Brown femininities and the queer erotics of indentureship

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ABSTRACT

This photo essay curates two interrelated bodies of creative work, Queering the Archive: Brown Bodies in Ecstasy (2013-ongoing) and The Brown Photo Album: An Archive of Feminist Futurities (2020), to explore the queer afterlives of indentureship in South Africa through the aesthetic realm. Queering the Archive and The Brown Photo Album are influenced by the photo archive of an Afro-Indian family from rural Kwa Zulu Natal. The curation of these two interrelated projects as this photo essay, Brown Femininities and the Queer Erotics of Indentureship, positions the maternal-feminine as central to the making of Afro-Indianness and to my own understanding of sexuality, beauty, pleasure and the erotic as informed by the home-space of the Afro-Indian family. This project maps my mother’s desire to create a visual archive of the Afro-Indian woman in the immediate afterlife of indentureship onto my own desire to create a visual archive of the Afro-Indian queer experience in contemporary South Africa. The images translate the violence associate with the sugarcane plantations and indentureship into an aesthetic of pleasure where the past, present, and future as well as Black, Brown, and white bodies rub against and touch each other as an ongoing practice dedicated to re-imagining Afro-Indian intimacies and South African Blackness.

KEYWORDS

South Africa, indenture, Afro-Indian, intimacies, archive, queer, erotic, sex, embodiment

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Archive of Feminist Futurity, as an ongoing practice invested in understanding the queer afterlives of indentureship in South Africa. The first project, Queering the Archive: Brown Bodies in Ecstasy, consists of visual assemblages created digitally by layering, cutting and juxtaposing old photographs from my family photo albums with digital photos shot in a studio environment. Queering the Archive is my ongoing attempt to grapple with the family photo archive as a counterintuitive site for understanding the relationship between race and sexuality as informed by the home space of the Afro-Indian family, steeped within the history and experience of Indian indentureship. Over the years, I have come to understand that my queerness, queer Afro-Indianness, continues to be shaped by the violent history of indentureship and the non-normative lives that were created in its wake. Similarly, to other South African artists of indenture origin, like Sharlene Khan and Riason Naidoo, my creative work responds to the colonial archive of visuality and the construction of the Indian within the ‘visual regimes of colonial [apartheid] modernity’ (Gopinath 2018, p. 7).

In my essay based on The Brown Photo Album I trace the ways in which the colonial apartheid state used photography to construct a very specific narrative of the Indian South African experience, which conflates the Indian with the figure of the trader/merchant colonial middleman class (Ellapen 2020). Thus, within the South African imaginary, the figure of the Indian has been flattened out, strategically invisibilizing the complexities of indenture history, experience and its afterlives. The Brown Photo Album is a curatorial project that seeks to make sense of my mother’s extensive archive of studio and vernacular photographs from the mid 1950s to the late 1960s. How do we read, and make sense, of a photo archive of an Afro-Indian woman one generation removed from the system of indentureship? What do her performances and her attention to fashion and beauty reveal about the immediate afterlife of Indian indentureship and Afro-Indian femininity?

Most historical, sociological, anthropological and aesthetic work concerning Indian South Africans focuses on urban areas
like Durban and, to a smaller extent, Johannesburg and Cape Town. Most work also focuses on Indian South African participation in anti-apartheid politics, once again centring the urban and routing an understanding of Indianness through struggle/liberation credentials. The story of the Indian in South Africa is often told though political figures like Gandhi (an elite Indian, largely invested in the trader class) or the apartheid-era political elite. This history of Afro-Indian relations, forged through anti-apartheid politics and the desire to imagine a new South Africa outside of the racial logics of the colonial apartheid state, rubs against a larger discourse that constructs the Indian as exploitative, lecherous and a foreign/alien element to the land. European colonialists mobilized such stereotypes to fracture Afro-Indian relations by strategically positioning the Indian as a buffer population between local Black African communities and the White settler community. Since the colonial era, the Indian manifests as a scapegoat to deflect African anxieties over European expansion and capital accumulation. The emphasis on Indian participation in anti-apartheid politics and the deep desire to belong to the nation repeats a progress narrative of Indianness that creates lines of flight away from the various sites of indentureship – the sugarcane plantations, the coal mines, tea estates and European Estates in the Natal Midlands. This progress narrative of Indianness imbricates with the new nation’s narrative of newness that subtends post-apartheid democracy. Left unacknowledged within these narratives of newness, and shaped by the intense ‘longing for belonging’ (Rastogi 2008, p. 1), is the making of rural Indianness and the afterlife of indentureship in South Africa.

