Archives in drag
Performing nachaniya towards a queer theory of indenture

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ABSTRACT

‘Archives in drag: Performing nachaniya towards a queer theory of indenture’ takes as its object the figure of the Indo-Jamaican nachaniya dancer as a paradigm for re-thinking queer theories of indenture. Nachaniya is a highly stylized Indo-Jamaican folk dance featuring a heterosexual male dancing in drag. The performance, which can be traced to the nineteenth century, is still common within present-day Indo-Jamaican communities and the diaspora. Nachaniya therefore presents both parts of a queer historical and living archive. By using an archival photograph from the 1960s of a nachaniya dancer as a point of entry, I consider the ways in which this genre of Indo-Jamaican folk performance demonstrates gender non-normativity as deeply embedded within the indentured archive. Since nachaniya is also read as not necessarily queer but ‘cultural’, I am interested in the tensions between a refusal to categorize the performance as a kind of drag while simultaneously elevating its ‘cultural’ status and the slippage between ‘queer’ and ‘culture’. I consider the figure of the nachaniya dancer as what Anjali Arondekar has termed a site of ‘ordinary surplus’ rather than a site of queer exception. Through a reading of this queer archival photograph, I consider destabilizing narratives of loss or absence that saturate approaches to the queer archive of indenture to suggest that nachaniya is a useful paradigm for theorizing the nexus at which Indo-Jamaican archives and queers of indenture have been theorized as ‘nothing to see’.

KEYWORDS

nachaniya, Indo-Jamaican, queer archives, drag, folk performance
INTRODUCTION

In a photograph from the 1960s, a group of musicians appear in black and white. Men pose with the harmonium, tabla and sarangi, evoking the familiar assemblage of the Indo-Caribbean instrumentalists in ritual singing of satsang. At the bottom of the photograph, a male dancer also poses – crouched in the front row of the photo, his hand gently resting on his cheek and a shawl covers his head. His dancing frock is draped across him. The eyes of this nachaniya dancer are lowered or closed – or perhaps he has just looked down from the camera for a moment. His body, among the musicians, is an archive in plain sight. In this article, I read this archival photograph as being at the intersection of ‘queer’ and ‘cultural’ to consider how the nachaniya tradition of Indo-Jamaican folk performance demonstrates gender non-normativity as deeply
embedded within the Indian indentured archive. Nachaniya might be read by scholars of sexuality as a form of ‘drag’ and read by Indo-Caribbean folk musicians as simply ‘cultural’, however the performance inhabits a liminal space between ‘queer’ and ‘culture’, which are interpreted as exclusive domains within the registers of indentureship. I am interested in both the tensions that arise when reading ‘queer’ and ‘cultural’ as discrete categories, as well as considering the nachaniya dancer as a figure of what Anjali Arondekar has termed a site of ‘ordinary surplus’ – rather than a site of queer exception (2015: 111). Through a reading of this queer archival photograph, I consider destabilizing narratives of invisibility and absence that saturate approaches to the queer archives of indenture to suggest that the performance of nachaniya is a valuable paradigm for theorizing the nexus at which Indo-Jamaican archives and queer descendants of indenture have been theorized as ‘nothing to see’.

Queer theory and indentureship studies first appear as unlikely bedfellows. The earliest scholarship of Indian indentureship evoked fantasies of the nuclear family at the site of the colonial plantation, despite the historical record that the plantation economy was anything but an order of traditional heteronormative paradigms of kinship. From its inception, the indentured plantation was a site of the queer, as sexual relations among the indentured veered far from their disciplining of monogamy and heteronormativity. From cases of sodomy to polyandrous women, the Indian indentured labourer occupied the plantation effectively throwing ‘any claim to normative gender and sexual regimes in crisis’ (Ellapen 2020: 104). Amar Wahab has noted that the figural ‘coolid signal multiple registrations of queerness in its normative sense (i.e., oriented toward non-normative gender and sexuality) as well as a broader sense of non-normativity’ by its positioning as an Eastern body squarely out of place (Wahab 2019: 390). These conceptualizations of non-normativity at the site of the indentured plantation configure not only a queer economy of
sex – that is, outside of the traditional strictures of nuclear family life – but also present an alternate approach to reading archives of indentureship as sites of non-normative or queer production.

