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# The Queer Potential: (Indo-)Caribbean Feminisms and Heteronormativity

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## Abstract

*This division of our communities and allegiances is a typically colonial strategy. It not only breaks up our movements and the force of our resistances, but breaks those bodies that are marginalized on multiple fronts, making them disappear.*

—Proma Tagore

Over the past ten years there has been remarkable growth in studies on sexuality in the Caribbean. One of the most underrepresented areas of these analyses, however, remains the intersection between queerness and Indo-Caribbean women. In general, much of the scholarship concerning Indo-Caribbean women remains tied to indentureship.

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## Introduction

In *Maharani's Misery: Narratives of a Passage from India to the Caribbean*, Verene Shepherd details the disciplinary approach within Caribbean Studies to the discussion of Indian women and indentureship:

Two conflicting, even dialectical arguments...One is that the Indian women's experience of emigration and indentureship was one of extreme hardship, exploitation and "sexploitation". The other...is that emigration was of significant material benefit to those who left India...[and that] emigration was a vehicle of female [(sexual)] emancipation...(2002, xvii).

As Shepherd's classification of these arguments as "dialectical" shows, the line between these arguments is in fact very blurry and better off undefined, as indentureship consisted of both prospects and barriers for even an individual woman.

However, as Alison Donnell writes in *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*, this discourse of both struggle and resistance has been altered in the twentieth century to find Indo-Caribbean women most often "represented as docile, loyal and submissive" (2006, 172). Caribbean feminisms have made important interventions into this narrative in order to complicate and broaden these representations.

What I aim to do here is not simply to acknowledge the existence of interlocking social and political categories of identity and experience, but, rather, to emphasize the possible contributions of a queer framework to Caribbean feminisms in order to make use of these differences. A queer [(Indo-)Caribbean] feminist reading and approach is fundamental in this moment because it is about the presence of a politic, instead of the continued disappearance of lives, desires, and identities. However, it is important to note that my analysis does not end with identity. And for this, I draw on Andrea Smith's article "Queer Theory and Native Studies" to illustrate the value in these interdisciplinary conversations.

Smith imagines queer theory enriching Native Studies through challenging the heteropatriarchal foundations of oppression (2010, 60), but she also sees Native Studies offering the politics of settler colonialism to queer theory. In a similar trade-off, I foresee the possibility of Caribbean Studies offering queer theory the particular lessons of its postcolonial history and present. I will explore this more below through Donnell's iteration of "dougla poetics."

Before that, however, it is methodologically important to look at how Smith begins her piece by highlighting the way "queer theory has made a critical intervention in LGBT studies by moving past simple identity politics to interrogate the *logics* of heteronormativity" [emphasis added] (2010, 41). She goes on to cite Michael Warner, "[queer theory] rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal" (2010,

41). My interest does not reside in oppositional politics for the sake of opposition, but rather in the ways queering Caribbean feminist discourse can actually work discursively to connect marginalities and political issues beyond sexual identity and liberal human rights.

Thus, this exploration will take up discourses of Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality through a queer lens by mapping the arguments made by Caribbean feminists concerning Hindu all-female pre-wedding fertility rituals, known as *matikor* ceremonies, and the transition of these performances into the realm of chutney music in Trinidad beginning in the late 1980s. As Donnell puts it, "the erotic power of *matikor* [means that]...Indian-Caribbean's women's writing and critical voices become visible on their own terms" (2006, 177). To me, this is what can be developed and extended to include *all* aspects of Indo-Caribbean women's experiences. I diverge from Donnell's analysis, however, because I do not take up *matikor* as a unique "paradigm" (2006, 177), but instead, I imagine *matikor* spaces and discourse to act more as an allegory within Caribbean feminism, one that allows for queered conversation. I will conceive of it here as a discursive tool that is rooted in the erotic emancipation, sacred elements, and communal connections of the *matikor* space, as well as the non-normative embodiments, behaviors, and imaginings it can create for Indo-Caribbean women. This is the potential and value I see most in work on *matikor* and chutney spaces, as it acknowledges the histories of Indo-Caribbean women, and offers an epistemology that allows for all embodiments of this subjecthood. This exploration also hinges on the present moment in Caribbean feminism in which Indo-Caribbean women remain comparatively underrepresented, silent or silenced in terms of queer identities, behaviors, and experiences, and are working to build connections with Afro-Caribbean feminists throughout the region and diaspora.

