

“Odd but recognizable”:
Indigenous Epistemologies and Indo-Creole
Belonging in Cyril Dabydeen’s *Dark Swirl*
Najnin Islam

Abstract: Recent scholarship across postcolonial, settler colonial, and critical Indigenous studies has interrogated the ascription of a settler identity to racialized communities whose own presence on Indigenous land may have been the result of the violent processes of colonialism. Simultaneously, this body of work has attended to how even these communities can replicate settler modes of belonging that marginalize Indigenous Peoples. In the postcolonial Caribbean, a discourse of labor and land ownership arguably consolidated Indo- and Afro-Creole belonging in such a way. This article examines literary fiction’s role in imagining other ways of belonging for East Indians in Guyana. It illuminates how Cyril Dabydeen’s *Dark Swirl* (1988) circumvents the framework of labor, land ownership, and enclosure to articulate a mode of belonging that unfolds by engaging with Indigenous histories and epistemologies. The resultant rearrangement of the East Indian characters’ understanding of the land they inhabit is key to the novel’s articulation of creole belonging. *Dark Swirl* thus intervenes in scholarship on creolization in the Caribbean that has often either ignored East Indians or reproduced the discourse of Indigenous disappearance.

Keywords: creolization, East Indian, Indigeneity, Cyril Dabydeen, Caribbean

I. Introduction

In 1919, the Imperial Colonisation Deputation of British Guiana forwarded a proposal issuing a “clarion call” to the British Indian

government to send its people—agriculturalists and capitalists—to Guyana. The deputation characterizes these desired immigrants as “settlers” and “colonists” who will pave the way for India to have “a colony of its own on the North Eastern coast of South America” (Wharton et al. 3). Anticipating that this proposal may be received with suspicion, especially so close to the abolition of Indian indentureship after a protracted period of political mobilization, the deputation is quick to distinguish this new plan from the old system. They clarify that it is “not a labour scheme or a project for securing cheap labour” and “there is to be no trace of the old indenture system” (3). Rather, they suggest, it is an attempt to aid a British possession that is “calling out for population” (3). New immigrants are offered the opportunity to purchase or lease land, take up wage labor, or be granted land on nominal terms after three years of agricultural work. The proposal ends by invoking the image of prosperous villages and flourishing crops and suggesting that the exploitation of the minerals and forests of British Guiana would ultimately lead to the realization of Sir Walter Raleigh’s three-centuries-old dream of the fabled land of El Dorado (12).

In articulating a “settler” identity for East Indian immigrants in Guyana and characterizing them as “colonists,” the 1919 Deputation drew on an established tradition. East Indian indentured workers brought to the Caribbean sugar plantations in the nineteenth century were described as a class of laborers who would not only act as a “racial barrier” (Lowe 24) between European planters and enslaved African peoples but also settle there and populate the colonies.¹ As early as 1805, in the aftermath of the Haitian revolution, British colonial officials discussed strategies to encourage Chinese immigrants to settle permanently in Trinidad to help stall the kinds of “convulsions that had taken place in the West Indies” (“Papers Respecting the Plan”).² Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, the British colonial government instituted the practice of granting lands to Indian indentured laborers instead of a return passage at the end of their contracts to incentivize long-term settlement.³ The 1919 Deputation connected the immigration of East Indians in Guyana to the idea of India acquiring a colony of its own in South America while at the same time helping to revitalize a British possession.⁴ East Indians

were thus conscripted into the project of settler colonialism. Whether as a “racial barrier” or as free immigrants, their settler status ultimately served colonial interests.

The Imperial Colonisation Deputation’s proposal reveals how the relationship between colonized subjects—in this case, East Indians and Indigenous Peoples—was discursively produced and materially structured. Land ownership was used as a central tactic of colonial governmentality. This land ownership affected racialized populations differently and also deliberately positioned them against one another. For instance, the offer of land to Indian “colonists” and the blueprint for resource extraction from forest lands required the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples and the subsequent erasure of their presence in the Guyanese hinterland. The deputation’s description of Indians as colonial subjects tasked with realizing Sir Walter Raleigh’s dream of El Dorado is a rhetorical maneuver that fashions these peoples in the image of early European colonists. This maneuver, coupled with the assertion that new Indian settlers would eventually pave the way for Guyana to become “an Indian colony,” simultaneously produces and inserts Indians into a colonial relationship with Indigenous Peoples and their land (Wharton et al. 12).⁵

Recent critical conversations have explored the relationship between Indigenous communities and racialized peoples in settler colonial contexts.⁶ This body of scholarship grapples with the complexities of settings in which the presence of racialized communities on Indigenous land is the result of the processes of colonialism. Shona Jackson, for example, discusses the continuities between the colonial and postcolonial eras for Indigenous Peoples in the context of plantation colonies such as Guyana; she suggests that their “real and figurative displacement,” which was central to the establishment of the plantation, continues to operate in the postcolonial present (*Creole Indigeneity* 2). If the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples during the colonial era was enacted through European policies and practices, their continued marginalization is facilitated through the actions and policies of the postcolonial state, largely represented by Afro- and Indo-Guyanese peoples. Even as Jackson acknowledges the violent histories of enslavement and indentureship that brought first Africans and then Indians to different parts

of the Caribbean, she argues that these racialized groups who were coercively brought into Indigenous territory “now hold identities through which settler power works affectively: whether deliberately or unwittingly, they extend the colonial subordination of Indigenous Peoples” (*Creole Indigeneity* 3). The postcolonial state, understood to have been built through the labor of the enslaved and indentured, is claimed as “an ethnic inheritance for Creoles” (4). Jackson’s argument illuminates how Afro- and Indo-Creoles indigenize by mobilizing a discourse of labor, a process she describes through the lens of Creole indigeneity. The question, however, of whether all non-white settlers—such as descendants of enslaved African peoples, Asian indentured laborers, or other racialized migrants—can be unequivocally called “settlers” is fraught.⁷ Scholars have thus developed other frameworks and critical vocabulary with which to name and differentiate non-Indigenous racialized subjects. Jodi Byrd’s use of the term “arrivant” to name racialized peoples forced into the Americas through the violence of colonialism is one such example.⁸

