"It sounds like *erasure*"

Mobility, Vulnerability, and Queer Coolitude Poetics in Rajiv Mohabir's *The Taxidermist's Cut*

Barbara Gfoellner

Abstract

In the Caribbean, im/mobilities linked to imperialism, colonialism, or recent forms of migration have created complex relations of vulnerability. This article examines human and more-than-human im/mobilities in the context of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora and their relations of vulnerability in Rajiv Mohabir's poetry collection *The Taxidermist's Cut* (2016). The collection addresses the vulnerability of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora and extends it to a shared more-than-human vulnerability by employing the practice of taxidermy as a figurative device to expose violences of oppressive and colonial regimes and their legacies today. These multiple vulnerabilities are related both to imperial im/mobilizations of peoples during the period of indentureship and to animals, on which taxidermy is performed, fixing their desired shape for eternity. This article reads *The Taxidermist's Cut* as a work that queers understandings of singular origin and binary classifications that serve to immobilize humans and non-humans alike. It then sheds light on how the art of taxidermy, with its colonial legacies, subversively applied as poetic tool, allows Mohabir to express shared vulnerabilities while generatively using them to resist colonial mechanisms of immobilization, fixation, and erasure.

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Mobility, Vulnerability, and Queer Coolitude Poetics in Rajiv Mohabir's *The Taxidermist's Cut*

Barbara Gfoellner

Rajiv Mohabir is an Indo-Caribbean writer, born in London, UK, in 1981 to parents who immigrated from Guyana and who then moved to Toronto and Chuluota, Florida, during Mohabir's adolescent years. While moving between multiple places—also in his later years to India, Hawai'i, and New York—as a queer man of color, he continually renegotiated his positionality within these various localities. Mohabir situates his vulnerabilities at the intersections of being both racialized and sexualized: "To be a man of color is tough. To be a queer man of color is even tougher . . . I felt vulnerable being both."[1] Through his writing, he renegotiates these vulnerabilities: his body was exposed to discriminatory and sometimes violent practices within a predominantly white and heteronormative surrounding. Mohabir has written various poetry collections and a memoir (*Antiman* [2021]) that treat both the daily inner and outer conflicts of oppression, as well as the entangled hauntings and legacies of Indo-Caribbean histories. His debut poetry collection to be examined in this article—*The Taxidermist's Cut* (2016)—is a multilayered poetic grappling with bodily vulnerabilities. These are linked to Indo-Caribbean ancestral legacies of colonialism and imperialism, their afterlives today in racialized oppression within a white supremacist society, and the speaker's own self-destructive practices against his body.

The art and technique of taxidermy serves as a metaphor that explores—cuts open and stitches back together—the speaker's multiple vulnerabilities. As a practice of skinning animals, taxidermy exposes the violences of colonial practices and their continuing oppressive legacies in the poetry collection. Weaving images of taxidermy with self-harm, the poems express a wider relational vulnerability that also encompasses the more-than-human, engaging in the practice of what Donna Haraway terms "multispecies worlding."[2] Following Sara Ahmed's considerations on the skin "as the site of exposure or connectedness,"[3] this article reads the skin—of the taxidermied animal and of the (human) speaker—as a tissue connecting human with

more-than-human vulnerabilities. Vulnerabilities are thus related to imperial im/mobilizations of peoples during the period of indentureship, as well as of animals, on which taxidermy was performed, immobilizing their desired shape for eternity. However, rather than perceiving these immobilizations as being fixed and determined, this article will distil the possibilities that are opened exactly through the exposure of these more-than-human vulnerabilities in the poems.

As Mohabir continues in the interview quoted above, "I felt vulnerable being both, but I also learned to be fierce, to survive like a coyote in a pack of wolves."[4] Setting vulnerabilities in relation to Indo-Caribbean and queer diasporic im/mobilities accordingly also enables a reading of these vulnerabilities as "a radical openness toward surprising possibilities . . .—as a space to work from as opposed to something only to be overcome."[5] By applying a mobility studies lens, this article will first explore the unevenness of vulnerabilities in the context of Indo-Caribbean im/mobilities before demonstrating how vulnerability functions as a relational potentiality through which a more-than-human poetics is articulated in *The Taxidermist's Cut*.