By engaging with six key texts on the subject, I hope to offer an overview of the discourse and an analysis of both the troubling and promising aspects of this material, before outlining the potential that can arise when the most moving and transgressive pathways of this work are carried forward into a politics of queer Caribbean feminism. I believe that there is strategic potential in a *matikor* politic that can help to define and sustain the formation of a distinct *and* interconnected queer (Indo-)Caribbean feminist discourse.

To begin, I will structure my analysis according to thematic development. I shall begin with and focus heavily on Rosanne Kanhai's groundbreaking collection *Matikor: The Politics of Identity for Indo-Caribbean Women*. Kanhai's introduction, Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen's "Power, Gender and Chutney," as well as Kanhai's "The Masala Stone Sings," provide useful starting points and frameworks for the discussion. Following these, Tejaswini Niranjana's article, "Left to the Imagination: Indian Nationalisms and Female Sexuality in Trinidad," offers a unique perspective from her position as an Indian national. Then, Brinda Mehta's *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani* presents a brief analysis of Caribbean literature and the potential of *matikor* within that field. In her book, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Culture*, Gayatri Gopinath poses important questions on the chutney debate in relation to heterosexism in Niranjana's work, as well as the role of

home/nation in defining Indo-Caribbean women. Finally, I will end with a discussion of Donnell's text mentioned above, which outlines a theory of double agency for Indo-Caribbean women, advocates a matikor paradigm within Caribbean feminism, and raises the question of the role of a dougla poetic.

The article concludes with an analysis of the political economy and its influences on the discourse of matikor/chutney. It proves valuable to consider the role of the nation and its impact on the epistemological development of Indo-Caribbean female subjectivity and feminism. The work of M. Jacqui Alexander, Jasbir Puar, and Anne McClintock will be used briefly for this exploration. It is my hope that this analysis will offer an outline of key work on contemporary Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality, and an impetus to build on these contributions in ways that challenge the heteronormativity of Caribbean feminist writing and postcolonial approaches to nationalism.

**Matikor to chutney: 'Tradition and its transgressors'**

*...when these women do begin to write they stare their origins of imposed degradation and humiliation in the face, in order to find the wellsprings of their creativity.*

—Rosanne Kanhai

It is crucial to begin with the work of Rosanne Kanhai in *Matikor* for the simple reason that such a collection of Indo-Caribbean women's writing has not existed before or since its publication. This text informs the inquiry here based on its deployment of the space and ideology of matikor with the explicit purpose of offering an opening for the creative development of Indo-Caribbean feminism with sexuality at its center. Since the publication of this text, there has been notable growth in Caribbean feminist theorizing on the practice of matikor and its successive cultural entity—chutney.

In explaining her approach to and objective for the collection, Kanhai provides a definition of the matikor ceremonies:

This festival originates in the oral culture which Indian indentured immigrants brought to the Caribbean, etched in their minds and bodies...**Matikor** provided a rare opportunity for...women to claim a space of celebration and articulation...They shared gossip and jokes, sang traditional songs, and performed dances that were celebratory and sexually suggestive. **Matikor** was a place of healing where women could act out their resistance against the degradation and depersonalization imposed upon them by the ruling class. As a grassroots Hindu festival, communal religious rituals were embedded in **matikor** activities, thus bringing together the sacred and the profane, the carnal and the spiritual, the political and the social (1999, xi).

She explains her title choice by identifying the uniqueness of the iconic space of matikor rituals in which "Indian women do not carry the burden of minority status" within the Afro-centric context of the Caribbean (Kanhai 1999, xi-xii). However, while recognizing the importance and rarity of this space, Kanhai admits that she does not feel as though such an entity exists in the same way for contemporary Indo-Caribbean women (1999, xii).

