The botanical afterlife of indenture: Mehndi as imaginative visual archive

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ABSTRACT

This article presents artwork from the project, ‘The botanical afterlife of indenture: Mehndi as imaginative visual archive’, which memorializes the legacy of Indian indenture by recording the flora brought by indentured workers as they exist in the midst of contemporary social life and in the region’s landscape. In the project, mehndi works as a decolonializing and embodied, post-indenture feminist aesthetic praxis and a method for contributing to a new world visual archive. Indo-Caribbean imaginative visual archives can challenge gendered and racialized exclusions in colonial and creole visual representations, and can instead image indenture and post-indenture histories in ways that are accessible, inclusive, consensual and popular; connecting all in the Caribbean and its diaspora to the afterlife of indenture. The article reflects on the images produced, how they echo biographical and fictional writing, and how they critically engage with the orientalising lens of colonial-era photography. In presenting these original designs of a botanical
imaginary, the project aims to transform mehndi in post-indenture sites so that art forms which are both traditional and contemporary can be seen as post-plantation techniques for making memory-work an act of beauty. Inspired by his scholarship and encouragement, the project is dedicated to beloved Professor Emeritus Brinsley Samaroo.

KEYWORDS
mehndi, afterlife of indenture, visual counter-archive, botanical imaginary, Indo-Caribbean feminism, post-indenture feminist praxis, embodiment, mothering

INTRODUCTION
This article presents artwork from the project, ‘The botanical afterlife of indenture: Mehndi as imaginative visual archive’. Produced in collaboration with the Trinidad and Tobago photographer, Abigail Hadeed, the project memorializes sustenance and survival through the hold of the ship, the Indian indenture experience, and its wake, and creates an imaginative archive through embodied visual praxis in order to do so. It challenges the colonial archive of indenture and its gendered silences and mobilizes Indo-Caribbean visual culture for memory-work which centres indentured Indian women’s waged and domestic labour as well as their botanical, ritual and medicinal knowledge (Mahabir 1991, 2012).

Inspired by Professor Emeritus Brinsley Samaroo’s article, ‘Changing Caribbean geographies: Connections in flora, fauna and patterns of settlement from Indian inheritances’ (2021), the artwork focuses on plants brought by indentured workers from India, and combines them with Indigenous and African plants, to create original mehndi designs of the botanical legacies of indenture in the Caribbean. The aesthetic logic of the project contributes to decolonizing the region’s visual archive.

There is a significant body of art which has worked through forms of imaginative visual archiving of Caribbean indenture history. I review some of this and highlight the project’s contribution,
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providing a rationale for its focus on botanical legacies and its use of mehndi as an aesthetic form. I connect the designs with fictional representations of the indenture and immediate post-indenture periods. I also detail other aspects of the project which can be seen in the images presented such as its meticulous, creative engagement with archival photos, and with the material culture presented in colonial-era studio photography of Indian women as well as my own memories of my Muslim great-grandmother’s and grandmother’s orhnis. These are all part of the pictorial in the project’s turn to mehndi as a post-indenture feminist praxis of memorialization.

MEHNDI AS POST-INDENTURE FEMINIST AESTHETIC PRAXIS

Post-indentureship feminism can be described as ‘feminist consciousness, theorizing and activism that traces its genealogy through indentureship and post-indentureship experience’, provides ‘greater attention to the ways that feminist desires call upon and articulate post-indentureship culture and cosmologies’, and develops ‘a significant intellectual tradition, which has evolved within the specific conditions of post-indentureship and post-slavery societies and is inextricably intertwined in cross-ethnic solidarities and relationality’ (Hosein and Outar 2016: 9).

In this vein, this project is conceptualized in terms of a post-indenture feminist praxis which traces genealogy through Indo-Caribbean art as well as through ‘cosmologies, artifacts, archetypes, myths, and symbols, engagements with embodiment, popular cultural expressions, the sacred and sexual’ (ibid.: 3). In the artwork produced, mehndi is the form that this post-indenture feminist praxis takes (Hosein 2020). Patricia Mohammed has defined imaging as ‘the act of drawing together many images which summon up the space, past and present, and configuring a future’ (2010: 370). Using beauty as a decolonializing and
embodied method, the project can be described as imaging indenture in a new world visual archive.

Indian indenture, from 1838 to 1 January 1920 when all existing indenture contracts were ended, drew nearly half a million Indian labourers to the Caribbean to work on sugar plantations. Indian women, who were on average about a quarter of migrants, experienced greater sexual and economic autonomy as independently waged workers than in India. However, this was overshadowed by the violence, dehumanization, hunger, poverty and misery of plantation life, and women’s struggles to survive among the competing patriarchies within the European empires that governed their existence (Mohammed 2002; Bahadur 2013). Indentured Indian women also faced a gendered division of labour in the cane fields and in the barracks, which defined them as wives and assigned them sexual, reproductive and domestic burdens. Sex, gender and sexuality constituted their indenture experience of superexploitation (Reddock 1986).

