Krishna kee bansi bhajay
Body politics in the Indo-Jamaican folk performance of Nachania

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ABSTRACT

Nachania (नचंनिया), translated as ‘female dancer’, refers to both a traditional Indo-Jamaican folk dance that has local origins in indentureship, and to those who perform it. The dance is characterized by flamboyant flailing hands, counterbalanced by acrobatic feats and yogic moments synchronous with beat drops. Its unbound choreography salvages important religio-cultural and historical narratives through ecstatic paroxysmal dance often with sexual overtones. This performance is important in ritualized and celebratory spaces to entertain crowds. While performing, Nachanias would have money launched at them, and they would sometimes engage men in dance. The performers were, and still are, frequently men who assume a different gendered role garbed in conscious ‘feminizing’ technologies such as make-up, jewellery and a frock. Especially during indentureship and the period immediately after, it was ‘vulgar’ for women to dance publicly or perform at religious ceremonies. Early women Nachanias were read as tainted spectacles, some of whom the archives record as professional ‘entertainers’. Inspired by the author’s curiosity, Indo-Jamaican identity, observations of Nachania and discourses with Ghanesh Maragh (one of the few contemporary performers of this artform), this article casts Indo-Jamaicans into the unbound erotic gendered tradition of Jamaica and indentureship by (a) tracing the (inter)religious, gendered, and historical anatomy of the lauded folk performance from the period of indentureship to the present in Jamaica and the Indo-Jamaican diaspora; (b) exploring themes of bidesia; and (c) examining possible problems with situating Nachania within categories of queer.

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‘Jamaica Pardes Chale’ Hindi

राम लाल ज़माने वाले
Rām lāl zamāne wāle
माता-पिता के कथा सुनाए
Mātā-pitā ke kathā sunāe
अब बैकुण्ठ चले
Ab baikunṭ chale
ताज मुलुक के तुम परवर
Taj muluk ke tum ṛ pariwār
जमैका परदेस चले
Jamaica pardes chale
राए-बरेली कोई चर्चा सुनाए
paisa pharat
Rāe-Barailī koi charchā sunāe
पैसा फरत पेड़ के डार
Paisā pharat peṛ ke ḍār
जमैका परदेस चले
Jamaica pardes chale
भला बुरा सब सजाए दहोमी
Bhalā burā sab sajāe dahomī
कोई कोई बदले है नाम
Koi koi badle hai naam
ते खाना परदेस चले
Te khānā parades chale
पाँच बरस लौटइ के बइरी
Pānch baras lautai ke bairī
जाता रजित फसाई
Jātā rījāt phasāī
बहुत नौकारी बेस
Bahut naukārī base.

Simplified translation

Rama’s children of the earth,
The story [katha] of your parents is being related,
Of how they went to heaven.
You left your family in the motherland,
To go to the foreign land of Jamaica
In the villages they heard rumours,
That money grows on trees there.
In order to go to the foreign land of Jamaica,
Good and bad all gathered on the ship,
Some changing their names and addresses,
All headed for the Promised Land.
On finishing a contract after five years,
They all inter-mixed – refusing caste.

They came to work and live, calling [Jamaica] their own.

Full translation

The people from the world of Lord Ram.

Listen to the story of your mother and father

You came to heaven

Your family came from the motherland (India) to the foreign country of Jamaica.

Your family came from the Yamuna River to the foreign country of Jamaica

In Raebareli (city in Uttar Pradesh), someone heard a rumour,

Joy and money was (apparently) abound,

And so they came to Jamaica.

Your family came from the motherland (India) to the foreign country of Jamaica

Your family came from the Yamuna River to the foreign country of Jamaica

Your family stayed together well

Whether some people have changed or not,

See that we have come to a foreign land

Your family came from the motherland (India) to the foreign country of Jamaica

Today we are happy,

But the sadness of the past returns
For nights they would search for happiness/success,
But were stripped away from their heritage.
Your family came from the motherland (India) to the foreign country of Jamaica

The above Indo-Jamaican folk song, ‘Jamaica Pardes Chale’, ¹ was featured on the album A Tribute to Indo-Jamaican Folk Music on Jamaica’s 50th Anniversary of Independence. It positions indentureship in an emotional economy, foregrounding the Indian indenturers’ psychic experience in the intercourse of British imperialism and Jamaica’s history. The descendants of those taken to Jamaica devised this narrative in a katha – a form usually reserved for educative religious narratives. Through theological frameworks, this narrative form expresses ‘the joys and torments of life portrayed through characterization of the virtuous against evil, giving an understanding of the ideals of living and the philosophy of life cycles’.² This article extends such a reading of indenturers, zooming in on their regards as subjects rather than objects of the colonial project. In this article, I use the Indo-Jamaican folk performance of Nachania, or ‘frock dance’ as it is sometimes referred to, as an entry point into understanding the system of indentureship. There is the hesitancy, however, to write pleasure into moments which are remembered with acrimony and situated in an oppressive political economy. Those moments of heightened nostalgia nonetheless can produce emotive cultural processing and allow for a connection across geographies by impregnating localities with spectral familiarities through the performing arts.³ In what was often a non-literate cultural group, dance and music are key subjective sources to discern the personal relationship of indenturers (and affected non-indenturers) to indentureship. Acknowledging that indentureship required a contractual leasing of the body to conform to servicing colonial greed, I still affirm its possibilities of pleasure and recognize its
use for citing, quoting and retrieving sensual data beyond written prosaic limitations. Through careful examinations of Nachania, I trace the (inter)religious, gendered, sexual and historical anatomy of the lauded folk performance from indenturers to the descendants of communities affected by indentureship.

Nachania (नचंनिया), translated as ‘female dancer’, refers to both a traditional Indo-Jamaican folk dance that has local origins in indentureship, and to those who perform it. Dancers are in most cases men, decked out in several ‘feminizing’ technologies. The dance is characterized by flamboyant flailing hands, counterbalanced by acrobatic feats and yogic moments synchronous with beat drops. Its unbound choreography salvages important religious-cultural and historical narratives through ecstatic paroxysmal dance, with blatant gendered, and often sexual, overtones. It requires synchronicity of tiptoed movements with the arms, hands, fingers, neck and waist. This performance is important in ritualized and celebratory Indian and Hindu spaces to entertain crowds and to carry out different rites, with one of the more important settings being weddings, as the performers are the principal entertainers during the baraat ceremony. Audiences of nachanias often launch or offer money to them as support and encouragement, and are often very active participants in several segments of performances.

In addition to its presence in Jamaica, the dance journeyed to other colonies that were part of the indentureship scheme. It also remained and continued developing in parts of India from which indenturers were taken. In some spaces, the dance evolved to meet newer expectations, while in others, it is no longer part of a collective ‘Indian’ culture. I briefly work through Suriname, Fiji and India, where the dance is still performed and referred to by different but related names, in conversation with the Jamaican Nachania to expose a wistful understanding of the imperial project. In Suriname, another Caribbean country, it is called londa ke naach, in Fiji, descendants refer to it as lahanga naach,
and in India there is the debate of what to name it, whether naach, launda naach or bidesiya. In each space, the dance and performers have also evolved and conformed to different cultural and social desires. Before turning to its production in each location, I will briefly outline its performance in India before the rupture caused by indentureship.