**INDIAN OR DRAG?**

The paradoxes of visibility with regard to queer (Indo-)Caribbean subjectivity evoke an ethnography conducted by Jasbir Puar in 1990s Trinidad and Tobago in which Indian identity is read as a kind of drag. Using the popular drag competition Diva as the metaphorical and literal stage for examining gender-variant identities in Trinidad, Puar interviewed a queer Indo-Trinidadian couple, Vik and Sasha, who were visibly ‘out’ in Trinidad but who displayed a general apathy towards discussing sexual orientation or sexual politics (2001: 1057–1058). As an Indo-Trinidadian couple, Vik and Sasha appeared not only as performers in a drag contest but as performing a kind of Indian-ness. One of Puar’s respondents remarked about the duo’s Bollywood performance, ‘It’s an Indian dance because we can classify it like that – it’s easy to classify. It’s not drag though’ (Puar 2001: 1055). Despite Vik and Sasha’s donning of Indian film costumes to mimic the boy-and-girl-falling-in-love sequence of a Bollywood film, their hyper-visibility as drag performers was still invisible due to their identity as Indo-Trinidadians. Vik and Sasha are not indexed by their gender identity but on account of their Indianness. Even their inclusion in the predominantly Afro-Trinidadian Diva competition appears tokenized, as the producer of the show told Puar: ‘I’ve always had an East Indian act . . . . I like variety’ (2001: 1054). The ‘variety’ of the drag performers attest to the complex racialization of Indo-Caribbean sexuality on the island, notably through historical and political tensions between Indo- and Afro-Trinidadian communities. Vik and Sasha’s ‘variety’ situates the queer Indo-Trinidadian couple in almost a state of racial alterity that excludes them from a national queer Trinidadian identity. Perhaps Vik and Sasha are not really visible as queer – or perhaps they are invisible as Indian and queer.
Like Vik and Sasha, the black and white photograph of the nachaniya counters the stereotyping of queer absence in the Caribbean – particularly within the archives of Indian indentureship. Rather than state that this archival material of Indo-Jamaican origin is obviously queer, I want to consider the nachaniya dancer in this photograph as an instance of ‘ordinary surplus’ (Arondekar 2015: 111) within the Indian indentured archive. A queer figure shrouded in a veil, the nachaniya dancer is undeniably gender non-normative within the photograph’s frame. But he is simultaneously a rather ordinary character within the photograph. He is not hidden, invisible, nor subtle; in fact, he is more than enough to see. The nachaniya dancer inhabits both the realm of the spectacle and spectacular while registering as a performative body that is anything but hidden. An archival orientation that considers the nachaniya dancer as a kind of ‘ordinary surplus’ therefore confounds a queer Caribbean hermeneutic that marks the body of the indentured-descendant gender-queer figure as a body of either scarcity or exception.

The dancer is clearly part of a musical ensemble embedded in the photographic frame. In fact, the role of nachaniya is perhaps the only constant in the photograph since the communal and informal practice of playing musical instruments might involve individuals who might not necessarily be musicians but might try their hands at an instrument for an evening; at times, others might pose with instruments for the sake of a photograph. At the level of the photographic frame, then, there is already an inherent visual precarity. But while some musicians playing the manjeera, tabla or dantaal might be left to chance for the evening, the nachaniya is the performer. His performance is known and unmistakable; he is an ordinary and yet exceptional part of festivities. His performance, learned from elders and often passed down from generations in his family, might be described as acrobatic – even mischievous at times. The eyeliner emphasizing his eyes might evoke a Kathakali dancer; his gestures might be playful, unpredictable, gender-queer
and erotic. The erotic dimension of his performance – sensual and exaggerated – marks the nachaniya, but his sensuality is nothing extraordinary; his omission from studies of Indian indentureship and Caribbean sexuality is the exception.

**NOTHING TO SEE**

Indentureship Studies has been marked itself by absence: the absence within South Asian history textbooks and studies of bonded labour of an estimated two million indentured Indians trafficked as part of the British, Dutch and French empires. Yet within this historical lacuna, Indo-Jamaican scholarship has been doubly marked by a paradox: an assumption of archival scarcity and, subsequently, cultural scarcity due to a smaller population of approximately 36,000 Indians indentured to the island. This has produced a discursive effect of the Indo-Jamaican archive as either inconsequential or as a site of indentured ‘exception’. Kirk Meighoo observed the phenomenon of the relegation of Indo-Jamaican communities within Jamaican society, evident in his decision to categorize a sub-heading in his article with the title, ‘The Non-Importance of Indians’ (1999). Meighoo argued that despite being the second largest ethnic group in Jamaica, his references to the Indo-Jamaican community among fellow academics were met by reactions of ‘novelty, skepticism, and/or (slight) hostility/defensiveness’ (1999: 43, 46). Unlike other indentured descendant communities in Trinidad and Tobago or Guyana, Jamaica has experienced a significant post-indenture South Asian expatriates. Situating Indian identity in Jamaica must therefore account for newly arrived South Asian expats from the 1970s, in addition to the indentured population, yet there are significant class differences between the groups (Meighoo 1999: 45).