In such ugly and hostile conditions, Indian women maintained aesthetic traditions through their jewellery (Mahabir 2017) and experiments with design (Mohammed 2010: 287). *Godnas*, or tattoos, on the upper and inner forearm, were also common. Although these confirmed entry to patriarchal conjugality, and were both painful to acquire and culturally imposed on young Hindu brides, they also provided women ‘with the capacity to ritually purify their bodies, to acquire spiritual knowledge, and to serve a guru and deities’ (Kloß 2022: 609). Mohammed describes one instance of a

*travelling male and female couple who practised this art as a profession. The man would apply the tattoo while the woman sang, to ease the pain, and perhaps also as a chaperon to the process … and the particular designs selected were symbols of what was expected of the woman in marriage.* (2010: 284)
Somewhat different, mehndi was a women’s tradition that came along with the henna plant and was also associated with bridal rituals (Jagmohan 2020). Mohammed suggests that it may have been a caste-based practice or skill. These feminine artistic practices, associated with moments in women’s life cycle, mark the survival of acts of imagination and creation of beauty.

Referring to her essay ‘Venus in Two Acts’, cultural historian Saidiya V. Hartman writes,

*For me, what’s really enabling about artistic practice is the way poets and filmmakers and visual artists use materials, the way beauty as both a practice and a method might enable some kind of redress, right? That might be a possible antidote to the violence that is a part of the everyday. At the same time, beauty as a discourse and a set of values is so structured by a very colonial, racist history and archival violence. So how do you steal something from it that’s enabling, but not be caught up in its structure of value? I think that artistic practice becomes the exercise of imagining beauty and what it might make possible in the world.* (2021)

In the photos presented below, mehndi as a practice and a method (and therefore praxis) challenges colonial archives’ silence and invisibility with a form of inscription associated with Indian femininities and rural women as well as with beautification of bodies that were otherwise framed solely in terms of reproductive, sexual, domestic and agricultural labour. This enacts repair by making women visible on feminist terms which value the complexity of their lives, and by countering objectification with subjectivity. Mehndi is feminine in its artists and aesthetics, and the bodies on which such art was created. It is considered traditional by Hindus and Muslims as well as connected to modern globalized and Indian fashion. And, in terms of its creolization – or its vernacular and relationality, it can be applied to bodies across race, class, sex, gender, sexuality, disability, religion, geography and age, thus mobilizing art in ways that circulate a post-indenture feminist praxis in the Caribbean.
and beyond. Mehndi as method thus works as a counter-archive which imagines and images the past, making it embodied, intimate, popular, inclusive and accessible to the present.

As part of its decolonizing work, mehndi also affirms our bodies’ deep connection with ecology. This is why henna, which is ecologically sustainable, was central to the project, further affirming our dependence on, consumption of, interconnection with and responsibility for the biosphere at a time of crisis created by the logic of empire founded on both enslavement and indenture-ship. In its engagement with the henna plant, the project also looks beyond the monocrops of sugar cane, coconut and cocoa so that the designs instead record an ecology of indenture which summons up a botanical imaginary rooted in the domestic, familial, feminine, nurturing, religious and medicinal roles that women performed. In such a way, it adds to Indo-Caribbean decolonizing of a Caribbean visual archive.

CHALLENGING A COLONIAL ARCHIVE

Scholarship has long noted the disciplinary power and violence of a colonial archive or ‘a knowledge system and practice that acts and is imagined as a physical and metaphorical placeholder of narratives’ (Kempadoo 2016: 4). An example of this is the ‘cooler-West Indian’ picturesque (Wahab 2008); a homogenizing gaze which stereotyped Indian indentured workers as heathen and exotic as a form of containment and social control, invisibilizing cross-race intimacies and gender-crossing in dress and roles, and the realities of their subordinated lives.

The gaze can particularly be seen in the photographs taken by studios, for example, in Trinidad and Jamaica, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Colonial-era photography emerged to enact its own form of orientalist stereotyping, subordinating and silencing which fed imperialist consumption of
images of Indian women as beautiful and wealthy while hiding the ravages of imperialism itself (Bahadur 2015). Indian women were staged, sexualized and hypervisibilized, but simultaneously misrepresented and therefore invisibilized, as a narrative of peaceful and content colonial subjects was circulated to quell resistance to Indian indenture across colonial empires (Niranjana 2006).

This ideological enterprise, established in the pre-emancipation period of African enslavement, began with painting and continued with photography, conscripting people, animals and nature into a pictorial tradition of ‘naturalising and aestheticizing the violence of the plantation system’ (Thompson 2008), disciplining bodies, and pastoralizing the Caribbean as a dreamlike paradise for travellers and settlers. Rudimentary techniques of photographic captioning, airbrushing, colouring and cropping were used to control and constrain contestations regarding ‘the truthfulness of these representations’ (2008: 177). Photography thus produced a ‘coolie picturesque’ which constructed this group as perpetually foreign, exotic, racially pure and ethnically isolated, essentially denying Indians their Caribbeanness (Sharpe 2022: 42).

