Introduction
Queering indentureship

Amar Wahab

Amar Wahab is associate professor of Gender and Sexuality in the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies at York University, Canada.

While scholars across the global Indian labour diaspora have published a growing body of work on gender and sexuality within the context of indentureship, this historic volume is the very first to be solely dedicated to a critical investigation of Indian indentureship from the perspectives of critical sexuality studies and queer studies. In doing so, this volume builds on an emerging body of scholarly work¹ that might be situated at the queer² turn in critical studies of indentureship and its contemporaneous legacies. At this subversive juncture, the articles, photo essay, interview, book review and poems in this volume all help to build a strong platform for substantively and critically engaging the following question: What do critical indentureship studies and queer studies have to offer each other? This question is not one that we can treat lightly, in terms of simply ‘discovering’ gender and sexually non-normative subjects and relations in the living and entangled archives of indentureship, but it advances a field of criticality that is punctuated by a host of methodological questions about the intellectual and political ramifications of rethinking each field through the analytic contours of the other. For example, can queer studies and critical sexuality studies help to productively trouble the heteronormativities of indentureship studies in ways that do not fold the field back into new colonial configurations? Might the broad
and unorthodox methodological practices (e.g., creative critical interventions, counter-archiving, etc.) and thematic emphases (e.g., affect, aesthetics, memory-work, etc.) of queer studies be useful and urgent for expanding the horizons of criticality in indentureship studies (a field that has emerged primarily through the disciplinary protocols of historical studies)? Alternatively, can critical and queer studies of indentureship serve to decolonize mainstream queer studies, especially given its increasing conscription into projects of late modernity? The connections and tensions generated through these questions underline the project of queering indentureship and are threaded throughout the various contributions in this volume.

Mainstream studies of Indian indentureship have been preoccupied with documenting histories of indenture and indentured experiences, implicitly reifying colonial epistemologies that anchor patriarchal heteronormativity (for example, through a prioritized focus on heteronormative kinship), precluding the possibility of queer coolie embodiments, relationalities and kinship formations within the various contexts of indenture and its ‘afterlife’ (Mohabir 2017). Yet, scholars working on the legacies of indentureship (e.g., Gosine and Mohabir 2022; Djeli 2021; Mohabir 2017; Gosine 2017; Kempadoo, Khan and Nanan 2017; Goffe 2014) have engaged and performed what Andil Gosine (2016) terms ‘wrecking work’ in critical studies of indentureship to capture and more affectively reterritorialize vibrant modes of embodiment, experience and relationality. Across this emerging and vibrant body of critical scholarship, queering indentureship entails several epistemological and methodological reorientations, re-routings and productive disruptions, which are key to resisting the queer erasures within mainstream studies of indentureship and for understanding queerness more broadly (i.e., beyond gender and sexual non-normativity). These scholars (a) question the centrality of the coolie odyssey (oversaturated with colonial violence, marginalization and trauma) as the prioritized analytic frame that anchors the heteropatriarchal jahaji-bhai (i.e., homosocial
brotherhood) narratives (e.g., Lokaisingh-Meighoo 2000; Khan 2016; Persard 2020; and Persadie 2020) of cultural resistance and retention, which preoccupy mainstream studies of indentureship; (b) unsettle the constructed incompatibility between queerness and indentureship/Indo-diasporic identity by subverting the opposition between queer erotic desire/pleasure and indentured labour; (c) refuse the dominant respectability and anti-queer politics that structure post- and ethno-nationalist projects of personhood, belonging and citizenship (e.g., Ghisyawan and Kumar 2020; Persadie 2020; Mohabeer 1994) by foregrounding the intersections of gender and sexuality with race, nation, class, etc.; (d) creatively intervene in the officialized and nationalized archives of indentureship to generate queer Indo-diasporic counter-archives that insist on queer coolie visibility and presence through literary interventions (e.g., Ramlochan 2017; Bahadur 2016; Mootoo 1998), aesthetic fabulations (e.g., Maharaj n.d.; Gosine 2021; Wahab 2019; Ellapen 2018; Seereeram n.d.) and disruptive performances (e.g., Ghisyawan and Kumar 2020; Persadie 2020); (e) foreground the agentic potentials of queer erotic desires, intimacies, affects, sensations, embodiments, selfhoods (beyond identity) and collective life within (post-) indentureship contexts; (f) critically reimagine and reclaim anchoring concepts like ‘coolie’ and ‘coolitude’ (Carter and Torabully 2002) through queerly refracted notions such as Ryan Persadie’s (2020) notion of ‘qoolieness’ (registering the ‘transgressive potentials’ [2020: 62] of the queer coolie) and Michelle Mohabeer’s discussion (this volume) of ‘coolie-tude – with an e’ (which foregrounds opacity as an aesthetic and poetic of legibility for queer Indo-Caribbean diasporas); and (g) draw on queer of colour and queer diasporic critiques to collectively reimagine and inhabit queer coolie possibilities and artifices as integral to queer world-making.