Tensions exist between Indo-Jamaican descendants and South Asian expatriates who were ‘never-indentured’ (Shepherd, quoted in Meighoo 1999: 46). Yet recent South Asian expatriates to
Jamaica with academic backgrounds and upper-class social access have had access to academic presses, literary journals and local newspapers. South Asian expatriates have subsequently produced the most popular writing about Indo-Jamaicans to Jamaica – not Indo-Jamaican descendants of indentureship. Writings by South Asian expatriates are embedded within caste- and class-based prejudices, as well as ethnonational litmus tests of ‘Indian’ identity in Jamaica, which has often relied upon the trope of an ‘absence’ of Indian culture in inaccurate and disparaging forms of pseudo-ethnographies. A clear example of this is the unfortunately oft-cited *Home Away from Home: 150 Years of Indians in Jamaica* published by the husband-and-wife duo, Ajai and Laxmi Mansingh. Despite its astounding lack of accuracy and degrading and patronizing tone of Indian nationals towards indentured Indo-Jamaican descendants, the text continues to be referenced due to the slim catalogue of Indo-Jamaican historiography. As Meighoo notes, the husband Mansingh ‘arrogantly [suggests] that Indian nationals now provide most of the leadership for Indians in Jamaica’ (1999: 53). The infantilizing terminology is not unique to South Asian expats, but an assumption of Indo-Jamaican ‘absence’ continues to configure epistemic approaches to this archive. These assumptions of scholarly gaps continue to produce and define the field, marked by the dismissal of Indo-Jamaican communities and cultural forms as either entirely absent (Niranjana 2006) and politically inconsequential (Birbalsingh 1989: 98), or within the coded racialized language of assimilation and disappearance (Manuel 2000: 34). A discourse of absence, inconsequence, assimilation and novelty subsequently produces the Subject-effect (Spivak 2010), through which such absences are legitimated. To whom is culture of no consequence, emergent or absent?

The disciplinary loop of exclusion that produces the omission of Indo-Jamaican archives from theories of Indian indentureship is therefore predicated upon a similar discourse of ‘absence’ that informs archival theories of queer sexuality. In the anglophone
Caribbean, queerness has historically been characterized through alternating tropes of spectacular violence, or by common themes of ‘invisibility’. The geopolitical positioning of Jamaica as a state of ‘exceptional violence’ within transnational human rights discourse has produced a paradoxical theme of Caribbean queers as either entirely absent or invisible, or as hyper-visible and spectacularly oppressed. This rehearsed trope of Jamaica as a site of ‘spectacular’ queer violence exists even among Caribbean queers from other islands, who cite Jamaica as less tolerant than their islands (King 2014: 73–74). Yet within the context of queer sexuality discourses regarding Jamaica and scholarship addressing Indo-Caribbean queer cultural productions, Indo-Jamaicans are also exceptionally excluded. Queer approaches to indentured sexuality might follow this model of scarcity and loss or ‘absence/presence’ (Arondekar 2005: 25) through the paucity of same-sex historical material that exists at the level of the historical archive.

