sampath (1993), and Peter Wilson (2013) have all theorized and essentialized Caribbean masculinity as only achievable through creolization, which in Wilson’s arguments, is structured through a dyad of garnering reputation and respectability. He argues that Afrocreole reputation, which is read as creolization, is achievable through the following means: engaging in the public sphere; partaking in extra premarital sex with women; performances of male virility defined by the ability to impregnate a woman; and the passing of this reputation to a male child who will take on the father’s name. Values of morality, dignity, honor and respect are engrained in this model as reputation attaches not only to sexual and marital matters but also to proficiency in all male activities and a fulfillment of obligations attached thereto.

In *Caribbean Masala: Indian Identity in Trinidad and Guyana*, Linden Lewis and Dave Ramsaran (2018) also theorize Indo-Caribbean masculinities in the Anglophone Caribbean region through creole paradigms. Despite creolization operating through an Afrocentric and classist framework—a slippage

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<sup>14</sup> I use “Asian” here to reference its deployment in this set of literature (which includes Indianness), however, I do not use it throughout this paper because “Asian” comes to bear different geographical, historical, and racial meanings in the context of the Caribbean and Caribbean diasporas.

in their theoretic which they actively acknowledge—they argue that creolization is the most adequate vocabulary to represent the specificities and complexities of Indo-Caribbean ontologies and lived experiences in the contemporary moment (17–18). However, their study fails to account for theorizations of queer, trans and same-sex desiring sexualities and masculinities among Indo-Caribbeans. In fact, they offer only a very brief mention of queer Indo-Caribbean life throughout their study when they merely identify a group of gay-identified men’s participation in Phagwah celebrations held in Richmond Hill, Queens, New York City, in one chapter. The invisibility and erasure of queer, trans and same-sex desiring practices of Indo-Caribbean subjects, both in the region and the diaspora, supports dominant heteronormative mythologies that queer life in the (Indo-)Caribbean is an impossibility and furthermore, to be queer or engage in nonnormative sexual practice or identifications would render one as un/non-Indo-Caribbean. As Vanessa Agard-Jones (2012) suggests, such queer invisibilities in the Caribbean perpetuate the notion that it is only through diasporic movement that Caribbean subjects gain the capacity to be “legible,” “official,” and “recognizable” queer subjects (327).<sup>15</sup>

With such heteronormative conceptualizations of creolization predicated on the silencing and invisibility of queerness, Lewis and Ramsaran are thus able to problematically argue in their study that Caribbean masculinities must be defined in their relationality and opposition to femininity. My point of contention with their arguments is that Afrocreole masculinity, as an instrument of heteromale power, is based on local perceptions of success that Indo-Caribbean men, branded as “effeminate,” “submissive,” and “abject” bodies will never be able to access in the same totality. Indeed, their arguments advance normative performances of masculinity that effectively delimit freedom to particular embodied forms and shaped sexualities (Sheller 2012, 241).

However, such feminine affects of Indianness do not have to be solely confined to the pejorative, but rather, pleasure, agency, and power can be found through performing one’s abject racialization (Nash 2014; Young 2014; Nguyen 2014). In challenging such heteronormative imaginings of creolization and Indo-Caribbeaness, how may we explore deployments of femininity that can engender emancipatory, “queered” possibilities among heterosexual, queer-identifying and same-sex desiring men? What power lies in these states of shattering, and being “undone”?

## **Historicizing Indo-Caribbean Approaches to Qoolie Subjectivities**

Before unpacking qoolie performances of masculinity, it would be logical to first discuss the historical genealogies that brought Indo-Caribbeans to the region. I employ the terminology and category of “Indo-Caribbean” in this study to refer to the descendants of Indian indentured laborers,

