Research spotlight
Trans-oceanic erotics: sexing indentureship

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ABSTRACT
Through creative speculation and intervention, this research project probes the ‘coolie homoerotic’ (Wahab 2019) as a critical reflection on the place of the homoerotic and queerness within the trans-oceanic lifeworld of coolie indentureship. The four artworks presented are informed by a series of questions that might help to build a platform for queering indentureship and trans-oceanic space beyond identity recovery and respectability politics. In this regard, the work in progress is aimed at sexing indenture by (1) focusing on Brown same-sex sexual intimacies and erotic relations on coolie ships, as a way of undoing the historically constructed disconnect between the categories ‘sex’ and ‘indentured labour’, and (2) critically engaging the colonial heteropatriarchal discourse of ‘sex/gender/sexuality’ that continues to condition the unthinkability of same-sex relations in the context of indentureship and its legacies.

KEYWORDS
Indentureship, erotics, trans-oceanic, coolie homoerotic, intimacies

Histories of British colonial indentureship remain submerged, silenced and marginalized in global history. During the official period of British indentureship (1838–1917) in the post-slavery Caribbean, over 2 million Indian indentured labourers or ‘coo-lies’ were brought to the region to work on sugar, cocoa and

DOI:10.13169/jofstudindentleg.2.2.0149
coffee plantations. While the system of labour was promoted as more humane than slavery, it was riddled with reports of abuse, neglect, misery and death aboard ships and on the plantations. There is an alarming paucity of historical scholarship on the sexual and erotic circuits which might have helped labourers survive the violence of this labour migration regime. In addition, the scholarship that pertains to gender and sexuality within the context of Indian indentureship is land-locked and pivoted on experiences on Caribbean plantations. There is no scholarly work which focuses on desire and sexual intimacies during the horrific and terrifying four-month trans-oceanic voyages across the Indo-Atlantic Ocean world. Furthermore, the limited body of scholarly work on indentureship that focuses on gender and sexuality tend to centre a heteronormative perspective, reproducing a consistent silence about homoerotic intimacies within the context of the ‘cooie odyssey’ (Dabydeen 1988). My research aims to address this gap by reimagining the trans-oceanic realm as a scholarly vector of queer counter-archival potential.

Through creative speculation and intervention, I probe the ‘cooie homoerotic’ (Wahab 2019) as a critical reflection on the place of the homoerotic and queerness within the trans-oceanic life-world of cooie indentureship. The project is theoretically situated at the ‘oceanic turn’ (Winkiel 2019) in global history – particularly focused on the categorical ‘oceanic South’ (Samuelson and Lavery 2019) – and anchored at the interdisciplinary conjunction of global and postcolonial studies of indentureship (as a historically constructed trans-oceanic formation) (Bahadur 2013), hydrocolonialism (i.e., colonialization on and by means of water; see Hofmeyer 2019) and queer studies (Eng 2011; Tinsley 2008). It departs from land-centric perspectives of the study of sexuality and erotics to investigate the eroto-political possibilities of desire, pleasure, intimacy and survival for Indian indentured labourers during trans-oceanic voyages under British colonialism – an extension of what Gooptu (2022) refers to as the ‘watery archives’. Especially since there is limited
scholarship on same-sex relations and intimacies during the colonial period (Ellapen 2018; Khan 2016; Tinsley 2008), this research is overdue in terms of the need to historicize the queer Caribbean from a trans-oceanic perspective. Moreover, the research focus on the understudied links between the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans is an important and crucial shift away from the North Atlantic centrism that dominates global oceanic history, potentially offering new and exciting conceptual and methodological challenges. The main analytic question that frames the research is: How might we think of trans-oceanic/hydrocolonial movement as conditioning the possibilities of ‘cooie’ homoerotic relations in the context of a violent global regime of governing the shipment of colonial labour, especially when the ocean has historically served as a site for the suspension of legal and social law?

To explore this question, I speculate on archival documentation (see Sendall 1898) that references relations of (alleged) ‘sodomy’ between male Indian indentured labourers and with British seamen aboard British ships making their Indo-Atlantic voyages from India to the Caribbean (between 1838 and 1917). My creative analysis of the documentation centres on the ‘cooie’ ship as a metaphor/chronotope for various modalities of queerness through the imposition and suspension of laws and rules of sociality and moral order. The various fragilities and vulnerabilities of the sea voyages would have served to produce forms of estrangement and instability that might have opened up opportunities for queer social relations (i.e., spaces of release, pleasure and erotic intimacy/kinship) as well as opportunities for British officials to reinstate discipline – itself a ritual of colonial intimacy.