The photograph of this nachaniya dancer is not housed within a colonial archive of the British Empire, as many indentureship records are, but in the National Library of Jamaica. The photograph, then, is in what Jacques Derrida deemed a ‘domiciliation’ or a kind of ‘house arrest’ (Derrida and Prenowitz 1995: 10). The photograph of the dancer, transitioning from a private individual to a public educational institution, thus enters a different domain of legibility. To employ the language of Derrida, the nachaniya occupies a place of ‘nonsecret’ as its performance as a popular folk dance has never been considered clandestine. Instead, nachaniya dancing is a common feature in any Indo-Jamaican cultural event. As an Indo-Jamaican art form, nachaniya is brazenly queer – as are its practitioners, who are primarily heterosexual men. Ethnographic studies of nachaniya dancing in Jamaica do not exist – again, a Spivakian Subject-effect of excluding Indo-Jamaican folk music and dance from more popular studies of ethnomusicology while focusing on other sites such as Trinidad and Tobago. But in a few self-published titles by descendants of indentured labourers to
Jamaica, nachaniya is cited as a critical part of community folk traditions. Within both Jamaica and its indentured Indo-Jamaican diaspora, nachaniya continues to occupy a place of prominence at cultural festivals. On social media, Indo-Jamaican descendants proudly post clips of nachaniya dancers or videos, emphasizing the ‘cultural’ importance of the dance. Nachaniya thus problematizes this ‘attachment to sexuality as loss’ (Arondekar 2015: 98) by serving as a site from which to counter discourses of the (in)visibility and exceptionality of queer indentured archival production, as well as the assumption of absences that continue to animate the exclusion of Indo-Jamaican archives.

Nachaniya, then, must be methodologically approached not as a site of queer exception but, perhaps, by reading gender non-normativity as performatively mundane. By considering the photograph of the nachaniya dancer, I intervene and interrupt discourses of Indo-Caribbean history, and especially folk songs and performance, that have positioned Jamaica as an exceptional or rare site of indentured cultural production. In the case of Jamaica, nachaniya is a cultural performance practiced by (presumably) heterosexual men; it is revered culturally as those who dance its form possess a rare knowledge of centuries past, which tether its identity to the post-colonial nationalism of Indo-Jamaican identity. At once, the dance is simultaneously queer and not queer. Queer, in this sense, is transgressing gender – especially within an understanding of what constitutes hegemonic masculinity in Jamaica; but not queer, as in men who dance are generally perceived as heterosexual and therefore their performance is read as simply a preservation of Indo-Jamaican folk culture. Nachaniya subsequently presents an alternative masculinity that destabilizes the figure of the indentured man as the heterosexual machete-wielder.

Curiously, the specific terminology of nachaniya as a genre of indentured folk performance is absent from discourses of Indo-Caribbean identity usually informed by Guyanese and Trinidadian Indo-Caribbean folk culture. In interviews conducted by Shainna
Ali and Tina K. Ramnarine with Guyanese and Trinidadian elders, however, the language of *hijra* – not *nachaniya* – characterizes a male performer dressed in women’s clothing who provides a blessing. Shainna Ali, who sought a genealogical connection between *hijras* of the Indian subcontinent in Guyana, interviewed her grandmother and found that men dressed as women blessed babies following Hindu nine-day ceremonies (2010: 29–30). Based on her respondents’ recollection of *hijras* at Hindu ceremonies and their general disappearance, Ali estimates these figures were common before 1949 until the 1960s (2010: 29–30). Tina K. Ramnarine, in her interview with a Trinidadian man named Satnarine Balkaransingh in the 1990s, noted the role of women participating in *matikor* celebrations in Guyana as a function of their replacement of *hijras* that were not indentured to the colonies:

> There’s a group of people in India – they are an accepted part of society – called hijras. They are basically eunuchs. They go around from place to place at the births of babies and when people have been married […] So these eunuchs […] would be dressed in female clothes and they would go to the home of the bride, and in dance and music make those suggestive expressions to show the young person what to expect […] When the Indians came to Trinidad they didn’t bring eunuchs with them because they came as workers. But to carry on the tradition the women took that same role when brides were being married (1998: 8).

Balkaransingh clearly distinguishes between ‘the Indians (who) came to Trinidad’ and their jettison of eunuchs ‘because they came as workers’ (Ramnarine 1998: 8). In this sense, a peculiar but common line of gendered demarcation is produced: that of the queer body and that of the labouring body; queers are presumably incapable of labour and labourers are presumably not queer. The language of the more recognizable South Asian term ‘*hijra*’, and not the indentured terminology of *nachaniya*, is also notable in this interview. It is important to note that *nachaniya* and
hijra are not interchangeable terms; however, the genealogy of gender-variance as part of indentured folk performance emerges in Balkaransingh and Ali’s accounts. Balkaransingh’s narrative importantly reveals that gender non-normative dancers were constitutive of the matikor, despite the popular belief that origins of the ceremony are exclusively attended by women. Ramnarine, therefore, offers a radically new ethnographic account of the origins of the matikor as including non-normativity at its cultural core (1998: 9). Following Balkaransingh’s cleaving of sexuality and labour is the language that ‘[w]hen the Indians came to Trinidad they didn’t bring eunuchs with them because they came as workers’ (emphasis mine, Ramnarine 1998: 8). The ‘workers’ are presumably male, but the idea of bringing these gender non-normative bodies also signifies a kind of intimacy in stewardship between these kin. If, however, nachaniya finds its performance progenitor among the practices of hijras in Trinidad and Tobago, indeed, ‘they came as workers’ and they brought their gender non-normative practice with them.

