

Queer Coolie-tudes: ‘A living archive, an oblique poetics’

A conversation with filmmaker and lecturer, Dr. Michelle Mohabeer

Michelle Mohabeer and Amar Wahab

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ABSTRACT

Scholar **Amar Wahab**, co-editor of the *Journal of Indentureship and its Legacies*, interviews queer diasporic filmmaker and lecturer **Dr. Michelle Mohabeer** about her critical and creative documentary interventions – spanning over 30 years – which seek to queer indentureship and Indo-Caribbean diasporic identity and experience. The dialogue focuses especially on her creative essay documentary *Queer Coolie-tudes* (2019), which places the slurs – ‘queer’ and ‘coolie’ – into proximity and conversation as a way of critically reclaiming them. In so doing, Mohabeer expands the contours of what it means to queer indentureship’s archive by ‘visualizing an Indo-Caribbean diasporic aesthetic’.

KEYWORDS

Queer Coolie-tudes, diasporic aesthetics, opacity, *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*, Dougl’a aesthetic, coolie, queer, archive, poetics

Connect to Dr. Mohabeer’s work at <https://michellemohabeer.com/>



Filmmaker, Michelle Mohabeer © Michelle Mohabeer

AW: Thanks very much for agreeing to do this interview. I should just give you a bit of context. The interview is for a special issue looking at queerness and unbound sexualities in its broadest sense, and it's an attempt to highlight or spotlight the intersections between queerness and studies of indentureship and its legacies. We're not only focusing on the histories of indentureship but also looking at the legacies of indentureship as those legacies anchor, travel

and make possible certain kinds of diasporic trajectories across the globe in the present contemporary context. So the discussion is not always about the past. I want to say thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview.

I'm thinking about queerness and indentureship. We haven't really seen special issues dedicated to this topic, even in Caribbean Studies!

The first question is how/in what ways do you situate your work? Can you please provide me with a brief overview of your work, the histories, the genealogy of the work that you've done? For example, the topics and themes, the trajectories, the influences, the kinds of relevance of your work, as a way of allowing us to enter a conversation about your documentary *Queer Coolie-tudes* (2019).

MM: My work has always made intersectional connections before the term became widely known and labelled as such, from my earliest film *Exposure* (1990) to *Queer Coolie-tudes* (2019), my work was concerned with themes of queerness, sexuality, race, gender, the nation, colonialism, immigration and displacement. Moreover, I applied oppositional film aesthetics to visualize and theoretically explore my thematic preoccupations as a diasporic filmmaker. As a queer diasporic person, I discovered my queer sensibility and sexuality in my mid-teens to mid-20s. I read books about and by queer artists, and my abiding interest in film history, silent and sound film stars who were gender playful or seemingly queer film performers, along with queer and/or feminist international directors like Fassbinder, Almodovar, Lizzie Borden, Chantal Akerman, Julie Dash and Kathy Collins, and early female directors like Ida Lupino and experimental filmmaker Maya Deren, were central to my queer feminist formation and shaped me as an artist. I also gravitated towards Black American Cinema from the 1970s and 80s, as well as

Caribbean and Latin American cinema. My films have also been influenced by my reading of various feminist scholarly materials, especially by Black feminists and by cultural theorists Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Audre Lorde, film scholarship on Third Cinema by Teshome Gabriel, Mbye Cham on Caribbean cinema, Black cinema scholarship by Manthia Diawara, bell hooks, Hamid Naficy's *Accented Cinema*, and ethnographic raced cinema by Fatimah Tobing Rony. All these interests have informed my artistic sensibilities to varying degrees, as well as my lived experiences and history as a queer diasporic racialized woman who does not fit easily into conventional orthodoxy of what it means to be female, artist, film scholar, mixed race Indo-Caribbean, feminist and queer, utilizing experimental sensibilities and nuanced approaches.

AW: You made *Exposure* in 1990 and shot *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* in 1992. What was going on that prompted that kind of reorientation, that turn towards 'the Caribbean', whether it be a physical space or a space of contemplation, a space that was worthy of your attention? Can you talk about what was going on in the Canadian context, or what inspired that turn towards the figure of the coolie in your work?