The contributions in this volume critically engage more mainstream studies of indentureship by foregrounding queer counter-archival politics to expand on the archive of indenture
through modes of affect, memory, aesthetics and creative visual intervention. In so doing, they seek to unsettle and perhaps decolonize the heteronormativity that underlines both the colonial and contemporary scholarly archives of indentureship (and the projects of nationalism they procure), not just in the way of making queer bodies visible, but also critically engaging the archive as a fixed and knowable concept. Furthermore, the analyses engage with, yet strive to interrupt, the odyssean perspective that anchors most studies of indentureship, moving with and beyond the trope of trauma to open space for thinking about queer intimacies, beauty, pleasure, sensuality and erotics as ways of negotiating and complicating subjection and subject formation. These analyses raise questions that are crucial to queering indentureship. If labour and queerness have been projected as mutually incompatible categories, how might the turn to queer pleasure, intimacy and sexpositivity counter this binary? How might studies and creative methodological interventions that centre affect and visual aesthetics generate new lines of enquiry about queer coolie selfhood in the myriad constellations of indentureship’s afterlife? What considerations, conceptual devices and analytical strategies are effective in working through queer genealogies of indentureship? These questions, debates and themes are taken up in various ways and with different critical emphases by the scholars featured in this volume.

Suzanne Persard’s article, ‘Archives in drag: Performing nachaniya towards a queer theory of indenture’, focuses on the queer figure of the nachaniya dancer and performer in the Indo-Jamaican context as an entry point into indentureship’s queer archive. Beyond a reading of the performer’s non-normative gender performance and embodiment (as counter-archival), Persard explores various slippages and ‘liminalities’ at the intersection of queerness and (Indo-Jamaican) culture to reveal a generative tension; that is, a queer relationality between queer studies and studies of indentureship. In so doing, Persard’s work critically
challenges the intellectual claims and horizons of both fields of study – challenging the Euro-American foundations of mainstream queer perspectives, as well as the heteronormativity of Indo-Caribbean studies. Using an archival photograph of a nachaniya dancer posing with a music ensemble as her analytical entry point, Persard seeks to counter the systematic absenting of queerness within the dominant archives of indentureship. This counter-archive is not merely about discovery or making queer bodies and performances visible (even through the queering of heteronormative Indo-Jamaican masculinity) within the context of indentureship, but it serves as a site for theoretical reformulation, whereby Indo-Jamaican culture serves to provisionally de-centre queer studies from its prioritized emphasis on gender and sexuality. Persard draws on queer studies scholar Anjali Arondekar’s concept of ‘ordinary surplus’ (Arondekar 2015) to develop a ‘queer theory of indenture’, whereby she reads the nachaniya dancer’s performance of queer erotic sensuality as ordinary – rather than exceptional – revealing the simultaneity of normativity and queerness. In doing so, her analysis resists discourses of queer exceptionalism (e.g., through the spectacularization of anti-queer violence) that often define mainstream queer studies.