‘The best dance you could ever see’

It is curious that within studies of chutney performance, nachaniya is all but absent. Analyses of performance within the Indo-Caribbean diaspora have generally centered on the role of Indo-Caribbean men as musicians and subsequently considered the realm of dance performance as occupied exclusively by women. The subsequent queer cultural practices of folk traditions like nachaniya have been neglected, while the folk music of indenture-ship has centered on the evolution of chutney as an exclusive domain of women performers. In the following texts, Indo-Caribbean men in drag appear as part of cultural analyses about gender and performance. In these texts, drag is mentioned in passing; it is as though the scarce scholarly inclusion of queer chutney dancers might register as an epistemic omission, in one sense, and
in another, the history of indentured Indians in drag might actually continue as a representation of ‘ordinary surplus’ (Arondekar 2015: 111). The inclusion of these citations about drag, then, is unremarkable in the following texts; feminist scholars do not pursue further analysis. I emphasize that feminist scholars do not continue to pursue drag as a site of analysis in the following examples not as a criticism of these scholarly texts but to consider the ordinary ways in which drag is seemingly a quotidian part of indentured and post-indentured performance and culture.

*Mobilizing India: Women, Music and Migration between India and Trinidad* by Tejaswini Niranjana remains one of the most authoritative monographs about the gendered performance of chutney music in Trinidad. In one scene, Niranjana interviews Hardeo Ramsingh, a man from the village of Felicity. Ramsingh tells Niranjana that male dance troupes performed at weddings and other festivals, in addition to court dances and ‘caste dances, such as *Ahir, Kaharwaa, Dhobi*, but none of these had female dancers’ (Niranjana 2006: 97). Niranjana does not pursue or probe this passing mention of the inclusion of female dancers or the genealogy of men-only dance performances. In the summer of 1998, Niranjana attends a chutney show in Arranguez, writing: ‘Hindi film songs and bhangra; chutney with dancing, including a *hijra* [trans-gendered person]; romantic American pop; Jamaican dancehall’ (109). Niranjana’s account of this detail of the presence of a *hijra* is unexplored in the rest of the monograph – a curious omission considering the focus of the monograph is almost exclusively on women’s sexual freedom and the role of chutney within this discourse of sexual liberation. The subcontinental language of *hijra*, which is not popular in the present-day Caribbean as a category of gender identity, is also a peculiar inclusion. One recalls Puar’s ethnography in the 1990s and wonders whether the ‘*hijra*’ was in fact a misreading, or perhaps a legible reading, of the Bollywood Diva duo Sasha. Yet in Puar’s own ethnography, she confesses that registering their gendered identities
was a difficult task without any explicit discussion about Sasha and Vik’s sexual identities (Puar 2001: 1059).

In Patricia Mohammed’s groundbreaking *Gender Negotiations Among Indians in Trinidad: 1917–1947* (2002), Mohammed notes that until the 1950s, women’s roles in the famous Trinidadian epic play of the *Ramleela* were exclusively played by men. These respondents’ details of men participating in public dancing are seemingly unremarkable, and Mohammed presents this gender impersonation as a matter-of-fact status among the post-indentureship community in Trinidad. A woman named Rupanee, describing Indian wedding rituals, recalls, ‘People will sing and dance the whole night. A set of dancers you order – you have to pay a little money for this, is male dancers only, not no ladies – and the best dance you could ever see’ (Mohammed 2002: 149–150). Rupanee’s emphatic praise for the men dancing in drag is an unremarkable detail in *Gender Negotiations*. Although Rupanee expresses praise for the male drag dancers, one is curious about Rupanee’s comment that male performers were ‘the best dance you could ever see’ (Mohammed 2002: 149–150). Mohammed’s respondents throughout the text were either indentured labourers or one generation beyond the plantation, as the system of Indian indentureship concluded technically in 1917, with the phasing out of the system continuing until the early 1920s.