MM: My approaches have been vastly different from when I first began in 1990 with *Exposure*, which is a film that was commissioned by the National Film Board of Canada (former women's unit, Studio D) and it was part of a collection called the 'Five Feminist Minutes'. *Exposure* (1990) was most likely the first documentary film that focused on queer women of colour in Canada, situating their cultural contexts, their histories and experiences, but also locating histories of racism in Canada in the context of when they came out as queer in the late 1980s to

1990s. *Exposure* featured an Afro-Jamaican lesbian poet and a third-generation Japanese Canadian lesbian writer and academic. *Exposure* and these women's interlocking conversations paved the way for me as an artist to explore my own diasporic indentured fractured history and how this butts up with and against my queer identity. I was very interested in probing my own history and queerness; however, it was a difficult and challenging three years for this project to be understood and receive trickle by trickle funding from the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, and other smaller LGBTQ community and film-based grants for emerging independent filmmakers.

Coconut/Cane & Cutlass emerged from my previous film experience and building blocks from a film residency that I held at the National Film Board of Canada (Montreal's Studio D, former women's unit). In *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*, I wanted to artistically express how I felt as a queer, Indo-Caribbean, mixed-race woman who saw nothing like herself in life or represented in film/media. I had finished a Film Studies degree at Carleton University, the residency in Montreal (1986–87), and later, in 1990, had the opportunity to make *Exposure*, however, I really wanted to make this film that allowed the complicated extent of my diasporic identity to emerge, to be represented in film. What was happening at that point in the 1990s was negotiating identity politics; there were many communities organizing and much activism by queer women of colour at that time. I'm not great at doing physical activism, I'm much stronger doing it artistically in my work and I feel that it has a lasting resonance in media form. It's memorialized on film, essentially, and that is where I'm strongest in terms of my own activism and my own queerness, representing it in terms of film and filmic spaces.



Still from *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* © Michelle Mohabeer

I would say that's where *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* emerged from – a sense of my personal identity and the lack of representation/visibility, but then, also, just from the sense of identity politics, LGBTQ activism in general, but specifically queer women of colour, their activism, all the groups that had formed specifically in Toronto at that point. I wasn't fully engaged with some of those groups because I didn't find a space to fully engage; on the one hand, I was not Afro-Caribbean, and on the other hand, I didn't identify as South Asian, so I was kind of in this in-betweenness of yes, I have a South Asian diasporic history which is three generations removed from India, and I wasn't raised in a typical Indian way. I was raised very Creole, so all of that really informed why I really wanted to make *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*, which I had a hard time getting funding for even though there was a lot going on around identities and identity politics and it was a real hot-button issue and a very political climate at that point around LGBTQ+ rights, AIDS activism and filmmaking, with works by queers of colour/queer women of colour beginning to emerge at

that time. My meandering diasporic and hybrid stylistic approach to the documentary wasn't understood fully by the arts councils. It was a real struggle to get funding until I got help – even though I got rejected twice for funding, the third time I guess was the charm because a lovely officer from Canada Council for the Arts, whose background was Chilean, really helped to have the jury see this project and its performative aspects. Because *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* did also engage with performance and performative aspects, in terms of how I represented the indentured plantation labour through a stylized dance sequence with rear projections of black and white sugar cane fields that I shot in Guyana. This dance sequence linked the ancestors and ancestral spirits and the presence of women cutting cane with a cutlass (machete) in a very evocative way to visualize what went on in the cane field. That's why the film is called *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*. The entire title encapsulated that colonial history and presence.

Coconut/Cane & Cutlass was shot in Guyana in late 1992 and then in studio in Toronto in 1993. It was completed and released in 1994. This is the first film to represent a hybrid diasporic meditation on queer sexuality, indentureship, the nation and the idea of being/feeling ruptured from the nation, and it still exists as such. The idea was – at that point – the nation state could not or doesn't have enough room to really accept this kind of queer difference, therefore *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* was a film that attempted to grapple with the colonial past and to evocatively trace and imagine a history of indentured people. But also Queering Indentureship because the indentured subjects in *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* were represented by two women who were also lovers on a symbolic journey across the Kala Pani.

Coconut/Cane & Cutlass really placed the body of queerness onto this indentured history and experience, and the two performers were the female indentured lovers on a ship travelling to the diasporic space of the Caribbean. I don't really name the space of the Caribbean, it's just 'the Caribbean'. It's not Guyana.

It's not Trinidad. It's about conjuring 'the Caribbean' as a space and place of imaginative possibilities, something that I play with across many of my films. This notion of mapping place and space has crucially figured in *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*, *Child-Play*, *Echoes*, *Blu in You* and *Queer Coolie-tudes*. In *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* I broached the history of indentureship by queering it – sexuality and gender were all tied to the exploration of the nation and the nation's non-acceptance at that point (in the early to late 90s), which didn't fully accept the queer body the way it might now. Certainly not at that time, nor when I travelled back to Guyana to shoot that film in 1992; it was my first time back to a place that used to be home, though did not entirely feel like home since I left as a girl of 12. When I was there to shoot the film there was a horrible election cycle that was very violent and full of racial blame. I was upset that Guyanese people acted this way, and it just shook and unsettled me when I was there.