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<sup>14</sup> I would also extend Agard-Jones’s (2012) arguments by suggesting that homonormative logics, such as Euro-American-centric narratives that assert that one’s full sexual liberation is achieved only through visibility or total disclosure of one’s queerness, is often taken up by Caribbean LGBTQ+ organizations in the region as well (Gosine 2015). However, in doing so they preserve the often “universal,” yet hegemonic conditions on which “official” forms of queerness can be recognized. For instance, Joseph Massad’s (2002) conceptualization of the “gay international” explores how such logics can quickly inauthenticate bodies and communities that “refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology” (160–161).

who arrived to various plantation ecologies in the Caribbean region between 1838 and 1917 (N. Mohabir 2017, 81). To fill the gap of the recently emancipated labor force of enslaved Africans, the British empire conscripted and coerced large numbers of subcontinental Indians to complete contracted labor in their colonies. The majority of these arrivals came from the Northeastern provinces of India, or what is now known as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (Manuel 2000, 3), relieving high anxieties and concerns among colonial powers surrounding the future of Caribbean plantation economies. Accustomed to working in agricultural settings in India, upon arrival indentured laborers were confined to rural living spaces that created an invisible divide between them and Afro-Caribbean populations.<sup>16</sup> Specific conditions including group arrival as a designated ethnic category, long periods of residential and occupational isolation, distinct language, religion, dress, and other distinguishing cultural attributes prevented Indians from easily being absorbed into dominant creole culture (Trotman 2005, 182) and became generative of ensuing and mutually recognized enmities each group would hold against each other (Bahadur 2014).<sup>17</sup>

These tensions would carry into the postcolonial moment, which especially in the case of Trinidad and Tobago, has invaded social, cultural, political, economic, and sexual spheres of everyday life. Creolization became the official uniting historical and cultural narrative of Anglophone Caribbean projects of nation-building to define the ideal citizen. Initially developed by Barbadian scholar Kamau Brathwaite, creolization is defined as the process of transculturation under circumstances of transportation, slavery, and colonization (Hall 2003). Reframing arguments made by Kamugisha (2007), “creole nationalism” became a form of cultural ideology that legitimized and defined Anglophone Caribbean citizenship and belonging through embracing discourses of white-black hybridities that commonly defined Afro-Caribbean identity and culture in the region. Promulgated as an official national policy, creoleness continues to be maintained as the regulatory ideal to access a status of official Caribbeanness in the nation.

For instance, Afrocreole cultural symbols such as Carnival, calypso, and steel pan were used in Trinidad by the Eric Williams administration, the first independent government, to formulate, circulate, advance, and authenticate a representation of national Trininess. According to historian Bridget Brereton (2010), Williams’s strategic use of these symbols of the nation were chosen purposefully to construct a particular ideal of legitimate citizenship. The historiography he generated within his publication, *The History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* (1962) exemplifies Afrocentric narratives that define national citizenship through blackness. As Brereton (2010) explains:

people of African or part-African descent—creoles in local terminology—were the most important constituted group in the nation, the core Trinidadians... “creole culture” was associated with that group; the people who would, and should, inherit the political kingdom where colonialists left. . . . [T]his was a view of Trinidad’s

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Manuel (2000) notes that they carried these skills because the majority of indentured labourers arrived from Northeastern India where agricultural labor was the dominant mode of making a livelihood.

<sup>16</sup> Tejaswini Niranjana (1999) specifically notes that even before the project of indentureship began in 1845, images of the “lazy African” and “industrious coolie” were frequently disseminated in the Caribbean region following the establishment of the Republic of Haiti in 1803 (30).

history which saw the descendants of the enslaved . . . as the people who had lived on the island the longest . . . who had suffered from enslavement and endured the “ordeal of free labour” . . . and had forged the cultural forms of the island ( 221)

While Williams and others such as Lewis and Ramsaran (2018) advocate for creolization as a national identity politic, their arguments fail to account for the fact that creolization is also constituted through adhering to heterosexuality. As I have already discussed, this asks Indo-Caribbeans to assimilate into a form of masculinity that is a double impossibility for them, as their racialization and feminized subjectivity bars them from accessing creole masculinity. Furthermore, as Stuart Hall (2003) reminds us, discourses of creolization cannot become detached from its specificity vis-à-vis the Afro-Caribbean experience. Discourses of creolization thus completely ignore modes of Indo-Caribbean and postindentureship feminist thought that, as Hosein and Outar (2016) describe, theorize Indo-Caribbeanness through cosmologies, artifacts, energies of the sacred-sexual and distinct intellectual traditions and epistemologies (2).