The cultural genesis of Nachania survives mostly in varied and sometimes conflicting oral histories. In one of the more popular historical tracings, the art form’s emergence is attributed to a mimicry by poorer Indians of a similar performance by women dancers. Jainendra Kumar Dost, founding director of the Bhikhari Thakur Repertory Training and Research Centre, and artist and researcher of the naach tradition, posits that:

In the Indian cultural context, tawayafs (courtesans) have held a significant importance in palaces and mansions of the kings and lords of the Mughal era. It is believed that the period of Baiji Naach arrived after the tawayafs. Landlords and moneylenders were the main organizers of Baiji Naach during special occasions such as marriage ceremonies and festivals. While this catered to the higher strata of society, in the villages, among the lower and middle sections, Naach performed by men was popular. It is believed that the term launda (male performer) was used to differentiate it from baiji (female performer).

Laundas were thus cheaper replacements for a baiji. This account, however, ignores the obvious sexed replacement by acknowledging its presence and does no further development on it. In addition to the missing treatment of the sex swap, it may obfuscate any theological underpinnings. A theological uncovering may ask questions about its centrality in a ceremony that joins a man and a woman, how it may be rendering Hindu episodes from sacred writings, or even how it extends religious themes such as maya. Dost also mentions caste, and the ways in which caste politics are tied up in the (re) naming of the art form. He, however, does not
lay out the oppressed castes/communities nor explicitly relate it to any other group. Performance parallels, for example, pop up with the Nat community who share the same spatiotemporal locations as launda naach. Being a nomadic community from north India, ‘they [Nats] are acrobats and they were traditionally patronized by the Rajput rulers. Nats were especially invited by the Jagirdars for celebrations related to childbirth, marriage and on other special occasions’. The question of who the earliest laundas are, outside of marginalized male dancers of Indian society, is not made clear by any of the histories.

An accurate nascency of Nachania, however, is not the objective of this article, mostly because of the limited sources, but also due to the considerations related to indentureship. First, performers create, borrow, discard and reintroduce all the time. This interplay refuses a linear tracking as absolute and maybe even impossible for something so stretched across time. One of the key methods of transmitting this tradition was through visual mentorship, so with the death of teachers, several things become irretrievable. At that moment of death as well, other things become possible for students outside the constraints of an instructor. Important to this article, the tradition did exist in India by the start of the colonial scheming of indentureship. Several indenturers brought their Nachania costumes with them to different plantations, to entertain and instruct newer generations of crowds and dancers.

In this essay, I record Nachania through some of the erotic contexts in which it ended up, from the period of indentureship to its aftermaths. Specifically, I mine these kinetic archives using emotional, sexual and gendered contexts as excavating tools to help uncover its social history across different spaces and times. With this in mind, I first turn to the emotional economy and folk tradition of indentureship, followed by some gendered and sexual ethnographies that gave and continue to give meaning to Nachania. I then conclude by collating these specific evolutions in
a juxtaposition of pain and pleasure, in addition to thinking through them with a bifluvial reading using two separate notions of queerness.

**BIDESIA, PARDESIA**

Indentureship tore communities apart. It preyed on the victims of British economic and political operations in the subcontinent. By the end of slavery in the British West Indies, Britain ‘had already set in place a huge available labor force in India’. They had orchestrated an ‘intensification of poverty’ in different regions that led to the native inhabitants seeking other possibilities of earning an income. Throughout the life of indentureship, most of the indenturers came from the northern regions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It is worth noting that

> due to its geographical location, migration was nothing new to the Bihar–Uttar Pradesh region, and there already existed patterns of intra-regional seasonal migration in precolonial India. Colonial migration, however, was different, and it was massive and sudden for the natives [who remained in India], as well as the migrants.

This rupturing will become important in understanding the folk performance of indenturers in colonies, of those they left behind in the motherland, and the descendants of both groups.

The functioning of indentureship relied on what all scams (and some other operations in the underground economy) rely on – they must initially be understood not as transgressive but rather respecting the social and economic context in which they end up. In the case of indentureship, arkatias would often hook future indenturers by appealing to their impoverished state and often presenting a solution in line with how the future indenturers imagined the world to work. However, it was by going through the solvent system, they sometimes realized that it was transgressive to
their hopeful ideals. There were also many cases of kidnapping, especially of young girls. Kulsma Bux, who was kidnapped at 16 and taken to Jamaica, remembered how she was returning home to her village and was offered a ride from a man she believed to be a family friend. Her wailing recollection of this fateful day, at 85 years old, culminated in her statement “hamka laic halo, hamar bap bhai abahin tak hamar rasta dekhat hoihen” (Take me back, my father and my brother must still be waiting for me)’. Thus, her capture, like many others, was enacted through a capitalizing on her vulnerabilities. She also articulated her ongoing hope of return to that which she had left, over 69 years later.

What about those who knew about what was ahead and those who returned to India then afterwards re-indentured? To participate willingly in the underground suggests that its actors have performed an integrated calculation that edges them away from more formal (or accepted) methods. There were those who believed in an economic haven waiting for them by crossing the kala pani. In ‘Jamaica Pardes Chale’, for example, the folk singer characterizes the island by the rumours indenturers heard of ‘money grow[ing] on trees there’. There were also political and social reasons for wanting to indenture. After the Sepoy Mutiny or the Indian Rebellion of 1857, there was a sharp increase in those registering for indentureship, suggesting several wanting to escape political persecution in India. Some of those who returned to India and re-indentured did so for several reasons including (a) having crossed the kala pani, they were understood as ‘tainted’ and were shunned from their own communities, (b) some could not navigate their return to the villages due to illiteracy and unfamiliarity with the geography, (c) they did a shameful act in caste considerations and did not have the economic gains that could have possibly helped lift them out of this state, and (d) some of their entire villages were displaced because of indentureship and British rule. There were also those who remained in India but could not return home for the reasons
above; they remained in ‘floating communities’ – slums around ports in Calcutta.

Bidesia culture emerges in this context. It became an emergent property, distinct though not separate from the cultures that existed in India before the rise of the global labour project of indentureship. According to Brahma Prakash,

_The term bidesi can be traced back to the metaphor of death and departure in the nirgun singing of the north Indian bhakti tradition, in which bidesi refers to the person who left for the other land (i.e., death). This early metaphorical use was reframed in different ways with people migrating in great numbers in the late nineteenth century._

In the northern states where labour was extracted, bidesia stood ‘for the migrants, the culture of the migrants, a folk song genre, and a theme of folk painting’. It became ‘the affectionate form of address given to the migrants by loved ones who were left behind in the homeland, and so lends its name to the new folk culture that emerged out of this migration’. A simple translation of these words as foreign, or any of its lexemic derivatives, does not accurately capture the emotional baggage these words carry. This language echoes the earlier metaphor of death and its accompanying pain. Moreover, referring to migrants ‘as bidesia, pardesi, [pardesi jan], batohi, and other terms [evoked] elements of both affection and complaint for leaving loved ones behind’. Their destinations – pardes (foreign land) – also had the connotation of strange or something that was hard to understand.

