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Publication Date
2012

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

“CALLING THE MAGICIAN”:
THE METAMORPHIC INDO-CARIBBEAN

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE
with an emphasis in FEMINIST STUDIES

by

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September 2012

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ABSTRACT

Aliyah R. Khan

“Calling the Magician”: The Metamorphic Indo-Caribbean

This dissertation examines the relationship between bodily shapeshifting in the literature of the Asian Indian Caribbean and the construction of postcolonial Indo-Caribbean identity. Metamorphosis, in opposition to hybridity, is the lens through which I examine the political and literary relationship between the Indo- and Afro-Caribbean. In contrast to creolization, mestizaje, and other hybridizations, various forms of metamorphosis, including mimicry and doubling, provide agency in the colonial and postcolonial context. Metamorphosis suggests ways of intervening in the historic ethnic and political divides in postcolonial Caribbean nations like Trinidad and Guyana. It is thus the key literary figure deployed in the texts under consideration.

The Indo-Caribbean is a distinct subgenre within Anglophone Caribbean literature that includes works produced by the descendants of nineteenth-century East Indian indentured laborers in, primarily, Trinidad and Guyana. Most of the texts examined in this dissertation are written and set in the 1960s and beyond, i.e., during and after the Caribbean independence period. While employing the common theme in Caribbean literature of indigenizing post-independence national identities, Indo-Caribbean literature focuses on tensions over the acculturation and assimilation of East Indian indentured laborers and their descendants into Afro-Creole culture—
tensions that are expressed on the bodies of women and queer people. The literature also engages with the larger Caribbean fabulist literary tradition of animal-human shapeshifting, and socio-political interventions by land-based spirits.

I draw on fiction and poetry by Shani Mootoo, Ramabai Espinet, Ryhaan Shah, Wilson Harris, Cyril Dabydeen, and others to show how Indo-Caribbean literature imaginatively configures the way bodies function in the national space and in the natural environment. Race, gender, politics, sexuality, and the definition of being human are interconnected and always in flux in the Caribbean colony and postcolony. Metamorphosis offers a non-assimilationist intervention into the Indo-Afro-Caribbean divide by articulating and promoting an ever-changing ontological (and thus epistemological) diversity in a way that static conceptions of hybridity cannot.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my dissertation committee—Carla Freccero, Vilashini Cooppan, and Anjali Arondekar—for their careful reading and thoughtful feedback. I am especially grateful to Carla Freccero, whose work and professional dedication inspire me, and whose humane care for her students is exceptional.

This dissertation was completed with the generous support of the University of California President’s Dissertation-Year Fellowship. I am also grateful for the financial support of the UCSC Literature Department, the UC Institute for Humanities Research, and the UCSC Graduate Division.

I received timely guidance from many non-committee members of the UCSC Literature faculty, including Wlad Godzich. The Literature Department has been for me an intellectually inspirational and supportive community of people who are both bright and kind.

The coffee shops, redwoods, and Pacific beaches of idyllic Santa Cruz also played integral support roles in this project.

Maria Frangos’ friendship, humor, advice, discourses upon Kingdom Animalia and events of the day, and provision of a magnificent feline companion, Poofies, have been instrumental to my happiness and work in Santa Cruz. I am indebted to Penelope Williams, whose long-distance talks and deep friendship have sustained me throughout the most difficult times. Heidi Morse’s masterful copyediting skills have been invaluable to me. I also thank her for being an unstinting source of affection, adventure, and food in the past year.
I am grateful to Erik Bachman for the camaraderie, and to both him and Christine Lupo-Montgomery, the members of my dissertation writing group, for their encouragement and time. Many other friends near and far stood in solidarity with me, offered their children and pets as wonderfully distracting companions, and talked me through this process: Sabrina Hom, Sara Orning, Liz Roberts, Rachel Bryant Anderson, Simina Calin, and Irini Neofotistos, among others.

Finally, I am grateful to my family: to my parents, Jan and Salima Khan, for a lifetime of love and support, and to my brother, Javed Khan, for being himself. This is our story, and the story of those who came before us. To you and them I owe this work.
“Beast”

In Gibraltar Straits,
pirates in search of El Dorado
masked and machete-bearing
kidnapped me.
Holding me to ransom,
they took my jewels and my secrets
and dismembered me.

The reckoning lasted for years.
Limbs and parts eventually grew:
a new nose, arms skilful and stronger,
sight after the gutted pits could bear a leaf.
It took centuries.

In the cave where they kept me,
a strange beast grew.
With his skin of glistening jewels
and his deadly tongue,
even I was afraid of him.

In the dark Ajanta caves of my breast
ever since he has stayed,
with his measure of venom,
his exact poison and scintillating glitter.
At a certain hour, I almost love him.

—Mahadai Das

Ah didn’t know that coolie people could write.

—Ismith Khan
INTRODUCTION

The Magical Indo-Caribbean

_The Caribbean has no civilization because the Caribbean shuns poetry._
_Scandalously._

_We have lost the meaning of the symbol. The literal has devoured our world._
_Scandalously._

..._The most vital thing is to re-establish a personal, fresh, compelling, magical contact with things._

_The revolution will be social and poetic or will not be._

_I don’t hide the fact that I expect everything from a new barbarism._

—Aimé Césaire, “Calling the Magician” 120-121

Caribbean literature—its fiction, poetry, and biomythographies, in which individuals’ biographical stories serve as universalizing myths of the nation and its citizens—has been associated in the realm of “world literature” with magic, marvelous realism, and various iterations of the unreal since Alejo Carpentier’s _El reino de este mundo_ (1949).¹ In this way, Caribbean literature is the original postcolonial literature, which seeks ways of reframing the colonial narrative of history from the perspective of the formerly enslaved and the oppressed indigenous.

¹ Carpentier’s _lo real maravilloso_, the “marvelous real,” precedes Latin America’s and the Caribbean’s literary tradition of “magical realism.” In _El reino’s_ original prologue, which is generally not included in English translations of the novel, Carpentier describes the marvelous real as beginning with “una inesperada alteración de la realidad (el milagro)...una ampliación de las escalas y categorías de la realidad, percibidas con particular intensidad en virtud de una exaltación del espíritu que lo conduce a un modo de ‘estado límite.’ Para empezar, la sensación de lo maravilloso presupone una fe.” (“An unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle)...an extension of the scales and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of spirit that leads to a mode of ‘limit state.’ To begin with, the sense of the marvelous presupposes a faith.” My translation).
Before Carpentier, the Martinican Aimé Césaire borrowed from the French surrealists in the 1930s to define Afro-Caribbeanness in terms of a magical poiesis, *Négritude*.\(^2\) *Négritude* as a francophone literary movement is generally associated with a poetics that exposed the global colonial suffering of all black people, and advocated for Marxist pan-Africanness and a cultural turn to Africa as solutions to imperialism and European hegemony. Césaire, most famous for his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939) and *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955), saw anti-colonial revolutionary potential in surrealism’s artistic automatism: the oppressed black unconscious could be released through such semiotically rejuvenating “magical contact,” which is necessarily preceded by a rejection of the barbarism of the real. As such, says Césaire, “I’m calling upon the magician…I’m calling upon the Enraged” (122). In the contemporary academy, magical and marvelous realism are deemed characteristic of Latin American and Caribbean literature because of the extremity of the loss of ancestral histories and the surreally harsh conditions of slavery and servitude in the Americas.\(^3\) The descendants of slaves must perform the irony of inventing ancestral histories in addition to constructing postcolonial futures; and only magic can adequately describe a state of fundamental violence wherein a group of human beings

\(^2\) “Calling the Magician: A Few Words for a Caribbean Civilization” was originally published in *Haiti-Journal*, 20 May 1944.

\(^3\) The problem with conventional genre articulations of magical realism is “the global market’s hyper-canonization of marvelous and magic realism as ideal forms of postcolonial writing…[which] has generated several postcolonial and/or Marxist rejections of the forms, on grounds that magic and marvelous realist texts *lend* themselves to co-optive, assimilationist, or dehistoricizing projects, whether within postmodernism or official postcolonial nationalisms” (Puri 139). Postcolonial literature is particularly subject to political historicization; but of course all depends on the critic’s mode of reading.
is robbed of their myths of identity and reduced for generations to bare life. Indo-Caribbean critic Shalini Puri fortunately reminds us that marvelous realism is a reformulation rather than a refusal of realism. Against the transparency of a formally realist colonial narrative, they set the mysterious opacity of an epistemologically realist narrative…

surface effects of realism (omniscient narrator, linear narrative, transparent language, centered individual subject) are not necessarily features of a realist narrative any more than their “opposites” (fragmented narrative, decentered or unstable individual subject, problematization of representation) are necessarily features of a postmodernist narrative. (143, 140)

“Magical” and “marvelous” realism are often used interchangeably, but Carpentier’s marvelous realism is, strictly speaking, the abovementioned reformulation of the existential real, whereas magical realism has come to encompass almost any non-linear narrative in service of the postcolonial nation-state. It is Western literary convention that “realism” is characterized, primarily, by a linear narrative and Cartesian subjectivity. As Carpentier originally defined el real maravilloso, marvelous realism is indeed a reclamation of the real. It is the lived real of the Other. And for the Other’s real, the Other’s myth of self, to show itself in the Grand Narrative of colonial reality, it must be as magic. In Carpentier’s novel, the marvelous real is foundational to the success of the 1791-1804 Haitian revolution. The ability of the one-armed slave Mackandal to metamorphose and become various
animals shows his anointedness by African spirits (loas or lwas) as a savior of slaves in the New World. He recovers his bodily wholeness in his metamorphosis, though it is necessary for him to become human again to free his people.⁴

Similarly, Césaire, Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott and myriad other Caribbean writers repeatedly argue that the Caribbean will never be free of colonialism until it (re)invents its myths, as “[t]he true manifestation of civilization is myth. Social organization, religion, partnerships, philosophies, morals, architecture and sculpture are the representations and expressions of myth” (Césaire 120).⁵ In the postcolonial nation-making mode of Césaire’s fellow Martinican and future revolutionary Frantz Fanon, fiction, poetry, and other art forms are the methods of myth-making. Césaire asserts: “the only avowed refuge of the mythic spirit is poetry. And poetry is an insurrection against society because it is a devotion to abandoned or exiled or obliterated myth” (120). In the case of the nascent postcolonial Indo-Caribbean community, not only were the founding myths colonially abandoned or exiled, but East Indians had to contend with their exclusion from twentieth-century Caribbean

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⁴ “Macandal había cerrado el ciclo de sus metamorfosis, volviendo a asentarse, nervudo y duro, con testículos como piedras, sobre sus piernas de hombre” (Carpentier 34). (“Macandal had closed the cycle of his metamorphosis, to be written down again, sinewy and hard, with testicles like stones, on his man’s legs.” My translation.)

⁵ Harris similarly argues that “a cleavage exists in my opinion between the historical convention in the Caribbean and Guianas and the arts of the imagination. I believe a philosophy of history may well lie buried in the arts of the imagination…There are two kinds of myths related to Africa in the Caribbean and Guianas. One kind seems fairly direct, the other [limbo] has clearly undergone metamorphosis. In fact even the direct kind of myth has suffered a ‘sea-change’ of some proportions. In an original sense, therefore, these myths which reflect an African link in the Caribbean are also part and parcel of a native West Indian imagination and therefore stand, in some important ways I feel, in curious rapport with vestiges of Amerindian fable and legend” (Harris 156).
national discourses of independence. In Trinidad and Guyana, the national, political sphere was dominated by the majority Afro-Caribbean—which was and is also undergoing a process of reconciling and reinventing its own histories and futures. In the interests of community preservation and pride, the Indo-Caribbean community defined itself as discrete in opposition to the Afro-Caribbean during and after the colonial period. What I show in this project, however, is that Indo-Caribbean identities are actually relational, developing mythically alongside the Afro-Caribbean, the indigenous Amerindian Caribbean, and the natural environment.

I. Indian to Indo-Caribbean

“The Magical Real”

TOBAGO, 1999

Fool,
With your magical real…
When I got tired of you, Fool,
And went out to see the Magical
London Tower and her parade of parrot
Fish. High as a kite, I snorkeled all day.
There was no English in me. There was no outside tongue.

No coolieman split up split up in the Di, you know, that great
Spread of brown bones and blood aspora…

Back on the back of an anaconda bringing you back to the land of rivers
Where the surprise of history lies buried and you pray for flight and you pray
For that child of islands you are not and never will be

—Faizal Deen (155-156)
Being Indo-Caribbean is to feel that one never belongs anywhere, as the Indo-Trinidadian poet Faizal Deen illustrates. History is a “surprise [that] lies buried,” never to be found (or made). Unlike, it is implied, the uncontested Afro-Caribbean “child of the islands,” and even with the help of the magical real, Indo-Caribbean people may never become Caribbean locals. Or at least, some Indo-Caribbean people might never become local. Deen’s poem was included in one of the first Caribbean gay and lesbian anthologies (Glave 2008), suggesting that for the Indo-Caribbean community to achieve full postcolonial Caribbean citizenship, as I will argue, there can be no room for non-homogeneity or non-normative, transgressive expressions of gender and sexuality. Indo-Caribbean identity is too new and too precarious for any “threat” to cultural cohesiveness. Perhaps, then, the magical real is less magic and more pained, wishful thinking.

From 1838 to 1917, over 500,000 East Indians were brought as indentured laborers to the Caribbean—British as well as French and Dutch colonies—by the British East India Company to replace recently manumitted African slaves on colonial sugar plantations (and cocoa plantations in Trinidad). Their descendants are today the largest ethnic group in Guyana and Suriname and about half the population in Trinidad and Guadeloupe. This project reads the literature of the Indo-Caribbean through the lens of transformative, ongoing metamorphosis of language, landscape, and self. The primary national spaces under consideration are postcolonial Guyana and Trinidad.
Guyana and Trinidad share crucial similarities. There are obvious differences: continental and coastal Guyana, formerly British Guiana, is not an island, and was originally colonized by the Dutch. Trinidad is an island that changed colonial hands on multiple occasions, as a result of which it has a (disappearing) legacy of French and Spanish linguistic and musical remnants. In contrast to Trinidad, Guyana has an indigenous Amerindian population of people who mostly live in villages in the Amazonian interior and have little to no political power and presence on the urban coast. However, the ethnic groups of Indian laborers who immigrated to Guyana and Trinidad were the same; British colonial policies regarding East Indian laborers were often enacted in both countries simultaneously; both countries are now Anglophone with similar creole dialects; there is more familial, culinary, and cultural exchange between these two nations than between any other countries harboring an Indian diaspora; and most crucially, the national character of both were forged in the extremely tense political crucible of ongoing racial strife between demographically similar populations. That is, Guyana’s population is just a bit more than half East Indian, and the majority of the rest are African; and Trinidad’s population is just a bit less than half East Indian, and the majority of the rest are African. Both nations are parliamentary democracies which have had, since independence in the 1960s, two major political parties each, one of which locals generally call the “Indian party” and the other the “Black party.” Until very recently, both nations had Afro-Caribbean

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6 In Guyana, the Afro-Guyanese party was the PNC, the People’s National Congress, recently renamed APNU, A Partnership for National Unity; the Indo-Guyanese Party is the PPP-Civic, the People’s Progressive Party. Both of these parties are nominally—some might say
leaders. Guyana in particular has a long history of fraudulent elections and being racked by racial violence, which resulted in a mass exodus of the East Indian population to England and North America. It has had an East Indian president since 1992. Trinidad notably elected its first Indian woman Prime Minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, in 2010. There are large populations of Indo-Caribbean immigrants in New York City and in Toronto; what is telling is that Indo-Trinidadians and Indo-Guyanese cluster and intermarry with each other in the same ethnic enclaves, in Richmond Hill in Queens, for example, whereas their Afro-Caribbean cohorts may be found in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. It is therefore hardly unusual to consider the postcolonial literature of East Indian Trinidad and East Indian Guyana comparatively. Together they are a very specific iteration of the Indo-Caribbean.7

East Indians in the Caribbean are afflicted by the same ethnic and cultural identity concerns that plague the Afro-Caribbean. Writer V.S. Naipaul, Nobel laureate and perhaps the most globally famous Indo-Caribbean individual, is known for his depressing literary speculation on the futures of Trinidad, the Caribbean, and indeed all former colonies of Europe. His dominant postcolonial model is the “mimic man” who has been robbed of his ancestral past. As such, his future holds nothing but political and cultural mimicry of the departed European colonizer. In 1979,

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7 Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo notes that “The term Indo-Caribbean itself is rather new, its earliest appearance in print and systematic use….dating back from the mid-eighties in community newspapers and books published in Toronto” (180). This transnational community term then migrated back to the Caribbean, where it is currently displacing the older term “East Indian.”
Naipaul’s literary contemporary Ismith Khan, in the second University of the West Indies conference on defining the Indo-Caribbean, plaintively asked the audience “Is it because we have no ongoing culture that we blindly borrow from others? Or is it that we do have something of an ongoing culture that we do not like well enough, and so drop it in favour of something borrowed[?]” (45). It is, however, a more complex story of becoming than that of blind borrowing, self-hatred, or absolute loss.

Viranjini Munasinghe (2002) points out that “one could argue that the terms East Indian and Creole developed in opposition” (679). In my view, what is most

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8 This academic conference was defined by a certain secrecy and lack of advertisement, attributed by Indo-Caribbean participants to not wanting to “upset” the Afro-Caribbean intellectuals who dominated UWI and the Afro-Trinidadian politicians who had nationalist interests in the UWI St. Augustine campus on which it took place. In his keynote speech (the other keynotes were delivered by Naipaul, Samuel Selvon, and Winston Mahabir), the Trinidadian Khan characterized the image of the East Indian in each diasporic Caribbean locale as follows: “The image of the Indian in the Caribbean varies from one place to another. In Guyana, the Indian is seen as a child, a race of people who display all the symptoms of arrested development, happy smiling faces that closely resemble what remains of American Blacks on the plantations of the deep South, just pleasant happy little things going about their way with little awareness or concern with the involvement in their country’s future. They will follow a charismatic leader when he appears, and if he fails, they will wait for another. The image of the Indian in Jamaica is a sociological stereotype, poor but grasping, dirty, unreliable, ignorant, incapable of learning, unfit for the most menial jobs of the tourist industry, lazy, contemptuous, they prefer squalor to the tidy homes and backyards of the Jamaican middle class, jealous and cunning…it is the list of characteristics of any poor ethnic group of peoples studied by sociologists and anthropologists. The image of the Indian in some of the smaller islands is all but lost because there are too few of them; and they have literally disappeared as a racial and cultural entity; they have either intermarried and assimilated, or blended in with the rest of the population, no doubt their answer to survival. The image of the Indian in Surinam is one which because of language offers little interexchange with other Indians who come from the English-speaking countries. The image of the Indian in Trinidad is one of a group of people who should plant cane and tomatoes and watermelons. That is what he was brought here for, and that is where he should stay…in his place” (49-50).

9 Tejaswini Niranjana (2006) echoes, “the African (already part of the ‘West’ in the New World) was presumably of the same class as the Indian, occupying a similar social position. The transformations among Indians, therefore had to do with finding ways to inhabit and
Important to keep in mind about the relationship between the Indo- and Afro-Caribbean is that, despite demurrals from both parties, the Indo-Caribbean community developed its identity primarily in relation to the Afro-Caribbean, and not in reaction to British colonialism. It is also an ongoing and changing cultural relationship, mediated by mass emigration, environmental concerns, and changing geopolitics.

What differentiates Indians’ process of acculturation to the New World from Africans’ is their own and others’ perception that they retained an ancestral cultural link to India. It is not simply their retention of food and religion (though not language) that “proves” this: it is their Indianness, the evidence of their physical bodies. It is particularly important, then, for the bodies of women to be read as normatively Indian: modest, feminine, and heterosexual. Indo-Caribbean communities have from the start been both remarkably averse to and successful in avoiding racial mixing with Afro-Caribbean populations. They in fact were willing to discard Indian caste and regional strictures in the pursuit of a survival characterized by racial “purity.” Such purity was and is enforced by insistence on marriage as a community value, and regulation of women’s bodies and sexualities, as I discuss in the second and fourth chapters.

change, their new home through a series of complex negotiations with other racial groups, the most significant of which was the African. Exposure to ‘Western’ ways, therefore, came to the Indian through interaction with the Afro-Caribbean rather than through contact with the European. Even today, when Trinidad Indians speak of Westernization, they often treat it as synonymous with ‘creolization,’ the common term for the Afro-Trinidadian still being ‘Creole’” (110-112).
In Trinidad and Guyana, the numbers of East Indian indentured laborers—including women—were large enough to realize the goal of producing discrete Indo-Caribbean communities. Munasinghe frames Indo-Caribbean resistance to the Caribbean creolizing production of “purity from impurity,” wherein the hybridizing model of the separate-but-equal “tossed salad” is favored over the “callaloo” (a Caribbean okra-dasheen stew in which all the ingredients are boiled together into a mush). Neither alternative seems particularly palatable in accounting for the complexity of East Indians’ relationship to the Caribbean. The Indo-Caribbean is not strictly a hybrid of two or more distinct cultures, nor is it an amalgamation of indistinguishable cultural fragments. It is, rather, metamorphic.

II. Literature and Metamorphosis

As a literary model, metamorphosis is defined in opposition to hybridity. Caroline Bynum (2005) describes metamorphosis as signifying flux and ongoing shifts, whereas hybridity produces static forms comprised of discrete parts. Metamorphosis is more appropriate to the Indo-Caribbean, which encompasses geo-historical spaces and bodily identities that are constantly in flux.

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10 “In a place where no one, except Amerindians, could truly claim native status on the basis of ancestry, new myths of origin arose. Since racial, cultural, and all other types of mixtures and multiplicities continue to be the pulse of the Caribbean, any ideology of nativeness had to encompass this fundamental characteristic. In other words, Trinidian purity necessarily had to acknowledge symbolically and then manage a situation of impurity or mixture” (Munasinghe 680).
The primary concern of Latin American and Caribbean magical and marvelous realism is elaborating the complex realities of the hybrid cultures and peoples of the Americas. The magical-historical postcolonial project of encoding the postcolonial Caribbean into myth draws on syncretic Afro-Caribbean folklore, religious practices like Haitian *vodun*, and national literatures. In these three realms, the Caribbean subject is defined by cultural and racial “mixing”: hybridity. Brinda Mehta points to the usefulness of the model of hybridity in theorizing the Anglophone Asian Caribbean because hybridity de-homogenizes the Caribbean and, crucially, acknowledges the foundational loci of ship and sea:

Hybridity inaugurates multiple points of connection by leading to a certain globalized creation of self through identifications with various “ports” of reference, ranging from the ports of Calcutta and Madras in India to Port of Spain in Trinidad and the old port of King George’s Town in Guyana. (12)

The specific sea discourse of the East Indian Caribbean, comparable to Paul Gilroy’s “Black Atlantic,” is what Mehta calls “*kala pani* discourse.” *Kala pani* simply means “black water” in Hindi, and refers to the Indian and Atlantic oceans. As a discourse it calls for the disruption of neatly aligned, state-determined racial categorizations and hierarchies that institute and sustain various levels of discrimination by initiating a search for common ground…Implicit within the parameters of *kala pani* hybridity is the recognition of two
turbulent Atlantic crossings, African and Indian, that highlight a particular commonality of experience… (15)

*Kala pani* hybridity thus allows for multiple points of origin and inaugurates a recognition of shared experience between the descendants of African slaves and East Indian indentured laborers. The literary lens through which I view East Indian indentured-labor migration to the Caribbean, however, is that of *kala pani* metamorphosis.

Literary metamorphosis is a manifestation of what Martinican writer Édouard Glissant (1997) calls the “poetics of relation.” Glissant posits metamorphic relationality rather than hybrid discreteness, advocating for the more inclusive *créolité* (general ethnic “mixing” solidarity) and *Antillanité* (geographic Caribbean island solidarity) as successors to *Négritude*. The former two movements, like metamorphosis, call for the defeat of History by ontologies of relation, but as theorized by Glissant, they are somewhat localized to the francophone Antilles.

Metamorphosis is relational but also ongoing, and privileges the magic of the semiotic transformation of bodily and linguistic identity. It is also appropriate to the study of postcolonial literature as a mythicizing genre with both political and artistic ramifications. As Neferti Tadiar says,

…I do not look to literature for typicality or representable realities; I look to it rather for creative possibility. Creative possibility recasts lived experience so that it no longer takes the form of incontrovertible social fact but instead takes on the experimental character of literature.
itself. Literary works are figurations of possibilities of life that authors exercise in their imaginations of historical experience; in this way, they are also theoretical perspectives on both dominant and residual cultural logics of social life…literary works are thus treated as both ethnographic material (ethnography of social imagination as much as of actually lived life) and theoretical resource for writing an alternative history of the present, a history that foregrounds the creative work and transformative potential of marginalized social experiences and their unrecognized role in the making of the contemporary world. (17-18)

The postcolonial literature of marvelous realism has ethnographic value, but not in the sense of an accurate representation of the real of the Other—there is no such singular alternative. The literature is, rather, a creative suggestion, a metamorphic exercise in potential, a magical incantation of difference.

As Tadiar suggests, postcolonial literature encompasses “figurations of possibilities of life that authors exercise in their imaginations of historical experience.” This is how I read Indo-Caribbean texts: not as sociology, but as works that engage with and (re)create history and future potentialities. The literature imagines race, gender, sexuality, and other postcolonial issues of history through metamorphic figurality.

The Indo-Caribbean is a distinct subgenre within Anglophone Caribbean literature. Indo-Caribbean literature, while employing the common theme in Caribbean literature of creating a postcolonial national identity, expresses as its main
concern tensions over the acculturation and assimilation of East Indian indentured laborers and their descendants into Afro-Creole culture. This literature also engages with the larger Caribbean fabulist literary tradition of animal-human shapeshifting and spirit possession that defines the way bodies function in the national space. Race, gender, politics, and the definition of being human are interconnected and always in flux in the Caribbean colony and postcolony. The acculturated discreteness of the Indo-Caribbean tradition shows that in bridging the gap between the Indo- and Afro-Caribbean, a metamorphic multiplicity provides an alternative to hybridity on the one hand, and total separation on the other.

The dominant Indo-Caribbean literary model is that of the mimic man. As previously noted, Naipaul’s novels often feature this figure, the post-independence Caribbean subject who is left with no culture or history of his own, and so falls back on degraded aping of European colonialism. In this dissertation I examine works that suggest metamorphosis as an alternative possibility to this model. The possibilities of Indo-Caribbean metamorphic becoming are figured temporally, and are chronologically different. The major moment of transition for Indo-Caribbean Trinidad and Guyana, however, is the 1960s-1970s period during which most of the British Caribbean was granted independence. As such, many of the texts I discuss, like Wilson Harris’ *The Far Journey of Oudin* (1961) and Cyril Dabydeen’s *Dark Swirl* (1996), are set during and around that era of Caribbean independence. These older works are very engaged with magically configuring a politics of place, and of locating East Indians within the landscape of the Caribbean. Later works like Shani
Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) and *Valmiki’s Daughter* (2008) continue, in the context of contemporary postcolonial politics and concerns, to employ a kind of magical, mythopoetic thinking to re-imagine the Indo-Caribbean. I read two of Mootoo’s novels in this dissertation because her work is particularly concerned with issues of gender and sexuality, unlike the work of earlier Indo-Caribbean writers who tended to focus on ethnicity and nationality.\(^\text{11}\) Her *Cereus Blooms at Night*, in particular, epitomizes an attempt by Indo-Caribbean women to reconfigure their reality through imaginative, magical thinking: they must trick the dominant real.

Harris, the great Guyanese writer and undying proponent of engaging myth in the pursuit of an anticolonial project, characterizes the need for reestablishing Césaire’s poetic “magical contact with things” as part and parcel of the “spider metamorphosis” of “limbo-anancy syndrome”:

> the rise of the poet or artist incurs a gamble of the soul which is symbolised in the West Indian trickster (the spider or anancy configuration). It is this element of tricksterdom that creates an individual and personal risk absolutely foreign to the conventional sanction of an old Tribal World: a risk which identifies him (the artist) with the submerged authority of dispossessed peoples but requires of him, in the same token, alchemic resources to conceal, as well as

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\(^{11}\) Whether or not East Indians could write “national literature” at all was an issue of independence-era debate. In his abovementioned conference speech, Khan took on the persona of a surprised Afro-Caribbean person to utter the second epigraph to this dissertation: “‘But A.. A. Ah didn’t know that coolie people could write’” (62).
elaborate, a far-reaching order of the imagination which, being suspect, could draw down upon him a crushing burden of censorship in economic or political terms. He stands therefore at the heart of the lie of community and the truth of community. And it is here, I believe, in this trickster gateway—this gamble of the soul—that there emerges the hope for a profoundly compassionate society committed to freedom within a creative scale. (166)

There is no possibility of return or myth of origin articulated here. Harris looks to the future, the construction of which requires trickery, deflective magic, that transmogrifies something that was once African into something newly Caribbean. Anancy is that Yoruba trickster-spider who crossed the Middle Passage with African slaves to become a fixture in Afro-Caribbean folklore. Similarly, the contortionist dance form of limbo “was born, it is said, on the slave ships of the Middle Passage. There was so little space that the slaves contorted themselves into human spiders” (Harris 157). One might say that to arrive at any Caribbean identity is to arrive by way of a sideways spider-crawl by a body that shifts shape from human to animal depending on the occasion.

Trickster figures like Anancy are not limited to Afro-Caribbean folklore. Indo-Caribbean folkloric tales sometimes speak of one Sakchulee, a young, poverty-stricken Indian man who, in the tale of “Sakchulee and the Rich Gentleman” (as
collected by the Trinidadian poet Kenneth Vidia Parmasad in 1984), is shown to be the quintessential brilliant fool.\textsuperscript{12} The tale begins:

People called him Sakchulee. There was no better name for him, they said. He was wayward. He was a bundle of mischief. He was cunning but seemed always to be such a fool. He tried always to be so honest but many people wished that he were not. He was so simple and so innocent yet he always seemed to be doing wrong. In trying to be too kind, he was often unkind. The more he tried to do good, the more it seemed that he did bad. No-one understood him and, try as he might, he never seemed to understand anyone. (127)

Sakchulee, of course, always has the upper hand by the end of his tales. He mimics, but he is not a mimic man; he is a trickster and master manipulator who illustrates that in the Indo-Caribbean, things are never what they seem, and the oppressed arrive at what they want by honing the ability to conceptualize reality differently.

\textsuperscript{12} Parmasad relates of the origins of the Sakchulee stories that “after the king, Sakchulee was the human character who appeared most frequently in the tales told by story-tellers in every corner of Trinidad. Because of the wide popularity of the Sakchulee tales, the word Sakchulee itself has been ascribed meanings such as wayward, wicked, mischievous. All of these meanings are very much in keeping with the qualities possessed by the character in the stories. An attempt on my part to locate this character at the source (in India) has resulted in a very interesting finding. A character who goes by the name of Sheikh Chilli appears in several of the folk tales of Uttar Pradesh. Since this state was one of the areas from which Indians were brought to the Caribbean and since both characters have so much in common it is reasonable to assume that the Sakchulee character is the Caribbean version of Sheikh Chilli from Uttar Pradesh in India” (xv).
III. Chapters

In the first chapter of the dissertation, “Land and Self: Mimicry and Doubling in the Metamorphic Caribbean,” I distinguish between metamorphosis and hybridity as models for reading postcolonial Caribbeanness, and examine the metamorphic acts of mimicry and “doubling” in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (imaginary Trinidad, 1996) and Wilson Harris’ *The Far Journey of Oudin* (Guyana, 1961). Derek Walcott asserts that colonial mimicry, rather than being, as V.S. Naipaul suggests, permanently perpetuated by the mindless, history-bereft colonial subject, has an integral part to play in the building of new postcolonial identities. *Cereus*, for example, is a surrealist reaction to racism and patriarchy by an Indo-Caribbean woman, wherein, refusing her humanity, Mala Ramchandin takes up twittering to the birds and marks place (by leaving snail scent) and time (by the blooming of her cereus plants). I argue that shifting species identity brings her freedom from racial and gender oppressions; and the natural world, the fluctuating geographic sea-space of the Caribbean, supports her exploits. Metamorphosis in Indo-Caribbean literature explores ways of representing that go beyond hybridity and the racial imaginary. The shapes of metamorphosing bodies and the pressures that work on them are integrally connected to the environment and landscapes of the New World.

My second chapter, “*Jahaji Bahen* Becomings: From Ship Sister to Woman President,” enumerates a politics of gender for Indo-Caribbean women, focusing on the particular sub-genre of Indo-Caribbean fiction and poetry that addresses the domestic and social sphere of women. “Women’s narratives” like Ryhaan Shah’s *A
Silent Place (Guyana, 2005) and Ramabai Espinet’s The Swinging Bridge (Trinidad/Toronto, 2004) act as supplements to the nation-centric, totalizing model of the Indo-Caribbean novel that focuses on the memorializing of the community in the New World in opposition to the Afro-Caribbean. In this chapter I look at women’s domestic and cultural spaces and argue for a jahaji bahen (“ship sister”) model of viewing Indo-Caribbean women that is commensurate with the jahaji bhai (“ship brother”) model of reading Indo-Caribbean men and heretofore, by extension, the entire Indo-Caribbean. These works are particularly focused on the bodies of Indo-Caribbean women as repositories of Indianess. In Espinet’s novel, the female protagonist Mona Singh, as a young girl and woman in Trinidad, experiences repeated acts of aggression by men who see her as rejecting Indian female values of chastity and docility simply by wearing above-the-knee skirts and attending school, among other “transgressions.” She is a victim of the anxiety and anger Indo-Trinidadian men felt about what was perceived to be forced douglarization, governmentally-supported racial mixing. Indo-Caribbean women were the primary victims of these postcolonial racial anxieties.

My third chapter, “‘More Coloured Animals’: Indigenous Indians and the Return of Myth,” is about becoming indigenous to a land through interpellation into its myths of becoming and belonging. In Cyril Dabydeen’s novel Dark Swirl (Guyana, 1986), the process of ecological indigenization of East Indians in Guyana occurs through “inheriting” the Amerindian mythical river spirit of the Massacouraman, who in essence deeds the jungle to them. By contrast, a white
scientist and naturalist, a representative of British colonialism, is rejected by the same mythical figure. In the Caribbean, there must be multiple ways of conceiving of being native. Various groups of people, brought against their will and not, now share natal residence in the Caribbean. They are different from their enslaved and indentured progenitors, and are no longer of Africa or India. But their ancestors brought those places with them in language, food, religion, and other cultural ways of being that required negotiation into and with their new land, which already had its own spirits. It was and is an uneasy settlement for all, people and land-embodying figures. Importantly, however, it is a negotiated settlement: people do have power over land. They cultivate it, use, and modify it. I argue that land spirits prefer harmony with humanity—we too are natural—but while Africans and East Indians are spelled into belonging to the Caribbean, whiteness, in the form of a colonizing interloper into the jungle, is not.

My fourth chapter, “Viveka and Valmiki: The Queer Indo-Caribbean Family,” posits ways of figuring the queer Indo-Caribbean. I read Shani Mootoo’s novel *Valmiki’s Daughter* (Trinidad, 2008), the first Indo-Caribbean novel to feature a lesbian protagonist, to show that homosexuality disrupts the ethno-nationalist project of Indo-Caribbean social and political inclusion. This project, I argue, hinges on particular conceptions of Indian gender normativity and roles, and on the cultural importance of marriage as a universal value that ensures community survival. Queerness also troubles the Hindu and Muslim religious identities to which East Indians clung as a marker of their discreteness even as they lost their ancestral
languages. Sexual license and freedom is associated within the Indo-community with Afro-Caribbeanness. East Indian queerness is generally invisible and stigmatized, finding limited expression only in diasporic community spaces in North America and London. In the context of Caribbean postcolonial nationalist and religious sentiment, homosexuality is, first, legislatively illegal in much of the Caribbean, and second, viewed as a product of critic Joseph Massad’s “Gay International,” an import propagated by tourists and media, ironically defined by its foreignness, even as anti-gay Anglican values and Victorian colonial constitutional laws become naturalized. While there is some tolerated space for Indo-Caribbean male homosexuality in the arts—particularly and ironically in the propagation of Hindu Indian dance forms as evidence of community survival—Indo-Caribbean lesbians remain invisible and without voice.

Indo- and Afro-Caribbean literatures are both literatures of nostalgia, mourning, exile and identity formation: they begin with the sea and share the space of the sugar plantation and later the Caribbean nation-state. Still, the very real Caribbean political divisions resulting from extreme inter-ethnic distrust between Afro- and Indo-Caribbean communities has led to economic and social paralysis, failed race-based dictatorship, and extreme racial violence. Metamorphosis offers a non-assimilationist intervention into the Indo-Afro-Caribbean conflict by articulating and promoting an ever-changing ontological (and thus epistemological) diversity in a way that static conceptions of hybridity cannot.
Mimicry is an act of imagination, and, in some animals and insects, endemic cunning. Lizards, chameleons, most butterflies, and certain insects adapt the immediate subtleties of color and even of texture both as defense and as lure. Camouflage, whether it is in the grass-blade stripes of the tiger or the eyed hide of the leopard, is mimicry, or more than that, it is design. What if the man in the New World needs mimicry as design, both as defense and as lure [my emphasis]. We take as long as other fellow creatures in the natural world to adapt and then blend into our habitats, whether we possess these environments by forced migration or by instinct. That is genetics. Culture must move faster, defensively.

—Derek Walcott, “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” 10

The “mimic man,” a colonial subject who apes and later perpetuates the culture of the colonizer, is usually depicted in postcolonial literature as the embodiment of craven survival and an opponent to nationalist postcolonial identity and achievement. In this view of postcoloniality—the one adopted by the Indo-Trinidadian writer V.S. Naipaul in, most famously, A House for Mr. Biswas (1961)—a true postcolonial state is not possible. Postcoloniality lacks the authentic productive relationships necessary to create a society, and instead attempts to create a social base from a flawed reiteration of the power hierarchy of the colonial state; robotized former colonials follow their slowly degrading, archaic programming into perpetuity. Derek Walcott is thus unusual in his attempt to rehabilitate mimicry in the postcolonial Caribbean context by positing it “as design, both as defense and as lure,” and as even a cultural defense that surpasses the slow mimicry of nature. But mimicry never quite shakes its association with nature: it inevitably requires the incorporation of habitat into the physical, verbal, and relational camouflaging of the
self. This type of assimilation is metamorphic: it operates in both directions, and the
displaced postcolonial subject is continually reincorporated into the landscape even as
he or she acquires a properly local geographic worldview. As Walcott states,
mimicry is not just defensive, it is lure—the environment lures the colonial subject to
it, but also gives that subject an (al)lure that attracts the European colonizer, perhaps
to the latter’s racial doom. This allure is of the exotic Old World Other gone native in
the New World: a double lure.

I define mimicry as a subcategory of mimetic metamorphosis, i.e., it is a type
of narrative change the tension of which is between imitation and representation.
Unlike mimetic functions like mirroring, instances of mimicry tend to skew more
toward the nonlinear imitative, rather than the representative function. The mimetic
function of doubling, by contrast, if understood not as splitting but as linear, temporal
repetition, is more representative than imitative. This chapter articulates a politics of
becoming, arguing that mimicry and doubling are two forms of metamorphosis that
subvert the static, racialized corporeality of colonial labor that produces and is
produced by the economic dictates of the colony, and that is reproduced in the
postcolony. In essence, I argue for and extend Walcott’s implied assertion that
colonial mimicry and doubling, rather than being simply undesirable modes of
behavior to be discarded (which is in any case impossible), have a necessary and
integral part to play in the building of postcolonial identities. In this chapter, I read
Shani Mootoo’s postcolonial Caribbean novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) and
Wilson Harris’ Guyanese novella *The Far Journey of Oudin* (1961) to show that
mimicry does not require the destruction of the original (Mootoo), whereas doubling does (Harris). Doubling is therefore shown to be temporal in a way that mimicry is not.

Crucial to the choice of these works is that they are both set primarily in the mid-twentieth century transitional period between British colonialism and Caribbean independence. Harris’ *Oudin* was both written during and set in the major period of British Caribbean independence in the 1960s, and the novel leaves the postcolonial future wide open. Mootoo’s *Cereus* is a contemporary postcolonial work wherein the narrative looks backward into the colonial past in order to quantify a pathological present and construct a better future. The novels are discussed in chronological order here, as *Cereus* incorporates the historical aftermath of colonialism in a way that *Oudin* could only project. *Cereus* addresses gender and sexuality in the postcolonial Caribbean in a way that typifies a more contemporary generation of Caribbean writers, rather than the old guard of George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, Naipaul and others whose main concerns were independence itself and the fate of the emasculated male postcolonial subject who represented all the people of the Caribbean.¹

I consider both Mootoo’s and Harris’ works to be Indo-Caribbean fiction. *Cereus* was written by an Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian novelist and poet, and its

¹ For example, the Barbadian George Lamming’s most well-known work is probably *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), an autobiographical novel which explores Barbadians’ (Bajans’) relationships with England and Africa, and potential postcolonial responses to the history of Caribbean slavery. Samuel Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) focuses on the exile of Caribbean emigrants to England in the 1950s, and on the development of Trinidadian creolized English; and Naipaul’s *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) are only two of his many works that suggest the inevitability of the postcolonial “mimic man” in the Caribbean, Africa, and India.
protagonist, Mala Ramchandin, is an Indo-Caribbean woman. The novel is set on the mythical Caribbean island of Lantanacamera, which mirrors Trinidad. The name of the island reflects the importance of the natural landscape in this novel: lantanas are a type of tropical, flowering verbena native, among other places, to the Americas and the islands of the Caribbean.² By contrast, Oudin is not an island novel—it is continental, and its environs are the jungles and savannahs of British Guiana. Given the history of that country, however, it is nonetheless like Cereus a Caribbean work that deals with the incorporation of East Indian indentured laborers into the wild and overgrown tropical, anti-pastoral landscapes of the British Empire, those natural surroundings that could never be molded into genteel English gardens. Oudin is the second of four novellas in Harris’ The Guyana Quartet (1960-1963), all of which address the intersections of colonial multiracial becomings in Guyana with mythic projections of once-Amerindian land and sea. But Oudin is the one that deals strictly with the restructuring of the East Indian family and the changing roles of East Indian women in Guyana, rather than with Harris’ own Creole mixed-race and Afro-Guyanese communities.³ Though a shorter novella, rather than a novel, the work is

² The entire word “Lantanacamera” would therefore mean, in Latin, “the room of lantanas.” In a contemporary legal sense, in camera (“in private”) describes court cases to which the public is not admitted. Lantanacamera is also then “the private [space] of lantanas” to which outsiders are not admitted, which aptly describes the living situation of the main character, Mala Ramchandin, who sequesters herself in her overgrown garden.

³ The Indo-Caribbean is, again, a transnational, triangular space the geographic apices of which are India, the Caribbean, and the secondary diaspora cities of London, Toronto and New York. Wilson Harris is not himself Indo-Guyanese. In my view of academic identity politics and the demands of “authentic” world literature production, it is sufficient that the milieu of the story is the Indo-Caribbean, that the characters are Indo-Caribbean, that their concerns are those of the Indo-Caribbean community.
quite characteristic of the temporally and existentially complicated narratives that typify Harris’ fiction and his critical essays on Caribbean folklore and literature.

I. Non-Hybrid Metamorphosis: Mimicry and Doubling

Mimicry and doubling are both acts of metamorphosis, which, following Caroline Bynum, is the term I oppose to hybridity, the major trope under which identity in Latin America and the Caribbean is generally organized. There is one major difference between metamorphosis and hybridity: metamorphosis is a chronotopic narrative, whereas hybridity is a static visibility. Bynum argues in Metamorphosis and Identity (2005) that the “hybrid is spatial and visual, not temporal” (30). Hybridity involves two discrete forms statically co-existing in one corpus, whereas bodily metamorphosis signifies a state of flux and therefore temporality between two forms:

The hybrid expresses a world of natures, essences, or substances (often diverse or contradictory to each other), encountered through paradox; it resists change. Metamorphosis expresses a labile world of flux and transformation, encountered through story…A hybrid is a double being, an entity of parts, two or more. It is an inherently visual form. We see what a hybrid is; it is a way of making two-ness, and the simultaneity of two-ness, visible. Metamorphosis goes from an entity

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4 “Chronotope,” as defined by M.M. Bakhtin (1937), is a literary time-space where temporality and spatiality are considered inseparable and neither is privileged.
that is one thing to an entity that is another. It is essentially narrative.

(29-30)

The visibility of the two-ness of the hybrid is crucial for its recognition as hybrid. The story of how it came to be hybrid, the projections of what aspects of itself are hidden from view, and the implications of its story are, for nation or culture, dependent on its physiognomy and on the observer. What I propose is to privilege a multiply subjective self, and that requires an understanding of difference that hinges less on discrete, quantifiable hybrid forms and more on narrative metamorphs. In the case of the Indo-Caribbean, this is a way to understand how people simultaneously identify as Old World Indian and New World Caribbean, and hold paradoxical beliefs, for instance, in orthodox Hinduism and Afro-Caribbean-derived folkloric figures. They are certainly not visibly half-and-half in either body or culture.

Metamorphosis has implications for the place of East Indians in the postcolonial Caribbean nation-state that go beyond explanations of shifting cultural forms. It is also a way to understand and, by extension, ameliorate the ongoing combative relationship between Afro- and the Indo-Caribbean communities in Trinidad and Guyana. Separating out which piece of culture belongs to whom, and how one group has historically influenced the other, and one-upmanship in the realm of comparative suffering are the methods of the racial superiority project of ethnic nationalists of both communities. Metamorphosis focuses on linkages, affinities, and tensions, and also accounts for that component of bodily shapeshifting that is not strictly racial: i.e., Caribbean “difference” is often anthropomorphized in relation to
nature and the tropical environment. As a literary trope and as a type of embodiment, Bynum argues, the metamorphic “shape or body is crucial, not incidental, to story. It carries story; it makes story visible; in a sense, it is story. Shape (or visible body) is in space what story is in time...my self is my story, known only in my shape” (180, 181). Story is, as many writers have noted, written on the body; but the body also is the story. As narrative, then, the body flows and changes, and is metamorphic rather than hybrid. In a sense, metamorphosis offers a diversion from racial categorization and a displacement of Caribbean identity crises onto a chronotopic time-space where place is a geographic and historical location that is seen, in both Harris’ and Mootoo’s works, to have its own agency and decisions to make in determining who is a postcolonial and how that process will happen. The project of the Caribbean nation-state, I argue, depends on the metamorphic processes of myth making and neo-indigenization of the descendants of slaves and indentured laborers that happen in relation to the environment. The new “natives” must contend with the colonial inheritance of uncontrolled land and maritime excess as threat; the idealization of the Caribbean as a tourist destination even for themselves upon emigration to London, New York, or Toronto; and the sea-jungle continuum as both home and exploitable natural resource. In essence, through the metamorphic tropes of mimicry and doubling, I examine the idea that the racial discourse of Indo-Caribbean national identities are produced in an ecological framework.

Visible hybridity is also insufficient to the specific and comparable historical situation of Trinidad and Guyana for one major reason: the vast majority of their
people are not *mestizo* or mixed-race, and take umbrage at the mere idea that they are somehow a mishmash of cultures without self-declared ongoing ties to India or Africa. The British strategy of colonialization of the Caribbean also did not include major European settlement and racial intermixing; it was always an overseas empire. This is quite a different system of colonial governance from that practiced in most of Hispanophone and Lusophone Latin America, where the trope of Caribbean hybridity and related theories of creolization, implying white admixture, originate. I view hybridity as an extension of colonial systems of racial categorization. Such categorizing and its resulting hierarchies remain dependent on eighteenth-century European naturalist systems of classification. As Grace Kyungwon Hong (2006) notes in her study of the relationship between natural history and queerness in Mootoo’s novel,

> Natural history as a discourse emerged to mediate the intrinsic and structural instabilities of colonialism. Its orderly taxonomic

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5 During the reign of the nominally socialist Afro-Guyanese dictator Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham in Guyana from the 1960s to the 1980s, for example, Guyana, though geographically far away from Africa and India, established very close diplomatic ties with the global Non-Aligned Movement of countries that viewed themselves as outside of Cold War divisions and European and North American concerns. Partly as a result of its own demographics, Burnham’s Guyana viewed itself as an especially close ally of Jawaharlal Nehru in India and Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana.

6 Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein (1992) describe British colonials as being loath to fraternize with their subjects in the Caribbean: the British created, in the “big houses,” “European-societies-outside-of-Europe” (552).

7 Quijano and Wallerstein also argue that “ethnicity was the inevitable cultural consequence of coloniality. It delineated the social boundaries corresponding to the division of labour” (550). Still, ethnicity as a simple classification system was not enough to maintain colonial economic structures: “ethnicity had to be reinforced by a conscious and systematic racism—a creation largely of the nineteenth century” (551).
classifications simultaneously legitimated racialized colonial rule, in particular, naturalizing the racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies on which the plantation economy was based. Yet in so doing, natural history also necessarily produced racialized and sexualized subjects as deviant and disorderly, and thus threatening to exceed this orderly classificatory rationale. Natural history was a discursive terrain that unevenly and heterogeneously disciplined colonial subjects by requiring internalization of and adherence to a normative formation.

Yet this process produced distance from these norms. (79)

Hybridity problematically takes colonial classifications of race as its foundation; i.e., people are categorized as white, black, indigenous, or some combination thereof. As such, it is an extrapolation of European racial taxonomy. But as Hong notes, racial taxonomies by definition produce some subjects who are outside the norm and are “deviant and disorderly”—and in those outsiders is the potential for a difference that can recalibrate the system or destroy it entirely.

Hybridity is a necessary dialectical precursor to metamorphosis. As Caribbean critic Stuart Hall explains, hybridity does the founding work of demolishing ideas of “essence and purity,” recognizing instead “heterogeneity and diversity [and] a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference” (244). The reconciliation of difference is what hybridity offers. José Martí in 1891 begins a discussion of Caribbean and Latin American hybridity as a
counterpoint to mono-cultural “authenticity” in “nuestra América Mestiza.”

Roberto Fernández Retamar (1979) later describes Caribbean and Latin American hybridity as exceptionalist, arguing that revolution and decolonization in “nuestra América Mestiza” will only be successful if the colonized identify as mestizo (racially “mixed”).

The impetus toward metamorphosis and hybridity is the same: as Bynum argues, “…both hybrid and metamorphosis can be destabilizing of expectation. Both can suggest that the world, either in process or in the instant, is disordered and fluid, with the horror and wonder of uncontrolled potency or violated boundaries” (31). Whether hybrid or metamorphic, the colonial world is one where chaos precipitated by an uncontrollable natural environment always threatens to overcome orderly ontologies.

Hybridity and metamorphosis both attempt to reject essentialism, incorporate change, and account for difference.

Analysis of what Hall (2003) calls the Caribbean’s présence américaine in the Caribbean thus begins with hybridity. The vision of static hybridity and acceptance of its reality, of its “mixed” cultures and bodies forming a whole that is the sum of its

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8 “Nuestra América” is a term coined by Cuban nationalist José Martí in his essay of the same name in Revista Ilustrada (New York) on 1 Jan. 1891, and in El Partido Liberal (Mexico) on 5 Mar. 1892, representing his pan-Latin American vision of revolution and decolonization.

9 Says Retamar, “…existe en el mundo colonial, en el planeta, un caso especial: una vasta zona para la cual el mestizaje no es el accidente, sino la esencia, la línea central: nosotros, “nuestra América Mestiza”…nuestra cultura, al igual que toda cultura, requiere como primera condición nuestra propia existencia” (11-12). (“…there exists in the colonial world, on the planet, a special case: a vast zone for which mestizaje is not an accident, but is the essence, the central line: we ourselves, our mestizo America…our culture, just like every culture, requires as (the) first condition our own existence.” My translation.)