Indo-Caribbean Im/Mobilities and Vulnerabilities

The Caribbean has been shaped by various human and nonhuman im/mobilities connected to colonialism and imperialism. Many of these im/mobilities were precariously linked to exploitation for the advancement of capitalism. Cedric Robinson's term "racial capitalism" illustrates how the exploitation of racialized labor put a capitalist system into place that was dependent on the increased mobility of peoples and goods.[6] The Caribbean and its plantations played a pivotal role in the advancement of capitalism through exploited labor and the concomitant rise in power of colonial empires such as Great Britain and France. After the abolition of slavery in the early nineteenth century, the introduction of indentureship responded to a shortage of labor. More than a million workers, especially from India (the largest group), China, and Indonesia were shipped to European colonies such as the Caribbean, including British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica, to work on sugar plantations.[7] This transoceanic crossing, referred to as *kala pani* ("black waters"), had special significance as a transformative journey: traversing the waters meant the loss or dispersal of cultural, religious, familial, or caste ties, while the classifications into which one was born—like rigid social hierarchies determined by the caste system in India—were renegotiated. Beyond loss, this migratory experience also represented a cut from rigid confinements of the native country.[8]

The arrival of indentured workers in the Caribbean was firmly linked to a desired smooth continuation and promotion of exploitation and capitalism. Asian workers carried the stigma of commodity status: "The Indian was perceived, consequently,

as a lackey of capitalism whose presence perpetuated coercive, unequal labour relations and inhibited the growth of an independent peasantry."[9] The indentured laborer was seen as the one furthering an exploitative and capitalist system, of which slavery was the precursory stage. As Lisa Lowe writes, Asian indentured laborers—referred to as "coolies"[10]—became the "*figure* introducing this alleged transition from slavery to freedom."[11]

While the mobility of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora was motivated by a desire for economic stability, this did not occur entirely voluntarily, as it threw people into complex relations of dependency. Indentureship was considered a form of bound labor; workers were assigned to plantations from which they were not allowed to leave, being bound to a contract with a duration of at least five years.[12] Rather than forwarding a romanticized view of free mobility and nomadism, mobility scholarship has drawn attention to different forms of mobility and immobility, which are always implicated in "the production and distribution of power," influencing and being influenced by social relations, such as relations between classes, caste, genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and nationalities.[13] Seeing mobilities merely in terms of voluntary and free agency easily obliterates complex power relations that channel these im/mobilities according to a dominant group's interests.

The system of indentureship was based on what Cotten Seiler refers to as "racialization of mobility," as certain mobilities and immobilities were controlled and monitored based on people's race and ethnicity.[14] Mobility is differentially distributed, thereby producing uneven mobilities, which are shaped by unequal relations of power; the question as to who, and what, can move freely must thus be situated within histories of slavery, colonialism, and patriarchy.[15] Mobilities such as those of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora are relationally produced through their entanglement with other human and nonhuman im/mobilities: the—often not entirely voluntary—mobility through displacement across the ocean of one group propelled the prosperity of another group. Vulnerabilities produced through im/mobilities thus always have to be located in their specific historical and political contexts and their wider global relations, which—in this article—speak to diasporas at large and the Indo-Caribbean diaspora in particular. In other words, vulnerabilities are a product of what Lowe calls the "intimacies of four continents," drawing together the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa, alongside their intimate imperial relations of colonialism and its legacies.[16]

Indentureship created precarious forms of im/mobility: while indentured workers moved across the ocean, hoping for social and economic upward mobility, the laborers were simultaneously tied to relations of dependency; in a sense, they were fixed in place. Their vulnerability was not only constituted by these relations, but these relations also dispossessed them, as they entered into what Butler refers to as "a

mode of being dispossessed, a way of being *for* another or *by virtue of* another."[17]

Mobilities in this respect might also engender vulnerability, rather than wealth and freedom, with the extent of one's vulnerability being distributed unevenly. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay argue for an understanding of vulnerability and invulnerability as being "politically produced, unequally distributed through and by a differential operation of power."[18] Perceiving vulnerability as an essential "part of social relations" defies any quick blame of a subject's vulnerability to the individual and instead embeds it into a wider web of power relations. Under the premise that vulnerabilities, along with mobilities, are relational, this article focuses on the diasporic and more-than-human bonds that define the self and its surroundings.

In her book *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020), Butler makes the expansive claim that vulnerability needs to be seen "as a feature of our shared or interdependent lives," and, thus, a "relational understanding of vulnerability shows that we are not altogether separable from the conditions that make our lives possible or impossible. In other words, because we cannot exist liberated from such conditions, we are never fully individuated."[19] While vulnerability necessarily has to be thought of as relational, these relations are themselves vulnerable. In the Caribbean context, relations of vulnerability evoke violent modes of rendering colonial subjects transparent and fungible for slavery or intendured labor.[20] However, these newly formed relations through historical and present experiences of mobility and cultural encounters—creolization—also hold the possibility for multiple generative formations that create anew. Martinican writer Édouard Glissant speaks of capital "R" "Relation" as this generative site that allows for differences and fluidities, for "each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open."[21] Relation is thus not restrictive or oppressive, but Glissant articulates the concept of a "Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other."[22] Theorizing vulnerability as "Relation" in a Glissantian sense, Guillermina de Ferrari refers to his notion of opacity: "Invoking its right to opacity, however, the contemporary Caribbean subject lays claim to its own materiality as a disidentification with the traces imprinted on the body. The vulnerability of the body thus becomes a condition of possibility of emancipation from colonialism at the cultural and social levels."[23] In this article, the skin—as part of the body that is not only vulnerable to direct outer harm but which also protects that which lies inside—is key to theorizing vulnerability, which necessarily must be understood as relational. These relations can be harnessed as forms of liberation from oppressive conditions, transcending—or queering—violent structures and categorizations into which one has been placed.