Her negotiation of the historical foundation of these rituals and their current emancipatory potential begins with the image of the Bhowjee, defined as the literal translation “from the Bhojpuri dialect (brought from India by the immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century) as sister-in-law and is being used here to denote the woman who lives according to the Indian traditions in the Caribbean” (1999, 235). She explains that this familiar Caribbean trope represents both the Indo-Caribbean woman’s oppression *and* creativity (1999, 209).

But within the context of modernity, Kanhai wonders where the voice of this woman, so steeped in oral tradition, goes when literary expression takes precedence (1999, 210). Kanhai identifies her main concern as being “less with the perceived silence than with the coming into voice” (1999, 211). The critical opportunity at hand for the definition of an Indo-Caribbean feminist discourse is precisely what Kanhai distinguishes as her purpose: to examine what resources are being drawn on by Indo-Caribbean women in their creative expressions, and to understand what role feminism plays in this development (1999, 211).

While Kanhai primarily examines artistic productions of Indo-Caribbean women, she also details and analyzes the history and possibility that inform these creations. In doing so, she explains the following:

After sixty to seventy years of indentureship, Indian communities began the process of forging a more positive identity. Educational opportunities, job possibilities, and social status of individuals and families were contingent upon *assimilation* into Western culture, thus discouraging the retention of the Indian heritage. Hindu and Muslim practices prevailed, however, although they were often conducted with a measure of secrecy and/or embarrassment [emphasis added] (1999, 212).

Here, then, we see both the retention of cultural norms and practices, but also the socially divisive splitting that has become naturalized for Indo-Caribbean subjects. In the context of this social position, Kanhai explains, as seen in the epigraph to this section, Indo-Caribbean women work from the very root of their oppression—which often means, their sexuality.

Before delving further into this point, however, Kanhai explains the historical opposition between Indo- and Afro-Caribbean peoples, “thrown together to compete for resources and ontological security in the shadow of white domination” (1999, 218). She quotes well-known Caribbean scholar Selwyn Ryan to point out the hostility that has existed between the groups, whether it be toward traditionally Indian spirituality and rituals, or the “awkward and vulgar” mannerisms of Africans (Kanhai 1999, 218). These racial divisions have been firmly embedded in general Caribbean politics, and specifically within the party politics of countries such as Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago. It has also made the creation of a cohesive, reflexive, and realistic Caribbean feminism incredibly challenging (Kanhai 1999, 218). Nevertheless, Kanhai believes that the poetry and perhaps wider literary contributions of Indo-Caribbean women hold the potential for

“a receptivity to creative inspiration from the dominant Afro-Caribbean culture” (1999, 219). She notes that Indo-Caribbean women have to lead severed lifestyles in which they are constantly negotiating popular culture and the culture of their familial traditions (Kanhai 1999, 219).

In one example of the sexualized creative transgression Bhowjees have always managed to produce within these realities, Kanhai turns to chutney. She explains that before the 1960s, Indo-Caribbeans maintained distance from calypso<sup>1</sup>, so for Indo-Caribbean women in the 1980s to defy this tradition was groundbreaking (Kanhai 1999, 220). Through an examination of poetry, Kanhai describes how these acts “[show] the courage of a Bhowjee who uses the calypso stage to make a public act of gender and ethnic liberation...[and how she] celebrate[s] the woman claiming freedom, her body itself becoming an expression of art, an act of creativity” (1999, 220-221). This explicit and conscious inclusion of one’s corporeal being within a creative and political statement is an example of the use of the erotic in Indo-Caribbean women’s lives, and in this case, scholarship. It also makes clear that the erotic includes much more than sexual acts and can offer a fuller awareness of one’s emotional and sensory encounters.

Kanhai’s examination of the possibility of matikor ceremonies, spaces, and politics begins with the question, “Steeped as she is in her community and culture, how does [Bhowjee] maintain the forms of creativity that are inherent to her heritage and at the same time liberate herself from the domination inscribed in this heritage?” (1999, 226). To begin that investigation Kanhai adds the following to her earlier definition of the ceremonies:

Bhowjees got the opportunity to adorn themselves with jewelry and saris and to rub sendoor in each other’s hair...Kept within the community, these activities presented no lasting threat, for ultimately they remained under the supervision of the male social managers. Women were expected to return to their defined roles after a brief indulgence...(1999, 226).