Simultaneously, Persard’s investigation critically responds to the normalized heteronormativity of the field of Indo-Caribbean studies (predominantly focused on Trinidad and Guyana), which are saturated with discourses of queer ‘loss or absence’. In doing so, she offers a platform for critiquing the archival hegemonies of Jamaican nationalism. Persard’s discussion of the ‘uncertain origins’ of nachaniya is developed through her brilliant genealogical investigation, which explores its conceptual affiliation and tension with the term ‘hijra’, which has various discursive currencies in India, Trinidad and Guyana. In this way, the article does not only offer us nachaniya as a queer figure, but also as a unique methodological entry point through which to complicate and queer
genealogical investigations. Beyond exceptionalism, Persard claims that ‘heterosexual men in drag’ are not read as queer but as ordinary cultural performance (‘a queer archive in plain sight’) within the Indo-Jamaican context. In this vein, Persard claims that nachaniya’s liminality is anchored in its performance of culture, which parodies queer studies’ prioritized focus on gender and sexual non-normativity, substantiating her claim that ‘all archives are in drag’. While this article makes a significant contribution to the visibility of queer bodies and relationalities within the archive of indentureship, it insists that opacity is crucial for theory-making and for disrupting the epistemological normativities within both queer and indentureship studies (that project these fields as incommensurable).

Next, Naveen Minai’s article, entitled ‘Sensuous movements: Beauty, power, and memory in Jordache Ellapen’s Queering the Archive (2018)’, explores the creative visual photographic work of queer South African artist-scholar Jordache Ellapen, which also seeks to create a queer counter-archive of indentureship in post-colonial South Africa. Minai offers a close, ‘delicate’ reading of the photographic strategies of layering and gradient by the artist, which centres opacity as a crucial element in fabulating a queer archive of brown bodies and relations as a counter to hegemonic nationalist and enduring colonial discourses that silence queerness. Rather than reproducing discourses of queer brown South African victimhood, both Minai (through her analysis) and Ellapen (through his creative critique) are concerned with understanding the ‘beauty’ or critical aesthetics of queer brown male embodiments and intimacies as rooted in the sexual and erotic opacities that emerge out of complex and entangled racialized gendered histories and relations.

For Minai, Ellapen’s work deploys the creative and disruptive methodology that Saidiya Hartman (2008b) refers to as ‘critical fabulation’ to refuse facticity as the cornerstone of indentureship’s archive and knowledge production. Minai reads the techniques of
layering and gradient that Ellapen applies to photo collages of colonial and contemporary photographs as simultaneously ‘interrupting and connecting’ queer sex and interracial intimacy, family histories and memory with studies of indentureship. Beyond a direct sexing and queering of indentureship, Minai sees Ellapen’s work as broadening the scope of archival engagement through an insistence on queer presence, with opacity as its condition of legibility. Yet Minai is adamant that such a project is also aimed at ‘challenging heteropatriarchal [and colonial] notions of beauty to make the brown male body beautiful’. She claims that Ellapen ‘crafts a different masculine that centers the feminine’. In so doing, Minai asserts that Ellapen challenges the colonial formulation of (masculinized) labour through a critical aesthetic that centres the erotic through the ‘sensuous movement’ (evident in Ellapen’s work) of bodies, intimacies, histories and relations. Minai concludes with a provocative question for both queer studies and studies of indentureship: How do we understand the dynamics of queer sex and intimacy in ways that engage with the difficulties and complications of family as both experience and institution?