Queer Coolitude Poetics

Mohabir's poems disrupt violent relations of power through the queering of rigid boundaries of binary categories, echoing Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's notion of "queering" as "marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so."[24] Gayatri Gopinath carves out an understanding of "aesthetic practices of queer diaspora"—that is, practices that "emerge out of, and respond to, the legacies of the colonial labor relations that tie Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas to each other; such legacies include the dispossession of indigenous peoples, postcolonial nationalisms, and the diasporas of racialized, migrant labor."[25] Queerness, then, offers ways not only to contend with such violent legacies, enducing uneven vulnerabilities, but also to cut through these ties to produce something new.

Rajiv Mohabir's *The Taxidermist's Cut* can be read as an example of an aesthetic practice of queer diaspora. Blurring human and nonhuman boundaries, *The Taxidermist's Cut* "disrupt[s] the normative ways of seeing and knowing that have been so central to the production, containment, and disciplining of sexual, racial, and gendered bodies," to draw on Gopinath.[26] Moreover, this disruption is done "through a particular deployment of queer desire and identification that renders apparent the promiscuous intimacies of our past histories as they continue to structure our everyday present, and determine our futures."[27] Mohabir's poetics is a form of queer expression anchored in diasporic histories of indentureship. He inscribes his writing in a "Coolitude" inheritance, a term coined by Mauritian poet Khal Torabully in 1992 to evoke diasporic histories of indentured migration across the globe, while creating a bond with other communities enduring colonial oppression, like the African diaspora.[28] The "coolie," as argued by Torabully, stands between relations of "the Master and the Slave" and has often been silenced—becoming "*l'être sans parole* (wordless being)." However, as the "third chaotic presence," the coolie unsettles binary oppositions.[29] Rajiv Mohabir's writing as a Coolitude poetics queers binaries and transcends national affiliation to build solidarity across borders: "My coolitude allows me to struggle with others in their fight for sovereignty . . . *My coolitude allows me to see and relate to the suffering of colonized people around me*." Thus, fundamentally building his Coolitude on diasporic relations, Mohabir's poetics are infused with mobility: "*My coolitude is forever movement*."[30] It is through this continuous mobility that the poems in *The Taxidermist's Cut* negotiate individual vulnerabilities of their speaker, thereby connecting them to a collective and shared human, as well as a more-than-human vulnerability.

Vulnerability of the Skin in Taxidermy

Vulnerability, seen as a condition shared among humans and the more-than-human alike, is shaped by colonial practices and mobility regimes that exerted control not only by mobilizing species, bringing them to new places, but also by immobilizing them, fixing them at specific locations, thus channeling their movement or stasis. *The Taxidermist's Cut* works against immobilization and fixations of humans and animals by disposing of the vulnerabilities linked to colonialism and its legacies. Instead of figuring vulnerability as an obstacle that must be overcome, the poems harness and expand it across time and space, the human and more-than-human, transforming vulnerability into "a radical openness toward surprising possibilities."[31] Opening vulnerability to other possibilities makes space for multiple histories, rather than a teleological understanding of a linear history that erases any non-Western versions, as outlined by Gopinath:

> The aesthetic practices of queer diaspora conjure these minor histories into being and make them apparent. Their value lies in their ability to demand that we look beyond the main event and instead become attuned to submerged and forgotten modes of longing, desire, affiliation, and embodiment that may in fact allow us to envision an alternative present and future. As such, these aesthetic practices enact a queer mode of critique that demands a retraining of our vision and a reattunement of our senses, and in so doing point to the limits of the entire apparatus of vision that is the inheritance of colonial modernity.[32]

Mohabir's Coolitude poetics reattunes the senses from a hegemonic colonial apparatus of vision, which tends to create a singular narrative through clear categorization and objectification, to one that pays heed to submerged and erased histories. As the poet writes in his "Coolitude Manifesto," "*My coolitude is queer, upsetting binaries and status quo. I am a dark body that bounces back from extinction's brink, almost hunted into ghost by whalers and colonizers alike who both built their empires on trying to eliminate my dreaming and imagination*."[33] Animal vulnerabilities of extinction are closely linked to human vulnerabilities of erasure, the eradication of Indigenous peoples as well as of displaced peoples' memories and cultures. Yet, words inscribed on the page of Mohabir's poems challenge this erasure to speak for other possibilities.

