Tanty feminisms
The aesthetics of auntyhood, #Coolieween and the erotics of post-indenture

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**ABSTRACT**

A genealogy of Caribbean feminism is a genealogy of tanty feminisms. Occupying numerous articulations throughout the history of the Caribbean region and its diasporas, the figure of the ‘tanty’, or ‘aunty’ as they are known in non-Caribbean contexts, and the consequential amital social relations they produce have been indispensable to contemporary discourses and practices of Caribbean feminist thought and praxis. The tanty cannot be read as indebted to a singular person, figure or monolithic legacy but operates as a fluid and transnational force of Caribbean feminist knowing that instructs us through non-normative embodied transgressions, and pedagogies of free up. Yet, despite their presence of vital integrity to Caribbean popular culture, community organizing, history, politics and literature, discussions of the politics and pedagogies of tantyhood remain underrepresented in scholarly Caribbean feminist literatures.

In this article, I reflect upon my creative practice as a drag artist and self-proclaimed tanty in an annual digital photography series I have produced over the last three years entitled ‘Coolieween’. In this work, I reference Indo-/Caribbean folklore and mythologies, and stories of horror, the grotesque and the paranormal as entangled with queer affects, embodiments and aesthetics. Drag artistry, which, like tantyhood, agitates the invisible boundaries of neo-colonial gender, racial and sexual binaries, provides a critical feminist terrain to metaphorize the institutional crossings of pain and pleasure held within historical and contemporary ontologies of Indo-Caribbeaness. Investigating the pedagogy of this crossing is central to understanding, as well as

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critiquing, long-standing attachments of pain, injury, pathologization and trauma that have been commonly scripted to Indo-Caribbean subjectivities, often in reference to genealogies of kala pani poetics and other diaspora narratives that have sutured ideas of Indo-Caribbeanness as always-already broken, fragmented and dislocated. In this article, I instead centre paradigms of erotics and pleasure as a transformative medium to turn our optics towards transformative reconfigurations of Indo-Caribbean feminist selfhoods. As I argue here, by thinking with and through tantly feminisms, we are provided with intergenerational and transnational languages of unsettling logic that continually instruct us through everyday modalities of Indo-Caribbean feminist living and being.

**KEYWORDS**
Caribbean feminisms, Indo-Caribbean feminisms, queer Caribbean, Caribbean diaspora, erotics, Caribbean indentureship, gendered and sexual violence, coolie, drag culture, aunty studies

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**PRELUDE**

Donne Dojoy. Vanessa Bailey. Omwattie Gill. Riya Rajkumar. Stacy Singh. Vanessa Zaman. Christina Sukhdeo. Andrea Bharatt. The names listed here are just a mere fragment of the lists upon lists of diasporic Indo-Caribbean women in Canada and the US who have been recently injured, harmed and murdered at the hands of heteropatriarchal power – whether that be in the form of their parents, community members or even partners.

We know the names of these women not only because we hear about them in the news but because we have seen these acts of death in multiple forms in our everyday lives and families, oftentimes passing through us generationally, physically, emotionally, unsolved and unhealed.

These forms of gendered and racialized violence are not just contained to the realm(s) of the past, historical, and that which can be unheard, unseen or unfelt today. Rather, these harms enacted upon the women mentioned above remind us time and time again how the afterlife of colonialism is not really an afterlife at all – but a continuity, an ongoing maintenance and a harmful lingering of regimes of power.
In ‘Coolie Woman’, journalist Gaiutra Bahadur (2014) notes that just like the women named above, during times of indenture an overwhelming majority of Indo-Caribbean women’s deaths were caused at the hands of kin, those in close relation, and specifically intimate partners. Some of these acts came be referred to as ‘wife murders’, where death became the consequence of the surveillance and regulation of Indo-Caribbean women’s sexualities – particularly as the mere potential of infidelity, immodesty or non-respectable behaviour was enough
justification for their death (Bahadur 2014; Mohapatra 1995). In particular, such acts were not meant only to kill, but largely to dishonour, disembodied and dehumanize. Bahadur found that the noses of indentured women – representative of Indian women’s honour – were a particular target for Indo-Caribbean men’s hands and cutlasses, coming to script the body with

Figure 2 ‘Tanty Feminisms’ (2020); Models (from left to right): Premika Leo, Ryan Persadie, Anjuli Shiwraj. Photography by Mashal Khan.
what colonial authorities, through acts of such ubiquitous witness, came to refer to as ‘the brand of infidelity’ (Bahadur 2014: 109). No longer was the face of violence only articulable through a genealogy attached to white supremacy as emerging harms began to move through Brown grammars and tongues.

In the series of images that make up what I am conceptualizing as ‘Tanty Feminisms’, I work through the traces of these violent histories of Indo-Caribbean misogyny that have been left behind in our houses, songs, language, families, communities and bodies. I want to think of these women, whose names and faces we will never be able to hear, read or see, and the call to action and activism their stories bear on us.

The outfits we are wearing are not meant to be historically accurate but draw upon documented visual references of Indo-Caribbean indentured labourers, as well as the stories and lessons that have been passed down to us through our elders in our material worlds, those both here and gone. I want to reflect upon the strength, resilience and transgressive force these women carried that colonialism and heteropatriarchial power tried to eradicate, and how their pedagogies of resistance cannot be silenced, even in death.

Lastly, I want to remind those in Indo-Caribbean communities that this history is not insular or monolithic. It is not just about Coolie folk. As the history of the Caribbean has always taught us, it was never about just one group or struggle but rather the crossings of movement, bodies and injustices that frame our contemporary forms of being and living.

Drawing upon the memory, and lessons that move through our bodies, I also want to think about how, like our ancestors, we are still in a time where our call to action, coalition and resistance against all oppressions demands insurgency. This extends beyond the mythology for the pursuit of liberation for a contained Indo-Caribbean ‘us’. All power structures, including the ones we can and cannot feel, have been built through co-existence, collaboration and dialogue – whether it be global anti-Blackness, anti-Indigeneity, classism, homo-/transphobia or any other namings and manifestations of the viral pollutant of injustice(s). May the lessons of these unknowable indentured lives remind us of that collective pursuit.

Tifa Wine (2021) – Artist Statement – #Coolieween: ‘Tanty Feminisms’
Figure 3  ‘Tanty Feminisms’ (2020); Model: Ryan Persadie. Photography by Mashal Khan.