The potential for arts, oral traditions, ceremonies and performances to present counter-narratives which decolonize social memory has also long been observed (Bastian et al. 2018). In his foundational text, Silencing the Past, Michel Rolph Trouillot (1995) points to ‘knowledge that exists outside of archives, which are also repositories of non-Western and non-Eurocentric knowledge’ (Campa 2023: 23). Such non-formal and non-official repositories, and how, where, when and what they record emphasize ‘the connection between the past and the present moment in processes of memorialisation, therefore preserving through praxis the embodied memory of ancestral and indigenous knowledges’ (ibid.: 23).

Scholars and artists have not only engaged with the concept of an archive through critical fabulation that fills silences and absences (Hartman 2008), but have also shown how artistic production challenges archival dominance over contemporary ways
of knowing, remembering and narrating (Gosine 2016). Such engagements with the form, violence and exclusions of archives have been taken up by those working through the afterlife of indenture.

Scholarship on visual culture has also noted the significance of visual arts in imaging the Caribbean, in ways that depart from a colonial gaze (Kempadoo 2016). Reflecting on creolizing a visual archive, Roshini Kempadoo describes this as ‘a generative practice using technologies and forms that are participatory and performative, seamlessly combining history and fiction’ (2016: 6). Indeed, for her, ‘creolisation is an active practice for the visual Caribbean archive, combining collections of materials and places that are indicative of “that which happened”, alongside the creation and analysis of artistic, poetic and fictional cultural production’ (ibid: 33). In analysing photographs and what they contribute, Kempadoo further describes embodiment as ‘central to our knowledge of the past and the relationship of memory to history’ (ibid.: 6) for embodied and active performing subjects, including scholars, artists, archivists and critics, are impossible to disentangle from practices that decolonize a visual archive.

Beyond just the visual, Patricia Mohmmed has noted ‘a multi-varied Indo-Trinidadian aesthetic contribution drawn from ritual, domestic, and imaginary space continues to remain historically and culturally submerged in both the definition of artistic practice and in the national consciousness of Trinidad society’ (Mohammed 2020: 10). There are therefore gaps both in authoritative record and in the contemporary visual archive (and discourse about Trinidadian art) which highlight the value of making aesthetics influenced by legacies of indenture and Indian Caribbean cultural practices, particularly those of women, more visible.

Mohammed points to *tadjahs* (model tombs), *murtis* (statues), *bedis* (temporary alters), *jhandis* (flag), *deyas* (clay oil lamps) and Carnival characters such as the Sumaree (Burrokeet mas) and the
Jab Jab as some of these Indian aesthetic forms. However, these hardly make visible the intersections of Indian women’s waged and domestic labour as constitutive of how indenture was organized. Indeed, while Indian women in the indenture period came to the Caribbean as workers and not as wives, their domesticity, sexuality and domination played a key role in stabilizing the system at women’s expense.

In the wake of indenture, scholars and artists have also developed feminist genealogies of archival practice (Gooptu 2022) which mobilize a range of media – from performance art and dance, to visual work that recuperates and decolonizes colonial images to use of songs, rituals, biographies and music that highlight alternative politics of memorialization. These have been ways of interrupting, expanding and creating counter-archives (Ali 2020). Such consideration of the afterlife of indenture or indenture’s legacy in the Caribbean through the lens of visual, performance and embodied art has been undertaken by a vast range of artists including Andil Gosine (2017), Wendy Nanan (Mohammed 2017) and Kelly Sinnapah Mary (Gosine 2022), Renluka Maharaj (Persard 2020), Ryan Persadie (2022), Suchitra Mattai, Maya Mackrandilal and Michael Lam (Ali 2023), Shalini Seereeram (Nixon 2016), Sharlene Khan (2017), Roshini Kempadoo (2017), Vanessa Godden (2020), Danielle Boodoo-Fortune, Portia Subran, Tessa Alexander, among many others. The artwork presented here adds original mehndi designs to this body of work in order to expand a non-formal repository of embodied memory in a way that is participatory and performative, combining history and fiction, and contributing to an Indo-Trinidadian and Caribbean aesthetic.

In thinking about the afterlives of plantation histories, Andil Gosine and Nalini Mohabir turn to ‘literary and visual representations of journeys of indenture to point to narratives, and lives, still complicated by the shadows of history’ (2022: 1). Yet, as Gosine points out in his discussion of the 2022 art exhibit, *everything slackens in a wreck*, his
own curatorial process has been to ‘illuminate the experience and legacy of indentureship … without burdening the artists with the task of ethnic or gender representation, allowing instead for their specific “anxieties, concerns, motivations and desires” and the particularities of their positions and histories’ (2022: 121). In a magazine review of Renluka Maharaj’s colouring of colonial-era photographs, Suzanne Persard also highlights that ‘Portraits of the indentured archive – however violently constructed – inevitably presents the possibility for a possible connection to one’s own unarchived and unknown family histories’ (2020). Visual practices thus have the potential to humanize indenture history, attending to how it affects ‘our desires, our sense of worth, our attitudes to each other, to ourselves’ (Gosine 2017: 67).