Traditional discourses of Indo-Caribbean epistemologies and identity also operate on similar queer-exclusionary grounds, often forefronted through heteronormative paradigms (Persard 2018, 25). One of the dominant and central tropes of Indo-Caribbean scholarship and identity (Khan 2016, 251) known as *jahaji bhai*, does not afford any space for same-sex desire or any form of queer subjectivity to exist within it. Translating to “ship brothers,” *jahaji bhai* narratives refer to personal bonds made on British East India Company ships that transported indentured labourers across the *kala pani* or “black waters” (Lokaisingh-Meighoo 2000, 88).<sup>18</sup> Stories of *jahaji bhai* imagine fraternal and platonic transoceanic crossings that produced important solidarities among Indian men who shared experiences of trauma, absence, dislocation, abjection, and removal which replaced the bonds of family and caste for those who left India behind. The remembering of these voyages in the collective memory of Indo-Caribbeans offered narratives for the descendants of indentureship related to labor, survival, resilience, bravery, and solidarities “with which to parallel and counter the nationalist discourse of Afro-Caribbean slavery and postcolonial entitlement to land and rule” (Khan 2016, 251). In excluding the queer subject from the (Indo-)Caribbean historical archive (Lokaisingh-Meighoo 2000, 80), *jahaji bhai* narratives enact a particular kind of erasure that links the ethnonationalist project of Indo-Caribbeanness to heterosexuality (Khan 2016), limit and deny any form of queer Indo-Caribbean life as a possibility.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, new iterations of these narratives such as the female-inclusive *jahaji-bhain* offer new articulations of Indo-Caribbeanness but again, do not account for varying queer and trans

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<sup>17</sup> The “kala pani” is a trope that has been widely circulated in Indo-Caribbean scholarship that paints the devastating voyage Indo-Caribbean indentured labourers endured as they sailed from the Indian subcontinent to the Caribbean region. The affective traumas that these journeys signify often link kala pani discourses to notions of loss, sorrow, abjection, erasure, dislocation, and displacement.

<sup>18</sup> Both Lokaisingh-Meighoo (2000) and Khan (2016) intervene in these imaginations by inserting the untold and erased stories of Indo-Caribbean same-sex desire in the archive of indentureship and Indo-Caribbeanness. These scholarly accounts incorporate the abject memories, traces, and resonances of same-sex desire and rewrite queerness into the Indo-Caribbean scholarly archive. In doing so, they trouble Indo-Caribbean ontological ideologies as exclusively heterosexual and provide a starting point for the (re)construction of queer-inclusive genealogies of Indo-Caribbeanness.

possibilities. Instead, it essentializes Indo-Caribbean women as only heterosexual. Developed as an Indo-Caribbean feminist logic, *jahaji-bhain* offers empowerment and support systems to Indo-Caribbean women to resist and transgress both intraethnic and interethnic, national and transnational forms of gendered control and violence (Singh 2016, 136). Singh (2016) offers this feminist framework to theorize how Indo-Caribbean women negotiate identity and belonging in Afrocreole geographies such as Carnival. In her words, it is “primarily the shared communal and gendered sacrifices and experiences of loss, erasure or exclusion, that even while adapting to historical change . . . still holds many Indo-Caribbean women together as jahaji-bhain” (144). Yet, even within feminist movements, the intersectionality of queerness is missing.