Rupanee’s unremarkable attitude towards men dancing at celebrations – and apparently serving as quite the entertainment – offers another lens for considering visibility within the queer Indo-Caribbean performance archive as one limited to merely silence and repression. Although Mohammed writes about the gender negotiations between men and women, queer bodies or other sexualities are not analyzed within this post-indentureship articulation of gender roles. In another chapter, Mohammed alludes to the prohibition of women dancing in public: ‘Only men were allowed to dance publicly and they danced female parts by dressing up as women, to the accompaniment of drums, accordion,
majira and sometimes songs’ (Mohammed 2002: 198). Here, the description of the performing indentured descendant in drag to the accompaniment of Hindustani instruments evokes the figure of the nachaniya.

In 1900, a version of the word nachaniya appears in The Royal Dictionary published in Lucknow: ‘Nachniya: a dancer, m.’ (Craven 1900: 391). The anglophone transliteration specifies a masculine noun as its definition, anchoring its genealogy as historically a male dancing figure. Throughout the indentured diaspora, varying linguistic configurations of the specific terminology of nachaniya are known as launda ke nach/nachaniya (Suriname), lahanga nach/nachaniya (Fiji) and nachaniya (South Africa). However, its origin story is a bit more ambiguous – as are most origin stories. According to a mix of lore from present-day launda naach dancers in India and nachaniya dancers within the Indo-Caribbean diaspora, women were not allowed to perform in public spaces so men were made to dress and perform in their place. In accounts by other dancers, poor families hired men to dance since they could not afford to hire a female dancer. In Fiji, nachaniya dancers might be openly known within a community as gay men or gender-variant individuals (Shandil 2018). In contrast, nachaniya dancers are often exclusively known as heterosexual men in Jamaica. In Suriname, nachaniya performers evoke a more identifiable brand of drag than the nachaniya performers of Jamaica. While nachaniya dancers might still be hired for auspicious occasions within certain parts of the indentured diaspora, in Jamaica, such a case is no longer commonly a tradition; instead, these performers mostly take the stage at Indo-Jamaican festival events on the island or within its multiple diasporas.

In present-day Bihar and Uttar Pradesh – two regions from which most indentured Indians hail – a performance known as launda naach shares an etymological similarity to nachaniya. Laund nach dancing is a form of entertainment, albeit characterized by an extraordinary level of risk, violence and abuse. The term
launda, however, is connoted as an insult, which includes caste-based connotations of inferiority and effeminacy (Dost 2017: 106), which can be read as a stigma of queerness. As Jainendra Kumar Dost states, naach is not simply a dance form but entails an exhaustive theater of song and dance performed ‘from dusk to dawn in rural Bihar’ (2017: 106). In present-day iterations of naach performance, traditional folk instruments like the dholak, table, jhal (manjeera) and sarangi are used (Dost 2017: 106) – essentially the same instruments common among Indo-Caribbean musicians. Dost argues that the renaming of naach to launda naach was an upper-caste phenomenon meant to stigmatize the lower-caste practice of naach, which was considered rife with vulgarities and a form of low-brow entertainment (2017: 107–108). Dost interestingly writes that naach produces ‘an erotic ambience that will keep the audience hooked to the entire performance’ (2017: 108). The present-day nachaniya performance possesses this erotic dimension, particularly through Kathakali-esque eye movements, gyrating at the floor and exaggerated hip movements. Dost’s observation that the dancer’s role is ‘not to sexually attract the audience but to charge the environment erotically’ (2017: 108) emphasizes the role of erotic dance as a caste-based stigma. Throughout his article, Dost makes critical arguments for refraining from the language of launda naach and its latest iteration in the popular bidesiya, the latter of which has been reclaimed among the Indian indentured diaspora as a synonym for ‘migrant’. Dost, however, argues that by deploying language such as bidesiya, the theater of naach is sanitized for upper castes.