This culture was articulated in the different colonies in several forms including nautanki, dramas, dance and folk music. It became a method of capturing and recording the affects and ruptures caused by indentureship. In Jamaica, for example, the themes of bidesia and pardesia are the central focus of several Indo-Jamaican songs. These songs also served purposes beyond documentation, they supported a ‘morally and psychologically
broken emotional community’. Specific to this article, Nachania was an important part of this emergent culture to record and transmit these fractured memories. Prakash best summarizes this emotional environment and emergent culture:

Against this background, bidesiya as a performance emerged as a transformative and vital reconciliatory force to endure hardship and provide a shared utopian space to rebuild the community in affective terms. Echoes of migration and displacement found their expression in the existing song culture. The idealized devotional love songs of the bhakti period were replaced by day-to-day love in viraha or songs of love in separation. The mythical deities – Radha-Krishna – were replaced by the more human characters of Bidesi and Sundari, or the newly married couple who had to migrate soon. Krishna himself was transformed into a bidesi (migrant) and Radha into a left-behind virahini (the person who is longing in separation) who yearns for the return of her beloved … Bidesiya, although it was the performance of an emotionally and psychologically broken community, never downplayed the political economy of the colonial migration. Infused with grief, a virahini sings ‘Reliya Na Bairee’ (Neither the Train Is Our Enemy), a popular bidesiya song from Bihar:

Neither the train is our enemy, nor is the ship our enemy, Money is the enemy / Money is the enemy That compels our beloveds to migrate [to other lands]. (Anonymous)

In the cultural landscape of bidesiya, two geographically separated entities, the land and the displaced bodies, attempt to meet and long for each other with intense memory. The memory was less about the self and more about ‘themselves,’ the sense of collective and shared experiences that ultimately constitutes a culture. Bidesiya made this longing performative, and its performance constantly evoked some hopes and desire amid grief, and kept the community aware of its own subjectivity, materiality, agency, and potency.22

The ruptures outlined above proliferated a method of folk tradition to capture the feelings, memories and the outlooks of indenturers’ and their descendants’ longing for home (from
pardes). Home here does not privilege a physical geography, though it remains part of its construction. Instead, it recalls a moment diametric to and unsullied by the exilic nature of colonialism that oversaturated their contexts. This method also captures the diverse ways they had to make life in their new locations, and it reinforces the need to remember and practice their heritage. Moreover, adding to the socio-religious intersections mentioned earlier, Rama and specifically his exile and eventual return in the Ramayana were urgent theological commentary throughout indentureship. In the Jamaican context, for example, indenturers ritualized their experience as parallel to that of Lord Rama. They would imagine the ending of their plight in conversation with Lord Rama’s return home – heralded as the outcome of the victory of good over evil.

Beyond the Ramayanic treatment of exile and repatriation, ‘the philosophy underlying the entire Indian indenture system, ... envisaged the immigrant contract labourers as transients within the plantation system’. Though many were not able to read, and if they could they were often untrained in the language of their contracts, the notion of repatriation was often explained and promised to them before they boarded ships headed for several colonies. This made contracts seem more attractive, but also temporary for the purposes of the indenturers as well as those who were fearful of a revival of slavery and its resistances. Furthermore, ‘the Indians themselves [who willingly (?) indentured] might not have embarked on the long journey ... without its inclusion’.

On boarding these ‘Coolie ships’, Indenturers were able to carry musical instruments and dance costumes. I caution, however, that a linear reading of this would suggest uninhibited freedom. Indentureship should always be read in conversation with slavery and how it tried to imagine itself as distinct from that system of labour. Several actions were undertaken by Whites having learnt from enslaved resistances. The allowance of performance accoutrements was useful for lulling physical resistance.
For example, in the diary of Angel, the captain of a Coolie ship headed for the Caribbean, he notes:

To prevent quarrelling or plotting mischief ... the coolies were encouraged to keep themselves amused in their own fashion ... The tunes they get out of those tom-toms, to European ears, is most dreary, tuneless, and monotonous; but the natives at times work themselves up to a high pitch of excitement.  

In a similar anecdote of performance on a ship bound for Jamaica, Henry Jaghai, an Indo-Jamaican cultural organizer, and grandson to indenturers, recalls:

[His] grandmother said everyone was homesick, but the camaraderie among the jahaji-bhai and the practice of their cultural and religious activities kept them going. [His] Hindu grandparents chanted their morning and evening prayers, sang birha (lamentation songs), danced Nachania and janghia, and told kissa to their jahaji-bhai to make life more tolerable.

In both accounts, performances were useful for distilling bidesia sentimentality into admissible behaviours.

Psychological and physical abuse of those bound for plantations evoked different responses at sea. Some decided to dwell in the chaos with their fellow jahajis with bidesia culture serving as their sustenance, others found comfort in suicide. On ships, songs were often composed about the undertaking as well as the experience and expectations of those who had to endure it. Ramgeet, headed to Jamaica, composed the following song which became popular among his fellow jahajis during the voyage, and remained popular well after his arrival to the island: ‘Calcutta say chute jahjwa, Jamaica tapoo ka, choot gawa mulakwa, ham durbhagan ka (The ship sailed from Calcutta, for the island of Jamaica, left behind is the motherland of us unfortunate ones).’ On Jamaican plantations (as well as in other colonies), Nachania was regularly performed to similar pardesia/bidesia folk lyrics.
From the above discussion, the following themes become some of the constellatory concerns for the emergent bidesia culture: home, exile, rupture, longing, return, deception, grief, memory, hope and community. These themes initially frame much of the contexts in which Nachania performances were enacted. Below, I sketch much of the additional framings, namely gendered and sexual economies, that Nachania performers later encountered, in combination with the outlined bidesia themes, in order to stage some of the different ‘descendants’ of the folk performance. In the geographies that follow – India, Suriname, Fiji, and then Jamaica – I examine how the kinetic art form comparatively evolved, in order to collate and compare its simultaneous meanings in the concluding section.

INDIA

In contemporary India, the dance still retains its traditional usage in weddings and has become part of newer theatrical and political productions. Those familiar with this performance refer to it by several names. This includes launda naach, bidesiya, nachania and launda ke naach. There is, of course, debate surrounding what to call it. Each argument recognizes possible pejorative or historical baggage (and sometimes comfort) that each term can offer. According to Dost, ‘launda literally means a young male adolescent. However, in everyday life, it is considered a derogatory term, suggesting a man who is effeminate, vulgar, immature and from an inferior class or caste.’ It can also imply that a young man (or sometimes a boy) is sexually available for other men to use. The second aspect of the term – Naach – has the translation ‘dance’, but this is not a singular dance. In India, for example, it has taken on other performing arts such as acting and singing. The next designation, ‘Bidesiya’, as mentioned earlier, carries the emotional captures of mass migration caused by indentureship and British
colonialism, and later on, intra-national migration. Nachania, though equivalent to dancer, often connotes specifically a female dancer and carries with it ‘the semantic baggage of denot[ing] promiscuity or inability to restrict social movement within sanctioned spaces’. In this section I use all terms interchangeably in citations, but the title I will use to denote it is Nachania.

Nachania remained an important aspect of the baraat celebrations in northern India, both during and after indentureship. In Bhojpuri villages, less affluent families use/d informal musical groups for the baraat. These musical groups would ‘often employ a launda who may dance opposite a male dancer playing a male role’. The following ethnography helps illustrate the entertaining and ritualistic importance of the art form. In his account of launda performances in the 1980s, Edward O. Henry images the following:

The laundas’ performances range from pleasantly sensual to lewd. The launda circles and turns with gyrating pelvis, often one hand on his hip and the other behind his head. He might also lean back with his bent legs spread and arms in the air, jerk toward his leering, slightly crouched and pelvis-thrusting partner, who with hand at crotch level motions with his upraised thumb. At low-caste gatherings women sometimes cluster near or around the band and dance with other women, or rarely, male kin, in this style.