**BOTANY AS AFTERLIFE OF INDENTURE**

Colonial circulation of plants from Asia predated the beginning of Indian indenture in the Caribbean, particularly through the establishment of botanic gardens and for commercial cultivation (Howard 1954). In this way, jackfruit, black pepper, nutmeg, hibiscus, and varieties of bananas and mangoes were introduced, further displacing and effacing indigenous flora while countering the ecological devastation of sugar cane monocropping. As highlighted earlier, landscape and botany have been particularly important for creating an imperial picturesque or a way of creating a pleasing scene that hides the horrors of plantation slavery and indenture. Krista Thompson (2006) documents how the Jamaican landscape was tropicalized through ‘making plant life conform to imperial fantasies of nature’s beauty’ (Sharpe 2022: 25), framing the region’s botanical colonization for highest production yields as idyllic. Caribbean artists and activists have challenged this gaze repeatedly, engaging rice paddies and sugar cane fields, forests, mangroves, rivers and flora in their art practice and activist politics (Our Stories Collective 2021).
In this project, indenture experience and its legacies are similarly memorialized through a botanical imaginary. Like Africans’ provision grounds and vegetable gardens, plants enabled Indians to supplement their rations, nourish traditional folk culture and independently market or trade food. The artwork therefore attends to the aspirations and survival of those below the hold. Peggy Mohan described these in the novel, *Jahajin*, as narrated to her by Deeda, an Indian woman who came as an indentured worker. The scene occurs on a ship destined for Trinidad:

The next day I let Kalloo go out again with his Langoor Mamoo to walk the buffaloes on the deck. When he came back he told me about a man in their quarters, Ramsukh, who was carrying different kinds of mango seeds to plant when we reached. He had been keeping the seeds since the summer, seeds from all the varieties that they had in his village. He said he didn’t want to go to a new place khaali haath, empty-handed.

When I told the other women in our quarters about Ramsukh and his mango seeds, one of the women came and told me quietly that she was carrying something too. She showed me: in a little cloth bag she was carrying some damp soil from muluk, and growing in that soil was a root of hardee, turmeric. The masala that turns food yellow, and keeps wounds from getting infected. She was keeping it alive so she could plant it when we reached. (Mohan 2007: 64)

Ramdayal, Maat and van Andel (2021) describe the ethnobiological legacy of indentured Indians as substantial with, for example, at least seventy-five botanical species being introduced to Jamaica (see Picking and Vandebroek 2019). As Samaroo observes, for Indian indentured labourers, agricultural practices were familiar for sustenance, but also as part of dharmic duty and religious ritual as flora and fauna were ‘objects of divinity’ for Hindus. He further notes, ‘Around 14 per cent of the girmityas were Muslims who took to their diasporic destinations the Qu’ranic injunctions about the importance of the cultivation of
crops’ (2021: 21). Such ‘ancestral urgings’ (ibid.: 20) were the basis for the ‘amazing array of dried fruits, seeds and cuttings, which survived the long crossing’ (ibid.: 16).

Brinsley Samaroo’s list, and my conversations with him about it, inspired this project:

The list of items of flora which were fitted into this jahaji bandal is long and impressive. Among these were mango (aam), guavas (amrudh), pomegranate (anar), string-bean (bodi), Indian drumsticks (saijan/moringa), pumpkins (khora, khadu), marijuana, datura, rice (chawal), sapodilla (chicu), betel-nut (supari), turmeric (haldi), bitter gourd (caraillee), ginger (adhrak), curry-plant (karapillay), cinnamon (dalchini), mustard (sarson), black pepper (kali mirch), onion (pyaj), cumin (geera), fennel (sauf), fenugreek (maithi), long gourd (lowki), cloves (laung) and the seeds of the ashoka, bael, neem and lotus (kumud). In the jahaji bandal they brought a whole range of spinach (bhaji) seeds as well as the full panoply of Indian lentils (dhal). Some of these seeds, such as guava and citrus, had been brought to the region before the arrival of the Indians but India now supplied new varieties which improved the native stock. In the jahaji bandal there were seeds of loofa (jinghi), tamarind (imli) and cucumber (khera). (Samaroo 2021: 22)

For this reason, rather than sugar cane which has been an over-determining trope of indenture, this project draws on the flora that came with indentured labourers, in cloths tied around their belongings, and cared for in the hold of ships. These were replanted around barrack yards and in villages to reconstitute home in exile. While flora were also brought to the Caribbean from India through colonial circuits of various kinds, the project counters the archive’s gendered silences and subordination of indentured women’s relationships to such flora in their own domestic, subsistence, medicinal, ritual, cultural and aesthetic practices. It therefore focuses on plants that are associated with backyard decoration and food as well as home gardens as women were often responsible for subsistence agriculture, flowers for rituals and home-made medicines.
Scholars have also highlighted how this has been documented in the fiction produced in the region, including novels such as Harold Sonny Ladoo’s *No Pain Like this Body* and Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (Phukan 2022).