This passage displays not only the community building and regulatory structures of matikor ceremonies, but importantly for this paper, it notes the intimacy between Indo-Caribbean women that opens up the historical and contemporary possibilities for queer encounters. In other words, acknowledging, expressing, and uplifting the erotic experiences of Indo-Caribbean women allows for a reflection in sacred cultural terms that does not force a rupture between queer subjects and their collective social history and present.

Here we see connections between the transformation of matikor rituals into chutney performances, and the discourses of morality and control surrounding Indo-Caribbean women’s bodies and sexuality. Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen begins her piece, “Power, Gender and Chutney,”<sup>2</sup> by explaining her introduction to these ceremonies as a young Muslim girl growing up in Trinidad (1999, 194). Once her initial shock at the explicitly

<sup>1</sup> “Calypso singing is a predominantly working-class, male, Afrocentered activity and many calypsos, in their celebration of Afro-Caribbean maleness, are openly derogatory to women” (220).

<sup>2</sup> Originally published as “Viewpoint” in the *Sunday Express* newspaper, December 1990.

sexual nature of these spaces shifts into an appreciation, she describes the freedom that is opened up without the ramifications of patriarchal retribution because of their female exclusivity and their “legitimacy” as religious ceremonial rites (Baksh-Soodeen 1999,195). Baksh-Soodeen writes about the origins of matikor as “spaces that [were] probably fought for centuries ago by Indian women to collectively express their sexuality within Hinduism...These dances were all brought by our foremothers from the rural lower caste communities of India to Trinidad and Tobago” (1999, 195). She goes on to say that while the dances are still mainly performed by “lower class women” they “have come to be practiced at Hindu weddings of all classes, whatever their original caste background” (Baksh-Soodeen 1999, 195).

In her exploration of the controversy that developed around chutney music in Trinidad, Baksh-Soodeen acknowledges and explores the public/private debate at the center of the conversation. While the songs and dances performed originate from the long-standing and sacred tradition of matikor ceremonies, “The dances which men were not supposed to view, far less participate in, are now in full view of five to ten thousand people, and further, men and women dance together as they combine the dances performed by men and women at Hindu weddings” (Baksh-Soodeen 1999, 196). She goes on to say “[that] to certain elements of the Trinidad and Tobago Hindu society, this phenomenon represents the loss of control by the individual Hindu male and the male-dominant Hindu community over the sexuality of the Hindu woman” (Baksh-Soodeen 1999, 196).

Much is at play in this summary of the chutney controversy. First, the imposed split between private and public has long been criticized and debunked within dominant discourses of feminism as a way of forcibly confining women, their sexuality and their work to a realm of non-recognition. In this discourse, the public/private separation is also immersed in racial politics. A definite part of the hysteria arose due to the association of public realms of Caribbean life with the dominant African population, and how this was understood as threatening to the Indo-Caribbean population through the purported vulnerability of women via displays of sexuality. This will be elaborated upon further below.

In direct connection to this fear is Baksh-Soodeen’s explanation of the middle- to upper-class conservative Hindu reaction in Trinidad. She explains the anxiety that arose due to the loss of control of patriarchal power structures, and she goes on to say that this vocal segment of the population mistakenly sees

Hindu culture as something which is puritanical, which operates on the asexual philosophy and practice. Surely this is total denial of the powerful sexuality which underpins the Hindu religion and culture...They talk about Hindu culture as something that is static—it originated in India and, as Indians in the diaspora, we are merely passive guardians of this thing called Hindu culture (Baksh-Soodeen 1999, 197).

This passage highlights the dismissal and/or erasure of an understanding of sacred sexuality.

But this passage also points to the imaginary fixing of Hinduism, and more broadly Indo-Trinidadian women in a time/space particularity that requires a specific embodiment of morality, duty, and sexuality. In her examination of Native American communities, Smith writes that “the appeal to ‘tradition’ often serves as the origin story that buttresses heteropatriarchy and other forms of oppression...while disavowing its political investments” (2010, 46-47). By understanding these roles and behaviors as unchanging or unchangeable, conservative, wealthy “defenders of authenticity” claim the righteousness of Indianness, and expel supposedly wayward Indo-Caribbean women from an established community and history.