The music that accompanies the dance is often a collage of several themes and lyrics from different genres. In one of the songs from a Kahar wedding, which Henry describes as ‘appropriate for such dancing’, there exists ‘the desperate longing of the gopis for Krishna, which occurs as a refrain throughout’. The performers often depict the accompanying music through their dance expression and suggestive moves. Later in the song previously mentioned, it ‘introduces the woman declining in her lonely separation. Unexpectedly her husband is present and the scene is erotic, her engorging breasts bursting her coli. They satisfy their desire in the images of Krishna and Radha.’ I emphasize here how the
‘launda’ is tasked with the ritual enactment of themes of (sexual) desire and longing, all the while being understood as male costumed in ‘feminizing’ technologies.

The meaningful inclusion of Nachania dancers in weddings in several regions has increased the demand for performers. To fill this need, ‘laundas’ form dance groups and accept contracts for performances. These ‘dance troupes come together, [by] recruiting effeminate young “males” … keeping them on a contract as they travel …, going from one marriage to another.’ Dancers join these groups for reasons including perceived economic upliftment and freedoms of gender expression. They sometimes become part of this community by acting on promises made by recruiters that being part of the dance group, they will end up finding romantic and sexual partners. For those who form part of travelling bands of dancers, they sometimes appropriate Bollywood music for their performances and often change lyrics ‘to make them more sexually suggestive’. As laundas, they often face exploitation by the contractual parties and their audiences. They are also stigmatized, (sexually) violated, and often misrepresented in casual and formal conversations surrounding the spread of HIV, sex trafficking and erotic economies in these regions.

Laundas also collate/d several prominent folk styles other than those previously described. These include comedy, satire, pun, banter and parody. One of the Indian theatrical genres that promotes these different folk styles, and in which the dancers feature prominently, is bidesia. This intersection has allowed some to denote the dance by the genre. The theatrical form was originally named after an eponymous play by Bhikhari Thakur, and like the performances at weddings, in bidesia stage laundas borrow from caste-based songs, women’s songs, labour or devotional songs, and popular Bollywood music. In its episodic social commentary, ‘bidesiyā performance addresses the social issues of migration, poverty, caste, gender, family relationship and the ancestors’ stories of the community’ through the lens of the
northern Indian states where manual labour was continuously extracted. These performers embody and enact the affective ruptures that became initially defined by indentureship.

In the political sphere, an Indian politician, Laloo Prasad Yadav, ‘was accused of inviting all manner of riff-raff to [his political] residence especially including as a particularly scandalous example dancing boys (laundas)’. Laloo used laundas as a mechanism for signals of rustic pride in his political appeal and thus they become used as symbols to mark a familiar culture. This, however, is not unique when compared to the earlier usages. The performers in weddings and plays also signal nostalgic histories. The uncelebrated judgement in the earlier citation reveals how the dance and performers face pushback from the public, and as mentioned in the dancing troupes, laundas often attend several forms of verbal and physical violence in these different spheres.

SURINAME

Though in India, londa ke naach (sometimes spelt londa ke nache) bears the earlier mentioned sociolinguistic baggage; in the Surinamese cultural setting (both in the local and Dutch diaspora) it is the unique name of this celebrated dance. In one Surinamese genealogical tracing of the art form, londa ke naach ancestral roots are found in the Kotha dance of the Bhojpuri people. In this origin story, on Surinamese plantations nachaniyas or londas sang and performed in pairs and their act was supplemented by a comedic and bearded clown. The clown, however, fell out of favour in this style and only the nachaniya remains. A musical band always accompanies londa performers. In addition, they wear ghungroo and geometric or patterned symbols drawn on their face and body. They are prominent at weddings and during heritage showcases.

Like in other bidesia contexts, Surinamese londas, who are always ‘males’, have their own assortment of ‘feminizing’ technologies.
This includes brassieres, (bedazzled) gloves, tiaras, waist scarves and bells, necklaces, veils/scarves (dupatta), bangles, make-up (specifically face powder and eyeliner), wigs or hair extensions, patterned clothing and most importantly a (often red) frock with a vertical rain-bowed base. The gendered considerations also extend to the religious realms with the colours of the dress base representing Adi Shakti. In addition to this, before performances the musical band and the londa often ask for blessings from Mother Durga. The dance often chronicles the ritual it is serving and/or the theological narratives that are being sung. Apart from weddings, londas also feature in religious hair-cutting ceremonies. The dance is identified by its fast-paced steps and the multipurpose use of the frock, for example as for a winged appendage or for a butterfly twirling. There is also the pulsating and throbbing pelvic and backside movements, almost mimicking a caterpillar’s locomotion.

At stage shows or cultural concerts, the londa and accompanying musical band may be separated from interacting directly with the audience. However, during weddings a londa becomes more engaged and intimate. Londas lead the groom’s entourage and serve as entertainment loci for much of the ceremony. The dancer may seek and pull audience members, often men, to dance alongside. The nachaniya performs inching pelvic wave dances either facing or having their back towards the lured spectator. Sometimes, londas fall on their knees with forward movements and undulating hips. These motions are complemented with a desiring gaze of the londa. The exchange is racy, and men often offer money whether discretely or openly during and after the spirited trade. The londa sometimes instructs the dance partner and may guide them by placing the frock base on the original bystander’s hips or shoulders. At the end of this exchange, the londa may reward the ‘pupil’ with a kiss on the forehead or cheek.

In an interview with Tina, the stage name of a Surinamese londa in the Netherlands, the interviewer asks him about how fellow students react to his costuming. He reveals that he does not
openly talk about this performance to others to avoid mockery or accusations of being gay or ‘transvestite’. During the interview, he declared, however, that he had a girlfriend, so the performance should not initiate any queer claim to his sexuality. He asserts that londas must be men, since it would be inappropriate for a woman to dance with a man so openly and sexually suggestive. In his description, Tina distinguishes between two identities: the first, the londa, which possesses him while performing, and the second, his everyday being outside entertainment. I later take up this interesting distinction, which is also similarly articulated by Fijian and Jamaican performers, in the conclusion (in conversation with the bifluvial reading of queerness).

**FIJI**

In the Fijian context (locally and in the New Zealand diaspora), the designation of this dance is Lahanga Naach and the dancers are referred to as nachaniyas. The dance is always performed by a male garbed in a costume normatively associated with women. Like in the Indian and Surinamese contexts, Lahanga Naach was/is performed during marriage ceremonies as part of the entertainment. The local myths that detail the dance’s origins either locate it as an import from India, which calls for a special reverence to the form as part of the journeying of their Indo-Fijian heritage, or they situate its genesis as a local activity that transformed into a tradition during the period of indentureship. In his dissertation, which focuses on gender subversions in Indo-Fijian performances, Vicky Shandil highlights three origin stories from different performers. The first believes that Lahanga Naach is as a result of the transformation of similar performances that girmitya remembered from India. The second is closely related to remembering but it traces its genesis as a spin off from specific performance genres such as nautanki and nat. The last account of lahanga naach’s origins is also a spin off but specifically of jhangiya wala naach. In this version, men
would dance jhangiya wala naach (jhangiya means pants) while wearing ghungroo. Women, who were few on plantations, joined the men in skirts (lahanga). They were, however, constrained by domestic duties, mostly childcare, so men took over from them. The men garbed themselves in the same clothes the women would wear. The interest in these dancing men dressed in lahanga led to the art form’s expansion.