10 As I will later discuss, Achille Mbembe (2001), for example, describes the colony as a naturally wild, uncontrolled space of danger for Europeans that threatened the orderliness of racial hierarchies and the Eurocentric narrative of history and civilization.
parts, necessarily precedes the acknowledgement of an ongoing shift and a whole that is more than its sum. Hall defines this originary hybrid Caribbean presence as not so much power, as ground, place, territory. It is a juncture where the many cultural tributaries meet, the “empty” land (the European colonisers emptied it) where strangers from every other part of the globe collide. The “new world” presence—America...—is therefore itself the beginning of diaspora, of diversity, of hybridity and difference, what makes Afro-Caribbean people already people of a diaspora. (244)

This is another way of defining what I have referred to as the Caribbean’s chronotopic time-space, where “place” has both spatial and temporal definitions and is preeminent. Hall borrows from Foucault’s “loci of enunciation” the idea that there are discrete points from which an individual speaks, suggesting that identity and opinion are aggregates of “points of identification, unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning* of the “I” (234). A diasporic Caribbean identity, then, is always in process, “constantly producing and reproducing [itself] anew,” and requiring a “historical imaginative rediscovery” (244, 235). Cultural identity in the Caribbean, as anywhere else, but perhaps more visibly and quickly, is always in the process of becoming, rather than being. Such identities are therefore metamorphic.

Metamorphosis more adequately articulates those spaces of, firstly, the in-between, and secondly, the interconnected, than does hybridity:
At the beginning and end, where there is no trace of the otherness from which and to which the process is going, there is no metamorphosis; there is metamorphosis only in between…Hybrid reveals a world of difference, a world that is and is multiple; metamorphosis reveals a world of stories, of things under way. Metamorphosis breaks down categories by breaching them; hybrid forces contradictory or incompatible categories to coexist and serve as commentary on each other. (Bynum 30-31)

The parts of the hybrid always remain discrete, “inherently two. Its contraries are simultaneous, hence dialogic” (30). But the language of hybridity does not acknowledge the ongoing nature of that dialogue, nor does it allow for a disruption of linear temporality. By contrast, non-linear time is a fundamental outcome and condition of both mimicry and doubling. These types of metamorphosis thus allow for and acknowledge the ongoing shifting of geographic, historical, and social boundaries that characterizes the Caribbean, as well as the contextual particularities (and peculiarities) of local permutations of Caribbean identity. As Shalini Puri (2004) says, “we are better served by terms such as *mestizaje*, creolization, douglarization, *jibarismo*, and the like…because the multiplicity of terms itself helps keep visible the specificities and histories of each term. In contrast, the umbrella term ‘hybridity’ enacts a dehistoricizing conflation” (3).

In Caribbean literature, the “mixing” of religion, politics and identity is indeed migratory and rarely ever static, and so falls under the auspices of a rather Deleuzian,
rhizomatic metamorphosis. Identity theory in general has moved in the direction of ongoing, interconnected narrative. The rhizome is related to metamorphosis is related to mimesis is related to the multitude is related to the transnational is related to a myriad other popular tropes. These terms all acknowledge that the state of flux, expansion, and change that is the reality of life in a global era—one that begins with colonization of the Americas—must be articulated as narratives with multiple subjectivities, not as static histories. But the rhizomatic narrative is not a directionless, rambling mass. Its rhizomes spread concentrically and establish connective nodes at regular junctions, and in the end, the rhizomatic system holds the environmental “ground” together.

Caribbean oral folktales and figures, translated into literary novels and poetry, carry with them a memory of colonialism that includes the transformation of subjectivity as a means of escape. Bodily metamorphosis and mutability question the socially established identity of slaves and other beings that have been defined by their solid, present bodies. The viability of various types of metamorphosis as ultimately creative and revolutionary is not just a literary tradition; as Walcott notes, calypso, which emerged in Trinidad at the beginning of the twentieth century as a form of musico-political commentary, emerged from a sense of mimicry, of patterning its form both on satire and self-satire. The impromptu elements of the calypso, like the improvisation and invention of steelband music, supersedes its traditional origins...From the viewpoint of history, these forms
originated in imitation if you want, and ended in invention.

(“Mimicry” 9)

So oral and written literature, poetry, music and other art forms become the incubators of metamorphic Caribbean identities; they are the crossroads itself, rather than its products, made visible.

Naipaul’s vision of the Indo-Caribbean is inextricably linked with the trope of the “mimic man.” Two of the quintessential “mimic men” of Caribbean fiction are his Indo-Trinidadian creations: the title character of the abovementioned Biswas, and protagonist Ganesh Ramsumair of The Mystic Masseur (1957). Biswas is henpecked, terminally unhappy, and builds a house of cards of both his life and his actual dwelling. Ganesh Ramsumair ends his life as G. Ramsay Muir, colonial Parliamentarian and knight of the realm, cut off from his Indian roots, his Caribbean inheritance, and any hope of an identity that is more than an Anglo-Indian shadow of an idealized British “native” subject.11  For this mimic man, there is no hope for the future, and nothing productive to be gained from even the strategic essentialization of a British-colonial identity that does not actually exist, except as it is produced by colonial subjects themselves. The corrupt, corpulent postcolonial native dictator, attended by apish sycophants and living in a palace of costly European furnishings while his people starve, the Trujillos and Mugabes of the “Third World,” is the most

11 In the book’s epilogue, titled “A Statesman on the 12.57 [from London],” the young Trinidadian narrator meets the former “mystic masseur” in England: “‘Pundit Ganesh!’ [the narrator] cried, running towards him. ‘Pundit Ganesh Ramsumair!’ ‘G. Ramsay Muir,’ he said coldly” (Naipaul, Mystic Masseur 208). The anglicized “G. Ramsay Muir” is, in Ganesh’s view, a far more suitable name for a statesman than his original Hindu one.
common literary—and real world—symbol of the hopeless inability of the colonized to govern themselves on democratic terms. In Naipaul’s view, “although its politicians have taken to calling it a country, Trinidad is a small island” (viii). This is a direct result of the loss of all cultural “authenticity” by colonial subjects.

For Walcott, the choice to mimic or not is stark: “We can praise the [indigenous Amerindians] for not imitating, but even imitation decimated them, or has humiliated them like the aborigine and the American Indian. What have we been offered here as an alternative but suicide[?]” (11). Mimicry, at least as a beginning, is here the alternative to death, or rather, self-annihilation. The distinction between suicide and the types of death—physical, spiritual, and cultural—forced on the colonized is clear. Mimicry is the choice to live. Walcott’s assessment of Naipaul and other Caribbean writers who embrace the inevitability of the colonial/postcolonial as mimic men is that they reject imitation, the basis of the tradition, for originality, the false basis of innovation, they represent eventually the old patronising attitude adapted to contemporaneous politics, for their demand for naturalness, novelty, originality, or truth is again based on preconceptions of behaviour. (“Muse” 18)

Walcott is not here rejecting originality and innovation—he is himself a formidable poet—but he points out that culture does not spring from an elitist vacuum, and that politics and art produce and are produced by each other. Naipaul is often accused by his literary critics of being out-of-touch with “the people” and of constructing the
postcolonial Caribbean as a no-win scenario. This is at least partly true. But sometimes, Naipaul in his cantankerousness is right: right about vicious postcolonial racial dynamics that his more politically correct literary contemporaries would rather idealize; right about governmental, religious, and economic corruption that they would rather ignore; right about the interconnected fear, intolerance, and rotten morality that, being once colonized, the people of the Caribbean would now rather not expose to outsiders, preferring instead to maintain a clear separation between public and private domains and victimizing each other behind closed doors. As I will discuss in later chapters, rates of domestic assault against women, children, lesbians, gays, and persons deemed nonconforming by Caribbean societies are unconscionably high even as the governments of these same countries promote themselves as ideal tourism destinations. Such cognitive dissonance is one possible ugly side of metamorphic existence, which offers up all potentials and is constantly adapting and changing.

The theoretical scope of mimicry as an affective state is vast. Homi Bhabha (1994), drawing on Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, and Walter Benjamin, links mimicry to postcoloniality by arguing that

Mimicry does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire. It is the process of the fixation of the colonial as a form of cross-classificatory, discriminatory knowledge within an interdictory discourse, and therefore necessarily raises the question of the authorization of colonial representations, a
question of authority that goes beyond the subject’s lack of priority (castration) to a historical crisis in the conceptuality of colonial man as an object of regulatory power, as the subject of racial, cultural, national representation. (129)

Partial parsing suggests that mimicry functions as an ontological disruptor in the production of the colonial subject through a process of othering and of exposing the tension between desire and, more appropriately, *différance*. Benjamin (1933) defines mimicry as, first, *play*, which does not require defined parameters or a defined goal:

Nature produces similarities—one need only think of mimicry. Human beings, however, possess the very highest capability to produce similarities. Indeed, there may not be a single one of the higher human functions which is not decisively co-determined by the mimetic faculty. This faculty, however, has a history, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. With respect to the latter, it is in many ways formed by play. To begin with, children's games are everywhere interlaced with mimetic modes of behavior, and their range is not limited at all to what one human being imitates from another. A child not only plays at being a grocer or a teacher, but also at being a windmill or a train. (65)

Mimicry is also *magic*, which disrupts linearity: there is, historically, “the increasing disappearance of this mimetic faculty. The perceived world (*Merkwelt*) of modern human beings seems to contain infinitely fewer of those magical correspondences
than the world of the ancient people or even of primitive peoples” (Benjamin 66).

Mimicry has both destructive and creative potential, and represents

the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a
difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that

the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in
order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage,
its excess, its difference...mimicry emerges as the representation of a
difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus[,] the
sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation
and discipline, which “appropriates” the Other as it visualizes power.

(Bhabha 122)

One of the colonial functions of mimicry is to produce difference, to continually
produce the separation between colonizer and colonized subject. Its limitations,
suggests Bhabha, include this ongoingness as well as the inherent reminder of the
existence of oppressive, differentiating racial and economic structures, and he
believes its strategic power to be limited. Bhabha does identify mimicry as a threat to
the colonizer, as it is a “sign of the inappropriate” that “poses an immanent threat to
both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers” (122-123). But the great
failure of mimicry as a transformative strategy is that the aforementioned
ambivalence “does not merely ‘rupture’ the discourse, but becomes transformed into
an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence” (123). Partial
or metonymic presences are
“incomplete” and “virtual.” It is as if the very emergence of the “colonial” is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition within the authoritative discourse itself. The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace. (123)

The uncomfortable paradox of Bhabha’s argument is that colonial mimicry is described as both ongoing and self-limiting. I do not dispute that the colonial subject may be produced via mimicry under the condition of his or her own impossibility in the dominant discourse. But there is nothing inevitable about the fixity of the colonial as partial presence, particularly as mimicry is continually producing the subject. The metonymic Indian indentured laborer, for instance, defined by his or her part in the racialized labor hierarchy, passes through mimic manhood into being Indo-Caribbean, which is itself not a fixed identity.

Like mimicry, doubling is a type of metamorphic becoming. But doubling privileges repetition and representation, rather than imitation. It is also more linear than mimicry. Metamorphosis does not strictly require the atemporality of “no time” or “all time.” It must allow for all potentialities, and sequential, linear time is also a kind of temporality with its own historical and political applications. What is more important is that metamorphic narrative includes a sense of space and place as well as time and that it does not depend on the visible the way hybridity does. By this definition, then, the doubling in Harris’ *Oudin* is metamorphic. The sequential
temporal doubling of the subject in Harris’ work is inextricably linked to the land, and appearance is all trickery—the identical incarnations are not the exact same person, and they do not take up the lives of their previous selves. Though the written narrative of *Oudin* is not linear, the underlying colonial story is. There is a clearly delineated past and its representative, Ram; a future represented by Beti and her child; and a convoluted present represented by Oudin and his half-brothers. It is only *within the present itself* that Indo-Guyanese existence is not strictly linear.

II. Oudin the Double: Wilson Harris’ *The Far Journey of Oudin*

Postcolonial metamorphic literature in the Anglophone Caribbean begins with Wilson Harris’ *The Guyana Quartet*. The second of these novellas, *The Far Journey of Oudin* (1961), illustrates the conflicts and changing social mores of rural Indo-Caribbean village life on the cusp of Guyanese independence from Britain in 1966. The story begins *in media res* with the death of one Oudin, laborer, who mysteriously appears in a rural savannah settlement in 1951. But this is his second death: Oudin is the reincarnation of an unnamed man who was once murdered by his half-brothers Hassan, Kaiser, and Mohammed over land inheritance. This Indo-Guyanese family is nominally Muslim. Over the course of the narrative, which swings wildly in time, the three half-brothers also die and reappear one by one. The second thread of the story concerns Oudin’s employer Ram, a craven Hindu Indo-Guyanese cattle rancher who

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12 Upon independence in 1966, British Guiana was renamed (and re-spelled) “The Cooperative Republic of Guyana.” Of the two other Guianas, colonial Dutch Guiana became postcolonial Suriname in 1975; French Guiana retains its colonial name and is still an overseas *département* of France.
is very much set in his traditional, patriarchal ways. The threads of the narrative are linked by Beti, an illiterate East Indian woman who is lusted after by Ram but who becomes Oudin’s wife and births his child just as he dies. She and Ram are the only characters who do not have “doubles.” Ram is the past and she, with her shedding of traditional dress and baby, is the future. The paradoxical present, however, is Oudin and his brothers, who constantly die, are born again, disappear, reappear, and demand to be taken to India while killing to possess land in Guyana. This is East Indian Guyana on the eve of independence, when the question of “who we are,” asked since the 1890s by the first native-born Indo-Guyanese, is just beginning to be answered in the context of postcolonialism.13

Oudin and his Indo-Caribbean relatives and associates likely live on the Rupununi savannahs, where the majority of cattle ranching is done in Guyana. This locale immediately delinks them from the mainstream history of Indian indentureship on the sugar estates, placing them instead in the category of the East Indian small farmer who eventually rises to become (usually through growing rice) the postcolonial Indo-Guyanese middle class. They therefore represent the potential of Indo-Guyanese to diverge from a permanent state of being a bound coolie on the plantation. Their inland savannahs comprise Guyana’s third major ecosystem after the arable farmland of the coast and what is locally referred to as “the interior,” the

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13 One of the first recorded public speeches on the subject of Indo-Guyanese history and identity and their place in the nation is Joseph Ruhoman’s “India—The Progress of Her People at Home and Abroad And How Those in British Guiana May Improve Themselves,” a lecture delivered in October 1894 at St. Leonard’s School in Georgetown, British Guiana.
Amazonian jungle. There is yet a fourth unique ecosystem: the segment of the ancient Precambrian Pakaraima tepui plateau mountain range that includes its highest point, the 9,000-foot-tall Mount Roraima. With the exception of this latter, each ecosystem has its own natural resource economics: the sugar plantations are located on the coasts, which are below sea level and still continually drained by dikes and canals built by the Dutch in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the grassland savannahs are the site of cattle ranching; and the interior is where some Amerindian villages remain and where gold and bauxite are dredged from the rivers. The majority of the population lives on the coasts, and (with the notable exception of the adventurous Sir Walter Raleigh) most European colonialists never ventured beyond the coastal area.¹⁴

With the single final exception of Beti’s child, who is the incarnation of an undetermined someone, all the doubles appear as full-grown adults who seem to spring from the savannah itself. Oudin, for example, materializes “no one knew from where and when. He may have come from the sand-hills a long way off topside but this was unlikely since he was not of Amerindian stock, neither trace nor ghostly feature was his...The truth was no one knew whom he represented or where he had sprung from” (Harris, Oudin 140). Harris’ work always lends itself to suggestions

¹⁴ This division of ecosystems is not the way in which the geography of Guyana is usually cartographically represented. Strictly and scientifically speaking, there are five ecosystems: coast, rainforest, river/sand belt, desert savannah, and interior savannah including mountains. But I have categorized the ecosystems metamorphically, according to the way in which they live in the Guyanese national and creative imagination; it is the Guyanese narrative of their environment. What the land can produce, its use-value, was and is still preeminent in this division.
that Guyanese land has agency that is derived from hauntings by indigenous Amerindians, and this novella is no exception. Most often, the doubles in *Oudin* attempt to redeem the actions of these earlier selves. Marina Warner (2002) describes the double as epitomizing the current state of metamorphosis: as a threat to personality on the one hand, of possession by another, and estrangement from the self. But, tugging strongly and contradictorily against this at the same time, the doubling also solicits hopes and dreams for yourself, of a possible becoming different while remaining the same person, of escaping the bounds of self, of aspiring to the polymorphous perversity of infants, in Freud’s phrase, which in some ways mimics the protean energy of the metamorphic gods. (164-5)

In this vein, I suggest that Oudin and his half-brothers are not allowed to rest in death and keep being reanimated by the savannah to try again because of their chronic inability to get being Indo-Guyanese right. That is, they lack understanding that they are now Guyanese and not just displaced Indians, and their worldview is inharmonious and unsustainable: it is tied to a mythical India, rather than to the geographical environment in which they live.

There are many different forms of the double, including, according to Warner, “a second self, or a second existence, usually coexisting in time, but sometimes sequentially...a lookalike who is a false twin, or, more commonly, someone who does not resemble oneself outwardly but embodies some inner truth. In this sense, the
double, while wholly dissimilar, unnervingly embodies a true self” (163). I use doubling here as a way of describing people who have sequential incarnations, look close to identical in each incarnation, and remember their past lives. They do, however, have different names, concerns, and roles to play in each incarnation. As they are sequential, they are not a product of splitting or fission. They are literal body doubles that, as Warner suggests, embody some kind of true self, or perhaps more properly a specific archetype.

The first scene of the novella describes Oudin in insubstantial form watching his wife, the pregnant Beti, announce his death. This non-corporeal form is closer to what Warner calls the “true self” than are any of the physical doubles. Oudin and his death are immediately linked to a temporal Caribbean geography:

…the land was a wilderness on which had fallen the curious naked spoil of his conquest and death...And it seemed to him that the first outcry from within the hut—the wailing voice of his wife and child—had happened in the depth of time long before the vain echo of the announcement could be heard in the still air he had ceased to breathe.

“Oudin dead, Oudin dead. Oudin dead.” (Oudin 124)

The being that is Oudin dies twice. This opening scene that harks back to an originary time reflects Walcott’s call for a turn to a naturalized neo-Adamic state that does, however, make room for history. As Jana Braziel typifies it, the tendency of Caribbean writers is
[to] return to genesis as if to the site of an originary crime, a place of an infraction against the natural world in order to unearth the idea of a beginning that is intrinsically tainted and marred. Their notions of Caribbean genesis refuse a static Eden, a fixed Paradise; rather, their Caribbean geneses are plural, becoming, autonomously flowing, and above all, dynamic. (123)

This dynamic genesis is metamorphic. Oudin’s present, his now, is traced backwards then forwards through time, and he is repeatedly made anew. He is the walking, talking body double of the original Caribbean victim of fratricide, a veritable Abel to his three brothers’ Cain(s). This original victim is not named; nonetheless, when his double returns to “haunt” his brothers, they recognize him immediately and somehow intuit that his true name is Oudin. That is, they recognize their sin when shown it by a force greater than themselves, as the biblical Cain does. Upon seeing him, Mohammed, one of the brother-murderers, thinks

Certainly this was not Oudin. Who was Oudin? Where had the name sprung from? The man he beheld on the road—who looked like the spirit of Oudin—was his half-brother…The murdered one was walking again on living smoke and feet, and behind a living face that trailed and resembled his. (Oudin 148, 164)

In his 1984 prefatory note to the Quartet, Harris notes that “Oudin’s struggle with Ram [his corrupt employer or, rather, master]…mirrors a ‘covenant’ or reversal of truth. It is a rehearsal in which ‘doubles’ appear to invoke the dead and the living
who revisit or re-play the deeds of the past in a new light of presences woven closely into the tapestry of past actions” (10-11). Harris’ commentary on his own work is often somewhat disingenuous, and stylistically as existential as his fiction; his frequent notes are additions to the works, rather than analyses. Precisely how the doubles are connected to each other in Oudin’s extremely convoluted narrative seems less important than the point Harris makes about the novella as rehearsal. Oudin and the others are rehearsing their roles in the grand play of postcolonial nationhood.

The cycle of birth and death in the novella arrives at no revelatory moment about Indo-Caribbean diasporic ethnic and national identity: Harris’ concern is more nature and less nation. But the cycle does point to the ongoing struggle of the migrant to belong to the land, and suggests hope: the persistence of the cycle indicates a will to succeed, and perhaps even support of the indigenization of Indo-Caribbean people by the land itself, which incorporates the production of human life into its own natural cycles. It is as though an essential Oudin has taken root; and when one shoot dies, another takes its place. Harris clearly references the Hindu cycle of rebirth into higher forms in order to attain nirvana. At the beginning of the text, when Oudin reawakens in noncorporeal form after his second death, he “knew it was still a dream, the dream of the heavenly cycle of the planting and reaping year he now stood within—as within a circle—for the first time in his life. He felt his heart stop where it had danced. It was the end of his labor of death” (123). Oudin has the chance to be reborn and achieve more than the nihilistic existence and end of the history-less indentured laborer.
These Indo-Caribbean people, barely one generation removed from indentured
servitude, are nominally either Hindu or Muslim, but the Muslims often reference
Hinduism and are depicted as believing in rebirth. The names of the brothers,
particularly Mohammed’s, indicate that their family is Muslim. Ram’s and Beti’s
names suggest they are Hindu. But they are all just Indians attempting to shift Indian
cultural practices onto a new environment:

Whether the imported population of the West Indies islands (and their
descendants) are aware of this or not, the Caribbean landscape is to
some degree always perceived in relationship to their earlier
homescapes; and second, [the imported population’s] relations with
the land are, to varying degrees, influenced by both the conditions of
their translocation and their lived circumstances in the new
locale...For colonized peoples, an English landscape—which most
Trinidadians of V.S. Naipaul’s generation had never seen—became
both normative and ideal, while the Caribbean was regarded as at best
exotic, and at worst, aberrant or second-rate. (Tiffin 200)

In contrast, Oudin’s project is the production of a worldview that is not dissonant
with its world. The Caribbean environment demands and produces its own set of
familial and gender mores that are neither wholly Indian nor African.

15 The Guyanese savannah with its nearby mountains and Amazonian jungle is neither an
English garden nor rural Bihar, from which the majority of Indian indentured laborers
migrated. There is in all three places the suggestion of agriculture and cultivation, keeping
Indians tied to a worldview that includes strategic consideration of the interaction of flora,
fauna, geological formations and weather. The Indo-Guyanese worldview has incorporated
In the 1950s and 1960s, on the eve of Guyanese independence from Britain, the people of British Guiana are becoming and becoming with no “have become” in sight: the “true self” sought by doubling and repetition is an ideal as yet undefined. This is the characteristic fragmentation of self in the New World begun with the first conquistadors and explorers, who

behold the images of themselves beholding. They are looking into the mirror of the sea, (the phrase is mimicked from Joseph Conrad), or the mirror of the plain, the desert, or the sky. We in the Americas are taught this as a succession of illuminations, lightning moments that must crystallize and irradiate memory if we are to believe in a chain of such illuminations known as history. (Walcott, “Mimicry” 8)

The migrant acquires another self at the moment of stepping foot on *terra incognita*, becoming a collection of selves that linear history does not acknowledge as continuous and continuously shifting. In Harris’ work, the Caribbean mirror double is aware of itself as both discrete and continuous, and therefore as a narrative self, rather than as a single instance in the linear chain of momentary flashes that Walcott describes as history.

This doubled, metamorphic narrative self is an alternative to the doomed Naipaulian Indo-Caribbean mimic man. The murder of the half-brother who will become Oudin, the event that sparks the doubling of individuals in the novella, is the

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its “conditions of translocation;” always there is a ship and a journey. It is the attempted reproduction of cultural mores inappropriate to a new and different context that is at issue.
result of a property inheritance dispute which sees full brothers Hassan, Kaiser, and Mohammed and their cousin Rajah disinherited by the dying paterfamilias in favor of the “imbecile” murder victim precisely because they have become mimic men. As Hassan says, “He believe we all really gone soft, driving car, and getting so Englishified in all our style…Year after year you throw away every tradition the old man prize” (Oudin 158). The “old man” was brought from India by his own father as a child. What it is that disturbs him about his sons they do not precisely know how to articulate, other than by saying that they have “gone soft,” but they do understand that his unfathomable looks are related to him despising them for being less than they ought to have been. When he is dying, Mohammed, the eldest, didactically tells his relatives the family story of emigration, exile, and loss, but concludes, “Why had he translated their little life into such grandiose terms? It baffled him” (161). The feeling of being bit players in a grand narrative of history is one that suffuses the literature and politics of the Indo-Caribbean, manifesting in a certain tendency towards self-depiction as perpetual victims. Mohamed’s story of exile is grand because it is both particular and representative of every Caribbean story except that of indigenous Amerindians. The death of the father represents a sundering with the Indian past that threatens to be final: when he dies and the brothers decide to kill their half-brother heir, they feel as though “[s]omething small and secure had been broken

16 Viranjini Munasinghe (2001) provides a thorough argument for an Indo-Caribbean political shift in Trinidad from Indians in a subordinate role in caste/European colonizer/Afro-Caribbean hierarchies of power to a wholly Indo-Caribbean community capable of self-determination.
beyond repair. It was a unity of faith and family…They had never dared to overthrow completely—until now—the secret participation and magic of ancient authority and kinship” (161). They have rejected a continuous lineage and are in danger of losing themselves forever, and their neighbors fear them not simply because they are murderers, but because they have committed a filial murder that threatens community identity and integrity (details of the murder are not revealed). At the local rum-shop, the brothers are shunned as “the acknowledged representatives of a dark deed in the region and the estate and the world” (171). Their punishment for fratricide is Cain’s: to wander the earth forever. As the Lord of Genesis forbade any man living to kill Cain and put him out of his misery, so do Oudin’s half-brothers die by no man’s hand—only by acts of God—and they are continually reborn.

In death, however, the brothers Hassan and Kaiser regain their connection with the past and with India, which requires a literal and excessively metaphorical ritual purification and sacrifice by fire. Felled by a stroke, “Hassan was the first of the brothers to die, at the zenith of life, after the plot and conspiracy that eliminated their imbecile half-brother…[he intuited] that he would not rest in his grave, unless his corpse was fired on a pyre, in the ancient way of his ancestors, before they had dreamed to cross the ocean to Demerara” (166). So the family obtains governmental permission for his Hindu cremation on a pyre, rather than an Islamic burial, despite the fact that they are Muslim. At the same time in the world (the 1950s), India, having passed through its parallel independence struggle from the British Empire, had just experienced the bloody 1947 post-Independence events of Partition, which
eventually relocated the majority of Muslim Indians to Pakistan and Bangladesh and Hindu Indians to India. Knowingly or not, Harris allays this religious divide in the New World, though unfortunately by aligning Hassan with the extreme but popular strain of the Hindu nationalist position *Hindutva*, which dictates that all peoples of the subcontinent are Hindu by ancestry and are therefore potential “reverts.”

The next brother to die is Kaiser, who dies when the aforementioned local rum-shop and site of community gathering burns down; “his charcoal death was the duplicate of Hassan’s” (180). Trapped in the burning building, “He collapsed. And yet it seemed to him that he had risen after all and was walking in blackening trousers and feet. He was light and floating in the sky of the mirror that had grown veined like a tree.” As Kaiser transitions into ghostly existence, his dead brother Hassan appears to him:

> Hassan had just got the obstinate idea in his burning head that he wanted to return to India to circulate his ashes on mother-soil. Kaiser protested. If he returned he would be looked upon as an outcast and an untouchable ghost...The ceremonies and sacraments he fitfully observed were not a patch on the real thing. (181)

Like Hassan, all real-life potential Hindu “reverts” must undergo purification. The usual prescription, a dip in the Ganges, is geographically unavailable to Hassan; relatedly, he is in even worse spiritual straits than the average Muslim Indian revert,

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17 *Hindutva* is the present-day term for the anti-Muslim Hindu nationalism promoted by, primarily, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in modern India. But this movement has its origins in and derives much of its rhetoric from a Hindu-centric narrative of Partition and its aftermath.
since all Indo-Caribbean ancestors lost their Hindu caste rights and their very Indianness when they crossed the *kala pani* (black water) of the Atlantic. Hassan’s ghost, then, desires the “real thing” that not even his cremation ritual achieved: a return to India itself. But Kaiser’s ghost rightly points out that his status in India would be that of an untouchable, even among ghosts. Their lot, therefore, is in the New World, which has already staked its claim on them, and it is there that they are reborn.

After their deaths, the brothers’ doubles appear to help and hinder Oudin, the double of the half-brother whom they killed. Much of *The Far Journey of Oudin* describes Oudin’s kidnapping of the sixteen-year-old Beti, daughter of Rajah and niece of Hassan and Kaiser, on behalf of his employer Ram, an old, corrupt Hindu cattle rancher who is only slightly less poverty-stricken than his neighbors. Ram’s desires are one axis around which the novella revolves. His first desire is wealth; his second is for Beti and the promise of an heir: “It had all started in the beginning of time with the dream of an heir in the heart of an old man like Ram, and in the unconscious womb of a child and daughter like Beti” (234). Beti’s father and then her uncle Mohammed prove reluctant to marry her to Ram, as a result of which Oudin

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18 It was a common belief among nineteenth century Hindu Indian emigrants to the Caribbean that they would lose their caste identities if they crossed the ocean. The sea was the realm of the immortals—the goddess Lakshmi, for example, rose from the “Milky Ocean” after it was churned for 1,000 years by the gods—and was also a nebulous kind of underworld, though antipathy to seafaring was more traditional taboo than religious doctrine. The belief that caste would be broken upon crossing the sea is also, in my view, partially a matter of religious defilement and ritual pollution (*juthaa*, when associated with others’ food) that resulted from interacting with strangers of unknown origin and caste aboard ship and in foreign lands. The majority of Indian migrants to the New World were poor rural villagers of lower castes; the opportunity to earn money, coupled with the fantasy of returning to India wealthy, was enough of a reason to take the religious risk.
is made to kidnap her; on the archetypal journey away from her home and through the geographical entirety of the Guianese landscape, Beti and Oudin enter a pact wherein he takes her as his wife. Hassan appears as a fisherman who helps them escape the wrath of Ram and Mohammed, and he clearly identifies himself to Oudin as another Hassan:

“...I is one of the tribe of fishermen. Me boat always tie up where the shadow of Hassan mound fall in the water. You know who is me now?”...It was a round agitated face, Oudin observed, the duplicate pool of some spectacle of treachery and dissolution and disaster like when water outs fire, and then waits for the spirit-fire to return again and baptize every ripple. (209)

In his previous incarnation, the roundness of Hassan’s face is compared to that of a serene Brahmin priest, so it is certainly him. Having been burnt on a pyre, his ashes buried near and cooled by a nameless Guianese river, which empties into the Atlantic, and (in theory) eventually reach the Ganges and India, he is still tied to the New World in a state of purgatory. As a result of his sins, he will continue to appear and reappear until a final fire of cleansing that may never happen. For now, he works his way up the karmic ladder by helping the one he had murdered. Kaiser, who died in the rum-shop blaze, reappears as a “negro woodcutter” who temporarily imprisons Oudin and Beti during their flight. He looks like the first Kaiser and is even named Kaiser, but his face has literally been burnt black in the fire in which he died. Upon seeing him, Mohammed, his still-living eldest brother, thinks “[n]o one knew where
this black, artificial beggar had got that relative name from…Names were so funny and contrary to all expectations. There was nothing in a name, and there was everything, of all mankind, as well” (231). The similarity of the decidedly non-Muslim name “Kaiser” to “Caesar” and the German “Kaiser” is intentional, as Harris has the character extraneously discuss his name, and the narrator notes that recent world events included the World War II development of the atomic bomb, which may or may not have affected this Caribbean world of dreams (182). This Kaiser, though, is ironically far more follower (of his brother Mohammed) than leader. Perhaps he is rather more an embodiment of kaise, the usual transliteration of the Hindi word that asks the question “how?” How, really, did rural Indian villagers find themselves in this strange land and how are they to live there?

Brother Mohammed, in his turn, is killed too, but his death is not associated with fire. He is eventually gored to death by that embodiment of Hinduism, the sacred bull: “Mohammed turned to see where the collision had occurred that split his skull. He stumbled and fell over the hoof of a falling tree, as over his own body of necessity and self-gratification. He had turned into an animal with a horned bullet in a blind eye” (234). He is the bull that kills him, and as such has gored out his own eye. He is an embodiment of traditional Indian religion and patriarchy, of a dead and stubbornly non-local worldview, and has therefore killed himself. He is the only brother who has no double—but there is as yet an unborn child, fathered by Oudin but destined to be heir to Ram, whose identity is yet to be determined. The potential exists for Mohammed to be reborn in this child.
The crux of the matter for the Indo-Caribbean is who that child will be. Will the future be Oudin again, Mohammed the murderer, or a new being entirely? Mohammed does not appear destined to be reborn. Just before his death, “Mohammed recalled Ram telling him that a grown man should never lean on ghosts” (234). The unborn child has been fathered by Oudin, a different kind of ghost than Hassan or Kaiser, a ghost with a future. For Mohammed, Oudin bring a curse...time itself change since he come. Is like if I starting to grow conscious after a long time, that time itself is a forerunner to something. But Ah learning me lesson so late, is like a curse...Two, three, four, face looking at me. Every face so different. I don’t know which is private, which is public, which is past, which is future. And yet all is one understand me? (198)

Oudin is the one whose refusal of linear existence acknowledges an Indian past while preparing for a New World future, a double feat that could not be accomplished by his half-brothers, murderers who vacillate between “Englishified” mimicry and a static memory of India. They are not metamorphic and cannot become, and so are destroyed by Oudin. The brothers are not unaware of the threat to themselves; Oudin’s wife Beti recalls that before their marriage, the first time Oudin appeared at their settlement: “He was the man who had rapped on their door, in the savannahs,  

19 In this way the brothers experience what W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) describes as “double consciousness,” being two people in the same body and having the ability to see themselves through the eyes of the oppressor or colonizer. But overall, doubling in Harris’ novel is not the same as double consciousness, as the characters in the novel repeat their existences sequentially, and do not particularly reflect on the actions of their previous selves.
seeking employment, shortly before her father died. He had looked like a bundle of
death then—as wild and terrible as he looked now—and her father had thrown him
out, swearing he wanted none of him” (146). Beti herself believes that “she had
never known him in any permanent sense, save only in the knowledge that he eluded
her because of her abysmal ignorance” (165).

In *Oudin*, Beti is described as “the representation of a slave despite her secret
longing and notion to be free…She had the refined emaciated face of an East Indian
and Guyanese woman that looked older than it was, bearing the stamp of a well-
known ornament” (125). She is either wearing a *bindi* (dot) or *tilak* (longer mark,
*tika* in Guyana), the “third eye” Hindu mark on the forehead; or a *nakphul*, the classic
Indian nose pin or ring discarded by Indo-Caribbean women in about two
generations. Beti, whose grandfather came from India, is the last generation to wear
it. The illiterate Beti’s main role in the novella is to perform the act of swallowing
the piece of paper on which Oudin had contractually promised his unborn child to
Ram, and then, relatedly, to birth the future. She “eats the contract between Oudin
and Ram and saves the inheritance for her unborn child,” seemingly acknowledging
that “history is the body of the other that must be swallowed” and becoming “Kali,
the Goddess of Death, [who] devours all, including time itself, thus renewing her
promise of fulfillment and regeneration” (Stephanides 39). Beti ingests history,
which becomes nutrition for her unborn child. As this is history in writing, however,
it is also a speech act that Beti commits. She is the one through whom the
omnipresent issue of the loss of ancestral language in the Caribbean is addressed:
She had swallowed it the night and morning of Oudin’s death—in a wave and spasm and panic—for any kind of mysterious paper and appearance was to be swallowed, she knew, and given a chance to be digested. It was the oldest crumb of fear and habit binding the illiterate world of reflection around her...She extracted it from his [dead] fingers, ate it and swallowed it before Ram arrived as she knew he would. Whatever unholy bargain had been consummated she had shattered in her breast. (Oudin 135-136)

There was a single piece of paper possessed by illiterate Indian indentured laborers to the Caribbean and their near descendants: the “blue paper,” their indentureship papers, handwritten by nameless British bureaucrats of the Empire and containing the only written documentation of their past. This documentation included names of parents, village, and region in India from which they had come; the name of the ship on which they had come to the New World; dates and period of indentureship; and the name of the Guianese sugar plantation to which they were allocated as labor. The majority of these papers, which functioned as totems rather than records of for people who could not read (until the advent of immigration “papers” to the United States in the twentieth century, all official papers in Caribbean Anglophone creoles are singular, a paper), were lost to history. Still, Beti understands that to change the world, one must consume that which attempts to make it history and memory: the written document. She eats the contract that gives her child to the representative of a traditional past, Ram, and also symbolically eats the paper of colonialization. Beti’s
child’s destiny involves new language too. Mohammed blames his father for the loss of Hindi: “But is who fault if the only language we got is a breaking-up or a making-up language?” (155). But Beti’s illiteracy in the old language also promises literacy in the new.

Unlike Beti, Oudin falls short of being the harbinger of the future. His promise to give his child to Ram is the cause of his mysterious second death. Abraham is not actually permitted to sacrifice Ishmael (in the Qur’an; Isaac, in the Bible). Oudin unfortunately does sign the child away, and that is the end of him. His second demise is foreshadowed when he initially kidnaps Beti and they are on the run:

Oudin looked dead with fatigue. Beti’s heart beat faster than ever. She told herself it was not Oudin’s expression that startled her. It was the thought of the grave out of which they had both come, a grave that left its vision of dead empires in him…What she had to do was to make her kind of secret mark on him—the obvious mark an illiterate person must make in lieu of a signature and a name. With her toes she drew in the sand an incomprehensible fertile figure within a hollow cage at Oudin’s feet. It was a way of saying she was equal to him after all. (217, 218)

The future is with Beti, with the woman (Harris does not in the least shy away from this old trope), and not, in particular, with the Mohammed family or with old Ram, who imagines himself arbiter of the Indo-Caribbean future. Ram believes himself
reliant on Oudin to work for him and father his heir: “Oudin was a dream, a fantasy and an obedient servant who had come to him at last across an incredible divide of time and reality...He had deceived the living. How would he deceive the dead?...What further elaborate deception could he practise to conjure into life an heir to the devil? His hope rested on Oudin” (141, 236). He understands that it is Beti who is his real enemy, though she appears powerless. Oudin ends with Ram reflecting that

Beti was another name for “daughter,” the daughter of a race that was being fashioned anew. He must do everything to repair the damage he had unwittingly set in motion that she was a free woman at last...Ram felt the sudden loss and tension of the visionary umbilical cord, the dreadful twine of shattering encirclement, stretching from far away out of a faint servant in the sun. (238)

Harris leaves the Indo-Caribbean with a number of possible futures. The only certainty is what seems to be cyclical repetition but may perhaps be more aptly described as a spiraling outward of parallel concentric whorls that repeat ad infinitum until they encompass all lands. And, characteristic of most of Harris’ work, the land itself directs the trajectory of the human spiral. Harris reflects that

[the very fixed stages—upon which we build our cities—are sentient and alive...the life of the earth is not fixed; it is not a description of fixed mountains or valleys divorced from the characters that move on it. The life of the earth needs to be seen in fiction as sensitively woven

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The Caribbean landscape is crucial to the identity of its inhabitants in *Oudin*. Oudin and Beti traverse the entirety of the Guianese rural continental landscape: from savannahs in view of the mountains through rivers to swamp and jungle. The land watches them and waits:

Oudin looked wildly and foolishly around, as if he had been found out for the “double” he was, the “murdered heir,” testing him now, mocking him now, as he held Beti close...Everywhere they were accompanied by the breathless, watching stillness, and venomous confinement, and it was all Oudin could do not to strangle the fantasy of a woman with him (*Oudin* 213-214).

Their Indo-Caribbean farming community lives on the savannah grasslands of the interior, bordered by a fecund, overgrown coconut plantation. The savannahs are “a white and blazing fire, circulating like a breathless sultry blast of unchanging wind across the dry earth and the brown cropped fields. One felt the sun burning on one’s skin, uninterruptedly, relentlessly, as though it contained a violent storm and climax” (188). The environment seems to have a kind of sentience:
The air had gone still, one of those incredible intervals well known to experienced bushmen and travellers, when the mosquitoes fly into nowhere and nothingness, and the long wings of palms, and the clustering leaves of creeper and tree hang still. One listens in vain, watching the phantom of the bush coming alive in its unearthly detachment, and in its muse of uttermost motionlessness. There is a somber conspiracy in every line and twig, a power so droopingly conscious of itself…The concert is too perfect to be other than consciousness. But a consciousness clothed with gloom and impending horror and despair. (212)

The horror is the memory of conquest and death of the indigenous; and the Guyanese jungle is after all the site of the mythical El Dorado. Helen Tiffin (2005) describes “landscape” as “a form of interaction between people and their place, in large part a symbolic order expressed through representation” (199). This is a seemingly unproblematic relationship for the autochthonous, whose language and cognition are in harmony with their environment. But for the displaced,

for the exile or migrant, “landscape” consists in the formation or (re)formation of connections with the adopted place…And for colonized peoples who are also ancestrally migrant, any coming to terms with the “new” landscape frequently involves a journey back through the depictions of that land by the imperium whose perceptions
and representations of it exert a powerful hegemonic influence on the colonized. (199)

The journey undertaken by Oudin and Beti is different. It is self-determined and independent of the imperial gaze. For the colonizer, the colony is dangerous. For them, it is not. What is dangerous is not live nature, but the static, dead constructions of Man: after dawn, Oudin’s “hut emerged suddenly, ordinary and dead as day. The vague eternity and outline vanished. There was no mystery in the poverty of its naked appearance—a few planks nailed together and roofed by bald aluminum” (Oudin 124). Even Mohammed’s motives for killing his half-brother involve an unacceptable, colonialist attempt to tame the land by building a house with his ill-gotten inheritance: post-Independence, he surmises, “[a] new building and rehabilitation programme would have been launched on the sugar plantations of Demerara, and a lot of old-fashioned overseers’ frames would be going dirt-cheap then for anyone who saw himself becoming a new kind of ruler” (150). But even while he imagines himself in a big house like the former English overseers, he understands that

in his image of time the family lived in the same illusion of dark space they had always occupied and rented. They had the same room or rooms, as in the cottage where they were in the present, while the remainder of the dreaming mansion of the future was bare and unlived in, and unoccupied as ever, and altogether too big, he knew. (150)
Ram’s inability to metamorphose, to become, is the same as Mohammed’s. Ten years after the marriage of Oudin and Beti, Ram recalls their wedding procession:

It was the year of the great flood, surpassing the previous one of his childhood recollection, and he recalled it as if what he had seen then was the dream and reflection of misery, and what he saw now was the launching and freedom of a release in time. And still he could not yet accept the evolution and change in appearance… (139)

Mohammed and Ram are mimic men whose fear of change, fear of the future, fear of the land, and fear of death have made them willing to live the colonial lie into the postcolonial future.

III. Mala the Mimic: Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*

As illustrated by this chapter’s epigraph, and in contrast to Naipaul, Walcott sees mimicry in the colony and postcolony as potentially productive, or at least necessary. Walcott’s ongoing literary contentions and long rivalry with Naipaul—the two are the Caribbean’s only living Nobel literary laureates—on the subject of mimicry and the production of identity, are direct and bitter:

To mimic, one needs a mirror, and, if I understand Mr. Naipaul correctly, our pantomime is conducted before a projection of ourselves which in its smallest gestures is based on metropolitan references. No gesture, according to this philosophy, is authentic, every sentence is a quotation, every movement either ambitious or pathetic, and because it
is mimicry, uncreative…The moment then, that a writer in the Caribbean, an American man, puts down a word—not only the first writer whoever he was, in Naipaul's view, but every writer since—at that moment he is a mimic, a mirror man, he is the ape beholding himself. (6, 8)

The authenticity or “wholeness” of Caribbean identities is the bitterest, most contentious question in Naipaul’s work. His generally harsh indictment of the hopelessly lost and confused Indo-Caribbean postcolonial subject does not reflect the potentials expressed in the work of other Caribbean writers. But his perspective is at least partially a generational one, and one from which the man himself, though not his work, has retreated in recent years.20 My aim here is not to provide a simple refutation of Naipaul’s Indo-Caribbean subject, but rather to argue that Indo-Caribbean subjectivity is not a static, doomed historical construct, and to illustrate its adaptive becoming through reconstructions of gender and sexuality.

Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), set in the ironically named town of Paradise on the mythical Caribbean island of Lantanacamara, and modeled after 1960s Trinidad in transition between colonial and postcolonial statehood, is a mimetic but life-affirming reaction to racism, patriarchy, and familial violence—all forms of abuse that negate the self—by an Indo-Caribbean woman, Mala Ramchandin. Mala reacts to rape by her father and abandonment by her mother, her

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20 Numerous humorous anecdotes to this effect, including an account of his conciliatory visit to Trinidad after winning the Nobel Prize, are to be found in Naipaul’s recent “authorized” biography by Patrick French (2009).
lover, and society by refusing human contact and speech. Instead, she establishes rapport with her garden flora and fauna through mimicry of their modes of communication and even their physicality. Her “companions were the garden’s birds, insects, snails and reptiles. She and they and the abundant foliage gossiped among themselves. She listened intently...When it came time for one creature to succumb to another, she retreated. Flora and fauna left her to her own devices and in return she left them to theirs” (Mootoo 127). Like *Oudin*, *Cereus* is set in Achille Mbembe’s (2001) “wild nature” of the colony, but there is a difference between literary representations of Caribbean island and continent (and Guyana is of the British Caribbean, despite its geographic position on the continent of South America):

> Writers from Caribbean island communities—in contrast, for example, to mainland Guyanese writers such as Wilson Harris—refer very little, if at all, to remnant “wilder” landscapes. Instead, the inescapable encounter between English and Caribbean versions of the West Indian environment occurs more often within the liminal zone of the garden, in areas of plantation and over flowers and floral symbology. (Tiffin 201)

The novel is characterized by “a shared queerness” that describes Mala’s relationship with nearly every iteration of life in her garden (48). In her reading of the novel as a queer Indian diasporic text that redefines the idea of “home,” Gayatri Gopinath notes that
Mala, for instance, is explicitly named as queer in the novel in the sense that she extricates herself from the terms of heterosexual domesticity. Queerness in *Cereus* thus extends to all those bodies disavowed by colonial and national constructions of home: bodies marked by rape and incest; biologically male bodies that are improperly feminine…and biologically “female” bodies that are improperly masculine... (183)

“Queer” as deployed in Mootoo’s novel describes the metamorph who falls outside of the bounds of Caribbean social normativity. As such, “queers” include the majority of the novel’s characters: Mala, the impurely Indian victim of incest; her Indian Christian mother Sarah, who runs off with the white missionary woman Lavinia Thoroughly; the male-to-female transgender transvestite Tyler, Mala’s eventual nursemaid and nominal narrator of the novel; and Otoh, Tyler’s female-to-male eventual lover and child of Mala’s childhood crush Ambrose. The only clear non-queers are biological males who embody patriarchy in different ways: Ambrose, who is a coward, and most importantly, Chandin Ramchandin, Mala’s father and abusive tormentor.

The plot of this dense novel may be summed up as follows: Indo-Lantanacamerans (Trinidadians) are Christianized by a white missionary family, the Thoroughlys. Young Indian man Chandin Ramchandin, mimic man extraordinaire, aspires not just to be like the family, but to become part of it, by marrying the daughter, Lavinia. Reverend Thoroughly rejects Chandin and pushes him to marry
the Indian Christian Sarah. In a queer, cruel twist, after birthing daughters Mala
(known in childhood as Pohpoh) and the younger Asha, Sarah runs off with Lavinia.
They attempt to take the children with them, but fail; the embittered Chandin almost
immediately begins to rape young Mala and force her to assume household duties.21
The family withdraws from the world, though Mala finds friendship and then sexual
agency in the young outsider Ambrose. However, upon discovering the true horror of
the incestuous relationship, Ambrose flees. Mala then withdraws entirely from the
world, but in the process finds the power to assault and imprison her father in the
house and presumably starve him to death. Nature reclaims her yard and house. Her
“crime” and living situation are only discovered when her house burns down years
later, prompting her relocation to the nursing home where she meets the sympathetic
Tyler and the now aged Ambrose reappears. Sarah’s and Asha’s locations remain
unknown.

Unlike Oudin, the narrative of Mootoo’s novel is rather more linear than not.
But also unlike Oudin, Cereus’ internal logic and story are not linear. This is the
distinction between mimicry and doubling, and mimicry is the primary instance of
metamorphosis in Cereus. A forgetting of history and a return to timelessness is
often deemed crucial to the project of imagining the postcolonial. Says Walcott,

21 Anita Mannur (2010) offers a fascinating analysis of cooking and food in the novel,
characterizing Mala’s defiance of her father as “cooking back”: “‘Cooking back’ is one of the
only weapons in Mala’s arsenal within a home more like a battlefield, almost always
shrouded with the veil of violence…She first knocks him out using a weapon from her
kitchen, a meat cleaver. But the real poetic justice of her action comes from the fact that she
locks Chandin in a room and allows him to slowly die of starvation. Her recuperation of her
body and self, then, is effected through her reappropriation of the same tools and space that
marked her domestic indentureship in the Ramachandin household” (74-77).
“how necessary is it for us to mimic the supreme good, the perfect annihilation of present, past, and future since God is without them, so that a man who has achieved that spiritual mimicry immediately annihilates all sense of time” (11). Walcott’s vision of the postcolonial is Adamic, and Mala’s garden is an Eden. For Mala, human speech and linear time are inextricable, and both must necessarily be abandoned together when humanity fails her. Her human mode of speech, an Anglophone Creole, is temporal; language dictates that life progresses from past to present to future; but she herself is emotionally frozen in the childhood moment of her mother’s leave-taking, and the almost immediate abuse by her father and abandonment by her only friend-turned-lover. With the assistance of the natural world, she has developed her own methods of ensuring that time moves cyclically instead of linearly:

Every few days, a smell of decay permeated the house. It was the smell of time itself passing but lest she was overcome by it, Mala brewed an odour of her own design. She collected and boiled six empty [periwinkle snail] shells at a time. After an hour, the shells lost their pink and yellow. The house would fill with the aroma of a long-simmering ocean into which worm-rich, root-matted earthiness was constantly being poured and stirred. The aroma obliterated, reclaimed and gave the impression of reversing decay. (Mootoo 115)

The smell of animal and plant rot erases human decay and the passage of time even in her own body. There are two concurrent Malas in the novel: the adult, “present” body, and the child Pohpoh (Mala’s childhood nickname), with whom the
adult Mala converses and whom she “sees” as quite real. The child Pohpoh is frozen at the age of eleven when her mother deserted her and her sister, and her father began to rape her. In her locked house and garden, present and past coexist together, and the future is now. Commensurately, Mootoo’s narrative itself also slips back and forth in time. The adult Mala treats her environment as atemporal: “She did not ascribe activities to specific times. When doziness pawed at her, she responded regardless of the time of day or night” (127). As a victim of trauma, she experiences compulsion in a non-linear way. There is only one event to which Mala assigns temporal significance: the highly anticipated, once-a-year night blooming of her cereus plants. The stench of this cactus is heady and overpowering and at once sweet and foul, and induces in her a sort of euphoria and corresponding ability, in fragments, to remember her past life. This annual event is a seasonal, cyclical marker of time. Isabel Hoving’s (2005) examination of representations of nature in the novel revolve around this titular cereus as a border-crosser and a sexual hermaphrodite, making it a metaphor for the sum of Cereus’ Caribbean becomings. Hoving notes that

The cereus, like all cactus plants, is a hermaphrodite; it can boast of both a stamen and an ovary, parts usually designated as respectively male and female. In the novel, it also becomes the central token of border-crossing…In this way, the cereus marks and mediates many transgressive relations, linking people and spaces that are not considered naturally related…Apart from its great ambiguity (as both
excessively repulsive and delightful), the cereus itself is not a hybrid plant. Not a hybrid or an ‘alien’ border-croesser itself, as it is native to the West Indies, the cereus still functions as the inspiration for the novel’s many border-crossers. In Piercean semiotic terms: the cereus is not an icon of the hybrid, but it is an index of border-crossing (as it is all but touching the evidence of that transgression—the father’s corpse). As an ambiguous night flower, it is a symbol of the hidden and the transgressive. The fact that the cereus is indigenous to this part of the world suggests that ambiguousness is at the heart of the Caribbean. (162-163)

This analysis of the significance of the flower begins to move the conversation away from hybridity. The cereus is an indigenous hermaphrodite, and while not a geographic border-croesser itself, it stands at the Caribbean crossroads, mediating the metamorphic, ongoing relationships of migrant people and their cultural concepts. Hoving’s reading of the cereus emphasizes the importance of the natural environment on the novel. To this I add Mala’s historical and cultural specificity as an Indo-Caribbean woman. In what way is the cereus an index of Indo-Caribbean border crossing? Hoving deems Mala simply Caribbean. But the type of Caribbean patriarchy to which Mala falls victim gives specific homage to Naipaul’s vision of the Indo-Trinidadian mimic man. Chandin is the embodiment of the typical emasculated Indo-Caribbean male subject who wreaks vengeance not upon his colonizers, but on the bodies of Indo-Caribbean women, the only people below him in the Caribbean
social hierarchy. In the racialized hierarchy of colonial Trinidad, whites were first; mixed-race “creoles” second; blacks third; Indians fourth; and the women of each group were below the men. Nowadays, the black-creole is a continuum that defines the postcolonial Trinidadian citizen, but the place of Indo-Trinidadians in the nation-state is still uncertain.