Phukan argues that the botanical creolizes descendants of indenture and depicts shared context for multi-ethnic histories of belonging, solidarity, intimacy and co-produced subjectivities across race, sexuality and gender among other axes. Seen differently, the botanical doesn’t simply highlight the historical creolization of Indians (that Indians have not been marginal to the creole) but rather places India more definitively in the post-emancipation creole. Indian indenture transformed the region and all within its geography as well as demands post-indenture feminist theorizing of its legacies.

Botany is itself a living archive of indenture or, put another way, a contemporary biological artefact of indentureship’s afterlife. By creating embodied designs, imaginative visual memorialization can move through contemporary landscape; reflecting, refracting and echoing an ecological array of sustenance, healing, divinity and beauty. Building on this framework of imaginative archives, the botanical afterlife of indenture and feminine aesthetic practices, mehndi designs can travel across indenture sites and even back to India, symbolizing how Indian art forms are being imagined on post-indenture and new world terms. This potentially ‘maps a cultural geography of transnational connectivity’ among those decolonizing dispersed plantation histories (Wainwright 2012: 240).

**IMAGING A BOTANICAL IMAGINARY**

The images presented below were produced in September 2023 and involved staining and painting a backdrop which included drawings of plants from Samaroo’s (2021) article. This meant testing various kinds of natural dye, including from coffee, tea and henna over several weeks, and it was undertaken by theatre educator, Geneva
Drepaulsingh, with the assistance of Christeen Harewood. Design prototypes of the plants and rural scenes began to be created and revised from May 2023 through collaboration with mehndi artist, Risa Raghunanan-Mohammed, of Henna Trinidad. The list was reviewed by Juan Francisco Morales, Curator of the National Herbarium of Trinidad and Tobago at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine Campus. Clothes for the portrait images were designed to represent various gendered historical moments, life stages and styles, such as a sari, ghagri (skirt), jhula (long blouse) and dhoti (cloth wrapped into pants), and material chosen was reminiscent of lace orhnis of my great-grandmother and grandmother and also bright natural colours representing sea and foliage. This was curated by fashion designer, Chandra Rattan. A silver bajuband was hand-made by Steven Frank Mitchum Weaver who engraved my Hindu woman partner and my own Muslim family histories of indenture beginning with crossing the kala pani and ending with the possibilities of continuing trans-oceanic mobilities. Original pieces of jewellery, sometimes at least seventy-five years old, were provided by the Bhagwat family who are multi-generational jewellers and family friends. These photographs, by Abigail Hadeed with the support of Michelle Jorsling and Jordan Briggs, include my daughter, Ziya Hosein Livingstone, who was twelve years old at the time, and myself, and they enact intergenerational memorialisation.

Figure 1 depicts designs of cane stalks; cucumber flowers, leaves and vines; rice and mustard. Writing on Suriname, Ramdayal et al.’s interviews with rice cultivators found that home consumption was the main reason for rice cultivation, and rice could even be traded for salt or sugar at a local shop. The by-products of rice production, such as unmilled padi were for animal consumption and the rice straw could be used to construct roofs and walls of homes. Rice also had spiritual and religious uses, and rice cultivation was managed through a gendered division of labour. Linking ‘land and its changing landscapes to constructs of rural Indian
belonging’ in the novel No Pain Like This Body, Phukan (2022: 110) describes rice cultivation as an essential visual symbol for post-indenture Caribbeanness which looks beyond ‘brown sugar’ readings of plantation histories (Mohabir 2018).

Near the upper arm is a woman with a cutlass, which puts a photograph by Garnett Ifill into mehndi form (Samaroo and Ifill 2015: 31). In this text, Glimpses of the Sugar Industry: The art of Garnett Ifill, Samaroo matches the image with text from the Ramcharitmanas or Ramayan. He chooses this source because its geographical centre is Uttar Pradesh, where the majority of girmityas (agreement signers) were recruited, because of its themes of exile and return, and its conveying of the ‘simple verities of everyday life’ (ibid.: 14). Under the image of the cane cutting woman, Samaroo quotes, ‘Oriahi hath, asanihu ke ghae. It is by one’s own arms alone that one parries the strikes even of a thunderbolt. Ramcharitmanas, Des. II, 305.4’. This emphasizes strength, and the position of the arm and fist embodies this, symbolizing women’s participation in collective and public labour struggles and strikes (Khan 2018) even as their studio poses conveyed docility. Embodiment here challenges the passivity with which women were typically rendered and in which resistance can sometimes be intimated only by reading a look in their eyes.