Figure 4  ‘Tanty Feminisms’ (2020); Model: Anjuli Shiwraj. Photography by Mashal Khan.
INTRODUCTION: TANTY FEMINISMS, TANTY PEDAGOGIES

Aunty X

‘Is the ro-dee spicy?’ Steups. Enough is said in this response, through the sucking of the lips to the teeth, that no words are required, although my Aunty X continues anyway. ‘No, the roti is not spicy.
You will be fine.’ She sits down beside me, moves her hand aggressively through her hair, and turns to me: ‘The fuck is wrong with these white people.’

We are at a family birthday celebration in my Aunty X’s house and we all head downstairs as the ringing of the dhantal on the stereo system echoes throughout the walls, a familiar prelude calling us to congregate into her basement as we transform an otherwise suburban, mundane dwelling into an unruly chutney fête. As a kid, I used to shy away from my aunty during these moments because she would always pick me to dance. No matter how much I tried to respectfully decline her advances, she would grab my arm and pull me into the circle of cousins, aunts and uncles as they became entrenched in the wining frenzy of the tassa rhythms.

She would put one foot in front of the other, using a steady rock and bounce motion to glide across the floor as she sang out the words of Bhojpuri lyrics none of us knew the meaning of.
Her hands would flow up to her face and outwards as she turned her wrists in typical chutney choreography, as is often done by Indo-Caribbean women and, in more recent times, men in chutney spaces. Drawing upon matikor sensibilities, she tells me to imitate her. ‘My mom taught me this, this is how the old Indian people do and you will do it too.’

**Orane**

I used to work as a bank teller in Toronto when I was 19. About two years into working there, Orane arrived one winter morning as a new hire. Tall, muscular, extremely well-dressed, proudly Afro-Jamaican (particularly noticeable when his patois would slip out with other Jamaican customers), twenty-something and visibly queer, he would often come and sit beside me and engage in small talk when no customers were around. Catching moments where I would slip into acts of bullaness, he would put me to the test. Every so often, an attractive banker would walk by and he would turn to me and say: ‘What do you think of that one?’ Still grappling with my same-sex desires, I always nervously laughed and shrugged him off. ‘I don’t know.’

Orane continued for years. He never let down. ‘When are you going to let me take you to the gay bar? Girl, you need to go.’ I thought about it for weeks. I finally agreed on one February evening, took the GO bus² to Toronto and showed up at the address he provided me. Our other gay co-worker was there. It was his apartment. They both took me to Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, an infamous theatre space turned gay bar (at night) in the Toronto village, though not before they made me change my ‘nerdy sweater’ for not being ‘sexy or gay enough’.

During that night, Orane took me into the middle of the dance floor, wined up on me and introduced me to men near my age, all the while encouraging and often pushing me into their vicinity. As the night went on, he continued to check-in on me every so often,
with the subtle: ‘Do you like this? How does this feel?’ My answer was a silent smile and a nod.

On our way home, Orane and I talked for hours, specifically as he watched me dabble in the articulation of queer pleasures only available within the space of nightclubs. We talked sex and safety, douching and bottoming for the first time, and the politics of dating as a person of colour. He was intense in his approach towards supporting me yet generous. The evening was a mix of anxiety, release, reservation and anticipation for the future.

So many years later, Orane often brings up memories of this night, particularly as he jokes about the timid and shy young gay-boy that has turned into Tifa Wine. I often think about the conditions that produced that night, and how if Orane had not pushed me to contend with my queerness right then (quite literally), how things would perhaps be different. I often think about the pedagogies his aggressive care offered and the politics of aunt-yhood he demonstrated that have been so central to my queer Caribbean subjectivity. Big Sis. Gyal. Tanty.

**Aruna**

I met Aruna at a Pride Toronto showcase called ‘brown//out’ where I was performing as Tifa Wine in 2017. This was the first time I had ever performed on a public stage and I was nervous, pacing and anxious. I was walking back and forth backstage waiting for my soca set to come up, going over the lyrics in my head to make sure I didn’t mess it up.

‘Hey Trini.’ I looked up and saw Aruna. She was telling me to get ready to perform. I wouldn’t have known it then, but this was the start of an incredible friendship that quite literally began with her telling me to call her tanty. Aruna is a community organizer and, since coming to know her, has taught me about feminist politics, Caribbean resistance and abolitionist pedagogy. Over the years she would call me out on my tendencies towards co-dependence when
I was broken-hearted over lost love and was quick to put me in my place when I made a mistake or uttered a problematic argument. Her care and friendship with me actively rejected liberal ideologies that take up so much place in mainstream diasporic politics. We were never to allow each other to slip into messy politics. Our friendship would not rupture at critique. Instead, she made it very clear that part of loving and being accountable to be each other in a settler colonial world was making sure we caught each other at moments of error. This was part of her call for radical feminist praxis, particularly as two Caribbean queers.

I outline some of her words below from a conversation we had together about tanties and the feminist pedagogy they offer us:

*Tanties are a collection of all the best and worst parts of us. They come from a very transgressive place. Caribbean tanties, in particular, I feel like they play this role that is very raw. They tell you how it is, they tell you what they think, they don’t hold back. That’s very much against the grain when we think of Canadian society, or being diasporically from here, this idea that you have to silence yourself. This idea of being a tanty really challenges all that. That vulgarity that comes from being a tanty really challenges a colonial understanding of a nice grandma or a nice aunty who sews sweaters and shit. Our aunties are not doing that. They’re aggressive, and wear clothes from Value Village, and they’re gossiping about everybody, they’re calling you fat. This proppaness3 Indo-Caribbean women are supposed to be, being a tanty really fucks with that. (Personal communication)*

A genealogy of Caribbean feminism is a genealogy of tanty feminisms. Occupying numerous identifications, articulations and grammars throughout the history of the Caribbean region and its diasporas, the figure of the ‘tanty’, or ‘aunty’ as they are known in non-Caribbean contexts, and the consequential amital social relations they produce have been indispensable to contemporary Caribbean discourses and practices of disaggregating structural power. To do this work, the tanty figure moves through adaptive
multiplicities throughout the temporalities and geographies their epistemology moves through. As such, the tanty cannot be read as indebted to a singular person, figure or legacy but operates as a fluid pedagogical force of ontological Caribbean feminist knowing, often uncredited to the tanty’s name.