According to Shandil, Lahanga Naach and the nachaniya represents ‘the most socially recognizable and acknowledged form of gender subversion among Indo-Fijians’.

The audience understand nachaniya to be mean ‘cross-dressed’ as well as embodying a transitory gender. It, however, has a declining reputation due to its association with other socially ‘transgressive’ activities such as alcoholism, ‘homosexuality’ and erotic dressing. In the ‘traditional’ sense, nachaniya are men who are understood to be heteronormative. They are married to women, take on the position of a household head, and they take on other duties in line with how the masculine is imagined in the Fijian context. The ephemeral display of transitory opposed gendered performance is limited to the religious and ritualistic realms. The primary stage for these nachaniya is during marriage ceremonies, the groom’s procession and pachra singing and dancing. This is still the case for contemporary performers of Lahanga Naach, as weddings are still the major arena for their performance; however, they continue to expand their performance portfolios to include birthday parties, rituals, stage shows, beauty contests, child births, talent shows, familial functions, Ramlila and nautanki. Contemporary artistes also overtly include more ‘effeminate’ men and those with ‘blurred sexualities’ who use the ritual to validate and enact their femininity.

Using these distinctions, Shandil constructs a typology to illustrate the types of nachaniyas using three descriptive points. The first site imagines gender as a possessive quality only while performing. In this case, men wear the lahanga and frock for
performance only. Outside this depiction, they return to patriarchal roles. Interestingly, according to Shandil’s grouping, the men can also be ‘effeminate’ so long as they fulfill ‘masculine’ duties outside the dance. The second grouping differs from the first by the more explicit partial fulfilment of heteronormative expectations. They are still the primary income earners in their families, though this typing is usually non-nuclear units. These nachaniya have more gender-fluid identities and they refuse husband or fathering roles, and they often wear gender neutral clothes outside of performances. The last point includes all nachaniya who wear feminine attire daily both on and off stage. Regardless of where they would fall on this typology today, they may be subjected to verbal abuse with ‘references to being liminal, homosexual or androgynous’. With regards to their stage names, they appropriate aliases from films, Indian women, anglophone women or events that have significant meaning to them.

As part of their costumes, the dancers are decked out in makeup, a tiara, bangles and a hip scarf to enhance the image of rotating hips. The most important piece of garb, however, is the lahanga choli. There is particular care in getting the frock made to fit kinetic expectations. The lahanga should be able to flair outwards when the nachaniya twirls in continuous circles, and it should be able to keep up with the rapid and switching movements. The nachaniya may also pray to Natraj, the Lord of the Dance, before putting on their clothing. Sometimes, dancers may burn camphor in their palms as part of their aesthetic. The spectators often gift money to performers as they dance. More recently, nachaniyas began sitting on spectators’ laps and throwing the lahanga over men’s heads until they gifted the dancer with money. Traditionally, nachaniyas danced to lokgeet (folk music) as part of musical bands. They could choose to sing as part of their performance. More contemporary nachaniyas perform to the same songs but, increasingly, some are ousting lokgeet for Indian film music. Others disagree with this style and complain that this
replacement makes the style different from Lahanga Naach. The dance also sees newer inspiration from Indian films, but it still draws heavily from traditional Indo-Fijian dances.

The religious dimensions of Lahanga Naach mostly flow from its gendered and sexual negotiations. Families usually welcome nachaniyas into their home with aarti, believing that dancers are incarnates of Hindu goddesses. Some performers prepare for Lahanga Naach with forms of fasting and abstinence. At weddings where pachra devotional songs are sung, nachaniyas must maintain absolute purity, otherwise there will be spiritual and physical consequences.49 The nachaniya should also be ‘gender liminal males’ and in ritual are ‘standing between and betwixt the natural and supernatural world’.50 For the pachra dancing, they dress to emulate Hindu goddesses and may show suffering as a path to attaining a spiritual connection. Like in the Surinamese and Indian contexts, the religious union with nachaniya intersects at the gendered and sexual negotiations of the performance/performers.

JAMAICA

The local gendered and sexualized frameworks that were/are used to characterize ‘East Indians’ in Jamaica, and later Indo-Jamaicans, are crucial for understanding Nachania as an Indo-Jamaican folk dance. These gendered and sexualized locations, whether attributed or performed, confabulated with the earlier mentioned bidesia longing and cultural productions, become structures that make Nachania legible to different Jamaican (including Indo-Jamaicans) audiences in different spatiotemporal settings. Earlier works have focused on polyandry, so-called miscegenation, and intercaste and interreligious partnering.51 I mention these, but I mostly attend to how gendered and sexed bodies were engineered and reimagined in these contexts.

In the post-emancipation period, Jamaican gendered citizenship becomes a contested site. In the case of Afro-Jamaican (males),
their citizenship, as a condition of their newly bestowed freedom, not only became fluent through an adjacency to White heteronormativity, but it was also positioned against ‘East Indians’. Specifically, not only was there guidance on what was allowed (enactment of White masculinities and heteronormativity), but this allowance was conditional on what could not be allowed, using ‘heathen’ Indian indenturers as prohibitive loci:

In the struggle to become free citizens, black men narrated their own qualifications as free British subjects not only through the marking of differences between men and women, but also through explicit differentiations between the status of native and foreign, free and indentured, Christian and heathen, Negro and Coolie. They resorted to a Christian and nativist discourse of manhood to insert themselves into British political discourses that emphasized a kind of active masculine citizenship. In laying claim to Christian citizenship, freedom came to be constituted not only through a subordination of women, but also through an equally problematic nationalistic exclusion of foreigners and ‘heathens’.

The Baptist Church in Jamaica was pivotal in circulating, intensifying and legitimating this construction of local Black masculine citizenship. Rooted in its anxieties concerning the moral corruption of the ‘native Negro’ by the introduction of Indians to the island, it positioned the indenturers as non-normative sirens.

At this turning point, the construction of gendered citizenship not only shifts for the Afro-Jamaican population, but Indian femininity also likewise becomes contestably understood through the indentureship project and within the plantation economy. Brinda Mehta maintains, ‘Hindu women, who represented a significant minority, had the most to gain by crossing over to different lands because of their confinement within Hindu patriarchal structures in India [that] made them victims of abusive family and communal traditions’. The dissolution of marginalizing social expectations with the crossing of the kala pani, according to Mehta, ‘offered
the potential for renegotiations of gendered identity within the structural dissolutions of caste, class and religion that occurred during the transatlantic displacements’. Brij Lal similarly reimagines possibilities of Indian women arguing that on plantations, ‘traditional notions of proper relations between men and women were re-negotiated, as they had to be, as women worked alongside men in the fields and assumed other responsibilities they would not have countenanced in India’. Thus the earlier mentioned ruptures also initiate newer kinds of Indian femininity and feminine experiences.

Though femininity takes on newer forms for the ‘Coolie’ woman on plantations, there continued to be cases of vigilante policing of Indian women’s gendered expectation and enactments before departure, on board ships and on arrival to the colonies. Besides this, they also encountered clashes with the newer male-dominated structures that sought to define them. Indian womanhood thus becomes embedded into a different patriarchal structure which often spoke for them and normatively allowed different gendered enactments (so long as it was non-disruptive to plantation efficiency), while still encountering Indian men who maintained expectations of systemic marginalization of women through native systems.