This informed how I strategically wrote the voice-over for the opening of the film, 'a love letter to the nation'. I felt very disavowed by the nation at that point and its rejection of queerness, and I also felt the pejorative sting of that term 'coolie'. At the time, when I made *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*, coolie was a word that was just literally a slur. It wasn't reclaimed or embraced in the way that it is now, it wasn't reimagined. These are some of my early works and experiences.

I'll mention *Child-Play* (1996) briefly because *Child-Play* was another important film that was shot in Tobago and in studio in Toronto. It was an allegory of colonial rape represented through the spirit of a Dutchman (named Georgie de Roote). He was an imaginary figure from my childhood that stayed with me and I casted him as a child molester. I attempted to evoke the Dutch colonization of Guyana through the perverting of the nursery rhyme Georgie Porgy, to grapple with the themes of colonial rape: of the land, its people, their resources and cultures. This film has certainly not been seen enough by Caribbean folks

because *Child-Play* was really my attempt to do an experimental narrative that really grappled with this idea of the legacies of colonialism, the idea of colonial rape displaced onto the female body – the literal rapes that happened but also through the imagining of colonial haunting throughout the life of its female character (Ateesha) from a young girl until she is an elderly woman and the attempted usurpation of her soul by this spirit.

I used the figure of a Dutchman – spirit in the film – to represent a child molester, who was killed by one of the mothers of a young girl that he raped. It was meant to be an unsettling film, emerging through the dreamscape of the elder woman. The figure of Georgie was an imaginary ‘friend’/spirit that I saw when I was a child in Guyana when I was playing under an old house that was on stilts, he was possibly real, possibly not. It’s a figure that has always stayed with me and I always wanted to explore it in a very surreal way in film. I don’t want to simply label *Child-Play* as a psychological surreal narrative, but it certainly has dream aspects, which is evocative of colonial rape and the kind of brutalities that it placed on girls’ and women’s bodies, including older women’s bodies. This film’s haunting is about how the colonial presence has tainted the entire life of an elderly woman; but she is able to free herself from his psychological grip just before she dies and reclaim herself and her identity. The Georgie (child molester) spirit haunts Ateesha throughout her entire life, and his final visitation was to lay claim to her soul before she dies (but she frees herself from him). What does that Dutch spirit haunting represent? It’s this kind of possession of her entire being, the possession of the mind, i.e., the colonization of the mind. That’s what I was trying to represent in *Child-Play*. It’s the colonization of the mind because colonialism had its physical effects and its emotional effects, but most important and most denigrating were the effects of how it colonized the minds and bodies of all the people that were colonized – slaves, indentured labourers, etc.

AW: When I first came to Toronto in the year 2000 and I started my graduate studies, you came to give a lecture about *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* and I remember thinking, 'I've never seen something like this conversation before, especially in a predominantly white classroom'. And it really grabbed me because I, wanting to pursue Caribbean studies, wasn't sure if that would have any traction in that space of Toronto because it felt like 'the Caribbean' (and even more so, the Indo-Caribbean) was made invisible as a legitimate site of study. When I saw your work, it really inspired me to continue with the work on the Caribbean as well as the Indo-Caribbean. One thing that stuck with me was your emphasizing that the film (*Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*) was a 'love letter to Guyana'. That is something that has stuck with me through the years. I also wondered whether the film is also a letter to Toronto and to Canada as well; like, is this film also responding – through a diasporic mode – to what is possible and what is impossible in the context of the here and now, like who is legible, who is visible, who is not visible? – opening up that circuit of contestation of the 'here' as well as the 'there' at the same time. You also talk about the kinds of intersectional identities and situations that you yourself know/inhabit in your history, and how you make sense of that. I always wonder how we make sense of that intersectionality in relation to over 'there' – the space of the Caribbean – while at the same time bringing that into relation to 'here'?