I employ the methodology of ‘critical fabulation’ (Hartman 2008) to creatively engage the archival records and speculate on the possibilities for tracing residues of homoerotic desire and resistance to colonial violence (or what Winkiel (2019) terms ‘hydro-imaginaries’). In this sense, I follow Chow and Bushman (2019: 97) who develop the concept of ‘hydro-eroticism’ to
capture the queer ‘erotic connectivities that bodies of water foster, while also remaining mindful of how fluid affiliations are policed, inhibited, or persecuted’. My goal is therefore to contemplate an ‘aesthetic eroto-political field of knowledge production in relation to the violence and indignities of indentureship’ (Wahab 2019) or the inter-constitutive proximities between the queer coolie erotics and British colonial eroto/queerphobia as aqueous entanglements. In doing so, the research recasts indentureship as a site of queer potential; a move that counters the deeply heteropatriarchal and homo/sex/phobic structuring of knowledge in the colonial archive (Marshall, Murphy and Tortorici 2014) and existing postcolonial scholarship on this labour regime.

The four paintings presented here are unfinished excerpts of the abovementioned project. Each painting stages and is informed by a series of questions that might help to build a platform for queering indentureship and trans-oceanic spaces beyond identity recovery and respectability politics. In this regard, the collection in progress is aimed at sexing indenture by: (1) focusing on Brown same-sex sexual intimacies and erotic relations on coolie ships, as a way of undoing the historically constructed disconnect between categories of ‘sex’ and ‘indentured labour’, and (2) critically engaging the colonial heteropatriarchal discourse of ‘sex/gender/sexuality’ that continues to condition the unthinkability of same-sex relations in the context of indentureship and its legacies.

Figure 1 They Came in Ships: This painting is inspired by the title of Mahadai Das’ poem of the same name. While Das’ (2010) poem depicts the coolie odyssey and its legacies in the Guyanese national context, this painting plays on the title to shift the focus from arrival to sexual intimacy, from odyssey to queer worldmaking, and from labour to erotic desire. Might the two entwined figures in intimate embrace, made up of a multitude of overlapping (coolie) ship masts, provoke us to think of the untold stories of queer and sexual intimacy on the many coolie ships
(e.g., Hesperus, Mersey, Fatel Razack, Whitby, etc.) that routed the Indo-Atlantic Ocean circuit (including return journeys)?

Figure 2 *Nothing Between Us: A Sex of Our Own*: Deliberately painted to visualize coolie same-sex sex (which remains absented in institutional archives and mainstream studies of indentureship), *Nothing Between Us: A Sex of Our Own* depicts two bodies in ecstatic embrace onboard a coolie ship in the dark of night. In queering the coolie ship, this painting not only speculates on coolie homoeroticism, but homoerotic possibilities across racial lines – between coolie subjects and white or black crew members. It is the possibility of Brown–black intimacies aboard the coolie ships (as a precursor to plantation intimacies) that I long to know about and conjure as sites of racial and sexual crossings.

Figure 3 *The Other Sex Ratio*: While postcolonial and feminist scholars have focused on colonial panics around the heteronormative male–female ‘sex ration’ of labour recruitment (especially in the early phases of indenture), *The Other Sex Ratio* questions the archival absence of same-sex relations on coolie ships – as another ratio – between indentured Indian men and British male authorities/crew members, even within the context of violent colonial discipline and punishment. The painting also responds critically to the recuperative Jahaji-Bhai (ship brotherhood) Indo-nationalist discourse that narrowly defined same-sex intimacy and kinning in heteropatriarchal terms – devoid of same-sex sexual and erotic connection. What are the generative potentials of the other sex ratio for undoing mainstream studies of indentureship and postcolonial nationalism?

Figure 4 *Ecologies of Desire/Feeling*: Finally, *Ecologies of Desire/Feeling* seeks to raise questions about how we might think about Indo-Atlantic oceanic space as a site of ecstatic queer coolie memory, generative sexual excess and heated sensuous longings. It begins a methodological contemplation of how to
frame the project of queering indentureship against the endur-
ing legacies of respectability and sexphobic scholarship when
the starting point for critical intervention is queer desire.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Figure 1  *They Came in Ships* (Acrylic, 2.5’ × 3’).
Figure 2  *Nothing Between Us: A Sex of Our Own* (acrylic, 2.5’ × 3’).

Figure 3  *The Other Sex Ratio* (acrylic, 2.5’× 3’).
Figure 4  *Ecologies of Desire/Feeling* (acrylic and oil pastels, 6" × 6").