The body, in Mohabir's poems, becomes a material body marked by the traces of colonial history, symbolized by the cuts and marks on the skin inflicted by the taxidermist. Yet, the body also resists through these persisting marks on the skin. The skin, the prime site for the practice of taxidermy, functions as a connecting tissue between human and more-than-human vulnerabilities in *The Taxidermist's Cut*. The poems' speaker transcends categories of the human, as they merge with animals

and relate their endured violences and experiences to those of living and taxidermied animals. Taxidermy, the practice of cutting a body open and stitching it back together, serves as the book's symbolical vehicle to expose and make opaque the vulnerabilities of the speaker and, consequently, their intimate surroundings.

Derived from ancient Greek, the word taxidermy is a compound of "taxi" (to arrange) and "dermis" (skin), literally describing the "arrangement" of skin. While anthropologists commonly date the first practices of taxidermy to the time of ancient Egypt, coeval with mummification,[34] one of the main differences between the two is their distinct treatment of the skin: in the former, the skin is cut and then stitched together, after the insides have been removed, while "mummification leaves the skin intact and in place."[35] The vulnerability of the skin is thus central to the practice of taxidermy, constituting a vulnerable boundary between what is inside and outside the body. As the outer layer of the animal, the skin is vulnerable to the cuts and openings of the taxidermist, rendering the animal fully transparent through exposure. Hence, the skin both exposes and hides, as well as protects. While dressing the animal—sewing up and reassembling body parts—is an important part of the practice, taxidermy always leaves its traces, albeit sometimes invisible, on the body. Sara Ahmed speaks of encounters of the skin as a "*contact zone of impressions*," arguing that the skin not only "separates us from others [but] also connects us to others." Any "marks" impressed upon the body remain as hauntings: "The impressions of others surface as marks on the body, in which the marks become a sign of absence, or a sign of a presence that 'is no longer.'"[36]

However, while the skin as the outer layer may directly be exposed to assaults or cuts, there is also a "perceived need to care for the skin, a sense of its vulnerability and exposure."[37] In taxidermy, careful preservation of the skin is of utmost importance. As valuable objects of interest, techniques to preserve the skin became essential and served to recreate animal specimen "as if still alive,"[38] exposing a desire to control and immobilize the animal body, which is also firmly baked into a colonial system. "In this context," Pauline Wakeham notes, "taxidermy functions as a powerful nodal point in a matrix of racial and species discourses, narratives of disappearance and extinction, and tropes of aboriginality that have been crucial to the maintenance of colonial power in Canada and the United States from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present."[39]

Taxidermy holds the tension between life and death, mortality and immortality, keeping the "semblance of life in death."[40] In an eerie sense, it tries to work against erasure, voicing a longing for the reversal of species extinction, largely due to human interventions, by preserving its *breathless* bodies for a desired eternity.[41] Taxidermy is thus embedded in a colonial system that fixes and immobilizes its object into a

desired shape, rendering it a product of colonial intimacies.[42] As the guiding thread in Mohabir's poetry collection, the art of taxidermy reveals, displays, and obscures multiple vulnerabilities through complex and fraught interrelations of im/mobilities.

Queering Taxidermy: Shared Interspecies Vulnerabilities

As a metaphor, taxidermy blurs human/animal boundaries and exposes "shared physical and ontological vulnerabilities concealed by the naturalization of past human/animal institutionalized relationships."[43] Multispecies worlding forms one of the book's main principles, as it allows readers to understand more-than-human vulnerabilities; it renders possible an active engagement with enmeshed relationships between the human and more-than-human. However, as these relationships metamorphose into forms of "becoming-with" in *The Taxidermist's Cut*, they become *inter*species worldings: "Becoming is always becoming *with*—in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake."[44] In the poetry collection, animals are immobilized, fixed, and made vulnerable to the taxidermist's cut, as through direct instructions on how to perform taxidermy. Taxidermy serves as a tool not only to explore the various types of violence inflicted upon both the animal and the human but also to think through how these openings are sewed up again.

The merging of human/animal relations and vulnerabilities can be analyzed through the speaker position and mode of address used in the poems. The line "Let's pretend you are going hunting" opens the collection, introducing the address of the second-person "you" as characteristic to the book.[45] The appeal conveys the impression of an internal monologue, suggesting that the speaker simultaneously becomes the addressee. Through this mode of address, the "I" swiftly transitions into the "you," the human into animal, taxidermist into taxidermied, thereby fusing both the violence inflicted on the speaker/animal and the violence the speaker enacts on themselves. Taxidermy serves as a vehicle to explore an external violence directed at the self; the collection thus deconstructs the practice of taxidermy to disclose vulnerabilities of animals and humans alike.