MM: I just want to say one more thing about *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*. It was the first film in which I really embraced and developed my diasporic aesthetics. The diasporic aesthetics has to do with travel/migration, journeying, movement, fragmentation – these are all thematic of diasporic aesthetics, which I visualized as meandering, moving, though not necessarily things flowing in a purely conventional

documentary mode of conveying these types of stories. Fragments, bits, memories, performances, enactments, imaginings and imaginaries. The landscape of the sea wall jetty in Guyana was deliberately made to look like an alien landscape, or something foreign. The fragmented bodies, the designing of the women bodies in this very Indian way, with the suspended fabrics creating a cocoon in the 'sex scene bed' and the partial saris that they wore against the projected cane fields. All that rich aesthetic was constructed for that film, to visualize an Indo-Caribbean diasporic aesthetic. I also had affinity and was influenced by Black British diasporic UK work, in particular the works of Sankofa and Black Film Audio, which were very influential in my thinking about and in the creation of my diasporic political aesthetics. Big-up to all the talented Black/African/Caribbean, queer and diasporic filmmakers in the UK doing groundbreaking work from the 1970s through to the 2000s. Along with the other influences that I mentioned, the Black British UK work left a lasting impression on me when I was emerging as a filmmaker. And, of course, cinema in general because I studied cinema and was a cinephile who watched films of all genres, especially independent cinema from all corners of the world. I also admire the early work of Felix de Roy (who is based in Amsterdam), and various works by filmmakers from the Caribbean and Latin America.

AW: Thanks. So out of these fragmented trajectories, what brought you to the place of thinking about something you would call *Queer Coolie-tudes* in your production? I'm thinking about what kind of intellectual influences, but more than that, what brought you beyond all the academics? Why was it important to make this documentary? What prompted it? Was it a desire to have a conversation with *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* but from a different perspective?



Still from *Queer Coolie-tudes* © Michelle Mohabeer

MM: *Queer Coolie-tudes* is a bookend to *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*. I felt *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* explored a time; it explored where we were at then in the 90s. Much has changed since the 90s, so *Queer Coolie-tudes* was always something that was in the back of my mind because I felt that *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* was unfinished. So *Queer Coolie-tudes* with an E – a derivative of ‘coolie’ and tudes (attitudes or stances) – is not the same as ‘coolitudes’ without the E.

K. Torabully’s term of coolitude differs from my use of *Queer Coolie-tudes*. I am interested in queering the term coolie, and creating a decolonial diasporic aesthetic to visualize multivocal Creole-ness as queer ethnography steeped in Caribbean and diasporic histories and experientials. I created the term queer coolie-tudes with the E, which I define in the film as an inflection. As a state of existence, *Queer Coolie-tudes* is an oblique politics and poetics of being queer and coolie, acknowledging diasporic histories of indentureship and complicated in-between hybrid Creole identities embodied as queer diasporic coolies with roots and stances of the Caribbean, while being

fluid bodies living in Canada. It's a theory that I created in the making of this film. However, I was aware of the work of Kal Thorabully – his book *Coolitude* without the E. While I read parts of his book, I was not entirely interested in this approach to coolitude. A theorist who was influential in my research-creation of *Queer Coolie-tudes* was Édouard Glissant's philosophy of opacity, which was something I visualized at the start of the film and visually explored throughout this film because I don't think that queer bodies of colour are easily understood in our contexts and conditions. I represented opacity at the very beginning of the film in a fluid shot of an undefinable object underwater, which although visible, is not easily understood or defined as 'legible'.

My theoretical mapping of the film's title implies a nuanced state of existence, which is fluidly intertwined with Édouard Glissant's poetics of opacity, which infers a state of otherness that rejects being visible under preconceived universal models that delimits nuanced understanding of the subjects impacted by colonialism, as being human. I reference Glissant's use of *opacity as a decolonial signaling of visibility on one's terms*.

Queer Coolie-tudes, as a film, traces an intergenerational queer ethnography, which is a living archive of the queer coolie, of the Dougl'a mixture of Indian and Black, and queer Creole Chinese (callaloo identity) in Trinidad. I also wanted to explore genderqueer identity and performances of drag gendered identity alongside age and the disabled body. I tried to visually suture many cultures and mixtures in this film – racial, cultural mixtures, gendered and genderqueer in an intergenerational representation of the subjects. The youngest subject was 20 to 21, the oldest was 65 to 67; there was truly a range of queer conditions and bodies visualized in the film.