Mala’s subsuming of her garden flora and fauna puts her close to affective impulses. Most of the time she just is, and that is enough. She exists as part of and in harmony with nature. Mala lives mostly outside, and after killing her father, “never lit a lantern in that house again. Nor did she, since that day, pass a night inside its walls” (Mootoo 230). Her abandonment of her humanity is defined by her gradual withdrawal from language:

In the phase just before Mala stopped using words, lexically shaped thoughts would sprawl across her mind, fractured here and there. The cracks would be filled with images. Soon the inverse happened. A sentence would be constructed primarily of images punctuated by only one or two verbalizations: a noun tentatively uttered in recognition, a descriptive word confirming a feeling or observation. A flock of seagulls squawking overhead might elicit a single word, *pretty*. That verbalization, she came to understand, was not the feeling itself but a name given to the feeling: *pretty*, an unnecessary translation of the delight she experienced seeing the soaring birds. Eventually Mala all but rid herself of words...Every muscle of her body swelled, tingled,
cringed or went numb in response to her surroundings—every fibre was sensitized in a way that words were unable to match or enhance....Many of her sounds were natural expansions and contractions of her body. (126-127)

Here Mala appears to transcend the semiotic gap between signifier and signified, and is able to bodily express the fullness of the signified. She is able to “speak” to the birds and snails in her version of their languages: she twitters to the former and leaves scent trails from the latter to mark place. The rhizomatic process of extending individual subjectivity to “be-with” the world (including, here, its other animate beings) is:

- not about signification, but rather the opposite: it is about the transcendence of the linguistic signifier. What it asserts is the potency of expression. Expression is about the non-linguistically coded affirmation of an affectivity whose degree, speed, extension and intensity can only be measured materially, pragmatically, case by case.

(Braidotti 119)

Mala engages in mimicry of the natural world that is a nondestructive, reversible merging. Destructiveness, in the form of her rape and the violent murder of her father, is relegated to the human-dominant world. Benjamin calls language “the highest application of the mimetic faculty: a medium into which the earlier perceptive capabilities for recognizing the similar had entered without residue, so that it is now language which represents the medium in which objects meet and enter into
relationship with each other” (68). Language is high mimicry preceded by perception of relation, but it is ultimately a medium. Mala is essentially reverting to a state in which the medium is not necessary, and simple mimicry (wherein “do as I do” produces creaturely harmony) is communicative. This is not quite the same as Bhabha’s definition of mimicry, as it does not involve distance. Mala’s denial of communication with other human beings is not pathological in that it is what she desires, as she acts with agency for the first time in her life. Benjamin suggests that what language attempts to express is that objects relate to each other “in their essences, in their most volatile and delicate substances, even in their aromata” (68). Smell is a language too. It is an avenue of sensory communication for Mala. Her nurse Tyler reports: “She did not have the sweet yet sour smell I had come to expect whenever close to an old person. Instead, an aroma resembling rich vegetable compost escaped from under the sheet” (Mootoo 11). That she smells of plant rot rather than human bodily degradation is indicative of her embrace of seasonal natural cycles: “The scent of decay was not offensive to her. It was the aroma of life refusing to end. It was the aroma of transformation. Such odour was proof that nothing truly ended, and she revelled in it as much as she did the fragrance of cereus blossoms along the back wall of the house” (128). Unlike her abusive father, this natural world of flora and fauna does not break its own rules. Death and decay represent life, not the annihilating finality of the death drive. There is no evidence that she desires self-annihilation; the “aroma of life refusing to end” and the “aroma of transformation” are what she seeks.
Roger Caillois (1935) describes mimicry in nature as suicidal “legendary psychasthenia,” succumbing to the “lure of space” and “depersonalization by assimilation into the environment” (99-100). Mimicry is not a “defense mechanism,” but rather “a disorder of spatial perception” (102). Caillois sees one creature’s mimicry of another purely in terms of a death drive, where

alongside the instinct of self-preservation that somehow attracts beings to life, there proves to be a very widespread *instinct d’abandon*

attracting them toward a kind of diminished existence; in its most extreme state, this would lack any degree of consciousness or feeling at all. (102)

Mimicry, according to Caillois, results in the dissociation of body and mind, where “the subject crosses the boundary of his own skin and stands outside of his senses...He feels that he is turning into space itself—*dark space into which things cannot be put*” (100). Devolution is, for Caillois, easier than evolution; a thermodynamically unstable, chaotic universe carries with it the tendency for “life [to] withdraw...to a lesser state” (101). This supposes that there is a hierarchy of life, a notion to which neither Mala nor Mootoo appears to subscribe. If mimicry is neither Caillois’ death drive nor Bhabha’s failed partial presence, it is also not simply a defensive mechanism. In this instance, it is the creative, metamorphic choice, the choice of becoming.

Mala’s linguistic journey into the bodily expression of meaning and ability, in essence, to creolize communication between living beings is also not regressive.
Animality and inhumanity for her are not negative states. She is, for the first time in her life, happy on her own terms. Her rejection of humanity is really the rejection of the definition of human as the other of the animal and plant, and a recreating of her own subject position. Too, her journey parallels the crisis of postcolonial identity, and does indeed span that same time between British colonial rule and the independence of Lantanacamara. The colonial “mimic (wo)man” is not here a figure of stasis caught in Naipaul’s endless cycle of aping and false imitation of an authoritarian outside other, as evidenced by Mala’s innovations in the fraught realms of postcolonial language. Mala’s is an ecological positioning with the land, that all-important whirling triangulation of Caribbean ocean and island and continent that is more than the geographic sum of its parts. Her garden is a microcosm of the wild colony itself, what Achille Mbembe describes as “a space of fatigue, danger, and exhaustion for the colonizer,” where he is beset by dysentery, death and the ceaseless “vertigo” and “whirl” of obscene, excessive plants and animals, including the gorillas, “hybrid animals par excellence—half human, half-beast” (184). In the colony, the colonized subject is nothing but an appearance and a body, “confine[d] in a name”; it is only “at the point where the thingness and its nothingness meet that the native’s identity lies” (186, 187). The fact that normal physical rules are subject to change in

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22 Antonio Benítez-Rojo calls the Caribbean the “repeating [Atlantic] island...unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth” and “the last of the great meta-archipelagos,” as the Caribbean has “neither a boundary nor a center” (3 and 4). The Caribbean meta-archipelago includes all of the Americas, connected by the Antillean “island bridge” which “gives the entire area, including its continental foci, the character of an archipelago, that is, a discontinuous conjunction [of] unstable condensations, turbulences, whirlpools...sunken galleons...uncertain voyages of signification...Chaos” (2).
the colony is a continual source of fear for the colonizer. Destabilized colonial bodies undermine the colonial order. But this garden-colony poses no danger to Mala. It is her own postcolonial space, and the colonizers are long since dead or disappeared. Call it a “becoming-autochthonous,” a coming from the soil itself; it is exactly what Walcott hopes for when he identifies repetitive imitation as the path of return to a more fundamental state for the purposes of postcolonial subject creation: “What surrounds all of us as mimic men is that gratitude which acknowledges those achievements as creation... Where have cultures originated? By the force of natural surroundings” (“Mimicry” 11-12). It is reductive to ascribe cultural authenticity solely to natural surroundings; but environment is part of the story. Mala is here creating her own culture. This is quite a different kind of colonizing mimicry from that described by Bhabha, where “mimicry repeats rather than re-presents” (125). Mala does in fact re-present, not repeat, through mimicry. Walcott says that when language and communication are merely condemned as mimicry, then the condition is hopeless and men are no more than jackdaws, parrots, myna birds, apes. The idea of the American as ape is heartening, however, for in the imitation of apes there is something more ancient than the first human effort....there is no memory or history of the moment when man stopped imitating the ape, his ancestor, and became human. Therefore, everything is mere repetition. (“Mimicry” 7)
Walcott, at least here, is a Cartesian and an anthropocentrist. I reject the notion that all fauna other than Man is capable only of imitation. But the important point that Walcott offers is simply that mimicry is not a dead end, and that it is communicative.

Rather than linguistic and physical mimicry and corresponding atemporality, readers of *Cereus Blooms at Night* tend to focus on the incestuous relationship and the seemingly permanent destruction of Mala’s potential to live a “full” adult life. Most important to critics like Brinda Mehta (2004) is to redeem her from her position as the victim who is too soiled to be loved, the type of de-virginized fallen Indian woman for whom “It seemed a waste to the townspeople that such a catch would be so preoccupied with a woman whose father had obviously mistaken her for his wife, and whose mother had obviously mistaken another woman for her husband” (109). The position of the townspeople, of course, is one of non-intervention complimented by unceasing gossip. The scandal of her mother leaving her father for a woman—and a missionary white woman at that—is still alive even in Mala’s old age. The novel seems to suggest that this ultimate colonial emasculation of her father in the last days of British rule is what causes his cruelty towards his daughters; that is his excuse, and the bitter outcome of colonization in which every single colonial subject is a victim. As a result of a desire to hold the father at least somewhat responsible for his actions, Mehta’s analysis of Mala’s loss of time and language becomes reductive: “Mala’s transformation into an apparent madwoman at the end of the novel is, in fact, a violent indictment of social atrocities that are leveled against women. Her body becomes a visible signifier of these monstrosities in the form of its altered physical
appearance and tenacity of expression” (208). In Mehta’s reading there is no redemptive value in communicating with flora and fauna or in any kind of metamorphic becoming that is not a socially accepted Indo-Caribbean woman. It is only at the end of the novel, with outside help from the sympathetic nurse Tyler (whom Mala, by virtue of her rejection of social strictures, assists in coming to terms with his homosexuality and transvestism), and from her cowardly returned lover Ambrose who had abandoned her years before after he discovering the incest, that she “recovers herself in her apparent madness when she is finally able to vent her innermost emotions and thoughts in an unconventional manner” (208). Her “recovery,” however, is not precipitated by simple cathartic venting, nor is it a recovery of humanity. Though she is forcibly taken to a mental hospital after the body of her father is discovered, she nevertheless remains in the human world on her own terms. At the hospital, says Tyler, “[d]ays passed with her calling out, only loud enough for me to hear, perfect imitations of all the species of birds that congregated in the garden and dotted the tropical Lantanacamaran sky. I would catch her watching me through the side of her eyes, as she did bird, cricket and frog calls as though she meant to entertain me” (Mootoo 24). On the whole, Mala continues to choose communication without speaking.

Mala’s rejection of human language is not irreversible, nor must others medically induce it. The first words she speaks aloud in years, haunted by memories brought on by the rainy season, slip out of her mouth in her garden some time before she is taken to the hospital. The words are a reiteration of her younger self’s begging
her mother not to leave her: “oh God, doh leave me, I beggin you. Take me with you” (133). This results in her deliberate severe burning of her tongue with raw pepper. The intense pain temporarily rekindles some emotion and reminds her that she is still alive as a being separate from the rest of the world: “Her flesh had come undone. But every tingling blister and eruption in her mouth and lips was a welcome sign that she had survived. She was alive” (134). That is, the adult Mala is alive, and separate from Pohpoh; when the police finally come to investigate the house, Mala tells Pohpoh to run, and Pohpoh eventually flies away from the island (178, 186).

This act of self-salvation is a familiar one in Caribbean history and in its oral and written literature: it is the freedom of the Flying African, the slave whom only magic and wings can return home. Mala/Pohpoh, as an Indo-Caribbean woman, thus establishes solidarity with the Afro-Caribbean. It is a mythical solidarity that joins the Indo- and Afro-Caribbean in a oceanic story of loss, bondage, and freedom.

In the end, Mala manages to strike a balance between being in the world and being of the world. She is brought up on charges of killing her father and on suspicion of burning down her house when the police attempt to investigate (it is unclear whether this is true), and is declared both mad and innocent. But

For almost a week, however, until a day or so after the presiding judge had reached his decision, the house and the trees and shrubs and every bit of live and dead matter that had thrived on the Hill Side property remained floating through the town in an irritating dust, suspended in a
thick, black cloud above the town and blocking out the light of the sun.

(188)

It is as though the island itself has condemned all the manifestations of coloniality and postcoloniality that resulted in Mala’s abuse. Whether these postcolonials who never intervened to help her deserve the reemergence of the light of the sun is debatable. But for Mala, mimicry has resulted in the establishment of an unbreakable ontological link between the land itself and her subject position, and she is neither dead nor displeased. Warner says that

the metamorphic creatures who issue from you, or whom you project or somehow generate, may be unruly, unbidden, disobedient selves inside you whom you do not know, and cannot keep in check…at the same times as the stories express the fear of loss of one’s self, they entertain the possibility of metamorphosis and combinations of persons into one. (164, 165)

Mala becomes possessed of a magical, material solidarity with her environment to which all postcolonials should aspire. It is not that she has power over nature; rather, nature manifests in affiliation with her. The mimic man may be a failure, but the mimic woman has potential. Mala and Oudin’s Beti both represent a metamorphic, geographic persistence that incorporates hope and a will to life by enlisting the Caribbean itself.
CHAPTER 2

_Jahaji Bahen_ Becomings: From Ship Sister to President

If you happen to be born into an Indo-Caribbean family, an Indian family from the Caribbean, migratory, never certain of the terrain, that’s how life falls down around you. It’s close and thick and sheltering, its ugly and violent secrets locked inside the family walls. The outside encroaches, but the ramparts are strong, and once you leave it you have no shelter and no ready skills for finding a different one.

—Ramabai Espinet, _The Swinging Bridge_ 15

In the previous chapter, I examined the development of Indo-Caribbean identities through the lens of ongoing bodily metamorphosis in relation to Caribbean landscapes, rather than through the model of racialized hybridity that is usually applied to the Caribbean and Latin America. That chapter concluded with two Indo-Caribbean women, Mala Ramchandin of Shani Mootoo’s _Cereus Blooms at Night_ (1996), and Beti of Wilson Harris’ _Far Journey of Oudin_ (1961), whose bodies become the sites of postcolonial shifts in familial and gender mores. The women represent the growth and potentially dangerous—untraditional—future of the Indo-Caribbean community and family.

This chapter enumerates a gender politics of Indo-Caribbean women like Mala and Beti, exploring the particular sub-genre of Indo-Caribbean fiction and poetry that focuses on the domestic and social sphere. “Women’s narratives” like Ryhaan Shah’s _A Silent Place_ (Guyana 2005) and Ramabai Espinet’s _The Swinging Bridge_ (Trinidad/Toronto 2004) act as supplements to the nation-centric, totalizing model of the Indo-Caribbean novel. That model focuses on memorializing the community in
the New World and establishing its discreteness from the Afro-Caribbean via the maintenance or reinvention of East Indian cultural values. I argue that a reclamation of the *jahaji bahen* (ship sister), the Indo-Caribbean female ancestress as she was, often a widow or a prostitute and not the sainted mother of Indo-Caribbean “family values” rhetoric, is the major focus of such narratives.¹ Espinet’s and Shah’s novels displace the importance of *jahaji bhai* or “ship brother” ties and legacies in favor of inventing and incorporating the *jahaji bahen* into the story of Indo-Caribbean. Both novels revolve around the inheritance of a maternal ancestral legacy that must be both recognized and resisted in the pursuit of self-development.

In this chapter I also discuss Indo-Caribbean women’s participation in the musical genre of chutney as an instance of Caribbean becoming, one that echoes delegitimized Indian female traditions of religiously “singing Ramayana” and performing *matikor*.² Chutney, a mashup mix of calypso, soca and Hindi/Bhojpuri language and rhythms, becomes, in Trinidad, one of the most visible ways Indo-Caribbean women exhibit and perform their metamorphic Indianness. Though “most chutney singers were men there were many more female singers in chutney than in

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¹ *Jahaji bahen* is the feminine analogue I posit to *jahaji bhai* or “ship brother,” the term that is usually suggested in Indo-Caribbean studies as the originary Indo-Caribbean familial relationship. *Jahaji bhai* describes the bond formed between mostly male indentured Indian shipmates bound for the New World. This bond was sustained into the early generations of indenture and sometimes beyond, when men and later their families attempted to maintain relations with those “relatives” dispersed to distant plantations. This gendered term came to encompass the totality of early Indo-Caribbean community bonding, subsuming Indian women’s family relationships and friendships with other Indian women in the drive to erase and rehabilitate their non-normative origins: the foundational fact that most indentured Indian women were single women traveling alone to the New World was culturally shameful for their male contemporaries and their descendants.

² *Matikor*, as I will discuss, is a bawdy, women-only ceremony on the eve of Caribbean Hindu weddings that is intended to initiate young brides into if not the reality, the idea of sex.
African-dominated calypso” (Niranjana 87). This phenomenon is perhaps, as I argue, less unusual in the light of Hindu women’s traditional participation in ritual religious music and dance, including “singing Ramayana” and matikor. The performative matikor space is one in which Hindu women both defied and adhered to gender norms and cultural expectations—a space in which they could literally act like men and reinforce their discrete Indian womanhood but that also remained a gender-segregated, heterosexually-normative outlet.

Gender-normative Indian women are at the center of the idealized Indo-Caribbean family, which is typically portrayed in the literature as an entrenched space of traditional, patriarchal values that are coded by the people themselves as particularly East Indian. Indians associate the “creole Caribbean” with a legacy of African slavery that features racial mixing, unwed mothers, and itinerant fathers. As such, adherence to normative gender roles ironically becomes the definition of being Indian in exile and the major avenue of resistance to racial and cultural assimilation into the African-majority Caribbean. In Trinidad and Guyana, the bodies of Indo-Caribbean women function as the loci and repositories of Indianness in both colonial and postcolonial national rhetoric. Familial life becomes repressive, especially when Indian women and men are taught that the price of seeking recourse outside of that inflexible structure is the total loss of it. As Trinidadian writer Ramabai Espinet notes in this chapter’s epigraph, “the outside encroaches, but the ramparts are strong.” This type of rigid domestic life is a reaction to migration and to the uncertainties of a culture in flux. The Indo-Caribbean was slow to gain full political participation in
Trinidad and Guyana and inclusion into the body of the postcolonial nation. Gender strictures, on the other hand, were enforced soon after Indian indentured laborers landed in the Caribbean in the nineteenth century and realized that they would be settling permanently. Intra-community social control of women provided an alternative to political participation by producing a community that embraced its distinctiveness from the Afro-Caribbean rather than mourning its lack of national inclusion.

The majority of Indo-Caribbean “women’s” narratives are written by women of that community. Indo-Caribbean women writers like Espinet and Mootoo were last on the literary scene—with some exceptions, most did not begin writing until late in the twentieth century—behind first Caribbean men of all stripes and then Afro-Caribbean women. Brinda Mehta (2004) argues that it is therefore “impossible to speak either of an identifiable genre or of a canon of Indo-Caribbean women’s writing: these writers are still fighting for a legitimate place and authority within the larger domain of anglophone Caribbean literature” (Diasporic 8). I do not believe this to be precisely true. Shani Mootoo, Ramabai Espinet, Rajkumari Singh, Ryhaan Shah, poet Mahadai Das, novelist Lakshmi Persaud, Lelawatee Manoo-Rahming, and a few others form the core of what is certainly a canon of Indo-Caribbean women’s writing, a canon that has been in formation since at least the 1970s and that has always had a more migrational, transnational focus: the “women’s stories” tend less to feature permanent exile and more to explore the metamorphic possibilities of
crossing back and forth between psychic and physical locations. Espinet’s and Shah’s works acknowledge the possibilities of transnationalism, globalization, and the ease of cross-continental physical and cultural travel. Crucially for this project of Indo-Caribbean metamorphosis, the novels emphasize the temporally ongoing nature of such exchange. Even after colonization, Indo-Caribbean women experience a continuous reshaping of their history as it changes to accommodate shifting national myths of origin and community perseverance. In *The Swinging Bridge* and *A Silent Place*, women’s social behavior is extrapolated to define the community internally and relationally on the political stage.

The underlying structure of both narratives is the quasi-linear life story of an individual Indo-Caribbean woman, with frequent flashbacks, dreams, and imaginative sequences in which the life history of one or more of her maternal ancestress(es) intrudes into her feminist “becoming.” In other words, both women try to gain agency and autonomy from their families, but they are continually haunted by their

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3 The Guyanese Rajkumari Singh began writing in the 1940s, producing mostly unpublished plays, poems and short stories. She is perhaps most well known for her poem “Per Ajie” (1971), dedicated to the ancestral Indo-Caribbean indentured aji, or grandmother (Poynting 103). More famously, another Guyanese woman, the poet Mahadai Das (1954-2003), produced the collection *I Want to be a Poetess of My People* (1976), which deals with the same themes of postcolonial Indo-Caribbean becomings as does the work of male authors like V.S. Naipaul and Samuel Selvon. The collection *Bones* (1988) is where Das finds her voice on issues specific to Indo-Caribbean women. *Bones* was published by Peepal Tress Press, which was founded in 1985 and is based in the United Kingdom. The press is dedicated to the re-issuing, preservation, and growth of Caribbean and Black British literature, with a specific and unique interest in Indo-Caribbean literature. It would not be remiss to say that most—not all, Shani Mootoo and other Canadian-Caribbean authors have other avenues open to them—Indo-Caribbean fiction and poetry that gains an international audience outside of the Caribbean does so through the efforts of this press.
grandmothers’ attempts and failures in this regard. In both novels the past continually intrudes into the present, demanding to be heard and seen with such insistence that it can become visible to the protagonists, allowing them to see time overlap. These narratives suggest that the maternal grandmothers’ true stories cannot be erased if their descendants are to have a future in which they are free to live their lives as they wish. That is because these jahaji bahen are the feminist models their own daughters could not be, in the first generations of establishing an Indo-Caribbean community, but that their granddaughters might be able to emulate in postcolonial society. Their granddaughters can continue the work they began of creating a woman who is Indo-Caribbean, rather than a mimic woman, neo-conservatively aping “Indian” female mores that are more than half invented.

Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge* is divided into three sections, each with a prologue recapping the migration of the thirteen-year-old female ancestress, Gainder (“marigold,” specifically of the sort used in Hindu worship), over the *kala pani*. Of particular import on the sea voyage is passing the Cape of Good Hope and the sea around it that is “named by indentures the *Pagal Samundar*, the ‘Mad Sea’” (Espinet 117). It is the first sight the Indian indentureds have of the particularly Caribbean

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4 “Grandmother” here includes both genealogical grandmother and ancestral great-great grandmother who emigrated from India.

5 As noted in the first chapter, the “black water” was Indian migrants’ term for the continuity of the Indian and Atlantic oceans. Crossing this body of water was anathema, as the Hindu migrants believed that doing so would cause them to forfeit their caste standing—which many returnees to India found to be the truth of the matter. But since many of the indentured were of lower castes, they often took the opportunity to reinvent themselves among strangers as persons of higher standing. Many were the newly-minted shipboard Brahmins who set foot in the New World.
creolization that begins with the sea and culminates in the “forced marriage of Africa with Europe [that] occurred on Caribbean soil, creating Creole plant and animal hybrids of astonishing beauty and hardiness” (117). They do not yet know it, but some became human woman hybrids of extraordinary aspect and endurance.

*The Swinging Bridge* follows the life of Mona Singh, an Indo-Trinidadian woman who leaves Trinidad for Toronto as a young adult in order to be free of her father and the gender mores of Indo-Trinidadian society. Most importantly, she abhors the idea of marriage, which destroys her romantic relationships with Trinidadian and Canadian men alike. She leaves Trinidad in what seems to be the 1980s and loses herself in a life in Toronto. When this fails to provide familial and romantic fulfillment, she returns to Trinidad in the mid-1990s to uncover the story of her forgotten ancestress Gainder. In the process, she reacquaints herself with her own history and identity as an Indo-Caribbean woman.

The ancestral narrative and the return of the female exile to her native land are also important in Shah’s *A Silent Place*. This novel follows the childhood highlights and adult life of protagonist Aleyah Hassan, who leaves Guyana as a young adult on the eve of independence to study in London. She stays and marries an Indo-Caribbean man there. But she is continually haunted by the life and secrets of her grandmother Nani (which is simply Hindi for “maternal grandma”), to whom she had been very close as a child. This is represented in the otherwise linear narrative by a series of dreams and interludes of “madness,” where Aleyah “sees” terrible historical events and family incidents. Aleyah begins to chafe at her own matrimonial bonds
and oppressive husband, and eventually experiences a stereotypically hysterical feminine nervous breakdown. The breakdown causes her to divorce her husband and leave her children to return to Guyana in the 1990s, when the nation is also experiencing a time of political transition. Upon Aleyah’s return, her grandmother Nani divulges the secrets of her and Nani’s own grandmother Gaitree’s life, then dies. The revelation of the particulars of Gaitree’s shipboard journey to the New World is part of the climax and “secret reveal” of this novel, just as it is in Espinet’s work. The novel is notably written mostly in the first person, present tense, with the exception of some sequences of Aleyah’s adult life in England—notably episodes involving her husband—which are written in the past tense. The use of the first person, present tense highlights the importance of her Guyana-related story as encompassing her “real life” and “real self.” Events in Guyana are delivered in the present tense regardless of when in time it is occurring and regardless of whether it involves a dream intrusion or an event occurring in the reality shared with the rest of the world. Both dreams and reality, it seems, are part of one’s history.

The contemporary protagonists of both novels must learn their Indian ancestress’ stories—their history—in order to move forward. Such stories are not

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6 Aleyah is briefly committed to a psychiatric ward by her husband, where she sees the following vision: “The trail is confusing, filled with ghosts of the past, veiled women, some crying, some just watching with hooded eyes. A few scream at me, pelt words in a language I never understood. And there are men who smirk and some who laugh openly, pointing at me. I look at myself and see a poor figure of a woman. I’d laugh too, if I did not understand her pain, understand her desolation…She’s on an island, afraid of the sea around her…She has no faith in miracles. She searches about her island and finds that it is empty of all but herself. No one comes to her rescue, to pluck her from her island and plant her into a future time, with solid earth beneath her feet. She is banished here, a sinner, shunned lest she befoul the air and her sinning seeps into the body of the sacred world” (Shah 129).
easy to come by or to verify, as they are shown to rely on mother-daughter word-of-mouth through several generations. Thus the novels both involve the reincorporation of oral family history into the Indo-Caribbean community narrative of history. These works suggest that orality is the only way in which women’s stories can be extracted and recovered from the dominant jahaji bhai narrative. But this is not entirely true, as the novels themselves form part of Indo-Caribbean women’s literary canon, the purpose of which is to fill in the gaps left by the absence of a complete written historical record. Espinet’s and Shah’s novels are historicizing texts; their characters draw together orally recovered fragments to recount and therefore create female ancestral Indo-Caribbean history as they imagine it happened, as it may as well have happened. I now turn to nineteenth century British-Caribbean records of indentureship and colonialism in juxtaposition with these “recovered” women’s stories to define the figure of the jahaji bhen and argue for the necessity of rehabilitating her for her female descendants.

Among the incarnations of the jahaji bhen is the rand; and it is the specter of this rand that resulted in the burial of the entire history of Indo-Caribbean women. The term signified, in plantation-era Trinidad, a widow, harlot, both, or simply an Indian woman of allegedly loose morals (Espinet 275). Feminists like Mehta and Patricia Mohammed argue that indentured Hindu men, having already been

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7 The British were meticulous statistical and naturalist anthropological record-keepers, but had no interest in historicizing indentureds as a self-determining community; they encouraged the quick adoption of English. Indian indentured men were almost as illiterate as the women. For the majority of indentureds, fluency in Indian languages, with the exception of some religious liturgy, was lost almost immediately.
disenfranchised in India by the upper castes, had much to gain from emigration. But Hindu women “had the most to gain by crossing over to different lands because their confinement within Hindu patriarchal structures in India made them victims of abusive family and communal traditions” (Mehta, Diasporic 5). The Indian women—both Hindu and Muslim—who did emigrate found themselves with heretofore unknown freedoms, notably a choice of sexual and marital partners. \(^8\)

Indian women in the Caribbean thus acquired an early reputation for having “loose morals” from both Indian men and the colonial British. Each woman was automatically made a rand. Even aboard ship, the British East India Company guarded its female investments from male crew, indentured men, and their own “loose” tendencies:

Fraternizing between the crew and Indian women was especially forbidden. The hatchways were guarded, especially that section leading down to the single women’s quarters. Men were forbidden to enter this section of the ship, and this applied to both fellow emigrants and crew…Some surgeons ensured that the decks below were well lit, especially the female section, to prevent what they termed

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\(^8\) Kamala Kempadoo (2004) writes that once on the plantation, “Often labeled and categorized as lewd and lascivious, or as prostitutes, working-class Indian women were cast as ‘loose’ element[s] who disrupted dominant notions of decency and proper family values. Thus while conditions of indentureship in the colonies provided Indian women with ‘a great degree of sexual independence and freedom’ and little incentive to enter into legal marriage, their sexual behavior and relationships were viewed with great suspicion by Indian men who favored and attempted to inculcate domesticated, docile femininity” (38-39).
‘promiscuous intercourse’…there was a real fear that emigrant women were always in danger of sexual assault. (Shepherd 23)

Such sexual assault was blamed on Indian women’s alleged promiscuity and on their small numbers. The disparate sex ratio of indentured laborers was of concern not just to Indian men, but also to British colonial officials. There were only fourteen women among the 1838 “Gladstone arrivals” that constituted the first batch of Indian indentured laborers to British Guiana (5). By the late nineteenth century, Caribbean planters wanted a stable domestic workforce, leading to “the 1890s reduction of the indenture period for women from five years to three and the promise to recruiting agents of an increased commission for women, sometimes 40 percent higher than for men. Emigrants were also encouraged to take female children, preferably between age ten and fourteen” (Niranjana 59). ⁹ British officials were concerned about the caliber of their female migrants, as it was quite difficult to recruit Indian women, and men who were already married did not want to bring their wives. In contrast to some orientalist and later Caribbean stereotypes of the docile Indian woman “with no mind, personality or significance of her own,” the British colonial government declared that many of the female immigrants were prostitutes, social outcasts, and women who had abandoned marriage and domesticity, all of whom were considered to “have gone astray,” to be “prone to immoral

⁹ As a result of increased quotas of female emigrants, “By 1856, 38.2 per cent of the 5,004 important to colonial Guyana were females, well above the average of 16 per cent shipped from Calcutta to all the colonies in that year. The records of the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission show that in 1857, female numbers reached a high of 69.6 per cent, decreasing thereafter to between 27.2 per cent and 47.7 per cent from 1858 to 1866” (Niranjana 5-6).
conduct,” to exercise a “corrupting influence” on “respectable” women, or were tempted into “abnormal sexual behavior by single men with money.” In the eyes of officialdom then, the women were highly sexual, of dubious character, and stood outside the boundaries of decent colonial womanhood. The skewed perception of Indian women held by the British reinforced patriarchal tendencies within the Indian community in both India and the Caribbean, which found the women not only “immoral” but corrupted sexual servants to non-Indian men. (Kempadoo 38)

Indian women migrants thus faced discrimination and abuse from mutually reinforcing British and Indian patriarchies. 10

On July 24, 1885, a woman identified in the colonial record as, ironically, Maharani (“princess”), along with 660 other contract laborers, boarded the Allanshaw at Calcutta, bound for British Guiana. Aboard ship, she and sixteen others died, but Maharani is documented as having died of rape and when the ship docked at the capital port of Georgetown there was a trial, even though “other Indian women had been raped on emigrant ships to the colonial Caribbean but never had their cases so elaborately investigated” (Shepherd xxiii). Ship’s surgeon-superintendent Dr. E.A.

10 The Swinging Bridge details such a tale of ongoing rape of an Indian wife by a white plantation overseer, but emphasizes that neither Indian woman nor Indian man had any choice in the matter. There are a few cases in which Indo-Caribbean women are recorded as exercising agency in the colonial context. Of note is one unusually well documented episode involving Indian women aboard ship, which I read here as a jahaji bahen story, one in which Indian women’s relationships with other women are a bulwark against a totalizing racial and gender oppression.
Hardwicke declared the cause of death as, variously, “‘shock to the nervous system’, ‘inflammation near the womb’, ‘shock from shame’ and ‘peritonitis.’”\(^{11}\) By contrast, “a few fellow female emigrants attributed her death to ‘criminal assault’ based on what Maharani allegedly told them before she died” (xxii). Verene Shepherd (2002) states that

One factor that could have influenced the investigation was the presence of returning emigrants who spoke English and who seemed to have had some influence…It appears that the presence of these experienced emigrants was often feared by the captains because of their insistence that emigrants’ rights be protected, and they were sometimes accused of fomenting resistance. There were several of these experienced emigrants on the *Allanshaw*, including Mohadaya and Moorti, the two female friends of Maharani who had informed the surgeon-superintendent of Maharani’s claim that she had been criminally assaulted. (xxv)

There is a well-documented phenomenon of the few Indians who returned to India after the period of indentureship finding that they could no longer tolerate the strictures of life in India and re-indenturing themselves to return to the Caribbean. Mohadaya’s and Moorti’s—the female re-migrants and friends of Maharani’s—

\(^{11}\) Maharani’s case was originally adjudged by colonial authorities to be one of “forced consent” rather than rape; but subsequently, an “independent report concluded that Maharani had been raped and that the cause of death was, in fact, inflammation of the womb caused by ‘sexual excess’—a euphemism for rape” (Shepherd 76, 77).
previous experiences of indentureship appear to have given them, in defense of their *jahaji bahen*, the ability to speak up, and speak up in English. Colonial investigators charged and convicted Robert Ipson, a twenty-two-year-old black seaman, with the rape; he “denied the charge, believing that he had been set up. Some of his fellow soldiers agreed, especially as the other man accused, the twenty-year-old Englishman James Oliver, was never investigated or charged” (xxii). Shepherd’s main agenda in the historical documentation of this case appears to be proving that the rape was investigated primarily because the seaman was black, establishing that though the British had abolished slavery in the Empire fifty years previous, in 1834, imperial racist sentiment against people of African descent was alive and well. She concludes by asserting again that relative racial suffering is important, declaring that this case “replicated some of the abuses on slave ships and will no doubt give more ammunition to those who contend that nineteenth-century labour migration was no more than ‘a new form of slavery’. Of course, the transatlantic slave trade was unique in its severity” (79-80). The milieu aboard ship was one in which, however, all “crew were routinely warned about mistreating emigrants…When the crew was mustered as the *Allanshaw* pulled out of port, for example, they were reminded that they would lose one month’s pay for every proven offence they committed against the emigrants” (xxvii). It is probable of course that Ipson, as a black man, a regular hand and not an officer, was accorded a low status in the crew hierarchy. That the female emigrants’ defense of their *jahaji bahen* Maharani entered the colonial record at a time when all Indians were considered unreliable witnesses is important; it is a fact
that should not be discounted or subsumed under real concerns over colonial racism against Ipson. It is also the women’s story. In a postcolonial context that privileges racial concerns over gender, Indo-Caribbean women’s specific issues and the recovery of the jahaji bahen are last priority even for Caribbean feminists.

Postcolonial pan-Caribbean feminism itself both privileges Afro-Caribbean female subjectivity and creates a space in which Indo-Caribbean feminism can emerge. But the tendency of the discourse is to assume an umbrella set of Caribbean women’s concerns that is dominated by the majority Afro-Caribbean experience and that “imposed certain themes, objectives and discursive spaces that Indo-Caribbean women found too confining, repressive, and culturally inappropriate” (Diasporic 65). Implied and overt claims that Afro-Caribbeans have greater Caribbean “authenticity” and privilege are often rooted in statements of greater comparative suffering that extend to the experiences of women. Shepherd, for example, argues that

The conclusion that emigration and indentureship can be located within the discourse of slavery is equally problematic, not only because no matter how harsh, the experiences of Indian women never approached the brutal condition endured by African women but also because those who support this perspective have failed to provide the requisite sustained and systemic comparative analysis. (xviii)

Such statements are symptomatic of the type of impassioned and educated racism that has historically foreclosed unity in Caribbean nation-building in Guyana and Trinidad. Unsurprisingly, it has not been politically productive to compare relative
racial suffering and colonial brutality. It is not a matter of historical contention that
conditions aboard African slave ships were more inhumane than those aboard the
British East India company ships transporting Indians to the New World. That is true.
But the repugnant depth to which these arguments can extend—comparing, for
example, how many African women were raped versus how many Indian women
were, even in the context of the transport of millions more African women than
Indian women to the Caribbean—has foreclosed open debate over national presents
and futures in favor of painful pasts.12

From the beginning of Indian indentureship, Indian women and African
women were pitted against each other in articulating the ideal models of the colonial
woman and the postcolonial woman-to-be. In some ways, the idealized colonial
woman was the docile Indian, whereas the postcolonial ideal was the liberated
African woman. Maharani’s story, the story of the Indian female victim of the black
man, becomes a contemporary one in Caribbean national racial ideologies, and it is a
story in which Indo-Caribbean women are read as being as unlike Afro-Caribbean
women as possible in a way that makes the Indian women both more femininely

12 Indo-Caribbean and Indian feminist critics like Mehta typically take a less comparative and
more conciliatory approach. Mehta points out that “African and Indian women in the
Caribbean share a common history of geographical and cultural displacement, forced labour,
economic enterprise, resistance and familial dispersal. The appreciation and recognition of
the commonality of experience has often been skewed by partisan politics in favour of
oppositional representation, whereby Indian and African women have been pitted against
each other as rivals in the fight for legitimacy and subjective autonomy even though both
groups of women were brought to the Caribbean primarily as plantation and estate workers in
the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These foremothers of Caribbean labour were
engaged in field labour before assuming domestic activities, thereby locating their
productivity within the visibility of the public” (64).
desirable and more guilty of inciting crimes of lust against themselves. In Guadeloupe and Martinique, where the French had bargained with the British for sizable numbers of Indian indentured laborers, a wave of Francophone Indo-Caribbean colonial literature in the 1920s depicted Indian women falling in love with white men; but by the 1950s, “[t]he colonial novel was moving away from stories in which the Indian woman was seen as the seductress to those in which she had become the victim” (Carter 71). This mid-century literature traded on an “unhappiness which is often attributed to Indian women[;] they are always ‘mal dans leur peau,’ seen as unable to profit from their beauty and youth, tempted into amorous liaisons which inevitably run counter to their social and family situations” (71, 72). In British colonial literature, however, the focus always remained on white men who, against their wills, fell victim to the wiles of Indian women. Such literature is exemplified by the early twentieth century British Guianese colonial romances of Edgar Mittelholzer, who was of mixed European and African heritage himself. During British indentureship in the nineteenth century, British orientalists like Charles Kingsley, surveying the pulchritude of their feminine colonial subjects, contrasted the masculine, “superabundant animal vigour and the perfect independence of the younger [African] women” to “the young Indian woman ‘hung all over with bangles, in a white muslin petticoat…and gauze green veil; a clever, smiling, delicate little woman, who is quite aware of the brightness of her own eyes’” (Niranjana 82).

British colonial literature found the Indian woman to be less doomed and more desirable and more guilty of inciting crimes of lust against themselves. In Guadeloupe and Martinique, where the French had bargained with the British for sizable numbers of Indian indentured laborers, a wave of Francophone Indo-Caribbean colonial literature in the 1920s depicted Indian women falling in love with white men; but by the 1950s, “[t]he colonial novel was moving away from stories in which the Indian woman was seen as the seductress to those in which she had become the victim” (Carter 71). This mid-century literature traded on an “unhappiness which is often attributed to Indian women[;] they are always ‘mal dans leur peau,’ seen as unable to profit from their beauty and youth, tempted into amorous liaisons which inevitably run counter to their social and family situations” (71, 72). In British colonial literature, however, the focus always remained on white men who, against their wills, fell victim to the wiles of Indian women. Such literature is exemplified by the early twentieth century British Guianese colonial romances of Edgar Mittelholzer, who was of mixed European and African heritage himself. During British indentureship in the nineteenth century, British orientalists like Charles Kingsley, surveying the pulchritude of their feminine colonial subjects, contrasted the masculine, “superabundant animal vigour and the perfect independence of the younger [African] women” to “the young Indian woman ‘hung all over with bangles, in a white muslin petticoat…and gauze green veil; a clever, smiling, delicate little woman, who is quite aware of the brightness of her own eyes’” (Niranjana 82).

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13 This colonial construction of Indian women as *mal dans leur peau* is quite similar to that of the American tragic mulatta.
dangerously seductive even in her docility. In the Caribbean, the specific post-slavery feminine contrast to the docile Indian indentured woman was

the African woman, the exslave, the _jamette_ of Carnival whose sexuality was othered, and sought to be regulated, by the European ruling class. The jamette was seen as vulgar, promiscuous, loud, and disruptive, and the removal of this figure from Carnival and related activities became part of the project of creating a new urban middle class in Trinidad…Much of the elite’s anxiety about the jamette, or even about the rural Creole woman, seemed to hinge on the fact of her being seen as independent in both sexual and economic terms. (82)

The frightening independence of the _jamette_ and the anarchic possibilities of Carnival called for the imagining of the East Indian woman as the Afro-Caribbean woman’s docile opposite: to (re)create this paragon of domesticity, “‘Indian tradition’ was invoked by different groups, and the lack of conformity of indentured women to the virtuous ideal of Indian culture was deplored.” After indentureship and on the eve of Caribbean independence, “the need to differentiate between the African and the Indian woman would take on a new type of urgency, both for the emerging Indo-Trinidadian middle class and for the dominant Creole imaginary” (82).

“Loose” Indian women on the plantation were and are accorded a different sort of negative valorization in comparison with Afro-Caribbean women: “as the very antithesis of African female resilience and self-sufficiency,” they “have been confined to inhibiting paradigms of docility, passivity and subservience” and located
“solely within the limitations of victimhood and subjugation.” As a result, says Mehta,

the research on Trinidad and Guyana’s Indo-Caribbean female population continues to remain at an ‘emergent’ level in comparison with studies on Afro-Caribbean women…[but] a more serious problem lies in the perception that Indians in the Caribbean are just not Caribbean enough to warrant equitable representation. Viewed as immigrants rather than Caribbean citizens, Indians symbolized the very enigma of arrival that justified marginal representation.

(\textit{Diasporic} 72)

Attempts to address Indo-Caribbean people’s lack of political representation unfortunately reinforce \textit{jahaji bhai} rhetoric that marginalizes Indian women.

After the first few years of immigration, Indian women’s sexual freedoms were quashed by a “nationalism created by the \textit{jahajibhai} bonds of fraternity on the ships of indenture and Hinducentric ideals of femininity” (Mehta, “Engendering” 21). \textit{The Swinging Bridge} addresses the greatest threat to this Indo-Caribbean nationalism: the specter of \textit{douglarization}, or miscegenation between Indo- and Afro-Caribbean people. Douglarization becomes the representational fear over the postcolonial survival of Indians as a discrete national group. An Indian taxi driver condemns sixteen-year-old Mona in front of strangers, sneering that because of independence, “Indian boy go ketch hell jes now. Nowadays all de girls going in for Creole boy. Watch dem nuh, in dey tight tight skirt and tight pants, looking for Creole boy”
(Espinet 172). Because of the mid-length of her quite respectable skirt, the man has noticed that Mona has shaved her legs. This makes Mona wish that she had not shaved her legs even though she was wearing a skirt—shaving here is an adult women’s activity, one that prepares the female body for sex. As an adult she recalls and Da-Da confirms

how Indian men were enraged at what they perceived to be a coercive drive to intermarriage between Indians and Africans in the Trinidad of the fifties and sixties. That deep-rooted fear had never gone away. I had heard only recently about protests from the Indian community in Trinidad about forced *douglarization*. But *douga* was such an old term for a person of mixed African/Indian ancestry. (75)

*Dougla* has long been a pejorative term on both sides for a person of African-Indian descent in Trinidad and Guyana, but critics like Shalini Puri, who has called for ethnic solidarity on the basis of a “douga poetics,” are attempting to rehabilitate the word. In common usage, douglarization, as she acknowledges, is used by racial “purists” on both sides to mean assimilation and “racial dilution,” rather than an

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14 Puri argues that “[t]he word ‘dougla’ can be thought of as capturing the triple discourse of illegitimacy that has haunted Indo-Caribbean history: the colonial state’s policy not to recognize Indian marriages, which therefore deemed Indian children illegitimate (a policy from which several Creole constructions of Indians as outsiders with no legitimate claims upon Trinidad took their cue); independent India’s rejection of the request of some Indo-Caribbeans for repatriation, which rendered Indo-Caribbeans illegitimate children of India; and finally Indo-Caribbeans’ own exclusionary and disciplining pejorative that demonizes the mixed descendents of Indo- and Afro-Caribbean as illegitimate…[But despite Puri’s desire to repatriate the term] it is however, undeniable that ‘douga’ carries many sedimented meanings, not all of which are politically suggestive or progressive. The figure of the dougla often functions in both African and Indian purist discourses, as well as in some pro-PNM discourses, as a code-word for assimilation and racial ‘dilution’” (197).
integration that allows for cultural difference (197). For Indians, Da-Da argues, “Mother India, with all of its many faults, is still our homeland. We reject coercive efforts to force us to become a mixed race of people. If this happens naturally, over time, all well and good. But national rhetoric that seeks to obliterate Indians—our ways, our appearance, our religion—is an act of racialism” (74). The potential for douglarization also rears its head when the then-teenage Mona is caught by her father wearing an above-the-knee “slack dress” and harboring a mixed-race Portuguese and African boyfriend. The father curses his daughter as a whore, beats her, destroys the dress, and forces her to kneel in the yard. When she becomes an adult, her father tells her of the resentment that Indo-Trinidadian men had over what was perceived to be forced douglarization and governmentally-supported racial mixing. As a woman, Mona is the primary victim of these postcolonial racial anxieties. Cautionary tales of Indian women who “married Creole” abound in Espinet’s novel. Mona is told the story of one nameless woman who married an Afro-Trinidadian and whose family disowned her, causing her to become mad. Years later, the community reaction is still: “It good for she! Who tell she to marry Creole?” (260). Race-mixing is most visible in urban spaces, as rural villages in both Guyana and Trinidad tend to be relatively mono-ethnic, and entire rural or “country” regions like south Trinidad are

15 The efficacy of “douga” is limited unless it can overcome both its use as an insult and as a straw man for arguments over racial “purity.” In a critical and theoretical context it is a good word to reclaim and is more locally useful than “creolization” and “hybridization” in the Trinidad-Guyana national contexts, but its use in national race rhetoric is perhaps still too ugly for immediate rehabilitation.
ethnic strongholds—in this case of East Indians. The city of San Fernando in Trinidad is described in *The Swinging Bridge* as housing its twin but separate populations, African and Indian, each lacerating the other, each tolerating the other’s crossovers, the strayaways, the inveterate mixers seduced by curiosity and a taste of difference, whose blood and semen and juices would solidify and form the rickety bridge across which others might begin to cross the rapids that they feared would wash them out into the open sea. (103)

Creolization in all its forms is the product of this seething ethnic morass. The Caribbean discourse of producing “purity from impurity” is in both novels displaced onto women’s bodies. Both Afro- and Indo-Caribbean communities find themselves in the position of defining their postcolonial identities as “native” when they are in fact not autochthonous. They must become “pure” in order to prove their right to the land to which they were brought and in such a way as to also revoke the claim of the colonizer. Viranjini Munasinghe (2002) has argued that in the case of Trinidad, Afro-Caribbeans or, ironically, anyone deemed “Creole”—racially or culturally hybridized, but never just Indo-Caribbean—are usually self-declared candidates for “purest” inheritors of the land. The desire of Indo-Caribbeans to remain nominally apart is a source of national suspicion. Particularly in Trinidad, Presbyterian Christianity hastened an early process of de-Indianization, as illustrated through Mona’s parents, who carry the creole names of Mackie and Myrtle and had a much more cosmopolitan
colonial courtship than they allowed her on the socio-politically fluctuating eve of independence:

Indentureship was over; it had ended in 1917, before they were born, and denial had set in. All that backward stuff was best forgotten. When Myrtle and Mackie walked hand in hand at the edges of the cane fields, they were already several levels removed from anything resembling bonded labour. It was a time when newly educated people would throw out almost everything Indian at first, and would slowly gather back into their lives only those relics that were essential for survival. Eating sada roti and tomato chokha, wearing gold churias at weddings, drying mangoes for achar and kuchela, treating nara with a special massage, rubbing down the limbs of babies with coconut oil: all seeping gradually back into Indian life in the towns and all well hidden except at home. (Espinet 29)

This extreme did not last. But both the general social push for creolization and the Indo-Caribbean community insistence on unbroken Indian-Caribbean lineages trade on women as agents without agency. Neither social movement acknowledges that an Indo-Caribbean woman like Aleyah, in *A Silent Place*, may in fact be capable of retaining a desired cultural discreteness and living as a full citizen of a multiethnic nation, nor that, in the case of Mona Singh, who repeatedly identifies herself as a “nowarian,” it is acceptable for one person to acknowledge multiple geographic
reference points for her identity.\textsuperscript{16} She is not a hybrid; she is a real person, sometimes more in the mood for Indianness and other times more in the mood for Creoleness, remaining in this state of flux, but always more than just half of one and half of the other: a multiplicity of being.\textsuperscript{17} This is a metamorphic way of being, in opposition to the hybrid formulations of douglarization and creolization.

A distinction between douglarization and creolization may be made on the grounds that douglarization is a more specific term that always includes Indian-Black miscegenation, while creolization broadly encompasses any type of cultural and ethnic hybridization and generally privileges older Afro-Caribbean ways of being Caribbean. Puri argues against the reductive, interchangeable ways in which the terms “douglarization” and “creolization” tend to be used by noting that it is a distinction

both the African and the Indian orthodoxies have an interest in erasing…For the Indian orthodoxy, any hybridization of black and Indian identities threatens to compromise its construction of Indianness; it thus considers douglarization and creolization equally as the contamination and dilution of Indianness…Equally interesting are

\textsuperscript{16} Mona defines “nowarian” as “a wanderer,” but a wanderer in a long line of Caribbean wanderers. Upon returning to her natal Iere Village in Trinidad as an adult, “The house was as welcoming as it always had been to its nowarian of old, and Bess’s nineteenth-century Creole bedroom with its rose-tinted antimacassars and vetiver sachets was mine again” (Espinet 303, 263). The nowarian, then, is specifically a product of Caribbean colonialism.