In the poems, immobilization often works through objectification. In the opening poem, "Preface," the speaker instructs the reader on hunting strategies and methods of taxidermy, training their gaze on the desired trophy: "You look first at the wandering deer, the bigger prize, / full of meat, with hide to cure, but keep an eye / peeled for upland birds too, smaller, / easier to mount once ensnared."[46] Even before being hunted, the living animal is objectified by the hunter's gaze, its value weighed by its size and flesh, as well as the complexity of the mounting process. Vulnerable to the human gaze, relations of dominion are established during the hunt, between humans and animals alike, as well as in terms of cultural and political relationships, as

Poliquin explains: "Traditionally trophies spelled out a hunter's rights over particular geographic terrains as much as human mastery over beast."[47]

In *The Taxidermist's Cut*, the speaker's shifting positionalities complicate power relations and defy definite objectification, while rejecting clear human/animal hierarchies. Adding another layer of ambiguity, the speaker takes on the instructive voice of the taxidermist, marked in italics: "*Yes*, I said, / *birds are easy to work with, refugee bones* / *that gift flight, delicate and slight,* / *may as well be shadow.*"[48] By adopting the taxidermist's voice, power relations constantly shift to challenge the superiority of the taxidermist, as well as to reverse the vulnerable position of the animal.

The concluding lines of the poem put the speaker back into a vulnerable object position: "I have always / made myself invisible. I mean to say / I am still—this trembling breath of a comma, / this coincidental object of your want."[49] Invisibility becomes the animal's form of resistance, which, as a desired hunting object, eludes the hunter's gaze. Visually fixing, oftentimes exhibiting, preserved specimens is one of taxidermy's foremost motivations: "The fact that we are born and inevitably disappear defines us, organically speaking. Taxidermy exists because of life's inevitable trudge towards dissolution . . . The desire to hold something back from this inevitable course and to savor its form *in perpetuum* exhibits a peculiar sort of desire."[50] Invisibility, for the speaker, is essential to resist that very immobilization. However, invisibility is a double-edged sword, a necessary means to escape immobilization, and yet the speaker clearly needs to assert their existence: "I am still—." The double meaning of the word "still," evoking both persistence and stillness, foregrounds a troubled subject/object position: *still* as persistence within ongoing conditions of oppression, prolonged by the use of a dash, yet defying stasis.

This ambiguous relationship with invisibility parallels Glissant's affirmation of a subject's "right to opacity": colonialism operates on the desire to make its objects transparent and legible in terms of a hegemonic Western logic, by extension, rendering subjects vulnerable to imposed—often binary—classifications.[51] Taxidermy follows in a similar logic: by rendering the living, moving, and thus elusive, animal immobile, it can become intelligible, as Mohabir explains in an interview: "Taxidermy is bending the body of a being into the taxidermist's reading of that body—fixing its pose in time, subtracting any sovereignty of the creatures fixed in motion. In this way, sovereignty is personal albeit vulnerable to the desires of those who would manipulate another's body."[52] Opacity, however, allows a subject to exist in an ambiguous in-between position of invisibility and persistence, laying claim to its own existence while reserving its right to not make itself fully transparent. The speaker expresses their right for opacity by playing with the ambiguity of words, signalling the impossibility of fixing the body or of full comprehension: "Whether you catch me or not is not

the point."[53] Rather than rendering oneself intelligible within binary categories such as human/nonhuman, Mohabir's poetics complicates anthropocentric agency and, instead, carves out the possibilities of "becoming-with," which speaks to a shared interspecies vulnerability.

Erasure and Preservation: "It sounds like *erasure*"

Taxidermy is a work of precision, carefully considering each cut to open the animal's skin without harming its outside, taking its insides out, to be replaced with foam, resin, wood, plaster, or clay, to then stitch it back together into the desired form, and finally preserving it to last in its new environment.[54] These cuts, however, leave traces on the body. Mohabir's poems reflect on taxidermy as a process of both erasure and preservation.

The titular poem, "The Taxidermist's Cut," and a set of poems subtitled "(Erasure Poem)" take and restitch words from taxidermy manuals to provide instructions on how to prepare a corpse. "*Lay the coyote / on the skinning table*," the speaker instructs, foreshadowing the opening of the animal body.[55] Laid bare on the skinning table, the animal's vulnerability becomes manifest through the opening of the skin and the exposure of its insides. In other words, it is rendered fully transparent to the taxidermist's gaze and subjected to their whims, taking out body parts that no longer serve the taxidermist's purpose. Mohabir poetically links what is called field dressing in taxidermy with colonial practices that caused erasure. By using the manuals' words—cutting out exact sentences and phrases and putting them into new contexts within the poems—Mohabir performatively dismantles the violence that comes along with erasure. While some parts are erased, others are carefully preserved. In the poem "Preservation (Erasure Poem)," the paradox in its title alludes to the double entendre of taxidermy, as some lines taken from Montagu Browne's taxidermy guide *Practical Taxidermy* (1884) are placed within the longer sentences of a poem: "Seize the bird by the sides, / insert poisons and other pain."[56] Adding the second line to the manual's instructions, the speaker writes themselves into the practice of taxidermy, as if to add subtler meanings of the practice, doubled by the alliteration and felt by those objectified. Poetry, then, becomes a craft of using raw materials and arranging them into new contexts to refine their meaning; the speaker turns into the taxidermist who decides what to erase and what to preserve.