One approach to the genealogy of nachaniya might impulsively locate the hijra as its queer subcontinental ancestor; but queer genealogies are rarely ever that straight. As Gayatri Reddy has argued in the groundbreaking With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India (2005), hijra identity is more than a sexual or gendered identity but consists of specific kinship networks and modes of sociality that are not easily reducible to
sexual acts. ‘Hijra’ is not simply a subcontinental equivalent of ‘transgender’, as Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy (2014) have argued, since these terms must be problematized with respect to geopolitical circuits of labour and capital that inform LGBT rights discourses. Although the terminology of ‘transgender’ is not an exclusive Global North identity, discourses of gender non-normativity cannot be reduced to universal transnational terms – particularly when these terms are often articulated in the hegemonic language of English (Dutta and Roy 2014: 321, 323). Gender non-normativity, whether in the case of an embodied performance like nachaniya or within the kinship networks of hijra, must therefore be carefully differentiated. Tendencies to homogenize all gender variance results in the notion that all gender/sexual practices ‘are simply assumed to be intelligible and classifiable’ in either cis/trans or homo/trans binaries (Dutta and Roy 2014: 328).

Nachaniya more likely represents a genealogical kink within indentured history. The archival backwards glance of sexuality often relies upon tracing the dust of materials for a eureka moment authorizing present-day sexual minorities (Arondekar 2005: 16), like ethnonationalist tendencies to locate Indo-Caribbean cultural practices within the subcontinent. Yet each of these methodologies often fails to recognize the resignification of specific sexual and cultural practices within and among the diaspora, as well as the role of diaspora in transforming and disrupting earlier forms of cultural traditions. Such fantasies of reconstructing ‘homeland’ practices in the diaspora characterize the indentured diaspora, which must contend with the trauma of rupture (Mishra 1996: 422). Generations later, the performance of nachaniya persists among mostly heterosexual men who might find nothing queer about their culture. Men, essentially, are performing a form of 200-year-old drag. The subversion of gender, in Butlerian terms, is heightened by the parodic nature of the nachaniya performance. But the parodic nature of nachaniya is not
in its queer performance; rather, it is the cultural performing of Indian culture instead, it is the performing of gender or sexuality.

AN ARCHIVE IN DRAG

All archives are arguably in drag. Colonial registers and queer radical archives alike perform the work of creation: lives are curated, fragments are magnified for their truth-toting potential, and narratives are crafted according to the backward teleological glance. In a sense, nachaniya is not only the performance of gendered and sexual non-normativity, it is also a performing of culture. If gender is constituted through an act of repetition (Butler 2006: xiv), then indentured Indian diasporic identity is subject to the same form of repetitive gestures that characterize its archive. Reading nachaniya as a form of drag offers one method of approaching the archive of Indian indentureship through a queer optic as a way to expand an understanding of gender variant performance within this marginalized history. But more importantly than recognizing this performance of gender is the performance of an Indian identity, which deploys a series of bodily acts to signify a cultural identity. The relative obscurity of nachaniya represents the limits to theorizing an archive of indenture that has failed to index Jamaica as a site of significant Indo-Caribbean folk performance, as well as an archive of Indian indentureship that has insisted on the rigidity of gender norms when the historical archive proves otherwise. If ‘gender performance allegorizes a loss it cannot grieve’ (Butler 1993: 25), nachaniya is an exemplar paradigm for considering the indentured archive and its diasporas through the corporeal repetition of its cultural performance. Just as ‘drag allegorizes some set of melancholic incorporative fantasies that stabilize gender’ (Butler 1993: 25), nachaniya allegorizes a diasporic fantasy that stabilizes indentured Indian culture. As Butler has cautioned, the existence of heterosexual drag performers precludes drag itself from
serving as paradigmatic of homosexuality (1993: 25). The iterative cultural allegory of drag thus unveils the paradox of performativity embedded within cultural practices as possessing unstable and ever-shifting resignifications that subsequently destabilize the fantasy of unmediated and authentic cultural practices. The iterative power of nachaniya seemingly consolidates its prominence as a repetition of culture rather than a repetition of gender non-normativity. And yet, the gender non-normativity embedded within the nachaniya performance presents queerness as a genealogical embodiment of Indian indentureship. Amidst uncertain origins and competing lore of nachaniya, such vagaries produce an allegorical moment of their own about the mythic stability of cultural retention/loss while enabling the possibilities for considering the same fantasies of the parameters of ‘normativity’ – whether cultural or gendered.