\textsuperscript{17} Indo-Caribbean women tend to be depicted as frozen: frozen as Indian paragons of virtue and religiosity, or frozen as permanent whores with tendencies towards miscegenation by dint of questionable Indian origins. I argue for a woman who is Indo-Caribbean: Indian but Caribbean Creole in her own right, in accord with creolized Afro-Caribbean identity but also in defiance of Afro-Caribbean wishes to exclude the Indian. Munasinghe (2002) provides an analysis of this racial exclusion.
the discursive overlaps between the Maha Sabha and the African
Association…Both advocate racial purity, and both subscribe to the
idea that douglarization represents racial “dilution” and African “self-
contempt.” (193)

Puri sees douglarization and creolization as two distinct types of hybridity. While I agree that they are instances of hybridization, douglarization, in my view, is a racial subset of creolization. They are not as unrelated as Puri argues. There is also a distinction between racial and cultural creolization, as racial hysteria over the specter of the métisse has historically and politically forestalled all discussion of cultural mestizaje—even while the cultural shifts and borrowings are happening in plain sight.

In general, the benefits of creolization for Indian women are that it offered them “the possibility of resisting rigid patterns of socialization imposed on them by Hindu patriarchy in the name of cultural integrity,” with attendant problematic consequences both inside and outside of the community: for Indo-Caribbean men, “the creolization of Indian women was consequently seen as an infraction likened to the Hindu taboo of crossing the kala pani”; and nationally, this creolization “furthered the marginal representation of Indians as a whole” (Diasporic 8). But both creolization and douglarization suggest a certain static hybridity. Metamorphic becoming better describes the cultural positional shifting of Indo-Caribbean women because they constantly exceed social boundaries by relying on the jahaji bahen past as inspiration for Caribbean becoming, rather than hiding that past to perform a dislocated subcontinental Indian normativity in the manner of jahaji bhai nationalist narratives.
The redemption of the Indian woman from prostitute and widow to Indo-Caribbean wife and mother is accomplished by negating the reality of many such women having been, in fact, widows, destitute women forced into prostitution, runaways and other pariahs. With denial of individual female histories, the Indo-Caribbean community as a whole and Indo-Caribbean individuals are frozen in a state of underdevelopment. Mona of The Swinging Bridge says, “At age forty-two I was still reluctant to join the ranks of adults in the family, the big people. I couldn’t see myself functioning the way they did in family matters. They had not told me enough. I needed more legends, more stories, more knowledge of the past to sustain me” (Espinet 79). Both Espinet’s and Shah’s novels attempt to move beyond static memorialization of a jahaji bhai Indo-Caribbean community. Mona chronically wonders: “Why did people leave the place they were born for an illusion of a better life?” as it never results in a second home but in permanent displacement of the sort where “I have spent my life just getting by” (27). Then she returns to Trinidad as an adult, and finds that perhaps it is home, and that one may have several homes. In Shah’s A Silent Place, Aleyah follows the same trajectory, returning home to Guyana in the end, essentially, to save her mind and soul. Both novels suggest that perhaps the exile can return home, which, as I noted in the previous chapter, is quite different from canonical Caribbean works by the earlier, predominantly male generation of Caribbean writers.
I. *The Swinging Bridge*: Mona the Nowarian

*The Swinging Bridge* begins with Mona Singh’s 1995 remembrances of Hindi words she had not heard since her youth in Trinidad: “Lately, words have been assailing me. Words like *ashes, cocoyea brooms, sem, chataigne, roti, chunkaying, lepaying, washing wares.* Everyday domestic words from long ago, a far-off time and place…Patois words and Hindi words. Words are ghosts, ancestors on this side. They are alive and sensate—full of flesh and stone and jagged edges. Word jumbies” (5). The language of the home and hearth catalyzes an exploration of the full scope of female Indo-Caribbean ghosting. Not unusually, these have been the types of Hindi and Indian words retained by Indo-Caribbeans and incorporated into general Caribbean lexicons long after the languages themselves fell out of daily use, which occurred from the first generation onwards. These “cooking and cleaning” words, associated with the domestic sphere, are used most by women, reinforcing their stature as repositories of Indianness—a position inciting both protection by and hatred and resentment from Indo-Caribbean men. That is, the only ones who really remember Indian history are the women, and as such they must be controlled.

The traumatic primal scene of Espinet’s novel occurs when Mona is eighteen and she first meets the light-skinned Afro-Trinidadian boy Bree in Trinidad. Her father Da-Da says nothing about their publicly developing relationship until one day when he is drunk, and sees her wearing an above-the-knee shift dress. He rips the back off and shouts, in stark contrast to any way he has ever spoken to her before, “‘You little bitch. You little ho…What the hell you doing again in that ho dress? You
ain’t find you attracting enough man already?” Mona’s mother defends her for the first time, running over with a dripping pot spoon and screaming “‘If you strip that dress off that child, is me and you here today. Yuh hear me? Is me and you here today’” (178). He takes his hands off his daughter, and the mother disappears while he punishes Mona further, ordering her to change, burning the dress, forcing her to kneel on the gravel to watch it then walk across the yard on her knees. Mona’s mother has very specifically said that she will only intervene if he “strip[s] that dress off that child,” that is, if he performs any act that would compromise her feminine moral standing. Mere violence is not enough of a reason for the mother to put herself in physical and community danger by defying her husband. Mona is left alone in the yard, whereupon a passing boy shouts: “Ay girl! Whey you do? You take man or what?” Mona “felt no pain, no shame, nothing” (178-179). Finally her mother helps her up, and it is then that they both decide that she has to study, pass her exams, and leave Trinidad. Everyone in Trinidad, it seems, seeks to control Indian women’s sexuality. Not just Indian men, but black, mixed race and other Creole people, according to Mona,

talk about how Indian girls were hot hot from small—no wonder they had to marry them off as children, and no wonder wife beating and chopping was so common among those people. They were not civilized or “creolized” enough. They did not reach the approved standard of proper Trinidad society. We were hot coolie girls who had
to be brought in line and who, at twelve or thirteen, were already showing signs of wantonness. (145)

Even after indenture, Indo-Caribbeans cannot shake their reputation for “slackness”—and this sexual failing is tied to race on the national level. Slackness is, Mona says, “talking to boys, writing letters to boys, having sex, doing the thing, along with a host of other potentially sexual behavior (139). “Proper” society means Christian society, to some extent exempting creolized, converted Indians from such judgments. Still, when as an adolescent Mona meets and briefly carries on a flirtation with the (light-skinned Afro-Trinidadian) “red boy” Bree, Indians spit the word “red nigger” at her on the street and report her to her father (185). The gulf is so wide that when as an adult, she meets Bree again in Brooklyn and consummates the relationship, they have nothing to say to each other afterwards. Even though neither is white in North America, still the island lies between them (189).

Mona’s life parallels her ancestress Gainder’s in the loss of a potential sympathetic mate and in the geographic journeys she must undertake to become Indo-Caribbean. On the Artist, the ship on which Gainder comes to the New World in 1803, the young Indian man Jeevan shows her compassion by helping her escape shipboard rape. For his troubles he is abandoned on St. Helena like Napoleon, leaving her to the tender community mercies of the insular jahaji bhai who survive the voyage and are quite different from Jeevan, whose name means “life.” It is implied that the “good” Indian men die with him somewhere in the black water. A married couple takes Gainder under their jahaji bhai protection until the ship reaches
Trinidad. After her term of indenture is finished, she performs as a singer and dancer at weddings, saves her money and “tries to get the land allocation promised in her contract, but the estate refuses to encourage single women to live alone and will not give it to her” (248). So she marries a young, educated newly Presbyterian Indian man renamed Joshua. To compound matters, they are married in a Hindu rite that he hides from the missionaries. He was attracted to her dancing; but he “waits a full month after the wedding to tell Gainder that she must never sing or dance in public again. Her heart turns to stone when she hears those words” (249). Gainder even gives up her own individual name, the Hindu marigold, and becomes known as simply the last and caste name Beharry, or Bihari, “of Bihar.” Still, Joshua remains suspicious of her for the rest of her life, and she passes into history as a rand of suspect morals because that is the story he told their family of her. And the official education system does not help; As Mona observes in Espinet’s novel, the history of Indian indentureship was not taught to any great degree in the inherited colonial British school system of the Anglophone Caribbean, at least until the 1990s.18 History, she says, “was the study of English kings and queens and brave explorers, Mary Queen of Scots, Sir Walter Raleigh, Hawkins, and Drake. We had been taught about slavery but almost nothing about indentureship” (276).

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18 The Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC), established in the 1970s to oversee education in the Caribbean, finalized the development of its own examinations paralleling the English high school “O” and “A” levels in the mid-1990s: the GCSE and CAPE, respectively. Students who wish to attend universities in the United Kingdom may still sit for the British exams, but all of their work is administered by correspondence. One of the new subject areas in the CXC exams is “Caribbean Studies,” which has been separated from the traditional “Social Studies.”
Espinet’s novel, however, retells the story by calling for what Mehta calls a “kala pani poetics,” which “converts the pariah status of widowhood in India into the transnational mobility of migration, while providing the great-granddaughter Mona with the necessary coming-of-age script to uncover the fragmented and dispersed genealogy of a ‘mother history’” (“Engendering” 20). That is, Mona is reminded through the discovery of her ancestress’ history as a runaway from an arranged marriage that she is not really a “nowarian,” but a woman of multiple lineages for whom it is the journey between that is important. This stands in stark contrast to the repetition of an oppressed, static Indian maternal legacy that appears to be both Mona’s and Aleyah’s lots in life. Mona’s mother functions in her family as the force holding together the fragments, creating something out of nothing each time. And this skill she had taught me so well that I often felt I wanted for nothing and I wanted nothing at the same time. The one thing I did not want was domestic life…She must have wanted love but hardly the labor and pain of countless years of toiling beside Da-Da, the man without a place. She seemed to love and resent him with equal ferocity. She loved [Mona’s brother] Kello purely. Me, I was her creature totally. Sometimes I was sure that she did not love me very much and would never like me. But that did not matter. I was still her creature, her female child, her right hand.

(Espinet 39)
What is most interesting in this passage is the depiction of the female child as a body part of the family, the mother’s “right hand.” For such a child to leave the confines of the family is a literal amputation. But the mother is willing to sever her hand because she wants her child to do what she could not—live life for herself. The fate of repeating her mother’s life and bondage to the ideal of the Indo-Caribbean family is intolerable to Mona too, so Mona flees Trinidad for Canada, a second Indo-Caribbean exile that causes her to mirror the “exilic traject[ory]” of her great-grandmother Gainder (“Engendering” 20).

The story of the Indian ancestress in Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge* is thus the story of the *rand*, the widow-prostitute whose origins have been hidden by Indo-Caribbean narratives of history. Espinet looks back in time to 1879 and imagines an untold story. Lines of women, veils pulled over their heads, seeking refuge at the shrine of Shiva in the holy city of Benares…They are mainly *rands*, widows who have escaped the funeral pyre by means of the laws forbidding sati laid down by the British administrators in 1829…The records of indentureship to the Caribbean show that Brahmin widows formed an inordinate number of the females who migrated. (3)

At the Vaishnavite temple, religion, men, the whole of colonial Indian society are complicit in the hidden abuse of homeless women: “During the day the other temple worshipers gave the women alms, but at night men would come to the shrine looking for them. Some women went willingly; others were taken” (247). The women
become ideal female recruits for Indian *arkatiyas* (recruiters) hired by the British to solicit women into Caribbean indenture. Ironically, then, the Caribbean erasure of caste strictures precipitated by the *kala pani* voyage sometimes functioned in the direction of lower-caste male recruits with higher-caste women—but higher-caste women who were perceived as irredeemably sullied, having cut themselves off from familial ties. Such women were the best British officials could hope for when “[t]he planters demanded not only more women but the ‘right kind of women,’ who would be not only productive laborers on the estates but also faithful wives to the male workers.” The “right kind of women” generally meant upper-caste Brahmin and other women. Many women who emigrated, were, of course, not Brahmin widows, and “recruiters pointed out that a better class of women could not be induced to emigrate and that, in any case, they would be no good as field laborers,” though it remained true that emigration agents equated lower caste with lower morality (Niranjana 61-62). But the British Caribbean planter issue commonly referred to as the “cooie-woman problem”—uxoricide and rampant violence against the small minority of Indian women on the sugar estates—was grave enough to warrant a relaxation of “standards” and admission of almost all female comers. Planters assumed that marriage and family were the keys to domesticating their male labor force, and that jealous violence against Indian women would lessen if there were enough wives to go around. The statistics of East Indian male violence against East Indian women were grim.19 The problem began as soon as the ships crossed the *kala*

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19 “The prevalence of the ‘wife murders’ by indentured Indians in Trinidad and British
pani, as “Indian women also suffered abuses at the hands of Indian men on board as domestic violence was not unheard of in instances where people tried to live as couples and families on board” (Shepherd 31). Colonial authorities blamed the inherent moral defects of both Indian men and women:

If Indian males under indenture were seen as drudges, content to toil for life on plantations, even to bear whippings with few visible signs of discontent, they were widely perceived to be volcanic and unrelenting in their personal relationships. The “coolie wife murders”—cases in which allegedly “jealous” husbands had killed their common-law spouses over infidelities—spread across the spectrum of colonial societies that received indentured laborers, and added much to the European assumptions of the barbarism of Indian males and their treatment of women as their “property.” Indian woman, for their part, were not considered blameless in official eyes. It was frequently contended that one of the causes of the high ratio of wife murders was the “low character” of migrant women. Respectable women would not cross the sea, it was believed, and coolie females

Guiana in the nineteenth century was represented as due to the inconstancy of the women...Between 1872 and 1880, 27 percent of all murders in Trinidad were committed by East Indian immigrants; subsequently, East Indians accounted for 60 percent of the murders between 1881 and 1889 and 70 percent between 1890 and 1898...The majority of the murderers were men, and those killed were women who were wives, concubines, or fiancées. Although there are quite a few court cases involving men who had killed their child brides whose fathers had promised them to several men for a hefty bride price each time, many of the cases were against men who had murdered their wives for having taken up with another man. It was also not uncommon for Indian women to form relationships with overseers and white estate managers” (Niranjana 69).
were classed as starving widows, absconded or abandoned wives and prostitutes. (Carter 52)

The rand is the sum figure of all fears of Indian women’s agency and the loss of societal control over their bodies. The very existence of the Hindu widow who did not commit sati—immolate herself on her husband’s funeral pyre—was an affront; that her survival was due to the imperial charity of the foreign British was an insult; and that she could go on to have a life that was not solely one of punishment for being alive was unthinkable. Espinet notes in one of her historical prologues that “thousands of young widows were regularly turned out of doors by their in-laws and could be found wandering in the cities, seeking a living by various means, singing and dancing, begging for alms, often prostituting themselves” (294). This was a stroke of good fortune for William Gladstone in British Guiana and other Caribbean planters who had begun to demand active recruitment of Indian women for the colonies. Mona’s ancestress Gainder, who develops a talent for dancing and singing, is identified derogatorily by her own female descendants as a rand. The sin she was guilty of in India—running away from her brother who sought to arrange a marriage for her to an older man—is compounded by her presence on the ship Artist as a single woman, though unusually for the time, the ship carries a passenger manifest of 285 women and 159 men, indicating that it was quite specifically charged with the task of bringing Indian women to wire Indian men in the New World.

Underlying community and family violence caused the majority of female jahaji bahen bonding to remain at the level of survival, where desires of all kinds are
sublimated into ritual, particularly socially sanctioned religious ritual, which also functions as a method of cultural preservation. The dangers of being an Indian woman without a male protector are exemplified in *The Swinging Bridge* by the sad “old time” tale of the beggar woman Baboonie, who “don’t have nobody” so she cleans and does odd jobs by day. At night, “[t]he fellers of the village does use she” (Espinet 111). Mona only comprehends the story as an adult, when she wonders at “How Baboonie must have had no real name, and how much cruelty must have gone into naming her Baboonie, or young girl” (114). Baboonie’s village, men and women, enable this maltreatment. Representing what all the women fear the most, she is a danger to them, so they can show her no pity. Yet they express their grief over her treatment and their own lives by “singing Ramayana” at night in the rain, that is, singing verses from the Hindu religious epic the *Ramayana* in a ritualistic way without any real ritual. Mona remembers hearing these mournful dirges at nine years old:

> The words were in Hindi and I knew only a few of them—dhuniya, popo, beti, kala pani. And there were others that I had heard night after night and will never forget...kangal, parishan, triskaar, thokna, parishan, parishan, parishan...pani, pani...the whole world grieving in unison...[and] the wailing voice of an old beggar woman, crying through the rain, breaking up the classical words of the Ramayana with her own tale of exile and banishment, and in broken chords and
unexpected riffs telling the story of a race. Of racial and tribal grief, of banishment, of the test of purity. (113)

Interestingly, the narrative does not mark these words as gendered. But they are domestic, gendered and “tribal” words in the Indo-Caribbean: world, baby, daughter, black water…pauper, confused, disrespect, push/hit (slang: “fuck”), water. Baboonie is the very embodiment of thokna (push/hit/fuck) and impurity, every Indian immigrant’s worst gender, racial and cultural fears in the flesh. Yet she is a living woman who survives despite having all possible evil wreaked on her body; she fought off intruders upon her body with curses and threats and words sung from the holy books, while bundles and bundles of rags walked upright in the early morning, following the strong men of the village as they walked with proud brushing cutlasses, lashed with cloth by wives and daughters, walking to work, walking to do task work, to earn the dollars that made homes and families and life. (113)

This passage shifts focus (and blame) from Baboonie to the men, suggesting that they have total social control because they have the earning power. This is not strictly true: indentured women worked as weeders on the sugar estates, although they earned significantly less than male cane-cutters. In the passage, women who are wives become mere “bundles of rags,” no longer people. Yet, ironically, it is the man-less Baboonie who is the visible bundle of rags. It seems that Baboonie is not the only woman castoff, and they are all in the same boat. Only the words of the Ramayana—God—have not deserted Baboonie (and the other women), which means that she is
still, despite her treatment, an Indian woman. Baboonie is the *rand* in the most debased form, far more so than Mona’s ancestress Gainder, whose own Christian husband told their children and grandchildren that she was “low class” because “she used to sing Ramayana before they were married” (250). That is because Gainder performed in public, in front of men, including possibly, heaven forfend, Afro-Trinidadian men. But it is the women condemned as *rands* who were keepers of culture. On her return to Trinidad as an adult, Mona collects Indian women’s stories, memorialized in songs that she learns from a *rand* (at this time, “performer”) who knows versions of Gainder’s own songs from her singing and dancing days during indentureship:

I taped her singing the one that had come into common usage, the popular chutney love song whose composer was long forgotten. These songs were my bounty, swinging open a doorway into another world, returning across the *kala pani* to the India the girl Gainder had left, alone. They told a tale of love and loss, distance, journeying, hope, hardship piled upon hardship, and, in the end, the triumph of fidelity. (293)

As the storytellers and keepers of history, it seems even the *rands*, the female outsiders, are complicit in the maintenance of the traditional structure of the Indian family. But they are also subversive and feminist: they provide the women’s side of the stories, a counter-narrative to the community *jahaji bhai* story. In addition to singing from the *Ramayana*, women also orally preserved culture through *aji* or
grandmother/wise woman “yard” storytelling, wherein the yard, where everyone would inter-generationally gather around the grandmother to hear her stories, represents the very site of Indo-Caribbean feminism through its enabling location of belonging, whereby women politicize the yard by transforming it into a microcosmic woman-centred representation of the nation. Control of the yard parallels an effective “sexing” or reclaiming of the nation by women, who feminize history through feminist agency and a rearticulation of nationally composed identities and gender affinities. (Diasporic 26)

Mehta argues that the yard is thus “preparatory ground for the enhancement of female empowerment” through female “re-membering” and speaking in a “mother tongue.” But there is a lack of proof that the nation is ever reclaimed by Indian women. That the recently elected Prime Minister of Trinidad, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, is an Indo-Caribbean woman does not mean that the rates of Indo-Caribbean domestic violence are not still abysmal or that Indo-Caribbean women are not first called on to prove their domestic prowess before they can be political leaders. But at the very least, singing Ramayana and aji yard culture are “[t]he voicing out of personal narratives and the communal hearing of stories [that] builds up a storehouse of collective knowledge that provides valuable archival documentation of women’s histories, thereby ensuring the preservation of those histories” (136). They ensure that women’s stories are included in communal Indo-Caribbean history.
The *rand* sings and dances, bodily acting out what can be articulated only in code. In addition to singing *Ramayana*, Indo-Caribbean women dance *matikor* to voice the unvoiceable, in this case the obligations and burdens of marriage and legitimized sexuality. *The Swinging Bridge*’s Mona observes such a women-only gathering the night before a Hindu wedding:

The drummers, all women, had already started. Not a man was in sight. Two older women crouched at the side of the house where the soil had been freshly dug. They mixed together ghee, earth, sugar, salt, and some petals on a broad leaf, wrapped it tightly and buried it. Bess whispered that this signified the start of another household. The women formed a circle, taking turns to dance to the centre of the ring, simulating the sex act in various ways, angry, fierce, tender. There were games as well, older women knotting their skirts into phallic forms, running races while holding eggplants firmly clamped between their legs, frolicking and teasing the younger women...The wedding night songs were held fast by their own beat, an underbeat it seemed to me, nasal and piercing at times, yet whispering, as if secrets were being passed from woman to woman. An ancient aura surrounded these women, a oneness with their past and present that showed in every ripple of bare flesh, every beat of their bare feet against the mud-daubed earth. (Espinet 278)
The women at *matikor* come to literally embody “past and present;” their dancing and creation of earth-based talismans are conjure, evoking ancient secrets in the New World. They are performing memory. This intergenerational event comprises the virgin Caribbean Hindu bride’s initiation into sex and domesticity. Older women subvert the marital trajectory by “claiming” the bride first in transgender foreplay—while also reinforcing, through the segregation of the space, heterosexual gender distinctions. No men, of course, can witness women behaving in such overtly sexual ways, especially when the women ape and mock male sexuality and reverse gender roles. The absence of men, of the male gaze, allows the female body to “fully participate in the expression of its pleasure and *jouissance*…women can openly mock the ‘sanctity’ of patriarchal power by reducing it to limp eggplants between their legs or twisted skirts and saris” (*Diasporic* 220). Men are not ignorant of their exclusion, and as women are gender-segregated in such social spaces, so are they. Mohammed describes a scenario where

an Indian man attending a traditional Muslim wedding night in village Trinidad may find himself cut off from the women and interacting with a primarily male grouping. Here he is expected to behave like his male peers, share their jokes, be a man in a male culture. He may or may not be comfortable in this situation, and may change drastically when confronted with another situation, say a masquerade band in Trinidad Carnival in which mixing with the other sex is not only indiscriminate, but altogether desirable. Here both the multicultural
setting and the flirtation with women bring out another aspect of his masculinity, one which may be quite different from his interaction with other men from his ethnic group and class. (38-39)

That is, an Indian man must behave differently with his jahaji bhai in an Indian space than with Creoles in a multicultural setting. With the former he must reinforce the values of Indian masculinity, whether he wants to or not, or risk being feminized or cast out of the society of other Indian men. Matikor (the women’s-only pre-wedding dance) was far more widely practiced in rural communities and is now far less common than it once was (Diasporic 97-98). Mona does not need matikor to show her what marriage is like. She already knows through observation that she does not want to marry: “I had always refused the idea of marriage. Not love, never that. But marriage with its eternal domestic trappings seemed like certain death” (Espinet 181). She does not need to subvert; in post-indenture Trinidad, she can actually leave. Matikor and jahaji bahen solidarity for survival are limited forms of personal freedom in, it is implied, a more modern age.20

The conclusion of The Swinging Bridge is also musical, evoking again singing Ramayana and dancing matikor. At the end of her sojourn back to Trinidad as an adult, Mona muses:

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20 Matikor, as an expression of Indian female sexuality that differentiates between older, experienced women and virgins and that suggests that young women must be “taught” sex, contradicts the more common Caribbean societal conception of Indian women as having a “natural” sensuality that exists in conjunction with their purported submissiveness. This naturally submissive sensuality is the same as the one previously noted (and invented) by orientalists like Kingsley; those colonial impressions are passed on to colonized men themselves like a disease.
Like any other migrant navigating new terrain, I bring my own beat to the land around me…When the rhythm [of a new beat] becomes right, everyone forgets the time when cacophony threatened to drown the whole enterprise. I heard the beat of the hosay drum inside the steelband, heard chac-chac and dholak, dhantal, cuatro, and iron, coming to me in a rhythm that had me transfixed for hours. A dub rhythm, the Caroni dub. (305)

Caroni dub is inherently creolized, a mixture of beats and instruments from Africa and India, “Afro-Caribbean dub mixes with Indian folk songs from the Caroni plain” (“Engendering” 35). Caroni dub is a representation of ethnic solidarity as “Trinidad swings into the new millennium as a ‘douglia nation,’” as it incorporates “historical experience stressing the commonality of experience between African slavery and Indian indenture as two insidious forms of colonial exploitation” (35).

*The Swinging Bridge* treats douglarization as variously an inevitability and an impossibility, suggesting that, at this postcolonial stage, no one really knows, and that both institutionally and individually, it is an idea many resist. The crux of the matter appears to be that it must not be imposed. The Trinidadian government’s misguided attempts at hybridized cultural production at the time of independence is represented in the novel by a government-sponsored travelling douglia folklorist and dancer whose efforts in Indian-dominated South Trinidad to sell interpretive dancing of indentured life on the plantation is met with refusal: “the cane-cutter image did not work at all; we were stiff and unresponsive and all her appeals to ancestral pride…met with
nothing. Obviously we at La Pastora were done with cane cutting” (Espinet 68). At the same time, “Coming into our own meant celebrating our own culture and not some washed-out white people song and dance sent from England. It was real, this culture of ours, a Creole bacchanal, multiracial, multicultural, cosmopolitan” (67). People have to work out the meaning of creolization for themselves, and music is a primary arena for this, particularly in Trinidad. Even there, overtness on the subject of culture-mixing alone does not go smoothly. Overtones of actual race-mixing and douglarization are even more controversial, particularly when the woman involved is Indian. “Real Unity” (2000), a collaborative soca song by Machel Montano (a black man) and Drupatee Ramgoonai (an Indian woman), was a “direct call for unity” that “sidestep[ed] the race talk common in the public sphere and…present[ed] messages of integration” (Niranjana 185-186). Despite its immense popularity, due mostly to catchiness, not politics, the song has been criticized for its overt suggestion of interracial sexuality:

Everybody looking at we
How we wining in ah unity

21 Tejaswini Niranjana cites the 1996 controversy over the calypso “Jahaji Bhai” by mixed-race performer Brother Marvin; the song extols common origins and shipboard kin groups, uses English and Hindi lyrics and criticizes “feigned ignorance” over shared roots. The public’s original enthusiasm for the song was followed by “fierce opposition from some Africanists to Marvin’s interpretation of history. One sort of criticism came from those who felt that the calypso privileged the Indian part of Marvin’s heritage over the African part…Marvin might be a douga, some said, but that did not mean that every Afro-Trinidadian would find in his or her ancestry a man praying in front of a [Hindu] jhandi [flag]. To argue that this mixing existed everywhere in Trinidad was to take away recognition from all that was African. Some listeners also complained that it was inappropriate to mix Shango religious chants with ‘coolic music’” (163).
Is Mr. Machel with Drupatee
Movin like ah big family
And that is real unity.

“Wining” is erotically charged Caribbean dancing that specifically features pelvic gyrations. The song also uses Hindi film song lyrics—it is an all-around mashup.

The implication that Machel and Drupatee together will parent the “united nation” of the chorus “suggests that the desire to unite physically is related to the desire for the unification of the body politic” (187). This may seem like an argument for douglarization in all forms, as well as the culmination of fears over Indian women’s “slackness” and propensity for Creole men, but it ignores who Drupatee is: the Indo-Caribbean queen of chutney.

Chutney is a hybridized Indo-Caribbean musical genre that blends Caribbean soca and calypso rhythms, certain kinds of Hindu religious instrumentation and songs, Hindi and Bhojpuri lyrics and sometimes English Creole. The Indo-Trinidadian Drupatee is the major and earliest Indian female singer of the genre, and indeed helped invent and define it. The problem is that her performances put her visibly on stage—and she is an expert winer. When she rose to national prominence in 1987-88, male Indian commentators stated flatly “no Indian woman has any right to sing calypso” or that “Indian women have been a disgrace to Hinduism.” An acerbic writer proclaimed that “for an Indian girl to throw her upbringing and culture to mix with vulgar music, sex and alcohol in Carnival tents tells me
that something is radically wrong with her psyche. Drupatee Ramgoonai has chosen to worship the God of sex, wine and easy money.” (113)

Drupatee’s oeuvre is negatively contrasted with classical Indian religious dance and music forms, though she began her career as a respectable singer of popular Indian film songs and Hindu religious songs, or bhajans. Particularly controversial is her song “Lick Down Me Nani” (“Careless Driver” 1998), the title of which means either “run over my maternal grandma with an automotive vehicle” or “give me cunnilingus.” That Indians’ revered grandmother could be punned with a vulgar slang for “vagina” was outrageous, especially as Drupatee sang this song in front of Afro-Caribbean men in racially mixed audiences. Puri argues, however, that “the public outcry about these aspects of ‘Lick Down Me Nani’ fails to address—indeed, actively displaces—another aspect of the song: its narrative of rape and violence” (197). Puri’s reading is one that presupposes rape or force in the sexual innuendo, though this is not immediately obvious from the lyrics. Drupatee is not the only female chutney singer, and it has fallen on Indian women singers of chutney to refuse the type of earlier Afro-Caribbean “race calypsos” that in the 1950s and then again in the 1980s would

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22 Mehta points out that Indo-Caribbean female writers—like Espinet and Shah—are also subject to “cultural constraints” and “the fear of social ostracism that still threaten[s] Indo-Caribbean women writers, who are forced to confront Hindu sexual prudishness and sexual censorship in their writings on a regular basis” (220).
exoticize the Indian woman, foreground Indian cooking [i.e., curry] in their sexual imagery and boast about the charms of the African man. Unlike in the 1950s, by the 1980s an articulate and confident East Indian middle class had emerged that periodically raised objections to how Indians were portrayed. (Niranjana 146)

Unlike Montano’s abovementioned “Real Unity” (2000), a co-production with Drupatee, such calypsos actively exhorted Indian women to join with African men because of the shortcomings of their own menfolk, again inciting the Indian fear of douglarization. An oft-cited example of such is the superstar Mighty Sparrow’s “Sexy Marajin” (1982), which called on “sexy Marajin” to leave her Hindu pandit husband for Sparrow, leading to Sparrow’s public attack by the Hindu Maha Sabha, the largest Hindu religious organization in the Caribbean. Interestingly, the political Afro-Caribbean calypsos that dealt with social ills rather than love and sex until the 1990s did not call the names of East Indian women at all. It is as though in the public realm of politics and society, only the Indian man could appear as a rival, who won by deceit, cunning, or sheer numbers, whereas in the private realm of intimate relations, the Indian woman is sought to be integrated into the Creole imaginary through cohabitation, marriage, and her supposed desire to leave behind the patriarchal structures of the close-knit East Indian community. (136)

Calypsos in general presumed that Indian women should want to leave their fathers
and husbands’ domination, should want to creolize as a better alternative to being Indian. Drupatee, though, embodies the possibility of being both Indian and Caribbean. She is rooted in Indian tradition, but is of Trinidad. It is simply not true that the majority of chutney participants and viewers are women, but otherwise, Indian women publicly performing and dancing chutney is an extraordinary feminine display of freedom of movement in a way that is both Indian and Creole. The indentureship legacy of Indian women’s “hotness” and “slackness” is transformed into a form of agency for the entire community. But in Espinet’s novel, the women must liberate themselves first.

Gainder’s and Mona’s journeys away from Trinidad and back to it parallel each other in the basic sense of beginning a new life away from the control of family and community, forging “solidarity bonds between widows and adolescent girls to demonstrate how both groups have been socially disinheritd by patriarchal gender infringements that associate widowhood and desertion from an unwanted marriage with a violation against normative expectations of respectability” (“Engendering” 23).

23 Chutney lyrics generally deal with the quotidian of rural and working-class Indian experiences; it is folk music, the people’s music. The characteristic wining is also quite reminiscent of matikor dancing. Mehta compares the movements when performed by Indian women on stage and in dancing to birthing, orgasm and general female sensuality, reading wining as an expression of female agency: “The suggestive movements of chutney dancing are a public demonstration of women’s efforts to defy normative codes of Hindu patriarchal morality and its prescriptions for women’s private and domesticated sexuality that should be relegated to the confines of the bedroom. By flaunting their bodies before an audience, Indian women show their disregard for the patriarchal dictates of their culture and class that associate open displays of female sexualized behaviour with vulgarity and cultural impropriety. Like matikor, chutney remains an all-inclusive female space; the majority of participants and viewers are women. Chutney represents the power of the female body in motion” (Diasporic 98).
Mona is less threatened by the reality of forced marriage than by the idea of marriage in general, having witnessed her mother’s oppressed life as a wife. Both her and Gainder’s mantra is “escape,” though she does manage, later, to move beyond pure reactionary survival. Their journeys both begin at the end and work back to the beginning. Espinet’s three chapter prologues follow this trajectory, a narrative structure that reflects when a “colonial history must be reverted from its chronological progression to expose the displaced historicity of the colonized” (25). This rewriting of the linear, Eurocentric meta-narrative of colonial history restores to Indo-Caribbean women their own specific histories.

The idea that Indians will forever be bound to the estate begins with their physical quarantine during indenture to the fields and to the logies, repurposed African slave barracks. Indians were immediately reduced to the fact of their existence as coolie labor, and this metonymic identification endures postcolonially. Young Mona, for instance, learns that she has a racial identity from black and mixed-race girls her own age when they call her a coolie: “The first time I was called a coolie [by the other girls] I was only about five years old…Until the moment I heard the words ‘Coolie, coolie, coolie!’ I had been just a girl…A coolie was a nasty ugly thing” (Espinet 203-204). For the original coolie laborers, life in the logies made marital privacy impossible and in this context, the public-private performance of marriage was privileged over intimacy: men policed men and women policed women

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24 The most pejorative term for an East Indian in the Caribbean remains “coolie,” which carries even now connotations of rural ignorance and permanent psychic boundedness to the sugar estate. “Coolie,” when Indo-Caribbean people use the word among themselves, is a state of mind.
in the proper conducting of marital roles. Somehow, in this milieu, the widow-prostitute had to become a wife again.

Hindu and Muslim marriages were not recognized as legal until 1946 in British Trinidad. Hindu marriages were generally referred to as “bamboo marriages,” after the bamboo maro (tent) under which they were conducted. A man could easily have both a “bamboo wife” and a wife under Christian law. His children with the “bamboo wife,” usually the first wife of youth, were illegitimate. The two-family controversies this practice provoked are explored in Espinet’s novel, which details the reaction of the legitimate Christianized family, Mona’s, to the discovery that her grandfather had a bamboo wife. After his “church wife” dies, Pappy, whose real name is Ganga Singh, receives a letter from his Hindu wife Etwaria, who had been waiting for him for decades:

I wait all these years for you. Now your wife die you can come back with me. I live in my house all this time…I still waiting for you. Now everything settle you could come back soon. I remain,

Your living wife,

Etwaria. (65)

Now an old man, Ganga wants to go to her, but his outraged son, Mona’s father, and the dictates of respectability will not permit him. The family debates Etwaria’s use of “living” rather than “loving” in her closing, and comes to no satisfactory conclusion other than that they are, either way, offended. No one is inclined to show either Ganga or Etwaria any compassion. Etwaria has no social place; although she made
the leap from Indian *rand* to wife in religion, she did not assimilate into the legal and therefore public Indo-Caribbean family. Her tragic tale is that she “had come from India as a young girl, already widowed. Her marriage to Pappy lasted for two years. She had no legal hold on him when he accepted the Christian minister’s suggestion of [second wife and Mona’s grandmother] Mama’s hand in marriage.” By contrast, “Mama was a fine young Christian girl, educated” (66). The childless Etwaria represents the Old World woman the scions of Indian indenture would rather forget. Unlike Gainder, she is never rehabilitated by a descendant, because she has none. Etwaria is a casualty of history, a *rand* forever through no fault of her own.

Joshua, Gainder’s husband is the first Christian in Mona’s family, but as a result of his conversion, all his descendants become committed Protestants. Having Anglicanized the black population and in contrast to the Catholic French in Guadeloupe and Martinique, which also received large numbers of Indian laborers, the British were never particularly interested in converting East Indian indentured laborers to Christianity. This proselytizing gap was filled in nineteenth-century Trinidad—but not in the more geographically spread out and colonially brutal British Guiana—by Canadian Presbyterian missionaries. Mona reports that

By the time my parents were born, many Indians in Trinidad had become Christian converts, and those who had not still took advantage of the church schools set up by Presbyterian missionaries from
Canada. A precarious middle class had begun to spring up among those formerly doomed to indentured servitude. (28)

The price of education and admission to the middle class was adherence to moral and social strictures dictated by Christian missionaries and the abandonment of Indian customs as “backward” even when they were not intrinsically Muslim or Hindu. Missionaries occupied a paternal role that included the approval of legal Indian marriages: “These church people from Canada interfered so much with our lives…Big strong men like Pappy and Mr. Bhim up the road, allowing a few white men to rule their lives and tell them who to marry and who to leave. And what about love?” (64) After indentureship, even when Hindu and Muslim marriages were legalized, Christianized Indians themselves considered such joinings less legitimate, as “conversion to Christianity reinforced the precarious position of Indo-Caribbean Christians through mediated identifications, a disavowal of history, and the internalization of Western referents” (“Engendering” 29). Certainly Mona’s family internalized their superior social position, as exemplified by their reaction to Etwaria’s letter and the Hindu “transgressions” of the grandfather. Mona reports that at the Hindu wedding of poorer relatives, the children are told “they were our family too and that we should understand that not everybody was Christian like us” (Espinet 64). That is, they were not lucky enough to be Christian, which also meant wealthier

25 In Trinidad, Presbyterian missionaries offered education to the formerly indentured, and Christianity became the major Indo-Trinidadian road to the middle class. By contrast, the rise of the Indian middle class in British Guiana is associated with former indentured laborers growing rice as a cash crop, i.e., with the former indentured becoming small-scale farmers in their own right.
and more educated. As an older man with grown children, Da-Da, however, becomes aware that “Indians hate their own background. People like our family, Presbyterian people and middle-class people, they hate the history that marks them as coolies” (285).

Canadian missionary activities were not discouraged by the British, as “[n]ew converts were not allowed to smoke or drink, a rule probably established to rein in the estate drunkenness of Indian labourers on payday and to quiet the night-time cries of beaten wives” (81). So there is some framing of conversion as beneficial to women. The wives of Canadian missionaries were often charged with advising Indian women on intimate matters, and they too articulated the conversion project in gendered terms:

Women evangelicals of the Canadian Presbyterian Church, which began proselytizing among the Indians in Trinidad in 1868, interacted closely with the indentured women and recorded their impressions…[they reported that] “Our women immigrants are not recruited from the [higher] class that in India are shut up in zenanas. In Trinidad they find themselves of added importance through the small proportion of their sex. They have great freedom of intercourse and much evil example around them. Sad to say they often shew themselves to be as degraded as they are ignorant.” (Niranjana 58)

Victorian social mores found both the Afro-Caribbean jamette and the orientalized Indian woman threatening, but the latter was presumed more tractable, if only because of Indian men’s presumed cultural drive to marry and Indian women’s
alleged inherent submissiveness. After independence and in an uncertain pre-
independence climate, the Presbyterian Church helped many Christian Trinidadian
Indians immigrate to Canada, arguing that, as Mona’s family says, “Indian people
from good families should think about settling in Canada because it was such a nice
place, with such nice polite people.” By contrast, the uncertain pre-independence
climate in Trinidad and British Guiana demanded “the Indian-only politics of
Apanjaat… ‘Your own people first… Others after’” (Espinet 35). Caribbean
immigrants to Canada found there a different breed of racism, though ironically, as
Mona notes,

many former Presbyterian missionaries, from other parts of Canada
originally, had retired in Toronto where their “old flock” had
dispersed. These old missionaries reached out to their Trini friends,
and sometimes showed up at dances and boat cruises just to keep in
touch. Funny how I had never imagined that they could be marked by
us as well. After years as Trinidad they must have found it difficult to
fit once more into the Canadian mould. (153)

As previously mentioned, the jamette was the stereotypical colonial figure of the Afro-
Caribbean exslave woman at Carnival: loud and overtly sexual yet unfeminine, in contrast to
the docile Indo-Caribbean indentured woman (Niranjana 82).

In the 1960s and 1970s, national independence narratives emphasized the discrete origins
and development of the Indo- and Afro-Caribbean to such an extent that Guyana in particular
developed a race-based bipartite political system and a strong tradition of voting according to
race. This system of racialized voting was called apan jaat (Hindi, “our kind”).
Colonization changes the colonizer too, though arguably less and certainly less malevolently than it does the colonized. The latter’s failure to adapt meant death on the plantation. Along with rampant addiction to rum and narcotics, for numerous indentured men and women, the ultimate escape from the drabness and brutality of estate life was through suicide. Some hung themselves because they were unable or unwilling to submit to the degrading or severe manual labour expected of them. The vulnerability of women placed many tensions on indentured families and were another cause of suicides much discussed by officials. (Carter 100)

Mohammed emphasizes that the high male suicide rate was worrisome to the colonial officials, who blamed it on the immorality of women (60). The legacy of suicide haunts the Indo-Caribbean to this day: the alleged “coolie people” tendency to kill themselves—usually over family rows or failed love—is a source of gallows humor in Guyana, where Indians are said to be always “drinking Malathion” (an insecticide), and in Trinidad, where they are always “drinking Gramazone” (or Gramoxone, an herbicide). Both of these poisons are older agricultural pesticides to which estate laborers had access. The substances are capable of killing all Caribbean “pests”—taking any kind of life that was an impediment to sugar plantation economics, from weeds to weevils to workers.

Indian women’s survival in and adaptation to indentured life on the plantation sometimes involved the type of forced sexual relations with white overseers and
planters more thoroughly documented in African slavery. Espinet tells the story of
Mona’s distant relative Dularie, a woman weeder, who catches the eye of a white
overseer: Dularie was “tall and slender with green cat’s eyes and a light
complexion…she would probably meet her own mother’s fate, producing an even
lighter-skinned child for [her Indian husband] Seeram.” Seeram, a cane truck driver,
was compelled “to let his wife go to the overseer’s quarters three nights a week for a
whole month,” as a result of which he allegedly commits arson on the sugar estate,
setting a series of fires for which no one is ever caught. The community consensus is
that “At least he had the sense to leave Dularie alone and punish the estate instead”
(Espinet 167). Dularie has a son, Devindra/Davy, who looks like his white overseer
father but is raised Indian. This branch of Mona’s family eventually produces her
cousin Bess, who is also quite light-skinned but identifies politically as a postcolonial
Indo-Caribbean woman and thoroughly disavows her colonial white ancestry:

I am not rapeseed. And that white raper-man who took advantage of
my great-grandmother, who caused my grandfather Davy to drink
himself to death because that overseer, the white coward, would not
smile on him, I curse him and all of his generations. I am not of that
line. (288)

The structure of Bess’ first-person invocation here is like that of a spell. She is
performing a magical speech act; by so declaring her identity, it becomes that. What
matters to Bess and to Mona is the existence of a biological and cultural maternal
Indian line, regardless of whether the Indian ancestress was married, widowed, raped or not; moral character is of no concern.

The moral character of women is however of the utmost concern to Indo-Caribbean men. Male rage permeates *The Swinging Bridge*. Mona grows up in a Trinidad on the eve of independence where, for Indians, life was a mess of contradictions. Even in urban San Fernando we heard of girls being cursed or even beaten by family members for so much as looking at ‘man.’ And husbands too, beating and kicking wives…It was a puzzle, the sheer violence of that time. Perhaps our parents were convinced that in this newer, freer world, with new rules being invented overnight, safeguarding their daughters’ honour had become much more complicated. (187)

But the violence begins before independence. All of Mona’s male relatives feel trapped by their circumstances, beginning with her grandfather, a usually quiet man who reaches his limit and is fired from his job of weighing cane at the estate factory “because he cussed up a young white overseer. The man horked and spat near Pappy’s foot and called him a stupid bong coolie. For nothing, just because he was white and he could do it…He cursed the overseer in Hindi, in patois, in Chinee, he cursed the man’s mother and all his generations to come” (58). This outrage spurs Pappy to defy the odds and save his meager wages to buy land, unheard-of for an Indian man of his generation. Mona admires his perseverance: “I was moved to tears

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28 “Looking at ‘man’” has no article in this creole because “man” is here the abstraction, the signified of “man.”
by his grasp of the sheer endurance, the courage, and the wiliness that early Indians like our own grandparents, ignorant in the ways of the Creole culture, needed to work out a means of survival in the face of such hostility” (59). Her father Da-Da, however, is doomed by his rejection of his land inheritance from Pappy and his desire to move to urban San Fernando, to live with Creoles away from his natal place. Da-Da is all that is wrong with the Indian man’s inheritance from the plantation: he has none of the self-sufficiency of Pappy and all of the propensity to blame and punish women and anyone weaker than himself for his lack of social power. A grown-up Mona overhears him justifying the corporal punishment of his children to her brother Kello; the father felt that he had been strict, but

I never punish my children like on the estate…On the estate they used to beat children with rope, thick thick rope tied up in knots…And it wasn’t only Indians on the estate—black people too would beat their children worse than that. And don’t think we so stupid that we don’t know what cause it. What cause it was slavery days when them bakra would find sport in thinking up all kinda punishment for the slaves…I want to forget it, Kello, but I can’t forget it. How could I do that to Mona? (206)

At this point Kello is on his deathbed, suggesting that it takes that severe of a familial event for Indian men and Indian families to admit the rotten truth of their domestic lives. Kello, a more “enlightened” man, refuses to accept the story of transference, that colonial violence by bakra—white people—is to blame for Indian male violence.
As Mohammed points out, the limiting view of Caribbean patriarchy “puts the blame for the subordination of women and the emasculation of men squarely in the hands of another greater patriarchy and not on the gender relations negotiated between men and women as these societies continue to undergo additional transformation” (59). So Kello responds instead by putting the blame squarely on his father: “You are a racist Da-Da… You tried to kill Mona because she had a Creole boyfriend. Ask Mona to forgive you. You have to do it. The last thing I’m asking for, you must do it, Da-Da” (Espinet 207). The father later acknowledges to Mona that the event happened, but can’t quite say he was sorry. Da-Da tells her “What happen happen. I feel a lot of shame for making a big girl like you kneel down and walk across the yard, cutting up your knees on the gravel…I can’t change what happened then, but we must cross that bridge” (209). He cries and she hugs him, but she can’t say anything. The partial apology does not change what happened. He is at least conscious than he has transgressed against his daughter, but cannot, as Kello also points out, admit that he has actually done the same to his son—Kello leaves Trinidad as a young man because of the severity of the beatings meted out by his father. As a result, Kello is not there to protect his sister Mona from being attacked by their father.

Mona also barely escapes, at eleven, being taken by a man who, having identified her as a schoolgirl, gives her twelve dollars and lures her into a taxi. When she resists successfully he becomes angry and says: “Me eh dealing with no lil gyul again. All ah allyuh so damn harden” (45). Schoolgirls, he implies, have learned some kind of agency from Creole society and black and Creole women that has
“robbed” them of submissiveness. Oddly, being a schoolgirl makes her both more and less likely, in his view, to go with him. That is, schoolgirls are presumed to be more open to sexual propositions that girls who stay safely at home; but school also teaches them to “talk back” and resist male advances. For Indian girls too, becoming a schoolgirl is allying themselves with black and creole girls who are more likely to go to school and, in traditional Indian perception, are more likely to engage in extramarital sexual practices. Ironically, Mona’s father supports her getting the education that might allow escape. She says he wanted me to have a career and to grow into an independent woman…To him, a scientist would be an ideal profession for me because I would be hidden from everyday contact with the world, pottering around a hidden lab, emerging on occasion to astound the world with a remarkable discovery, then retreating to safety again.

(177)

Pride in his offspring’s educational potential does not preclude him from policing her sexuality; these are two different matters—but being scholarly and virginal are both approved-of values in the eyes of the Indo-Caribbean community, and it is Da-Da’s job to ensure that his daughter is both. His fantasy is to have a daughter who is both educated and “pure,” a hidden pearl for her family, destined for one select man. But the approved-of school is where Indian girls share stories and fears, and where Mona learns things her family would prefer her not to know:
At school we heard stories about what fathers or brothers or uncles would do if they caught wayward girls in slackness. When I thought back to those times, it seemed obvious that other girls—black, Chinese, mixed, the few white girls in the school—did not live with the same threats. Or did they? I never knew. There must have been some reason why the stories circulated only among the Indian girls, though we never admitted it, so strong was the habit of denial. (138)

High school, Mona concludes, is a place of “false promises,” where girls aspire to become secretaries but reinforce the gender roles with which they must live, learning mostly that they needed to watch the way they looked and be “careful.” School is the training ground for them to learn how to be women in the public eye of the community. But school is also where danger exists, where Indian women might learn to creolize, or even worse, douglarize. Guarding girls’ virginity presumably preserves them for Indian men and for the continuation of the Indian community.

29 The milieu of school is where girls learn the gendered behavior of “Walking as if you know where you’re going. Walking without a slip, without a blemish, without a flaw to ruin your character. Walking and holding up your good name, your family’s good name. Walking with your back straight, your posture taken from imprinting yourself against a wall…Walking with a tempo moving between thinking out what steps to make, carefully now, and thinking out what false steps not to make because you could lose everything, thinking how not to shame everybody, how not to stand at a street corner and talk to a boy, especially a boy out of a school uniform, a big boy already working, a big man. Being careful…Becoming a wife, with a husband, drunk maybe…falling on you late at night…Tiptoeing through life, frightened, following rules and laws that hold down your skirt, your hair, your mind, serving all the men in the family…careful. Better be careful” (Espinet 137).

30 Indian male control of Indian women in Trinidad was also threatened by the establishment of American military bases in Trinidad during World War II. Espinet’s novel describes how “Overnight North Trinidad became a place full of American soldiers, their pockets bulging with cash. The island was strategically located at the bottom of the Caribbean Basin, hugging the curving tip of the South American land mass. A military base was established at
The titular “swingbridge” of Espinet’s novel makes its appearance when Mona, as a country girl from South Trinidad visiting her urban cousins, is warned not to go any further from home than a silk bridge above a roaring river. But she is dared by a boy and crosses the bridge, though the boy is too afraid to do so and punishes her by rocking the bridge while she is on it. Mehta argues that this “swinging bridge” provides an apt metaphor for these indeterminate timelines on which the past mediates a future-inspired present in the form of multiple diasporic dislocations and exilic relocations” (“Engendering” 25). At the time, Mona is less interested in the crossing and its symbolism than in the boy’s attitude of masculine superiority: “It wasn’t just his swinging of the bridge that enraged me; it was his little mannish attitude, as if he was sure that he was better than I was and always would be” (Espinet 87). As a female child, her mode is defiance. But when she returns as an adult to Trinidad in 1995, one hundred and fifty years after Indian indentureship begins, it is the ongoing nature of Indian arrival and departure and the Indo-Caribbean woman’s constant state of becoming that capture her attention. At her cousin Bess’s celebration of Indian arrival, Bess points out that

the grand picture is still what everybody wants. The righteous Indian family, intact, coming across the kala pani together. Like the way migration is presented today. Not this story. Not a journey of young

Chaguaramas in the northwest and out of it spewed loud music, green army jeeps, and soldier boys. Local girls from respectable families were ‘dating, necking, and petting’ with Yankee boys, sometimes even ‘going all the way,’ while their behavior with local boys was different. With local boys they used to go out, kiss, feel up, but then hold out and not ‘give nutten till they get de ring” (80).
widows looking for a new life. Wife-murder? Beatings? You must be mad, they would say (297).

Bess’ material contribution to the celebration is an exhibit featuring Indian women’s traditional jewelry. But she foregoes her desire to also tell the ancestress Gainder’s story at the festivities, as she fears Gainder will be dismissed as a rand. The celebration of Indian arrival is an odd mix of historical recuperation and rejection.