Considering the foregoing discussion, how might we better understand the lateral relations between different racialized peoples while still acknowledging the historical conditions of colonialism that structured those relationships? Especially resonant here is Byrd’s provocation to reorient our interrogation of settler colonialism beyond the vertical interactions between colonizer and colonized, centering instead “the horizontal struggles among people with competing claims to historical oppressions” (xxxiv). Might such a reorientation enable us to texture the particularities of the relations between Indians and Indigenous Peoples beyond what Jackson suggests or what was desired by the British colonizers and the Imperial Deputation? What texts, archives, and reading methods might be apposite to this task?

In this essay, I turn to Anglophone Caribbean fiction to probe the ways it represents the relationships between different racialized communities. In particular, I examine how Indo-Guyanese Canadian author Cyril Dabydeen’s novel *Dark Swirl* (1988) articulates East Indians’ engagement with Indigenous histories and their negotiations with the fact of living on Indigenous land. Interrogating the foundational discourse

of native disappearance and how it affects any attempt to understand the horizontal relations between subaltern groups, I make two interrelated arguments about the novel. First, *Dark Swirl* positions Indigenous presence and sovereignty and the violence of their dispossession during European colonialism as central to understanding Guyanese history. This rearticulation enables the novel to accomplish a second critical task: an examination of how East Indians, who were brought to and eventually settled on the South American coastland during European colonialism, come to belong to Guyana. This examination unfolds not through the exclusion of Indigenous histories but through an engagement with the ethical and political implications of East Indian presence on Arawak and Warrau land. In *Dark Swirl*, creolization happens through the East Indian characters' apprehension of Indigenous histories and an acceptance of Indigenous epistemologies. This apprehension, the text insists, is a fundamental precondition for creole belonging. By illuminating how East Indians creolize, *Dark Swirl* ultimately addresses a lacuna in theories of creolization in the Caribbean that have predominantly, if not exclusively, focused on Europeans and people of African descent.

Dark Swirl unfolds in a village located in the Canje region of Guyana, the traditional territory of the Arawak and Warrau peoples inhabited by East Indians. While the exact period in which the plot unfolds is not readily discernible, Aliyah Khan suggests that the novel is set in the 1960s, around the time of Guyana's independence from Britain (208). Michael Niblett also situates the novel in the 1960s and 1970s, during the era of falling imperial profits and the rise of a “neoliberal regime of accumulation” (334), which is mirrored in the actions of the European naturalist in *Dark Swirl* who arrives in this village to collect specimens of local fauna. The narrative features East Indian villagers, particularly a ten-year-old boy named Josh, his father Ghulam, and his mother Savitri; a European naturalist who remains unnamed and is referred to as “the stranger” (Dabydeen 15); and an entity named the massacouraman who is a figure from Amerindian cosmologies. While this entity is never fully described in the novel, the novel suggests that it is an enormous creature who chooses who it becomes visible to and who can initiate profound transformations in its observers. Josh and Ghulam's encounter with the

massacouraman, variously described as the “creature” (65), the “monster” (54), and “the thing in the creek” (78), provokes a desire in the European naturalist to capture it like he has his other specimens. The novel narrates the changes that these characters undergo through their encounters with the massacouraman. These changes can be described as affective—even psychological—but more importantly they reflect how the characters come to apprehend Guyanese history and their place in it. Through the perspectives of the European naturalist and the East Indian villagers, particularly Ghulam, the novel offers competing interpretations of Guyanese history and geography that register Indigenous presence and dispossession in different ways.

The novel’s description of the massacouraman is deliberately impressionistic, piecemeal, and filtered through the perspectives of the characters who encounter it. Various named water spirits, including the massacouraman, feature consistently in nineteenth-century colonial texts about Guyana, specifically in relation to its Indigenous communities. For instance, in his account of the Indigenous People of Guyana, published in 1852, Reverend William Henry Brett discusses the figure of the *Orehu*: a mysterious shapeshifting female spirit being who inhabits the waters. The *Orehu*, he writes, is dreaded for her capricious nature and her propensity to terrify people for her own amusement; she is also revered for offering protection from another spirit called the *Yauhahu*. He notes how “belief concerning this being [had] extended itself to the few negroes who dwell on the rivers of Guiana” (Brett 291). British colonial administrator, explorer, and botanist Everard F. im Thurn discusses a similar spirit figure called the *di-di*, or water-mama, who lives underwater and is said to have a body “like that of a gigantic fish, sometimes like that of a huge crab, and again at other times to be of various other forms” (352). Niblett suggests that some of the earliest references to the massacouraman are found in the stories and songs of Guyanese pork-knockers or gold and diamond miners who explored the interior of the country during the gold rush of the 1890s. He also argues that while the origins of this figure are obscure, it might have both African and Amerindian roots. Beyond these nineteenth-century accounts, references to the massacouraman persist in later explorers’ narratives and

in contemporary anthropological accounts.⁹ *Dark Swirl's* refusal to fully describe the masscouraman is also a refusal to indulge in the curiosity of the colonial gaze that marks the nineteenth-century texts I discuss here. The masscouraman enables the novel to stage an encounter between different epistemologies and modes of understanding history.