If gender, as Judith Butler suggested, is purely a repetition of acts, we might consider culture, too, as a form of repetition with its mythical genealogical origins. The uncertain origins of nachaniya as either an alternative to women performers or as intentionally devoid of women mark it as a queer Indo-Caribbean cultural form, since most scholarship about Indo-Caribbean performance hasprivileged the role of women within chutney music and its oft-cited origins within the all-women space of the matikor wedding tradition. Indo-Caribbean men are heralded as popular singers and musicians but are nearly entirely absent from popular discourses of folk dance. In Jamaica, men – not women – bear the cultural custodian burden of transmitting this generational performance. If, however, nachaniya has always had queer origins, in its subsequent generational iterations, nachaniya has been straightened by its very practitioners: heterosexual men. The dance thus inhabits a doubling of the liminal space of queer performativity – a meta-text whereby an ostensibly straight man performs a queer character, but with neither the performer nor performance registering as necessarily queer.
The queer potential of nachaniya is punctured by its relegation as a cultural reading; conversely, a queer reading might not register that such heterosexual Indo-Caribbean men wield such gender non-normativity. Yet nachaniya confounds existing notions of an ‘absent’ queer indentured archive, and particularly one that is ‘invisible’. Instead, nachaniya proves to be a ‘radical abundance’ (Arondekar 2015: 99) of a cultural folk form that is neither just cultural nor queer. Most ‘homophobic’ anglophone Caribbean discourse in Jamaica has never considered the instance of this popular and common folk form. Nearly 200 years after the commencement of indentureship in the Caribbean, I would argue that the art form of nachaniya is revered in Jamaica for its romanticized notion of ‘preserving’ indentured Indian culture. The effect of nachaniya as a performance produces a kind of bodily repetition that registers as ‘cultural’ despite its mimesis as a performance of gender non-normativity by primarily heterosexual men. Performing Indian-ness is, in effect, the parody of nachaniya – its mimetic effect is not of gender but as a kind of 200-year-old cultural production that emphasizes the mythic origins of Indian folk dance on the island.

CONCLUSION

Queer bodies and citizenship in the anglophone Caribbean have historically occupied a place of paradox within academic, activist and popular discourse. But perhaps in the case of the emblematic nachaniya dancer – who is hyper-visible and unmistakably queer in the non-normative sense of the term – this intervenes within a discourse that deploys tropes of ‘visibility’ and ‘acceptance’ into crisis. Nachaniya problematizes existing cross-dressing discourses because its ‘crossing’ potential is kept at bay by the cultural domain of its performance. The hyper-visibility of the gender non-normativity embedded within the dancer’s performative acts and gestures is confounded by its cultural legibility. But nachaniya
also presents a critical point from which to problematize discourses of gender non-normativity and cross-dressing: the space of cultural performance occupies both the public and the private spheres, a demarcation that nachaniya cleaves.

We might consider queerness as deeply embedded at the level of the indentured jahaji odyssey rather than as an exceptional part of its archive. Rather than considering the queering of Indentureship Studies, we might consider the discursive forces that have produced its straightening. In the case of Indian Indentureship Studies, broadly, and in the case of Indo-Jamaican history more specifically, the imperative to continue engaging with this archive is not only a necessary historical undertaking but a decidedly political one. Nachaniya, then, is not a site of exception but a site of the ordinary within an archive of Indo-Jamaican folk performance that remains marginalized within Indentureship Studies. As an Indo-Jamaican cultural form and a queer folk practice, nachaniya intervenes in a discourse that considers the concept of gender normativity as ‘crucial to the survival and perpetuation of the Indo-Caribbean minority community’ (Khan 2016: 264). The nachaniya thus unsettles figurations of Indo-Caribbean masculinity that have relied upon rigid plantation-based stereotypes of heteronormative genders and sexualities. However, rather than throw assumptions about gender normativity into crisis, nachaniya also demonstrates the critical need for Indo-Jamaican archives to be considered as an under-theorized site of archival production. Subsequently, sites of smaller indentured descendant populations such as Jamaica – which remain generally excluded from hegemonic framings that position ‘Indo-Caribbean’ – can destabilize an archive of sexuality as ‘nothing to see’. Engagement with archives of sexuality is, in fact, a seductive endeavour. The archive is already an erotic site of engagement – affectively charged with power and pleasure as registers of legibility for bodies at the nexus of sexual and gender non-normativity. But perhaps Indentureship Studies,
which seeks its seduction in the form of ship registers and emigration passes, might reckon with the narrow epistemologies that have precluded queerness at the site of the historical archive. From considering nachaniya as a queer archive in plain sight, we can move towards a queer theory of indenture.

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