Keeping with the themes of the aesthetics and erotics of indenture, Ryan Persadie’s article, ‘Tanty feminisms: The aesthetics of auntyhood, #Coolieween, and the erotics of post-indenture’, pursues creative and performative methodologies to investigate tantyhood as a domain of feminist and queer relationalities within and across Indo-Caribbean diasporic sites. Persadie maps out the ‘transgressive’, feminist and queer pedagogical potential and ‘aggressive care’ of the aunty figure as a critical response to (post) colonial regimes of respectable selfhood, or what he terms ‘propparness’. Through an analysis of his own embedded relation to his biological aunty in Trinidad and his aesthetic practices as a drag artist and tanty in Toronto, Persadie expands the ‘corporeal archive’ of indentureship’s queer afterlife to situate the ‘hyperbolic’ figure of the aunty as a ‘fluid pedagogical force of ontological Caribbean
knowing . . . autonomy, agency and anti-colonial disruption’. For Persadie, the ‘extraness’ of ‘tantyness’ – as a feminist politic – holds the potential for queering (post)colonial (and perhaps even settler) normativities (at the national and diasporic levels). His own creative social media production – #Coolieween (i.e., figures ‘stitched together from folklore, myths, grotesque, [and the] paranormal’) – works through an ‘axis of pain and pleasure’ that seeks to counter the overdetermining focus on victimhood and pain that has prioritized studies of indentureship (as reflected in concepts like coolitude). In doing so, #Coolieween aims to ‘open up Indo-Caribbean feminist erotic selfhoods that centre resilience, joy and pleasure’. Through his deployment of paranormal imagery – for example in his creative photography of the Adramnarines – Persadie expands our understanding of indentureship as a dense and complex field of queer and erotic relationalities (that are not necessarily identitarian). In fact, he claims that the purpose of his critical work is to ‘arrive at an erotics of post-indenture that constitutes a critical archive of racial-sexual difference’. In centering joy and pleasure as a critical and ‘decolonial’ practice, Persadie claims that ‘queer Indo-Caribbean life labours to undo the archive of trauma’ – an ‘essentialism’ that is often reinforced by studies of indentureship.

Next, Jordache Ellapen’s photo essay, ‘Brown femininities and the queer erotics of indentureship’, makes visible queer Indo-South African embodiments and desires through creative curatorial experimentation. Ellapen builds on his previous creative works (some of which are included in this photo essay), which foreground the turn to queer aesthetics as a mode of thinking about queer sensualities, affects, intimacies and memories (see Minai’s discussion, this volume), bringing (queer and queerly interracial) sex, desire and intimacy ‘out of [the] closet’ of the officialized archives of indentureship and South African nationalism. Ellapen’s creative treatments and assemblage of images, such as studio portraits, selfies, colonial postcards, family photos and
Indian ‘pass’ documents, aim to ‘create a haunting effect that captures the stickiness of bodies, histories, memories, desires, and pleasures . . . [as] black–brown–white racialized bodies touch and bleed into each other . . .’. Focusing on his mother’s studio photos and their grounding of the ‘maternal feminine’ in conjunction with his own queer desire for ‘beauty and creativity as a practice of living’, Ellapen offers the erotic as a domain that productively ruptures the hetero-coloniality of kinship and radically broadens the possibilities for queering brown intimacies.

Continuing the focus on the queer afterlife of indentureship, ‘Queer Coolie-tudes: “A living archive, an oblique poetics” – A conversation with filmmaker and lecturer, Dr. Michelle Mohabeer’, especially focuses on her creative essay documentary *Queer Coolie-tudes* (2019). Mohabeer first discusses her ground-breaking film *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* (1992) – one of the earliest attempts at queering indentureship and Caribbean nationalism, through its focus on lesbian and queer Indo-Caribbean desire – as a prelude to the critical explorations of *Queer Coolie-tudes*. In placing the slurs – ‘queer’ and ‘coolie’ – into proximity and conversation, as a way of reclaiming them, Mohabeer expands the contours of what it means to queer indentureship by ‘visualizing an Indo-Caribbean diasporic aesthetic’. This methodology foregrounds ‘fragments, bits, memories, performances, enactments, imaginings and imaginaries’, to ground the filmmaker’s concept of ‘queer coolie-tudes – with an e’ (distinct from Khal Torabully’s concept of ‘coolitude’) as an ‘oblique politics and poetics of being queer and coolie’. Mohabeer discusses the importance of opacity (as a mode of reclamation) and a broadened conception of creole-ness (through a discussion of dougla aesthetics) in her critical reimagining of ‘a living archive of the queer coolie’ – a move, she claims, that has critical import for decolonizing studies of indentureship and queer studies. The filmmaker also discusses the production contexts and the politics of the circulation of the film, which has implications when considering how institutional structures condition the im/possibilities of seeing and witnessing the ‘fluid aesthetics’ of *Queer Coolie-tudes*. 
Keith McNeal’s review of Andil Gosine’s *Nature’s Wild: Love, Sex, and Law in the Caribbean* (2021, Duke University Press) demonstrates how the scholar-artist reckons with and critically engages the enduring coloniality of the human–animal binary as a key structuring referent of queer (Indo-)Caribbean experience and self-formation. For McNeal, Gosine’s analyses of the queer intersections of race, gender, sexuality and citizenship across the chapters advocate for refusing respectability politics and instead ‘embracing animality as a necessary refusal of continuing interpellation by the dominant colonial-modern shitstem’. While McNeal questions this ‘embrace’, he praises the book as a ‘compellingly-written intervention’ for ‘queering the postcolonial and decolonizing the queer’.