## **Genealogies of the *Matikor* and Chutney’s Affective Power**

Despite descending from long-standing genealogies of *matikor* practice and traditions (Ramnarine 1996, 139), the popular Indo-Caribbean musical genre known as chutney emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (Baksh-Sooden 1999; Myers 1998).<sup>20</sup> As the genre’s name suggests, chutney music is sounded and embodied through its “hot and spicy” qualities, “assembled out of the selective and stylistic retention of elements—performed and remembered—associated with folk practices once observed predominantly in British India’s Bhojpuri speaking regions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar” (Baksh 2014, 153). Arriving in the Caribbean as the product of trans-national/-oceanic flows of indentured labourers, chutney draws upon genealogies of Bhojpuri folk song, Indian instrumentations such as the harmonium, dholak (hand drum), and the dhantal (metal idiophone) (Baksh 2014, 153), and dance traditionally performed by Hindu women during *matikor* and *laawa* celebrations (Manuel 2000; Baksh-Sooden 1999; Ramnarine 1996) which usually involved erotic and sexually explicit lyrical content, imagery (Reddock 2014, 52), and embodiments. Legacies to erotic embodiments move specifically through a distinct Indo-Caribbean dance form known as Nagara<sup>21</sup> now primarily performed by women, but historically the arena of men (Premika Leo, personal communication).

Given chutney’s parentage to the *matikor*, most musical and dance practices affiliated with chutney can be traced to lineages in colonial India, however, the genre’s distinct sound and rhythmic power is also derived from cultural exchanges, interactions, and intimacies of Indian routes and networks in the Anglophone Caribbean across and between Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and Suriname (Regis 2010; Ramnarine 1996) and thus, the formation of the genre and its affective importance to Indo-Caribbean communities are resultant of such inter-national/regional mobilizations and circulations. For instance, nagara dance, which emerges in the Caribbean before chutney, was orally and corporeally disseminated by male dance teachers that would travel to different villages across Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana teaching young men its traditions. While it carries

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<sup>19</sup> In an interview with Ferne Louanne Regis (2010) regarding chutney’s emergence in Guyana, Ian E. Robertson noted that despite common scholarly acknowledgments that chutney developed within the 1980s as a widely acknowledged popular music genre, its long-standing presence in the Anglophone Caribbean cannot be attributed to one moment in time or a singular musician (i.e., Sundar Popo), but rather occurred through gradual developments through time and between transnational cultural exchanges of Indo-Caribbean communities between and across the region.

<sup>21</sup> Renowned Nagara dance teacher Geeta Leo refers to the art form as the “true folk dance of the Indo-Caribbean people.” However, despite its affiliations to the popular forms of *tassa* dance and chutney music, it is quickly disappearing as a local art form (personal communication).

genealogies to Biraha and Rajasthani dance, its contemporary practice is rooted in a place-based specificity to the Indo-Caribbean (Premika Leo, personal communication).<sup>22</sup>

The matikor festivity, or the “Dig Dutty” as it is known in Guyana, evolves out of the Vedic Hindu tradition (Lewis and Ramsaran 2012, 82). It describes a private, female-exclusive, prewedding Hindu rite performed on the eve of a young *dulabin*, or Hindu bride’s, wedding, in which women shared gossip and jokes, sang traditional songs, wore traditional costumes, and performed dances that were celebratory and sexually suggestive (Kanhai 1999). Through the performance of Indian traditional music, and particularly chutney, women members of the extended family would provide the young bride with advice on common issues leading up to matrimony such as the consummation of one’s marriage and issues with troublesome in-laws (Baksh-Sooden 1999). The matikor however also carried the potential to formulate spaces of healing through celebration where women could bring together the sacred and the profane, the carnal and spiritual, the political and the social (Kanhai 1999). Indeed, in contemporary performance, sacred-sexual feminist energies transported through temporalities of the “then” and “now” are resurged and perform embodied and affective matikor feminisms of *jahaji bbai(n)* through song and dance.