Bess reflects:

It’s Indian time now…Every time I go to an Indian celebration and I see who we are, hundreds of thousands of us, dressed in shimmering clothing, in the reds and yellows and shocking pinks that we brought to this land, I feel a sense of pride. And power too. But nights like this I am filled with fear about what might go wrong…I feel a rigid kind of thinking coming through. (300-301)

Rigidity and the foreclosure of multiple ways of becoming are the enemy of the Indo-Caribbean community and of the Indo-Caribbean. Both this novel and A Silent Place end hopefully but cautiously, emphasizing that these stories and identities are still in process.

II. A Silent Place: Aleyah, Mother of the Nation

Less is known of the Indian ancestress Gaitree (the Vedic Gayatri is the Brahmic consort and mother of all) in Shah’s A Silent Place, with the exception of the fact that she had, against her will, committed the cardinal sin of motherhood:
abandoning her children to save her own life. Still, for Aleyah Hassan, she is a worthy progenitor because she saved her own life. The legacy that Gainder and Gaitree leave to their female descendants is courage. But the courage always skips generations. Aleyah describes the first generation of her family born in British Guiana as a weeder and a cane-cutter on plantation Leonora, west coast Demerara, who had a hard life but accepted it with a sort of resignation that, rather than bravery, becomes the Indo-Caribbean inheritance. So Aleyah theorizes that her grandmother Nani got her spirit from the ones who actually crossed over, as “[t]hat would take spirit and daring—to stand at the stern of a sailing ship and watch the land of your ancestors disappear from view, possibly forever. It had to be their blood that made fists of their hands and placed the fight in her shoulders” (Shah 72). Yet, once on the estates, the intrepid migrants revert and turn inward, raising their children to be quiet and keep their heads down. The migrants were sent to a hard life on Plantation Versailles where they worked and eventually arranged a marriage for their only daughter: “And so they lived, and so they died, and the old world went with them” (180). But not really. In Indo-Caribbean literature, the old world always reasserts

31 Upon leaving Guyana at eighteen, Aleyah describes her natal Indo-Guyanese township of Victorine in semi-rural West Demerara as the kind of place where “they expect my claim, as if it is a matter of course, that a schoolgirl from their town should set about to save the world. I can only suppose that the full import has escaped them. Their world is defined by the boundaries of this small country town and the nearby rice fields and sugar plantations. They accept everything that comes their way with a minimum of fuss: births, deaths, newcomers, new laws, higher taxes. Everything is tacked on accommodated, absorbed. The occasional unrest of the sugar workers on the neighboring estates is seen as something foreign; they never care to participate in protests or strikes. It is not their way. All that happens is God’s will and they thank the heavens for life and everything that goes with it” (Shah 40-41).
itself as it perhaps never was, as a veiled historical imaginary and an ever-present yearning for roots.

In *A Silent Place*, Gaitree’s marriage to Calcutta Muslim Janki Khan takes place aboard ship. The “bored” migrants

picked up themselves to celebrate. The women fetched Gaitree away from her husband and found a red sari to dress her in, and decorated her palms and feet with henna paste…They lent her their bangles and earrings and necklaces…They danced around her as they took her out into the yard to present her to her husband. When Janki looked upon her, he saw a rich Hindu bride. (178)

This dancing foreshadows the development of *matikor*. This is the first time Gaitree has ever experienced kindness from other Indian women: in her rural village, where she is *chamar*, of slightly lower caste status than her husband, her own typically ogreish mother-in-law is the chief agent of her misery, treating her as a slave, stealing Gaitree’s sons’ affections and in the end attempting to poison Gaitree. Aboard ship, the loan of jewelry—wealth worn on the body—establishes the migrant women as Gaitree’s replacement family, her *jahaji bahene* or “ship sisters.” Too, *matikor* is supposed to be performed by older female relatives; Gaitree’s *bahene* handily step in and it matters to no one that she is not a virgin being initiated into Indian wifehood. Perhaps in shock over their own *kala pani* loss of caste in the oceanic crossing, the women also do not comment on the radically interfaith nature of the marriage:
Gaitree is a Hindu, Janki is a Muslim, and the ceremony is both: they circle the fire in a Hindu ritual to prayers by a Muslim moulvi,

married, Janki and Gaitree, in the eyes of both their gods, before Allah and before Bhagwan. No one questioned this. It was as if they had already taken up new ways as they sat at the water’s edge and waited on their passage to a new world. (178)

Their coupling aboard ship is also as idyllic as it is unlikely: “when he unwound her sari and saw, by the light of the moon, the slivers of stretched skin that scarred her belly, saw the silver streaks on her honey skin, he asked no questions, just kissed each one tenderly. When she made as if to talk, he put a finger to her lips and shushed her. All their whole married life together he never asked” (178). Though inter-caste marriage is generally acknowledged as common on the plantations, interreligious marriage between the far more numerous Hindus and Muslims is less commented upon, for the simple reason that in the absence of Muslim women, Indian Muslim laborers married Hindu women who then converted to Islam.

Marriage is of primary importance in *A Silent Place*. Aleyah’s entire lineage is haunted by grandmother Nani’s inability to be a community-approved “proper wife,” and Aleyah herself repeats the pattern. Before British Guianese independence, Nani is an outspoken young wife who acquires a reputation for helping other poor Indian women and men by offering them a socialist vision of an alternative to the drudgery of their lives:
They came from the sugar plantations and the rice fields: poor women with sunk-in eyes and rickety children, and men with rum bellies and swear words…They worked worse than mules, they said. They were poor, all right. We weren’t much better off than them, but they came because my mother fed them hope. (Shah 23-24)

Nani acquires socialism from the mysterious Pandit Seecharan, a Hindu religious leader. She is bright enough to understand it and fiery enough to electrify others when she repeats it. She tells Aleyah in her own words that she wanted to help other women in more destitute positions and that “strikers were shot in the back,” which required revenge and restitution (182). Indian women were indeed strike leaders in both pre- and post-independence Caribbean. Some such women were even considered martyrs.

Nani’s problem is that she literally outstages her husband Nazeer, a quiet man who is talented in the implied “feminine” pursuit of dancing. She speaks on stage at

32 A Trinidad Express article from January 17, 1975, entitled “Women Play Militant Role in Cane Belt Row,” states: “One of the many features of the cane farmers’ struggles in 1974 and this year, has been the militancy of the women taking part, and several women of Barrackpore have given good examples of this…In many ways the more militant people are the women, and it is an indication of their belief in what they are doing.” Still though, “Indian male collusion with women’s subjugation is also evident in the various labour unions, where men have not considered it their responsibility to create dynamic leadership roles for women despite women’s demonstrated leadership during periods of labour unrest” (qtd. in Diaspora 75, 76).

33 Notably, in 1939 British Guiana, a weeder known as Sumintra was shot for protesting conditions on the sugar estates; and in 1964, two years before independence, one Kowsilla was murdered while protesting at Plantation Leonora by an Afro-Guyanese scab—the British often used Afro-Guyanese to quell Indo-Guyanese plantation uprisings during this time that marked the emergence of race-based nationalism. Both women are remembered by their first names—the majority of Indian indentured laborers were assigned surnames that the first generation did not necessarily consider their own.
unionizing meetings and is far more articulate than he. Despite the presence of vocal women in the labor movement as a whole, in Nani’s village labor organizing is man’s work. The managers dealt with men. It was fun for [Nazeer] at first. He liked the crowds; he thought it was all a stage, a real-life dance to the chants of the workers. He really enjoyed himself. But then the questions would come. People expected him to know about all the things that Ma knew. When they found out he didn’t, they’d watch Pa stumble and mumble and try to duck away from the questions they threw at his head, and then they stopped clapping back their laughter in their bellies. (24)

At a final workers’ rally, Nani answers political questions her husband cannot; the crowd murmurs and laughs, and Nazeer walks away. He stays out lying in a punt trench until dawn and his hair turns white overnight. When he comes home, Nani—then called “Baby”—is so panicked at the idea of losing her husband, her social net and legitimacy as an Indian wife, that she cries

Nazeer, Nazeer, I’m going to stop all this now. All the books and leaflets—look, I am tearing them up. They’re dead. I’ll burn them. I’ll bury them. I’ll be a wife to you and a mother to Shabhan, that’s what I’ll be from now on. I’ll chase everybody from my kitchen the

34 A “punt trench” is an open tunnel filled with shallow water through which oxen and/or tractors pull “punts,” flat vessels loaded with cut sugar cane stalks. They generally run on streets between the roadway and homes, and during the colonial era, stretched all the way from plantations to coastal ports. Nowadays the trenches remain but are filled with refuse and wastewater.
next time they come here. I’ll never go near a platform again. I just want to see you dance on a stage now. You’ll dance again for me, Nazeer. And I’ll make that other baby you’ve always wanted. I know you want a sister or brother for Shabhan, but I’ve always been so busy carrying on with all these people that I clean forgot myself, forgot who I was. Nazeer, Nazeer, I’m sorry, so sorry. I won’t talk to anyone but you from now on. I’ll stop-up my mouth, I’ll throw away the words, I’ll put them all on a fire today and burn every last one of them. (27-28)

Burning words, though, burns history. Even Nazeer recognizes the futility of attempting to erase history. Baby’s invocations fail when he responds with a resounding “no” to all of it:

If you ever stop-up your words they’ll choke you. You aren’t like the other women round here who just keep to their skirts and their kitchens. I like the fire in you, but I can’t be who you want. You want to change the world. Me, I just want to enjoy it. You push me how you want to go and I try to speak your words and fight your fights. Now I’m “Baby’s boy.” That’s what the men call me. That and worse…Shame’s gone deep to the roots. (28)

Shame has gone literally to the roots of his hair, which turn white with inadequacy; but Nazeer is also implying that the ancestral roots of Indians in the Caribbean are besmirched by his wife’s lack of submission to him. He wants to be a proper jahaji
bhai. Nazeer hangs up his dancing bells, takes to his room and never emerges again. The social damage has been done. His wife gives up and goes so far as to remove Shabhan, Aleyah’s mother, from school, declaring that books and learning cause unnecessary heartbreak for women.

In *A Silent Place*, Aleyah’s introduction to the domestic violence intended to subdue Indo-Caribbean women comes early. Even the children know the circumstances of her great-uncle Rayman and his wife Shamroon, whom Rayman beats mercilessly for being barren. His female relatives urge her to leave, but at the same time, “These women were most cruel with their taunts in the early days of Rayman and Shamroon’s commotion, as if throwing it all at Shamroon relieved them of a burden” (15). The women simultaneously reassure themselves that being beaten is proof of love while paradoxically hating Shamroon for refusing to leave. That is, they wish one of them had the courage to leave; but since none of them do, they deceive themselves into thinking that their domestic situations are tolerable because being beaten means that they are loved. Nani desires this to not be Aleyah’s fate, and Aleyah leaves then-British Guiana for educational exile at university in England. As her grandmother Nani’s first grandchild and “hope,” she has been blessed and cursed by visions of the old lady’s struggles and sins all her life, and even her parents say that “[i]f we believed in reincarnation, you’d think she thought that you were herself reborn, that you’re her karma” (46). Aleyah too initially—and then finally—rejects marriage, at one time, like Mona, comparing it to death (64). It is this specter of marriage as living death that causes the prescient Nani, upon hearing of her
granddaughter’s engagement, to fall into a sort of coma as though she herself were dying, after which she “[gets] up and start[s] to hum again, but all her songs are sad.”

Says Aleyah’s mother: “‘We don’t know why your news has upset her so, but we are so happy for you that you and Dean are engaged. He looks like a nice boy and his family sound like nice people’” (94). Where family and community are concerned though, appearances are, the Indo-Caribbean novel emphasizes, always deceiving. Aleyah wishes to divorce and Mona in *The Swinging Bridge* remains unmarried at the end of their respective stories.

As the aforementioned “hope” and perhaps even karmic inheritor of Nani, Aleyah is predictably doomed to repeat the pattern of driving her husband and then herself to madness over an inability to be a traditional Indian wife. When she is still young, her mother has the temerity to say that it is “different times” and that Aleyah will choose her own husband. Aleyah’s great-aunts quickly reject such a “modern” (and Afro-Caribbean) notion, declaring that “[e]ven if they find a boy that they like they still have to get approval—just like our parents did for us—or it’s nothing doing.” When the mother responds that Aleyah has plenty of time and is too focused on her books in any case, one of the old ladies mumbles, “It’s the books that worry me…The words are heavy-heavy.” They “carry the weight of the world and can ‘crush and kill’” (52). That is what happened to Nani: her learning crushed her husband and ultimately killed him. Women’s non-adherence to traditional gender roles, it is suggested, actually causes men to die. The great reveal of *A Silent Place* is Nani’s secret that she actively enabled her husband to kill himself. Aleyah’s family
and neighbors all know the story, but no one will repeat it until confronted by Aleyah, who experiences a dream-vision of the event the night before leaving her homeland for London. She hits Nani, who says nothing. In the morning, it’s as if nothing happened,

But as I cross the floor, I tread on something soft. I reach down and pick up a small bundle of threads. They are pale gold and coarse. Directly overhead is the beam where my grandfather threw the rope. I take these strands of rope to my room and put them away carefully in a corner of my suitcase. (57-58)

Reality itself is disrupted when women usurp their husbands’ roles. Female descendants are continually haunted, inheriting the guilt of betraying a husband. Nani goes hysterically and temporarily blind after she finds the body. Shortly after the hanging, after her daughter, Aleyah’s mother, secures her husband, Nani gives up all participation in the world. She “took to her rocking chair and turned herself into an old woman, killing herself with her memories,” and seeing only “a long piece of rope” (35). The community is not without feeling: “People felt so sorry for us. A dead that got carried off with a rope round his neck is not supposed to get prayers said for him, but the moulvi came. He felt so sorry for us, and said the prayers asking Allah’s pardon” (30). Individual pity for the man who committed suicide and for his bereft family—which is left without a male protector and provider—does not ultimately preclude assigning the incident to its proper place of disgrace in the communal narrative. The entire township considers Nani’s lapse into silence
“rightful penance for her sin, and they look on my mother and father as good children who are taking care of their family worries with correct fortitude: they have not bruised the neighbourhood with bitter talk, or thrown their mother out to suffer among strangers” (45). Nani and women like her are only temporary hitches in the group transformation into a spotless Indian-Caribbean community ripe for the national stage.

As the novel foreshadows, and despite her family’s implied warnings, Aleyah falls into a contemporary version of Nani’s trap. A bright girl, she wins a scholarship to study in England. There she holds herself aloof and is told by her roommate that she is “afraid to be pretty,” afraid of her own sexuality (73). She has a single brief flirtation with an Englishman who commendably does not exoticize her. But marrying him is impossible because “[h]e would never fit into our landscape, was not made to move about on hot, parched earth or through fields drowned with rain, so I had continued to edge my eyes away from his long glance” (74). She then meets the young trainee accountant Dean (Mohammed Dean Yacoob), who “knew I was a girl from back home the moment he saw me, he said. ‘The face, the hair, the voice: I still remember. I was seven when my parents left for England, but I remember.’” His family “had left Guyana in the fifties when Britain was open to immigrants from its colonies” (89, 91). Aleyah and Dean marry and have two sons, but all is not connubial bliss. Unlike successful economist Aleyah, Dean is not rising at work and he has become obsessive about it. He is cold and uncommunicative, even with his sons, and his wife reports that “[t]his freedom with his emotions has gone. As the
years have passed I have come to hope that the clasp of a hand or a move to steady me on my feet expresses some poetry that he could never say.” To save his ego, “without thinking about it,” says Aleyah, “I’d been keeping my own successes from Dean out of consideration for all that he was not achieving” (96). Aleyah blames herself for having colluded in his disappointments…I can do little else but give him a comforting embrace. I do not have the heart to confront his distress but skirt around it, careful to find the right time to give him news of my promotions and salary increases over the years. It was months before I told him that I had been made the Financial Director of World Aid. Even though he was full of congratulations, I saw how he sat before his books that night, his back rigid, unbending. (103)

His back and his Indian masculinity are rigid and unbending. Ultimately, Aleyah is offered a promotion and transfer to Barbados to be Caribbean director of World Aid. She busies herself building castles in the air where Dean can start over and the family can be happy, but his reaction to the news at the dinner table is to push his chair to the floor and leave the house, slamming the door and leaving his family behind (118). He stays out overnight as decades ago Nazeer did. When Dean returns, they have a conversation over power that parallels that of Baby/Nani and Nazeer, except Dean is more strident and less passive in his manipulation than Nazeer:

His face was dark with anger when he said, “So, what happens to my years of work? What of my career? And since when do you make the
decisions for the family? I’m the head of this house. You go where I go. It’s never the other way around.” I had stepped over his authority. I had overstepped mine. No, we were not partners. Whatever gave me that idea? My highfalutin theories of women’s place in the world?

(123-124)

Dean then attempts to wheedle Aleyah by telling her she should not be selfish and throw away her family life. In the end, she withdraws and suffers a mental breakdown, where she is haunted by visions of Nani’s “inviting” rope, appearing to her as golden “streaks of sunlight” (184). That the rope is the only brightness and possibility in her life after Dean rejects her and even decides to institutionalize her suggests that she may be doomed to suffer Nani’s punishment of eternal suffering for betraying her role as a wife. However, there is indication that the cursed feminine line will end with Aleyah, as she only has sons.

The rope represents the possibility of escape from the world via suicide, but it is also the continuation of a familial, mariticide fantasy that begins with Nani, though one might imply that Gaitree had thought it first in her abusive first marriage in India. Nazeer first threatens to kill himself when his wife Baby/Nani offers to help a poor Indian woman receive compensation from the manager of the estate on which her husband had died. Nazeer is terribly offended that Baby would have the temerity to speak up, all alone, to a white man. He says “I’m not going to stand by and watch.

35 Significantly, killing one’s husband is a reversal of the usual Indo-Caribbean uxoricide, the aforementioned “coolie wife murders” on colonial sugar plantations. But there is no feminine winner in this new scenario; after the suspicious death of her husband, Nani and to some extent her descendants are shunned by their Indo-Caribbean neighbors.
Not this time…I’ll kill myself, I tell you. I’ll hang myself first.” Aleyah imagines the rest of the story and Baby’s response:

“That why don’t you? Here!” I see Baby reach over to the table. I see her lean forward, her own face tight and angry, and I see her pick up something lying there in loops and coils, but before I can get a clear view of her hands, the air is split with a scream pitched high to the heavens. Nani is screaming and holding out her hands, presenting the streaks of sunlight that lie golden on her palms to the empty air.

“Here,” she screams. “Here. Take it!” (184)

On her deathbed, after pushing Aleyah into “seeing” the story unfold, Nani whispers to Aleyah, “Now that you are home, daughter, the rope will never again throw itself over…” Aleyah responds, “No, no! No, Nani, not that! Never! I could never have done…” Nani shushes her, and with her dying breath, says, “Safe. We are all safe, safe, safe” (185). It is unclear who or what is “safe” now. Presumably, however, Nani is safe in death, and Aleyah is safe because she has just finally filed for divorce from her husband and returned to Guyana, exercising agency over her own life for the first time. While it is true that Aleyah denies that she would ever encourage her husband to kill himself, the reader understands from her trailing off that it is not a total denial and that she is unsure.

Aleyah’s reaction to Dean’s rejection of her is “I did not set out to be a sinner,” but she implicitly believes that she somehow is (119). The framing of Indo-Caribbean woman’s agency as “sin” may be rooted in the idealization of the
Ramayana’s Sita as the paragon of Hindu and Indian feminine virtue. After being kidnapped by the king of demons, Sita throws herself on a burning pyre to prove her fidelity to her god-avatar husband Rama, even though it is hardly her fault that she had been captured. Sita is the perfect wife, following her husband into exile and living in his forest hut performing domestic tasks even though she is a princess and then a queen. Humility and its implied deference to her husband are her ultimate virtues. She is also commonly referred to by Hindus as “Mother Sita,” in the sense that she is a mother to all of humanity, being found as a baby lying in the Earth. The end of A Silent Place is when Aleyah learns that her great-great grandmother Gaitree had left behind not only her husband but also her twin sons in India. Nani reports that Gaitree said “I loved my sons, but I wanted to live, I wanted to live. God, forgive me.’ She cried like this to my mother, my mother Lena, named for the ship that brought her mother to this new earth” (175). Gaitree’s descendants seem doomed to repeat this pattern of child abandonment. Nani believes she has failed as a woman because she has had only one child—a daughter, at that—and because her daughter Shabhan, Aleyah’s mother, did not break the domestic cycle. Aleyah repeats the pattern of maternal guilt when she ultimately decides to divorce her husband, leave her sons with him in London, and return to Guyana to salvage her own mental

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36 Mehta argues that “patriarchal domination received its validation through mythical inscriptions in daily life that guaranteed the permanence and ‘respectability’ of varying levels of control. This model eliminated the notion of male accountability or responsibility while configuring itself ‘as contingent on women’s acceptance and collusion with the control of female sexuality’” (Diasporic 95). The Rama/Sita model is then an aspirational one for both men and women, if they are to be faithful Hindus.
wellbeing. It being a woman’s responsibility to ensure the health and viability of her offspring, Aleyah’s in-laws the Yacoobs also deem her irresponsible for passing on an alleged genetic legacy of “madness” to her sons. At first, she had appeared to the Yacoobs as

the daughter I was to my parents. They didn’t wish me to be a sophisticate, a beauty, anything exotic at all. I was known here. I was not required to explain myself and I knew, without even thinking it, that this would please my parents. They would know that I would not put aside all that I was to them and become a stranger. (93)

But the warning signs are there: Mrs. Yacoob has no interest in Aleyah’s studies, asking her only if she knows how to cook. After her mental breakdown, the Yacoob family blames her for not telling them about Nani’s madness—her withdrawal and refusal to speak when her husband commits suicide. Aleyah’s mother-in-law reproaches her for marrying their son while knowing

[t]hat your grandfather hung himself, that your grandmother is mad—yes, mad!—that there is madness in your family. That your nanny has given herself over to the devil, speaking in tongues all day and screaming down the whole place. You never said anything…You’ve brought all that sickness to us. Now, our boy has to live with this.

And our grandsons. (132)

A fed-up Aleyah decides to go home to Guyana, maybe to help rebuild her country, and finally finds the courage to stand up to her husband Dean and tell him what she
has thought of him all along: that he is a failure as an accountant and that he should become a shopkeeper, a destiny to which, the novel implies, he was born.\textsuperscript{37}

Ultimately, “[h]e is disappointed that I am not a simple girl from back home after all, someone comfortable with the old ways” (138). She is no Sita. Being Ma Sita is far too much pressure for Aleyah, for Nani, for Mona, or for any human woman.

Aleyah’s family, the Hassans, are Muslim, not Hindu. Yet the Muslim Indo-Caribbean is culturally Indian and heavily influenced by their majority Hindu neighbors, as had been the case in India.\textsuperscript{38} The Sita wifely ideal holds true, nominally replaced on occasion by Ayesha or Khadijah, notable wives of Prophet Muhammad. Singing \textit{Ramayana} as a form of ritual feminine mourning and sustenance becomes, in this novel, Nani’s incessant humming of Arabic verses from the Qur’an and Islamic prayers. At her husband’s funeral, her daughter observes that “when you hear them singing in the old Arabic way it makes you remember that you belong to a long line of family that goes all the way back to the time when the world had just started spinning round” (30). In this way, the same “singing” that marks death sustains life,

\textsuperscript{37} Shopkeeping is an ironically Naipaulian destiny, in the sense that Naipaul’s works suggest that is the kind of non-intellectual, money-grubbing work Indians are most fit for and enjoy best. But though the novel implicitly mocks Dean and he takes offense at the suggestion, Aleyah herself does not mean to insult him; she genuinely believes that he has the potential to be a successful shopkeeper, and that it is an honest occupation.

\textsuperscript{38} Aleyah’s parents hold a Quranic function to send her off to London, which is “[s]trange because we do not usually observe the rituals of our religion...We keep up the holy days and holidays but they are little more than excuses to gather in the family for feasting and celebration. But now my parents seek comfort in the singsong reading of the Koran and the chanting of age-old Arabic prayers. I lay a white lace on my head and place my palms side by side like an open book, and follow the moulvi’s prayer as he asks Allah to grant me success, and protect me from the temptations of the world” (54). Religion may not have much of a role in the family’s everyday life, but it is always at the ready if needed.
and it is both prayer and incantation for Nani. She rarely speaks, and it is her only real mode of verbal expression. The sustained humming, says Aleyah, “kept her safe, I believed, anchored her to this side of the world…If the humming ever stopped, Nani would disappear” (7). Nani also hums to “guard her tongue from talking,” a possibility even though, having seen the “unforgivable,” her “spirit flew away one day but her body goes on breathing. That happens when the spirit gets frightened; it breaks away because its eyes look on a deep, dark hell” (8, 12). Nani speaks her story at the end of the novel and dies shortly thereafter, having waited for her granddaughter to grow up, endure her own marital oppressions, and escape them with her mind intact. Singing Ramayana, or in this case singing Quranic suras, guards the tongue and inhibits the chaos that might result from women speaking the truth before the time is right. It can also, unfortunately, be a kind of complicity.

In A Silent Place, Aleyah returns after the end of her marriage to a Guyana that has been economically devastated by an Afro-Guyanese dictatorship, but which, supervised by ex-U.S. President Jimmy Carter and his international peacekeeping Carter Center, has for the first time elected an Indo-Guyanese president in “free and fair” elections. Nani’s main concern is that “now she is safe, safe, safe” from men and marriage (156). The last word Nani utters is “safe,” and then she dies (185). But safety and avoidance of an indentureship legacy of female madness through oppression is not enough for Aleyah. Neither is compromise. She reflects, “How does one manage? Compromise. It is a mature word. It is used by happy people and unhappy people…You whittle away at your youthful ideals so that they fit into the
grown-up requirements of the world. Then you are rewarded. Then you are blessed. Then you know peace” (129). But she and all of her maternal ancestors have compromised, and it did not bring them peace. As the Indo-Caribbean jahaji bahan, inheritor of the courage of the women who spoke up for their fellow female passenger aboard ship, Aleyah must remain metamorphically flexible and actively take control of national destiny. She takes the lead in articulating sexual crimes formerly unspeakable because they also involved race. At a multi-ethnic meeting of younger educated people, she says that she heard “Not just about the burning of buildings and the looting and beatings, but of Indian women being stripped in the streets while the opposition thugs—including women—stood about laughing” (164). The group falls silent and she becomes acutely conscious that she is the only woman and one of only a few Indians in the room. Finally, “one young black man says in a low voice, his head in his hands, ‘It shames us all.’” Conciliatorily, those assembled then agree that racism was “the tool of the colonizers” who “taught us well” (164-165). Aleyah’s education, life experiences and articulateness thrust her into a leadership role as, the young man says, potential “Mother to a troubled nation. During the years you were away the position of women in this country really changed. They were the most energetic traders. They played a big part in the unofficial economy” (166). Ma Sita is everywhere. Having rejected being a mother to her boys, Aleyah must now be a

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39 They do not, however, apologize for sexism. Gender and every other social issue in this postcolonial Guyanese context are problematically reduced to race and the political struggle between Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese. Aleyah’s private realization of her family history is perhaps the first move in giving Indo-Caribbean women a voice in the public sphere.
mother to her people and her nation. Fortunately, at the close of the novel, she herself remains uncertain. At the very least, it is a far leap from the traditional female indentured emigrant’s occupation of plantation weeder to postcolonial contender for the presidency.

Similarly, Mona in Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge* returns to Trinidad to assume the once-masculine role of claiming her family’s—Pappy’s—natal land on Manahambre Road “where you bury your navel string” (77). The land in Trinidad and Guyana is itself now under dominion of the Indo-Caribbean women who have left parts of their bodies in it. Mona’s, Aleyah’s and other Indo-Caribbean women’s self-determination through rediscovery of jahaji bahen ties and recovery of the historical rand can be enlisted in the postcolonial nationalist cause if feminism, or female empowerment, is seen as beneficial (or more) to nationalism as the maternal feminine. This is not quite a liberationist stance, and as the final chapter will show, sexuality in the form of queerness troubles the ability to enlist “unruly” women in the project of the nation. On the whole, women’s agency remains a casualty in the indigenization of Indo- and Afro-Caribbean people. This indigenization focuses, as I will discuss in the next chapter, on contending with native Amerindian legacies and restructuring colonial hierarchies—more privileging of race over gender.
CHAPTER 3

“More Coloured Animals”: Indigenous Indians and the Return of Myth

“More Coloured Animals”

Stay awhile Christopher Columbus,
your skin is blue
your lips are pink –
a happier animal than you
in any jungle
I will hardly find.

The red-skinned ones
do not wish me well –
they are eating flesh
and other foods they grow
below the dirt.

They stone me when I pass
and seize my iguana.

Silver like the moon
I see you, sprouting feathers
From your iron head.
You may fly into any valley
Like a loud parrot
and always twist my neck,
Christopher Columbus

—James Aboud, *Lagahoo Poems* 16

The Lagahoo, the local *loup garou* in a series of poems by Trinidadian poet James Aboud, is an autochthonous resident and embodiment of the Caribbean islands, capable of affecting events but only interested when they are meaningful on a cosmic scale.¹ He is a capricious elemental and his sympathy lies with no one but himself.

¹ The word “lagahoo” is derived from the French *loup garou*, meaning werewolf. Trinidad was for some time a French colony: between 1677 and 1803, Trinidad changed hands between the French, Dutch and British several times, but most of the European settlers were
All humans are just “more coloured animals,” no less or more than the local 
capybaras. But in this poem he is shown to develop a certain antipathy toward the 
blue-skinned Christopher Columbus and the other “red-skinned” eaters of “flesh / and 
other foods they grow below the dirt” (Amerindians, presumably). The parrot-like 
cacophonic screeching of demanding foreign voices and metal weapons compounded 
by helmet plumage—false imitation of the natural—are an irritant. But the eating of 
his flesh—use of natural resources—he only barely tolerates, and clearing the jungle 
and sowing sugar cane in it are incitement to war. Personal affronts to him are in fact 
events on a cosmic scale. His flesh is the land. Christopher Columbus has no right to 
the kind of imperial happiness that comes with dominion, as that is Lagahoo’s 
province. This is a tale of the attempted dismemberment of Trinidad: the Spaniards, 
then the French, and lastly the British all take their turns stoning Lagahoo to kill the 
mythic history of the island, and they seize his iguana in order to make his inherent 
geological properties and geographic ownership theirs. But when one seizes an 
iguana, it autotomizes its tail, and one is left with only a tail as the creature itself 
scurries off into hiding. Iguanas are not as quick to grow back their tails as other 
lacertilians, and the replacement appendage is shorter, perhaps more club-like, a

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French. From 1803 until 1962 Trinidad was a British colony. It is now an Anglophone 
Caribbean nation, but the linguistic influence of the French remained strong until recent 
times. The Trinidadian being and all its etymologically related Caribbean cousins generally 
lost their temperate- and arctic-zone wolfishness in the Middle Passage, emerging into the 
New World in forms more suitable to a tropical landscape. In Haitian French Creole, the 
“lougarou” or “lougawou” is more akin to what is called on other islands the soucouyant 
(from the French sucer, “to suck”), a vampiric old woman who sheds her human skin to fly 
around at night and prey on babies. In Trinidad, the lagahoo is often thought to be a were-
donkey, and is associated with death. Donkeys are commonly used as beasts of burden in the 
Caribbean, and are especially part of the rural landscape.
different color and never as aesthetically pleasing as the original. But Lagahoo-lizard
is not really killable even if his neck is twisted; he is slippery and always escapes to
return another day. In the meantime, the blue-veined, too-pale invaders begin to cook
from the heat. Some will brown so much that they become too well-done for
Lagahoo to eat. These ones may be kept or discarded. He is not particularly pleased
with the presence of the “red-skinned” natives either, but they are perhaps more
tolerable because they attempt to drive him away, rather than twist his neck and kill
him.

I use Lagahoo here as the exemplary indigenous Caribbean spirit, corollary to
the Guyanese massacouraman that is the subject of Cyril Dabdydeen’s novel *Dark
Swirl* (1986). Dabydeen’s novel reprises and gives us the end of Columbus’ colonial
encounter with Lagahoo by juxtaposing the appearance of an unnamed white English
scientist with the simultaneous emergence of the legendary Amerindian water spirit,
the massacouraman, in a rural Indo- and Afro-Guyanese village. Massacouraman is a
reptilian, vaguely manlike river spirit who is seen only indirectly.² Whether the
setting is independent Guyana or colonial British Guiana is unclear, but the novel’s
discussion of rural-urban differences suggests the period around independence in
1966. The novel focuses on the white stranger’s interaction with a deracinated Indo-

² As there is no definitive typography, I use (upper-case) “Massacouraman” as the proper but
generic name of an individual member of that class of fabled beings, and (lower-case) “[the]
massacouraman” as the noun for the folkloric figure. This usage is consistent with how
people speak of the creature in the novel and in Guyana (the same usage applies to
“Lagahoo”). Anglophone Caribbean creoles frequently drop the definite article of generic
terms and characteristics in order to metonymically name specific individuals to whom those
terms and characteristics apply. This linguistic practice is especially visible in nicknames, as
exemplified in V.S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street* (1959), where characters have names like “Big
Foot” and “Man-man.”
Caribbean family, notably the boy Josh and his father Ghulam. The scientist’s naturalist work is collecting specimens of the local flora and fauna, and he represents the last colonial, the last successor to Columbus. He does literally tan brown; but whether his ultimate disappearance into the Guyanese rainforest means that Lagahoo and company have assimilated or done away with him completely is unclear. The fate of the villagers is different from that of the scientist. He is absorbed by the jungle. They are accepted by the indigenous spirit and eventually let alone.³

This chapter is about becoming indigenous to the Caribbean. In the first chapter I explored mimicry and doubling as modes of metamorphic becoming in the postcolonial Caribbean, establishing encounters with land and with nature as ontologically determining the construction of Indo-Caribbean identity. In the second chapter I examined the crucial East Indian-Caribbean encounter with the Afro-Caribbean and the role gender plays in the construction of oppositional ethno-national identities in Trinidad and Guyana. In this chapter I continue to link the metamorphic development of Indo-Caribbean identities with land-based generative forces, but in the context of the migrant encounter with indigenous spirits of the land. “Native” status in the post-independence Caribbean has been transferred to the Afro-Caribbean, and to some extent in Trinidad and Guyana, to the Indo-Caribbean. On the islands, the Amerindians are all dead or racially assimilated. This is not true on

³ The major difference between Lagahoo and the massacouraman is that Lagahoo has little allegiance to the “red-skinned” Amerindians of the Caribbean who “stone him.” Massacouraman, on the other hand, is a spirit named, identified, and propitiated by Amerindians. Both, however, are elementals whose primary concern is safeguarding the land and its natural resources.
the continent, but in Guyana most tribal people live in villages deep in the interior and have little political contact with the nation-state. The neo-native Indian and African migrants, not the Amerindians, are the subjects of *Dark Swirl*. These former slaves and indentured laborers must be judged by the massacouraman, a river spirit—do they deserve to replace the Amerindians who have disappeared from their part of the country? Can they be integrated into the landscape? Their status is complicated—and they get a chance to prove their case—because as forced migrants, they are victims of colonization just as the Patamona, Wai Wai, Arecuna and other indigenous Amerindian residents of that area were.4

I argue in this chapter that the villagers, having initially neither memories of India and Africa nor a sense of belonging to the Guyanese landscape, acquire the latter and “remember” the former through intercession by the primeval land spirit, the massacouraman. I suggest that native status and residency are transferred from the disappeared Amerindians through the land spirit. This status is given to the villagers, who become true believers in the otherworldliness of the spirit, though they deny it by the end. The colonial stranger believes in spite of himself but continues to try to categorize the spirit scientifically, and also holds himself apart from the villagers. What is interesting in this novel is that though the novel begins and ends with Josh,

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4 “Amerindian” is the official and colloquial group name for indigenous tribal people in post-independence Guyana. Guyana has nine Amerindian tribes granted recognition by the government: Arawak, Carib, Warrau, Patamona, Wai Wai, Macushi, Wapishana, Arecuna, and Akawaio. The first three were the only originally coastal tribes; the others have always lived inland, away from the majority of European colonial settlements. Today, most of the tribes live in isolated areas on the Rupununi savannahs or on the banks of the Essequibo, Pomeroon, and other rivers. The Arawak and Wapishana speak related Arawak languages, whereas most of the others, with the exception of the Warrau, speak derivatives of Carib.
the young boy, the real focus is on the stranger and the latter’s encounters with the massacouraman. That is, the fitness of the villagers to inherit the mantle of indigeneity is proven less by their own merit than by the unfitness of the white colonial to inherit the earth. Despite not being given a name, the stranger is the most well-developed character in the novel, and the story becomes his. The villagers do not seem to think at all until the massacouraman rouses them. The massacouraman emerges from a lake and gives the villagers, at the end of the novel, memory like an ancient, primordial imagining that surpassed the places where they had come from—Africa, India, Europe—or where they secretly yearned to return when the soil no longer seemed to accept them; memory of a nether place, like the massacouraman itself, merely reflecting the phases of the moon where all else was vanquished or simply disappeared. (Dabydeen 102)

This final passage does not imply that the villagers exist in a state of nothingness. It specifically ties soil, phases of the moon, and primordial landscape—natural phenomena—to cultural memory. The massacouraman takes them back to a space of “primordial imagining” where all possibilities are present, so that they can reformulate themselves as Indo- and Afro-Guyanese. This is reminiscent of Derek Walcott’s “Adamic man,” discussed in the first chapter, a postcolonial man of the New World who shakes off the baggage of slavery and mimicry and acknowledges his African (or Indian) roots—but just as roots. The stranger’s disappearance disrupts the inevitability of the postcolonial mimic man, the damaged creature aping white
civilization. Since he disappears, the villagers are left on their own with no one to imitate.

According to Joan Dayan (1995), “the justification of slavery depended on converting a biological fact into an ontological truth—black = savage, white = civilized” (8). Mimicry is racialized, causing the descendant of the slave or indentured laborer to

not only pay tribute to those who enslaved but make himself white, while remaining black. Further, acquisition of the forever unreal new identity is paid for by negation of the old self…The complex working out of personal identity through a duplicity or doubling of color proves crucial to the making of a nation. (8)

Both “Adamic man” and the villagers of Dark Swirl are charged with ridding themselves of their doubled coloring. In the latter case, they literally rid themselves of whiteness in the form of the stranger. The villagers experience a metamorphic becoming and are given the chance to (re)write their histories. The jungle claims the scientist and thus also claims the imposed colonial history consequent upon the forcible capture and annexation of Lagahoo’s symbolic iguana. The generative space that replaces colonial history is ahistory, a chronotopic area of darkness characterized by a reasserted primeval state of being not specifically associated with Africa, India, or Europe, but with land itself and vast geologic forces. Still, what is arrived at is not the original planetary state, but the memory of it, bearing also, I suggest, the traces of all who have passed by. According to Jim Clifford,
Old myths and genealogies change, connect, and reach out, but always in relation to an enduring spatial nexus. This is the indigenous longue durée, the precolonial space and time that tends to be lost in postcolonial projections. Thus indigenous identities must always transcend colonial disruptions (including the posts and the neos), claiming: we were here before all that; we are still here; we will make a future here. (482)

The original memory-space of existence is that same spatial nexus. But what I wish to suggest here is that, even though there are still native persons left in Guyana and the rest of the South American continent, the true indigenous are not human beings. Lagahoo and Massacouraman “were here before all that,” are “still here,” and they may be acting with an eye to their future. Coloniality is a major disruption. That does not diminish the political fact that some people have first human claim of residence and access to resources, should they be able to live in peace with the land and its entities. In Dark Swirl, the myths and genealogies do not so much change as they reach out and metamorphically flex. It is a tentacular or perhaps a tendrilic reaching out in the Amazon, and if those reaching creepers touch you, they will certainly feel you out a bit, and either spit you out or assimilate you in some manner—eat you.
I. Myth and Massacouraman

The massacouraman is one of Guyana’s Lagahoo figures, come to haunt and warn invading peoples as to who and what exactly needs to be propitiated in that place. Like Lagahoo, it is silent, appearing as if in dreams, fatal, and a monster bearing some resemblance to humanity. It is legendarishly reptilian, upright, larger than a man, and has ferocious teeth, but that is a general description. Guyanese who have seen it—and there are many—give differing specific accounts. In the novel,

The villagers speculated obsessively. The creature had eyes as large as calabashes, teeth like spears. It had numerous appendages; it was amorphous; it defied description. Yet others claimed it was hydra-headed…With each account, something new was added. It lived far below the creek in a tunnel that wound underneath their houses. Others contradicted. It had wings like a flying horse or a bat, a flying hippopotamus and boa-constrictor combined and it flew out of the creek at night and dwelt far into the hinterland. From time to time, though, it returned to the creek. Others insisted that there was a tunnel, that it reached to the opposite side of the village, extending as far as the sea, which was where the monster came from. (Dabydeen 65)

The massacouraman’s visage is shrouded because seeing it involves a kind of unfocusing or dreaming in which the watcher must slip sideways in reality. In that land of caiman-infested rivers, undoubtedly what many think they are seeing are
really alligators, as is pointed out in the novel. Massacouraman needs a good reason to show itself, and the ignorance of villagers and the impositions of the scientist are good reasons. The massacouraman’s form remains amorphous and only partially visible throughout the novel at least partly because the villagers do not belong to that place or that time—yet. Nor do they have a definitive sense of the wide ether in which primordial forces and memory-time co-exist. Perhaps people are not capable of existing in such a mythic way except in dreams or in pieces, which is how most of the characters in the novel, even susceptible young Josh, experience the massacouraman.

The creature of legend is not particularly known to be a shapeshifter—neither is the primordial Lagahoo—except in the most reptilian sense: Massacouraman might be a very large sea-snake. Massacouraman was apocryphally named by indigenous Amerindians. Appropriate to Guyana, “Land of Many Waters,” where the political nation is the sum of its major landscape feature, it is a river-monster, unlike landlubber Lagahoo.\(^5\) Though it is a creature of the water like the migrant villagers, it does not come from the saltwater sea. It is a local American inhabitant of freshwater rivers and creeks.

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\(^5\) Historical reports differ on whether the name “Guyana” or “Guiana” comes from the indigenous Arawak *wina* or “many waters,” or Warrau *wai ana*, “without name,” but the former view is commonly accepted. Guyana’s contemporary national slogan is “Land of Many Waters.” The adoption of many indigenous Amerindian place-names by the majority Indian and African population politically legitimates their inheritance of the land and place within the geo-historical lineage. But the massacouraman has a few ontological things to say about that.
At night in the Caribbean, especially during the rainy season, jumbies and duppies, generic spirits and ghosts, are known to walk the streets unmolested. The wise among the living stay inside. This is what—who—stalks the darkness of the British Caribbean. And so: it was a dark and stormy night in Guyana. In a small unnamed, unnamable Canje River village at the edge of the Amazonian jungle, a family of East Indian laborers were silent, afraid of the portents. Foreign but native, they were not indigenous—yet. Colonized land took that kind of weather opportunity to remember and send forth a representative or two to warn them it had been watching and that it kept who wanted to stay:

They could hear in the wind echoes of an ancestral past of indigenous men and women fleeing into the bushes; of sugar-plantation owners, white-white, who buried slaves alive under silk-cotton trees with their own dead so their kind would be served even in the underworld; of voodoo brought from Africa to these shores; of jumbies manifesting from smelly hovels; of backoos, who worked in the sugarcane fields in the darkness of the night with an efficiency no man could match; of a plantation owner riding on a majestic white horse, dragging a heavy chain behind; of Moongazer straddling the road, of indentured people, brown and blackfaces, small-framed, clutching at the Bhagavad Gita and reciting remnant words from the Ramayana in the flicker of light
from the wall lamps in narrow logies as they clung to their faith in this hostile place. (28-29)\(^6\)

This excerpt from Dabydeen’s novel, from before the massacouraman itself becomes evident, is a rundown of some of the major folkloric figures of Guyana, the majority of which are derived from a mixture of African and Amerindian myths and legends. Most of the figures here, though, are associated with black slavery and its haunts. These are creatures that appear to and plague people, not ones that are tied to the land like the massacouraman. East Indians are nineteenth-century latecomers to this bloody colonial history. They have only remembered snatches of Hinduism and Islam with which to confront other people’s ghosts. And so religion and superstition, or at least spiritual belief, swirl (darkly) around each other in a new place and re-syncretize.

\(^6\) In Guyana, a *jumbie* is any ghostly spirit being. Jumbies are attracted to the living for unspecific nefarious reasons. A *backoo* is an imp, under three feet tall, that is thought by Guyanese to be obtainable in the neighboring country of Suriname (Dutch Guiana). People have been known to travel by boat across to Suriname to bring back backoos, which are usually kept in corked bottles; backoo bottles often turn up found in rivers or mud flats. The person controlling a bakoo can use it to perform good or evil deeds against others. Backoos must however be paid with milk and other things, or they will turn their powers against those controlling them, causing windows to be broken in houses and causing people to die. *Moongazer* is a tall, silent, man-like figure who stands at crossroads at night. White plantation owner ghosts are generally called *Dutch jumbies*, as the Dutch colonized the Guianas before the British and French. In particular, it was thought that the Dutch had a habit of burying plundered gold and treasure under certain silk-cotton trees, trees that grow very large and live a very long time. They would shoot a black slave over the spot to ensure that the slave’s spirit would guard the treasure. Over the centuries, the spirit would become restless, as it could not leave the spot unless the treasure was found. Invisible Dutchmen on horses are also known to ride at night in certain villages, producing an unexplainable sound of galloping hooves. They may also walk behind people, invisibly but audibly. *Logies*, as noted in the second chapter, are the former African slave barracks in which East Indian indentured laborers were housed. The *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Ramayana* are the religious texts most important to Hindu Indo-Guyanese.
From the very beginning, whatever spirits there were noticed the new East Indian arrivals. In Trinidad, Lajabless, (*la diablesse*), a beautiful cloven-hoofed woman who lures young men to their doom, cottoned on right away to potential new victims in the 1938 calypso song “The Lajabeless Woman-Calypso,” by Lord Executor and Harmony Kings’ Orchestra (Decca).\(^7\) What is remarkable is that in 1938, exactly one hundred years after East Indians had begun arriving as indentured laborers in the Caribbean, they were a little commented-upon political fact and community, existing to others mostly as statistics in plantation logs. Afro-Caribbean people were not sure whether East Indians would stay, and what their role would be, and especially who they really were. But it seems the local spirits, particularly the predatory ones, noticed some potential.

The Indian laddie had such a fright
He was led away by a woman in white
That is the rumor they heard next day:
Ladjablès chayé li alé. [The Devil Woman took him away.]

This is the story of Na[r]badeen
Of St. James Village he was highly esteem

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\(^7\) In Trinidadian folklore Lajabless is the consort of Papa Bois; both have cloven hooves and look African. I use (proper generic name) “Lajabless” and species type “the lajabless” in the same way as Masscouraman/the massacouraman; see footnote 2. Calypso is an originally Afro-Trinidadian musical style that is rooted in eighteenth-century West African folk music. It is an intricate component of Carnival, as it was used since the beginning of the twentieth century for political purposes: at Carnival, which turns “reality” topsy-turvy, colonial subjects would openly mock and sing criticisms of the British government.
With his book in hand he went by a stream
And unfortunately he began to dream. (Hill 76)

This calypso was produced the same year St. James was incorporated into the capital of Port-of-Spain, which is perhaps why Nabadeen hails from there. Every Trinidadian listener would know without being told that Nabadeen, sometimes rendered Narbadeen, was an East Indian Muslim. Anything –deen is a dead giveaway, as the Afro-Trinidadian calypsonian Lord Executor would have known when he wrote the lyrics.\(^8\) For Nabadeen to be a studious, respected young Muslim man in a relatively diverse urban place, when most Indians were rural Hindu plantation laborers in South Trinidad—and conceived of as illiterate country people in the national imagination—is fascinating. There is some implied joshing for his perhaps racialized bookishness (a local stereotype pertaining to the few “town” Indians and their perceived hunger for education), but this early calypso in no way duplicates the racial attitudes and strife in many of the later ones. This Afro-Trinidadian calypso gestures towards how, in 1938, Nabadeen had potential to be Trinidadian, even though he was not of African descent: so much so that the lajabless found him a good-looking chap, so “Ladjablès chayé li alé.” It is a signifier of further belonging and incorporation into Trinidadian history that Nabadeen enters mythology in a proper local creole language, sung in by those who have a right to do so, the first

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\(^8\) *Deen* is an Arabic word meaning “religion,” but it is better translated as “Islamic way of life/obedience.” *Muzdhab* is the generic Arabic word for religion. Using –deen as an appellation and suffix to other names is a nomenclature practice mostly of Indian subcontinental Muslims.
ocean wave of exiled, newly-resident slaves, the Afro-Trinidadians. So he receives the approbation of the Afro-Caribbean and one of its spirits, the lajabless. But like Papa Bois, Lajabless is not indigenous to the island, making her only a predator. No one consulted Lagahoo, or Massacouraman. So out of the dank and ghostly night in the bloody excess of the tropics came a thing to the Canje villagers of Dark Swirl. This thing, the massacourman, had been many things: primeval; Amerindian; and now perhaps postcolonial Indo-Caribbean.

Donald Hill, in the major geographically wide-reaching collection of Caribbean folklore (the literal “Handbook,” implying its status as a definitive guide) describes Caribbean folklore as reflective of the melting pot of colonialism, characterized by “a call-and-response melody, a song with a lead voice and a chorus” where the ongoing variation is more important than fixity (5). In his ethnographic assessment, Caribbean folklore has not been around long enough to have the depth of Asian, African, European, or Native American folklore, built up over thousands of years…it seem[s] shallow. By “shallow” I do not mean “not profound”; I mean that it has a facade that makes it seem pedestrian whereas in fact it is always changing, always adjusting, always different, always new…If Caribbean folklore is fresh and lacks an ancient history it is wider than indigenous cultures of the continents from where it came. It holds pieces from all

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9 The refrain “Ladjablès chayé li alè” is rendered in an Afro-Francophone Trinidadian creole that was not dead in 1938, but now no longer survives as a spoken language. A related dialect survives in St. Lucia, which shares a similar French-British colonial history with Trinidad.

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those areas, like a kaleidoscope with bits of glass (but not the entire
glass), in ever-shifting patterns. (5)

Caribbean folklore, then, is a new kind of piecework mythography for a new kind of
pieced-together world. Hill takes Caribbean folklore to be the perfect subject of Lévi-
Strauss’ application of bricolage to myth, taking bits and pieces and combining them
into some other use from that for which they were originally intended, putting them
together differently each time (17). In the Caribbean, this is partly true, though one
must pay attention to the differing weights each bit may carry, and new forms
sometimes appear. People who must live in such a milieu, Hill says, have a folklore
and therefore a culture that is of a “helter-skelter nature,” and Caribbean folklore is
“not a Mahlerian symphony,” that is, not a master narrative (5-6, 17). Édouard
Glissant, however, argues that there is in fact rhyme and reason to “the Caribbean
folktale [that] zeroes in on our absence of history: it is the site of the deactivated
word” (85). The word, in the form of historical multiplicity is (re)activated through
relationality, rather than accumulation. For example, “Krik? Krak!” is the call-and-
response formulation with which Haitian storytellers engage their audiences.  

Caribbean people have had no time for folkloric accumulation, and their
historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and
continuously, like sediment as it were, as happened with those peoples
who have frequently produced a totalitarian philosophy of history, for

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10 The Haitian storyteller begins a tale by asking, “Krik?” to which the audience responds,
“Krak!” The words have no specific meanings; they are complimentary interrogative and
affirmative sounds. Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat titled her short story collection, which
deals with the history of slavery and oppression in Haiti, Krik? Krak! (2005).
instance European peoples, but came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation and explosive forces…the Caribbean notion of time was fixed in the void of an imposed nonhistory.