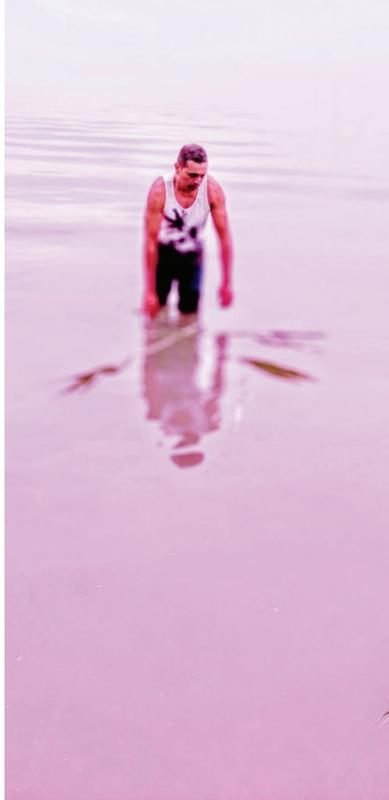
AW: Thank you. You distinguished between queer coolie-tudes (with an E) and coolitude (without the E). Are you also doing something with the term queer in this film that is quite distinct from how queer studies in academia deals with queer? Much of queer/ness focuses specifically on gender and sexuality *per se*, especially in the North American academy. Are you doing something different with queer or queerness in this film? Through my own work, one of the things that I'm trying to argue is that the coolie is a queer figure and has a queer genealogy that is not only reducible to gender and sexuality. Of course, it is wrapped up in gender and sexuality, but the term coolie in itself is a registration of queerness. I'm wondering if this is something that you were also doing; that you're not just having a critical conversation about the term coolie, but in doing so, are also having a critical conversation with queerness? Are you responding to the Canadian/North American Academy that sets up the terms and conditions about what can and cannot be considered as queer or queerness?

MM: Definitely. To a certain extent, I do keep queer in its conventional spelling in the North American context of queer. I'm aware that there's also Quare Studies from African American, Southern Queer/Quare Studies, and a particular vernacular use of language. I decided to keep it as *Queer Coolie-tudes*, working together, because I inflected queer with a diasporic transnational context. The entire film gestured to queer coolie-tudes as linked to the Caribbean and the queer diasporas in Canada. It speaks to the idea of diasporic histories, separated in certain ways from a typical North American queer context as you outlined. My notion of queer is framed through a colonial anchor of indentureship and its afterlife. I agree, I think the figure of the Coolie is a queer figure, and the queer coolie is also a figure of displacement, interrupted (through migration) from the

Caribbean space, yet also still asserting belonging in whatever way to the Caribbean. It's all queer; queer in a sense of an unreconcilable, odd difference and queer as oblique, not easily read or understood in a straightforward type of way (especially since the Brown body is not readily conflated with being Caribbean but rather labelled as being merely South Asian). This does a disservice to Brown Creole identity formations and lived experiences, which culturally intertwine Blackness as part of their Brownness; a Brownness, which I might add, is also classed. Queer is a great word in that context, an original slur, and in *Queer Coolie-tudes* I was invested in intertwining the slur of queer coalescing with the slur of coolie. That's how I imagine the film – two slurs coming together that are embraced and reimaged, embodied differently in this film's aesthetics, especially in the genderqueer and Dougl'a aesthetics sections of the film. The political aesthetics that I utilize in *Queer Coolie-udes* come from a place of how to imagine queer Brown and intersecting Black and Chinese bodies differently, beyond a distorted monoscopic western lens of what it means to be queers of colour/diasporic queers. In this sense I am queering the coolie body and its embodied visibility, all of which can be applicable in the academy, and pushing queer studies and sexuality studies to consider this alternative centring of queer and coolie as Creole queer. I wanted to visualize a presence and history that imagines queer Indo-Caribbean in nuanced ways; queer coolie-tudes literally.

AW: Great, thank you. Across the film, you have eight subjects, including yourself, and you basically depict opacity in different ways and from different perspectives/different angles. How do you think that you travelled with this concept across the film? How did you do work on/with this concept? For example, in the segment with myself, as

opposed to the segment with someone who was performing in drag, as opposed to the segment with someone talking about Douglá aesthetics. I wonder if you can reflect on how you utilized the concept of opacity to do certain kinds of work in the film?



'Lavender Coolie', still from *Queer Coolie-tudes* © Michelle Mohabeer

MM: You're asking a question that is difficult for me to respond to in terms of my creative process, approach and shooting schedule. Although I am a filmmaker and artist/academic

whose research-creations are influenced by theory, how I structure my work, the actual art making process of how I make my work, is farthest removed from any kind of academic approach. I've always worked from a space of intuitiveness as part of my process, the work is channelled through me. It's hard to explain but as a director, as a visual person, the work, the theories, everything that I've read, everything that I've studied, the way I research, the way I create, is all being channelled in those moments of creation on set, in writing, in visualizing, in shooting, editing and in the overall vision for the work. In the process of working and creating, I plan a shoot and have a strong sense of how I wish to visualize or represent something/someone, but I am also open and guided by happy accidents, by spontaneous moments of inspiration.