However, despite chutney’s beginnings among women in the matikor festivity, the dominance of men in the contemporary chutney arena offers qoolie possibilities for Indo-Caribbean masculinities to defy and transgress normative ideals of hegemonic Afrocreole masculinities by rewriting and rescripting the abject qualities of Indianness that render them as improperly national, creole, and Caribbean, into forms of erotic power. When taken up by men, how do such appropriations and reconfigurations of chutney energies activate and engage with the potentials of the erotic? How do homo-social/-erotic bonds forged in chutney spaces allow us to trouble, disrupt, and unsettle the fixed location of Indian femininity as masculinity within locations of shame, humiliation, and powerlessness and instead, enable new modes of agency, social recognition, alliance and citizenship?

Both Rhoda Reddock (2014) and Patricia Mohammed (2012) have argued that chutney spaces offer Indo-Caribbean men gateways to possess power at a symbolic level and affirm their sexual potency. However, why are Indo-Caribbean men required to remasculinize themselves to assert their manhood and access a form of legible and heteronormative sexual citizenship? My investigation of Mystic’s chutney song “Coolie Bai” (2014) argues that the matikor erotic carries meaningful agentive possibilities that does not rely on hegemonic creole and heteronormative paradigms to recuperate one’s heteromale power and agency as the consequence of his Indian abjection. Instead, performing a qoolieness through chutney femininities, feminisms, and erotics, while potentially shattering and “emasculating” the hypermasculine self, uses the state of being undone or “queered” to generate forms of pleasure and joy while at the same time cultivating alternative pedagogies of citizenship, masculinity and ways of *being* Indo-Caribbean.

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<sup>22</sup> Premika Leo, one of the last educators who carries the knowledge to teach Nagara dance, also notes that chutney carries a parentage to *jhatkay ke naach* or *landa ken ach* traditions which saw men performing feminine dances through what may now resemble drag but acted as forms of spiritual devotion (personal communication).

## **“Meh Just Realize I’s ah Coolie Bai”: Matikor Energies and Agentive Possibilities**

A staple track found within many contemporary chutney fêtes is the hit “Coolie Bai” (2014), released by Indo-Guyanese chutney artist Romeo Nermal, otherwise known by his stage name “Mystic.” As one of the only songs that reclaim the word “coolie” from its history of pathologization and harm, the dissemination of a coolie bai masculinity offers us a compelling reading and pedagogy of the qoolie subjectivities.<sup>23</sup> Rescripting tropes and representations of Indo-Caribbeanness that have come to mark coolieness with nonnormativity, the interstices of queerness and Indo-Caribbeanness becomes the epistemological archive through which Indo-Caribbean racial-sexual difference is rewritten, reconfigured, and sounded with power and agency. In particular, in the associated music video, his framing of his qoolie subjectivity evidences that such gender transgressive can exist outside the spaces of the celebratory, festive, and spectacular, and critical forms of self-making have always been and continue to be formulated through geographies of the mundane, in this case, a Guyanese rumshop. As Sidnell (2000) argues, in the context of Guyana, the rumshop remains a salient site for the production of Indo-Caribbean male kinship networks, homosocial bonds, and storytelling where significant social actions and processes are played out (72).

The song and music video begins with the echoing voice of a man singing “coolie bai” in the distance. Images of multiple Indo-Caribbean men are shown in large groups dancing together, liming, and taking shots with a bartender as the first verse begins. Multiple articulations of “coolie” are rendered throughout the song. As it continues, Mystic is shown at the forefront of the video in a rumshop with large groups of Indo-Caribbean men who continue to deploy feminine, chutney dances usually seen among women in the matikor. As a very commonplace practice, the rumshop affords opportunities for Indo-Caribbean men to dance with each other and enact homoerotic behaviours where men compete with each other to see who can wine better, who can wine lower, encouraged by alcohol, and, interestingly, female spectators.