(Glissant 61-62, 65)

For Glissant, folktales, which he distinguishes from myth, are what can “combat the sometimes paralyzing force of a yearning for history, to save us from the belief that history is the first and most basic dimension of human experience, a belief inherited from the West or imposed by it” (84). The massacouraman comes from another time and people, thus disrupting the colonial narrative of history and creating a way for the Indian villagers to abandon their assigned nonhistory. Glissant calls this process of Caribbean combining and metamorphosing a “subterranean convergence” that illustrates the true “transversality” of human behavior (66). In its least complex sense, the mathematical term transversality describes the intersection of a line with a system of other lines, such that each point at which they touch becomes part of the joined nodes and boundaries of a certain shape of topographical space. Applied to humanity in the Caribbean, transversality is, as Glissant suggests, a convergence of intersecting points (cultures, ethnicities, origins) that form a particularly Caribbean topography. It is another way of positing a multiplicity that forms a whole. *Dark Swirl* illustrates the process whereby the lines intersect their transversal to create a new space through the way the villagers come to accept the reality of the massacouraman’s existence:
Initial doubt gave way to complete belief. Now everyone talked about this thing that could loom up like a mountain; that could swallow whole houses; that was bigger than the biggest anaconda, crocodile, manatee and fish combined; this thing with eyes that were very small, fixed like malevolent beads in a head larger than the biggest wood-ants’ nest, eyes that seemed to carry with them a knowledge of past centuries, of prehistory even…things which man couldn’t understand.

(Dabydeen 55)

The villagers recognize that there is something prehistoric about the massacouraman, that though it might have been named by Amerindians, it is something that humans cannot comprehend because it predates them. Religion too offers little assistance, as it only addresses the interaction between human beings and gods.

The villagers’ inattention to Indian strictures, the backbone of which is religion, is most obviously demonstrated by the names of the main Indian family: the father is Ghulam, the mother is Savitri, the son is Josh: Muslim, Hindu, and Christian names respectively, though the family is nominally Hindu. This carelessness in naming and in other professions of belief is accounted for in the novel mostly by their extremely isolated rural location, not by a general loss of culture. The villagers do have some allegiance to the religions into which they and their forefathers were born, but what is crucial here is a kind of belief that encompasses not just organized religion, but also conviction of the right order of things in the place in which these
villagers find themselves—the mythology of that place. Massacouraman thus is a part of belief. The villagers are not inclined to fight what seems to be real.

Antonio Benítez-Rojo calls the Caribbean the site of not just syncretic, but supersyncretic religious beliefs. In this formulation, “[a] syncretic artifact is not a synthesis, but rather a signifier made of differences…syncretic processes realize themselves through an economy in whose modality of exchange the signifier of there—of the Other—is consumed (‘read’) according to local codes that are already in existence; that is, codes from here” (21). In Dark Swirl, what Ghulam experiences is this confusion of codes that results in syncretism. Alone at night in the forest, on a quest to see the massacouraman,

he pressed on, willing himself to be at one with everything, as if his spirit could be with the insects, reptiles animals, and plants…it was then he felt himself to be most truly Hindu and yet something else. Most times he scarcely thought about his people’s origins in that distant subcontinent. Here, in this isolated part of the Guyanese coastland, almost cut off from the rest of the population, they—Indians, Africans—lived in a strange harmony, eking out a meagre living. Whatever they had been, he sensed they were becoming something else, but he couldn’t sustain this thought further; such thoughts came to him suddenly, and as quickly went. (44-45)

Dabydeen is careful to note that both Indians and Africans live together in the village, bound by class and history and even mutual ability to see the massacouraman. It is a
nationally unifying move. But the novel focuses on one Hindu Indian family, and the jungle brings back Hinduism and Indianness to Ghulam, who, like the rest of the villagers, was mostly illiterate and practiced ritual and a sort of fragmented religious belief without much thought. Pure deracination is shown to be unsatisfactory in its erasure of history, as what will Ghulam bring to this new becoming with the land if he is empty? The villagers have grown careless, apathetic, and forgetful in their isolation. Massacouraman and Lagahoo will never regard fools who cannot remember their own history as anything akin to equals. Should they not hold on to the introspection brought to them by the advent of Massacouraman, the land giving them a chance, their fate may be like that of the animals in the forest.

What is happening to Ghulam in the passage above is just this: his foreign Indianness and Hinduism are being processed and swallowed by Guyana and the manifestation produced by its already-existent coding, the massacouraman. “There” is being read and assimilated by “here,” and the syncretized result will be a new “here” that is partly what was once “there.” The elements of the syncretism will be visible, too, in the final product. It is not a process of destruction, but rather of assimilation and rewiring, and perhaps in the end Ghulam, through comparison with his new elements, will be revealed to himself and remember his Hinduism.

Supersyncretic beliefs, says Benítez-Rojo, “make up a discourse that stays in contact with many other discourses; that is, they organize themselves within a discursive network that connects surreptitiously with the knowledge of the disciplines and the professions” and with politics (163). Religious syncretism in the Caribbean is
therefore posited as a pathway to power. At least in countries like Haiti, and for
Afro-Caribbean traditions, this has been true, as it is commonly accepted that *vodun*
rites held at Bois Caïman in 1791 sparked the slaves of Saint-Domingue into bloody
and successful revolt.\textsuperscript{11} The story is more complex when minority, non-African
religious traditions are in question.

For Ghulam’s Hindu family, religion and taking recourse in the *Gita* are not
incompatible with an acknowledgement of supernatural forces. *Obeah* is the
Guyanese equivalent of *vodun* and *santería*, though much less ritualistically
developed and often having connotations of black magic. All manifestations that do
not fit neatly into either standard religious practice or shared physical reality may fall
under the auspices of *obeah*. Aisha Khan notes that in the Caribbean, “[t]o practice
obeah is to engage, more or less, in evil. To believe in it seems a logical assessment
of empirical reality. *Obeah* has the power of efficacy (it causes intended things to
happen); it can be offset by the stronger (sacred) power of God/s; few admit to
‘working it’ but most ‘know’ that it has been done” (116). The initial supposition of
the villagers is that the massacouraman is a manifestation of black magic, *obeah*, and
is therefore evil itself. Their immediate recourse is to try to dominate
Massacouraman with chanting from the *Ramayana*, but in this novel they are
portrayed as deracinated India-Indians in the process of becoming something else, so

\textsuperscript{11} Bois Caïman means “Caiman Woods”—more involvement from the local reptilian
carnivores (caimans are South American relatives of alligators). The Haitian rite of
revolution on August 14, 1791, openly called for retribution against white plantation owners.
The rite was carried out by the *houngan* (priest) Dutty Boukman and *mambo* (priestess)
Cécile Fatiman. Fatiman, who apocryphally performed the sacrifice of a pig, was said to
have been possessed by Ezili, *vodun* goddess of love and revenge.
that really will not work. Only your own people’s magic in which you truly believe can work for you.

Steven Vertovec argues that “official” and “popular” should be the distinction made in diasporic Hinduism: “official” representing ritual, belief, and education prescribed by the formal pandit priestly structure, and “popular” involving everything else.\textsuperscript{12} Popular Caribbean Hinduism thus includes beliefs and practices undertaken or maintained by lay believers… orthodox practices undertaken outside “official” auspices (especially domestic worship, but also including local festivals which celebrate mainstream deities or saints), so-called superstitious (magic religious) and/or charismatic phenomena (such as healing rites spirit-possession and exorcism, pursuits of miraculous ends, or steps taken to ward off evil forces), and “cult” phenomena (collective religious activity directed toward some specific but usually unorthodox focus, such as

\textsuperscript{12}Hinduism in the Caribbean was historically comprised of nineteenth-century elements from mostly the compatible Shaivite (Shiva-focused) and Vaishnavite (Vishnu-focused) North Indian traditions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, with a small but very visible South Indian influence associated with ecstatic worship of goddesses of darker mien and intent. Vertovec reports that then and now, there is a distinction commonly made between the “Great” and “Little” Traditions of Hinduism, wherein the “Great” symbolizes the deep Sanskritic philosophy of the ancient texts, and the “Little” the myriad differing rituals as practiced by people in their homes, temples and lives; but, he notes, this distinction is less relevant to the Hinduism practiced in diasporas outside of India (228). Most importantly, in the Caribbean in the nineteenth century, racial solidarity trumped caste differences, leading to “attenuation of the caste system.” Even when people remembered what caste they and their ancestors were from, and used them as identities or hierarchical markers within the temple and Indian community, village structures of “caste could never be transplanted as a system (as it was in India, simultaneously being a hierarchy and social relationships, a network of economic interdependence, an order of reciprocal ritual duties, and a conceptual continuum of ontological states according to notions of purity and pollution)” (234).
an extraordinary person, sacred place or item, or supernatural being propitiated by a relative minority. (228-229)

Ghulam and the Canje villagers operate under “popular” but unofficial Hinduism by entertaining the notion of the massacouraman. Indo-Caribbean religious syncretism with folk beliefs is usually predicated on engagement with the Afro-Caribbean. The novel also nods to the early Indo-Caribbean conflation of Hinduism and Islam. Some of the villagers remember Islam enough to invoke the Muslim name for the devil and associate it with magic and the white man: they call him “Shaitan! Evil one!” and declare “‘Is not massacouraman, is only the whiteman obeah!’” (53). Here half-remembered Indian religion is distinct from the folkloric but real existence of the massacouraman, and also from magical practice believed to be malevolent and that is associated with the Afro-Caribbean.

Early American and European anthropological research on Indo-Caribbean communities concluded that almost all “spirit beliefs” were borrowed from black

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13 Popular diasporic Hinduism may be further subdivided into five categories: alternative official (including Kali Mai); collective (festivals); domestic (puja, group home worship), individual (having a personal ishtdevata), and the last that concerns Ghulam and us, “‘amorphous’ or peripheral forms,” that is, the forms that are syncretic or accommodate what may be perceived as superstition. Says Vertovec, “Because a considerable set of beliefs and practices fall far outside the ‘official’ forms of Hinduism…they have often been maintained in a rather clandestine and unformulated, often quite vague, manner by a decreasing minority. These are usually directed toward therapeutic or protective ends, and include: beliefs and precautions regarding the evil eye (najar or malja), jharay and phukay (the use of specific mantras and notions to cure various afflictions), tabij (talismans) and totka (specific acts to undo the work of malevolent forces or mpens), ojha (black magic, often blended with Creole forms, called obeah), exorcism of ill-meaning spirits, and offerings to minor deities” (239).

14 The Arabic word Shaitan, or rather, Shaytān, is etymologically “Satan” in Arabic, and denotes the same leader of evil forces. But shaitan is a generic word for a devil, a jinn. The Islamic counterpart of the biblical Satan is named Iblis. Similarly to the Caribbean folkloric creatures here, Iblis is (title) Shaitan, and his demonic underlings are (generic class of beings) shaitans.
Creole culture that itself was based on African beliefs (Khan 108). But it is difficult to tease apart the complicated origins of Caribbean folkloric figures. The assertion, moreover, risks discounting the Amerindian folkloric influence of figures like the massacouraman. Aisha Khan argues, in her detailed examination of Indian religious syncretism in Trinidad, that such syncretisms are defended by most Indo-Trinidadians as characteristic of “long time” generations who tenaciously sustained “we culture” in any way they could, [but] are also decried today as derailing “correct” or “authentic” (pure) practice, forcing contestations over authorized knowledge (orthodoxy), and confusing the role of cultural traditions in religious expression. For Afro-Trinidadians, racial emblems come from the marked category “African culture,” which subsumes ideas about African religious practice. For Indo-Trinidadians, racial emblems come from the marked category “Indian religion,” which encompasses much of what is recognized as Indian cultural practices. In the Trinidadian context, religion has been Indo-Trinidadians’ alterity; that is, the marked category largely definitive of the Indian “race.” A major reason for this difference was because by 1845, the time Indians arrived, Trinidad’s white-black racial continuum included a shared Christianity. (14)
That is, religion serves as the major signifier of alterity for the Indo-Caribbean community, superseding and actually elaborating racial distinctions. Religion distinguishes Indians from Christian blacks and whites.\textsuperscript{15}

What Ghulam and the villagers are missing is a cohesive syncretism that will make them Caribbean. They believe they still live in India, though they do not really know anything about India. They know words from the \textit{Ramayana}, but do not understand how these fragments might be reintegrated into something new. There are two major avenues of religious syncretism for the Indo-Caribbean: Hindu/Muslim integration, and adoption of certain folkloric Afro-Caribbean beliefs. Between Hindus and Muslims, it is a cultural and racial integration, not a theological one—there is no doctrinal equivalent of Sikhism or evidence of any tradition that combines the two. The absorption of non-Indian folkloric beliefs is typically characterized as an issue of superstition, where such beliefs exist in tension with both religious doctrine and popular religious practice. According to the Victorian sensibilities of the colonial Trinidadian planter class,

\textsuperscript{15} The African Muslim legacy disappeared around the mid-nineteenth century, but it “continues in the local Trinidadian slang term for Muslims, \textit{Madinga}, which Indo-Trinidadian Hindus occasionally use in jest” (Khan 191). The idea here is than \textit{Madinga} is etymologically derived from “Mandinka” or “Mandingo,” a predominantly Muslim West African people who were enslaved and brought to the Americas in large numbers during the colonial period. Relatedly, in Guyana the sometimes-jesting, sometimes-insulting slang term for a Muslim is \textit{Fullaman}, from Muslim West African nomadic tribe the Fulani, who were also victims of colonial slavery. Khan adds that in the present day, “awareness of the two centuries of African Muslims’ presence in the Caribbean, along with the far longer history of Islam in Africa, prompts Afro-Trinidadian Muslims to refer to themselves as ‘returnees’ rather than as ‘converts’” (191). These contemporary “returnee” Muslims are generally converts who attend predominantly Indian mosques; there is no local equivalent of the American Nation of Islam in the Caribbean.
Until the early twentieth century Indo-Trinidadians, irrespective of class, were typically charged with superstition, while grassroots Afro-Trinidadians and their “folk” religions, such as Orisha, were judged ecstatic until the late twentieth century. Occasionally the two, ecstatic and superstitious, would overlap, drawing together racial and class characteristics within a religious idiom. For example, in 1877 Trinidad’s *New Era* newspaper decried the tendency of the “lower orders”—Afro-Trinidadian “blacks” as opposed to the “colored middle class”—to participate in the “heathen ceremony”—the Hosay commemoration—“which seemed strange and contradictory to our character of a strictly Christian community.” (Khan 39)

As exemplified by Hosay, on a grassroots level, the exchange of religion and folklore was bi-directional between the Indian and African Caribbean communities until it was legally restricted by the colonial British government. But, says Khan, Hindu pandits and Muslim imams also saw themselves as warring against the intrusion of a kind of “superstition” that challenged their religious and political community authority:

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16 Hosay, the imported Shia Muslim street festival commemorating the martyrdom of Hassan and Hussein, grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad, featured the carnivalesque *tadjah* floats and became, in the late nineteenth century, a space for anti-British resistance in which Afro-Caribbeans participated at both a political and quasi-religious level. Accordingly, this dangerously unifying festival was steadily restricted in the British Caribbean colonies during a decade of repression that culminated in the infamous San Fernando riots of 1884, when twenty-two Indians were shot to death by colonial police firing into a crowd of revelers.
The image of pandits as con-artist magicians—engaging in mumbo jumbo?—is clearly stimulated by the competition for authority between colonial planters and traditional religious leadership. To be superstitious is to bear the double indignity of being fooled by both the visceral (mortal) and the ephemeral (supernatural), to not be able to tell true from false, real from artifice. (106-107)

The image of pandits as fake fakirs was one promoted by British colonials to indentured Indians, though that tactic was relatively unsuccessful. The distinction between what constitutes religion and what constitutes superstition is very important here. Superstition is anything other than doctrine. It would be easy to assume that Hindu polytheism, for example, lent itself easily to association with the orishas of vodun and related Afro-Caribbean religious practice, but this did not happen: “Most of the elements common to both the Orisha and East Indian religions may be explained by the theory of a ‘parallel tradition’ rather than of open borrowing from the other” (Mahabir and Maharaj 97). Indian religious distinction is kept as clear as racial distinctions, and indeed these modes of community preservation are interrelated. Khan explains that Hindus and Muslims in the Caribbean have a complex and fraught relationship with the “superstitions” and spirit beliefs they harbor. There is a distinction between “what people know they ought to believe

\[\textit{Orishas}\] are the deities of Shango, Candomblé, Santería, and a host of syncretic Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latino faith practices derived from the same Yoruba religious tradition brought by slaves to the New World. Each orisha—and there are many—is a manifestation of an aspect of Olodumare, God. Yemayá, goddess of the sea and motherhood, is particularly revered by Caribbean women.
and…what they often discount with difficulty… Superstition mediates legitimate and illegitimate, but the potency, the potential danger of illicit or marginalized beliefs and practices are not necessarily in doubt” (112). That is, people believe strongly in and worry about extra-religious spirits and supernatural phenomena even when they “know” they shouldn’t. In Dabydeen’s novel, the villagers are very conflicted over whether or not the massacouraman really exists. Tellingly, the final unspoken consensus is that it does.

What, then, comprises Indo-Caribbean nonreligious spirit belief? Khan uses the local Trinidadian term *simi-dimi*, meaning “mumbo-jumbo, or superstition” (103). *Simi-dimi* ranges from universal Caribbean beliefs in folkloric figures like Lagahoo, Massacouraman, Lajabless and a host of others, to the efficacy of working obeah alongside religious prayer, to more specifically Indo-Caribbean traditional medicine, wherein “masseuses” who were often midwives were called upon to treat medical ailments through a combination of herbal and spiritual remedies.19

According to Khan, *simi-dimi* connotes to Indians

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18 Khan argues for the likely derivation of *simi-dimi* from the Arabic term *dhimmi*, which historically meant a non-Muslim resident of a Muslim land who was required to pay the *jizya*, a religious tax (103). Hence the term would be etymologically derived from “semi-dhimmi.” I disagree, for two reasons: (1) the corresponding Guyanese term is *semi-jemi*, no relation to dhimmi, and it is impossible to say which, if either, is originary; and (2) the pattern of the word has much more in common with the rhyming repetition that characterizes African-derived Caribbean syntax, and indeed means the exact same thing as does the magical “mumbo-jumbo,” carrying even its contemporary connotations of derision.

19 V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) explores the tragicomic fate of one such figure in the postcolony. After Indians gained access to hospitals in the 1950s, traditional Indo-Caribbean midwife and masseuse practices were “truncated to rubbing the new mother and her newborn and performing rituals to placate the supernatural spirits…. [They perform] the *jharay nahar* (cure the evil eye), deal with neonatal jaundice, treat culturally-specific bodily dislocations such as *hassuli* among infants, *boochet, narai*, and *palai*. Most of their
dilution and loss of identity—absorption into the cultural hegemony of Afro and Christian Trinidad. As a state of mind or character trait, superstition is viewed by Indo-Trinidadians as something to be avoided or corrected because it implies the weakness, naïveté, and ignorance that mark submission. Not being superstitious is being empowered—with knowledge and sophistication that signal resistance to, or competence within, the status quo. Superstition, then, is not ultimately about religion per se, it is about power, power expressed in the debates over what is permissibly viewed as correct, that is, truly “religious” phenomena, and what is not. Being perceived as superstitious means being inferior, in ways that are particularly vulnerable to doubt about one’s value and place in the world. (228)

To engage in superstitious belief and practice, then, is to be weak, without power, and, crucially, to be not Indian. *Dark Swirl* repudiates this sentiment and uses the supernatural to empower the marginalized Indo-Caribbeans left, post-indentureship, to the mercy of the jungle. The massacouraman reminds them of the Indianness they have forgotten while forcing them to acknowledge that they have changed places and therapeutic treatments relate to attempts to relocate bodily organs believed to have been shifted from their normal positions. Traditional masseuses primarily treat non-life-threatening conditions; they often refer their patients to doctors when they feel that curing a complaint is beyond their level of expertise” (Mahabir 165-166). Such women are often called upon to treat infertility and, crucially, provide abortions. Abortion is still illegal in Trinidad except in cases where the mother’s life is in danger, but formerly socialist Guyana has more complex laws that de facto allow for other types of abortions until the sixteenth week of gestation. In the generally culturally and religiously conservative Caribbean, abortion, like homosexuality, is very much frowned upon by the public. Here again, on the bodies of women, religion finds itself trumpeting for “life” while “superstitious” practice is associated with secrecy and death. The same people, of course, engage in both.
must become something that is of both India and the Caribbean. The creature is the return of the indigenous Caribbean that lacks representation in the Afro-Indo-Caribbean divide.

_Dark Swirl_ is about a relatively deracinated East Indian family becoming Caribbean and becoming Guyanese. But national identity politics are indirect in this story. Rather, the postcolonial question is, can they live here in/with this soil that isn’t really theirs? Perhaps it does not want them and has grown ill with the ecological exploitation all the new people represent. The independence period during which _Dark Swirl_ ostensibly takes places, the 1960s, marked the first time since the sixteenth century that the European stranglehold on nature and life in Guyana stood a chance of being broken. And so the massacouraman, land spirit, reappears. The Europeans are a lost cause as humans who would respect the land and propitiate its spirits. The disappeared or relocated indigenous Amerindians had at least struck a utilitarian balance that Lagahoo could tolerate: even though they were not kind to him, they acknowledged the reality of his existence. What _Dark Swirl_ emphasizes is that the Caribbean belongs only to itself and has the final ontological say in how people experience national and racial identities. “In the Beginning,”

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20 The European presence in the territory that would become Guyana began in 1593; the land changed hands several times between the Dutch, French and British, with the Dutch being the major presence before 1803 and the British taking full control thereafter. The legal enslavement of Amerindians ended in 1793; the enslavement of Africans ended in 1838; and indentureship of East Indians ended in 1917. From the very beginning of settlement, Guyana was both exploited for its natural resources of gold and timber and seen as a suitable site for plantation-scale agriculture.
according to a poem of the same title in Aboud’s *Lagahoo* collection, after the “great shadow” of Man’s and other spirit beings’ doings wreaked havoc on the earth,

That was when Lagahoo awoke
And rubbed his eyes, muttering
“This crap must stop.”

And he crawled thirteen miles
To the foot of the monstrous image
And on its toe
Wrote his name with an oar. (14)

This is another Genesis. Man’s dominion over the earth proves harmful to it. He attempts to own and control land as if it belongs to him. But the true indigenous of Trinidad is Lagahoo, because he simply woke up there. He writes his name on the foot of the world, its stability. I invoke Lagahoo because he is the Trinidadian, island corollary of the Guyanese continental massacouraman. But Lagahoo has had more contact with the outsider humans than has the massacouraman: he saw Columbus first. The massacouraman’s task is to follow Lagahoo’s trajectory in protecting the land. The francophone creole term “Lagahoo” is probably not the secret name that that being wrote on Trinidad with an oar, but it is all the information we have. The Amerindians who might have known more are gone. All island territory in its broadest sense, all the terra firma, is Lagahoo’s. And he is not God, nor does he want God in his territory, nor does he want foreign spirits mucking around: he’s the boss
man and the local authority. The significance of writing his name with an oar is not lost when it is the sea itself that is the major tropological figure of much of Caribbean literature and history. The “sea is history,” as Walcott writes in the poem of that name (1979). But the discourse of sea changes and the great ever-shifting metamorphic, creolized continent-island-ocean behemoth of the Caribbean is a human construct. The major tectonic plates of the planet have not shifted since Pangaea 250 million years ago. Humanity might approach Lagahoo and Massacouraman if we last long enough to be epochal. Or they might come to us when they grow weary of us interfering with their habitat and trying to kill them.

Even Papa Bois, the folkloric old cloven-hoofed African man who lives in the forest and (according to Lagahoo) was brought to Trinidad by African slaves, is named in the Lagahoo poem series as an invader. Papa Bois might be like the other two, a mythic being, but he’s no local. After Lagahoo claims ownership of Trinidad with the marking of his name,

So it was that earth devoured sand
And light, the darkness,
And Lagahoo, unimpressed,
Built a great bonfire
And combed his hair

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21 Papa Bois is another Trinidadian folkloric figure whose name is of French derivation: “Father Wood,” protector of the forest and its animals. He is a hairy, horned, man-like creature with cloven hooves, much like the Greek Pan (who, likely not coincidentally, is also a god of nature; but Papa Bois is always depicted as a black African man). Papa Bois can metamorphose into a deer to lure hunters to their doom.
While Papa Bois and his children wept. (14)

The children of Papa Bois are the children of Africa and now the Afro-Caribbean: the Afro-Guyanese, the Afro-Trinidadians, the dominant majority population of most of the non-Hispanophone Caribbean. These people are the obvious choice for the new indigenous, a strong underlying current in nationalist rhetoric in both Guyana and Trinidad. But Lagahoo is unmoved by their historical suffering as a reason for taking over postcolonial ownership. It is less that he is callous and more that ownership itself is the problem. He does not seek to turn joint custody over to the Indo-Caribbean, or even, in Guyana, the Amerindians who are left, though he might favor their rights of return as people he previously tolerated without a problem. He has no racial bias, except against the red and blue persons who were especially rude—and “red” and “blue” are not races, they are colors like the yellow of the native kiskadee bird. At the end of this poem, after his reclaimed land has reasserted primacy over the other flashes in the pan, Lagahoo builds a bonfire in anticipation of something to burn, and waits for minor forces like humanity to complete their game, grooming himself for what may come.

Dark Swirl is about becoming indigenous to a land: through interpellation into its myths and the identification of enemies whom you are not and against whom you may band together with your new habitat and its spirits, inasmuch as you too are now one of its spirits. The meaning of land, says Clifford, can figuratively shift, as it “signifies the past in the future, a continuous, changing base of political and cultural

22 The population of the Spanish Caribbean falls rather more under the auspices of the mixed-race politics of mestizaje.
operation.” By contrast, “An absolutist indigenism, where each distinct ‘people’ strives to occupy an original bit of ground, is a frightening utopia” (482, 483).

Clifford suggests there must be multiple ways of conceiving of being native What I suggest is that here those conceptualizations of place-in-land apply to and are right for humanity: various groups of people, brought against their will and not, now share natal residence in the Caribbean. They are different from their ancestors and are no longer of Africa or India. But even enslaved, they have brought those places with them in language, food, religion and other cultural ways of being. Ghulam, the father in *Dark Swirl*, wonders if Massacouraman was a hidden passenger amongst the migrants, or part of their baggage:

Had [the massacouraman] come from [Africa] with the slaves as a curse on all the white sugar plantation owners from Europe, to lurk in the many creeks and rivers, to surge up from time to time from the depths of these dark waters? [Ghulam’s] thoughts drifted to China, then to India. Perhaps this thing had come from the Ganges, that most ancient, holy and foul of rivers, brought here by the indentured people from that land, their curse on the plantation owners? But what if this thing, the massacouraman, had been here since the very beginning, was native to this region, to this one spot, and had been known first by the Arawaks who prayed to it on moon-filled nights? Had they left it behind when they fled into the jungle many decades ago, as a protector
of their coastland, against the likes of the whiteman or even people like themselves? (59-60)

It being the final and lengthiest supposition, the reader surmises that the massacouraman’s original propitiators were indeed the Arawaks or another such tribe. But the creature had not been left behind. Instead, it had always belonged to the creek in which the villagers thought they found it, so it had no reason to leave with any people. The massacouraman initially seems as unwelcoming to the East Indians as he is to the white scientist, and the villagers feel that. On the other hand, they might not after all need defending by any land-tied spirit beings they rightly left in India. Were they to pass whatever tests the massacouraman and its land set for them, it might protect them all from the white man who has failed at all tests. The first test was why he was in Guyana: the scientist’s answer was that he was there for the most ecologically unsound reason, collecting specimens. The villagers were forced to be in the New World by their colonial masters. And so Massacouraman chooses them.

Ghulam reflects that

There was no getting away from thinking about the massacouraman, how he embraced it and simultaneously denied it because he felt it wasn’t truly part of himself or the villagers. Was it because they were transplanted people? Yet he also sensed that they had begun to see themselves less and less in this light on the Guyana coastland; that somehow the landscape was changing with them, that the birds, insects, and other animals were also going through a slow
transformation. Was the whiteman trying to stop that? Was that why he was putting things into crates, measuring counting, making notes about each one? What about the inner spirit of things which was changing all the time? (Dabydeen 75)

In the quest to be Guyanese, Indians and Massacouraman, figment of the ecology, change with each other and reach mutual tolerance. The novel implies that that is what the Amerindians achieved.

II. Stranger, Strange Land

Phenotypic skin shade, which is all-important to the stranger and the villagers—to all the humans—is just red or another color to Lagahoo, though Massacouraman, perhaps because it is resident in a country still occupied by various indigenous (in the common human usage) tribes, has brown color interests. It does ensure that the white stranger turns brown. Overall, though, both Lagahoo and Massacouraman snidely point to whiteness as unsuited to the tropics as a matter of melanocytic fact.

In his Discours sur le colonialisme (Discourse on Colonialism, 1955), Aimé Césaire writes that

First, we must study how colonization works to decivilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism…[upon each incidence of colonial
torture] civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place, gangrene sets in…” (35)

The English stranger in *Dark Swirl* is unhappy, amoral, and somewhat of a “dead weight” to the world, as he never finds his place in it. Massacouraman, as an avatar of the forest, does not sever the gangrenous colonial limb, but absorbs it—there is no redemption for the colonizer, but there is no annihilation either. The stranger appears one day in the village and sets up shop without asking permission. He is a scientist whose work is to collect and categorize samples of the native flora and fauna, and he keeps small animals in crates to ship back to Europe as curiosities. He is dissatisfied with what he thinks is his lonely, unfulfilling life, and seeks recognition in his homeland as a naturalist. The stranger is the quintessential colonial attempting to quantify and regulate excessive nature—in this case the lush jungle. He is referred to as “the stranger” throughout the novel, and he remains that. We never learn his name. It is not important, as he has no human future in Guyana. The stranger begins to be psychologically eaten by the jungle long before he is physically devoured by it. He repeatedly fails to capture or truly see the massacouraman but hangs on to vestiges of the belief that he is a member of a different order of human being than the villagers, one that prizes individualism, hierarchy and domination as methods of relation. A nagging part of him has known from the beginning that his worldview is inappropriate to his surroundings. He has attempted to buy life and scientifically classify it:
“You see anything strange?” one of [the villagers] asked when he reached them. The stranger smiled; this was his question to them; were they parodying him? “Just let me know what you’ve seen. I’ll pay well.” He jingled a few coins in his pocket. “If you see strange toads, fish, animals—whatever—I’m willing to pay.” (15)

Of course the villagers have seen something strange: the stranger, as the sequential structure of the first two sentences of this passage implies. He is, first, white-skinned, and that makes him look strange and out of place in their village of darker-skinned people. Only something or someone truly strange would imagine that Lagahoo’s iguana was for sale, and that is why they are ironically reflecting his question back at him. Third, to classify any form of life as “strange” is to contrast it to another that is not strange. No toad or fish in these parts is strange to the villagers. They have no knowledge of the stranger’s referents, the native toads and fish of a foreign continent. He is the one who is strange in the Guyanese jungle, and so he remains simply the nameless “stranger” to the very end. He is always uneasy, as despite his attitude of entitlement, he bodily suspects that he is somewhere he does not belong. When he first appears in the village, the villagers “seemed like children at times; but he suspected that they mocked him when he wasn’t there” (16). He is not sure why, and never understands why.

The stranger is marked by his visible whiteness as strange. The last scion of blue-and-pink Christopher Columbus, he eventually cooks to a well-done crisp—his skin burns brown—in the tropical heat late in the novel, after the animal specimens
escape and before his final disappearance into the jungle. His initial whiteness is visually out of place among the brown-skinned villagers. They do not particularly question his presence among them, but as he suspects, they mock his color: “He ‘in like we; he skin white-white an’ yellow too. He ‘in like we, brown wid the sun, an’ wid mud in we skin, we eye, we ear, we voice! He in’ like we—he pale like root!” When they laughed, it was as if the wind carried their laughter” (17). The villagers link their skin color with earth and sun, with living openly on the surface of the world. The pale stranger, though, is like a creeping root underground, with hidden, perhaps illicit motives, but also bearing something fundamental: the root of the villagers’ presence in the New World is, after all, colonial. Though the villagers laugh at the stranger, they recognize that he is also human: different in color, but similar enough to compare physical human features. The villagers understand phenotypic whiteness; the confusion is over how a person who seems human can be so psychologically different and have such a different approach to intimacy with other humans and to nature. Nonetheless, their first impulse is that of mimic men: when the massacouraman appears, they look to the stranger to save them. He is not a simple human as they are, so perhaps he has heroic European powers. Ghulam, Josh’s father, is the one who breaks this mold, as I will later discuss. The other villagers more slowly and passively get used to the stranger’s appearance:

Everyone in the village was curious about the white man. He was also peering into the odd places at the edge of the creek, a strange-looking man, with mottled white skin, a shaggy head of knotted blonde hair,
his face fringed by a thick beard. He had looked alarming at first, but now everyone was getting used to seeing him. (11)

This passage illustrates that the stranger is beginning to “go native,” the colonial’s worst fear, from the moment he steps foot in the tropics and his skin mottles and hair grows wild.

Skin is all-important in the racial hierarchy of the Caribbean colony, where its coloration is magically transformed from a protective to an oppressive characteristic. Dayan posits that the Caribbean is “a world where identities wavered between colors, where signs of whitening and darkening were quickly apprehended by all inhabitants, [and where] enlightenment depended on shadows. They were never fully exorcised” (237). What is odd is that, contra Dayan, though the villagers understand the stranger to be white, whiteness does not carry much significance to them beyond that of “outsider,” and outsiders are expected to act strangely. The villagers are isolated even from their previous history of indentured labor, and no longer quite remember why they are where they are and who brought them there. But it is true, as Dayan argues, that color consciousness has not been exorcized from the environment, and whiteness reappears against the backdrop of the villagers’ homogeneity. The white stranger turns up in the village in as much a ghostly fashion as does the massacouraman. But unlike Massacouraman, he is not tied to the landscape. He is a wandering spirit, and those are dangerous, because they are always searching for a home in some place or some person. The stranger’s whiteness is superficially a
reminder of colonial evil, but it is more complicated than that.23 His tormentedness and uncertainty are why Massacouraman does not punish him through a pure exorcism, but rather takes him into itself in an unknown way. Benítez-Rojo suggests that

Caribbean texts are fugitive by nature, constituting a marginal catalog that involves a desire for nonviolence… If we look at the Caribbean’s most representative novels we see that their narrative discourse is constantly disrupted, and at times almost annulled, by heteroclitic, fractal, baroque, or arboreal forms, which propose themselves as vehicles to drive the reader and the text to the marginal and ritually initiating territory of the absence of violence. (25)

As such a fractal (but less arboreal and more aquatic) form, the massacouraman has the power to punish but does not. Why would it, when so much blood has been spilled in the colony already? It seems to be a bit less bloodthirsty than Lagahoo—but both mostly leave the humans to their own devices. So the stranger does not experience a violent end. Before he disappears, he is given the choice to integrate

23 Dayan notes that “In popular [Haitian and Caribbean] belief, people-turned-spirits shed skin, but people also become white by shedding skin…These skin transformations suggest both monstrosity and whitening: dark flesh peeled white. Consider this logic: to be without skin is to be white and to be white is to be a devil. Although none of the tales of demon spirits ever mentions the color underneath the skin, I am concerned with the insistence on the absence of skin [in evil spirits]” (265-266). Is the stranger then an object of pity, a disguised sufferer whose dark flesh has been peeled white? There are, I believe, some complications with Dayan’s logic of whiteness: white is not necessarily the absence of color, it is also the blending of every visible color. In addition, in vodun and other related Afro-Caribbean faith practices, white is the orisha Obátálá’s color, and he is usually referred to as the “orisha of the white cloth.” Obátálá created humanity. Too, absence of skin is distinct from whiteness of skin.
himself into Josh’s family. To that end, he actually turns brown—and it’s no mere
tan. This is a phenomenon he experienced before when traveling the colonial lands:
early on, he feels beating down upon him

the same tropical sun which he knew cracked brittle skin and flesh,
especially skin like his, a man so absolutely of the temperate world.

His body seemed already to be moulting. His skin had once changed
in the Far East; then he’d become dark brown, almost black—like a
Negro. For a while he believed he’d contracted a strange disease. For
weeks he’d itched. The villagers had laughed at him then; they’d
never seen anyone who scratched as much. Now, looking at his hands,
his chest, he saw something akin to the same colour as the “disease”
and he felt uncomfortable. Josh, following his eyes, said, “You
become like one of we,” and laughed a little. (Dabydeen 39)

The stranger experiences the reverse of the process described by Dayan: scratching
off the chrysalis of white skin reveals a dark skin underneath. But he is not
succumbing to a disease, he is returning to bodily health, in that he is at least
acquiring some environmentally protective camouflage. As his mind empties into the
aforementioned “oneness” of a larger world-consciousness,

his memories were not strong or persistent. Something else had taken
over his mind: the feeling that he was now someone else, that he had
become like the villagers…The villagers nodded to him in greeting.
The stranger responded politely. There were smiles, an easy
familiarity. They stopped and talked, called him by his indistinguishable surname. The stranger was no longer a stranger, in mood or spirit. His skin, at first mottled, was now healthily dark. His hard-edged pragmatism had given way to a mild openness. (100)

In the jungle, dark skin is healthy. But the stranger’s development of protective color does not equal agency. It is a type of camouflage, but just one that prepares him for eventual assimilation into the darkness of the forest. The stranger’s time is done in this period around national independence. His English surname has become indistinguishable, just as discrete Englishness is slowly fading from the postcolony, becoming integrated as part of the perpetual background noise of the jungle. The white stranger experiences relatively gentle retribution from the colonized land, in the form, as I have described in the first chapter, of Roger Caillois’ “legendary psychasthenia,” depersonalization and assimilation into space, which is distinct from death. When the stranger goes to look for Massacouraman, he finds himself standing on the creek bank “stretching out an arm; he was a fish, scaly all over; the same fish he’d watched so many times from the window. He remembered the bubbles, each sucking him in. His senses were confused. It was dream, oblivion, a Oneness” (96). He withdraws from the creek after this incident. But the event foreshadows his subsequent assimilation into the jungle, when he wanders off into it, never to be heard from again. The stranger’s subsumption into a “melding” or a “Oneness” of being counters his colonial attempt to fragment, deconstruct, and capture. He imagines, in becoming fish, that he is metamorphosing into a sea creature, perhaps into the
massacouraman itself; he is becoming a part of the history of the land, but differently from the villagers: his desires are too dangerous, so the massacouraman leads him down a path lined with tantalizing glimpses of itself, ending in his disappearance into the jungle.

Resistance to the dictates of where one is and pure imposition of outside mores are a recipe for ultimate failure in any environment, natural or not. The East Indians accept their environment as is, and do not much attempt to manipulate it; but the scientist keeps trying to collect and categorize flora and fauna, and quite literally does not see the forest for the trees. Still, the fear that sparks the changing of the village corpus into something new and Caribbean arrives with the white specimen-collector, the “root.” That his colonial presence is necessary to spark such change is an uncomfortable suggestion for a postcolonial novel, but as the novel also suggests, colonization put the villagers in their confusing Neverland in the first place.

The trajectory of Dark Swirl is strikingly similar to another ecological story of the Indian subaltern, Mahasweta Devi’s “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha” (1995) translated by Gayatri Spivak. In this tale a pterodactyl, embodiment of a primordial spirit and representative of the tribal people, appears in an Indian Adivasi (tribal) village that is being decimated by deforestation and industrialization. An outsider journalist, Puran Sahay, goes to investigate the story, but does not understand the silent message the pterodactyl brings. The pterodactyl dies without transmitting its knowledge.²⁴ I note this story here partly because it is particular to Bihar, from

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²⁴ Puran notes that “[t]here is no communication point between us and the pterodactyl. We
where the majority of Caribbean East Indians emigrated, and because it is easily the
archetypal story of the return of a primeval spirit to the postcolony to intercede
ecologically and politically on behalf of the indigenous oppressed. The major
difference between this story and *Dark Swirl* is that the massacouraman does not die,
and that the Indo-Caribbeans are not authochthonous tribals, but are in the process of
becoming native.

Puran of “Pterodactyl” notes, “[t]o be a *miracle man* is a grave
responsibility…Today *magicman*, tomorrow fraud” (Devi 149). The stranger in *Dark
Swirl* is a miracle man in that the villagers at first believe he brings the
massacouraman with him and because the colonization of the New World by his
people, its becoming, is a miracle and magic of a dark kind. Missing from this
postcolonial triangulation of “miracle man” and “magicman” is its third angle,
“mimic man.” Mimicry, miracles, and magic combine to form the postcolonial
person and nation. In an afterword to Devi’s story, Spivak suggests “Pterodactyl”
implies that

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belong to two worlds and *there is no communication point*. There was a *message* in the
pterodactyl, whether it was a fact or not, and we couldn’t grasp it. *We missed* it. We suffered
a great loss, yet we couldn’t know it. The pterodactyl was *myth* and *message* from the start”
(Devi 195). One might argue that myth is message: the message of one’s origins. The lack
of affective relation between Puran and the pterodactyl, their inability to communicate, is laid
out starkly:

Those eyes have a message for Puran.
Puran does not know those eyes’ language.
Puran is a newcomer in the history of earth’s evolution. The human being is only a
few million years old.
This one came long before Puran. (154)
large-scale mind change is hardly ever possible on grounds of reason
alone. In order to mobilize for nonviolence, for example, one relies,
however remotely, on building up a conviction of the “sacredness” of
human life. “Sacred” here need not have a religious sanction, but
simply a sanction that cannot be contained within the principle of
reason alone. Nature is no longer sacred in this sense for civilizations
based on the control of Nature. (199)

The specific “large-scale mind change” Spivak addresses here is ending ecological
exploitation of Indian forests and maltreatment of tribal people, who are denied
access to forest and land they technically own and must rely on Indian government
handouts to live. The protection of Adivasi lives and of the life of the forest itself
necessitates a revival of the idea that life is sacred. This requires a leap of the
imagination that changes linear reality, so that a pterodactyl might appear in the
present. In Dark Swirl, the appearance of the massacouraman is outside the principle
of reason. For the colonial scientist, the jungle is not sacred, as his main goal is to
name and control all of its plant and animal manifestations as discrete elements rather
than part of a whole landscape. The scientist also has the temerity to attempt to
capture the massacouraman, the jungle’s spirit, in order to gain fame by exhibiting it
in Europe as a New World freak. In the colonial construct of “today magicman,
tomorrow fraud,” he epitomizes the fraud, both because colonialism has failed and
because he fails as a human being to connect with others. Though the stranger is
associated with outside “science” rather than the supernatural, the villagers
understand that he is a kind of magician. They repeatedly accuse him of working black magic on them: “He one whiteman jumbieman, teking out t’ings from the creek; an’ putting t’ings in too!” ‘T’ings from the land ... T’ings from far.’ ‘Digging up the ground wid he bare hand,’ they imagined. ‘Now all ahwe get punish, like Josh an’ he fadder!’” (Dabydeen 50). The villagers practice small farming where they “dig up the ground” and “put things in,” but it is for survival, and using a hoe indicates that they’re performing a normal human activity. Digging in the ground barehanded indicates madness or inhumanity. The villagers call the stranger a jumbie, or ghost, as he is the attempted return of the colonizer. Evil, they imagine, has been brought by him to their slumbering village. Now they fear they are complicit and all will be punished by whatever deity or spirit is in charge. With the exception of Josh and Ghulam, though, all the villagers really do is wait to see what the massacouraman and the stranger will do.

Unlike the stranger, what the villagers immediately realize is that the removal of flora and fauna from their natural place is an earthly affront. They understand, as Spivak notes, that attempting to control the forest is linked to rejecting the sanctity of human life. As they have not yet recovered from their dehumanization during indentureship, they are averse to caging other creatures. The stranger, though, blatantly attempts to steal Lagahoo’s iguana. When Ghulam and the villagers first see animal “specimens” locked in crates and boxes, “they looked at the stranger in disbelief, because this was the first time they had seen these creatures outside their natural habitat. The stranger was definitely a different kind of human being; they
were convinced now of his danger” (31). Only a madman or a non-human would attempt to control nature or transplant its elements; the colonizer does not fit the definition of “human” because he does not respect the sacredness of life. Ghulam intuits that freeing the specimens might rid the village of the specter of the massacouraman—whether this is true is not made clear—and goes one night on an unsuccessful mission to free the animals. The stranger resists seizure of a crate, saying “I brought it here and I’ll take it with me; as I’ll take all the other things.” His relationship to the land, again, is one of colonial acquisition. Angry, Ghulam reiterates what some of the villagers believe: “Is obeah; you wuk obeah pon we” (77). Removal of bits of the land cannot be seen as anything but an act of bad magic, of obeah. The fragmentation of the land through removal of specimens echoes the magical bodily deconstruction that occurs after the initial terror of white colonizers is projected onto the bodies of slaves:

The relics and scraps of bodies, variously called “ebony wood,” “pieces of the Indies,” “heads of cattle,” buried indiscriminately in the savannah and fields, returned as zombi spirits, baka, or lougawou, condemned to wander the earth in the form of cats, dogs, pigs, or cows. What links these evil spirits is the capacity for transformation into things that are not human…These “monsters” are the surfeit or remnants of an institution that turned humans into things, beasts, or mongrels. In this regenerative, reinterpreted, and vengeful history, dislocated bodies return to find their place. What whites called
“superstition” and “fetichism” turned out to be something more akin to the journeys of bodies that relocalize themselves as spirits and consumers, taking up space, greedy for goods, services, and attention.

(Dayan 258)

In disembodied pieces, the corpse-parts of land and people are evil and return as vengeful ghosts. Ghulam’s attempt to free the specimens shows his understanding that the land is already haunted enough by its history of colonization, and that he must stop this last iteration of its disembodiment. The stranger believes that he will be fulfilled when he collects the ultimate specimen-embodiment of the land, the massacouraman: “He wondered why he’d never married, why he’d preferred to spend his life all over the world looking for specimens. There had been no time for a wife. Suddenly his life felt empty. Only this thing, this leviathan, could fill it” (Dabydeen 39). Nothing can fill the yawning colonial void of unending desire for plunder but something that might not be real, and something that might be the entirety of the New World in one tremendous form. But also underscored in *Dark Swirl* is that the colonizer never marries and has no progeny. He has been so busy colonizing others than he forgot to ensure his own posterity; his attempted capture of the massacouraman to secure fame fails; and the villagers show some glimmer of turning

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25 Aisha Khan points out in her study of Indo-Trinidadian race and religion that “when what is lacking is culture, or, more accurately, high culture, the ethnos, or peopleness of a population comes into question…‘mongrelized’ (mixed, hybrid, creole) encapsulates numerous faults which rest on a race-culture axis. And echoes and fragments and severed limbs are only able to produce other fragments” (65-66). The postcolonial national question becomes one of constructing a community from and building a culture for what appears to be just remnants and parts.
away from a colonial, mimic man worldview. The colonizer is left with no legacy. He remains the nameless white embodiment of colonizing greed that can never be content, because there will always be more to acquire, even if it is a dream:

He wanted something else, something that was unique, that would be the talk of Europe and America, something that would make the zoos around the world compete with one another for his specimens. This would be the crowning achievement of his career. Wasn’t it for this he had come here, to live in this tropical backwater? He got up at once and started walking along the creek, towards the centre of the village. He looked at the darkness of the water, how seemingly impenetrable. He looked at the houses and thought of the people, their customs…he wished he knew more about them, about their ways, but he wasn’t really an anthropologist. He saw them as simple folk without much of a history; they were people whom Sir Walter Raleigh had never met on these Guyanese shores. (33)

The villagers may be “simple folk” whose history has been taken from them, but his ignorance of them—or rather, his lack of an ability to relate to them—illustrates that he will be unable to grasp or be a part of what they are to become. He is wrong in his typically colonial way of thinking of Guyana as an empty land before colonization. Sir Walter Raleigh indeed never met these (East) Indians upon the Guyanese shore; but Raleigh met Amerindians when he searched up the Orinoco River in Guyana for El Dorado. Having once been the Amerindians’ ancestral spirit, then, the
massacouraman has encountered the colonizer before; it is not naïve to the stranger’s ways. The scientist mostly sees the landscape the way colonialists always see the tropics, through the old trope of excess foliage and color that threaten to rob one of sanity:

He marveled at the tropical sunset—it was like nothing else in the world. The clouds were like multicoloured blinds, shapes and shadows, burgeoning, disappearing. The stranger looked up. The more he looked at the shapes and shadows, at the russet, vermilion, the ochre, everything with a marvelous restlessness, the more he sensed a giant melding taking place…Again he felt he was being detached from his usual self, rational, pragmatic. But who was he? Raleigh, Darwin, or some other forerunner unknown? Whose spectre would he eventually take on? It was as if his mind was becoming separated from him. (75)

Massacouraman appears to remind him and the villagers that the place had a history before them, and to judge their fitness to remain there. The scientist does undergo a physical change and a transformation—or at least degradation—in his thinking process; but this results only in his disappearance. He is primarily an old creature with the sickness of colonialism: “How he festered, like an old disease” (99). He is the rightful sacrificial scapegoat, and Massacouraman accepts him. He falls victim to the excess of the tropics.

Benítez-Rojo argues that the identity-searching of the Caribbean novel
strongly recalls the search for El Dorado. It is taken in like manner along many and varied routes by various means of traveling toward a hypothetical center or origin. This imaginary point, which is fashioned by desire, is neither static nor localizable, but rather in continuous displacement…And it is right there, in this fugitive place, where Caribbean Being, violently fragmented and uprooted, intuits that it can recover its lost form. Such is the inexhaustible treasure so fervently sought in this place at once both mythic and utopian. (187)

Neither the scientist nor Raleigh found their El Dorado. Rather, they were both consumed by the obsessive quest for the hidden heart of the New World and their minds and lives taken, in one way or another, by the massacouraman. The stranger does not need to become the specter of Raleigh. He already is Raleigh, and they have failed again. El Dorado is not findable. Rather, it finds those who look for it once they have exhausted themselves. The villagers are in “continuous displacement,” uncertain of their identity in the world and of what in the world is real. El Dorado finds them, sends its emissary the massacouraman and gives them a chance to be part of it, to come into “Caribbean Being.” Structurally, this narrative is chronological, but its time and location are imprecise and never explicitly named. It swirls in mythic time where the colonial and postcolonial overlap. The villagers are becoming postcolonial, but they are not there yet.

Like the other residents of the village, Ghulam is not quite out of danger of repeating the old hierarchical structures of colonialism. He continues to be afflicted
by a desire to make the stranger one of them—like a villager—even as the land and its agents are taking care of matters. He comes to believe that the stranger should be the one to capture the massacouraman, because it would gain the stranger the villagers’ acceptance. If the stranger caught the spirit beast,

There’d be gasps and cries, like a strong wind hurling from the sea, then tremendous applause. Broad smiles next; from the stranger first; then everyone else. Then the creature would be laid out along the main road and the ritual would begin. They’d carry firebrands which they’d jab at the stunned and defenceless creature, which would twitch and turn in pain as it burned. The small beady eyes in the gigantic black head would roll pathetically like those of a whale in distress. The younger ones and some of the less inhibited would dance around it. This would go on all night, with sporting, drinking and laughter; young men snatching at formerly distant sweethearts who now laughed giddily; while one special young girl would offer herself to the stranger, her generosity for a deed well done. He’d refuse, of course…but only for a while. He’d look around; blush; he’d wish he was young again…That very night his blood would pulse wildly, his emotions would be free like blood from a reopened wound; he’d laugh and forget his boxes and crates. He’d be like one of them! Ghulam wanted to tell the stranger all this, but the words wouldn’t come.

(Dabydeen 73)
This fantasy of Ghulam’s is part of the villagers’ lingering desire to have the white stranger “save” them, even as they blame him for the advent of the massacouraman. They are willing to give him one of their young girls as a reward; maybe then he could even have a genetic legacy, and be fully integrated into the community’s body—in a dominant position. Ghulam wonders innocently “What if somet’ing dey, a big-big t’ing that eat all we fish…How we could live? He have to take it away fo we’” (54). It is up to the stranger to save even their source of sustenance. But if the stranger did kill the massacouraman for them, they would never be free of colonialism.