The epistemological vocality of tantyness operates as critical pedagogy of Caribbean feminist autonomy, erotic agency and anti-colonial disruptive force that is birthed through its commitment to active oppositional pressure to Euro-American logics of gendered, raced and classed proprieties. Noticeable even in the grammar of their name, the tanty’s transgressive affects and political genealogies are sounded. As a creole manifestation of European, African and arrivant intimacies (and thereby also historical itineraries of imperial empire and encounter), the word ‘tanty’ draws upon both English and French terminologies for the aunt figure while remixing and coalescing colonial meanings into a new world vocabulary of re-oriented gender subjectivities birthed out of a desire to speak the ‘illegible’ and ‘inauthentic’ as ontological truth. Situated in contradistinction to Euro-American imaginaries, even in naming, the tanty serves as a disruption to what the (colonial) aunt/y and her corresponding performance of hetero-femininity reinforced.

For many Caribbean communities, we come to know of the sensational parameters of Caribbeanness and its feminist formations through tanties, both historical and contemporary. Drawing upon what Diana Taylor (2003) refers to as the ‘repertoire’ or embodied epistemological teachings that produce forms of knowing via the body, performance and ritual, tanties produce their pedagogy through the corporeal archive, effectively defying the absolutist European epistemological canon of materiality, codification and the written record as universal truth. For instance, in some forms the tanty can be read through embodied languages of the Jamette, in the vocal melisma of sung chutney poetics, in the political commentary of calypso lyrics, a masquerader’s ferocious
wine on the carnival road, and on live-streamed performances of soca monarch stages as tanty embodiments command and demand our attention through the archive of performed hyperbolic gender and sexuality to those in the vicinity. In other capacities, tanties and tanty pedagogy can be found on a rocking chair on a verandah, serving people food in a roti shop, taking care of children at the park, in line at the bank, working at an office job, or in nineteenth-century photographs only identified through the colonial caption of ‘coolie woman’. Yet, despite their presence of vital integrity to Caribbean folklore, music, cinema, history, politics and literature, discussions of the genealogical timelines and transgressive politics they move through has remained quite absent in scholarly literature.

Defined as both a familial aunt figure or as a term of endearment, affection or respect for, usually, an older Caribbean woman (Winer 2009: 880), the tanty carries a long-standing position in Anglophone Caribbean communities as a defining feature of many common Caribbean kinship dynamics (biological and otherwise), but also as a grammar, analytic and way into reading dialectical webs of social relations that defy hegemonic and biological determinist logics. Rhonda Cobham-Sander (2020), in particular, notes that the tanty is a figure of diasporic conditioning and multiplicity as she disrupts regimes of heteronormativity, biological affiliation and static temporality. In her public talk ‘Amital Queer: Towards a Definition of the Aunty in Caribbean Literature’, she describes tanties as ‘rambunctious, lower-class salt-of-the-earth female figures’ that circumvent and disrupt biological logics of descent, distort androcentric genealogies of Caribbean community-building, reorient colonial ‘sorting codes’ of normative Caribbean gender and sexual scripts, and, through her position as the antithesis of (Euro-American) normality and heteronormative familial organization, produces important diagonal, rhizomatic and intersectional networks of relation.
Such logics and definitions of tantyness are important because as figures and archives of knowledge, they can be made anywhere. They are not bound by the category of woman, or biological kinship either, and can occupy many forms and genres: as a gay man, a trans elder, a co-worker, a woman who marries into your family. Occupying a site of multiplicity that is inherently diasporic and transnational, an archive of tantyhood is indispensable when thinking about the ecological formations and epistemological crossings that have produced contemporary formations and subjectivities of Caribbeanness and Caribbean feminism. It is through their pedagogy of instability, mobility and non-normativity that we come to learn about the ways in which we become and enact Caribbean feminist lives. Caribbean feminism is tanty feminism.

At the same time, and particularly for my uses here, I also want to read the tanty as a figure of queerness through the numerous forms of non-normative pedagogy she is cultivated out of and works through. In one capacity, the tanty represents the erotic force of hyperbolic excess, exaggeration and extraness. Unruly, witless, aggressive and direct, the tanty defies legislations of normative rules of racialized femininity that, specifically for Indo- and Afro-Caribbean women, has been bound up in ideas of heterosexual domesticity, submission, passiveness, docility and respectability (Mohammed 2012; Ollivierre 2019).

Situated in direct opposition to these codes of heteronormative femininity, the tanty instructs us through choreographies of embodied transgressions, resistance, disruption and pedagogies of free up. Defying stable identity and gender categories, the tanty instructs on how sexual and gendered praxis re-arrange and re-orient dominant formations of kinship and lineage that often move through the Caribbean via colonial indoctrinations, legislations and regimes. Instead, the tanty operates through what Kamala Kempadoo (2009) refers to as ‘sexual praxis’ or the ways in which ontology is made through important webs of behaviour, interactions and relation that foreground how contemporary understandings of
self are actualized and practiced outside of logics of rigidity, such as identity politics. Defying archives of normality, the tanty produces languages of unsettling logic and action that continually instruct us through everyday modalities of Caribbean feminist living and being.

It is important to also note that despite my focus and interest on tanties here, they are not always utopic or idealist subjects. Rather, they are often caught up in vexed crossings and the interstices of contradiction, pain and pleasure, and present/the historical past. They will love you up while also telling you to lose weight or be the first one to point out your emerging acne or queer-adjacent behaviours as a flaw in need of correction. Yet while tanties hold critical archives of feminist epistemology, they do not always practice what they teach. For this reason, they are particularly important as they demonstrate the non-ideal ways in which feminist pedagogy moves to and through us: that is, non-linear, complicated, chaotic and messy.