Mystic’s reclamation of the pejorative term “coolie” deserves our attention as it offers an alternative framing and transgressive performance of Indo-Caribbean masculinity in the chutney arena. In addition, it must also be noted that this is one of the first contemporary songs within the chutney/chutney-soca repertoire to use the term “coolie” as an ontological vocabulary of pleasure and power. The term “coolie,” which arguably stems from the Tamil word “kuli” meaning “wages” or “hire,” functioned as an original signifier of caste and economic disparity within colonial India, identifying a porter class of unskilled, cheaply-employed laborers whose value was solely located in their utilitarian capacities, situating them at the bottom of a multiple-tiered Hindu caste structure

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<sup>23</sup> The word “coolie” is also used in the Caribbean to refer to Chinese labor diasporas that arrived to the region through colliding histories of indentured labor. Given this article’s focus on Indo-Caribbean subjectivities, I am not able to discuss at length the distinctions and parallels to Chinese coolie histories and their relationships to this pejorative language, however, there is growing scholarly literature that unpacks how new forms of self-making and new afterlives for the term were also enacted through the reconfiguration of representations and tropes of the Chinese coolie. See Goffe 2014.

(Mehta 2001, 125).<sup>24</sup> Appropriated by the British in the Caribbean, the term took on new meaning when it began to circulate in the region during times of coloniality. As a new racialized, classed, and gendered category, and ethnic slur, “coolie” conflated Indianness with lowness, subservience, weakness and effeminacy that added multiple levels of marginalization to an already disempowered social categorization. Yet, at the turn of the twentieth century, many second- and third-generation Indo-Caribbeans revealed their great anxieties, disdain, offense, and discomfort with circulation of the term as a reclaimed identification, since they were fully conscious of the pejorative connotations of prejudice that the vocabulary carried from its original definition in colonial India (Dabydeen, Kaladeen, and Ramnarine 2018).

However, since the 1970s, many Indo-Caribbeans have resisted critiques that utterances of “coolie” and performances of “cooliness” must be eradicated from public view. This can be seen in the works of Rakumari Singh’s (1973) essay “I Am Coolie,” David Dabydeen’s (1988) text “Coolie Odyssey,” and Gaiutra Bahadur’s (2014) groundbreaking work “Coolie Woman.”<sup>25</sup> Rewriting and rescripting tropes of Indianness in the Caribbean archive from its location within affects of loss, abjection, dislocation, and woundedness, Mystic activates, embodies, and continues this reclamatory work, which I suggest functions by deploying practices of queering as methodology, resignifying the “coolie bai” as a new vocabulary of self. Through its agentive, liberatory, and emancipatory potentials, deploying the “coolie bai” as an ontological affect, embodied and emotional “felt theory” of knowing, as coined by indigenous scholar Dian Million (2009), demonstrates how “coolie bai” functions as a theory of being whereby one’s lived experience, historical, embodied, and emotional knowledges contained within coolie genealogies and subjectivities engender a queered Indo-Caribbean ethics of survival. Here “founding worldviews [are] made possible[,] . . . ignite and cultivate individual passions and social erotics” (Garcia-Rojas 2017, 258), and through transforming cooliness from a vocabulary of alterity to a pedagogy of possibility, Mystic is able to envision new ontological languages that usher new possible visions of coolie selfhood and Indo-Caribbeanness.

In addition, offering an embodied articulation of Khal Torabully’s (2002) “coolitude,” the “unhappy memory of immigration,” or odyssey of indenture can be reclaimed to theorize new articulations of Indo-Caribbean feminist epistemologies and masculinities whereby “the coolie symbolizes . . . the possibility of building a composite identity to ease the pain and enrich culturally the lands in which he/she settled” (144). Moving discourses of coolitude beyond fixed locations within realms of injury, harm, woundedness, and recovery, Mystic’s articulation of a coolie bai masculinity