Ultimately, the poems speak to various forms of erasure: erasure of the self and its identities—queer and ethnic—and its larger diasporic and interspecies vulnerabilities. As Mohabir writes elsewhere, "I see my first person as an assertion against empire, a way to un-erase memory, a decolonial act. How can a brown queer speak?"[57] In *The Taxidermist's Cut*, the "brown queer" speaks through one of the most prominent ani-

mals in the poems, the coyote, which is objectified and made vulnerable to the taxidermist's cut, a cut that tries to rearrange and categorize its complexities. However, the text's constant movement resists the taxidermist's actions. Given colonialism's histories of erasure—both of living beings and their cultural traces—linked to genocide and forceful displacement, persistence has been both a necessary and rebellious act. The poems counter fixation and erasure by using the traces of living beings to un-erase memory and to recreate an identity through mobility.

Queering Purity Through Mobility

Against the backdrop of immobilization through objectification and erasure, Rajiv Mohabir carves out a poetics of mobility, one that moves through personal and collective histories, as well as beyond rigid confines of bounded affiliation. By linking indentured Indo-Caribbean mobilities and mobilities of migration to the US, the poems illustrate how these mobilities are relational, bound by a sense of shared vulnerability across generations, species, time, and space.

In the book, the figure of the coyote—as an animal both alive and preserved—exemplifies these complex relations. The coyote represents the speaker's hybrid identities, evoking both its Native American symbolism as trickster figure and Haraway's use of the coyote to disrupt rigid nature/culture boundaries. For Haraway, the coyote "is about the world as a place that is active in terms that are not particularly under human control, but it is not about the human, on the one side, and the natural, on the other. There is a communication between what we would call 'nature' and 'culture,' but in a world where 'coyote' is a relevant category, 'nature' and 'culture' are not the relevant categories. Coyote disturbs nature/culture ontologies."[58] Thus, the coyote resists clear (anthropocentric) categorization; instead, it disrupts and confuses linear genealogy, creating alternative understandings of human/nonhuman bodies and relations.

Throughout the collection, the speaker and the coyote merge into one; *becoming-with* the coyote, the speaker defies fixed identities. The collection's titular poem—which stretches across several pages to explore themes of racial, bodily, and animal violence through the tool of taxidermy—juxtaposes the speaker's background of displacement with the coyote's. The first line explains: "Your great grandparents traveled kalapani from India to South America." The poem then outlines the speaker's migration to Chuluota, establishing a link between their transnational mobilities by referring to "Florida's black water," which "flows northward" and which is not only the name of a river in Florida but also the literal translation of "kala pani." The last line of the poem fuses these human traces with the coyote, as "canid footprints trail yours."[59]

This fusion between the human and the non-human provides a transition to the following page, which outlines the coyote's presence and value in Florida. Visually, the prose poem's layout—two longer coherent paragraphs, interrupted by one shorter sentence—creates a link between the pages, allowing for a comparison between human and nonhuman experiences of mobility. The coyote's background, similarly, is one of displacement: "*Canis latrans* are new to Florida." Yet, for the animal, in contrast to the speaker, displacement is linked to assimilation: "They adapt easily, experts at elusion." For the coyote, assimilation comes at a certain cost, as the animal continuously oscillates between being alive and dead, made clear by a sudden change in the following sentence: "Their pelts hang by the dozens at the Sanford / Flea Market—hated for being exotic, invasive, and competition for jobs."[60] The animal, now in death, is defined by the value of its hide. Killed by "the dozens," its monetary value is decreased to the point that it ends up being sold at flea markets. The dash extends these animal vulnerabilities in commercial spaces to those of humans, alluding to both the exploitative coyote system and aggressions directed at immigrants who come to work in the US, joining the "competition for jobs." This evokes the disparaging stigma of Indo-Caribbean people on the labor market from its origins: frowned upon as "lackey of capitalism" during indentureship on the plantation, feared for taking away jobs today in the US.[61] While faced with these reproaches, the Indo-Caribbean speaker is merely a victim of this exploitative machinery, even standing at the very bottom of this ladder: "But you are not from the subcontinent and you don't descend from first- / wave doctors and lawyers, but from illiterate farmers who were once slaves / in the sugarcane fields for the East India Company."[62] The poem links the coyote's and the Indo-Caribbean descendant's vulnerabilities to capitalism and commercialization, highlighting their precarious positions in their respective environments, intricately linked to past colonial violence.