My visual representation of opacity was inflected in the opening underwater shot, in which an alien globe-like transparent sphere was submerged in the water, surrounded by floating fragments of passion fruit skin and flowers. These are my creative interventions in terms of how I literalize or visualize the theory behind opacity, and each person in the film brought something quite unique in terms of how they were represented. Some were more performative, some more meandering, journeying, moving, but for all eight subjects represented in this documentary, including myself, we're not easily understood. Again, going back to the fullest notion of opacity, we're not easily understood as this singular fixed being. We're not easily understood and therefore a Creole aesthetics and representation matters. I was really trying to work with something that was very fluid, a fluid aesthetic in terms of how I represented the subjects, literally at the water's edge. Water's history and movement of peoples, its fluidity, its visible/invisible substance, all coalesce. They're anchored in

moments, locations and histories, where they speak about very specific things. But opacity has a fluidness to it as well, something that's not always readily, easily understood or fixed. I was going for that in terms of the aesthetics of the film and, of course, coolie-tudes and the queering of all of that.

AW: When you envisioned this film, who was your intended audience?

MM: You could say that my absolute intended audience would be queers from the Caribbean diaspora or diasporic queers or colour. These viewers are the presumed 'ideal' intended audience. However, the film can speak to many audiences, especially academic audiences (university classrooms). I was very thankful that *Queer Coolie-tudes* premiered at the 29th Inside Out Film Festival in Toronto, and the audience was quite mixed. There were people from the Caribbean, heterosexual, queer, and some people who were not familiar with the subject or culture. One older Indo-Caribbean woman stressed the importance of the film and stated that she had never seen anything like this before and that it was affirming. It screened at an amazing festival in Amsterdam called Queer Migrant Film Festival, but I was not able to attend. It was invited to the Leeds Queer Film Festival in the UK, but the in-person screening for that got cancelled due to covid, so it was screened virtually. Covid has interrupted everything, obviously, including some festivals that don't necessarily screen online. I have screened (and continue to screen) at many festivals online, including at the 45th Frameline LGBTQ Festival in San Francisco, as a geo-blocked online California premiere. The last time I screened *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*, I travelled to San Francisco and screened it at the lovely large Castro cinema, which is an excellent theatrical venue that seats about 1400 people. I have also screened online at FIDBA (Buenos

Aires International Documentary Film Festival) in South America; at Docs Without Borders, where I won Direction Excellence; and screened at the 15th Caribbean Tales Film Festival online and won the 'Intersect Award'. The last festival that I attended in person just before covid was in Miami, at the Third Horizon Film Festival, Feb 6–9, 2020. The film also screened at the 7th Indian Cine Film Festival 2019 in Mumbai, India, where it was awarded a Certificate of Excellence, and at the 50th Visions du Reel Film Festival, Nyon, Switzerland, as an official invitation to their Media Library for industry professionals. Academic sales have been increasing across university libraries in Canada and the US.

AW: So in terms of its circulation within the Caribbean itself, you've mentioned the Caribbean diaspora in Toronto, but do you have plans to screen it in the Caribbean?

MM: So far there have been two Caribbean screenings, the more recent was at the 6th Timehri Film festival (online), which was followed by a Q&A with a lecturer from the University of Guyana. There was also a community screening with SASOD in Guyana (an LGBTQ organization in Guyana that does cultural events, including a film festival). I'm working on more festival screenings or academic conference screenings, and as covid lifts, there could hopefully be in-person screenings. I would love to attend virtual or in-person screenings in Trinidad and Tobago, at the Belize International Film Festival, and elsewhere in the Caribbean and Latin American.

Queer Coolie-tudes has already been purchased by several academic institutions in North America, and it has the potential to screen at academic conferences in the Caribbean and beyond. Covid has curtailed many festivals and conferences from operating regularly, and typically a film's festival life is usually about two to three years.

AW: Based on the showings – I know that you may not have been able to attend them all – what has been the response to this documentary?

MM: I've not attended a lot of festivals in person (mostly virtual) because when the film started to pick up on the festival circuit in early 2020 covid took hold. Ironically, what I heard from you at the very beginning of our conversation and your being influenced by me/my work has made me realize how, through my art, I've touched and influenced a lot of younger folks, a lot of queer folks who didn't always feel they had a voice or could really do something or express themselves through film. I've received emails and messages to that effect. One of the most touching was someone who commented, 'you've really inspired me to make art, as an Indo-Caribbean person, I never felt I was present in anything'.

As I'm older now, this is something that I value because it's good to know after all the struggles I've had to create my work; and being the only one, and what that means to be the only one when you don't set out to be the only one. I didn't set out to be bold or brave or pioneering, I just did it. I broke through struggles and erasures by channelling it into my nuanced film practice and craft. Art is incredible, its process can heal and transform the maker, inspire those that it most speaks to. The films that I make are creative expressions with a purpose, they are pedagogical and political. Through my art I have (in some ways) reimaged and reinterpreted who we are as diasporic and queer people in the world. That's the strength, I think, of my art. And hopefully I will be able to make more.