Labour strikes also included Muslim women, which is part of the genealogy I am tracing in terms of my own post-indenture feminism and in the mehndi artwork. In the Guyanese novel, A Silent Life, Ryhaan Shah describes her protagonist’s grandmother – alternately called Ma, Nani and Sister Baby to her daughter, granddaughter and other women labourers and mothers – as her granddaughter imagines her:

‘Now, you listen to me!’ This is my grandmother. She is small, yet in that room, packed with tight-muscled men and heavy women, she leads. The fight in her fisted hands fires her eyes and gives power to her voice …
Figure 1

Her fist punches the air. Everyone has stepped back. They press themselves against the walls to create a circle around her. And there, standing in its centre, she tells them of the struggles of workers in other parts of the world, how they face their bourgeois masters and vanquish the enemies of the people.

(Shah 2005: 70)
Andil Gosine has produced significant work on the cutlass as an object, writing,

I am not quite sure yet how to properly and fairly characterize an ‘Indo-Caribbean feminist aesthetic’ but I am certain that Ohrni and Cutlass are examples of it. Both replicas of complicated objects, they are as much markers of oppression as they are evidence of the creative agency of women who lived through miserable conditions of colonization and the still-patriarchal postcolonial process of nation building that followed. (2012: 2)

He reminds us that ‘The cutlass is mired in blood’ and it references ‘misery, but it also aspires to match the elegance of the ways my grandmother Ramadai wielded hers’ (ibid.: 3). Yet, cane cutting also connected women beyond the fields (Parsard 2016). For her championing of their cause as a Marxist and Muslim woman in the first decades of the twentieth century, Shah created a new world where women always brought Nani ‘something from their kitchen gardens, so our house was always packed with pumpkins and mangoes and cassava’ (2005: 44).

Above my elbow is a hand-made silver bajuband, forged and engraved for this project with the pattern of caraillie around the edges, and used as a metal canvas to highlight both cane and rice in women’s indenture history. Again, Brinsley Samaroo points out that Indians brought rice varieties such as balam, mooghyri and basmati (2021: 24). These bajubands appear in colonial-era portraits of Indian women in the Caribbean, but they were most likely made of tin or a silver alloy, and the surface was typically flat and undecorated. Most scholarship on women’s jewellery in the indenture and immediate post-indenture period focuses on beras and churias, which sit at the wrist or forearm. There is limited mention of the bajuband (Mahabir 2017), and no contribution to a post-indenture visual archive that includes this piece of jewellery or uses it as a canvas for imaginatively inscribing indenture history. Whereas there have been centuries of landscape painting in the Caribbean, mostly on canvas, here an object of beauty and decoration from women’s lives in the indenture
period is treated as an under-recognized space for archiving the botanical, and an engraving of rice can be seen in the silver plate.

The material of the sari top is part of the archival work of this image. It recollects the lace of an orhni in recognition of the white, cream, transparent and lace orhnis worn by women in my family as documented in family photos. These soft material objects have been lost over time, but remain poignant in my memory. Material therefore works here as a method of memorialization.

Peggy Mohan describes the orhni as,

\[\ldots\] transparent, with two corners tied around the waist, and the other end over the chest, shoulder and head like the end of a sari. Later, it was easy to move the ghangri-jhula to a belted dress, coming down to mid-calf, with the orhni tucked into the belt, and the other end over the shoulder and head (always over the head!).

This is how our grandmothers dressed to go out, with a brooch holding the orhni at the shoulder, and special pins to keep it on the head. For very fancy occasions, like weddings, the orhni would be made of lace. (Mohan 2001: 8–9)

Thus, while imagining the botanical afterlife of indenture through the feminine aesthetic of mehndi, this artwork also speaks back to the colonial portrait form where women were arranged passively; never with their fists in the air and never with such a look behind their arm and fist. The portrait created (Figure 1) includes an object featured in colonial photographs of bejewelled girls and women, but produced here as a personal, familial and intimate visual archive. As photography democratized, Indian women began to choose how to appear in photos and when to have them taken. Nalini Mohabir describes these kinds of studio photos as ‘new ways of seeing, and crafting, one’s place in the world’ for those ‘in the shadow of plantation history, navigating respectability and resistance’ (Hosein 2014). For their descendants, they are an ‘aides-memoire to the past’ (2018) and how it is imagined. The use of material culture in Figure 1 also makes the sari, which I remember my mother and aunts also wearing in the 1970s, part of a post-indenture feminist method of memorialization.
Figure 2  My father’s mother, Taimoon Hosein. Photo taken at Wong’s Studio in San Fernando around 1941 when she was about 25 years old. She is wearing a wedding ring which her daughter, Taimoon Stewart, gave me when I finished my PhD. I’m wearing it along with my mother’s wedding ring from my father as I type these words.
Mehndi is traditionally drawn on hands, arms, feet and ankles and even up the calf of the leg. In the designs in Figure 3, there is the water buffalo (and a bull cart at rest on the other side) in the background of cane stalks. About the bull, Samaroo states that the ‘Indian bhaisa [water buffalo] was perhaps the most important faunal gift to the Caribbean’ (Samaroo and Ifill 2015: 30) as it ‘revolutionized transport on the estates and provided leather, manure and meat to the wider population’ (Samaroo 2021: 16). This mehndi version of the bhaisa is also drawn from Garnett Ifill’s photo (Samaroo and Ifill 2015: 30). Neighbouring this scene is a domestic setting, representative of village life, most likely in the post-indenture period, with a sorrel plant in the foreground. Culantro, a plant native to the Americas but given the Hindi name, Bhandaniya, as an Indian-centred form of creolization, is growing in the ground nearer to the wooden house on stilts and bamboo towers in the
backyard. In my memories as a child driving from Northern Trinidad to Princes’ Town to see my great-grandmother, houses raised on wooden stilts or bricks would line the central plains, particularly along the highway which crossed the Caroni River, and gardens of crops would spread out around these small structures.