Indentured women were less desirable for labour since ‘planters did not regard Indian women as capable agricultural workers. They believed that Indian men worked more efficiently and productively.’ Even ‘when efforts were being made to increase the numbers of women shipped, planters objected to being obliged to pay to import women who they claimed were “not as good” as male agricultural workers’. This gendered distribution is often read as a catalyst for Indian women gaining greater possibility to choose their partners. This new notion of liberty is equally understood as the spawning of ‘irregular unions’, with some Indian women having multiple partners and others refusing to be tied down by marriages. In response, Indian men sometimes reacted with
violence (too often fatal), with the infamous maiming of their victims with cutlasses – dismembering limbs, as well as sensory organs like the earlobes, eyes, nose and tongue. Around the same time, there were also circulating ideas that marked Indian women with sex work on the island. This narrative was usually tied to the gendered distribution mentioned earlier in two different, but related, ways: (1) the women, having greater freedom, used their new autonomy to earn through ‘prostitution’ after being ‘constantly tempted into “abnormal” sexual behaviour by single men with money’\textsuperscript{58} and (2) the small pool of women being introduced were not of ‘good class’. Both framings of indentured women were embraced for attacks on indentureship, and more importantly for carving out clear examples of the prohibitive loci mentioned earlier.

This sexualized judgement, which becomes fastened to the Indian woman, introduces questions about different ubiquitous fetishizations ascribed to them on the island. I am especially interested in how this narrative collates the Indian with the idea of ‘\textit{white liver}’ in Jamaica. The folk knowledge of white liver may be extracted from the exchange between Vybz Kartel and Gaza Indu, dancehall artistes, in their 2010 song ‘Virginity’.\textsuperscript{59} Vybz Kartel, after boasting of taking Gaza Indu’s ‘virginity’, mentions ‘now yuh wah buddy every single second’ and she responds, ‘mi have white liva cah mi a Indian’. In other words, an explanation of her newly unlocked insatiable sexual appetite is corroborated by her Indian roots. Another location where one finds similar mentions of white liver is in the Southern US Black practice of hoodoo. Harry Kerr describes this ‘black folk concept’ of white liver as follows:

\textit{An aspect of hoodoo and an example of the workings and framework of the hoodoo system is the cultural phenomenon called ‘white liver’. Black patients occasionally note that a particular individual with a wasting disorder may have ‘white liver’ or may have been ‘white-livered’. This refers to their belief that the afflicted person has fallen under the spell of someone whose sexual appetites are killing him or her by draining away their vitality.}\textsuperscript{60}
In this context,

_A person with white liver may be either male or female. It may be passed through the generations or from one person to another ... A person with white liver is regarded as ‘strong’ and having a ‘high nature’. Sexual encounters with such strength lead inevitably to the development of weakness, wasting away and eventual death of sexual partners._61

Those who believe they have been afflicted by white liver may consult a local ‘conjure man’. In addition,

_When one has white liver and is ‘strong’ he or she can never get enough sex. The strong individual casts a spell on the weaker one. The spell cannot be wished away or resisted by avoiding the person who cast the spell. Those who are whitelivered cannot discard their role._62

The presence of the white liver in the US hoodoo context, though having some difference, leads to speculative imaginings of inter-racial and interreligious encounters in Jamaica between Indians and Obeah. Was white liver an Obeah framework used in Jamaica to crystallize the folk understanding of the colonial outlook on Indian women’s gendered and sexualized performances (real and imagined)?

To play with this relationship some more, I look at the following two encounters across time. Contemporary Indo-Jamaicans who practise vestiges of Hinduism perform pujas but warn ‘that if [they are] done incorrectly, the puja will “tun back pon yuh,” vocabulary borrowed from the Afro-Jamaican system of Obeah’._63

Here, Hindu ritual, for some Indo-Jamaicans, has become understood through the lens of Obeah. Similarly, the following anecdote demonstrates a use of Ayurveda in the Afro-Jamaican context to enact an Obeah ritual. In her account of Obeah in Jamaica in her book _Tell My Horse_, originally published in 1938, African American anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston hints at a sexualized relationship between Indo-Jamaicans and the system of Obeah in her
chapter entitled ‘Curry Goat’. In it, Hurston described a sexual ritual performed by an Obeah specialist who ‘prepares young girls for love’. On the last day of the specialist’s preparatory work (on the day of the wedding), she gives a balm bath to the soon-to-be-wed woman then bathes her again in soapy water. After both baths, the specialist

massages the girl from head to foot with this fragrant unction [khus khus]. The toes, the fingers, the thighs, and there is a special motional treatment for every part of the body. It seems to [Hurston] the breasts alone were ignored. But when the body massage is over, [the Obeah specialist] returns to the breasts. These are bathed several times in warm water in which something special had been steeped. After that they are massaged ever so lightly with the very tips of the fingers dipped in khus khus. This fingertip motion is circular and moves ever towards the nipple. Arriving there, it begins over and over again. Finally the breasts are cupped and the nipples flicked with a warm feather back and forth, back and forth until there was a reaction to stimulation. The breasts stiffened and pouted, while the rest of the body relaxed.

After this erotic stimulation,

[The specialist] carries this same light-fingered manipulation down the body and the girl swoons. She is revived by a mere sip of rum in which a single leaf of ganga has been steeped. Ganga is that ‘wisdom weed’ which has been brought from the banks of the sacred Ganges to Jamaica. The girl revives and the massage continues. She swoons again and is revived. But she is not aware of the work-a-day world. She is in a twilight state of awareness, cushioned on a cloud of love thoughts.

Though the specialist and the soon-to-be-wed are both Afro-Jamaicans, the Indian becomes perceptible in the etymological and public acknowledgement of the origins of the herbs. Khus khus, from the Hindi cuscus and ganja (also from Hindi) were both used in Ayurvedic medicine by Indian indenturers and their descendants. What then might have been the relationship of Indian and African
folk medicines, and how were the two conflated in/by erotic spiritualities? Moreover, there is an obvious acknowledgement that recognizes a Gangetic origin of the ‘wisdom weed’. The sexualized relationship between the two systems will need more sources and further close readings of those available.

The above outlined contexts (gendered and sexual negotiations, and bidesiya) construct varied meanings of Nachania that I examine below. Before tending to the dance, which was mostly reserved for wedding performances, I touch on the disciplining of Indian love in the marriage context by the law. In the British West Indian colonies with indenturers, ‘Marriages performed by Hindu and Muslim priests were not recognized and after the Husband’s death, the widow was declared a mistress and the children considered bastards’.68 Though illegitimate before the law, several Indians still performed Hindu and Muslim weddings. These weddings were often performed at night, in keeping with their own (Hindu) customs, but also to prevent conflicts with plantation demands.69 Some also decided to have two weddings, sometimes separately, other times sandwiching the Hindu or Muslim rituals around a Christian ceremony. Others had a single wedding formalized by Christian priests with heavy elements of Hindu/Muslim wedding rituals.

It may be in one of these interreligious weddings, during what seems to be the baraat procession, that we first get an archival glimpse of one of the earliest recorded Nachania performances in Jamaica:

On the 10th of May, 1893, occurred the first marriage ever performed in Amity Hall Chapel. The contracting parties were Karrathtie, a native of India, and Julia Williams, a Jamaican born Coolie. … yet it was an occasion of thanksgiving on our part that the people of India should in this land be united in marriage in the proper way, when they have the example on every hand of both Coolies and Creoles living together in sin; and are without the light of the Gospel to guide them into ways of purity and right.