For instance, long-standing practices of alteration between radical gender and sexuality ideologies and assimilations into patriarchal systems and gender codes have been a historic modality of resilience that many Afro- and Indo-Caribbean women have been forced to uphold to maintain their survival. In discussions of the early twentieth-century Anglophone Caribbean feminist movements, Rhoda Reddock (2014) discusses how such acts of alteration cannot position these women as non- or anti-feminists (perhaps as liberal feminist discourse would claim), but rather through what she describes as ‘community feminism’, or an ontological paradigm structured through a dual consciousness of performance feminist action (when safely possible) and patriarchal tolerance at other times. Such a means of living allowed women to access feminist praxis in hegemonic terrains, albeit ephemerally, in their personal and public lives (73) while also being forced to contend with the impacts of misogyny at other moments. Such acts were also referred to as ‘gender negotiations’ by Patricia Mohammed.
(2002), whereby in the Indo-Caribbean feminist context, moving between both realms of transgression and survival became a defining feature of feminist consciousness in the mid-twentieth century. It is this locus of pain/pleasure, rooted and spoken through the archive of the tanty, which my aesthetic practice and method as a drag artist emerges.

**THINKING WITH TANTIES: #COOLIEWEEN**

Over the past five years I have worked as a drag artist in the greater Toronto area (of Ontario, Canada) under the stage name of ‘Tifa Wine’. As a proclaimed drag tanty, I work through embodied grammars of Caribbean feminist pedagogy found within popular music, sound, dance and vocality, as well as video and photography. A tanty feminism is a resource that lives in the bloodline of diasporic Caribbean communities, a visceral pedagogy that, like the force of Audre Lorde’s erotic, speaks transgressive truths through acts of transference, sharing and relational exchange. Song, dance and everyday Caribbean phrases speak through tanty tongues of disaggregating force; thus, tuning my senses to tanty forms of pedagogy to critically think intersectionally and intergenerationally about the current realities of queer diasporic Indo-/Caribbean communities and the afterlife of indenture that move through spectral traces within our lives.

Since 2018 I have produced an annual photography series entitled #Coolieween. Originally premiering on my Instagram account, Coolieween works through crossings and connectivities of pain/pleasure that are deeply embedded in contemporary queer Indo-Caribbean subjectivities. I articulate such epistemology by deploying a tanty analytic, or a reading practice, to speak these knowledges through sonic and kinesthetic language. In this project, I worked to trace these embodied archives by turning to stories of Indo-Caribbean folklore, mythology, the paranormal and the grotesque...
to represent the contemporary paradoxes, conditions and diasporic realities of the afterlife of indenture. Some of these included the Soucouyant, Churile, and figures of my own creation that bridge together, and queer diasporic imaginations of Caribbean cultural formations bound up in the crossing of pain/pleasure. These include a clown figure I called the ‘Dhalpuri Dulahin’ and a vampiric ‘Dhal Belly Uncle’.

Figure 7  ‘The Dhalpuri Dulahin’ (2019). Photography by Andrés Ignacio Torres.

In #Coolieween, images and reference to pain, harm, pathologization and woundedness think through long-standing genealogies of *kala pani* poetics that have been sutured to dominant Indo-Caribbean ontologies of brokenness, fragmentation and dislocation (from sites of ‘originary’ homelands such as colonial India). For instance, in the context of the Indo-Caribbean, we can also see how (despite its problematic victim diaspora poetics), 7 ‘Coolitude’,

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a term originally coined by Khal Torabully in the 1990s, became an important framing of subjectivity for descendants of Indian indenture. Coolitude came to serve as a language of self that could exist outside of contemporary post-colonial paradigms of belonging, such as creolization in the Caribbean or dominant Hindu-centric (and arguably nationalist) discourses of indienocénisme in Indian ocean societies such as Fiji and Mauritius (Carter and Torabully 2002: 6–7). However, I do not wish to romanticize any of these paradigms of Indo-Caribbean/post-indenture subjectivity because of their outdated and often exclusionary
articulations. For instance, as Ananya J. Kabir (2020) argues, Coolitude works through a trauma/victim diaspora narrative that only constructs the coolie or Indo-Caribbean subject through legacies of dislocation and separation from ‘mother India’ – similar, also, to the central framing narrative of traditional kala pani poetics. Furthermore, it ignores the ways in which Indo-Caribbeans, either voluntarily or otherwise, have been subject to (Caribbean) creole formations and, through this erasure, flattens Indo-Caribbean subjectivity through a Hindu-centric, South Asian-specific frame. Furthermore, such revisionist Indo-Caribbean tropes and historiographies both forget and erase the transgressive force contained within legacies of indenture – and particularly Indo-Caribbean sexuality – that push against such victim narratives, and instead turn our optics towards new reconfigurations of Indo-Caribbean feminist erotic selfhoods that have been made through ongoing resistance, resilience, joy and pleasure-making.

To pursue this call towards alternative methods of Indo-Caribbean erotic self-making, I also choose to work with the language of ‘coolie’. Forefronting labour diaspora histories specific to the Indo-Caribbean, the language of ‘coolie’ is deeply positioned within pejorative legacies of non-normativity and queerness that marked Indo-Caribbean subjectivities with distinct materialities of embodied difference and peripherality. Drawing upon these queer realities, and their often submerged articulations within larger landscapes of contemporary Caribbean discourses of identity that often bifurcate queerness from normative Indo-Caribbean epistemology, a grammar of coolie ontologies also helps us to interrogate flows of post-indentureship feminisms that engage and constitute the transgressive force of these self-making practices and the ways in which queer Indo-Caribbean selfhoods have always-already been important cultural archives deeply entangled in the landscapes of the region and its diasporas.
In the ‘The Adramnarines’, a series of photographs I produced in 2019, my reading of the architectures of the crossings of pain/pleasure within contemporary queer Indo-Caribbean lives evidences how a post-indenture feminist reading practice (Hosein and Outar 2016) operates as a critical technology of pursuing these locally and historically specific decolonial calls. Working with a number of fellow community organizers, friends and tantes located in Toronto, Canada, the ‘Adramnarines’ played upon the dark and eerie nature of the Western vernacular sketch ‘the Adams Family’ to honour the tanty and the queer spatial networks organized through her.

The first shot (see Figure 9) drew upon references to family pictures taken during the post-indenture and post-colonial periods in countries such as Trinidad and Guyana with the introduction of new photography studios. During this time, families were often depictured as without emotion, direct, forward and serious in nature. I wanted to recreate this by disrupting the overly heterosexualized Indo-Caribbean familial archive by embedding queer Indo-Caribbean subjectivities in the photographic imaginary. In this photo, you will see references to paranormal imagery, such as a skull face, drag makeup and references to ‘Bad Beti’ visualities, made famous in diaspora by Maria Qamar in 2019.