The proposed violent ritual of death for the massacouraman is the same as that accorded the occasional caiman that makes its way out of river and creek and into the environs of the village. At the beginning of his stay, the stranger witnesses such a ritual:

The stunned reptile had been dragged out of the creek and left to the youths who pulled and poked at it in the middle of the road, applauding their efforts as they dragged at the tail. A few moments later they’d lit a fire and set it against the beast. Each time the reptile twitched, they cheered, and one or two had started a chant, “Massacouraman…massacouraman,” which had really puzzled him.

(43)

The stranger wavers between being revolted by the physical torture of the animal and being anthropologically fascinated by and afraid of the villagers’ actions, so he does
nothing to stop the killing. This incident illustrates that the villagers are not innocent either, and that their conception of the sacredness of life in its natural habitat extends only so far: as long as that life does not threaten human beings. An alligator that is just an alligator symbolizes the encroachment of nature on their tenuous foothold in the jungle, and the literal possibility of losing their own body parts and lives to consumption. But every alligator is also the specter of the massacouraman, which proposes, perhaps, to eat their souls and spit them out as something new. Which is to say, they are resistant to what Massacouraman offers. They wish to persist in ignorance, thinking neither of what they have lost nor what they are becoming. They are less victims of stasis than of apathetic entropy and degradation. I do not suggest that the villagers are being forced against their wills to participate in Massacouraman’s evident scheme to ontologically locate them in the history and land-memory of Guyana. The novel frames their subsistence lives as having little context and sense of historical place. They are outside of time, not just outside of the less-important linear time that involves decolonization and the workings of politics, but also outside of the mythic time that assures their right to live among Lagahoo, Massacouraman, and other local spirits, and their fitness to become the new Caribbean human indigenous.

For the stranger, the narrative’s end is anti-climactic: the specimens are released by an unknown hand, possibly his; and his resolution is a decline of humanity and absorption into the environment. Before his ultimate disappearance, he “drifted along in a kind of insubstantiality, as if he had accepted the creek’s mildness
in himself, was one with the flow, the ripples, the fish, the weeds” (101). That is, he succumbs to Caillois’ legendary psychasthenia and depersonalization into space. Josh, who is no longer afraid of the water, takes pity on the now-aimless stranger and invites him to live with Josh’s family. “But the stranger was hesitant, he talked vaguely about independence, but it seemed as if he wasn’t sure what he wanted. Josh laughed, ‘Eh-eh, you still de same?’ The stranger smiled” (101). The stranger has lost his agency but in some ways he is still the same; he never could make up his mind about what role he, the colonial anthropologist and naturalist, had in this land. Unlike Josh and his village, the stranger is not given a future, at least not in the human sense. At the end, his only chance of remaining an individual entity is to accept the offer of adoption by the future of Guyana—Josh. The stranger rejects an offer to join the family as a member without a vote, a senile uncle of sorts. The only fate left for him is to be swallowed by the forest, and he is. It is not clear, however, whether he has actually died.

III. The Boy and the Village

In *Dark Swirl* the Afro-Caribbean is not the mediator between the East Indian community and its experience of the natural and political Caribbean. The villagers are instead confronted with the much older and more rarefied spiritual and geographic legacy of the indigenous Caribbean. Tellingly, the village does not appear to have a pandit or spiritual leader, or really any real kind of leader at all. The villagers act as a collective, a representative splinter group demonstrating one possible postcolonial
avenue for Indo-Guyanese that acknowledges that the Amerindian Caribbean must be engaged rather than forgotten. The trajectory of their belief in the massacouraman is: disbelief; fear; dawning belief; excitement and desire; belief; denial; acceptance. Ghulam and Josh are exceptions, as they experience each stage earlier and to some extent, at least in the case of the boy, who always believed and then didn’t, in a different order.

Josh, a quiet, ten-year-old dreamer, begins the furor by claiming to see the massacouraman. He withdraws further into himself as the villagers at first disbelieve him, while the stranger becomes obsessed with the possibility of discovering the ultimate unknown specimen. The linear narrative begins with the boy, then digresses into his father’s story. Ghulam sees something in the night too, and he who was previously just a hardworking but demonstrably kind laborer, becomes introspective like his son. To the villagers, who are beginning to believe the whole family has gone mad,

Only [Ghulam’s] mind seemed to be at work; his eye brightening then going dull. He didn’t seem like one of them anymore; more like one of those from the crowded parts of the coastland, a city or town-dweller; the kind of person who, from time to time, gave way to prolonged brooding after a life of bustle and busyness; this sort—Africans, Indians or of whatever douglia mixture—were all the same, people without belief or fate, who swaggered drunkenly and plotted violence
against each other; people who definitely didn’t know hard work and
thrift; who didn’t know the virtue of inhaling black-sage and acacia
deep in their lungs in the late afternoons when all was quiet and
tranquil. (47)

Race is less important here than class and the urban/rural divide. The villagers mark a
difference between urban people and themselves. Without fetishizing the pastoral,
the villagers at first seem to have a more balanced philosophy. Ghulam’s fault is that
he has stopped working and resting at the appointed times. He has grown melancholy
like an urbanite, losing sight of life priorities. But it is an intermediary stage, and
they are all waiting, through the creek and the massacouraman, to be reborn.

The villagers’ progressive relationship with the water of the creek is marked
by Josh’s interactions with it. When, at the beginning of the novel, he grows
mysteriously ill, all the massacouraman rumors are sparked by the one rumor that the
creek—which he fears in part because he can’t swim, and in part because he is an
imaginative little boy—has caused his sickness. The result of that rumor is that
“[n]ow, no one wanted to swim there, no matter how inviting the water or how hot the
sun. They gazed at it, noting the ripples and looking for strange clues. One muttered
‘De watta gat bad spirit. It catch pon he’” (26).26 Josh is prescient, and understands
that the water carries danger and change before the rest of the villagers do.

The villagers are referred to in the novel as “they,” and experience collective,
representative Indo-Guyanese emotion. In their fear they think

26 “Spirit catch” in the Guyanese sense means that Josh has become haunted though not
necessarily possessed by some malevolence emanating from the water.
It was their bad luck that they had to deal with it now. Yes, the bubbles were signs of its breathing, when it was about to rise up like a mountain. Was this what they had called the massacouraman? Now no one went to the creek alone. Parents forbade their children to swim in it, the women would not wash clothes there and the men no longer bathed at the water’s edge after a long day in the fields. In all minds was the dread of being pulled under by the creature’s cavernous mouth. Yet they needed water. Two or three would go to the creek in broad daylight, one circumspectly watching, ready to shout a warning. They dipped their pails into the creek and hurried away. Later, as their apprehension grew, they saw the very water in their pails as having the creature in it. They refused to touch it, hardly washing, drinking, or cooking with it because they felt raw wounds in their insides, sores forming under their skins, in their armpits, between their thighs. They walked the streets spiritless, defenseless. (Dabydeen 65-66)

The prose here is shorter, more clipped, and structurally repetitive than in most of the novel, emphasizing the depths of their fear. The repetition of “they” makes clear that this fear is a collective experience. Terror, especially gothic terror that overlays the supernatural and natural, says Dayan, “is the place of greatest love. When I ask, ‘How are gods made?’ I am also asking, ‘How are histories told?’” (xx). The villagers are supplicants waiting for the love of their new land which they may consume, if they choose, in the water that they need to live. The monster,
embodiment of this love, lives in and is the water. Water retains here its usual religious and spiritual symbolism as a natural force associated with both creation and cleansing. In grief over a new becoming, before acceptance there is denial:

Any object that rose to the surface suffered death after death by gunshot wound. At night, fire burnt in their minds, raging against each board-stiff alligator’s tail as it beat out the final spasms of death. A pregnant woman bawled out in her sleep, “M-a-s-s-a-c-o-u-r-a-m-a-n!” “De creek give life to we—de creek can’t dead!” one lamented. Now they were saying things they’d never said before, things they’d felt but never expressed. (Dabydeen 54)

There is no use trying to shoot or burn water. It won’t die by those means, and even if it is dammed or dried up, water is conserved: rerouted elsewhere, condensed as rain, or in one’s own blood. As the villager notes, the creek can’t die and not only does it sustain life, it is currently in the process of giving life (in every sense) to the village as a relatively new entity in those jungle parts. This is a birthing process they feel but have so far lacked the power to articulate. They are dying and being birthed into Guyana, a development represented by the appearance of the massacouraman. At the end, after the massacouraman is finally “seen” but not killed by his frightened but accepting father Ghulam, the creature itself seems to dissipate and the water returns to its less terrifying generative capabilities. Josh is reborn, or at least baptized, in the creek. He loses his fear of the water and discovers that swimming is the most natural thing in the world:
Josh felt an immediate freshness as he entered the water. There was nothing else to be conscious of, no self-consciousness about the others watching him. He felt as if he had been used to the water all his life. There was no pressure as the water’s blackness surrounded him, as it swirled, as it engulfed him. It was like being swallowed; he laughed, enjoying the sensation, the warmth. Saliva-warm. Josh could feel the sun in the water, creating new life…And [to the villagers] the water no longer appeared black; its opacity gave way to a crystalline clarity. They saw themselves through it; they looked at each other while they were underneath it; they surfaced, with their eyes and mouths brimful with water, and they still saw clearly. (90-91)

Here it seems the massacouraman encloses Josh in the warm darkness of his mouth, but it holds him there without eating him. Being surrounded by a warm darkness also symbolizes a womb, and so the villagers, including Josh, are reborn. Josh can leave the creek and dry off, interact with the world and come back for refreshing later. All the villagers have survived their rebirth, finding their way back to a neutralized relationship with the creek where it is just water again.

The massacouraman invades the dreams and the daily life of Ghulam and the other villagers. It takes them over whether they see it or not. But they come to realize that yes, they want to be part of it:

It was something they had always feared in a dim, unspecific way, yet now that they thought the stranger was looking for it, they were sure
that it couldn’t really exist, that it was just a local legend. And then, without knowing why, they simultaneously wanted it to be real, and not to be there…So, amidst their fear and confusion, there was also exhilaration. The object in the creek surpassed the stranger, and it was theirs. It was in their own innards, for the creek was inside them; they drank from it when the government’s artesian well was dry…They reflected on the rituals surrounding the creek: they washed and frolicked in it; they fished in it, they gained their sustenance from it. Then they imagined the thing’s evil eye, erupting before them like a monstrous shadow, overwhelming all before it. It was their own insignificance they had to deal with now. They wondered what evil they’d done to deserve this. (Dabydeen 40, 55)

The villagers experience both guilt and a possessive thrill that finally, in the aftermath of colonialism, something might be theirs. Their “evil” is twofold: that they are on someone else’s land, regardless of how they got there; and that they have been simultaneously deracinated from the old world and have acquired no other cultural mores in its stead. To live like subsistence beings with no gods or guidance is to not be human. Land spirits require propitiating, and such creatures cannot perform that function. Massacouraman is sent to set them back on the right path for a people. In their terror they are making a new history with different spirits.

Despite their fearful blaming of the stranger for the advent of the creature, the villagers understand that it is local: “‘Is massacouraman he bring wid he?’ ‘It cyan
be, Massacouraman belaang right in dis place. It na he who bring it”” (27).

Massacouraman’s provenance is uncertain, but not for long. Ghulam is the first to think of its relation to his own place in the world:

Was it what they called massacouraman, something which was close to him and the other villagers, which was local—wasn’t from outside. Was part of himself, really. Where did such thoughts come from? He sighed. He wished he were like the stranger, able to understand the nature of things. (48)

But it is his son who has a better eventual grasp of the “nature of things.” A newly mature Josh repeatedly challenges and questions the stranger as the narrative comes to a close:

“De t’ing in the creek...It na real,” Josh cried out. It was as if he was speaking with the voice of his father; his mother; his brothers and sisters; with the voice of the entire village. The stranger scowled; his eyes hardening like marbles. Josh suddenly laughed—irrepressibly. Bewildered, the stranger walked on, like a man in a hurry to be nowhere. (85)

“Is de t’ing real?” Josh pressed. “Or was it only somet’ing in we mind?” Josh sounded like a grownup. The stranger was amazed at how much he’d grown. One could easily mistake him for being older than he was. (102)
Josh here exhibits a skepticism that the stranger associates with maturity in individuals and in civilizations. This cynical approach to countering the apish style of the mimic man is exemplified by the fact that once the lake becomes clear again, openly speaking of the massacouraman becomes taboo. The novel points to the ironic denial of the magical act of creation that may be the foundation of any nation or imagined community, postcolonial or otherwise. But what the villagers are charged with comprehending is that Massacouraman might reappear if and when they betray the trust that it has accorded them in the form of the real deed to Guyana. The creature is theirs.

When Josh initially refuses his father’s efforts to teach him how to swim, his perspective is different from his later skepticism and seeming arrogance. Ghulam says “’Memba, the creek belong to we too, not only to de fish an alligata.” Josh replies, “Leave me. The creek don’ belong to anyone but it!” (19-20). By the end, their positions have reversed. Ghulam comes to understand that the creek belongs to itself, while Josh discovers that he is quite comfortable swimming in it. But Josh’s sense of “belonging to” is not the same as the stranger’s or Ghulam’s initial proprietariness. Though he may live in his environment with a certain degree of mastery, he does not own it. Ghulam is the only one who consciously thinks about the villagers’ shift in perspective and recognizes the stages they go through. Almost as soon as he begins to experience the abovementioned complex thoughts of uncertain origin,
his longing grew that this thing in the creek should be alive. He wanted those who came from outside, those from far, to see that this thing was theirs; that it stemmed from them and in a way defined them; massacouraman or whatever name it was known by; that it was part of their identity on this Guyana coastland; part of what made them appear odd but recognizable. (79)

The villagers are “odd” in cultural terms because they are such a syncretic mix, but that is what makes them Caribbean. They had not realized that it was necessary to incorporate the indigenous Amerindian history of Guyana into their becoming Caribbean. Josh integrates Ghulam’s understanding of their syncretic history into his worldview, and his gaze is bright and toward the future. The massacouraman is a silent partner, but then, he never displayed any desire to speak. An understanding of his presence and original ownership rights is enough.

The appearance of the massacouraman sparks a different process of coming into (Carib)being, one that is not predicated on becoming white of soul while remaining dark of skin. In *Dark Swirl* there is more than an echo of Walcott’s call for a new, Adamic Caribbean man, as discussed in the first chapter. There is no duplicitous doubling, no dishonest twoness of color for the villagers. They are simply brown. Crucially, through the intervention of the massacouraman, their becoming is not racialized. They are not in opposition to the black Afro-Caribbean, nor are they in opposition to the whiteness of the stranger, whose color is made substance without meaning. As syncretic magical *simi-dimi*, the massacouraman does not “exist in a
divided domain of ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural.’” Both natural and supernatural simi-
dimi exist “in the domain of the natural…Although they may involve mysterious or
supernatural occurrences, and be deemed above human history, they are an integral
part of everyday life” (Khan 104-105). There is no getting rid of Lagahoo or
Massacouraman; they are part of the landscape. At the end of the novel we are left
with the poetic reflection and lament of the once-murdered alligator/Massacouraman, who is brought back to life by its fellow reptilians:

*Postscript: revival of alligator*

Hours after they left the dead one
on the brick road
the other reptiles crawled out one by one
and slowly dragged the beast back
into the creek

There they nursed him—
they tended to his wounds.
they poured water out from their mouths—
they swallowed leaves.
and regurgitated them onto his wounds

Slowly the beast’s eyes opened
he took in the other reptiles
his eyes widened—
he remembered death, remembered the noises of people
all around him

He wondered about the water holding a mystery,
how life survived among his kind;
at once he knew prehistory and registered
everything with a splash and a commotion

which made all the others wonder
where from they actually
came (Dabydeen 103)
Massacouraman can’t die. Glissant says that the work of the Caribbean writer is to reconstruct a “tormented chronology: that is, to reveal the creative energy of a dialectic reestablished between nature and culture in the Caribbean” (65). In Dabydeen’s novel, the massacouraman is the agent of this dialectic, ensuring that, in the transposition of the Old World to the New, Indian and African cultures do not abstract themselves with no relation to Caribbean nature. This was the cardinal sin of the European colonial stranger, and why Massacouraman stopped giving him chances to live: he could just never understand where he was.

*Dark Swirl* is the beginning of the postcolonial story for the Indo-Caribbean community. The villagers discover that they might have a place in the landscape of the New World, and an identity as a specific ethnic group. But with the exception of Josh and Ghulam, they are magically interpellated into the land as a community, remaining an undistinguished mass of villagers who share opinions and reactions. They are not forgiving of difference. In the next and final chapter, I will show how the project of naturalization excludes some Indo-Caribbean people from membership in the postcolonial nation by dint of their transgressive genders and sexualities, particularly, in this case, queer female sexuality.
CHAPTER 4

Viveka and Valmiki: The Queer Indo-Caribbean Family

CARIBBEAN LESBIANS DO NOT EXIST. So we are told…Of course, Caribbean lesbians do exist. As soon as I write this—as soon as I say it—I am attacked and dismissed: not my existence, but my authenticity as a Caribbean person and whether or not I have a legitimate claim on that identity…How does a living, breathing, loving person prove her existence? And why should she have to?

—Rosamond King, “More Notes on the Invisibility of Caribbean Lesbians” 191

Shani Mootoo’s novel Valmiki’s Daughter (2008), the tale of a young Indo-Trinidadian woman’s cultural, familial and personal struggle with her lesbian sexuality, is the author’s long-awaited “coming-out” novel: that is, the one in which the major Indo-Caribbean protagonists are unquestionably homosexual. Most importantly, it appears to be the first novel written in which the main character, Viveka, is an Indo-Caribbean lesbian. The frequently anthologized short story “Out on Main Street” (1993), from a collection of the same name, was Mootoo’s previous foray into this literary realm, addressing in a short narrative nearly every theme of import to an Indo-Caribbean lesbian: butch-femme identity, Indo-Caribbean race as viewed by Indians from India and white Westerners, feminist solidarity with heterosexual women, parents and marriage, language and immigration. But, I would argue, it is so frequently anthologized because it is a rare example of a story written entirely and unapologetically in a Caribbean—Trinidadian—Creole, and as such fulfills the requirements of linguistic pride that characterize national literatures. Caribbean critics, including feminists, generally tend to ignore queer literature in
favor of works with nationalist and feminist orientations. Heteronormativity is too important to the postcolonial national project and to literature in its service.¹

This chapter posits ways of figuring the queer Indo-Caribbean. In the context of Caribbean postcolonial nationalist and religious sentiment, homosexuality is, first, legislatively illegal in much of the Caribbean, and second, viewed by the general public and government officials as a product of “Western influence” in the form of Joseph Massad’s “Gay International,” an anti-social import propagated by tourists and media, ironically defined by its foreignness, even as anti-gay Anglican values and Victorian colonial constitutional laws become naturalized postcolonially as “Caribbean.” M. Jacqui Alexander’s widely cited study of the revision of sodomy laws in 1986 Trinidad provides the legal context for Valmiki’s Daughter.² In sum,

¹ Vera Kutzinski notes that “many recent Caribbean writers—both male and female—show an increasing willingness to speak of, and speak out against, practices of sexism and homophobia not only in the various locations of the Caribbean diaspora but, even more importantly, in the islands themselves, sexuality remains an issue largely shrouded in silence in contemporary scholarship on Caribbean literatures. Even feminist critics, such as Carole Boyce Davies, Evelyn O’Callaghan, and Myriam Chancy, are still ‘searching for safe spaces,’ ideologically speaking, when it comes to approaching literary representations of gender and especially of female sexuality. What spells ideological safety, to today’s feminist scholars of Caribbean extraction, is heteronormativity, whose representations they happily pursue and locate in the fiction and poetry of those writers whose texts are most regularly called upon to deliver authoritative accounts of the socio-cultural experiences of Caribbean women: novelists Jean Rhys from Dominica; Jamaica Kincaid from Antigua; Michelle Cliff from Jamaica; Simone Schwarz-Bart and Maryse Condé from Guadeloupe; and poet Nancy Morejón from Cuba” (168-169).

² Alexander: “In 1986, the Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago scripted and passed the Sexual Offences Act: ‘An Act to Repeal and Replace the Laws of the Country relating to Sexual Crimes, to the Procuration, Abduction and Prostitution of Persons and to Kindred Offences.’ This gesture of consolidation was, in the words of law commissioners, an attempt ‘to bring all laws dealing with sexual offences under one heading.’ It was the first time the postcolonial state confronted earlier colonial practices which policed and scripted ‘native’ sexuality to help consolidate the myth of imperial authority. Many of the thirty-five provisions of the legislation, then, had prior lives, and were being reconsolidated under a different schedule of punishments. Prohibitions regarding sexual violence within the family
Victorian laws relating to “buggery” and rape were somewhat reformulated under the rhetoric of “protecting women”; the end result was the 1986 “Sexual Offenses Act” under which all anal sex between persons of any sex or gender was criminalized (adults over sixteen: twenty-five years in prison), and lesbian sex was criminalized for the first time under the rubric of “serious indecency” (adults over sixteen: five years in prison). In addition, all “prostitutes and homosexuals” were legally barred from entering the country. These legal provisions were upheld in 2000, though they are rarely if ever enforced. Valmiki’s Daughter is set after 1986, and takes place over the course of two years, though the exact two years are not specified. This limited timelessness suggests that postcolonial homophobia in Trinidad is an ongoing and unchanging story. No one year after 1986 is a watershed moment for local gays and lesbians, who, as the epigraph by Rosamond King illustrates, are denied their Caribbean heritage by dint of their sexuality, and remain somewhat hopeless about their precarious legal and social circumstances.

(incest), and against women who exchanged sex for money (prostitutes) and those who aided them (brothel-keepers), or those who exploited them (pimps) had long been established in the emendations to the Offences Against the Person Acts, that one-sided pivot of British jurisprudence. In keeping with its allegiance to hegemonic masculinity, the script upheld a prior provision that defined anal intercourse between men as buggery, outlawed it, and affixed a penalty often years imprisonment, if convicted. It moved, in addition, to criminalize new areas of sexual activity. Established were prohibitions against employers who took sexual advantage of their minor employees at the workplace, and against men who had sex with fourteen- to sixteen-year-old girls, who would now be guilty of a statutory offence. For the first time, a category called rape within marriage was established and criminalized: ‘Any ‘husband’ who had forceful intercourse with his ‘wife’ without her ‘consent’ could be convicted and imprisoned for fifteen years under a new offence called sexual assault; and sex between women became punishable by five years under a new offence called ‘serious indecency,’ if committed on or towards a person sixteen years or more” (Alexander 7-8).
In the previous chapter, I discussed the evolution of Indo-Guyanese identity in relation to native Amerindian manifestations of the land. I argued that indigeneity is transferred to East Indians and Africans in the Caribbean through land-spirits like the massacouraman, whereas the European descendants of colonizers are symbolically rejected by it. This mythic transfer is the beginning of a people, the whole Indo-Caribbean community. Such a magical act is necessary when history is lost or rewritten, and people are oppressed. But the Indo-Caribbean is not really homogenous. As I argued in the second chapter, gender normativity is crucial to the survival and perpetuation of this minority community, which enforces common racial mores and rigid structures of public and private gender behavior in order to maintain cohesion. As a result, the queers of the Indo-Caribbean community require their own mythical stories in order to prove their very existence against the dominant narrative of Indo-Caribbean history. Thus, in this chapter I read Mootoo’s fictional *Valmiki’s Daughter* in the context of the earlier “biomythographies” (archetypal autobiographical stories) of queer Caribbean writers to argue that in Trinidad and Guyana, homosexuality disrupts the ethno-nationalist project of Indo-Caribbean social and political inclusion that hinges on particular conceptions of Indian gender normativity, which includes the cultural importance of marriage compliance as a value that ensures community survival. Queerness also troubles the Hindu and Muslim religious identities to which East Indians clung as markers of their discreteness even as they lost their ancestral languages in a mere generation or two in the Caribbean. Sexual license and freedom is even now associated by the Indo-
community with Afro-Caribbeanness. East Indian queerness is generally invisible or stigmatized, finding limited expression only in diasporic community spaces in North America and London. I also show that, while there is some tolerated space for Indo-Caribbean male homosexuality in the arts—particularly and ironically in the propagation of Hindu Indian dance forms as evidence of community survival—Indo-Caribbean lesbians remain invisible and without voice, except to a small extent in the literary realm. This chapter picks up the theme of metamorphic Indo-Caribbean transformations on the terrains of gender and sexuality. Queerness is the very newest ground of visible difference, the latest manifestation of an Indo-Caribbean community still in the process of becoming.³

*Valmiki’s Daughter* is a non-linear narrative that follows Viveka’s and her father Valmiki’s journeys as they realize and act upon same-sex attraction in the setting of contemporary, postcolonial East Indian Trinidad. While studying abroad, Valmiki falls for a Sri Lankan fellow male student—another displaced subcontinental—but chooses to return home, marry, and engage in affairs with multiple white women in order to conceal his clandestine affair with an Afro-Caribbean man, whom he treats as a mere substitute for his lost love. Years later, his

³ I assert this because, for example, to my knowledge there are no specifically Indo-Caribbean queer groups or organizations in the Caribbean itself. There is one in the U.S.: Sangam, which is based in New York and was founded in February 2012. Sangam was founded by Indo-Caribbean activists earlier affiliated with SALGA, the South Asian Lesbian & Gay Association of New York City, established in 1991. This origin is particularly salient as it shows that Indo-Caribbean community organizers felt more kinship with the diasporic Indian queer community than they did with the queer Afro-Caribbean diaspora. My observation is that this shared queer Indian kinship is in large part a result of shared Hindu and Muslim religious upbringings, and common first- and second-generation immigrant Indian family mores (full disclosure: one of the founders of Sangam is a friend).
tomboyish, college-age elder daughter Viveka refuses to conform to all aspects of Indo-Caribbean femininity, and eventually falls in love and has sex with Anick, the bisexual French wife of Nayan, a cacao-farming Indo-Caribbean mimic man. The novel concludes in ostensibly realistic fashion, with Viveka accepting a man’s marriage proposal in order to escape to Canada, where she may or may not find freedom. The work is divided into a prologue, four chronological chapters, and an epilogue. Each chapter is divided into sections in which an omniscient narrator relays the story from the point of view of a particular individual, or describes the interaction between two or more persons named in the section title. The novel addresses the reader in the first section of the beginning of each chapter, which is titled “Your Journey Part [chapter number].” The reader is first taken on a complete sensorial tour of the environment in which that chapter is set, suggesting that a place must be comprehended before its people can be. As in Mootoo’s other works, smells are given careful attention. While the reader is briefly told of the town of San Fernando that “the people on the streets are mostly of Indian and of African origin. Indian or black. You’d likely notice that most of the beggars are Indian. But you might not”—the descriptions of street smells are far lengthier than any elaboration of the usually all-important racial dynamics (Mootoo 10). The combination of natural and human environmental excrescence is the key to understanding Trinidad. The mingled smell of plants, animals, human bodies, weather, food, sea, industry, and all waste is the singular smell of Trinidad, its olfactory identity. But some smells dominate:
Despite the aural melee, what might well overwhelm you are this intersection’s odours...it might be the season when the long, dangling pods of the samaan tree (the unofficial tree of the city, planted and self-sprouted everywhere), which resemble a caricature-witch’s misshapen fingers, split—and the entire town is drenched in an odour akin to that of a thousand pairs of off-shore oil workers’ unwashed socks, an odour as bad as, but more widely distributed than, the effluvia from the medical waste incinerator. (9-10)

The witchy, spreading samaan tree’s foul odor is even more foul and dominant than anything humans can produce, a natural warning of sorts to the people of Trinidad. The samaan tree cautions Trinidadians that nature is ever-present, and that in the long colonial history of Trinidad, it has not been tamed. The tree is native to the tropical Americas, but was introduced into and grew quite well in colonial India: a reverse Indo-Caribbean colonization.

But humans have imposed upon this natural landscape. The main setting of the novel is the wealthy section of the neighborhood of Luminada Heights in the Indian-dominated town of San Fernando, South Trinidad, where the Krishnu family resides. Chayu, a rural cacao plantation estate—and an original site of Indian indentureship—is the place where town mores flounder and Viveka consummates her relationship with Anick. Viveka’s and Anick’s presence at Chayu legitimizes their link to the unorthodox colonial sexual practices of indentured men and women.
Time matters in this novel, and it is carefully segmented. The prologue is entitled “24 Seconds” and begins the story at its end, after all events have unfolded. Valmiki is left regretting his life and the fact that he did not, somehow, warn or help his daughter. The epilogue in which Viveka speaks of her own courage in contracting a heterosexual marriage in order to leave Trinidad is entitled “24 Months,” and takes the reader back to the time of the prologue—except that Viveka, unlike her father, might have an emotionally whole future. Chapter I is titled “San Fernando: 24 Hours”; Chapter II is “Luminada Heights: 24 Days”; and Chapter III is “Chayu: 24 Weeks.” As, most notably, the number of hours in a day, the number twenty-four symbolizes the discreteness of each episode of time it marks. The prologue, chapters I-III, and the epilogue are each like a day, with a beginning and an end in the same place; they are all just different lengths of days, from shortest (24 seconds) to longest (24 months). But chapter IV carries no time or place index, and is instead divided into sections of which the first is “Your Journey Home,” the second “Valmiki’s Daughter,” and the fifth and last “Viveka’s Father.” Time in this novel, as in much of Mootoo’s oeuvre, is circular, progressing until it returns to the same point. But perhaps the circle is neither closed nor infinite, as the novel shifts focus from Valmiki to his daughter. Valmiki’s Daughter ends with a renegotiation of that parent-child relationship into “Viveka’s Father.” The future is dialogic: Viveka’s perspective becomes the privileged one, but her story is still metamorphic, in negotiation with her father’s own story and the Trinidad she is preparing, at the end, to leave behind.
I. Queers Against the Mimic Man: Indo-Caribbean Theories of Sexuality

Viveka and Valmiki are marked as different because both are measured against the yardstick of the typical Naipaulian postcolonial mimic man and found to be something more than he is. The novel’s primary family relationship is a father-daughter one. The mother/wife Devika is their foil who embraces conventional gender roles—but, as I will later discuss, as a member of the male older generation, Valmiki has many more roads open to him than does an older woman. Devika is left to be a mimic woman because she, unlike her daughter, does not have the wherewithal to fight oppressive social mores.

The mimic man of *Valmiki’s Daughter* is Nayan Prakash, Anick’s husband. He is young, but has inherited the mantle of that postcolonial type. Nayan lives in the colonial past. Nayan marries Anick because she is white and foreign and beautiful and thus gives him status. He is aware that she is bisexual, but, naturally, “had wholeheartedly believed, known deep inside of his very soul, that he—he—could change Anick, show her what love and happiness could look like” (231-232). At first, he is fascinated and aroused by her proclivities, but once they marry and move to Trinidad, “he was suddenly disgusted. He told Anick he hated that part of her life, that he was appalled, even tormented, by the idea that she had once loved women”

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4 Nayan explicitly says to Viveka of his marriage contract that “I know that marrying Anick, or rather, *Anick* marrying *me* is an indication of my worth…look at how many of our men go abroad and come back with white women. And usually they are not good-looking women at all, but that doesn’t matter. What matters is that they are white. Neither of them could have done better. She nets herself a professional, or at least a man with a degree, and he returns to his family, his village, to the country, with a white woman on his arm. He returns the conqueror!” (309).
(232-233). Sexual disgust gives way to deep suspicion linked to class anxieties. Her beauty and foreignness gives them access to social circles that were previously beyond his reach; but then he realizes that the upper class is entirely too sexually permissive for his family’s orthodox Hindu taste. He bitterly accused Anick of wanting to spend time with these people because they were so worldly that they would accept or even laud her strange sexual deviance. He had watched them carefully and he saw suggestions in some of the men and the women of homosexual tendencies. He spotted signs that he was unable to adequately articulate…He watched every interaction Anick had with these particular other women, to see how they looked at each other or touched each other, and feeling vulnerable by association himself, he monitored the other men’s interactions with him. They so easily touched each other, but not with the slaps on the back or big animated handshakes he shared with Bally and other men who were more like himself. The gestures of these men were small, too delicate to be coming from real men. They seemed so reserved and polite and good-humoured, clean-humoured, on the outside, but who hadn’t heard of their transgressions? (252-253)

Nayan is a middle-class Hindu businessman, stolid and unbending in his views of the world and certainly in his perceptions of gender. He is too proper and image-conscious to be openly antagonistic about his feelings regarding effeminacy and
inappropriate bodily contact. Gender-normative behavior is part of his overall conception of Indianness, which is very narrow but is also his only defense against a world that thinks of him and his people as racially and culturally inferior. Chayu, his family’s cacao estate, turns out to be handed down from the onetime French colonizers of Trinidad. Upon renovations at the Chayu estate house,

A wax rubbing revealed the words *Le Ciel de Chaillou*. When Anick told her father of the discovery of the plaque, and of the French words on it, he immediately replied, “But of course, Chaillou must refer to David Chaillou, France’s first official chocolatier, appointed to the court of the chocoholic Queen Marie Therese.” The original French owners of the estate obviously knew the history of chocolate in France and had named it in honour of David Chaillou—“Chaillou’s Heaven.” It was a pleasant irony to Anick that she had ended up living in this particular estate, this particular house. The discovery of the name of the house was, to her mind, like unearthing an umbilical cord to France. It gave her a humorous sense of “right of presence.” But the connection, and her talk of it in this manner, irritated Nayan. He had an ornate brass plaque made, on which was inscribed the single word *Chayu*. This is how the house had come to be known, with a name that sounded Indian enough, and so, according to Nayan, it would remain. (279)
Nayan, in his mind, bests his supercilious French relatives. He also asserts the postcolonial dominance of the colonized over the colonizer, particularly in the Caribbean linguistic creolization of European languages (French Chaillou to creolized Chayu): he literally gets the last word. But it is a hollow victory, for the man himself is pathetically insecure and exhibits all the ridiculous pomposity of the born mimic man. His dreams of the future are provincial dreams of his own financial glory:

Nayan knew better than to talk with his father about the luxury-car detailing business or the haberdashery shop he imagined, all under the umbrella of a new “Ramayan Enterprises” or perhaps “Ramnayan Enterprises” or “Ramnayana Enterprises.” He played with his and his father’s names, and even added his mother’s into the mix and he came up with Ramanayaminty Enterprises, which, despite its length, was his favourite. (243-244)

In classic Indian and Indo-Trinidadian country fashion, Nayan’s father’s name is Ram and his mother’s Minty. And in the grand literary tradition of the Naipaulian faux-educated postcolonial Indian fool with doomed class aspirations, the longest possible business name is the one most satisfying to him. His provincialism is also evident in his implied satisfaction that the name “Ramnayaminty Enterprises” and all of its variants are strikingly reminiscent of the title of the Ramayana, the Hindu religious epic. It is like his insistence on calling his home “Chayu”: it seems Indian and that is good enough for him. This humorous moment is very much an homage to Naipaul,
and an acknowledgement that the forever colonized mimic man is alive and well in twenty-first-century Trinidad. Nayan is ignorant of the historical facts of his ancestral indentureship, but he does not need to know them in order to feel the mimic man’s sting of postcolonial racial insecurity when he leaves the small pond of Trinidad and walks the streets of Europe. Upon his return to Trinidad with his new wife, he says to Viveka:

When I returned here I watched my friends and saw—I still see it—how they all think that because they are men—just because of that single fact—that they are special. Little do they know that among other men of the world, we are practically not visible. Not just in the white world, you know. Look, I have met men from African countries, from Kuwait, from India, and if only you could see how they treat us—or don’t treat us, because in their eyes, too, we—the sugar-cane and cacao Indians, those of us from Trinidad, Guyana, Fiji—we don’t exist. With the Indians from India we can bond over cricket, but other than that they—even they, who share our ancestors—dismiss us. As if we are poor, poor, poor copies of an original that no longer exists. They see how we run to them for accessories like cushion covers, tablecloths, like pictures to hang up, bangles to wear on your hand. We have nothing of our own making—no style, no art or culture—to show for ourselves. So many years after leaving India, after losing the language, after watering down the culture, the religion, we’re groping,
still shy of becoming Trinidadian. Abroad, we exude no confidence in the way we move about. How can we? We are not properly Indian, and don’t know how to be Trinidadian. We are nothing...We gave up what was ours a long time ago and are trying too late to replace it with the same things. Too much has happened to us, we can’t go back, but we don’t know how to go ahead. Between being ashamed of our Indianness and the new born-again Indianness you see people practicing here, men like me fell off the radar. And the only place we can be big and confident is in the ponds we create for ourselves. (307-308)

Nayan is self-aware enough to understand the Indo-Caribbean cultural struggle to be properly Indian and Caribbean at the same time, but his outlook is pessimistic and selfishly pragmatic—unlike Viveka, he has no desire to change the world. His feelings of racial inferiority are gendered, giving credence to the old canards of psychological emasculation of the slave, and holding the culturally “backward” indentured laborer responsible for racial insecurity and the patriarchal oppression of women of color by men of color in the present day. Certainly Nayan feels emasculated; but he chooses to live according to questionable mores he understands all too well, because rather than fight, he prefers to have his small bit of power in his own world, over his women and over Indo-Trinidadians poorer than himself. This shortsightedness is the ultimate failure of postcolonial mimic man, and why, in
Naipaul’s view, the nation-states of the Caribbean will never progress beyond apish
imitations of Europe. Gayatri Gopinath notes that

Naipaul recognizes that within a colonial system of gender, possessing
a viable masculinity is intimately tied to the ownership of property in
the form of an idealized domestic space. Naipaul also recognizes that
both masculinity and housing are invariably denied to the colonized
male subject…The ‘mimic’ masculinities of colonized men are not so
much desperate attempts to become real as they are the only forms of
identification available to them. (73)

Young Nayan is a lost cause. His mind is colonized and his legacy is to perpetuate
mimic manhood. But contra Naipaul, in Mootoo’s work, there are two other types of
Indo-Trinidadians: those who want to break their socio-cultural bonds but fail, and
those who have the courage to break them and face an unknown future: the gay man
Valmiki and his lesbian daughter Viveka, respectively.

Mootoo’s novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* does, as I have discussed in the first
chapter, treat themes of homosexuality, but not in a main character. In fact, it more
thoroughly addresses the transgenderism of secondary, biologically male characters.
As Gopinath and other theorists of queer and Indian diaspora have noted, in *Cereus*
the two lesbian characters disappear quickly (and wreck the lives of an Indian
husband and daughter), “exiting both the house and the narrative as a whole as they
set sail for the ‘north,’ apparently unable to reconcile queer desire within the
exigencies of the home” (Gopinath 165). In *Valmiki’s Daughter* too, the way out
leads to Toronto, the queer Third World subject as usual leaving an oppressive homeland for the more enlightened West. Mootoo’s work in general complicates that idea by “trac[ing] the various forms of travel and motion undertaken by sexual subjects both within the home and away from it” (Gopinath 165-166). Valmiki’s Daughter, as I read it, suggests, first, that one can begin to discover the truth of oneself at “home;” and secondly, that the “West” provides a qualified and racialized liberation, and is not always kind to its own queer children.

It is no overstatement that Valmiki’s Daughter is a long-awaited novel, the one “we”—not just queer Indo-Caribbean people, but the overlapping group of postcolonial Caribbeanists concerned with issues of gender and sexuality—always hoped she would write. There are novels that treat Afro-Caribbean queer female sexuality, including much of the work of Paule Marshall and Patricia Powell, but Indo-Caribbean women’s sexuality has remained invisible, confined to the home. It is a small literary world, the queer Caribbean; and, in a bid to be heard and seen, the same persons take on multiple roles. Thomas Glave, academic scholar, writer, and co-founder of J-FLAG (Jamaican Friends of Lesbians and Gays, the most visible LGBT organization in the Caribbean) is editor of the first anthology of queer Caribbean literature, which includes Mootoo’s abovementioned short story. Glave’s anthology, titled Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles (2008), is about community. The collection, he says, “is a book that I and others have been waiting for and have wanted for all our lives. It is in no way an exaggeration to say that this gathering originated as an idea born out of the most
extreme longing: the desire to know finally, and with complete certainty, that a book such as this one actually existed and could exist” (1). Choosing the Antilles as the collective Caribbean geography immediately invokes Antillanité, a term popularized by the Martinican Édouard Glissant (1981) that opposes the African-centeredness of the earlier Négritude movement of Caribbean identity.\(^5\) Antillanité includes indigenous, Indian, Chinese, Irish and other Caribbean labor histories and acknowledges a *multiplicity of difference*, a hallmark of metamorphosis. No one story predominates, an apt signifier for a queer diaspora that resists “evoking an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history” (Gopinath 4). Instead, remembering through queer diasporic desires and bodies evokes “a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles” (4). This multiplicity reveals the heterosexual underpinnings of the postcolonial nation, a notion I will explore further. Glave’s bid at an inclusive queer Antillean-ness is complicated by language—Antilleans speak Standard English, Dutch, French, Spanish, and uncounted creole variants of these languages that borrow from African languages, Hindi, and, continentally, Javanese (Suriname) and Amerindian languages (Guyana). Shared colonial and demographic histories with the islands result, for Glave and Glissant, in the incorporation of the three Guianas—the non-Hispanophone and non-Lusophone nations of South

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\(^5\) As a general term for regional Antillean island collective identity, the term has, however, been included in Caribbean nationalist and independence discourse since the 1960s.
America—into the literary and theoretical “Antilles.”

Glave also decenters Jamaica from the Anglophone Caribbean and specifically denies being a “Jamaican supremacist,” calling that an “inexcusable act of nationalism thickened by naive nostalgia.” In the end he says that there is “no truly satisfactory conclusion” to divisive language and regional issues, except to be “glad…that we are in this gathering truly present: speaking and listening to each other as the neighbors we are and have always been” (8). That is, it is implicitly permissible to set aside postcolonial debates over linguistic and racial identity because of the temporal urgency of the cause of queer sexuality, which at the very least involves mutual recognition of queer self and others, and with luck the cohesion of a queer Caribbean imagined community.

The Caribbean is a transnational Western space wherein some of the “natives” are newer to the place than the colonizers themselves, as I have previously

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6 “Latin America” is a conceptually and historically different entity, a product of Spanish and nominally Portuguese colonialism. But Portuguese-speaking Brazil’s sheer size and ecological and ethnic diversity usually earns it separate political and academic attention.

7 Outside the Caribbean, Jamaica is often regarded as the epitome of Caribbeanness, not least because of the worldwide popularity of the reggae music of Robert Nesta Marley. Jamaicans themselves also hold that notion rather more than less, hence Glave’s disavowal of being a “Jamaican supremacist.” Jamaica has the ignoble distinction of being named in 1996 by Time magazine the most homophobic place in the world, which perhaps comes as a surprise to outsiders who conceive of the Caribbean as an entertainment complex of sun, beaches, laid-back natives and licentiousness exemplified by tourist-friendly sex workers. Much of the Caribbean retains antiquated Victorian colonial laws regarding sodomy, which are bolstered by a majority Christian population.

8 Benedict Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion… it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (6-7). Applied extranationally, a queer Caribbean imagined community is one that seeks transnational bonds based on regionally oppressed sexualities.
discussed in the context of Cyril Dabydeen’s *Dark Swirl* (1989). Slaves and indentureds were the transplanted, laboring Other of Empire, not the exotic, indolent Oriental Other depicted in nineteenth-century European paintings of the harem. Yet, fully bared or fully concealed, they were all reducible to bodies. Bodies engaged in same-sex relations do not require a politics; they just are, they simply do. Those not in need of a politics might also be in danger of remaining just bodies.

In their discussions of diasporic Indian sexuality, most queer theorists feel compelled to elaborate upon terminology. Viveka is queer; but she is also specifically lesbian, or as Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley puts it in her discussion of the links between Afro-Caribbean female lesbian attraction and labor, a Caribbean “woman-loving-woman.” Thus far I have used the terms “queer,” “homosexual,” “gay” and “lesbian” more or less interchangeably to mean, specifically, those persons engaged in same-sex sexual behavior and/or identity. This is certainly an older way of formulating the non-heterosexual that hinges in some ways on a type of unsatisfactory biological determinism and that focuses on catalogued sexual behavior rather than desire, affect, or self-identification. But each term has contextual Caribbean specificity. Tinsley, who prefers “women who love women” as the operative term for queer Caribbean women, acknowledges that “lesbian” has entered the Caribbean lexicon and is linked to the Gay International in both strategically useful and potentially harmful ways.⁹ I adopt Tinsley’s theoretical strategy of

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⁹ Tinsley: “At the turn of the twenty-first century, *lesbian* had entered Caribbean languages as a noun, but it was not the only word and history women could call on to speak desire for females. The adoption of *gay* and lesbian identity and human rights vocabulary strategically
refusing to “crown any one noun or adjective ‘most’ emancipatory” (8). As Tinsley says, the tensions are simply too productive. But of course, even if it falls short, there is always need for a collective linguistic signifier. “Women who love women” is quite appropriate, and acknowledges the affective; “queer” is broad, but has the underappreciated capacity of being blessedly general shorthand for “gay and politically aware.” As such, Gopinath, Jasbir Puar and others who examine Indian transnational queerness through subaltern and postcolonial models—which owe much to the Western academy in concert with the Spivakian “native informant”—tend to generalize (uncomfortably) when necessary with the term “queer.” Says Gopinath, On the most simple level, I use “queer” to refer to a range of dissident and non-heteronormative practices and desires that may very well be incommensurate with the identity categories of “gay” and “lesbian.” A queer diasporic formation works in contradistinction to the globalization of “gay” identity that replicates a colonial narrative of development and progress that judges all “other” sexual cultures,

links JFLAG to well-known, well-funded groups like the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC). At the same time, it makes the Jamaican organization vulnerable to imperialist rhetoric that sees Caribbean lesbians as passive victims of the Global South’s ‘underdevelopment’ of sexual identity who need assistance from more advanced northern sisters. The answer to this conundrum, of course, is not to crown any one noun or adjective ‘most’ emancipatory but to maintain productive tensions between them, and the vocabularies of the texts examined here speak to this…taking a cue from Creoles’ verbal constructions of sexuality (that you “make” rather than “are” zanmi), I avoid the culturally specific nouns lesbian, dyke, zanmi, madivine, and sodomite to designate same-sex sexuality in general in the Caribbean and opt for a verb phrase—women who love women—that aims to reach beyond shortcomings of either-or identity politics” (8).
communities, and practices against a model of Euro-American sexual identity. (11)

“Queer diaspora” here is a repudiation of what Joseph Massad terms the “Gay International.”

The same Caribbean gays, lesbians and transpersons who find more personal traction in identifying themselves as gay and lesbian and trans* also sometimes deliberately adopt “queer” as an organizing strategy that connects them to international LGBT rights movements.

It is useful as a kinship term that covers everyone and everything non-heteronormative. It is also, perhaps, a respectful way of implicitly including those who are not willing, able, or ready to identify themselves publicly as sexually different. Glave notes of his anthology that “[t]he words lesbian and gay in the title lost this gathering at least two writers: one a woman of Caribbean background who, while erotically interested in other women, has long refused to call herself a lesbian and, as she told me, wished not to have her work involved with any text that would categorize her writing as either lesbian in content or as authored by a

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10 According to Massad, the “Gay International” in the orientalized Arab and Muslim world include the “missionary tasks, the discourse that produces them, and the organizations that represent them….Like the major U.S.-based human rights groups (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International) and many white Western feminist organizations, the Gay International has reserved a special place for the Muslim world in both its discourse and its advocacy. This orientalist impulse, borrowed from predominant representations of the Arab and Muslim worlds in the United States and Europe, continues to guide all branches of the human rights community….The larger mission… is to liberate Arab and Muslim ‘gays and lesbians’ from the oppression under which they allegedly live by transforming them from practitioners of same-sex contact into subjects who identify as homosexual and gay” (362).

11 I employ trans* (with an asterisk) according to contemporary political organizing usage, indicating inclusion of any identity label that begins with the prefix “trans.” The apocryphal origin of this usage is that the asterisk is a wildcard character in computer command-line interfaces: searching for any term that is followed by an asterisk produces results that include all occurrences of the term as a prefix. Nowadays trans* is used as a placeholder for all fluid, queer gender identities, including ones that do not specifically include the term “trans.”
lesbian” (9). He then proceeds to “out” the second non-collaborator on the apparent and problematic grounds that the man is dead and it is his literary estate and heirs that refuse to have his name appear in such an anthology. “Queer,” in its generalized use in international political organizing, might be an appropriate way to refer to such persons’ non-heteronormativity, whatever their specific iteration. It simply means the reclaimed “bent,” giving mainstream society and its sexual mores the side-eye.

Puar’s commentary on identity labels appropriate to the queer Indian diaspora also reveals a careful negotiation with cultural relativity. Her observations of Indo-Caribbean queerness in the 1990s are a by-product of her early ethnographic work on Carnival performances amongst Indians in Trinidad. She relates that “I have also, with ambivalence, used the terms gay and lesbian as well as transgender to describe people in Trinidad while I used the term queer for myself. I have done this in part because queer does not yet circulate as a descriptor in Trinidad” (“Global” 1062).12 Things have changed, but not completely. In a conversation with two male Indo-Trinidadian dancers who seem to be a couple, and whose relationship existed under the guise of a business partnership, Puar uncomfortably seeks a queer Indian diasporic connection and attempts to find a queer international common ground; but they are uncooperative. She says, “Unlike with the other drag performers I interviewed, who were Afro-Trinidadian, I simply could not bring up the question of sexuality with Vikram and Sasha, largely because they did not appear gay to me in

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12 Stating that “queer” does not yet circulate as a Trinidadian descriptor implies a problematic temporal, “progressive” ideology that the world should share—unfortunate shades of the “Gay International.”
any intelligible way”¹³ (1058). This mode of interaction, where one party seeks commonality the other does not or cannot give, is often characteristic of Indian/Indo-Caribbean and “First World”/”Third World” queer interaction. Differing national origins, class, and expressions of non-heterosexuality cannot always be bridged by race and ancestral ethnic origin—a fact that may seem self-evident, but people often presume otherwise. In this case, not all Indian diasporic sexualities are created alike. In Trinidad itself, homoerotic performance in so-called Trinidadian “Indian dancing” is not actually read as masculine or feminine, trans* or queer. Puar reports that

The differences between Afro-femininity and how it “gets dragged” versus the dragging of Indian femininity is striking. In the audience response surveys that I conducted after the shows, many comments indicated that the Indian performers were regarded as closeted and thus not “really” in drag; rather, they were simply performing an “ethnic” dance. (“Global” 1055)

¹³ In her apparent case study of the relative queerness of the couple, Puar continues: “That they were ‘closeted’ is easy to assume here except that Vikram and Sasha exist in Chaguanas as ‘openly’ as any gay couple ever could, in a somewhat accepted/tolerated/negotiated transgendered partnership. And given my struggles to respect their privacy and interpretation, on the one hand, and to frame the meaning of their relationship in terms I could comprehend, on the other, the impact of my own closeting of them is indeed hard to assess. I was also unable to gain any insight into what Sasha and Vik were thinking about me or if they read me as a lesbian; they asked me only about my family in the United States, my knowledge of Indian dance, and my connections to Indian musicians and performers overseas. In fact, toward the end of our second hour together, Sasha and Vik started pressing what seemed to me at that time their real agenda—they wanted to know if I had any business contacts on the West Coast who could set them up with a show. In this moment, in which they indicated that their shows were quite successful in New York and Miami, they foregrounded the materiality of their bodies not only in relation to other bodies but also through an emphasis on institutional and economic constraints” (“Global” 1058).
Afro-Trinidadian spectators and Indo-Trini performers who are themselves homosexual describe the homoerotic aspect of their dancing as “ethnic”; and indeed in the Caribbean popular imagination, Indian men who perform kathak or other kinds of Indian dances professionally are seen as presenting a socially acceptable spectacle of effemineness. The matikor women’s-only wedding dance that I have described in the second chapter is also a non-sexualized homoerotic space. Dragging and nontraditional gender roles are ironically tolerated only in the context of religious and artistic aspects of “Indian culture.” In such spaces gender-bending is the spectacle and the topsy-turvy carnival that produces normativity as its other. As a result, intrusion of the queer into the quotidian is an attack on reality itself.