The colonial apartheid state understood the importance of the visual in constructing racial difference, and the construction of the Indian within the regime of visuality cannot be undermined. This is the enduring legacy of colonial apartheid that South Africans continue to deal with on an everyday basis in the post-apartheid period. Anthropologist Thomas Blom Hansen (2012: 5) writes:
Today, no statement, no sentence, and no gesture can acquire its full meaning and significance in South Africa without being linked to, and invariably qualified by, the phenotypical classification of the speaker. An individual’s pigmentation is what can be seen by the eye but is also always/already inserted and framed by a larger gaze, a schema of racial ideology that makes bodily pigmentation the very root cause of intrinsic social qualities and cultural propensities.

Thus, my attention to the aesthetic realm is committed to engaging and rethinking the entanglement between the visual regimes of colonial modernity and the racialized production of the Indian; the role of indentureship in the production of Indianness that has been obscured because of the conflation of the category ‘Indian’ with the trope of the passenger/merchant Indian class; and the race–gender–sexual dynamics of diasporic homemaking among the Indian community. I am particularly interested in how attention to the erotic, the feminine and feminized, and the vulnerable may begin to unfurl the thick silences embedded within this South African-specific entanglement.

Against the grand spectacle of apartheid, I am interested in the minor, the quiet and the mundane. I am interested in an aesthetic of queerness that emerges from the sugarcane fields and the home space in the afterlife of indentureship. I grew up in Tongaat, a small rural town on the shores of the Indian Ocean that is often referred to as the last bastion of Indian indentureship in South Africa. Before I understood the connection between indentureship and the violence of plantation life, I felt an intimate connection with the sugarcane plantations. I was drawn to their infinite beauty yet threatened by their expansiveness as they stretched across the horizon. My body gravitated towards this space; I wanted to, and still want to, understand my visceral relationship to the sugarcane plantations. I am not done with the sugarcane plantations as a site of aesthetic exploration. The sugarcane plantations evoke larger histories of overlapping racialized coercive labour practices across Southern Africa that stretch backward to the history of slavery in the Cape that
began in 1652 and ended in 1834. In the Cape, the ‘vast majority’ of the enslaved population ‘came from Madagascar, the Indian subcontinent and South East Asia’. In the early days of the slave trade in the Cape, enslaved peoples were ‘predominantly from Bengal’, and also included enslaved people from the ‘West Coast of Africa, mainly Guinea and Angola’. Even though 1860 is commemorated as the year indentured Indians first arrived in South Africa to work on sugarcane plantations, coal mines, tea estates and within European-owned homes and estates, this longer history of slavery disrupts 1860 as the origin narrative of the Indian/Asian presence. Indeed, in Southern Africa, forms of coercive labour practices like slavery and indentureship, for instance, imbricate across time and space and repeat across plantations and mines. This longer historical arch has much to teach us about the making of Afro-Indianness and Afro-Indian relations. It is also a fecund site from which to re-imagine Afro-Indian intimacies in Southern Africa.

Across the long history of South Africa, reaching back to the era of slavery in the Cape, the Indian manifests as a ghostly figure, an absent presence, that haunts Southern Africa.

Growing up in rural South Africa, the official narrative of the Indian as the trader/merchant class rubbed against the Indianness I was intimately familiar with; an Indianness shaped within the afterlife of indentureship. I returned repeatedly to my family photo archive to grapple with the multiple meanings of Indian South Africanness. As a child, I remember these photo albums positioned as somewhat sacred objects that lived and slowly deteriorated in the hot and humid climate, locked away in cupboards under old blankets and duvets. I remember them being taken out and opened on special occasions, mostly when extended family members visited. The old photographs inspired memories and narratives of life growing up in small rural towns in the Natal Midlands, like Nottingham Road, Clifton, Mooi River, Balgowan and Rosetta. These small towns were home to many Indian indentured labourers who worked on European-owned estates. The descendants of these indentured workers continue to live
in these small rural towns scattered across the interior of Kwa Zulu Natal. Their stories, histories and experiences remain to be told. I remember how family members touched and engaged with the photographs; how they held them in their hands as they traced the figure of a cousin, parent, uncle or friend who had become distant with the passage of time. This intimate archive, an ‘archive of feeling’ – to evoke Ann Cvetkovich (2003) – allowed me to access an alternative understanding of Indianness in South Africa. This archive – the family archive – reveals a history of the indenture experience, which has been strategically rendered invisible and irrelevant to contemporary South Africa. Scholars of family photography argue that the family photo album functions as a visual genealogical map, a ‘compass, for we seek from it our own historical orientation’ (Nair 2020: 28).