Alluding to the "coolie's" precarious position in society—often obliterated from discourse in the Caribbean context and not accepted as being fully Indian by other Indian immigrants in the US—the coyote, as a trickster figure, becomes an apt representation of the speaker in the text. It creates confusion due to its mobility and hybrid identity. Opposite the disdained coyote stands the figure of the wolf, which represents direct Indian origin, one that can be more easily traced. The speaker's Indo-Caribbean descent is addressed in "*Canis Latrans*," a poem problematizing singular belonging. Bearing the Latin binomial term for coyote as its title, the poem alludes to the attempt of categorization through naming, yet eludes clear identification through negation: "Do not mistake yourself / for a wolf, your plantation days / of illiterate indenture still / dusk the horizon."[63]

The coyote symbolizes misrecognition, too easily mistaken for an Indian, yet is clearly marked as Indo-Caribbean by their ancestors' work on the plantation. Inden-

tureship, described as "illiterate," calls attention to another marker of discrimination—class and caste—and alludes to the social and economic background of those laborers who decided to enter indentureship. Implied is the superiority of clear origin—or pure breed—over a hybridized identity, which in the poem is linked to deception ("camouflage," "misread," "mistake yourself"), presupposing an essentialist conception of cultures being fixed and local. Yet, the idea of culture as fixed in place is itself a myth, as Greenblatt reminds us: "One of the characteristic powers of a culture is its ability to hide the mobility that is its enabling condition."[64] For the Indo-Caribbean speaker, identity cannot be built on affiliation to any single nation or ethnic group; in queering purity—of both the coyote and the Indo-Caribbean self—the speaker's identity relies on mobility rather than fixity.

In "The Taxidermist's Cut," erasure is linked to racism experienced through the Ku Klux Klan in Florida ("where active members of the Klan rally"). The speaker again ponders their own erasure: "It tries to erase you still, though you cannot hide brown skin and burnt / cumin in Chuluota." Erasure is denied, as any movement leaves its traces: "On the banks of the river, the wet sand keeps a record of all who pass."[65] These traces exist and persist as hauntings; as Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, speaking about historical loss, "The production of traces is always also the creation of silences."[66] The wet sand resists complete erasure, memorizing any passing movement. As Glissant writes of the Caribbean, "Our landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history."[67]

These traces can also be read as mobile ways of resisting external attempts of fixation and erasure of the self, as in the poem "The Complete Tracker." Against the backdrop of ancestral mobilities, the speaker sets out to uncover their traces, yet they merely exist as half-sunken remnants of the past: "I trek the wreckage of myths: / toadstools on a felled tree." Thus, any mobility, albeit nonlinear, leaves its traces, as a taxidermy guidebook ensures, "*Every creature / that moves on earth leaves / a mark of its passing*, though the trails are seldom linear."[68] The speaker's mobility can be described in Glissant's sense of errantry, a kind of wandering without clear origin or endpoint, yet one that is based on Relation, building its rhizomatic identity on this very movement, on routes rather than roots. Refusing to be tracked at any one place, errantry allows for opacity and, thus, intelligibility of the speaker's traces: "Your footprints are covered over / by leaves and other men's heavy soles."[69] For indentured Indians, the kala pani crossing most strikingly symbolizes the dissolving of fixed affiliation, recreating relations through mobilities rather than through fixed identities. *Kala pani* therefore lies at the heart of the meaning of Coolitude: "By making the crossing central, Coolitude avoids my essentialism and connection with an idealized Mother India, which is clearly left behind. It discloses the Coolie's story which has been shipwrecked ('erased') in the ocean of a Western-made historical discourse."[70]

The skin is particularly vulnerable to predetermined classifications, as it racially marks the body as Other. Existing in Ahmed's "contact zone of impressions," it evokes prior historical encounters that shape enduring impressions of and upon the skin. Pejoratively defined from the outside, the coyote is seen as forgery, a chimera of the wolf: "You are a coyote / in wolf's clothes."[71] In "*Canis Latrans*," misrecognition is visually and sonically determined by skin and voice: "your skin / sings one song while people hear / another."[72] The sensual distortion of the skin, singing and being heard, constructs a synaesthesia, similar to the alienation experienced by the speaker: seemingly opposing entities are put together, ones that diverge from normative understandings of nationality or ethnicity. The repeated use of the word "hide" and its ambiguous meaning—either as animal skin or to conceal oneself—illustrates the close connection of the skin and erasure and links it to taxidermy. Struggling with misrecognition, the poem reads, "You cannot change your hide— / your parents are not from India."[73] The *hide* becomes a central marker for the speaker's vulnerability: while it represents a desire for escape and shelter, this is simultaneously denied due to the skin's persistence. Yet, the skin, here, needs to be seen in its double valence: not merely as a neutral outer layer that protects from outer impact on the skin but also, in Ahmed's sense, as "a surface that is felt only in the event of being 'impressed upon' in the encounters we have with others." Thus, not only does the skin persist but past encounters also *impress upon* the skin: "The impression is a sign of the persistence of others even in the face of their absence. The skin may in this way record past impressions, past encounters with others, who are others insofar as they have already made an impression. Hence the very impression of the skin surface is itself an effect of impressions."[74]