Gopinath argues that “queer” can counter the international hegemony of the terms gay, lesbian, and homosexual. But they are all used in different ways in the Caribbean, and the latter three identifiers are far more popular than “queer.”14 The rhetoric of the Gay International does indeed produce persons who adopt the foreign identity-labels of gay, lesbian, homosexual. So it seems that Western Anglophone

14 Massad’s critique of the international human rights bodies that focus on queer organizing centers on their understanding of their work as liberatory for “an always already homosexualized population.” His central argument is “that it is the discourse of the Gay International that both produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology” (363). In fact, “by inciting discourse about homosexuals where none existed before, the Gay International is in fact heterosexualizing a world that is being forced to be fixed by a Western binary” (383). In the Arab context Massad examines, wealthier, westernized men become gay native informants, but “remain a minuscule minority among those men who engage in same-sex relations and who do not identify as ‘gay’ or express a need for gay politics” (373). This may be true for the Arab world, though men who do engage in such liwat (Arabic: male homosexuality, derived from “the men of Lot;” sihaq, “rubbing,” is lesbianism) without a specifically gay identity might prefer not to face the corporal and capital punishment demanded by, say, Saudi penal codes regarding sodomy that have been in place since 1928, long before any plausible Gay International.
colonization of even the smallest minorities is complete. But there are varying reasons why such labels are adopted, and signified meaning, as always, is contextual. What I am arguing is that while it is necessary to be wary of the very real imperializing, patronizing impulses of some international “human rights” organizations, NGOs, and other American and European government-funded groups, some locals nonetheless choose to engage in the type of political advocacy suggested by the Gay International, and use its organizing tools to their own ends. GLBT terminology is such a type of political organizing tool. Such “international” terms coexist in places like the Caribbean with local terms and understandings of same-sex behavioral expression—they have different rhetorical purposes. It may strike the outsider as cognitively dissonant for a Surinamese woman to think of herself as mati but call for the government to recognize lesbian rights, but why should it present any difficulty for her to metamorphically see herself as both?\footnote{Mati is a Surinamese term for “lesbian,” derived from “(ship)mate,” a fascinating Middle Passage etymology I later discuss.} This construction escapes Massad’s assertion that the Gay International always forces people into a minority homosexual—majority heterosexual Western binary.\footnote{It is neocolonialist presumption to imply that “natives” are not bright enough to recognize, use, and modify terms and identity signifiers. Worth remembering is that the native informant is still a native. Cultural “authenticity” is really cultural multiplicity, and as such not confined to impossibly uncontaminated indigenous rural persons living in poverty.} 

Caribbean queerness confronts Spivak’s native informant and Massad’s missionary of the Gay International with the zami poet Audre Lorde’s biomythographist. The heartfelt words of queer Caribbean writers and theorists beg...
for respite from violence and dehumanization via grassroots movements that may or may not borrow from non-local structures of political organizing. Activist and academic Wesley Crichlow wrote one of the first essay accounts of being a gay Caribbean man, beginning by reclaiming the homophobic insult “buller man,” which he describes as “an indigenous derogatory epithet that I grew up with in Trinidad and Tobago, used to refer to men who have sex with other men. It is also widely used in some English-speaking Caribbean islands such as St Lucia, St Vincent and Barbados” (217). After staking out his position on local terminology—he also finds the globalized term “gay” unproblematic—Crichlow identifies himself as subaltern, “representing self and relating to other similar, yet unique experiences in a developmental exploration of other bullers’ lives and identities...as a subaltern I speak from a contested place” (187). He is thus simultaneously and consciously native informant and subaltern. This is a positioning that allows him to merge academic theorizing and social justice work:

Because of my social location and my professional and personal commitment to social justice, I must as a buller man work for positive change. When we engage in work to which we are personally committed, our academic contributions are more likely to come out of a creative, politically engaged self, one that adds social to academic purpose…I hope this approach will allow me to elucidate the

17 Zami is a Grenadian term for “lesbian,” or perhaps more accurately, woman-loving-woman.
similarities and differences with other men who share and have shared a similar location, towards the goal of social change. (187)

Praxis is an imperative. Crichlow’s account is very much a testimonio in the subaltern tradition, but it is also an intellectual’s appeal to humanistic decency for national social change in the best Fanonian light. The generic conflation of didactic, minority, autobiographical (non)fiction may however result in unfortunate “expectations of authenticity” (Kutzinski 173). 18 Literary truth and historical fact are not at odds in Crichlow’s work—at least not enough to be jarring or scandalous. As a gay man of color, a self-identified Trinidadian “buller,” he invites and embraces assumptions of authenticity. His work makes no pretense at being fictional, but does have the ring of the universalizing testimonio that is community property rather than strict autobiography. As did Lorde in 1982, he writes biomythography, defined as life story, or representation of self—to translate my experiences of heterosexist oppression into this project. The genre elucidates Lorde’s interest in using her life story to create a larger framework for other zamis. For her the individual becomes the collective, as she recognizes the women who helped give her life substance…In this

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18 Expectations of authenticity “reduce the literary writings of women of color to mere testimony of their ‘conditions’ and accounts of victims’ resistance to gender oppression in a presumably universal patriarchy…some critical circles are downright hostile to female others’ fictionalizations of what readers assume to be the writers’ personal experiences. Interestingly, most readers experience discontinuities between literary truth and historical fact as jarring, or even scandalous, only in cases where a narrator seems to resemble an author, that is, in (fictional) autobiographies” (Kutzinski 173).
sense Lorde enables the move from the singular (I) to the collective (we) in black autobiographical writing. (Crichlow 188)

Lorde’s is also a specifically queer Caribbean feminist biomythography—she was a New Yorker with parents from Grenada and Barbados, and identified as a Caribbean *zami*. Biomythography is (auto)biography that heralds an imagined community through the mythicizing of one or a few individuals’ personal stories. It gives equal privilege to a speaker’s locus of enunciation and to the content of her words. In this biomythography sidesteps genre debates over the authenticity of fictionalized autobiographies, choosing a position outside that structure of narrative. It is not that author and text are indistinguishable, but rather that they bleed into each other in a way that must be acknowledged, especially when the subject has been heretofore unspoken and the speaker’s community voiceless. For Lorde and Crichlow, biomythography is somewhere to begin representation. So Crichlow begins the autobiographical part of his statement by saying, baldly, that

I am a black buller man, born in Trinidad and Tobago to Caribbean parents. It is from within this ethnically rich cultural heritage—imbibed from grandparents, parents, relatives and friends—that I begin my journey…I do not posit myself as a single, authoritative voice. For me biomythography has been invaluable, because I am living proof of some of the experiences that some men in the Caribbean face in coming out and coming to terms with their sexual orientation. (188, 189)
So the queer Caribbean, which includes its doubly diasporic citizens—who relocate first forcibly to the New World, then voluntarily to North America and England—becomes Glave’s gathering, a gathering of the silenced.

In her examination of the intersections of feminist and queer literary production in the Caribbean, Vera Kutzinski identifies Shani Mootoo’s fiction as falling within the genre of queer Caribbean testimony. Writing about *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), Kutzinski calls it “a fictional autobiography that is also a biography…a variation on the form of the testimonio” (194). Kutzinski notes that Mootoo herself is an Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian lesbian writing her own experience, or at least extrapolating it into a community experience. In this vein, *Valmiki’s Daughter*, the first Indo-Caribbean novel to feature a lesbian protagonist (who flees to Canada), is also biomythography.

II. The Queer Indo-Caribbean Father: Valmiki

    Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo argues that *jahaji bhai*, the “ship-brother” relationship that took the place of biological family for indentured East Indian men during and after their sea voyages to the Caribbean, is the general, male-privileging signifier of all Indo-Caribbean identity, and an originarily queer identity. Whether female or male, the “masculine subject of Indo-Caribbean identity” is hailed as *jahaji bhai*, though “the term *jahaji bhai* signifies the always-already gendered and
sexualized practices of both the masculine and the homoerotic within the articulation of Indo-Caribbean identity” (79). By no means is this recuperation the same thing as simply calling the (straight) subject of Indo-Caribbean identity a queer one—it is not…but this recuperation of the Indo-Caribbean homoerotic subtext within jahaji bhai culture threatens not only the entire jahaji bhai culture of Indo-Caribbean studies, but all Indo-Caribbean male homosocial spaces as somehow queer. (91)

While it may seem obvious that some same-sex relationships must have occurred in the stressful and homosocial environment of the colonial (indenture)ship, Indo-Caribbean people and literature generally disavow such a possibility in quite vehement terms. Lokaisingh-Meighoo classes the Indo-Caribbean academy as a homosocial space that does not easily admit women. It also engages in historiographical projects that denies male same-sex sexual relations: “Sexuality, as in the issue of sexual orientation, is altogether absent in Indo-Caribbean scholarship”

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19 Lokaisingh-Meighoo on the “masculine subject of Indo-Caribbean identity”: “I do not mean that women have had no historical place in those practices that constitute Indo-Caribbean culture. What I do want to get at is that jahaji bhai as the, or at least a, central trope of Indo-Caribbean identity interpelatex the Indo-Caribbean subject as masculine. Jhahaji bhai means ‘ship brother’ in the Bhojpuri dialect of Hindi, which has achieved a nearly total hegemony as the Indian language of the English-speaking Caribbean. While jahaji bahin or ‘ship sister’ is occasionally used in certain Indo-Caribbean cultural practices, it is the usual case that jahaji bhai functions as a ‘gender-neutral’ term. Of course, so-called gender-neutral terms are always-already gendered as masculine, in the sense that ‘man’ functions as the gender-neutral term for ‘humanity.’ Similarly, then, jahaji bhai summons up the Indo-Caribbean subject as ship brother, and calls all of those persons who hear this call to Indo-Caribbean identity as ship brothers” (80).
(86). The terms in which he posits his claim of ship-brother homosexuality are notably cautious and theoretical:

Just as bonds between men and women are easily accepted as having been sexual in nature, those that held men together even long after the voyage must also be understood in many cases to have been sexual. Certainly, some of these sexual bonds between men were short term and some of them long term. And some of them persisted on the plantations and in the newly established Indian villages, even among those who eventually married. (89)

What is interesting is that the bonds between indentured men and women are presumed to have been sexual, as I have discussed in the context of the indentured woman Etwaria’s “bamboo marriage” in Ramabai Espinet’s novel The Swinging Bridge (2004). Similarly, the uncomfortable subtext of jahaji bhai Indo-Caribbean studies and literature is that the bonds between indentured male shipmates were probably sexual too, but that is a problem: a problem for postcolonial formulations of Indo-Caribbean cultural identity, and a notable difficulty for nascent Indo-Caribbean feminism. Same-sex shipboard relationships therefore tend to be dismissed as situational, in the manner of emotionally and sexually lonely prison inmates. Indian community survival and cultural perpetuation demanded denial of early colonial sexual freedoms and a speedy return to visible marital, heterosexual orthodoxy. There is no difference here between Hindus and Muslims, as it is ethnicity that is the defining element of community membership in the Caribbean.
Dr. Valmiki Krishnu is the male queer *jahaji bhai* made (literary) flesh. Valmiki hunts with his male, Afro-Trinidadian lover Saul Joseph and with Saul’s male friends, who are of a lower socioeconomic class than is he. Their relationship is that of the homosocial and homosexual *jahaji bhai*. With these men, he knew an affinity he simply did not share with [his wife Devika]. It was a world of few words, more silence, and hard, immediate, and sure handling of one another that was as loaded, as sprung, as the guns they carried. The act of looking out for one another in the most primal way gripped him. It was not just him looking out for them, but them looking out for him too. An equal caring…In the forest with the men he might have been duty bound, but he was not weighed down by it. He was no one’s father, husband, employer, or healer. He was one with them. They were one with each other. (57)

Ironically, the men accord him a higher status because he is a doctor and they are laborers. They are never equals. This homosocial and indeed homosexual world of male hunters echoes the *jahaji bhai* ship relationships posited by Lokaisingh-Meighoo. It is an originary way of being for Caribbean men. The hunting, “unusual as it was for a man of Valmiki’s background, was seen as his little quirk and a recommendation of his widely admired virility” (43). Valmiki also “proves” his masculinity through multiple affairs with women of which his wife and everyone else are aware. Crichlow also echoes this obfuscating strategy of the closet, noting that “as a young black man in the Caribbean, I found a desperate assurance in my hyper-
masculinity through religion, sports, aggressiveness, loudness, having many intimate women friends, and practising occupations or trades constructed as ‘manly’ in my family and the community at large” (190). No one except Valmiki’s wife questions his hypermasculinity, and she only knows because he does not have sex with her. Quite simply, in the Caribbean, as elsewhere, people decide that they will not see what they do not want to see. And they do not want to see something considered as gravely antisocial as homosexuality. Saul’s wife, known only as Mrs. Joseph, is the only one who does see and condone the relationship between her husband and Valmiki. In the novel her perceptiveness and tolerance are equated with her lower-class status: she is not suffering too badly, so she will make do. As Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo says, “let us emphasize: there is no homosexual subject in jahaji bhai culture” (87).

Valmiki marries after leaving his medical school lover, the Sri Lankan Tony—he cannot face confronting his mother with a male partner—and fleeing back to Trinidad, accidentally impregnating the very suitable wealthy Indian businessman’s daughter Devika Sankarsingh. He consents to marry Devika because he believes that there could never again be a “hard body to butt against. No shared knowledge of a particular touch or wanting…He would turn into a man who was dead in spirit but whose physical body was trapped in everyday Trinidadian limbo” (Mootoo 69). In the Indo-Caribbean, living the public life proper to a successful man is more important than having a living spirit or a fulfilled soul. What the community
thinks of one and one’s family is all-important. It must be noted, however, that it is still Valmiki’s choice:

But in the end, Valmiki felt quite pleased with himself for what he hoped the fact of pregnancy publicly confirmed about him. He ended his relationship with Tony, left the apartment one day when Tony was not there, and even when he heard that Tony had tried to kill himself, he felt there was nothing he could have done differently. In the deepest recesses of his heart and mind he congratulated himself again and again on his astuteness in making sure that he had had sex with that girl back home. (69)

Valmiki despises his homosexuality from the instant of his first consensual sexual encounter with an older schoolboy. In fact, he hits the boy after and is then consumed by violent fantasies:

Valmiki hated that boy and what they had done together. He practised bouncing a soccer ball on his head and on his knee. He made a point of engaging in disparaging jokes about women and “faggots.” He developed the affectation of spitting, velocity and distance becoming markers of his manhood. He launched, too, into a display, at school and in front of his parents, of noticing girls, commenting almost to the point of excess, sometimes with a lewdness that did not suit him.

(Mootoo 55)
His hunting is a continuation of his youthful hypermasculine deflection of his homosexuality. The novel suggests, though, that Valmiki might want to be caught. He conducts affairs with female patients at his medical office, and “his attendance upon particularly privileged queue-jumpers had so often coincided with the unexpected arrival of Mrs. Krishnu that one might wonder if fate was complying with a subconscious wish of Valmiki’s that he be caught out” (29).

Valmiki is not a mimic man, because he has a secret life and an imagination, but he is often guilty of the selfishness and fear that paralyze the mimic man. In the end, though, like a good Indian parent, his child does actually mean more to him than himself. He attempts to strike a Faustian bargain with the universe to save Viveka, when Anick cements her relationship with her own mimic man husband Nayan by becoming pregnant. Trinidad, he tells her, is “a small place…not a kind place” (354).²⁰

Valmiki, for his part, was suddenly determined. He would put an end to his relationship with Saul. He would make do with Devika, whom he had robbed of a fuller life. He would try to give her some morsel of happiness by being more present for her. Perhaps, he reasoned, the universe would then be kinder and in some miraculous turnabout allow his daughter the freedom to love in any way she wanted, and in so

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²⁰ The phrase “a small place” invokes Jamaica Kincaid’s 1988 memoir *A Small Place*, a study in the postcolonial corruption of Antigua’s government, tourism, and the natural beauty of Antigua. Ultimately, Antigua is shown to be a colonially corrupted paradise, much like Trinidad here. Kincaid’s Antigua, like Valmiki’s Trinidad, seems beautiful and friendly in the tourist brochures; but that is the veneer that hides a maelstrom of social and political dysfunction.
doing spare her the double life he was forced to live. Otherwise there were so many casualties in these pretenses. Devika certainly, but Nayan and Mrs. Joseph too, as well as Anick, Saul, and, of course, himself. He did not want this for his daughter. He would make a deal with the universe and call Saul tomorrow…Even if this meant he would spend the rest of his life without air in his chest, that he would slowly shrivel and die of loneliness, there was no sacrifice too great for this daughter. (353-354)

But the moment passes, as it always does for him. The reader is given to understand that he will in fact never give up Saul or the potential to have male lovers. This is his freedom and his attempt to make a bid for his own happiness within the confines of Trinidadian society. He does not sacrifice himself for his daughter, but instead sends her away to be free. In this way, he breaks the cycle of closeted silence; and he can live openly through her. He mumbles that he loves her, and looks at her with “a strange, urgent, almost pained understanding in his eyes” such that she wonders if he somehow understands her struggles:

He wanted to tell her to leave this place, to go far away, but he held himself back. She had always been a strong child, stronger than he had ever been. She would do what she had to do. He knew this about her. He only hoped that in this instance she would do the right thing. He could not lift and carry her. He could not set her down on the
correct stepping stones, but he could nudge her like a herding dog.

The actual steps would have to be hers. (354)

Viveka is quite young and distraught, and the open disapproval of her mother might have been mitigated by the open support of her father. But he gives what he can.

Valmiki himself is tragically consigned to follow the safest, most socially acceptable path for an Indo-Caribbean man in his world, a jahaji bhai risen to the comfortable middle class and thus to all he could possibly be expected to want in life. But appearances are deceiving.

Valmiki is named after the Vālmīki, the sage who is said to have authored the ancient Hindu epic the Rāmāyana. According to Julia Leslie (2003), Vālmīki has been at times a contentious character in Hinduism, despite the fact that

Regardless of one’s caste origin, Vālmīki is widely celebrated as the poet who composed the Sanskrit epic, the Rāmāyana. Despite his importance for the Indian tradition, however, surprisingly little academic attention has been paid to him as an individual…For most scholars in the broad field of Indian studies, Vālmīki’s significance lies not in himself but rather in the work attributed to him. (Leslie 4)

As do most figures in the Hindu cosmos, however, Vālmīki has his own followers, and they are rather more concerned with his image than with his work.

Contemporary Hindu “Valmikis” are notable for having an “untouchable” past. There are two important elements of their version of the Vālmīki legend. First,
Vālmīki as the archetypical redeemed sinner of the *bhakti* tradition and [secondly,] Vālmīki as the vaguely “ancestral” figure of the *dalit* movement in much of north India…the part of the legend that is still valued by Valmikis today is the idea of a shared ancestral link: that Vālmīki, like them, was an “aboriginal” (*adī*) inhabitant of India, a “tribal,” a *dalit*. (186)

Vālmīki is therefore a symbol of *dalit* potential to rise above lower-caste origins, as Vālmīki was chosen to tell the epic story of the godly Lord Rama and Sita of Ayodhya, and indeed intervened with fate on behalf of both Sita and her twin sons.\(^{21}\)

Despite Vālmīki’s celebration as a sainted poet, Hindu popular tradition still holds that before becoming a wise old sage, he was a violent tribal *dacoit* (robber).

Valmikis reject the *dacoit* story and the claim that the name Vālmīki “is derived from any incident involving termites (*vālmī*) or termite mounds (*vālmīka*)” (15). The sage is said to have been cured of his antisocial behavior only after contemplating his sins in an anthill. The *dacoit* aspect of the story has been widely perpetuated in contemporary India by widely-disseminated religious comics, notably the ubiquitous *Amar Chitra Katha* no. 579, first published in 1973 and titled “Valmiki: the story of

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\(^{21}\) Vālmīki’s “real” life as an elderly sage “begins when Lord Brahmā tells Vālmīki to compose the Rāmāyana. He eventually rescues Rāma’s abandoned wife Sītā and brings her to his hermitage/ashram, where she gives birth to twin boys, to whom he teaches the epic. When they are older, the sage sends them to Ramā’s court to perform a recitation; and “When Ramā realizes who they are, he sends a message to Vālmīki: if Sītā will swear in public that she is pure, he will take her back. Vālmīki accompanies her to the royal court where he swears publicly on her behalf. But Ramā insists that Sītā speak for herself. Instead, the earth opens up and the Earth Goddess [her parent] takes her away. Ramā is grief-stricken. Vālmīki returns to his ascetic life” (Leslie 16).
the author of the epic of the ‘Ramayana.’” The comic, says Leslie, portrayed Vālmīki as racially different from his higher-caste betters:

In the first frame of the story, and in the rest of the comic, Vālmīki’s skin is markedly darker than that of most of the people he encounters:

this is a pointed allusion to his presumed tribal (and therefore, according to the Brahmin perspective, low-status) origins. (14)

If not a godly blue, the Brahmins of *Amar Chitra Katha* are notably pink-skinned.

Before Vālmīki becomes an ascetic and a sage, he is portrayed in the comic—which mirrors popular Hindu perception—as a bandit hunter with bows and arrows, “wearing the animal-skin loin-cloth of the forest-dwelling tribal,” killing deer and other “gentle animals” and “harmless birds” in the jungle (14). This tribal dacoit incarnation of the original Vālmīki has much bearing on the character Valmiki in Mootoo’s novel, as the latter finds solace from his sexual troubles and struggles with masculinity in the hunt, and almost shoots a helpless female dog for the visceral pleasure of it. He is rightly disgusted with himself, but never attains wisdom in the same way the poet does. In Vālmīkish fashion, the novel’s Valmiki at first believes

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22 *Amar Chitra Katha* serializes stories from the Hindu epics in comic book form. In the Vālmīki comic and in the Indian public imagination, the young Sanskritic Vālmīki continued his ways as a brigand until meeting sages who ask him if his wife and children have a moral share in his sinning, since they live on the fruits of his sins. He says yes; his wife and children say no. Shocked, he leaves them and falls into meditation for years, until a termite mound grows up and covers him. The sages eventually return, whereupon Vālmīki emerges from the anthill (*vālmik*), and they rename him after it (14-15). The Valmikis reject much of this story, as a result of which they rioted against *Amar Chitra Katha* and burned an effigy of publisher Anant Pai in 1978, and the issue was pulled from the shelves and replaced. According to Valmikis, “The point of the Vālmiki legend is that the protagonist was once a wicked person who had a transformative experience, after which he was supremely good. As a general theme, this one is common to most religious traditions” (136).
that his daughter should share the wages of his sin. When he realizes that Viveka has begun a relationship with Anick:

> Really, he asked himself, what the hell was Viveka doing? He hated the question, for he knew the answer. She was beginning to live the life he had made choices to avoid. It was his doing. His fault. But how dare she? How dare she think only of herself. Had she no good sense after all? No sense of loyalty—if not loyalty, then responsibility—to her family, to society? To him? And why wouldn’t she have loyalty? They, he and she, had their differences, but those differences were their thing, their special thing they shared with each other to bond. There was no small love between them. Had she no discretion? (342-343)

Valmiki does, however, love this daughter who is like him. He “never fell in love with Devika, but from the start he was entranced by this daughter” (70). When Devika begins to suspect Viveka of unmentionable things, Valmiki attempts to avoid the acrimony between his wife and daughter because they were “two people he loved—one because she was his own flesh and blood; the other because he had first grown used to her, then to appreciate all she had done to run the house and keep the family, and then, finally, to love, at least like one might love one’s sister—but neither of whom he understood” (61).

The Valmiki of Mootoo’s novel never completes his transformative experience after which he can become supremely good. That is to say, he remains
inside the anthill chrysalis of Indian Trinidad and dies inside it. Like the Vālmīki of the epic, he hunts; but he hunts to escape from his wife and children, not to provide for them. So there is no question about whether they bear responsibility for his sins; they do not. Viveka does not have to perform filial penance by also remaining closeted her entire life.

III. The Queer Indo-Caribbean Daughter: Viveka

Viveka’s attempts to come to terms with her sexual attraction to women is familial—her father Valmiki is a closeted homosexual who watches her progressively increasing visibility with alternating dismay and pride. Viveka inherits Valmiki’s failed struggle, the failed attempt of most Caribbean homosexuals before her to live openly in their native lands. She attempts to transform it into something else by metamorphosing into something new: a visible lesbian. But there are as yet no models for her to follow in the Caribbean, and her knowledge of women like herself is confined to derogatory rumors, whispers and insults.

As Makeda Silvera states in her discussion of the peculiarly Jamaican usage of the term “sodomite” as a derogatory term for “lesbian,” “[t]he word ‘sodomite’ derives from the Old Testament. Its common use to describe lesbians (or any strong independent woman) is peculiar to Jamaica—a culture historically and strongly grounded in the Bible…the [colonizing] importance the Bible plays in Afro-Caribbean culture must be recognized in order to understand the historical and
political context for the invisibility of lesbians” (523). In Guyana and Trinidad, Islam and Hinduism fall in line with the majority Christian condemnation of homosexuality. The influence of other religious legacies—the sycretisms of obeah, etc.—are negligible in the political sphere. Caribbean women who love and/or have sex with other women have historically gone by a host of local names, some derogatory, some not, some both. Notable, however, is that the terminology often references a behavior, rather than an identity. Tinsley notes in her examination of the relation between Caribbean lesbian eroticism and labor roles and identities on the colonial sugar plantation that

Like Trinidad’s jamettes, Jamaica’s man royals, Haiti’s madivines, and Barbados’s wicca, many involved in same-sex relationships here have done so openly in the context of working-class Afro-Caribbean traditions called mati in Suriname, zanmi in Grenada, and kambrada in

23 “In Jamaica, the words used to describe many of these [women-loving] women would be ‘Man Royal’ and/or ‘Sodomite.’ Dread words. So dread that women dare not use these words to name themselves. They were names given to women by men to describe aspects of our lives that men neither understood nor approved. I heard ‘sodomite’ whispered a lot during my primary-school years; and tales of women secretly having sex, joining at the genitals, and being taken to the hospital to be ‘cut’ apart were told in the schoolyard. Invariably, one of the women would die. Every five to ten years the same story would surface. At times, it would even be published in the newspapers. Such stories always generated much talking and speculation” (Silvera 522). See footnote 25 for an explanation of “Man Royal.”

24 For example: in August 2012, the Guyanese Parliament for the second time considered a constitutional amendment relaxing laws on punishing “buggery” with life imprisonment. Representatives of the country’s two major Hindu and Muslim religious bodies, the Guyana Hindu Dharmic Sabha and the Central Islamic Organization of Guyana (CIOG), respectively, joined Catholic, Anglican and other Christian leaders in condemning on moral grounds any decriminalization of homosexuality. A similar bill received unanimous parliamentary approval in 2000, but was not signed into law by the president as a result of strong religious objection and public outcry.
Curaçao. These last terms can refer without distinction to female friends or lovers: mi mati is like my girl in African American English, maybe my friend or maybe my lover. Mati and zanmi particularly are used more frequently in verbal constructions than in nominal ones. Women do mati work or make zanmi, verbalizing sexuality not as identity but as praxis, something constantly constructed and reconstructed through daily actions…mati comes from the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Derived from the Dutch maat or mate, mati also means “mate” as in “shipmate”: she who survived the Middle Passage with me. (7)

The term jamette has an etymological history deeply tied up in the history of Trinidadian colonial conceptualizations of black women’s gender and sexuality. Rosamond King: “While researching nineteenth-century Trinidadian carnival, I came across the original meaning of jamette, a word that now means ‘slut.’ It derives from the French word diametre, which in the 1880s in Trinidad referred to men and women who lived below the ‘diameter’ of ‘respectable society’—the madams, prostitutes, gamblers, stick-fighters, and others. As many have noted, poor black women during this time were ‘catchin dey tail’ in several ways: they were often unemployed, and laws and public scorn were overwhelmingly focused on criticizing and policing their bodies and sexualities. So perhaps it is not surprising that jamette, once a word for a member of a social and economic class, came to refer to women with unacceptable sexualities…what remains from that time are records written by Europeans and white Creoles, from their point of view. Nevertheless, what information is available does point to the existence of Caribbean lesbians, even more than one hundred years ago” (192). Man Royal or “manroyal” (apocryphally: “royal man” in the sardonic usage of “royal” to mean “real” or “extreme,” as in “royal pain”) is a Jamaican term for a butch masculine woman. The dancehall artist Beenie Man has fallen afoul of GLBT activists internationally for the song “Man Royal” (1996), which criticizes a woman who “come a dance dress up in a man material,” who socializes in masculine clothing. The final verse is “Reason why mi hate di Man Royal gal dem/Always end up wid nuff ole bwoy friend/All six, seven, eight, nine, fifteen a dem/Eeh, wid all a one gal friend, so sing again.” This is a reference and incitement to lesbian punishment via gang rape; fifteen men, all with one “girlfriend.”
That women do *mati* work and make *zanmi* (or *zami*), is one of Lorde’s major
cconcerns in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982). Same-sex attraction or sexual
activity does not singularly define such women’s existence (for Lorde, gender and
race are more important, though some might disagree). *Mati* work and *zami* acts are
also, as Tinsley points out, constantly reconstructed—that is, they indicate a
metamorphic, fluxive sexuality and relationship between sexuality, self-definition,
and interactions with others. This relationship is under constant negotiation in
Mootoo’s *Valmiki’s Daughter*. Viveka’s *mati* work is the attempt to make her desire
to be a woman who loves women into a publicly acknowledgeable identity.

*Mati* is not an Indo-Caribbean-specific term as is *jahaji bhai* or “ship
brother.” But both signify “shipmate” on that very particular Middle Passage journey
of slavery and indentureship between Africa or India, and the New World. The
current usage of *mati* originated with Afro-Surinamese female shipmates during
African slavery, but it now also refers to Indo- and other Surinamese women,
interestingly presuming a shared history—without much documented proof—of such
acts on and after everyone’s Middle Passage journey. The number of Indo-Caribbean
Surinamese is hardly insignificant, comprising approximately one-third of the
population. Indians retained their ancestral languages to a much greater extent in
Surinam than in Trinidad or Guyana, likely as a result of less aggressively
assimilationist Dutch Caribbean colonial policies.26 *Mati* is akin to the *jahaji bahin*

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26 “East Indian” refers to people of subcontinental descent everywhere in the extended
Caribbean except for Suriname, where it denotes the descendants of mainly Javanese
“ship-sister” identity for which I have previously argued, but with the addition of an implied or explicit sexual relationship. Viveka is the queer *jahaji bahin*.

*Valmiki’s Daughter* posits from its very title onwards that the daughter, Viveka Krishnu, is no queer Indo-European Lakshmi-Aphrodite, springing from the ocean in loco parentis to bless the world with divine feminine *shakti*. Viveka has a clear lineage. Father Valmiki, the masculine Indo-Caribbean *jahaji bhai* subject, opens the way—but it is Viveka, a woman who speaks her lesbian identity, who is brave and bright enough to morph herself in order to pass through. After all, the name “Viveka” means in Sanskrit no less than “wisdom” itself, with connotations of a higher human ethical ability to discern right from wrong.

State ideology is perpetuated by the normativization of certain social mores, such that communities can police their own members on behalf of the nation. So Mootoo gives us the cautionary model tale of Merle Bedi, onetime lesbian schoolmate of Viveka. Once a gifted pianist, this young woman now lives on the streets, cast out by her parents for being desperately and publicly in love with her former schoolmistress Miss Seukaran. She survives by prostituting herself to men, for which the public has sympathy only for her parents. People whisper,

“But if she is doing this sort of thing, what they say about her can’t be true then. It can’t be so that she is a buller. If is woman she like, how come she doing it with man? Well, maybe is not a bad thing, then.

Indonesians who were also indentured plantation laborers in nineteenth century Dutch Guiana (Suriname). “Indians” and “Hindustanis” signify Surinamese subcontinentals.
That might cure her. And from such a family, too. It is killing her parents. No wonder they put she out the house.” (23)

These are typical Caribbean sentiments regarding the privileging of family over individual and the potential of heterosexual sex to “cure” homosexuals. In the public consciousness, those who refuse to adhere to their proscribed gender and sexual roles deserve to be punished; the unspoken fear is that Caribbean identities are too tenuous, too new, too enmeshed in originary displacement to survive flexible social boundaries. The needs of society outweigh the desires of the individual, and Viveka is no fool. At the end of a conversation on Viveka’s masculine appearance, Viveka’s sister delivers the parting shot “‘I saw Merle Bedi yesterday.’ Viveka stopped. This information, immediately following a conversation about mannishness, made her feel ill” (89-90). Merle Bedi, Viveka’s former friend and the archetypal Trinidadian lesbian who was cast out by her family, is a threat to Viveka: Merle Bedi might be able to tell that Viveka is a lesbian, and expose Viveka to everyone.

In Trinidad parlance, at the age of twenty or so Viveka is “mannish.” Being called mannish by her own younger sister Vashti early in the novel is the jolting catalyst for her feelings of same-sex attraction to rise to the surface of her consciousness. She does not yet know what she is, but sometimes “had the sensation that her arms were tightly bound to her body with yards and yards of clear Scotch tape” (98-99). Viveka and all the members of her family know that “something” is amiss with her, but no one dares think it, much less say it aloud. Her sister looks at her critically and says
“you do look kind of tough for a female…you have a tendency to be muscular. I mean, really: do you want big calves and harder arms—which you will get if you play sports? That’s so ugly on a…whatever. It makes us look mannish. Mom says *you’re* sort of mannish.” That was enough. The word *mannish* was unacceptable. (89-90)

Later on,

In the limbo of taxi travel, the dreaded word came to her again. *Mannish.* An onomatopoeic word that sounded as disgusting as what it suggested. It occurred to Viveka that her father was mannish, and she meant that in the derogatory sense—hunting helpless creatures on weekends and almost flaunting those affairs he had with women. (114)

“Mannish” in the Caribbean can refer to a masculine woman, an excessively and perhaps violently patriarchal man, or a boy who acts older than his age. In all cases, there is a connotation of behavior that is socially unacceptable and outside proscribed gender or age boundaries. Being a mannish woman, however, is particularly dangerous—not just for her physical safety, but in fact for the postcolonial national project. As Alexander notes,

Not just (any) body can be a citizen any more, for *some* bodies have been marked by the state as non-procreative, in pursuit of sex only for pleasure, a sex that is non-productive of babies and of no economic gain. Having refused the heterosexual imperative of citizenship, *these* bodies, according to the state, pose a profound threat to the very
survival of the nation. Thus, I argue that as the state moves to reconfigure the nation it simultaneously resuscitates the nation as heterosexual. (6)

Viveka’s mannish appearance suggests that she might not reproduce. And “the archetypal source of state legitimation is anchored in the heterosexual family, the form of family crucial in the state’s view to the founding of the nation” (20). There is no place for the mannish lesbian woman in the family that is the microcosm of the nation.27

Viveka is a masculine woman. In fact, she sometimes imagines herself to be a man, Ardhanarishvara incarnate.28 As a child, she is a stereotypic tomboy who loves sports and dismisses girls and women who primp and scheme for male attention. She sometimes believes herself to be her brother Anand, who died in infancy, and at other times believes herself to be a blonde-haired white boy named Vince. Young Viveka imagines herself to be her brother for two reasons: first, because she mistakenly comes to believe she is responsible for his death, since as the eldest sibling “she hadn’t been able to save or to protect anyone when it had been necessary” (Mootoo 168). Secondly, on some level she is subconsciously aware of her father Valmiki thinking that

27 The Caribbean household, says Alexander, “has been an important ideological instrument for the state. It has been indispensable in the creation of the ‘public’ against which it can be positioned…the state must move to rehabilitate this sphere by specifically recoding women’s experience of domestic violence and rape within it, and generally, by disallowing any household space for lesbians” (19).

28 Ardhanarishvara is the hermaphroditic Hindu deity that is half male Shiva (right side) and half his female consort Parvati, split bilaterally and representing the unity of shiva and shakti, male and female cosmic forces respectively. So Viveka, as previously noted, does not just embody feminine shakti.
if his son Anand had lived, these two children, particularly because of Viveka’s angular facial features, her lankiness, and her short hair, would have been unmistakable as siblings. He wished Viveka would grow her hair longer like all the other attractive young ladies he and Devika knew, at least to her shoulders. (62)

Viveka is aware early that she is not feminine enough to be an acceptable daughter to her parents. So, she imagines, she might as well be their son. Her second masculine alter ego, Vince, “was strong, powerful, peaceful, and could do anything and everything. He had a horse he could ride. He didn’t speak much. He was kind. His name was Vince, short for ‘invincible.’ He was not in the least the bastard her father said all men were. Vince loved being outdoors” (Mootoo 110). Vince is a protective identity. At seven, it is Vince, not Viveka, who observes her father in the act of committing adultery with a white female neighbor. She does not understand what she sees, so Viveka goes away; and Vince “did not go straight home, but ran around and around the neighbourhood until, dripping with sweat, he limped, feet swollen, blistered, and bleeding, through the front gates of his parents’ house” (114). When she is twelve years old, Viveka finds her father’s hidden stash of gay pornographic magazines and her birth certificate suggesting that she had been conceived before her parents’ marriage. The shock of both discoveries leave her perspiring and with heart racing; and looking at the magazines, she felt odd sensations, like those one had swinging high up, or plunging fast down on a garden swing. There were men in the photos
in what must have been a man’s version of a panty, skimpy and black. The bulges inside of the men’s underpants were large and there were little points in them. She opened the sock drawer and took out a sock. She rolled it tight and shoved it in her pants, then looked at the outcome in the mirror of the nearby dressing table. She compared it to one of the photos of the men, rearranged it a bit and compared again. She pulled out the sock, wiped it on her pant leg, and replaced it. (160)

This gender-bending experiment is not repeated, nor does she engage in any further Freudian speculation on having or acquiring a phallus. The incident remains a sort of sexually predictive act of play. As an adult, she does not consider herself to be other than female and attracted to women; she is not transgender, and she is not bisexual. She is physically capable of having sex with a man, as her father is capable of having sex with women, but she derives no physical or emotional feeling from it, and is merely a spectator. She is a masculine lesbian, and her style of lovemaking with the extremely feminine Anick is almost stereotypically dominant. She realizes all of these things about herself during their first, much-anticipated sexual encounter:

Tears suddenly ran down Viveka’s cheeks and she wiped them fast so that Anick wouldn’t know. She had felt, during the initial moments of their lovemaking, a sense of having taken on the form of a young man’s body. Her body had become, albeit briefly, Vince’s body, and in other moments [her dead baby brother] Anand’s. These two were suddenly young men; sturdy; muscled, handsome. As handsome as
Anick was beautiful. It was strange how Vince and Anand had grown into such young men; this was the strongest sensation of that sort Viveka had ever had—of not being what she looked like, female. And yet, she knew now more than ever that her feelings and her way with Anick were hers and hers alone. Not a boy’s. Not a man’s. Whatever she was, these feelings were hers…Perhaps she could be finished with Anand now. And with Vince. (322-323)

Making love to another woman does in fact purge Viveka of both her masculine alter egos. She no longer needs their protection, as she has figured out what she is, at least in terms of who she desires. Anand and Vince grow up into discrete young men and leave her. She is left biologically female and emotionally not male, and whatever gender construction she makes of that is entirely open but also entirely hers.

Beginning a relationship with Anick gives her the courage to cut her hair short and begin dressing in a more gender-neutral way, in defiance of her mother. She never actually desires a penis. But the novel leaves undetermined her particular version of queer, suggesting that such labels are not as necessary as the reader might think.

Viveka’s responsibility to present herself as gender-normative extends beyond service to postcolonial Caribbeanness and to the nation of Trinidad. As an Indo-Caribbean woman, she is also tasked with perpetuating the cultural and physical survival of that specific community by being properly feminine. This is a duty that her mother, Devika, understands and embraces:
Educated women, [Devika] said, were aggressive, unladylike. The only professions she could imagine for either of her daughters in an age, she conceded, when women were demanding to spend time outside of the home, were catering, flower arranging (both of which, incidentally, could be done in the home), and teaching…What she understood was preparing oneself for marriage. But marriage had never interested Viveka. (100-101)

As such, Viveka is the bane of her mother’s life. Devika is highly concerned with the gender and class proprieties of being an upper-middle class Indo-Caribbean woman, which entails being a member of an upper-middle class Indo-Caribbean family in which every member adheres to the proper script. It does not entail, as Naipaul might argue, wanting to be white. One must be properly Indian. Devika does not understand the behavior of her child or her husband. But she knows everything:

29 Viveka has a country-club friend named Helen, who is half white and half Indian. Of her Devika says: “‘Look, I don’t want to hear about Helen. Helen is not even Indian. At least, not properly Indian. Her father is white—which, let me remind you, not just you, but you and your father, does not mean that he is one bit better than us. Most of those foreign whites who leave their countries and come here are not from our class. They come here because they can’t do better for themselves in their own countries. They come behaving as if they are superior, lording it over us. They have no social graces whatsoever, and people like you and your father fall for all of their nonsense…On top of that, Helen’s mother is a brassy Port of Spain Indian. Those Indians from the north like to think they are too different. They do whatever they please without thinking of what others might say. Mix that sort of attitude with a little whiteness and they have their children joining swim clubs and tennis clubs, prancing about like horses, and you hear about their children attending all kinds of parties they have no right being at, you hear things about them, things that I would be ashamed to repeat to your father. Those town Indians have no respect for their origins, they forget their place, they ooh and they aaah over curry as if they never had curry before, and they give their children names like Helen. You are not joining that club’” (Mootoo 47-48).
Devika worried about her own daughter. She would not form a sentence even in the recesses of her mind to say what it was, exactly, that worried her or why. The only words that come to her mind were, *Wives know what their husbands won’t tell them, and there isn’t a thing that a mother does not already know about her child.* (126-127)

Saul, Valmiki’s male lover, also has a wife who knows about her husband’s homosexuality. But she is of a different (lower) class than Devika, and the novel implies that that is why she is more tolerant. The two wives encounter each other in the market, and Devika gets unwanted commiseration. Mrs. Joseph horrifyingly says “You and me, we in this thing together. You know what I am talking about, eh?...The consolation is that the good Lord gives us no more than what we are capable of handling, not so?” (124). Devika hustles away before her chauffeur can hear them conversing. But

What did Saul and his wife do? she wondered. His wife, what did *she* do? Women from those classes had more resources. They could fight in public, they could let it all out, they could leave or throw their husbands out on the street for several days or for good, but women like Devika had to behave themselves, take it all and smile in public and defend their husbands even if they were tyrants or bastards or useless in the privacy of their homes. Well, it wasn’t exactly so anymore. Times had changed. Younger women from her class weren’t putting up with what their mothers did... Leaving one’s husband was done
when the children were small; that is when she should or might have done it. But time was not on her side then. Or now. She wouldn’t have left the children, and she wouldn’t have been able to take them with her. (123)

Devika even theorizes that “Perhaps Saul was different, and was able to do it with his wife as well as with her husband. She didn’t even know for certain what her husband and Saul did, and she didn’t want to be sure of any of it…No one knew how strong she was, and that aloneness was her burden to bear” (122-123). Devika perceives herself as a traditionally strong Indo-Caribbean woman because she can bear heavy burdens. That, not what Viveka is attempting to do (break social boundaries) is the acceptable kind of martyred strength for an Indian woman. Devika is outraged that such a woman as Saul Joseph’s wife would speak to her in public, much less insinuate that they had horrifying marital situations in common. Saul’s unnamed wife makes the best of her life, and reiterates similar sentiments to Valmiki himself. She goes so far as to fry plantains for Valmiki before he arrives at her home, then leaves him alone with her husband. She tells Valmiki

“I know about him and you, you know, Doc. I know he real take to you…it used to be that he minding he own business, me minding mine. But he come like a brother to me since…We don’t have relations, but I have to say what we have is better than that…I did want a chance to tell you I don’t have no bad feelings. Nobody can expect me to feel good as a woman, but I don’t have bad feelings
either…He work hard and with his hard-earned money he buy the house…Saul does sleep in one room. I in the next. Why I wouldn’t be a little sorry for myself? But he treat me all right. Doc, we are not rich people. I can’t get up and leave just so. Leave and go where? I have to stay and make do. Saul happy, and I happy for him. It might be a strange thing, but I will say it, I happy for him because he happy and he is my husband. Is only strange if you not in the situation yourself and you watching-judging from outside.”

There might be some queer openness between Saul and his wife, Valmiki noted, yet not so great a one that Saul would reveal that it was Valmiki who had bought that house. (74-75)

Mootoo uses the word “queer” here in a tongue-in-cheek way. The situation is very, very queer in every way. Both Devika and Valmiki attribute Mrs. Joseph’s acceptance of her situation to what Indians racially stereotype as a laissez-faire Afro-Caribbean attitude towards sexuality and marriage, wherein Afro-Caribbean women like Mrs. Joseph are said to be lucky to get any household support at all. The domestic situation of Indian women is supposed to be different: the community shames Indian men if they do not provide. As Devika understands it, her complementary role is to be in charge of the household. But her husband and daughter are willful and unmanageable, and their homosexuality is unthinkable, the greatest threat she could ever imagine to the sanctity of the family.
IV. Queer Indo-Caribbean Futures

Valmiki regrets throughout the novel that he does not more actively help his daughter, but as decreed by Naipaul, he remains a domestically paralyzed gay Biswas. First Valmiki’s and then Viveka’s homosexuality are open secrets to tradition-bound wife and mother Devika, whose traditionally gendered cultural convictions give her only (contra Naipaul) the veneer of familial power. The trope of the Indo-Caribbean literary exile in the tradition of Naipaul and Samuel Selvon is omnipresent, but the object of struggle has shifted. No longer must the postcolonial embark upon a basic quest for identity that ends in exile in the British motherland to escape becoming a mere “mimic man.” The question of Britishness or Indianness is reconciled in generations born after colonialism: Viveka is Indo-Caribbean, an identity with unique cultural substance. As a literary scholar, aspiring writer, and Indo-Trinidadian, she is rather irked by Naipaul himself, complaining to her schoolmate that

“He makes Indians out to be ugly, stupid, concerned only with their narrow knife-edged slice of life. He’s criticizing his ancestors, but these are my ancestors too, and by implication he is criticizing me. And yet, I keep wanting to read on. He gets it right, but so what? Does he have to write it at all? I don’t think he really hates us so much as he is gravely disappointed in what we have not become.” (104-105)
She answers the question of what Indo-Trinidadians have not become with “I don’t know. White? Brighter, whiter than the conqueror himself?” (105). Viveka implies, as many Caribbean critics say, that there is no satisfying Naipaul, to whose international-level literary genius and community representation all Indo-Caribbean people are beholden. The novel pays its dues to Naipaul, acknowledging him as the godfather of Indo-Caribbean literature. This homage also establishes its literary lineage as Indo-Caribbean even though the subject is queerness. But there are two ways in which Naipaul is adjudged outdated: first, in his preoccupation with the postcolonial Indo-Caribbean mimic man who simply apes what he believes to be his ancestral Indian culture, and second, in his lack of acknowledgement of Afro-Caribbean influences as anything other than purely negative and harmful toward East Indians (this is exactly what Derek Walcott takes him to task for).30 Viveka sees in Afro-Caribbean literary imaginings a way out of the stultifying calcifications of some aspects of Indo-Caribbean culture and literature, as “[t]he writings of Jamaica Kincaid, Dionne Brand, Jean Rhys, Derek Walcott, and Earl Lovelace provoked her to want to experience a Caribbean-ness, and a Trinidadian-ness more specifically, that was antithetical to her mother’s tie to all things Indian and Hindu” (100-101). To Viveka, these works are biomythographies of being Caribbean: they show her to what she should aspire. Viveka’s first meeting with Anick results in her thinking of herself

30 At one point Viveka “looked out the window and wondered what Naipaul would make of this particular present-day Trinidad. What had really changed for these people since Naipaul’s depictions of them? He hadn’t ever really paid attention in his work to the presence of blacks in the country, but now his cane-and-cacao Indians seemed outnumbered by people of African descent” (Mootoo 285).
as ugly and unsophisticated as Naipaul has occasionally suggested Indo-Caribbean people are doomed to be. She determines that

She would study, too. She was refining her goal of becoming a literary critic, and was currently enjoying the notion of becoming a Naipaul scholar. She would embark on a study of early East Indian communal life in Trinidad, in the countryside, in the town and in the city, and she would theorize on the gulf between the cacao Indian and the sugar Indian. It would be one small step toward understanding Naipaul’s work and Naipaul himself. (263)

Viveka does not need to compete with Anick, especially as Anick is actually more like Viveka’s relatively passive and gender-normative mother Devika: Anick decides to stay with her husband Nayan because he brings her material security and social approval. Unlike mimic man Nayan, Viveka and Valmiki in their own ways are meant to escape the destiny of the bound coolie. Valmiki begins the process by refusing to give up his secret life with other men; and through his daughter he envisions possibilities denied him and a future that might be better for the queer Indo-

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31 Differences between the “cacao Indian” and the “sugar Indian” in Trinidad stem from the facts that cacao can be cultivated on smallholdings and sugarcane requires vast hectares of land, and that cacao production remained economically viable long after the international colonial sugar market collapsed in the nineteenth century. Cacao farming raised Trinidad Indians like the Prakashes—Anick’s husband’s Nayan’s family—into the middle class just as rice cultivation did for Guyanese Indians. Those East Indians who remained economically and geographically tied to the sugar estates remained poor, “bound coolies” into perpetuity. Naipaul identifies differences between “town” Indians and “country” Indians, but all are rendered pitiable.
Caribbean. The final chapter of the novel before Viveka’s epilogue concludes with Valmiki contemplating his daughter’s impending wedding:

he knew it was too late to speak with Viveka…In his day he had had no choice, but she had choices, and even as he thought this he felt the relief, instantly, that she had made the one she had…Perhaps it had begun, rather, when he, Valmiki, had decided to leave the only person he had ever really loved, Tony, and to court Devika Sankarsingh…Viveka would, in the end, like everyone else, have to cut out her own path. He had no advice and his glass was empty.

(390)

It is unclear which of Viveka’s choices her father is relieved about: is it her choice to semi-publicly take a female lover, or to marry a man for appearance’s sake, or her finding a way to leave Trinidad permanently? All of these perhaps, because in sum, Viveka goes about her freedom in a very pragmatic way. Most importantly, she has hope that Valmiki never had. Viveka realizes that she has no future with Anick, but that that relationship served a purpose in her development, as she had felt more open and authentic than she had ever felt before.

Big. Full. Full of purpose. How could any of this be wrong? She had to find a way to be all that she was, regardless of how society would view her. She could not live clandestinely. She would not. Nor would she let her present sadness devour her. She had to train herself to remain above it, otherwise she would become like Merle. There
simply had to be a place where she would fit in, and she would find that place. (359)

Valmiki has found a way to live in Trinidad and be with a male lover. But he is able to do this because he is male, and well off, and neither his wife nor society questions him when he goes off on his own. Indo-Caribbean women’s traditional relegation to the domestic sphere simply does not permit such freedoms for a lesbian. The novel suggests that, at least for now, it is such Indo-Caribbean women who must take up the mantle of the Caribbean exile. Like the real-life Naipaul, the fictional Valmiki could return to live freely (and conduct his many adulterous affairs) in Trinidad anytime he wanted, and be lauded as appropriately mannish for it. But it is a cruel irony that Viveka of all women, of all human beings, intends to marry a man in order to escape. Her future husband knows of her sexual past and is accepting, not having the hangups of Nayan. She is nonetheless uninterested in him as a person, as long as he is tolerable. But despite this pragmatic ending, we are at least left with some hope that she may one day live her life as she chooses when she says, in the final line of the novel, “You’d be surprised at my courage right now” (395).
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