In the next section of this essay, I examine the contrast that *Dark Swirl* draws between the European naturalist and the East Indian villagers. I focus on the text's delineation of their different reactions to the figure of the masscouraman. This juxtaposition illuminates multiple modes of apprehending not just history but also historicity—and through that, different epistemologies. The naturalist's erasure of the violence of colonialism via his performance of colonial unknowing, an idea I explain below, is juxtaposed with the East Indian villagers' capacious and relational conceptualization of history, one that accounts for the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples and the status of “arrivants” like themselves on Indigenous land. In the subsequent section of this essay, I examine *Dark Swirl's* elaboration of East Indian belonging on Indigenous land. Instead of offering a discourse of labor to justify such belonging, *Dark Swirl* offers alternative modes through which East Indians could have belonged. I invoke the past conditional form—“could have belonged”—to emphasize the function of speculation in the analysis I offer. My reading focuses on the novel's exploration of East Indian modes of belonging that may be empirically unverifiable or that otherwise cannot be known because of the nature of the historical archive and the limitations of our critical methods.¹⁰ Thus, I read the novel's exploration of East Indian belonging in tandem with theories of creolization in the Caribbean that, though generative in many ways, have at times discursively rehearsed the narrative of Indigenous disappearance while neglecting the creolization of East Indians. *Dark Swirl* offers an alternative imagining of how East Indians could have belonged or might have learned to belong. The liberatory potential of this conceptualization lies in the suggestion that belonging is facilitated through the acceptance of heterodox modes of understanding the land one inhabits and one's own sense of being in relation to it. It is also facilitated through the resultant rearrangement of one's approach to different epistemologies. My reading of the novel

unfolds in conversation with scholars of settler colonialism who focus on the relationship between Indigenous and other racialized communities as well as scholars of Indigenous histories in the Americas. My analysis remains attuned to both the creative potential and limitations of *Dark Swirl's* engagement with Indigenous presence and representation. Attention to the novel's limitations is especially important because its engagement with Indigenous histories unfolds in the absence of Indigenous human characters and communities.

II. Competing Historicities

In *Dark Swirl*, the naturalist's view of Guyanese history is shaped by European time, which posits Sir Walter Raleigh's arrival in the sixteenth century as the single point of reference for both Indigenous and East Indian presence on the South American coastland. By obfuscating the implications of colonial expeditions and erasing the violence of colonialism from his account of the history of Guyana, the naturalist enacts what Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein describe as "colonial unknowing." In contrast to the passivity the phrase initially suggests, it refers to deliberate processes that seek "to render unintelligible the entanglements of racialization and colonization" and "attribute finality to events of conquest and dispossession" (Vimalassery et al.). Ironically, by expressing a desire to be the legitimate successor to Sir Walter Raleigh and Charles Darwin, both of whom found their way to South America in search of various kinds of wealth, the naturalist implicates himself within this other history of European extractive projects. His act of calling the specimens he collects his "property" (Dabydeen 77) echoes colonial processes such as the appropriation of Indigenous lands and the exploitation of racialized labor on the plantations. At one point, the naturalist wonders what "the indigenous people thought when they had first seen a white man" or what they might have "felt when they encountered the stern gaze of these Englishmen who had hacked a trail through the mighty tangle of green thickets, asking if the city of El Dorado really existed" (81). The suggestion of a neutral encounter is undercut by the violent imagery of hacking and invasion. Indigenous Peoples figure as a matter of curiosity, unreadable and

unknowable, whose introduction into the annals of (European) history is mediated by the figure of Sir Walter Raleigh.

The naturalist’s way of characterizing non-Europeans, one that is tethered to a narrow conceptualization of history, extends to East Indians as well. He describes them as a people whom “Sir Walter Raleigh had never met on these Guyanese shores” (33). Oddly enough, in his eyes this renders them a people “without much of a history” (33), a comment that enacts multiple erasures. On the one hand, it erases the history of East Indians prior to being brought to Guyana as part of the European colonial project. Raleigh may not have met East Indians during his expeditions in Guyana, but their contemporary presence is the result of a long history of colonialism spanning Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. On the other hand, describing East Indians in these terms obscures the lives they have lived alongside other racialized communities in Guyana, not just in the service of, but also and often against, their colonial oppressors. Not unlike European planters who deemed East Indians a suitable labor force to replace emancipated African peoples, the naturalist continues to speak of them in terms of their capacity for labor. Thus, he describes the East Indian villagers as incapable of working out “solutions to difficult problems” (56) yet still able to labor “like beasts” (57). Historically, racialized ideas about Asian and African peoples’ disposition toward work and their purported ability to withstand harsh conditions were leveraged to justify their exploitation in the plantation colonies. The naturalist’s descriptive maneuver obfuscates the entanglement of racialization and colonization that brought East Indians to Guyana.

Dark Swirl challenges the naturalist’s view of history by including the perspective of the East Indian villagers:

They could hear in the wind echoes of an ancestral past of indigenous men and women fleeing into the bushes; of sugar-plantation owners, white-white, who buried slaves alive under silk-cotton trees with their own dead so their kind would be served even in the underworld; of voodoo brought from Africa to these shores; of jumbies manifesting from smelly hovels; of

backoos, who worked in the sugarcane fields in the darkness of the night with an efficiency no man would match; of a plantation owner riding on a majestic white horse, dragging a heavy chain behind; of Moongazer straddling the road, head a pillar in the sky, silently watching. The wind sang too of indentured people, brown and black faces, small-framed, clutching at the *Bhagavad Gita* and reciting remnant words from the *Ramayana* in the flicker of light from the wall-lamps in narrow logies as they clung to their faith in this hostile place. (28–29)

The past described here is filled not with the achievements of explorers in pursuit of El Dorado; instead, it notes the foundation they laid for the arrival of European colonists and sugar plantation owners. The expropriation of Indigenous Peoples and the exploitation of Africans and Asians take center stage in this account. However, instead of offering a direct account of colonization, the text rehearses a series of local beliefs that encode the violent, material processes that subtended the workings of empire. In doing so, it introduces an alternative epistemological framework—one that might ordinarily be overlooked as myth, legend, or superstition—through which to apprehend Guyanese history. Reading the many presences (human and non-human, native and from elsewhere) that haunt the Guyanese landscape is central to this process. For instance, the backoo, a spirit being of West African origin, working in the sugarcane fields invokes the history of the transatlantic slave trade. The hovels that house jumbies, spirits of the dead, recall the accommodations of the enslaved and the indentured on the plantation. Other spirit beings like Moongazers dot the landscape along with silk cotton trees, which are also sites of haunting. The relentlessness of colonial violence is underscored by the suggestion that plantation owners buried the enslaved with their own people under these trees so that they could be served even after death. Voodoo coexists with the Hindu epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* brought by Indian indentured laborers who seek comfort in them. Unlike the naturalist's narrative the villagers' account underscores the need for a relational mode of understanding Indigenous, African, and East Indian presence in Guyana

facilitated by “colonialism’s multiple, uneven yet interlocking violences” (Vimalassery et al.).