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<sup>23</sup> Other scholars such as Dabydeen, Kaladeen, and Ramnarine (2018) have noted that the term “coolie” may carry Telugu origins (to also denote a laborer in colonial India), while Helen Myers (1998) suggests that the word’s etymology may also originate from syncretisms of the Chinese words “k’u” meaning “bitter” and “li” translating to strength (14). In historical accounts, the usage of “coolie” in the Caribbean was also popularized by the term “Gladstone’s Coolies,” a misnomer “that centered the system of indentureship and its inception in the Caribbean at the point where John Gladstone, father of the future Prime Minister William Gladstone engaged a Calcutta firm to source Indian labourers for two of his estates in British Guyana” (Dabydeen, Kaladeen, and Ramnarine 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Despite these reclamations, the word coolie is still deployed in postcolonial times as a marker of inferiority and draws upon this site of Indo-Caribbean injury to cause further harm, especially within battles of political and racial politics in countries with colliding histories of slavery and indenture such as Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana. See Rajiv Mohabir 2017.

asks us to reflect on other meanings that embodied performances of femininity can attribute to racialized bodies outside of problematic attachments to an abdication of power, weakness, or in the logics of Bersani (1987), a shattering of the masculine self. Rather, it asks us to think about the ways in which historical and embodied emotions of pain and misery have cultivated practices of joy and pleasure not only as a process of recuperation away from pain but *through* it, for chutney only exists because of the colonial project of indentureship.

As I have argued throughout this essay, performances of “coolie bai-ness” repurpose abject Indianness as a site of pleasure, agency, and power—a queered Indo-Caribbean *free up*. As articulated by the lyrics:

Meh just realize meh ah coolie bai,  
Gonna sing some songs li ah coolie bai,  
Gonna screw some bulb li ah coolie bai,  
Gonna drink some liquor li ah coolie bai,  
Nah goh wine fuh no one, li ah coolie bai,  
Eat with meh hand, I ah coolie bai...

Meh neva shame, meh’s a coolie bai...  
Sing in meh nose, I’s ah coolie bai.

Mystic offers “coolie bai-ness” as an alternative collective (dis)identification from Afrocreole masculinities that reconfigures stereotypes and tropes of Indianness typically rendered effeminate and lowly by Afro-Caribbean powers, such as the deployment of typical chutney/matikor dances usually performed by women; melodies sung in “nasally” voice qualities often attributed to Indian vocal traditions; eating with one’s hands; and wining alongside other men. Coolie otherness functions as a method of engaging in a disruptive, and unsettling work towards homogenized, heteronormative paradigms of Indo- and Afro-Caribbean masculinity. In the performance of abjection through strategic essentialism, agentive power is generated.

In the sense used by Muñoz (1999), disidentifying with creole masculinities envisions and activates new social relations for minoritarian counterpublic spheres (5). Furthermore, the pleasures these men articulate through their abject racialization asks us to reconsider the problematic assumption that the reclamation of such pejorative language, albeit embedded with genealogies of danger and colonial violence, could engender potentials aside from powerlessness and emasculation. Performing “coolieness” and the orientalist tropes associated with it also engenders a politics of refusal towards the rigid social organization of postcolonial Caribbean societies as the category of “coolie” defies the racialized, gendered, and sexualized norms that have informed dominant, nationalist subjectivities in the region.

The first time I heard this song at a chutney event in Toronto, an Indo-Caribbean middle-aged woman turned to me and said: “For real? He just realized *now* dat he ah coolie bai?” Upon first listening, this lyric may seem out of place and peculiar, but I read this realization of Mystic’s “coolie bai-ness”

as an embodied theory of the self. The nation often does not recognize the Indo-Caribbean body unless it is mediated, dressed, or fashioned through Creoleness. To dance, sing, and embody Indianness through the body demonstrates how Sara Ahmed (2017) famously argued that “feminism begins with sensation.” Drawing upon and resurging emotional and embodied chutney erotics practiced by women in the matikor and activating Indo-Caribbean feminist energies, bonds, transgressions, and solidarities that historically kept Indo-Caribbean women alive (Mehta 2004), allows men to think the self through the vehicle of the body: using the voice, waist, and feet to engender revolutionary action through a transgressive performance of femininity.