Finally, Amilcar Sanatan’s poems, *Coolie belle, Mitera* and *Festival light*, together engage with the gendered intersections of desire, intimacy and pleasure, complicating and queering the temporalities of subjection and subject formation despite indentureship’s violating legacies. Sanatan reveals the difficult and indispensable tensions with which queer Indo-Caribbean world-making would need to contend.

While the contributions in this volume critically intervene in studies of indentureship and its legacies, to expand on indentureship’s queer archive, it is also important to consider the implications of these foregoing analyses for critically engaging the field of queer studies. Beyond making queer bodies visible, might Persard’s queer genealogy of the *nachaniya* dancer and her discussion of Indian culture as dragging gender and sexual non-normativity reveal the limits of thinking queerly? If so, might we recognize the figure of the coolie as always-already queer (beyond gender and sexuality), i.e., a non-normative figure birthed within the violent subjection of imperial racial capitalism? How does the aesthetic turn to brown queer beauty and intimacy in Minai’s analysis of Ellapen’s work and in his own creative intervention prompt further questions about the enduring coloniality of queer and critical sexuality studies, whereby brown queer bodies are rendered impossible or monstrous? What are the
implications of the authors’ discussions and questions about beauty and pleasure for critically rethinking indentured subjects as queer labouring bodies and labouring queerly? Does Persadie’s focus on the aesthetics of ‘tantyness’ and erotic selfhood provide us with a broader conceptual understanding of transgressiveness – one that is too transgressive to be properly queer? Might Mohabeer’s queer re-conceptualization of ‘coolitude’ not only be critically responding to the heteropatriarchy and modes of knowing that govern mainstream studies of indentureship, but also to hegemonic colonial protocols governing the study of indentureship within mainstream Caribbean studies and queer studies? Furthermore, if much of the critical scholarship that marks the queer turn in studies of indentureship is being produced by queer scholars located in the Indo-indentured diaspora (primarily located in the North American academy), what do scholars working on Indian indentureship in the postcolonial Global South have to say about indentureship’s queer archive? How might they inflect and refract this emerging critical conversation in ways that might broaden and further complicate the queering of indentureship as a global project of intimate and vibrant exchange?

Amar Wahab
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NOTES

1 See, for example, Sinnapah Mary n.d.; Maharaj n.d.; Gosine 2021; Ghisyawan and Kumar 2020; Persadie 2020; Persard 2020; Mohabeer 2019; Mohabir, 2019; Wahab 2019; Cummings and Mohabir 2018; Ellapen 2018, 2017; Mohabir, N. 2017; Ramlochan 2017; Ghisyawan 2016; Khan 2016; Nixon 2016; Pragg 2012; Kempadoo 2009; Atluri 2009, 2001; Lokaisingh-Meighoo 2000; Kanhai 1999; Niranjana 1999; and Mohabeer 1994. It is important to acknowledge, genealogically speaking, that these scholars not only build on scholarship in queer studies, queer of colour studies and studies of queer diaspora, but also on their intersections with anti-racist, postcolonial and transnational feminist thought. It is yet to be seen how scholars
working on indentureship and its legacies will critically engage the emerging conversations within the field of critical trans* studies.

2 The umbrella term ‘queer’ is used here to denote all registrations of gender and sexual non-normativity, including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, genderqueer and genderfluid identities and collectivities. It is also important to acknowledge that these categories are not always substantiated in the same ways as they are in the Global North.

3 The concept of ‘afterlife’ was originally coined by Saidiya Hartman (2008a) in the context of trans-Atlantic slavery and its violent aftermath.

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