Kanhai explains the development of chutney as follows:

Some younger Indo-Trinidadian women are rejecting the secrecy and confinement of **Matikor** and...have developed a performance, called **Chutney**, which combines religious and secular singing with **Matikor**-type dancing. These public, overtly sexual dances are being performed by young, mainly lower-income Indo-Caribbean women who refuse to regard their bodies as sources of secret shame. Paradoxically, they are accused of “bringing down shame” (1999, 226).

This is a powerful example of the contemporary efforts by Indo-Caribbean women to escape “domination inscribed in [their] heritage” (Kanhai 1999, 226), as well as their unapologetic insertion into a nationally recognized mode of cultural and political production. Kanhai sees a liberation movement. She feels that “No longer can the stereotype of the docile, sexually passive Bhowjee hold sway” (Kanhai 1999, 227). I believe that it is possible for this insertion to reaffirm stereotypes of Indo-Caribbean women as sexually manipulative *and* passive, as they have existed simultaneously in the past. Although I do agree with Kanhai in her assertion that “These women expand the **Matikor** space, drawing creative energy from their familiar surroundings...demanding the right to celebrate their female bodies in a way that denies neither their Indian heritage nor their claim to elements of Afrocentric cultural expression available to them” (1999, 227). And it is this expression of interlocking and transformative social, cultural and political positionality that is captured in the allegory of matikor—and that can offer room for a comprehensive queer discourse.

### **Modernity and nationalism**

Before directly addressing the heteronormative aspects of this discourse, it is important to acknowledge the relationship of Indo-Caribbean womanhood to conceptions of modernity and nationalism. Thus, in a remarkably different entry-point to the discourse, the work of Tejaswini Niranjana’s “Left to the Imagination” sets out to challenge the dominant understanding of “the modern Indian woman” through comparison via a context that does not directly favor Western or metropolitan spaces (1999, 223). Niranjana focuses much of her analysis on the history of indentured Indians in Trinidad and their negotiations with modernity. She begins by explaining that for nationalists in India, modern subjectivity was accessed through class status, but for working-class indentured laborers it was gained through their “geographical displacement” (Niranjana 1999, 231). The reaction to this dynamic by nationalists was that the laborers’ modernity “would have to be considered an illegitimate modernity because it had not passed

through, been formed by, the story of the nation-in-the-making” (Niranjana 1999, 232). Therefore, the abolition of indentureship seemed to be the only way of dealing with this unconventional progress.

And on whose backs should such a campaign be waged? Why, Indian women in the Caribbean, of course. For nationalists,

The manifest immorality and depravity of the indentured woman would not only bring down the system but also serve to reveal more clearly the contrasting image of the virtuous and chaste woman at home. As [Mohandas K.] Gandhi asserted, “Women, who in India would never touch wine, are sometimes found lying dead-drunk on the roads”. The point is not that women never drank in India...but that for Gandhi and others this functioned as a mark of degraded Westernization and “artificial modernity” (Niranjana 1999, 232).

Therefore, around the 1910s efforts were made by Indians to end indentureship with the victimized indentured woman at the center of the cause (Niranjana 1999, 233). Women in general, and Indian women in particular, were seen once again as the terrain on which nationalism is built, and the nation defined.

In a focused look at the contemporary Caribbean context, Niranjana turns to the chutney debate of the 1990s and highlights the connections. The chutney controversy came around the time of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of Indian Arrival in Trinidad, and as Niranjana points out, “One of the reasons for this could be the emergence of new narratives of ‘Indianness’...[since the] assertion of an ‘Indian’ ethnic identity has sometimes been seen as the manifestation of ‘Indian nationalism’” (Niranjana 1999, 234).