Colonial unknowing takes on a different valence in the context of the naturalist’s encounter with the massacouraman. Here, too, the novel stages a powerful contrast between his outlook and the villagers’ ways of seeing, especially Ghulam’s. For the naturalist, the massacouraman lies outside of rational thought; it is a mythical figure, an improbability. At first, he doubts the existence of the massacouraman, as suggested by his questions to Josh about whether he had imagined the creature in the creek or perhaps seen it in a dream or a nightmare. He echoes the reactions of nineteenth-century explorers and British colonial administrators. For instance, Brett discusses the figure of the massacouraman in a section of his book that seeks to illuminate the character, “habits[,] and superstitions” of the Indians of Guiana (269). Similarly, Thurn introduces his discussion of the water-mama with the phrase “fabulous and nonexistent” (353). He ascribes Indigenous Peoples’ belief in the massacouraman to “their lack of the rudiments of scientific thought” (353). Thus, Thurn positions Indigenous cosmologies in opposition to Western scientific rationality. The naturalist’s unwillingness to confront the failure of his library to yield answers and to recognize that the massacouraman’s existence cannot be explained through either Darwin’s theory of evolution or an epistemological framework rooted in Western rationality is an instance of incommensurability. Such incommensurability, as Byrd and Michael Rothberg argue, is not a natural outcome of cultural difference but something that derives from power differentials. Rather than an inability to comprehend others’ perspectives, it names either a deliberate unwillingness to listen or even a willingness to actively mishear the cultural other. In *Dark Swirl*, this unwillingness to recognize other ways of apprehending the world is something that the naturalist has to cultivate in the face of evidence to the contrary. He laughs “at the folly of entertaining” any of his own theories about the natural world that do not align with Darwin’s theory of evolution (Dabydeen 36). Having witnessed “the inevitability and the futility of human effort in the face of implacable nature” in the Guyanese interior, he must immediately remind himself that he is “a man with western

education, with a western concept of the world” and a scientist who has a certain “responsibility” toward the world (57).

In contrast, the villagers’—particularly Ghulam’s—encounter with the masscouraman initiates an interrogation of belonging for the descendants of East Indian arrivants like himself and of the custodianship of the Indigenous People’s land. This encounter also facilitates a deep awareness of the connected histories of dispossessed communities who found their way onto Indigenous lands through colonial regimes. This is most evident in a scene in which Ghulam wonders about the masscouraman’s purpose in coming into their lives:

The stranger [the European naturalist] kept on talking while Ghulam listened and yet not listened, his thoughts wandering, going back to the far past . . . to Africa. . . . This thing might have lived there in a mighty river blacker than all other rivers in the world. Had it come from there with the slaves as a curse on all the white sugar plantation owners from Europe, to lurk in the many creeks and rivers, to surge up from time to time from the depths of these dark waters? His thoughts drifted to China, then to India. Perhaps this thing had come from the Ganges, that most ancient, holy and foul of rivers, brought here by the indentured people from that land, *their* curse on the plantation owners? But what if this thing, the masscouraman, had been here since the very beginning, was native to this region, to this one spot, and had been known first by the Arawaks who prayed to it on moon-filled nights? Had they left it behind when they fled into the jungle many decades ago, as a protector of their coastland, against the likes of the whiteman or even people like themselves? (59–60; emphasis in original)

Ghulam’s reflections are not bound by the prescriptions of linear time, colonial rationality, or empirical possibility. They express a reality where mythical and cosmological figures, curses, and blessings can travel across time and space. He speculates that perhaps the creature in the creek is a curse on plantation owners brought by enslaved Africans or indentured laborers from China and India. Or perhaps the masscouraman

is native to the region, left behind by Arawaks to protect “their coastland” not only from European colonizers but also from “people like themselves.” While the phrase “their coastland” underscores Ghulam’s acknowledgment of how he lives on Indigenous land, his use of the phrase “people like themselves” to designate East Indians (and by extension, also perhaps Chinese and African people) underscores his perception of the massacouraman as a custodian of this land, protecting it from them. In her reading of the novel, Aliyah Khan suggests that the “syncretic overlap among the discretely folkloric, religious, and spiritual ideologies of *place* of Africans, Indians, and indigenous peoples” creates the conditions for a cosmology of belonging where the land and land-based spirits act “as active agents in determining human citizenship” (211; emphasis in original). Ghulam’s invocation of the massacouraman as a protector rejects the vocabulary of ownership. It is also telling that the massacouraman’s appearance coincides with the coming of the European naturalist and his collecting of local fauna: specimens he then claims are his property.

Rather than a representation of the incommensurable and improbable, Ghulam approaches the massacouraman as a fact and a reality. In doing so, he actively reconceptualizes historicity. If historicity involves the process of sorting out what is factual from what is fictional, mythical, or legendary, then Ghulam’s response to the massacouraman undoes such binary oppositions. His conceptualization of historicity attends to the ostensibly improbable, the mythic, and the cosmological. Ghulam foregrounds ways of knowing the world that are heterogenous and uncircumscribed by European epistemological categories. More importantly, his acknowledgment of the status of East Indians as settlers on Indigenous land circumvents a specific kind of representational problem wherein Indigeneity is elided in favor of creole belonging.¹¹ Ghulam’s acknowledgement is both the precondition and the core of creole belonging, which unfolds in this novel through means other than the discourse of labor.