Indeed, the family photo album reoriented me towards the making of rural Indianness. Even though I was drawn in a very visceral sense to this archive, the photo albums communicated a heteronormative narrative of family and community that reinforced the racial parameters of Indianness. As my familiarity with this archive developed, I noticed quiet and minor moments of intimacy between men in the photo from my grandfather’s and father’s generations: two men posing for a photograph, one seated with his legs crossed, the other standing next to him with one hand on his tilted hip and his other hand placed across the shoulder of the man seated; two men standing next to each other with their hands gently touching; a studio photograph of a group of friends sitting with their arms around each other and one man sitting on the lap of another. The photos point to forms of intimacies between men that may reveal more complicated narratives about sociality and world-making practices amongst the marginalized and oppressed. These moments of male–male intimacies cannot be easily categorized as gay or homosexual, identity markers that are still stigmatized across the country. These moments of homosociality largely determined the aesthetic parameters of Queering the Archive: Brown Bodies in Ecstasy.
As a curatorial project, Brown Femininities and the Queer Erotics of Indentureship begins with a set of my mother’s studio photos shot in Ladysmith sometime in the late 1950s and 1960s. I begin with this series of studio photos for numerous reasons. First, I am interested in what my mother’s attention to fashion, beauty and performance reveals about her desire for the otherwise in the immediate afterlife of indentureship. Second, as I grew older and engaged with my mother’s photo archive and her attention to beauty and creativity as a practice of living, I understood that my own understanding of beauty and sensuality, and desire for beauty and sensuality, resonates with my mother’s. Her positionality of ‘impossibility’ in the immediate afterlife of indentureship imbricated with my own positionality of impossibility as a Brown queer subject within a broader South African public sphere where the racial category Indian is itself an impossibility (Gopinath 2005). By beginning with my mother’s studio photos, I situate the feminine – the ‘maternal feminine’ – as central to my own understanding of sexuality, beauty, pleasure and the erotic in the afterlife of indentureship. The more I dwelled within my mother’s photo archive, the more I realized that my mother was creating a visual archive of the Afro-Indian woman in the immediate afterlife of indentureship.

The next set of images are from the series Queering the Archive: Brown Bodies in Ecstasy. In Queering the Archive, I create visual assemblages by digitally layering, juxtaposing, and cutting up and repositioning family photos and other kinds of documents, like the Indian ‘pass’ (identification) documents, which my grandparents and parents collected over the years. I position these archival documents in relation to digital photographs of homoerotic scenes between differently racialized men (Indian, Black African and White). Shot in Johannesburg, the digital photographs were re-imaginings – my re-imaginings – of the quiet moments of homosociality that I traced within the family photos. Through the process of creating digital visual assemblages, I shift the homosocial into the realm of the homoerotic to ‘open up affective circuits of desire between past and
present’ (Wahab 2019: 389) and to create lines of relationality between different queer bodies of colour.

Queering the Archive is an experiment in queering family narratives in order to understand Brown queer embodiment in a context where such experiences have been invisibilized. Influenced by Black feminist scholars like Audre Lorde (2007) and Cathy Cohen (1997), I am invested in an aesthetic of deviant/transgressive erotics as a site through which we can begin to imagine and craft alternative social worlds outside of the heteronormative and racialized logics of nation, family and community. My engagement with aesthetics (film, photography) is undeniably a response, as articulated by South African scholar Haseenah Ebrahim, to the ‘under-visibility of Brown intimacies and of the South African Indian … subject in the country’s cinematic representations in general, but especially in its archive of queer cinema and its scholarship’ (Ebrahim 2021: 155). When my short film, cane/cain (2011) was first screened in Johannesburg in 2011, I spoke about my own desire to see Brown bodies on screen. This film began as a pedagogical practice in learning how to desire my own Brown body and to position the Brown body as desirable in a context where, given the history of indentureship and the racial politics of colonial apartheid, the Indian male body is both feminized and imagined as heteronormative. However, this is not a Brown queerness that emerges in isolation from other racialized bodies.4 This is a notion of Brown queerness that emerges when differently racialized bodies rub against each other, stick together and tear apart, directing us to the regimes of pain and pleasure that have constructed the racialized body in South Africa (Macharia 2019).