In *The Taxidermist's Cut*, the skin is subjected to a great deal of violence. As the largest organ constituting the outer layer of the body, it is particularly vulnerable to direct outer harm. The titular poem, "The Taxidermist's Cut," exposes the vulnerability of the skin, as taxidermy is performed on the animal—the coyote—as well as the self. Instructions from a manual carefully direct the process:

Remember not to cut
through more skin
than is necessary,
as you will have to sew

up the holes you make
along the way—[75]

These lines describing the performance of taxidermy are short; most sentences are broken up into enjambments and are indented, so as to slowly guide the reader

through the process. Violence inflicted upon the self is not italicized but is equally phrased as instruction: "Pick up the razor. / It sounds like *erasure*."[76]

Shifting between the manual's instructions on performing taxidermy on the coyote and the speaker's own cutting, equally described in taxidermy terminology, the poem queers—disrupts and destabilizes—bodily boundaries and relations as well as notions of purity by merging the human and non-human. Physical violence inflicted on the animal and the self speaks to a wider, more subtle, epistemological, and racial violence that contributes to vulnerability and erasure. Once opened, the speaker's body is stitched back together, covered anew: "Cover your own skin with the hide that does not hide. Place your arms / and legs in the empty pelt and sew yourself up."[77] Complete erasure of their outside is denied, skillfully emphasized by the homophone/homograph that underlines the impossibility to *hide* underneath a different skin.

Ultimately, the speaker alludes to the taxidermist's attempts to preserve and fix the animal. In "Field Care," the speaker explains, "No matter how well you prepare / this memory, doctored to reshape / my chest against your back, / I am not inside that skin you fix."[78] In the last line, the speaker escapes the taxidermist's cut by asserting their elusiveness. Thereby, they resist the taxidermist's fixation and recording of memory as well, claiming its right to opacity, to gaps and openings that exist within the self and one's ancestors' histories. In his "Coolitude Manifesto," Mohabir uses the image of the skin to express his interaction with the wider world; here, belonging is defined in terms of mobility and multiplicity:

> *My skin adapts to the world around, the element of its place. It is my skin, supported and given shape by my ancestry that allows me to ally with others in the spaces that I enter. I am a queer citizen of motion and movement. My home is in journey. My ancestors migrate with me as I learn and resing old sohar, kajari, and bhajans, and my skin changes as I learn how to move through unforeseeable currents. I belong nowhere and everywhere. Indeed, the idea of a native country means stasis and I am in constant motion. I am descended from survivors. In fact, my first instinct is to survive—and this is ancestral.*[79]

While heightened mobility of displacement and migration has put Caribbean people into vulnerable positions, survival—and thus persistence—is also anchored in the possibilities opened through that mobility. In his manifesto, Mohabir gives the skin a new meaning, one that does not bind him to any nation state, yet creates a deep ancestral bond. The skin refuses to be fixed, erased, or immobilized; instead, it moves with the mobility of the self and thereby allows him to adapt and relate to more than a singular human being. As Mohabir further proclaims, "The India we were once from is no longer the center of our travail, rather, what we center now is our dynamism, our

movement, our multiple belongings."[80] These multiple belongings extend to a shared sense of vulnerability, one that, in *The Taxidermist's Cut*, merges with animal vulnerabilities. As a response to the various immobilizations of humans and non-humans linked to colonialism and its legacies—ones related to the performance of taxidermy in the book—the poems then move out of this fixation by opening up the vulnerabilities of the self to other possibilities. As an aesthetic practice of queer diaspora, *The Taxidermist's Cut* transgresses various established boundaries through the conceptual metaphor of taxidermy, queering notions of purity linked to humans and non-humans.

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Notes

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25 Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 8.

26 Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 7.

27 Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 7.

28 Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, 143. The word "Coolitude" is an Indo-Caribbean answer to former Caribbean cultural and literary movements, such as "négritude" and "créolité." The latter emerged from the French Caribbean and African diaspora and attempted to emphasize African ancestries of the Caribbean, yet largely leaves out Caribbean peoples of Asian descent. Coolitude thus brings the Indo-Caribbean dimension to light.

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33 Mohabir, "Coolitude Manifesto."

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36 Ahmed and Stacey, *Thinking Through the Skin*, 10.

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42 It was in the sixteenth century, and particularly during the Victorian era, that taxidermy became popular in Europe, linked to heightened mobility of seafaring and "exploration" as well as a mounting interest in the natural world. Species were often hunted and removed from their place of origin—mostly "exotic" creatures that could serve as trophies brought by "explorers" to Europe—to be then preserved and displayed for those who stayed put to see. The act of collecting plants and animals was intricately interwoven with the larger colonial practices of conquest and control. See Marbury, *Taxidermy Art*, 9; Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso Books, 1993), 17.

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