While the novel asserts the status of Europeans, Africans, and East Indians in Guyana as outsiders, it is attentive to the distinctions that mark the historical experiences of these groups: both the conditions of

arrival and settling. The textual instance cited above emphasizes Ghulam's awareness of East Indians as a "transplanted people" (Dabydeen 75). This organic imagery of setting down roots in a place differs significantly from European modes of extracting value from the land and these same "transplanted people." In the aftermath of his encounter with the massacouraman, Ghulam acknowledges that East Indians had begun to see themselves less and less as just a transplanted people. He suggests that, along with the landscape, the birds, animals, and insects, they too are undergoing a "slow transformation" (75). The idea of undergoing a transformation, of becoming something different from what they or their ancestors may have arrived as, is mentioned multiple times in the novel. Ghulam, for instance, feels "that he [i]s changing, becoming closer to the outside world" (68). At one point, he thinks to himself how it is in moments when he wills himself to be one with everything around him, "as if his spirit could be with the insects, reptiles, animals and plants," that he "fe[els] himself to be most truly Hindu and yet something else" (44). This sentiment extends to the collective histories of other "transplanted people," as is evident in Ghulam's assertion that "in this isolated part of the Guyanese coastland, almost cut off from the rest of the population, they—Indians, Africans—lived in a strange harmony, eking out a meagre living. Whatever they had been, he sensed they were becoming something else" (45). The present continuous form of the verb, "to become," suggests something that is in process, signaling ongoing change. What does it mean to undergo "a slow transformation," to be "truly Hindu and yet something else"?

III. "Yet Something Else": Indian Creolization

Dark Swirl describes how East Indians creolize. Anthropologist Viranjini Munasinghe explains that "'Creolization' emerged as the key analytical concept for examining the processes of cultural adaptation, change, and synthesis within deeply hierarchical relations whereby new cultural forms were developed in the New World by piecing together elements derived from Old World cultural orientations" (552). Creolization destabilizes the idea of pure origins, and it acknowledges, at least in theory, "the creative capacity of Caribbean peoples to forge new cultural forms

that escape representations of diasporic peoples as mere reproducers of traditional forms or as assimilators of dominant cultures” (Munasinghe 552). Ghulam’s slow transformation resonates with Munasinghe’s invocation of adaptation and change that rejects discourses of pure origins. His identity, while still Hindu and East Indian, gradually becomes “something else” through a cultivated intimacy with the Guyanese landscape and Indigenous cosmologies. By gesturing toward this process of cultural change, *Dark Swirl* invites readers to interrogate critical theory’s inattention to East Indian and Indigenous communities when it comes to discourses of creolization in the Caribbean.

Aisha Khan and Patricia Mohammed, among others, note that foundational theories of creolization in the Caribbean tend to foreground the experiences of African and European peoples to the exclusion of other racialized groups. Verene Shepherd and Glen Richards also argue that the idea of creolization has gained legibility primarily in relation to Europeans and Africans, occasionally in relation to mixed-race people, but rarely with regard to the Indian population.¹² Turning her attention to the scholarship of Edward Kamau Brathwaite, one of the earliest proponents of the theory of creolization, Munasinghe notes the absence of East Indians. When Brathwaite does mention them, it is to emphasize how the entry of East Indians post-Emancipation changed “the trajectory of Creole society into a plural one” (Munasinghe 555). For Brathwaite, the primary subjects of creolization are enslaved African peoples and Europeans.¹³ However, Brathwaite’s essay “Timehri” (1974) offers (if only fleetingly) a more capacious conceptualization of creolization, one that includes Europeans, Africans, East Indians, and Indigenous Peoples. He defines creolization as a “socio-cultural description and explanation of the way the four main culture-carriers of the region—Amerindian, European, African and East Indian—interacted with each other and with their environment to create the new societies of the New World” (29–30). However, his subsequent distinction between “mestizo-creolization” and “mulatto-creolization” (30) makes no mention of East Indians. While he defines “mestizo-creolization” as the process of interculturalization between Amerindian and European peoples located primarily in Central and South America, “mulatto-creolization”

involves the interculturalization of African and European peoples in the West Indies and parts of North America. Brathwaite's delineation of the geographical contours of "mulatto-creolization" further obscures Indigenous communities and their experiences with interculturalization.

Despite these omissions, Brathwaite considers the possibility of African and Amerindian interculturalization in the context of Guyana, a place that he marks as a site of mestizo-creolization. He notes that Guyanese writer Wilson Harris and artist Aubrey Williams exemplify this possibility in their work by illuminating the "primordial nature" of Amerindian and African cultures as well as "the potent spiritual connections between them and the present" (Brathwaite, "Timehri" 41–42). Williams' presence among the Warrau Indians, Brathwaite claims, places him "in a significant continuum" with their ancient art, which he made visible to others through his work (40). The suggestion of creole intellectual labor as essential to mediating Indigenous art has been critiqued by scholars who see this gesture as an extension of the discourse of physical labor aimed at securing creole belonging in the colony.¹⁴ In other words, the exploration of African and Amerindian interculturalization ends up suggesting not only that Amerindian culture requires mediation but that it can in fact be translated by non-Indigenous cultural practitioners for the benefit of others.

