

# Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal

---

Volume 7

Issue 1 *The Asian Experience in the Caribbean: A  
Special Double Issue*

Article 11

---

April 2010

## Poetics of Space in the Works of Mahadai Das and Adesh Samaroo

Joy Mahabir  
anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium>

---

### Recommended Citation

Mahabir, Joy (2010) "Poetics of Space in the Works of Mahadai Das and Adesh Samaroo," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.  
Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol7/iss1/11>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal by an authorized editor of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact [repository.library@miami.edu](mailto:repository.library@miami.edu).

In many Indo-Caribbean cultural forms, the concept of space seems to have a distinct importance, and this became clearer to me after seeing Adesh Samaroo perform at Guaracara Park in Trinidad during the 2007 Carnival season. The event was billed as a soca concert, not a soca-chutney concert, so all of the chutney performers, like the group *Dil-e-Nadaan* for example, sang only the latest soca. The reception was lukewarm since the crowd was impatient, anxiously awaiting the high-energy performance of the featured artist, Machel Montano. Adesh Samaroo was the last of the opening acts and I assumed that he would sing one song and quickly vacate the stage since the crowd was restless, but when Samaroo came on stage he managed to win over the crowd before he started singing, and this seemed to be a result of how he recreated his performance space. After repositioning the musicians, Samaroo stepped down from the stage onto a lower platform, a move that seemed counterintuitive since he is relatively short. The crowd, however, understood immediately what Samaroo was doing: he was subverting his given space to conjure a different one, a communal counter-space that enabled him to move his body into the crowd as the first step in his performance, before even the lyrics and the music. When Samaroo began to sing the crowd went wild, giving him several enthusiastic encores and delaying Machel Montano's performance.

Adesh Samaroo's rearrangements and subversions of space seem to be an established part of his performances, and lead to wider questions about the production and poetics of space in Indo-Caribbean cultural forms, and in Caribbean culture generally. Concepts of space have always been important to Caribbean writers, who use the specific history, politics and culture of the Caribbean region to formulate their spatial theories. Antonio Benítez-Rojo, for example, imagines the Caribbean as a supersyncretic referential space, a repeating island where boundaries and centers are continually redefined (12), and this definition is similar to Édouard Glissant's idea of the Caribbean as a space characterized by a multiple series of relationships. Writing about academic theories of space, Peter Hitchcock suggests that both Benítez-Rojo and Glissant offer new theories of space capable of countering the current transnational configuration of global capital, since both writers envision a flowing culture of the Atlantic that can subvert North American-European cultural hegemony (108). Caribbean writers have continually emphasized the relationship between space and politics in their writing, and this same approach can be seen in the work of Guyanese poet Mahadai Das and Trinidadian chutney-soca artist Adesh Samaroo. In their poetics, these artists challenge those theories in postcolonial and cultural studies that use the imaginative and seemingly abstract concepts associated with space to avoid linking space with material conditions.

The spatial practices of Indo-Caribbean people, whether in the Caribbean or its Diaspora, have shaped Caribbean ideas of space and place in a distinctive way. No comprehensive studies of Indo-Caribbean cultural contributions to Caribbean spatial theories have been done to date, but Henri Lefebvre's theories of space are certainly important to such a project. Lefebvre sees all spaces, material and abstract, as defined by the production and reproduction of economic, social, political, and ideological relations, and the conceptual triad he uses of spatial practices,

representational spaces, and representations of space is a useful lens for examining Indo-Caribbean contributions to the production of space in the Caribbean and its Diaspora (33).

Indo-Caribbean spatial practices are evident throughout the Caribbean in architectural styles developed to negotiate traditional Indian and nuclear household patterns. In many Indo-Caribbean households one finds that over time single-family structures are expanded into apartments and separate quarters that support proximity as well as distance from the original household. These arrangements reflect distinctive Indo-Caribbean spatial aesthetics characterized by fluid boundaries and communal sites. At the level of social resistance, the Indo-Caribbean extended-family home can be understood as a repudiation of the cramped barrack houses of indentureship that were spatial reflections of oppressive labor conditions.