At the forefront is a river lined with rocks where girls and women would wash clothes, fill buckets with water, bathe and spend time with children. When flowing in channels in and around homes, women have also caught cascadoux fish, such as in the communities in the Nariva Swamp in South Eastern Trinidad. Rivers were sites of overlapping, gendered labour and leisure. Focusing on the significance of rivers to ritual, Persaud argues that scholars of Caribbean creole religions have excluded Hinduism, its contribution to the region, and ‘the ways in which Indo-Caribbeans, in particular, have tied themselves to the space of the Caribbean in the retellings of their own religious histories’ (2021: 27). She focuses on the Gangadhaara festival at Marianne River which enables devotees to identify with jahajs, make offerings to ancestors, and perform rituals, particularly to Ganga Ma.

In the literary imagination, rivers and ponds are also where women go when life in rural villages became too unbearable. There are also these histories. In Kevin Jared Hosein’s novel, Hungry Ghosts, Shewta is rejected by her husband and in grief over the loss of her baby. Hosein writes:

> As the rain came down, Shewta walked to the shallow end of the pond and into the water. Seated herself so that the armada of water lilies ebbed around her elbows. The steely-blue of the plains seemed so far away. Everything losing its outline in the blur of rain. She submerged herself, let the water take her. Her body was now floating carefree as driftwood. Her mouth underwater, she let out a long scream. Screamed until she felt like her head would explode. (Hosein 2022: 257)

At one point in Trinidad’s history, children would play in rivers near to their houses all along the foothills of the Northern Range,
Figure 4  Image from the Michael Goldberg Collection.

Country Washer Woman, Trinidad, B. W. I.

Figure 5  Image from the Michael Goldberg Collection.

Wishing you the complements of the season

10.13169/jofstudindentleg.4.1.0061
from Diego Martin, through Santa Cruz to Maracas Valley and Valencia. Urbanization and pollution mean that is hardly possible anymore today although in Guyana and Suriname, this remains a common sight and symbolic of both past and present.

Photographs of women, girls and children at the river can be seen in both the Michael Goldberg Postcard Collection held in the West Indiana Division of the University of the West Indies, St Augustine Alma Jordan Library and the Montgomery Collection of Caribbean Photographs at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. As discussed earlier, colonial-era photographs constructed misleading narratives about Indians, cropping out racial proximity and creating the illusion of self-contained Indian villages. Writing of Jamaica, Jenny Sharpe observes that Indian communities were made to appear autonomous ‘despite residing on the same plantation and working alongside Jamaicans’ (2022: 28). Rivers, then, were and perhaps still are places of new world possibility though our relationships to them have changed.

Figure 6  Mama and Ziya: Intergenerational memorialisation
Figure 6’s designs are on the other side of the ankles. A woman is in her yard while the river flows in the foreground. She is wearing a *ghangri-jhula* with a dupatta over her shoulder, and her *nakpul* (nose ring) stretches on a chain to her ear. Her head is wrapped in a scarf and she sweeps with a *cocoyea* broom while a large milk jug sits on the ground behind her. Photos of women in their domestic contexts are rare in comparison to those in public spaces and in studio portraits. Mainly, these photos are of women cooking or washing dishes outside. Yet, despite their absence in a visual record, familiarity with the morning practice of sweeping a *lepayed* floor (made with cow dung or *gobar*, water and dirt) with a broom made from coconut tree fronds is a familiar memory. Although this is a domestic scene, this woman is also a milk-seller, which was a way that Indian women found to earn an independent income. For example, in the novel, *A Brighter Sun*, Samuel Selvon (1952) describes young, recently married Urmilla carrying the cow to graze and beginning to proudly sell milk.

On the other ankle, a girl faces the morning sun and the sorrel plant in the far distance, and readies herself to walk down a dirt road to school. She is in a uniform with her hair in two braids, and a satchel is slung over her shoulders. The bull cart lies at rest in the distance in front of her, and lotus flowers grow a little further away. This design references an image of a bull cart at rest in Debe in 1973 again found in the photographs by Ifill (2015: 44). Samaroo’s note is worth repeating:

*Utseediyur ime lokaa na kuryaam karma ced, aham samkarasya ca, kartaa syaam upahan yam imaah prajaah.*

*If I should cease work, these fields would fall in ruin and I should be the creator of disordered life and destroy these people.* Bhagavadgita, Ch. 3, V.24.