Dark Swirl explores the possibility of new social formations arising out of East Indians' encounters with Indigenous histories and knowledge-systems. Even though these formations do not achieve their fullest elaboration in the novel, the text gestures toward them. Ghulam and the East Indian villagers' "slow transformation," read through the analytic of creolization, happens not despite but because of their engagement with Indigenous histories and cosmologies. Ghulam's encounter with the massacouraman leads him to a deeper awareness of being on Indigenous land while also slowly becoming of that land. Similarly, the villagers' fear and uncertainty give way to "complete belief" (Dabydeen 55) in and acceptance of the massacouraman as indigenous to Guyana, a presence that precedes not only their arrival but also any conception of human time. This belief does not, however, signal Ghulam and the villagers' complete comprehension of it. The massacouraman remains enigmatic to the

villagers even as they develop feelings of attachment to it. By not rendering the massacouraman interpretable or commensurable, *Dark Swirl* avoids the kind of intellectual mediation for which Brathwaite, among others, has been critiqued. The novel’s goal is not to translate the massacouraman but to render it a forceful reminder of Indigenous epistemologies that are often devalued as irrational and unscientific. The text narrates the collective thoughts of the villagers in the following terms:

Now everyone talked about this thing that could loom up like a mountain; that could swallow whole houses; that was bigger than the biggest anaconda, crocodile, manatee and fish combined; this thing with eyes that were very small, fixed like malevolent beads in a head larger than the biggest wood-ants’ nest, eyes that seemed to carry with them a knowledge of past centuries, of prehistory even[,] . . . things which man couldn’t understand. Compared to this thing the stranger’s knowledge was minuscule, no better than that of any ordinary man. All he [the European naturalist] knew about were the tiny tadpoles or the weird reptiles no longer than a forearm or broader than a villager’s foot—flat as this was through a lifetime’s walking shoeless on the hard ground. (55)

The villager’s acceptance of the massacouraman enables them to see the limitations of the European naturalist’s claims to scientificity. Over the course of the novel, the naturalist’s response to the massacouraman transforms. After his initial rejection of the very idea of the massacouraman, he comes to entertain the possibility that it is perhaps an extraordinary, unique animal specimen that, if captured, “would be the crowning achievement of his career” (33). He ruminates that “countless scientists would want to measure it, weigh it, to discover its feeding and mating habits, its behavior patterns—and thousands of visitors, cameras flashing, movie-cameras whirring on tripods, would flock to see it” (49). In contrast, the villagers realize that the massacouraman’s knowledge of past centuries, of prehistory, exceeds what can be comprehended by human beings. This perspectival shift is significant because it acknowledges non-anthropocentric modes of knowing and

apprehending the world. It is emphasized in the villagers' assertion that the knowledge the naturalist has or seeks to produce through the study of Guyanese fauna is "minuscule" in comparison to what the massacouraman knows. The creature reminds them of their own insignificance and yet they are grateful for its presence. They want to protect it from the prying hands of the naturalist and also be protected by it. The villagers' declaration that the massacouraman is "theirs" conveys a sense of belonging rather than a sense of ownership. This sentiment is expressed more clearly in Josh's conviction that the massacouraman is "part of their identity on this Guyana coastland; part of what made them appear odd but recognizable" (79).

What makes East Indians in Guyana simultaneously odd and recognizable? Briefly, I would like to return to Munasinghe's emphasis on creolization as a process of change, adaptation, and synthesis that chafes against the perception of diasporic groups as culture-bearers of their homeland. Read through this analytic lens, the East Indians' oddity derives from the fact that they are no longer just Indians but are profoundly transformed by their encounter with Indigenous cosmologies. The text does not suggest a process of acculturation or a loss of one's culture and belief systems in the process of adopting another. The East Indians remain East Indian: their "slow transformation" renders them "truly Hindu, yet something else" (Dabydeen 44). Interculturation manifests not only through visible cultural practices but also through the transformation of habits of thought and the acceptance of heterogeneous epistemologies. These epistemologies are most forcefully signaled through the emplaced knowledges that the massacouraman bears.

The final encounter between the European naturalist and the massacouraman brings about a shift in the naturalist's perspective. Faced with something that cannot be accounted for through the epistemes at his disposal, something that is "palpably flesh as well as spirit" (99), the naturalist is forced to turn to what he deems non-empirical and, therefore, without value. He wonders whether things from prehistory may, in fact, exist. He is overwhelmed by the futility of the tasks he has set up for himself and questions the work he has dedicated his entire life to: "a

journal to write, articles to prepare for scholarly publications, lectures to give. Commitments to zoos and museums” (89). Instead of repeating the oft-repeated narrative of Indigenous disappearance (physical and cultural), in this encounter it is European epistemology that is rendered inadequate. If the earlier instances discussed here illuminate, as I suggest above, moments of incommensurability between the European naturalist and Indigenous cosmologies, then the naturalist’s final predicament demonstrates the novel’s resistance to the question of commensurability. This refusal to be read, measured, and weighed in ways that the naturalist is habituated to rejects both his knowledge systems and his presence in the Guyanese hinterland. In a radical reversal, the masscouraman asserts its incommensurability as the ultimate gesture of sovereignty.

IV. Emplaced Knowledges, Reciprocity, and Creole Belonging

Despite its creative intervention on several fronts, *Dark Swirl* might appear to repeat some of the infelicitous tropes associated with representing Indigeneity. Could the final disappearance of the masscouraman, coupled with the absence of Indigenous human characters in the novel, be read as a troublesome symptom of “the mythology of the vanished native” (Shields 444)? Does the text’s representation of Indigeneity through the “mythical” figure of the masscouraman risk erasing real Indigenous presence in Guyana? This potential critique is especially pertinent in light of ongoing projects of Indigenous sovereignty and struggles for land rights in the face of postcolonial governments often resistant to such claims.¹⁵ Alternatively, might such skepticism about the critical and representational function of the masscouraman betray our own epistemological biases, particularly our expectations about who or what *ought* to be represented as agential figures? I suggest that, rather than a figure that stands in for Indigenous communities, the masscouraman is an elaboration of a knowledge system that is attuned to the entanglements of the human and the non-human. Its disappearance at the end of the novel is the ultimate assertion of its sovereignty over the land. The final sentences of the novel underscore the masscouraman’s sovereignty and its custodianship of the land in the following terms:

Now, indeed, it was only memory that was left; memory like an ancient, primordial imagining that surpassed the places where they had come from—Africa, India, Europe—or where they secretly yearned to return when the soil no longer seemed to accept them; memory of a nether place, like the massacouraman itself, merely reflecting the phases of the moon where all else was vanquished or simply disappeared. (Dabydeen 102)

The massacouraman leaves behind an ancient, primordial memory in its wake. This is a memory of the land whose duration exceeds human time. The land is sentient and able to either accept or reject the people who inhabit it. East Indian belonging no longer tethered to the discourse of labor depends upon the acceptance and reciprocity of the land. The East Indians' acceptance of the massacouraman does not indigenize them or validate any claims of ownership. In fact, the text insists that the human relationship to land needs to be apprehended in ways that lie outside the frameworks of settlement, enclosure, and labor. By imbuing land with memory and agency, *Dark Swirl* invites readers to think about human-land relations in ways other than those foregrounded by colonial settler logic. Indigenous philosophies of land and the human relation to it offer crucial insights in this regard.

Janette and Arif Bulkan argue that, for Indigenous communities in Guyana, the natural world is intimately tied to “origin myths, the social order and the regulation of daily life” (137). Fernando Santos-Granero echoes this argument, further suggesting that, for southern Arawakan communities, the idea of landscape includes not only geography and geological formations but also the human, the animal, and the divine. Arawakan sacred landscapes are “cultural processes” rather than fixed geographies; they are understood to be continually shaped by divinities, powerful spirits, and their interactions with human beings (94). Writing in the context of North America, Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred illuminates a fundamental distinction between the European idea of sovereignty as dominance and Indigenous philosophies premised on the belief that “land was created by a power outside of human beings. . . . [T]herefore possession by man is unnatural and unjust” (470). In her

discussion of “literacies of land,” Sandra Styres explains that, as an Indigenous philosophical construct, land “is both space (abstract) and place/land (concrete); it is also conceptual, experiential, relational, and embodied” (27). Similarly, in a conversation about settler colonial attacks on Indigenous political orders, especially their relationship to land, Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson articulate the idea of “grounded normativity” (254), which denotes reciprocity-based practices and procedures of relating to place. They explain that grounded normativity teaches one how to live “in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitative manner” (254). The possibility of a deep, nonhierarchical intimacy between the natural and human worlds, the idea that land is not a fixed geography but a set of cultural processes, and that it is fundamentally unnatural for human beings to possess it, grate against the very logic of land as property.

In writing about Indigenous knowledge systems in Guyana and parts of North America, these scholars thus illuminate ways of understanding the land that are not tethered to the frameworks of ownership, enclosure, and labor. This understanding is crucial in light of the fact that the postcolonial state’s recognition of Indigenous land claims is often enacted by recasting those very claims in terms of propertied ownership. In Guyana, for instance, the Independence Agreement and later Amerindian Acts have done exactly this. Such a perception of land, Shanya Cordis rightly observes, “delimits and displaces distinct cultural and spiritual attachments and embodied relationships” as well as “indigenous modes of interdependence with the land” (“Push Ya’ Body” 440).

In arguing that *Dark Swirl* deploys the figure of the masscouraman to foreground non-Eurocentric modes of understanding and relating to land, I do not intend to suggest that the novel tries to represent Indigeneity. Rather, by centering these heterodox ways of seeing and relating to land, the novel makes a case for their salience in understanding how East Indians might live on Indigenous land in ways that exceed the framework of labor.¹⁶ Possibly, it articulates a less acknowledged way in which East Indians creolize and belong. Read through the analytic of creolization, this is a remarkable textual gesture in that it recasts

creolization not as the result of the cooptation of people's belief systems and symbols but as the product of a radical rearrangement of one's approach to epistemology and ontology. The novel does not metaphorize the masscouraman or present it as an abstraction or a symbol of Indigenous presence. On the contrary, the text underscores its literal and physical presence in the village. This representation is simultaneously an invitation to engage with Indigenous cosmologies as constitutive of heterodox epistemologies and as expressions of difference that need to be grappled with on their own terms.¹⁷ Furthermore, in *Dark Swirl*, the masscouraman becomes a way of reorienting the East Indian villagers' outlook on their own presence in Guyana and of insisting on the land's sovereignty in accepting or rejecting a "transplanted people." Its disappearance, similarly, is an elaboration of its role as the protector of the land left behind by the Arawaks when they were forced to flee into the hinterland. The masscouraman fulfills this role by appearing around the same time as the European naturalist who depletes the land one specimen at a time.

Dark Swirl illuminates a method to understand the lateral relations between racialized and dispossessed communities. This method requires that we situate contemporary life in Guyana, in all its racial complexity, within the longer history of European colonialism that produced self-serving racial hierarchies. This method also invites us to be attentive to how racialized groups relate to one another because of and despite these hierarchies. *Dark Swirl* theorizes Indo-Creole belonging through an engagement with Indigenous epistemologies that find expression in and through the figure of the masscouraman. In doing so, the novel attends to conceptual lacunae in critical thinking on creolization in the Caribbean, especially around East Indian and Indigenous experiences with processes of interculturalization. *Dark Swirl* begins a conversation about how we comprehend creolization of East Indians as a quotidian experience that is processual and deeply entangled with Indigeneity. The novel's pursuit of what makes East Indians "odd but recognizable" is an exercise not in excavating a hidden truth but in acknowledging what is possible.