The visual assemblages in Queering the Archive create a haunting effect that captures the stickiness of bodies, histories, memories, desires and pleasures across time and space. In these assemblages, the past and present, and Black-Brown-White racialized bodies touch and bleed into each other, gesturing towards our sticky pasts, presents and futures. Through touch and feeling, I am interested in
expanding and exploding the racial categories African, Black and Indian. Bodies touching each other – feeling each other across our regimes of difference – creating intimate moments of pleasure and ecstasy. The aesthetic of touch in the work reflects my desire for a different form of embodiment, which may release us from the colonial apartheid ‘order of things’. In South Africa, we continue to understand ourselves and our positionalities through racial categorizations, which continue to structure how we see, care and relate to each other. The assemblages, particularly the scenes of sex as art, reflect my desire to feel for and to feel with, across our differences; this is a praxis of care. The scenes of sex as art opens a space to re-imagine the erotic (queer erotics) as a site of disruption, a disruption of the normative racial order of colonial apartheid. These scenes offer an aesthetic of intimacy and connection in a context where these racialized bodies were never meant to feel for, feel with and feel together.

Towards the end of this photo essay, I include a curation of selfies taken between 2012 and 2022. I position my selfies in relationship/conversation with a collection of my mother’s studio portraits and a composite image I created using my mother’s identification photos (one taken when my mother was in her early twenties and the other taken when she was in her forties). The selfie and the studio portrait are an interconnected form of self-representation and self-actualization. Across generations and across our own regimes of difference, my mother’s desire to create a photo archive rubs against and sticks to my own desire to examine Brown queer embodiment and to create an archive of the queer Afro-Indian experience.

This body of work continues to be influenced by the Nigerian British photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode. This is most apparent in my use of the African masks and the reference to ecstasy, particularly the images titled *Traces of Ecstasy*. Throughout this project I play with the African mask aesthetically. These masks are not indigenous to local South African communities. I am unaware of any masking traditions in South Africa. However, African masks are easily available
across the country, mainly catering to the tourist market, although they are increasingly used in middle-class homes as a décor choice. This use of the African mask is also visible in the homes of South Africans living abroad. The masks used in this project are of Cameroonian origin and were purchased in Johannesburg. My creative work can be characterized as an experiment in visuality and visibility. It is invested in disrupting the dominant ways in which Indianness appears/disappears from the visual frame whilst reflecting my desire to articulate a queer Afro-Indian positionality in a context where they remain largely absent. These interrelated projects emphasize the body and embodiment and draw on queer aesthetics in order to understand Afro-Indian relations otherwise.

NOTES
1 My visual assemblage project Queering the Archive: Brown Bodies in Ecstasy first appeared as a visual essay in 2018 (see Ellapen 2018).
2 https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/early-cape-slave-trade
3 Ibid.
4 In South Africa, the term Brown has been used historically as a colloquial label for Coloured people. The Afrikaans term is Bruinmense, literally translated as Brown people. Bruin/Brown in this context refers to the history of mixing between different groups like European, Malay, Bantu, Khoisan and Indian. Whilst I recognize that the term Brown has a long and complex history in South Africa, my notion of Brownness is informed by José Esteban Muñoz’s theorization of Brown (see Muñoz 2020).

REFERENCES


Photographer: Victory Studios, Bully Narandas, Ladysmith [from artist's mother's photo albums], ca. 1960s.
Brownflesh I (Triptych), 2016
Digital Composite Image

Photographer: Unknown
[from artist’s mother’s photo albums], ca. 1960s.
Brownflesh II (Triptych), 2017
Digital Composite Image

untitled, 2021
Digital photos shot in 2013
Photo Credit: Zewande Bk. Bhengu
Family Portrait III, 2017
Digital Composite Image

Photographer: unknown, somewhere in Natal [from artist's grandfather's photo albums], ca. 1930s/1940s
Family Portrait II, Sugarcane Coolies, 2017
Digital Composite Image

Photographer: Jordache A. Ellapen
Tongaat, Kwa Zulu Natal, ca. 2019
Photographer: Jordache A. Ellapen
Tongaat, Kwa Zulu Natal, ca. 2019

Photographer: Victory Studios, Bully Narandas, Ladysmith [from artist’s mother’s photo albums], ca. 1960s.
Brownflesh, 2022
Collection of selfies taken by the artist between 2012 and 2022

16854/117331, 2020
Digital composite image