Indeed, the figure of the “coolie bai” repurposes the chutney arena’s potential to operate as a space of healing where women could perform resistance against the degradation and depersonalization imposed on them by the ruling class. In activating the genealogies of spiritual strength the matikor offered to them, women did not carry the burden of a minority status (Kanhai 1999). When appropriated by men, the space allows for Indo-Caribbean men to use the abjection of their racialization by deploying elements of abject Indianness such as femininity and the chutney erotic as resource, to enact new forms of being. Furthermore, coolie bai masculinities clear spaces and break down false constructions of racial and sexual difference found in nationalist discourse of Caribbeaness that “serves the political power . . . and cultural hegemonies of a mainstream social order” (Eng 2001, 19) and instead, offers a queered, liberatory Indo-Caribbean identity politic of masculinity. Indeed, Mystic’s resurgence of chutney erotics evidences how its deployments not only transgress hegemonic and “compulsory” scripts of Caribbean heteromascularity, but use the body to perform memory work as a queering act to offer alternative subjectivities and forms of knowledge that call into question the homogenizing conditions of what it means to perform Indo-Caribbean masculinities.

Mystic’s performance disseminates a critical embodied form of ontological knowledge production and self-making: an optic, musicality, embodiment, vocality, and visuality of an Indo-Caribbeaness unreliant on creole or heteronormative sensibilities. Rescripting affective archives of solidarity and jahaji-bhain (sisterhood) found within matikor works through the legacies of postindentureship feminisms where languages and pedagogies of joy, living and being—forms of queer speaking that have always been there—can be loosed from hidden locations and excavated to embody qoolie ways of being.<sup>26</sup>

In “Coolie Bai,” performing qoolie potentials through sacred genealogies of matikor energies produces definitions of self through queerness. These performances call us to revisit definitions of Indo-Caribbeaness that exist outside of dominant logics. However, we must also realize that these

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<sup>25</sup> The relocation of chutney music within this music video from the its historical location within the private realm to the transnational public space of the internet, also engages in powerful genealogies of the Indo-Caribbean feminine erotic. As Baksh-Sooden (1999) argues, the shifting location of chutney performance from the private to public realm of Indo-Caribbean society has led to greater autonomy for Indo-Caribbean women (196). In the 1980s and 1990s, chutney garnered national attention and mobilized onto public Afrocentric national stages, as seen with the provocative performances of the self-proclaimed “Queen of Chutney,” Drupatee Ramgoonai, allowing for traditionalist and purist ideals of Hindu Indian femininity such as modesty, morality, and passivity to be resisted.

performances are ephemeral and would be often deemed impermissible in other Afrocreole celebratory spaces (i.e. Carnival) and many geographies of the mundane. As queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz (1996) famously argued, queerness often exists as “ephemera” or “invisible evidence.” “Queer” acts within performance open up avenues of possibility, “a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality, and relationality,” yet never clearly visible as it often evaporates “at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility” (6). Again, in responding to Pragg’s (2012) call for more queer analysis of Indo-Caribbeanness, my study seeks to open a gateway to think not only of the queer qualities of Indo-Caribbeanness but its afterlife. As Pragg (2012) reminds us, we need to construct definitions of ourselves “from a place that accounts for the assemblages of time and space . . . beginning again from a place that accounts for the power and potential of sexuality in all of its fullness” (13). I offer qoolie subjectivities as one important theorization to describe the ways in which transgressive queer Indo-Caribbean histories, contemporary realities, and futures have been and can be made possible.

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**Ryan Persadie** is a PhD candidate in Women and Gender Studies and Sexual Diversity Studies at the University of Toronto. He holds a MA in Ethnomusicology from the University of Toronto. His doctoral research investigates queer Indo-Caribbean diasporas and the ways in which performance and specifically Anglophone Caribbean popular music, dance, vocality, and embodiment offer salient archives for descendants of Indian indenture to cultivate as well as disrupt hetero/homonormative notions of sexual citizenship, belonging, desire, pleasure, identity, and “Pride” in Toronto and New York City. Outside of academia Ryan is a community organizer with the Caribbean Equality Project and Queeribbean Toronto, and drag artist where he goes by the stage name of Tifa Wine.

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