As noted by both of the previous theorists, and now Niranjana, Indo-Trinidadians are set up as naturally oppositional to Afro-Caribbeans: “One cannot speak of how the sexuality of the East Indian woman in Trinidad is constituted except through the grid provided by discourses of racial difference” (Niranjana 1999, 237). She continues in her observation that “these discourses intersect in various ways with that of ‘East Indian nationalism’, which is often seen as being at odds with ‘Trinidadian’ or ‘West Indian’ nationalism” (Niranjana 1999, 237). A large part of this dynamic comes from the interactions these racialized groups were subjected to and participated in through the violent and enduring history of colonization. Consequently, Niranjana points out the “Afro-Saxon” influence in Trinidad “came to stand in for the West as far as Indians were concerned” (1999, 237).

Niranjana is therefore not surprised when the chutney controversy is framed as a fear of the “creolization and...degradation of ‘Indian culture’” (1999, 238). At the heart of the chutney debate lies a fear of interracial sexual relations and mixed-race descendants (Niranjana 1999, 240). For critics of chutney, “Indianness” is seen as a superior form of cultural purity that relies on women’s chastity (Niranjana 1999, 241). In fact, Trinidadian Pundit Ramesh Tiwari is quoted as saying that “the concept of the liberated woman” had created a “crisis in womanhood” threatening to the Hindu religion (Niranjana 1999, 242). Niranjana concludes with the idea that a fixed “Hindu” or “Indian” identity stems from colonial and Indian nationalist efforts, but that it is not “Indian patriarchy” that is

exclusively at fault in both the anti-indenture and anti-chutney campaigns, but rather it is patriarchy at large which finds itself in crises (Niranjana 1999, 242-243). In other words, Niranjana emphasizes the overarching structural aims and processes of patriarchy at large that come together in the specificities of Indian and British national desires. Here, then, we see a similar conclusion to Kanhai and Baksh-Soodeen in terms of the “threatening” nature of matikor and chutney spaces and performance. Yet, we also see the continued foreclosures of a heteronormative analysis. Below, I will look at the tendency of Caribbean feminism to gesture to the absence of queer analysis, followed by a failure to pursue it.

### **Heteronormative foundations**

To begin, Baksh-Soodeen’s analysis of chutney performance space reveals the implicit heterosexism of Caribbean feminist theorizing. She suggests that a large part of what is feared in these public arenas is the encouragement to act on the sexuality of the performances (Baksh-Soodeen 1999, 196). However, by not recognizing the potential for sexual acts between the previously all-female participants, she maintains a consistent silencing of queer sexualities within (Indo-)Caribbean feminism. This foreclosure of the possibility of queerness limits an otherwise critical text that advocates a fuller and more holistic understanding of sexual being, and the “cultural creativity and renewal” that Baksh-Soodeen identifies in both matikor and chutney performances.

Brinda Mehta’s *Diasporic (Dis)locations*, which draws much of its analysis from Kanhai’s collection (Chapter 2), offers a necessary intervention through a fleeting recognition of the heterosexist lens of Caribbean feminism. She begins her analysis by stating that while matikor ceremonies have been seen as a form of cultural and sexual resistance, “it must be pointed out that, for the most part, these sexual reclaimings are situated [by Indo-Caribbean women writers] within a heterosexual model of affirmation...” (Mehta 2004, 220). Mehta explains this tendency by referring to the “cultural constraints and...fear of social ostracism” faced by these writers (2004, 220). She ends the chapter by drawing on the work of filmmaker Michelle Mohabeer and positing that the “plurality of sexual experiences and sensations” represented by (Indo-)Caribbean women poets, literary writers, and artists recognizes “the spirit of the erotic” and offers new possibilities for decolonized sexual knowledge and pleasures (Mehta 2004, 225-226). She continues, “Indo-Caribbean women writers have the onerous task of claiming and sustaining decolonized sexual subjectivities through the rupturing of classically defined male and female sexuality” (Mehta 2004, 226). Her analysis demonstrates the disciplinary restrictions (self-imposed and otherwise) that limit the potential and relevance of the erotic, and inevitably limit sexuality to heteronormativity, identity, and/or at most, homonormativity.