Following in line with critical Caribbean sexuality scholars, this photo series also worked to disrupt narratives of queer impossibility within the Caribbean region and its diaspora, or what Agard-Jones (2012) refers to as ‘silent archives’. Unable to strictly follow the rules of homonormative dynasties of the Global North, the Caribbean becomes ideologically constructed as the always-already ‘homophobic other’ (Jackson 2014), and the geographic anti-thesis to the site of (white, bourgeois) ‘good gay subjects’ (Dryden and Lenon 2015; Wahab and Plaza 2009) and ‘modern’ queer homonations (Chin 2019; Lazarus 2015; Lewis and Carr 2009).

As one such site of non-conformity, the Caribbean region is imagined, through the heterosexual nation, as a site in which queerness cannot and does not exist, and rather, the only means to live an
‘authentic’ queer life is by escaping to diasporic sites of the north (Agard-Jones 2012; La Fountain-Stokes 2009). However, such discourses do not take into account material archives of same-sex desire held within the architecture and landscapes of the region that help us see how queer life has always existed in the Caribbean. For instance, the work of Vanessa Agard-Jones (2012), Aliyah Khan (2016), Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley (2010, 2008), Rafael Ramírez (1999), Gloria Wekker (2006), Suzanne Persard (2018), Matthew Chin (2019) and Rosamund Elwin (1997) have shown us how Caribbean practices of same-sex desire need not be bound by homonormative optics. Rather, queer and same-sex desiring histories can be excavated from the archive of sand, transoceanic currents of the queer/black Atlantic, Indian indenture- ships, the cane field and our living rooms to evidence forms of ‘queer’

Figure 9  ‘The Adramnarines’ (2019); Models (from left to right): Ryan Persadie, Suzanne Narain, Aruna Boodram, Talisha Ramsaroop. Photography by Marisa Rosa Grant.
practice that has historically existed outside the rules and geographic territories of homonormativity.

In the images shown here (Figures 9, 10 and 11), these four tanties are followed by moments of pleasure and joy common to queer Indo-Caribbean living. These include making roti together, wining up to soca and chutney, and poking fun at each other. It is also important that this series of photographs were taken while Aruna was pregnant with her child, Surya. In Figure 9 she rests her hand on her stomach to denote this position and particular lived experience at this time. In this shot I wanted to bring the social parameters that make queer tanties possible in our lives – specifically the erotic – and the ecologies of relation and feminist knowledge they produce as they move through the historical then to the contemporary now. Following Black and Caribbean feminist thought, the erotic practice being mobilized here (which I further detail below) becomes a central mechanism by which a post-indenture feminist practice and aesthetic form is made possible and can speak its transgressive truths.

Figure 10  ‘The Adramnarines’ (2019); Models (from left to right) Suzanne Narain, Aruna Boodram, Talisha Ramsaroop, Ryan Persadie. Photography by Marisa Rosa Grant.
THE EROTICS OF POST-INDENTURE

Following these critical interventions, my aesthetic, theoretical and reading practice of dissident pleasure archives is constituted through what I am calling ‘the erotics of post-indenture’. The establishment of the Indian indenture programme in the Anglophone Caribbean (c. 1845–1917), and its afterlife, offers us an epistemological archive and analytical frame through which to think through queer Indo-Caribbean subjectivities and place-making practices in contemporary contexts.

In my work surrounding queer Indo-Caribbean diaspora, queerness operates as an organizing tool of affiliation and methodology of space-making where genealogies of non-normativity and engagements in transgressive difference, or what Ariane Cruz (2016) refers to as the ‘politics of perversion’, become both the birthing place and diasporic itinerary whereby erotic queer Indo-Caribbean subjectivities, pathways and linkages are organized. As I have discussed, I argue that such forms of erotic and pleasure spatializations allow us to re-organize transnational feminist and
decolonial geographic assemblages that do not rely on stable boundaries or other logics of normativity (such as identity politics or monolithic ontological frames such as South Asianness) to speak for us. Rather, grammars, pedagogies and assemblages of sexual and gender peripherality – and specifically the antithetical site of Euro-American order, rationality and normality – that emerge through legacies of indenture constitute the critical archive of racial-sexual difference I am working with.

My reading of erotics here is greatly influenced and shaped by transnational feminist and critical gender and sexuality scholars who work through the erotic as an ontological ‘catalyst for the creation of community’ (Allen 2011, 97). These include Audre Lorde (1984), Jordache Ellapen (2018, 2020), Juana Maria Rodriguez (2011), Lyndon Gill (2018, 2012), M. Jacqui Alexander (2005), Marlon Bailey (2016), Jafari S. Allen (2011), Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman (2012), Mirelle Miller Young (2014) and Kim TallBear (2016, 2018), among others. Moving beyond dominant discourses that consistently lock and bind sexual practice/behaviour with identificatory practices, provocations of the erotic – most famously offered by Audre Lorde (1984) – call us to theorize different ideological terrains of non-normative gender and sexuality. Feminist approaches to the erotic allows us to pursue cartographical possibilities to chart legacies of same-sex desiring survival, resiliency and resistance (Gill 2018); produce new social relations through disidentificatory praxis’ and pleasure sensoria (Ellapen 2018); re-make queer and trans worlds outside of hegemonic designs (Abdur-Rahman 2012); transform the racial-sexual pejorative from a site of harm and injury to one of autonomy, agency, and transgressive re-making (Rodriguez 2011; Young 2014); provide us with methodologies of understanding our relationality to one another outside of neoliberal settler hegemonies (TallBear 2016); and allow minoritarian subjects to imagine sexual and gendered possibilities beyond the (hetero) normative (Bailey 2016: 249).
In Lorde’s canonical essay on the erotic, she defines the erotic as ‘... a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling’ (1984: 53). In the Lordean sense, the erotic is contained within ‘the lifeforce of women’ and is activated by ‘sharing deeply any pursuit with another person’ (56). Forming bridges among and between multiple women, the erotic is theorized as an ancient affective force located within the hidden shadows of feminine interiority that has been consistently policed, regulated and surveilled by colonial, (neo-)imperial and masculinist powers who fear the transgressive potential of its power. This is because, as Lorde argues, it is deeply empowering as ‘a lens through which [women can] scrutinize all aspects of [their] existence, forcing [them] to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning in [their] lives’ (56). Yet, because the erotic carries such disruptive and unsettling potentials, neo-colonial powers have sought to burn the erotic out of memory, deploying a practice of transnational forgetting over the bodies it regulates and, as a technology of control, enforcing the continuity of colonial epistemological duress on minoritarian knowing (Alexander 2005: 192).