Apart from extended-family homes, another spatial practice intrinsic to Indo-Caribbean culture is the establishment of businesses or restaurants in unexpected physical spaces. It seems that the ability of Indo-Caribbean people to use small, unwanted spaces to earn a living is an innovative spatial practice that also functions as a spatial response to an experience of marginality within the Caribbean nation-state. Spatial practices are employed to create representational spaces or spaces imbued with what Lefebvre defines as, “complex symbolisms ... linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art” (33). Representational spaces in Lefebvre’s definition are always encoded spaces, and if Indo-Caribbean roti shops in the North American Diaspora are seen as representational spaces, then it is easy to understand why all of these roti shops use similar styles of furniture arrangement, visuals and music to recreate with uncanny exactitude the spatial aesthetics of roti shops in the Caribbean.

The category that completes Lefebvre’s triad, the representation of space, immediately brings into focus texts like V.S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1962), Harold Sonny Ladoo’s *No Pain Like This Body* (1972), or Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) where discrete spaces are used to represent specific aspects of Indo-Caribbean social relations. There are differences between Das’ and Samaroo’s work in terms of spatial practices, representational spaces, and the representation of space, but underlying these differences one finds a theoretically consistent poetics of space that continually establishes “space” as a material concept in which class struggle is always inscribed.

### **Exile, Home, and Poetic Voice**

The space of exile is an important one in Caribbean writing and, according to Brinda Mehta, exile has remained a central theme in Indo-Caribbean women’s writing. Mehta finds that Indo-Caribbean women, including Mahadai Das, have represented exile in very physical terms, inscribing the reality of dislocation from the Caribbean onto the female body itself (199). In

poems where Das alludes to exile, the spaces are enclosed and infertile, as illustrated in lines such as these, from “For Maria de Borges:”

Landscape of nightmares,  
city of skyscrapers  
treeless and flowerless city -  
city without children. (*Bones* 29)

Even when Das writes of springtime in Chicago in “Chicago Spring,” the images are gloomy and sinister:

Hooded shadows  
wrap themselves into night.  
Rainsticks, slender-snaked,  
hang from resolute limbs  
of staid office-racks. (*Bones* 10)

In Das’ work movement in the cityscape is always a descent into confinement and imprisonment, where the narrator is estranged from all the natural and inanimate elements that characterize the city, for example, in “For Maria de Borges:”

Between its iron teeth, mechanical, regular;  
in escalators, prisonlike elevators  
I am lifted indifferently, dropped  
like a stone,  
borne, like a jumbie  
beneath stony earth.  
Shadowless, I descend, deeply  
into nightmares of childhood;  
down to steel-lined metros,  
to summerheat that beats, insistent,  
at my temples. Down, down to carriages,  
grimy steel-boxes caging men like packhorses  
being driven to a mill. (*Bones* 21)

These lines imply that the city offers an underground, socially repressed existence, but what is interesting in Das’ volume of poetry *Bones* (1988) is that there is no contrasting space where a different experience is possible, for instance, a physical Caribbean-centered, counter-exilic space. One may expect to find concrete Caribbean spaces in Das’ work as literary counterpoints to her experience of exile in North America. Das first lived in New York while a student at Columbia University, where she obtained her B.A. in Philosophy. She then moved to Chicago

and earned her M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Chicago. While working on her Ph.D. in Chicago she became ill and was forced to return to Guyana, where she lived in relative obscurity, cut off from Caribbean literary circles and isolated in a rural village where she was considered mad (Mehta 22).