He [the bridegroom] felt that all eyes were upon him; his long coat, boots, and white gloves were a new style of raiment to him, and seemed very
strange; … The bride was dressed very simply in white muslin, with the bridal veil but no jewelry, which seemed strange, as the Coolie women usually wear so much of it.

While we were eating [sic] a company of Coolie musicians with their rude instruments formed a circle in front of the door, and a dancing man dressed in native costume of scarlet began dancing. He glided around very gracefully, keeping time with his hands as well as his feet, all the while chanting something that seemed to be addressed to those inside. Soon a woman in the house began to dance and answer back something which of course we could not understand.\textsuperscript{70}

This dancer might have been a nachania, given his participation in the wedding ceremony as well as him wearing a scarlet costume. Note that in this account the colonial scorn of Indian culture and religion reiterates the earlier ecclesial anxieties of the ‘heathens’ and their moral corruption.

During this period of indentureship and early post-indenture-ship, nachanias also performed at yajnas, pujas, kathas and several forms of plantation bidesia entertainment.\textsuperscript{71} These performances were remembered fondly by those who witnessed and experienced them,

\begin{quote}
The eyes of old folks still shine when they think of thrilling Nachania dancers Rahim Bux, Jaipal, and the two sisters, Ajiban and Najiban who were professional ‘entertainers’ and migrated here in 1916. Jaipal was known for his stamina, as he would dance all night without any sign of fatigue.\textsuperscript{72}
\end{quote}

Here, ‘professional entertainers’ used to describe the two sisters presents as an oral archival euphemism that announces the previously mentioned sex work narratives. Especially during indentureship and the period immediately after, it was ‘vulgar’ for women to dance publicly or perform at religious ceremonies. Though most plantation dancers were men, in Jamaica specifically, women were also nachanias. Early women nachanias were read as tainted and may have been understood in relation to circulating
chatter about Indian women’s involvement in prostitution. Indian men often understood these early nachania women as sullied because of their apparent availability to being touched by other men and having money given to them for performance. Curiously, women nachania have not been recorded as being part of wedding entertainments during this period, though their absence in the
The sparse record of them indicates that their performance was for sexualized/bidesia entertainment. Women were often excluded from being part of religious ceremonies (due to menstrual taboos) and the wedding may have been another religious arena of exclusion. A clear difference in Jamaica from the other social geographies, however, includes women under this umbrella of performers.

Women’s costumes in Jamaica included a lahanga, choli and a dupatta with head, neck and ear ornaments as well as ghungroos. The male costume – like their Surinamese, Fijian and Indian counterparts – is a combination of different ‘feminizing’ technologies, the most obvious being the red and often florally or geometrically patterned ‘dancing frock’ (see Figure 1). The frock may also be beaded, embellished with shiny material, striping and/or frills. In a discussion with Ghanesh Maragh, a contemporary Indo-Jamaican nachania, he mentioned how heavy this garb was, estimating his own costume to weigh about twenty pounds. The main purpose of this heaviness is to ensure a better flow of the dress outwards while the dancer whirls. In rarer cases, men may wear women’s necklaces, a dupatta and sometimes a tiara. Their costumes also include a cloth (often a different or contrasting colour to emphasize its presence) wrapped around their waists that sometimes drags on the ground or close to it, a piece of fabric tied on their head with an open top and dropping, swallowtail endings, ghungroo, earrings and head jewellery. They are also often barefoot. Any kind of make-up used seems to be limited to eyeliner, though most go without. Several performers actively tried to present as less ‘feminine’ for fear of accusations of ‘homosexuality’. There were instances when these accusations were only dampened when a male nachania got into a relationship or was married. Audiences also recognized the ‘feminine’ quality of the costume but often recorded it as cultural carry over, since this was usually how it was marketed.
The songs that nachanias perform to often place Lord Rama or Lord Krishna at their centre, with the dance style sometimes reflecting the lyrical accompaniment, but they may also choose to perform to some songs considered Indo-Jamaican folk music or bhajans. They would not, however, perform to chutney music, which they recognize as Indo-Caribbean but not appropriate for their performances. They may sing and dance and in some cases even translate while performing for the audience. In addition to yogic techniques such as matsyasana (fish pose) and shirshasana (head stand), they may do somersaults, and there is a flexible technique by Cheenee, one of the oldest Indo-Jamaican nachanias still alive, where he bends backwards and reaches the money offered to him on a handkerchief to collect it with his mouth while in a contorted position. All these postures are expected to be supported by the costume.

In Jamaica, the frock may be passed down from older generations of performers to newer dancers, along with corresponding techniques. One of the more famous trainers of this art form was Johnny Mykoo, now deceased, who was also a singer and folk music composer. He was born in Jamaica but moved to the United Kingdom in 1964. However, while there, he had a dream from a sadhu that instructed him to return to Jamaica to develop the Indian culture on the island. He returned home and from there, formed the Raja Sarangi band, which inducted many dancers (men and women) into the Nachania tradition (in addition to other Indian dance styles). Indo-Jamaican nachanias have performed both locally and internationally. On the local level, they performed at the aforementioned religious events but also at cultural stage shows such as Indian Arrival Day celebrations and Grand Gala, a national celebration of Jamaica’s independence and emancipation heritage, as well as for the Governor General of Jamaica and the Indian High Commissioner to Jamaica. On the international scale, they have performed in diasporic locations such as in the US, UK and Canada; they also have performed
at Indo-Caribbean cultural events in these spaces as well as in Trinidad, Guyana and Suriname.

**CONCLUSION**

Nachania performances, and performers, have meant different things to, and for, different people across different spaces and at different times. In each of the above locations, India, Suriname, Fiji and Jamaica, I have laid out distinct aspects in the performance’s evolutionary trajectory, namely its designations, narrated origins, bidesia captures, several gendered/sexualized negotiations and religious/theological intersections. This approach has proven useful in working outside nationalist reconstructions of the dance, while also demonstrating certain intricacies of specific social histories that comparative works often flatten. Performers locate their origins similarly but emphasize different moments in their historical anatomies. This reveals cardinal bearings for how descendants put themselves in conversation with indentureship ruptures. The dance and dancers become older tools for a newer project – for citing, quoting and retrieving sensual data beyond the limitations of the written dregs in formal archives. They become tasked with this newer method of dual capture as an extension of their synthesis of longing and union. Both themes, previously encountered in weddings, suddenly are tethered to different contexts with the penetration of colonial scheming in the subcontinent. Nachania today represents a kinetic archive which houses several accumulations of bidesia concerns and gratifies some of the interests of those labouring family charts transformed by the global project of Indian indentureship. There is a negotiated juxtaposition of pain and pleasure through performances. Dancers form displays of erotic power using different styles and bodily narrations that become strengthened by older fluid constructions of gender through different ‘feminizing’ technologies. Nachania’s erotic site is thus useful for recalling the painful past
– as seen in its usage in theatrical/political appeals and heritage showcases – while still suggesting hope of a different future.