The erotic is of utmost importance in my framing of feminist post-indenture self-making practices as it is foundational to helping me theorize stratified sensoria of onto-epistemological truths that defy structural homo-/heteronormalities. Outside of academic prose, my framings of the erotics of post-indenture are also extended by the work of Caribbean artists and poets who have helped me theorize, both as a scholar and practising artist, how temporospatial intimacies of indenture and transgressive sexuality move through the then and now to evidence and challenge the ever-present colonialities of our changing world. These include Rodell Warner, Shani Mootoo, Renluka Maharaj, Andil Gosine, Michelle Mohabeer, Rajiv Mohabir, Kama La Mackerel, and others.
In addition, inspired by the work of critical thinkers of queer diaspora such as Gayatri Gopinath (2018), my usage of ‘queer’ in my framing of the erotic is not situated within its common usage in the Global North: as a homonormative sexual identity category and politic. Rather, I extend the critical work of transnational feminist Caribbean thinkers such as Nadia Ellis (2011, 2015), Gloria Wekker (2006, 1999), Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley (2008) and Kamala Kempadoo (2009), who show us how queer, as a theoretic and analytic, can be mobilized beyond states of identification, as embodied acts of moving, doing, disrupting and unsettling against systems of heteronormality. Despite neo-colonial structures of silencing, I work to investigate how the interstices of non-normativity contained within the entanglement of queerness and Indo-Caribbeanness, and particularly the erotics of indenture, have produced contemporary queer Indo-Caribbean ontology, which, as I argue, has always constituted ideas around geopolitical lives of Indo-Caribbean spaces, both inside and outside of the Caribbean region.

We can first think of the inherent queerness of the indentured coolie figure through the ways in which ‘contrapuntal queerness’, as referred to by Amar Wahab (2019a), has produced the coolie as a ‘racialized-queer and debilitated figure’. Referring to colonial racializations (and their nationalist post-colonial offspring), the naming of ‘coolie’ produced, he argues, eras of indenture that loaded coolie life and ontology with non-normative, queer and ‘not-quite-human’ sensibilities. Here, he is referring to the unjust and necropolitical systems of labour that positioned the coolie as experimental ground to test the expansive potential of imperial wealth and settler expansionism through contracted human exhaustion. This argument speaks to regimes of regulation, surveillance and control that were imposed on indentured lives and which rendered them within ‘a sub-human category of labour’.13 While the ‘coolie’ was never positioned as an official legal category, Jung (2006) notes that it operated during times of coloniality as a
conglomeration of racial imaginings that merged worldwide in the era of slave emancipation, a product of the imaginers rather than the imagined’ (5), to reify a white supremist and settler notion of Asiatic difference as always-already inferior, yet in constant servitude, to white heteromasculinity.

Wahab (2019a) also notes that such paradigms of the (queer) coolie carry critical transnational and temporal qualities that do not only live within the historical archive but, rather, carry an active presence in our material world today and thus frame contemporary negotiations of Indo-Caribbean gender and sexuality. In particular, he argues that the historical coolie became attached to notions of ‘oriental queerness’ that positioned indentured subjectivities as traditional and fixed in fragmentation (from colonial India), and when re-located to the Caribbean become bound to tropes of subservience, docility and the carnal (390). Queer of colour critique has also furthered such critiques in conversations of ‘Asian masculinities’ in the contemporary context. When positioned against systems of Afro-Caribbean normalities, and specifically creole nationalisms in the region, cooliness becomes historically and psychically bound by the orientalist imagination (Nguyen 2014; Eng 2001), often being represented as possessing an intrinsic ‘feminine penetrability’ (Said 1978). These lowered tropes of Asian/Indian genderings have also acquired a host of (in the context of heteropatriarchal power) negative associations to weakness, emasculation, shame, humiliation, abjection, submission and femininity (Nguyen 2014; Scott 2010; Eng 2001). Thus, in one regard, we can read the inherent queerness of Indo-Caribbeanness through such non-normative scripts that then become further exacerbated as coolie subjectivity is positioned as foreign, peripheral and unbelonging to the site of creole nationalisms and Black nativisms that emerge in the post-colonial Caribbean (Brereton 2010; Kamugisha 2007; Newton 2013).

Secondly, we can read Indo-Caribbean queerness through the unsettling conditions indentureship produced that positioned
Indo-Caribbean communities against normative Euro-American paradigms of rigidity, fixity and stability, particularly related to dis/emplacement of sexual and gendered being. This is because indentureship emerged as one of the first mobile forces that forcibly conditioned coolies to build place through practices of the non-normative, queer and the erotic. Indentureship positioned them within a landscape that did not allow for any sense of gender or sexual normality as they previously knew in colonial India, if they ascribed to it at all. Consequently, this cultivated queer social relations and ecologies that become deeply embedded in coolie selfhoods. For instance, such acts of compulsory diasporization created the conditions for practices of transgressive sexuality where Indo-Caribbean landscapes witnessed acts of gender non-conformity and same-sex desire. Scholars such as Amar Wahab (2019a), Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo (2000), Suzanne Persard (2018) and Aliyah Khan (2016) have all demonstrated in their work that, despite traditional and historiographic attachments and scriptings of Indo-Caribbeanness to compulsory heterosexuality (i.e., jahaji bhai poetics), Indo-Caribbean archives, geographies, histories and popular culture have never been bifurcated from the realm of the queer erotic. The memory of the indenture ship, the matikor space and the chutney arena, for instance, remembers and can attest to the very active presence of what Wahab (2019a) refers to as the ‘coolie homoerotic’.

Finally, the erotic interventions that I have outlined here help me to pursue ontological readings of Indo-Caribbean diaspora beyond its current fixed and arguably long-standing location within Hindu nationalism, identity politics and neoliberal paradigms. Beginning in the mid-1900s, academic discourses of Indo-Caribbean identity, subjectivity and experience were brought to the forefront through confluences of coolie identity and subjectivity to ideas of dislocation, fragmentation, brokenness, pathologization, injury and trauma, most commonly disseminated in jahaji-bhai and kala pani poetics. Such victim narratives suture
Indo-Caribbean subjecthood to archives of relentless struggle of working to recuperate lost ontologies through returning to a sub-continental Indianness rooted in the atavistic homeland (Carter and Torabully 2002: 16).