… After the crop-time reaping of the canes they planted vegetables on the adjoining lands. The low-lying lands in the background would be blossoming fields of *bodi*, watermelon, *karailli*, *bhagi* and *bhaigan*. These would provide income and food after the canes have been sold. (Samaroo and Ifill 2015: 45)
Figure 7  My great-grandmother, Ayesha Khan, is sitting. My great-grandfather, Iraj Khan, who was at one time a reporter with the Guardian South Bureau (and covered the story of Haile Selassie’s visit to South Trinidad) is standing, and my grandmother, Zahina Khan, is on the left and a late teenager. The photo was taken between 1938 and 1940.
Access to education for Indian girls began in the late 1800s in Trinidad with the Canadian Presbyterian missionary schools, which also encouraged conversion. It wasn’t until the 1940s that this began to change. Writing of Muslim women’s enrolment in schooling in Trinidad in the 1920s, Kassim describes families’ mixed feelings and ambivalent aspirations (2012). However, even as the daughter of Syed Abdul Aziz, then Khalifa of the Muslim community in Trinidad, my mother’s grandmother (born 1905) was enrolled in school in Princes Town. She remained Muslim, and could read English, Urdu and Arabic. This mehndi design both records a historical and coming of age moment, the history of my family as urbanizing Muslims, and the promise of girls’ education.

On Ziya’s ankles in Figure 6, a pumpkin vine in fruit grows in the garden. Higher up, a woman in a blouse and skirt, with her head wrapped, pounds a mortar into a pestle, illustrating some of her typical domestic responsibilities. This design comes from an image of a woman by a knee-high mortar in the Michael Goldberg Collection. Below her is a bedi with a fig tree. On the other leg, near the ankle, fever grass grows in a patch; a plant often found in backyards and used for healing. A peerha and cocoeyea broom are at the edge of the image referencing both the material culture in women’s lives and what would have been typical household objects that never appear in orientalist photography.

In this image, we are in dhotis, and the green and blue symbolize ecological elements such as sky, water, forest and field. Few scholars or artists have examined or engaged with the dhoti as part of labouring Indian women’s dress when creating original artwork, and there is only one woman working on a coconut plantation in Jamaica who appears in photographs this way (Sharpe 2022). In that image, she is also covering her hair in a turban, illuminating how labour queered gender during the indenture period.

The designs in Figures 7 and 8 are of poui, dasheen bush, moringa, black pepper and caraillie. There is also a chulha (mud stove) with sticks of wood burning, and a wooden spoon and jug for
water to add to the boiling pot. Merinos, or white cotton vests, are hung from a clothesline which sits just back from the dasheen plot. Returning to *Hungry Ghosts*, Hosein writes:

_Hans would emulate the boy and together they would make it all the way to the point where the tracks ran parallel to the river’s embankment. There, they shed their merino shirts and Hans would take the boy into the water, holding him horizontal, plank-like, his buoyant body resting neatly along his forearms. Both their cheeks round and pouting with held breaths as they went under. Here, Hans taught him how to float, how to paddle, how to do a backstroke._ (Hosein 2022: 111)

In the foreground and in the garden just outside of the kitchen is moringa and slightly out of the second photo is a hibiscus plant with some flowers just budding. These images point to plants both for decoration and ritual and for consumption. Both outside and inside forms of feminized labour, typical of women’s lives, are depicted, and the landscape of the scene details a post-indenture Caribbean botanical imaginary.

Curation of this project intersected women’s waged work, subsistence agriculture and domestic labour, their nurturing and familial roles, their participation in the informal economy which included animal husbandry, mobility and independent livelihood, and the changing histories brought on by girls’ access to education. All this takes place within a landscape changed by flora and fauna brought during the period of indenture and from India.

This is the first time that mehndi is being used like this as, in the Caribbean, it usually reproduces designs from India or the Middle East as packaged in booklets or collated on the internet. This design is meant to show descendants of indenture that our landscapes are living archives worth imaging.
CONCLUSION

Imaginative archives are places outside of formal, official and written archives where history is recorded and remembered, where gaps and inequities in colonial records are filled in and stories from the hold, the field, the yard, the kitchen and the surrounding landscape are made visible, and where connection to history can be made meaningful, personal and self-determined. This project uses mehndi as a method to image and memorialize Indian survival in ways that are feminine, beautiful and connected to home-making and livelihood in the Caribbean. The project adds to the contribution of Indo-Caribbean and post-indenture aesthetics to Caribbean visual archives. It exemplifies how an embodied aesthetic can be mobilized as part of contemporary post-indenture feminist praxis, which intersects the past with the contemporary, and tradition with globalized modern fashion. The project produced original mehndi designs while drawing on artefacts, material culture, archival material, photographs, and familial memory. In this way, it aimed to complement current art on the afterlife of Indian indenture in a way that takes visuality into the popular, critically and creatively engaging the Caribbean’s politically complex gendered legacies and botanical ecologies.

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