AW: If you had to do a second installation or retake of *Queer Coolie-tudes*, would you do anything differently and, if so, what would inform this?

MM: I wouldn't. The film is made as how I intended. I would do nothing differently. I created the film that I wanted to make,

with experimental and unconventional edges. I put everything into the film, it consumed me. That's the process of creation and creativity. I did a lot of work myself because I didn't have or want a large crew working on this film. I took on many roles as writer, producer, director, videographer, visual designer. I visualized the film before the shooting, during the shooting and in the editing process (with my excellent editor, Sabrina Budiman). *Queer Coolie-tudes* surpassed my expectations. When something surpasses your expectations or your own visualization (once it is done and you watch it as an audience), then I think that you've made a 'successful' work and *Queer Coolie-tudes* did that for me. I suppose my one regret is that I didn't have enough funding to be able to travel to Trinidad and Tobago to have someone from UWI be involved in the film, as I had originally intended. I would have liked to have a Caribbean locale in the film, as I have with many of my films, but this is the one film that I wasn't able to do that, mainly because of funding.

AW: Where does *Queer Coolie-tudes* take us? What kinds of spaces does it open up for you as a filmmaker? What does it make possible for the Caribbean, for the queer Caribbean, the queer diasporic Caribbean? What next? I think this film opens up space in studies of the Indo-Caribbean and studies of queerness as well. It is critically responding to two intellectual, scholarly hegemonies, even though Indo-Caribbean studies and queer studies are marginalized within the North American and Caribbean academies. So this film is a bridge; it is opening up that space and bridging two areas that themselves have been marginalized in both the Caribbean as well as the North American academies. But also, at the same time, it is responding to the hegemonies that have set in within these margins.

MM: Yes. I agree with all that you've mentioned. This film lends an opportunity to hopefully rethink what Creole means.

Creole applies to anyone that is born in the Caribbean. The Caribbean is a Creole space. It is not a unitary singular space; it is a multiracial, multicultural, multiethnic, Creole space. It is a space of rupture. It is a space of multiplicities coming together to form the pluri-versal. In that context I think *Queer Coolie-tudes* allows the opportunity to reconceive the Black and Brown diasporas, how we understand Black and Brown in a Caribbean diasporic context living and surviving elsewhere (outside of the Caribbean). How does the Douglă and the Creole queer figure of the Coolie intertwine with Black Studies and Black Queer Studies and expand on conceptions of South Asian queer diasporas away from South Asia. I think the queer coolie body also belongs under Black Studies, but it is not necessarily placed there because Blackness and its diasporas has been defined and understood as having a history and ancestry through slavery, but I think indentureship and slavery have overlapped. I think bodies and cultures have mingled; racial and cultural categories and bodies have mingled in the Caribbean as well and in the diaspora, and I think our histories are connected. I'm not saying that Black Studies shouldn't be a specific type of studies connected to Blackness and the Black Diaspora, but I hope that *Queer Coolie-tudes* allows the opportunity to think about what Creole means in its fullest context; by all the bodies that are represented in this film, to understand Creole in a more dynamic way when intertwined with queer. That is also why I referenced Glissant's opacity alongside my theorized visibility of *Queer Coolie-tudes*; as an oblique politics and poetics of weaving queer and coolie, with diasporic histories and indentureship and the complicated in-between Creole identities. That is the heart of what this film is doing. And with roots and stances from the Caribbean also located in diasporic spaces. Hopefully, that's the power

and potential of this film. In terms of my own lived experience in the Caribbean and Canada, this film also bridges my Creole Black cultural identification alongside my Indo-Caribbean (Guyanese) roots, up-rooted from South Asia (over three generations). It is not enough to be labelled or identified by equity surveys or government census as simply South Asian or from the South Asian diaspora; to do this entails the erasure of Creole intermingling and a more nuanced understanding of who is Black and Brown. I identify in a more nuanced way because my own specific identity was shaped through Indo and Afro-Caribbean co-mingling and cultural identities.

I claim Black cultural identity within my Indo-Caribbeaness because I was raised Creole – from the spaces where I lived, who I was exposed to/interacted with, the food that I ate as a child, the music that I listened to – all the cultural exchanges that I had were Black and Afro-Caribbean informed more than Indo-Caribbean informed. I was also raised Catholic. This has impacted me as an artist, as an academic and as a person. I hope that my work also bridges and, most importantly, heals some of the limitations of how people view each other. I think Glissant was also going for that. I think that is what my work hopefully does. I think *Queer Coolie-tudes* has succeeded in bridging a Francophone, primarily Afro-Caribbean philosopher, with my visual theorizing of *Queer Coolie-tudes*, with the E.

