

**Silent Archives: Indo-Caribbean Women's Jewelry**  
**by Joy Mahabir**  
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Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

In Caribbean studies, the archive has several registers. The official colonial archives of slavery and indentureship include ship logs, diaries of slave traders and ship captains, inventories of names and dates, collections of private letters. All of these documents yield examples of the violence of the archive that Jacques Derrida refers to, in the way that they organize, regulate and commodify the subjects and objects of colonial power. Alongside these colonial archives of the Caribbean, it seems that there also exist alternative archives that hold historical knowledges and memories that were excluded, obscured or erased in order to establish the authority of the colonial state. Alternative Caribbean archives usually exist in open-ended, ephemeral forms, in street festivals like Carnival, Ramleela or Hosay, in oral tales, in musical lyrics and rhythms, in cuisine and architecture, and even in the Atlantic middle passage or *kala pani* itself — “The Sea is History,” as Derek Walcott reminds us.

There have been recent attempts to explore the archives of the black diaspora, one example being the “Archaeologies of Black Memory” symposium held at the University of Miami in 2007, and centered on Afro-Caribbean and African-American subjectivity. A similar project of recovering the archives of the Indo-Caribbean experience seems to have already been started by Indo-Caribbean women writers, whose poetry and novels explore alternative archives in order to uncover the political, historical and social conditions of Indo-Caribbean women that are absent from many colonial as well as postcolonial texts. Many Indo-Caribbean women writers acknowledge or privilege those sources usually ignored by archives, especially the stories of women told through oral testimonies, songs, folk theatre, journals, shopping lists, diaries, and even through the jewelry of indenture.

Indentured workers were paid in silver shillings, and women laborers had these shillings melted down by jewelers into various pieces including *churis* or *churiyaan* that would be worn from wrist to elbow, *bazubands* (arm bands), *karas* (ankle bands), various types of necklaces such as *chandahars*, *tillarys*, *kanthis*, and *chakapajees*, rings including *nakphuls* (nose rings) and finger and toe rings. Since most women laborers purchased their own jewelry, they were able to dictate the designs and patterns of the pieces.

In the colonial archives, the jewelry of indenture is described in great detail, and by the late nineteenth-century we find indentured women being made to pose in their jewelry for colonial postcards. At this time postcards from the Anglophone Caribbean cast images of black women laborers surrounded or overwhelmed by tropical landscape and crops, but there is a distinct shift in the representation of Indian women laborers since the images of land and agricultural produce are absent.

In many of the photographs of Indo-Caribbean women taken in the first decade of the twentieth century (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4), the removal of the images of wooden barracks, cane stalks and cocoa trees deliberately render invisible the labor they performed; the photographer's emphasis on the elaborate jewelry and clothing serves to erase the real conditions of poverty, labor exploitation, and hazardous working conditions on plantations that replicated those of slavery. Although Indo-Caribbean women were especially active in estate strikes and demonstrations during the period in which these photographs were taken, they are carefully posed as exotic, adorned, domesticated and disciplined subjects who seem to accept the control and power of the plantation structure as passively as they sit for the photographer. Yet, the practice of wearing jewelry undermines and transgresses the intention of the visual colonial archive, since Indo-Caribbean women consciously used jewelry to emphasize their role in the economic and social relations of the system of indentureship.

The main focus of my project on Indo-Caribbean jewelry is to show how Indo-Caribbean women created an alternative visual archive through the practice of a materialist visuality that immediately referenced the invisible relations of indentureship. The theoretical implications of this practice challenge some current theories on visual culture that highlight the sensual immediacy or the sublime of the visual, where vision is rendered opaque or mediated because of the slippages of signification, and therefore irreducible to underlying social and economic structures. Another aim of this project is to show how the representational practices of Indo-Caribbean women have shaped the visual imaginary of Caribbean culture, and how in turn the aesthetic elements of theatre, music, dance, story-telling and spirituality associated with most Caribbean visual forms also imbue the archive of Indo-Caribbean jewelry.

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