### **Queer Caribbean potentials**

The work of Gayatri Gopinath offers the discourse that is the most developed example of a queered perspective. In *Impossible Desires*, Gopinath’s sixth chapter, “Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora,” opens with a succinct breakdown of the chutney controversy. She begins by identifying the “colonial constructions of respectable female sexuality and proper womanhood as enshrined within the home, initially consolidated during the period

of Indian indentureship in Trinidad, [and the ways they] continue to resonate in the public culture of the postcolonial present” (Gopinath 2005, 162).

Gopinath then proceeds to address the article by Niranjana through her observation that the latter’s analysis is “unable to imagine the ways in which women’s sexuality may exceed the heterosexual parameters put in place by these nationalist discourses” (2005, 162). Gopinath finds great value in Niranjana’s theorizing on the process of national regulation, but again points out that what fails to be acknowledged is the possibility of queer desire amongst, and between, Indo-Caribbean women (2005, 163).

Gopinath writes,

Niranjana..., then, inadvertently replicate[s] the nationalist framings of gender and sexuality that [she] set[s] out to critique. [She does] so by enacting the familiar discursive move of equating queerness with men and femaleness with heterosexuality...Within this schema, queer *female* desire, pleasure, and subjectivity is indeed rendered impossible, and the queer public cultural space that the performance of chutney may produce and make available is effaced (2005, 164).

Gopinath’s critique acts as an important articulation of modernity’s reliance on home or nation being created through the regulation of women’s bodies while also alluding to what a queer reading could offer the discourse and lives of Indo-Caribbean women.

This theorization leads directly into Donnell’s concept of Indo-Caribbean women as “double agents,” a concept she defines earlier in the chapter as “the strange (strained) agency of the oppressed woman” (2006, 159). In relation to matikor ceremonies, and Kanhai’s collection in particular, Donnell feels that both the selection of a Hindu practice and the role of the erotic display the ways in which Indo-Caribbean women can resist *within* and against dominant cultural norms (2006, 176). It is important to note here that there is a need to expand this analysis to include other religious practices, their various connections to colonization, and questions about the currency of authenticity. But Donnell’s text does well to recognize the *active* methods of expression and sacred practice present in both matikor itself and the analytic discourse that follows.

When explaining the importance of these ceremonies, Donnell writes that sexuality has been foregrounded in discourses on Indo-Caribbean women, and that these women “have seemingly elected to frame their own stories and critical interventions around this issue as they come both to literary and critical visibility” (2006, 175). She sees this as the establishment of “a new archive of creative identities” that can enable and enrich the history and potential of Indo-Caribbean women (Donnell 2006, 175). Those experiences include the “messiness” of the Caribbean social and cultural landscape. Donnell’s second theoretical offering to the matikor discourse is her inclusion of the concept of “dougla<sup>3</sup> poetics.” She defines this framework as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> The term was originally used to refer to “illegitimate” and mixed-race children.

An indigenous feminist theory that both contests and deconstructs those dominant political and theoretical discourses that frame Caribbean women's alliances as always inevitably fractured along ethnic divides, and their interests and enfranchisements as set in competition with each other (2006, 177).

Therefore, while a matikor discourse creates the space and opportunity for Indo-Caribbean women to engage with each other and their histories in a way that has not yet occurred, the aims and terms of dougla poetics counter the privileging of one racial or ethnic experience over another (Donnell 2006, 177).

In other words, I see dougla poetics working in similar, cohesive ways as queer theory. They both consist of reclamations of marginal identities and oppressive discourses toward the creation of holistic political frameworks that allow for difference and hybridity. When considering the essentialism that can reside in efforts toward universal subjectivity, Smith writes, "the very quest for full subjecthood implicit in the ethnographic project to tell our 'truth' is already premised on a logic that requires us to be objects to be discovered" (2010, 42). The positionality of (Indo-)Caribbean (queer) women is not the same as that of the Native people Smith discusses, but what is highly relevant about this observation is the danger to which subjects who are not normative are exposed in liberal mainstream feminism. It has been shown time and again that difference will be objectified, and experiences and knowledge will be relegated. Simply put, I recognize a need for Caribbean feminism to engage with *heteropatriarchy*, not just patriarchy. There is great value in queer analysis to challenge the naturalization of oppression at this level and to identify its social, economic, and political impacts. I believe that the lived realities of the Caribbean already contain elements of queerness and should be used to further a politicized analysis that moves beyond the hegemony of heteronormativity.