AW: Thanks very much for that reflection because it really pushed me to think about the genealogy of the term Creole and its historical trajectories, moving through different contexts within the Caribbean, but also the ways it resonates or loses resonance in the Canadian context. And even with the concept of queer coolie-tudes, how do we open up a conversation about Creole in tandem with this concept? Is it already there, within the foundations of

queer coolie-tudes? What is the importance of orienting ourselves towards the term Creole, given the histories of the term in the Caribbean? What does it mean to respond to it, to return to it, but also to re-orient the term itself and re-anchor it in a different way? I wonder, where does the idea of Dougla aesthetics come in here? Is coolie-tude a concept that can speak to Dougla aesthetics? I think, in the film, this is what you've done; you've tried to open up space for asking how we bring the terms queer/ness, coolie, Dougla and Creole together. Not necessarily in a way that erases the historical tensions and distinctions between these terms, but also, probably, using the methodology that you have used in your film to think about what is productive about the opacities across these terms as they resonate with each other.

MM: Agreed with pretty much all of what you said. I was incredibly aware of the seemingly disjointed two-ness and in-betweenness of what Dougla represents and I wanted to represent Dougla with all the complexities of that identity, through a visibility that moor and unmoor Dougla identity since it is linked to mixtures of what is apparently more visible. In my filmic representation of Dougla aesthetics, the person in the film is part Indo-Caribbean (Indo-Guyanese mother), part-African (her father is from Ghana). In a sense, her Dougla identity is even further complicated because she also has an African identity (directly linked to Africa). It was very crucial that Dougla identity and its aesthetics be part of *Queer Coolie-tudes* – it belongs there also. To have that word 'coolie' be attached to and understood in this context of the Dougla body was incredibly important because of all the debates and histories of those terms and where Dougla embodiment fits into all of this. What are the limits of how the Dougla body/identity is read and recognized (or misrecognized)? A Dougla aesthetic can

look one way and be something else; it can be a polarizing set of identities and cultures for some, and not for others. It also speaks to the limitations of how we read people in a shorthand visual way, of what is more visible and readily identified and what is disavowed in the process.

Sometimes the biases we bring to how we read people denies their complex histories and racial and cultural identities. I wanted to really bring more contemplation in this film, to create a nuanced and textured work that explored all the themes that I've mentioned.

AW: I'm just thinking that the term 'coolie' and the concept of coolie-tudes should have resonance in places like Canada and on the West Coast of the US because these places are themselves deeply enmeshed in histories of indentureship.

MM: And yet, a lot of people don't know the term 'coolie'. They don't know that it was used derogatorily to describe indentured labourers in a colonial context. They don't know of the slur that's stamped on bodies and the way in which bodies are then marked as being somehow perpetually inferior, and the reclamation of it now, like the reclamation of queer. I think this film has taught some people what 'coolie' means and its historical context.

AW: Yes, and we must ask ourselves: why don't they know this history – of indentureship – as an interconnected global history? It's not just specific spaces that are enmeshed in this, but this was/is a global labour system and a very different and unique 'tilt of the world'. The illegibility, the invisibility of that global system of exploitation, is perhaps the reason why **some** film festivals and venues do not pick up the work.

MM: I think you're correct, but I think you're reading a lot more into certain film festivals. Many typically want what is easily categorizable, viewable and digestible for their audiences. This film is provocative, it makes people think, it uses a

particular kind of politicized aesthetics that was very carefully constructed. For all those reasons, I think that the more mainstream, larger conventional festivals wouldn't think that their audiences could connect to the film, which is a disservice to their audiences. But then again, I never set out to court the mainstream – I'm an alternative, independent filmmaker whose works have pedagogic value and are very applicable to university programmes in film studies, diaspora, ethnic, queer, gender and sexuality studies, communication studies and cultural anthropology.

AW: Thank you, Michelle. This was wonderful. There's so much that you touched on that we could continue a conversation about. The work has just begun, but what is great is that we can have this kind of conversation, and that the film provokes this space of exchange.

MM: I want to thank you again for being part of this work – for your contributions in this film – and the way in which we spoke about bringing in the academic/the theoretical and how it moves through all the various subjects in the film.

Queer Coolie-tudes distributors: Frameline (US) www.frameline.org (US-based); the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Center www.cfmdc.org; and McIntyre Media www.myintyre.com.