Such traditional forms of diaspora- and self-making through injury have also been coined as ‘diaspora as social form’ (Vertovec 2000), or what is now known as ‘classical diaspora studies’. While crafting a quite insular definition of diaspora, this referred to the dispersal and scattering of ethnic bodies by a cataclysmic event that forces those in exile to be bound to new locations based on acts of violence by human or non-human forces, framing new realities through experiences of victimhood and forced removal (Cohen 1997: 1). This has also been referred to, by Vijay Mishra (1996), as the ‘diasporic imaginary’:

*any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously or because of the political self-interest of a racialization nation-state, as a group that lives in displacement (423).*

Here, the imagination of the mythological (heterosexual) homeland also becomes the site of origination, purity and authenticity, where ideas surrounding race, ethnicity, belonging, identity and community are forged and disseminated to its citizens. Such framings of diasporic consciousness that position the homeland as always-already authentic and absolute simultaneously rendered diasporic life in opposition, or as deviation, ‘inauthentic’, ‘illegible’, ‘deviant’, ‘dissident’ and foreign from a ‘true [or] presumed narrative form’ (Vertovec 2000: 1). As an ‘impure genre of human’ (Mishra 1996: 430), the diasporic subject becomes an unsettling threat to the framework of homeland ideologies and imaginaries, and thus, loaded with queer potential.

Rather than framing a geopolitical mapping of the queer Indo-Caribbean through the optics of the colonial past (which I will never be able to properly hear, sense or feel), I instead situate my
work through the afterlife of indenture (Mohabir 2017), and particularly, performative ecologies and economics of affective, aesthetic and performative bodies and labour. In my aesthetic work, I focus on the language of coolieness because I have found that Indo-Caribbean studies has often elided over the ecological conditions of labouring that have set the parameters for (queer) Indo-Caribbean subjectivities, and more broadly, the emergence of Indo-Caribbean diasporas. In centring the body, performance and erotic self-making practices, it is important to return to archives that help us contend with acts of place-making as labour and work. As Kale (1998) notes in her study of Indian indentureship in the Caribbean, ‘labour is a category, a role, and not people’ (10).

Far too much time has been spent in Indo-Caribbean studies worrying about strategically essentializing Indo-Caribbean self-hoods into neat ontological parameters pre-scribed through colonial namings and identities. This work seeks to produce identitarian logics that neatly fit into paradoxical forces of neoliberal assimilations where citizens are asked to give in to regimes of individualism, self-entrepreneurialism and consumptions of identity – and, specifically, the ‘model minority’ trope in Canada and the US – that contribute to the economic productivity and profitability of nationalistic governance and normative being. Furthermore, such a logic helps us also to see how racial capitalist and settler colonial strategies of ascribing to the normative Indian work through productions of property relations and genres of humanity that construct and reward those in urban space who ascribe to its colonial legislations.

However, what has not often been considered in the scholarly literature is the ways in which queer Indo-Caribbean life has laboured to undo ‘authentic’ archives of trauma diaspora studies and its affective legacies against the production of cartographic, border imperialist, quantifiable and accountable paradigms. Despite the ongoing work of queer Indo-Caribbean communities, and self- and place-making strategies, Indo-Caribbean studies has not successfully
been able to move beyond Eurocentric methodologies of understanding the self and the (settler) colonial geographies we inhabit. Through centring pleasure, erotics and performance, I command attention to the ways in which moving bodies illuminate queer Indo-Caribbean practices of producing decolonial geographic routes and stories that move through legacies of post/-indentureship struggle and colonial undoing.

To reiterate, erotic space and selfhoods are made through genealogies of post-indentureship feminisms. Transforming ‘coolieness’, as an ontological category, from its position as an absolute archive of trauma and hardship (Shepherd 2002) to one of erotic-ecological transformation defies the rules of post-colonial/nationalist Caribbean homogeneity and asks us to contend with the ways in which queer Indo-Caribbeanness has historically and continues to move us beyond flattened essentialisms of Indo-Caribbean living and being. By turning to tanty feminisms, I work to investigate how the archive of Indo-Caribbeanness has always moved through the realm of the queer, the sexual and gender differential, the non-normative, the randi\textsuperscript{16} and the erotic. The erotics of post-indenture operates here as a central embodied grammar of disruptive epistemological and ontological praxis that queer Caribbean life has cultivated to provide its communities with corporeal methods, tools and strategies to free (up) themselves from heteropatriarchal sexual and gender norms in addition to other articulations of internalized colonial epistemological indoctrinations.

The images and artist statement included in the prelude of this article are reflective of my most recent work with #Coolieween. Following a number of escalating acts of misogyny in the Toronto area towards Indo-Caribbean woman, particularly in relation to femicide, child abuse and domestic abuse, I wanted to reflect on the afterlife of colonialism and indenture and question if we have ever really arrived in a moment of ‘post-’ anything at all. Here, the tanty becomes an arbitor of this message. My commitment to this
work as a cisgender queer man is to not only work through the archives of feminist pedagogy that have been provided to me by women, assigned female at birth, and queer and trans mentors and tanties, but take up their call for practising Caribbean feminism outside of theoretical investments and articulations.

The number of Indo-Caribbean women’s deaths in Canada that had been enacted by their intimate partners and close kin reveals to us that the long-standing parameters and affects of indentured processes do not live as ghosts in our lives but active agentive forces. My practice as a drag tanty and artist is, then, not only to hear its pedagogical truths but enact it as the epistemology of critical mundane archives. As a Caribbean feminist, I tune into tanty knowledge as a means of doing Caribbean feminism every day. As Sarah Ahmed (2016) beautifully notes in her essay, ‘Feminist Aunties’, every day, living a feminist life forces us to contend with that which only aunties know:

*To be a feminist auntie...is to offer alternatives by how you live and in what you do. To be a feminist auntie...is to work to enable others to speak out and speak against the violence; those that are enacted by individuals, those that are reproduced by institutions that are hostile to those that challenge that violence.*

Through listening to the aunties and the lessons of auntyhood, we better hear and learn the potentials of Indo-/Caribbean feminism.