Notes

- 1 For a discussion of the phrase “racial barrier,” see Lowe’s study of an 1803 British colonial document titled “Secret Memorandum from the British Colonial Office to the Chairman of the Court of Directors of the East India Company” in *The Intimacies of Four Continents*.
- 2 This discussion is part of a colonial document from 1805 titled “Papers Respecting the Plan of Introducing Chinese Settlers in Trinidad.” It builds on the conversations about Chinese settlement in Trinidad in the 1803 document that Lowe examines in *The Intimacies of Four Continents*.
- 3 After emancipation and during the period of indentureship, Indians and Africans did not have the same access to land ownership. Whereas indentured Indian laborers were given land in some parts of the Caribbean such as Trinidad in lieu of a return passage at the end of their contracts, emancipated African peoples had to purchase prohibitively expensive Crown lands. Scholars deem this one of the many ways in which the colonial government fomented friction between Indians and Africans. For an extended discussion of these mechanisms of racial management see Look Lai and Manjapra.
- 4 The plan, drafted by W. Hewley Wharton, J. A. Luckoo, and Parbhu Sawh, found support among the planter class who saw in this scheme an opportunity to remedy labor shortages on sugar plantations following the end of indentureship. The plan was the culmination of conversations between the Colonial Office, attorney general Joseph Nunan (who led a seven-person delegation in 1919 that Wharton, Luckoo, and Sawh were part of), and Thomas Greenwood of the West India Committee, which represented the interests of the planters.
- 5 For discussions of the history and subsequent fate of this proposal, see Ishmael and Mangru.
- 6 Scholars such as Fujikane and Okamura and Saranillio examine the concept of Asian settler colonialism outside the context of the Caribbean. They have discussed its role in the dispossession of Hawai’ian (Kanaka Maoli) Indigenous Peoples. They also illuminate the complex power dynamics that mark the relations between Indigenous Peoples, white settlers, and “locals,” who are understood to be a combination of Asians and Pacific Islanders. For scholarship on this issue in the Indian Ocean world, see Khatun, who writes about the relationships forged between South Asian migrants and Aboriginal communities in Australia in the nineteenth century.
- 7 See Day’s discussion of the conceptual challenge posed by the term “settler” when describing non-white racialized populations living on Indigenous lands. Her work examines the role of Asian migrants in the capitalist development of Indigenous lands and in the dispossession of Indigenous communities in North America. This work builds on Fujikane and Okamura’s influential theorization of Asian settler colonialism and engages a tradition of decolonial criticism that

- seeks to examine Asian complicity with colonization as well as Asian-Indigenous solidarities.
- 8 Byrd delineates the categories of the settler, the native, and the arrivant to underscore the power differences in the positionalities of these groups and the historical conditions of their arrival. The term “arrivant” comes from Brathwaite’s *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*.
- 9 For instance, in his 1925 account of an expedition into the interior of Guyana, Matthew French Young recalls being warned about the massacouraman, “something in the shape of a human form covered with hair, having small ears set in a head armed with the fangs of a tiger with webbed hands and feet having terrible claws and having a tail” (qtd. in Niblett 319). More recently, Whitaker has studied the persistence of the figure of the water-mama among the Makushis of contemporary Guyana.
- 10 Lowe’s reflections on the past conditional temporality of what she describes as the “what could have been” is especially resonant here. It entails a kind of thinking that considers what is forgotten and what is affirmed, that is attentive to “the positive objects and methods of history and social science, and also the matters absent, entangled, and unavailable by its methods” (41).
- 11 For further explanation and examples of the ways in which Indigeneity gets elided in favor of creole belonging, see Jackson’s “The Re/Presentation of the Indigenous Caribbean in Literature” and Shields.
- 12 Scholars have sought to explain the reasons behind the exclusion of East Indians from discourses of creolization. For instance, in the context of Trinidad, Aisha Khan explains that the exclusion of Indians may be attributable to their late arrival into a society where “Euro/white and Afro-Black and their various ranked combinations formed the basis of creole society” (172). As Segal argues, Indians were seen as “an unassimilated ancestral kind” (97). Alternatively, Mohammed argues that creolization may not always have been seen as desirable by the Indian community. This outlook had a particular gendered dimension: Indian women’s relationships with African men were regarded as a threat to the Indian community. Reddock echoes this idea in her discussion of how creolization was seen as “Indian subordination to Afro-creole norms” (584). Yet racial mixing among Afro-Creoles and Indians has been significant enough “to produce a distinctive Creole variant identified as ‘Douglas’ in local lexicon” (Hintzen 99). Less has been written about the creolization of East Indians in relation to Indigenous Peoples in the Caribbean. Cordis, however, looks at the intersection of Black and Indigenous identities in the Americas through the conceptual lens of “Black indigeneity” in “Settler Unfreedoms.” For critiques of the erasure of Indigenous communities from historical accounts, see Forte, Jackson, and Newton.
- 13 For Braithwaite’s discussion of the primary actors in processes of creolization, see *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica: 1770–1820* and *Contradictory Omens*.

- 14 For a discussion of intellectual labor as a means of consolidating creole belonging, see Jackson's *Creole Indigeneity*. Brathwaite's approach to the question of Indigeneity has been critiqued by Newton, who highlights both his idea of Indigenous disappearance and his belief, expressed in *Contradictory Omens*, that Afro-Caribbean peasants were the new bearers of Indigenous culture.
- 15 For instance, the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs in Guyana refused Indigenous rights campaigners' demands in 2006 to replace the term “Amerindian” with “Indigenous People” in the 1976 Amerindian Act, arguing that the latter term could just as well apply to other groups, thereby raising a fundamental question about who qualifies as Indigenous in Guyana. For further discussion of the political implications of this event, see Jackson (*Creole Indigeneity*) and Aliyah Khan.
- 16 Indeed, one might correctly observe that the Guyanese state's increasing encroachment on Indigenous forest lands at the behest of mining companies and other extractive projects demonstrates that such alternative modes of being in relation with the land are absent from the workings of the postcolonial state. For a historical account of colonial and postcolonial state apparatuses through which Indigenous land rights in Guyana have been eroded, see Bulkan and Hennessey.
- 17 For a discussion of how the academic treatment of Indigenous knowledge systems as tropic, mythical, and metaphorical hinders Indigenous claims for intellectual sovereignty, see Coleman.

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