To conclude this article, I want to join the above preliminary ethnographic collation to a bifluvial combination of two readings of the queer in the Caribbean, namely Amar Wahab’s concept of ‘contrapuntal queerness’ and Nadia Ellis’s ritualized queerness. By bifluvial, I evoke the image of two distinct rivers of thought that become explicitly connected at a point, in this case ‘queerness’. I still risk assigning an anachronistic (and slippery) importance to Nachania through a queer reading of the art form. By that, I evoke a louder understanding of the ‘queer’ framework that positions the queered subjects in a potentially liberatory and/or uniquely marginalized light. This can mask its character in several violence and violent systems. In the case of Nachania, its historical utility lay in its ability to dismiss women from public possibilities. Though there is a counter to this view, the historicization of the performance has opened a more romantic relation to it as tradition, authorizing biffure in collective memory. At the other extreme, we also see how violence is implemented against it, having been exposed to ‘newer’ gendered and sexualized systems through European colonial schemes. This risk however is worth taking since it forms part of the dynamic nature of the kinetic archive.

In the performance of Indo-Caribbean masculinities, digested as alterity, there has always been an implicit queered reading of their cultural productions. As seen in the case of Mimi Sheller’s earlier mentioned work on the characterization of Black (male) citizenship in Jamaica, Indians illustrate the transgressive in gendered ethics. I expand on this with Wahab’s contrapuntal queerness. This notion ‘refers to the entangled and inter-constitutive assemblage of otherings which do not necessarily take gender and/or sexuality as the primary site of analysis. … it is the very operation of race and coloniality that serves to queer gender and sexuality (as knowledge formations, not only identities)’.

The Coolie becomes relegated to a queer realm, not immediately
because of gendered or sexual action, but rather due to several racialized calculations. I develop these colonial calculations through a bifluvial attachment of the contrapuntal to the ritualized queerness. Ritual, as a social performance, demands differentiation from what is considered ordinary, and thus what is transgressive can enter and hence escape the repercussions and disciplining done in normative (colonial) realms. Ritualizing thus holds space for the queer. Certain inhibitions of the ordinary become dissolved and less policed in these contexts. Similarly, in the case of Nachania, its presence in Hindu and later cultural rituals pardons non-normative behaviour. What becomes queer is only a possessive quality that is emergent of the space and not a claim on orientation or their quotidian masculinities. This has been the primary outlook or distinction that performers use to defend their art, as seen in the case of Jamaica and Suriname. There are also instances, such as in the Fijian and Indian contexts, where we have seen how this space has been appropriated for use by those who fit non-normative categories to elude normative penalties.

A bifluvial combination thus thinks through Nachania with both these notions simultaneously. It echoes and extends the earlier juxtaposition of pain and pleasure with provisions of escape and culture. Queerness becomes used to define, possess and defend performers as they navigate different bandwidths of values, rules and transgressions. Nachania thus becomes taut in a radial graphing of the different gendered and sexualized contexts that it brings and is brought to. In combining both renderings of the queer with the aforementioned social contexts, I hope to begin a mapping of the relationship of nachania to the unbound erotic gendered tradition of Jamaica, as well as the other contexts, and equally, to the system of indentureship.

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NOTES


20 Examples include Paradesia by Thadeus Bessi, Pardaise by Johnny Mykoo, Jamaica Parades Chale by Beverly Pancham-Rampersaud, Paradesiya by Phillip Raj Mykoo, and Paradesiya Balam Tore by Johnny Mykoo.


25 Shepherd, ‘Indians, Jamaica and the Emergence of a Modern Migration Culture’, p. 173

26 Jaghai, Parades, 7.


28 Jaghai, Parades, 8.

29 Mansingh and Mansingh, Home Away from Home, p. 51.


31 Shandil, (Re)Viewing the Other’, p. 142.


33 Henry, Chant the Names of God, p. 196.

34 Henry, Chant the Names of God, pp. 196–197.


37 Shrivastava, ‘Ramchandra Manjhi’.


39 Kumar, ‘Bhojpuri Consolidations in the Hindi Territory’, p. 204.

40 Prakash, ‘Performing Bidesiyā in Bihar’, pp. 57–58. This dance style hit the screens in 2018, when a Bhojpuri film titled Nachaniya was released – see Sameer Ramesh Surve, dir., Nachaniya (Jaiom Productions: Worldwide Records Bhojpuri, 2019), online film
recording, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/zxKXmqfWR0Q>. There is also a 2017 documentary, *Naach Bhikhari Naach*, which looks at the politics and aesthetics of this folk theatrical tradition and the legacies of Bhikhari Thakur, writer of many plays within this tradition – see Jainendra Kumar Dost and Shipi Gulati, dir., *Naach Bhikhari Naach* (Public Service Broadcasting Trust India, 2017), online film recording, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulIXBPSMpQnU&t=328s>.

41 Cohen, ‘Science, Politics, and Dancing Boys’, p. 38.


45 Shandil, ‘(Re)Viewing the *Other*,’ p. 2; Lal, *Indo-Fijians*, p. 102.

46 Shandil, ‘(Re)Viewing the *Other*,’ pp. 139–143.

47 Shandil, ‘(Re)Viewing the *Other*,’ p. 4.

48 Shandil, ‘(Re)Viewing the *Other*,’ p. 58.

49 Shandil, ‘(Re)Viewing the *Other*,’ pp. 163–169.

50 Shandil, ‘(Re)Viewing the *Other*,’ p. 167.


55 Brinda J. Mehta, *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2004), p. 5. The overwhelming majority of the historical sources used to reconstruct the lives of these women were not generated by them. Their presence was catalogued by gazing photographers, ecclesial officials, colonial administrators, newspaper reports on ‘wife murders’ and other channels that similarly lacked enough care for them. As Gaiutra Bahadur notes, ‘rather than speaking for themselves in the historical record, they were spoken for’. Special attention is needed to this fact when reading the lives of indentured women. Gaiutra Bahadur, ‘Postcards from Empire,’ *Dissent*, 62(2) (2015), 49–58 (50); Shepherd, ‘Constructing Visibility’, pp. 195–214.


57 Shepherd, *Constructing Visibility*, p. 199.

58 Shepherd, *Constructing Visibility*, p. 201.


69 *The Gleaner*, ‘East Indian Wedding,’ 26 June 1912, p. 6. This has allowed me to conjecture that one of Jamaica’s strangest marriage laws, still in effect today, section 28 of the Marriage Act of Jamaica, passed on 2 June 1897, was part of disciplining Indians. This section of the Marriage Act of Jamaica creates an additional hurdle (time) and limiting agent in the orthodox enactment of Hindu marriage ceremonies.

baraat, like in the other mentioned locations, was an integral part of Indian marriage ceremonies in Jamaica. See Lakshmi Mansingh and Ajai Mansingh, ‘Indian Heritage in Jamaica’, *Jamaica Journal* 10(2, 3 & 4) (1976), 10–20 (15); Jaghai, *Pardes*, p. 131.

Mansingh and Mansingh, *Home Away from Home*, pp. 102, 115, 173. The Mansinghs have recorded the names of several Nachania dancers (mostly men). Nachania was also associated with Nat performance on the island; Mansingh and Mansingh, *Home Away from Home*, pp. 18–19.


Mansingh and Mansingh, *Home Away from Home*, pp. 18–19.

Ghanesh Maragh, Interview with Dominique Stewart (Zoom, 14 November 2020).

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Trevor Mykoo, ‘Raja Sarangie Group’.


82 Wahab, ‘(Re)tracing Queerness’, p. 388.

83 In the dancehall street dances of Jamaica, Ellis acknowledges the inclusion of fluidity in gender expressions and performance through the ritualizing power of the space and the consecratory homophobic music. Ellis, ‘Out and Bad’, pp. 17–18.

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