**NOTES**

1 The following section displays my artist statement that was produced to be read alongside the featured photography series entitled ‘Tanty Feminisms’, part of my larger annual visual project ‘Coolieween’. This statement is taken from my Instagram profile, where this work was first exhibited. This version of the statement is an edited version of its original form.

2 The GO transit system is a local Toronto-based transit system made up of bus and train routes that connect various cities and neighbourhoods throughout the Greater Toronto Area.
The language of ‘proppaness’ outlined here refers to discourses of Euro-American and cis-/heteronormative gender ideologies of morality, respectability, docility and other tactics of regulation and control often positioned on Caribbean women in the region and its diasporas. Assimilating into proppaness speaks to acts and performances of ‘legitimate gendering’ that conform with regimes of colonial normativity. In opposition, stark Caribbean improprieties to such legislations operate as acts of cultural resistance to such misogynistic paradigms. See Persadie (2020) for more on the politics of proppaness.

I particularly use gender-neutral pronouns here because while tantes/aunties are often scripted to the bodies of women, the archive of tantyhood and tanty femininity can be accessed and articulated by multiple gendered subjects and identifications.

The word for ‘aunt’ in French is ‘tante’.

Tracy Robinson (2013) refers to ‘sorting codes’ as categories of normative and non-normative intimacies in the Caribbean, crafted through legislation by colonial administrators and social reformers. These were put in place to address the inherent queerness of Caribbean kinship structures and sexual formations that defied Victorian British logics of morality, respectability and modesty, particularly for colonized women (426). Robinson argues that these epistemological parameters provided the conditions for the formation of contemporary taxonomic descriptions of intimacy (i.e., marriage, common-law marriage and visiting relationships).

In ‘victim diasporas’, Robin Cohen (1997) notes that two major qualities are evident: 1. experiences of shared trauma through such deterritorializing forces, and 2. a collective memory of a material or imagined homeland among those dispersed. These framings of diaspora are constituted through triadic relationalities between globally dispersed yet self-identified ethnic groups, the territorial nation state where they have been displaced to, and the site of homeland from which they associate their ancestries and lineages (Vertovec 2000: 143–144).

Kala pani is translated to ‘black waters’ in Bhojpuri-Hindi. It is a Hindu-centric narrative that has been widely circulated in traditional Indo-Caribbean scholarship that metaphorizes journeys of indenture from the subcontinent of India to the Caribbean as emblematic of Indo-Caribbean subjectivity, in effect framing Indo-Caribbean identities within tropes of displacement, fragmentation and always-already unbelonging to both colonial and contemporary India and the Caribbean. See Goffe (2019), Kabir (2020) and Shepherd (2002).

I discuss this in more detail later in the article.
David A. B. Murray (2009) offers us one compelling example of the invisibility of the Caribbean queer. In Barbados, he argues that the figure of the ‘homosexual’ instills moral panic among the Christian-majoritarian population. Drawn from long-standing histories of Victorian gender ideologies embedded in the nation, the homosexual presents a ‘corrupt’, ‘perverted’, ‘sinful’ force that haunts Barbadian mediascapes through the pathologizing fear it presents to ‘good’ Christian society and its nationalist image, despite the country carrying numerous spots for queer cruising, sex and community-building. This imagining extends from Euro-American historical legacies beginning in the 19th century that saw the use of Eugenicist ideologies to frame queers as ‘moral imbeciles’, ‘pathological liars’ and ‘persons with abnormal sexual instincts’ (Luibhéid and Cantú 2005, xii).

Originally coined by Jasbir Puar (2006), ‘homonationalism’ refers to methodologies and tactics by which queer subjects attempt to fit into, naturalize and embrace state agendas by inserting and appropriating queerness and queer culture into the vision of the nation, which often includes upholding state hegemonies such as anti-blackness and settler colonialism (Dryden and Lenon 2015).

I am extending the ‘politics of perversion’ from Ariane Cruz (2016), with it originally used to refer to unsettling and disruptive politics of working through the pathological and deviant to transgress regimes of moral visibility and respectability politics. In her study, the politics of perversion is initially used to think about the ways in which Black BDSM adult performers reconfigured archives of racial-sexual alterity to think differently about the domain of heterosexual pleasure as a ‘queer critique of the regimes of normalcy’ (13).

Wahab (2019b) specifies in his book, Disciplining Coolies: An Archival Footprint of Trinidad, 1846, that such tropes of Indo-Caribbeans as ‘docile’ and in need of constant surveillance emerged during a period known as the ‘experimental indentureship period’, where colonial occupiers of the region saw indentured labourers as unfit for liberal regimes of self-regulation and thus in need of strict colonial regulation to transform the coolie subject from one of unruliness to obedience (8–9).

For instance, for this reason many Indo-Caribbean communities choose to disidentify with South Asian ontological frameworks because, as I originally mentioned, conceptualizations of South Asianness and Indianness are often constructed through exclusive framings of identity that exist with the exclusion, erasure and positioning of Indo-Caribbean histories, genealogies and subjectivities as ‘other’, inauthentic, immodest and impure (Bahadur 2014; Hosein and Outar 2016; Khan 2016; Niranjana 2006). In particular,
Indo-Caribbeans were further dislocated from India as they crafted bonds with Afro-Caribbean subjects (whereby anti-blackness was used to inferiorize and ‘darken’ coolies in the Indian nationalist imagination and global caste order) as they departed the subcontinent (Mishra 1996: 430).

15 Mishra (2007) extends upon this discourse by suggesting that part of the troubling condition of the diasporic subject is that it ruins the ‘enjoyment’ that authenticity narratives hold for the subjects it privileges. When diasporic bodies or ideologies permeate the boundaries of the homeland/nation-state, the homeland seeks to defend its purity politics to maintain its structure, hegemonic position, privilege and knowledge systems.

16 The Bhojpuri word ‘rand’ or ‘randi’, meaning ‘promiscuous’, was used to describe typically Indo-Caribbean women who were ‘sexually loose’ and without respectability and morals within the colonial Victorian imagination (Khan 2018: 279–280). This reminds us that, upon entrance to the Caribbean, the ontological category of Indo-Caribeanness was bound up in queer alterity and that there can be no engagement with the Indo-/Caribbean without interrupting archives of gender and sexual un-belonging and non-conformity.

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