### Conclusion

The constant effort toward the constitution of Trinidad and Tobago<sup>4</sup> as properly modern and civilized envelops matters of race and sexuality in its endeavors. This dependence eventually leads to the colonized elites taking on the role of regulator in defense of "proper" sexuality and gender, in an effort to inhabit a fully modern and liberal nation-state (Alexander 1994, 13-14). Since the colonial encounter, part of this regulation has meant that women's relationships to the modern nation-state have relied upon their sexual relationships with men (McClintock 1997, 91). Additionally, the heterosexual family unit has been positioned as the foundation of modernity and the signifier of civility (McClintock 1997, 99). Jasbir Puar explains, "The process of decolonization happens through the shoring up of heteronormativity through the promotion of the 'new' and ever self-generating (procreative) nation that must 'prove' itself to the colonial father in the face of destabilizing global trends" (2007, 4). What does this entrenched heterosexism/homophobia do to bodies? Simply put, it makes some bodies subjects and some bodies abject in the nation's ideological and biological reproductive capacities. M. Jacqui Alexander writes the following about the Bahamas and Trinidad and Tobago:

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<sup>4</sup> Trinidad and Tobago gained independence in 1962.

State managers generated a...discourse invoking nostalgia for a [state] when there were ostensibly no lesbians, gay men and people with AIDS. In this move, heterosexuality becomes coterminous with and gives birth to the nation. Its antithesis can unravel the nation (1994, 10).

In a similar fashion, Indo-Caribbean elites call on a pure and authentic past to regulate the bodies and sexualities of Indo-Caribbean women. So even with the ongoing development of gay and lesbian rights movements in Trinidad, the difficulty in including Indo-Caribbeans as a part of this “progress” is that they are neither “properly” national or diasporic; these subjects are neither Trinidadian nor Indian enough (Puar 2007, 6). Therefore, these peripheral subjects cannot easily enter any form of (homo)nationalism that may exist in Trinidad.

And so, this is an important moment for Indo-Caribbean feminists. Defining ourselves from a place that accounts for the assemblages of time and space; beginning again from a place that accounts for the power and potential of sexuality in all its fullness. In other words, if Caribbean scholars do not begin to recognize and acknowledge the heterosexist frameworks they operate within *and* make room for voices of queer (Indo-)Caribbeans, not only will the same homophobic epistemic violence be reproduced, but the emancipatory potential of a matikor discourse and/or the erotic will be driven further toward the margins.

This analysis has been an attempt at a preliminary exploration into much-needed intersectionality between queer theory and Caribbean feminism, or even Caribbean studies at large. I chose to attempt this through the ritual of matikor and its discourse because it has been firmly established in the field, but also because of its aforementioned allegorical qualities. Matikor captures the racialized, gendered and classed effects of the Caribbean social and political context. I also turned to matikor in an attempt to center the role of healing and the sacred in transformative movements, organizing, and scholarship.

In drawing to a close, one must wonder where a matikor paradigm has gone in (Indo-)Caribbean feminism. While the willingness and ability of Caribbean feminism to address sexuality has been widely acknowledged as slow (see *Sexing the Caribbean*), matikor spaces and the erotic offer rich, rooted and transgressive possibilities for such reflection. Its potential lies within the epistemic space it creates, as well as within our ability to connect contemporary nonheteronormative experiences, identities and embodiments with a sacred and honest past. Or simply put, it shows that queer Indo-Caribbean women are not destined to eternal rupture and dis-ease. But it is up to *all* Caribbean feminists and scholars to recognize the heterosexist assumptions operating within dominant discourses of Caribbean studies, liberal feminism, and postcolonial studies at large. The erotic may offer the means to connect to Afro-Caribbean, trans, mixed-race, and non-Hindu subjects because of its very definition as a full consideration of human experience.

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