Perhaps Das' estrangement in Guyana accounts for her characteristic representations of space that are unusual in the context of Caribbean poetry, because one never finds those sensual images central to the work of Caribbean poets including Martin Carter, whose poetry is filled with images of the green rural landscapes and muddy riverscapes of Guyana. In *Bones* (1988), only one poem, "Oars," describes a Caribbean space:

I am an Indian woman  
with long hair,  
a band of beads  
across my forehead.

I paddle against desire's deep  
slow-dark river,  
sliding softly along  
in love's canoe. (44)

As this poem progresses, however, metaphors of love and longing predominate, dissolving the concrete spatial images of the journey. In Das' poetry the cityscapes of exile are clearly defined, but the spaces that represent the Caribbean are so subtle and ambiguous, one can argue that they are not distinctly Caribbean at all. If, in *Bones*, Das alludes to Caribbean spaces, it is at an abstract, conceptual level, rather than a physical one, and this absence of clearly demarcated Caribbean spaces suggests alienation and estrangement from the Caribbean.

In Das' representation of space there is no dialectical contradiction between the Caribbean and exile, since all spaces represent exile or estrangement. This construction of space is reminiscent of Gaston Bachelard's dialectical structure of inside and outside spaces in his work *The Poetics of Space* (1958), where he shows that in poems where there is an ostensible opposition between the inside and the outside, the geometrical evidence shows that these spaces of outside and inside are not contradictory (230). Bachelard suggests that the reason for the breakdown of contradictory spaces is to "put space, all space, outside" (231). The attempt to put all space outside or to withdraw from space is evident in the majority of Das' poems, where concrete or material spaces have intensely negative, oppressive configurations, and the poetic Indo-Caribbean female voice continually seeks to be released and find its own alternative representational space. Consider, for instance, the following lines from the poem "Resurrection":

I dwell upon my entombment,  
clear, unmarbled walls,

coffin-like spaces with no room for my limbs.  
Its futility is darknesses's prism. (*Bones* 13)

At the end of this poem the speaker is able to rise from the tomb:

When I rise from this tomb  
as if I were Jesus come again to proclaim  
to the world that death has been conquered,  
I come with joy in my breast,  
but without exaltation. (14-15)

“Without exaltation” is the defining condition. It is enough that the poetic voice has survived “earth’s opaque jar” and escaped: “Though I have reason / to blow trumpets, I play / an elegiac flute in silver hours” (15). This acknowledges that although the poetic voice is out of its enclosure, it does not achieve full or triumphant expression; it is fragile since the poet is aware that her words remain unexpressed, as the following line from Das’ “Unborn Children” indicates: “I mourn unflowered words, / unborn children, inside me” (*Bones* 12).

Similar representations of a fragile poetic voice that must escape from its confinement are seen in the poem “Bones.” In this poem, bones that are hidden, or almost erased, ought to have a chance to speak. Uncovered “bones” can be read as an allusion to the silenced histories of Indo-Caribbean women:

Someone should examine their story.  
After all, it’s not that they dwindled  
into dust altogether. Besides,  
these bones could make more than music.  
They’re a fire-tried instrument.

They have no wish to stay in the attic.  
They want to be part of the world. (*Bones* 8)

If the poetic voice must enter the world, then it must have a representational space and Das’ representational space of the poetic voice parallels Samaroo’s representational space of performance, although the artists are a generation apart. So insistently do these artists configure these representational spaces of creation in their work that it prompts consideration of what social relations exist in contemporary Caribbean society that compel Indo-Caribbean artists to create encoded, alternative spaces that must necessarily be established even before words can be uttered, before lyrics can be sung. Das and Samaroo both register an awareness of their marginality in Caribbean spaces and the necessity to produce their work in underground or subversive spaces. Their representational space of aesthetic production calls attention to the political, historical, and cultural realities of the Caribbean that are always embedded in these spaces.

## **Representational Spaces of Survival**

Adesh Samaroo's popularity in the Caribbean is due in part to his underlying class-consciousness, and the ways in which his lyrics and music reference contemporary issues such as poverty, the spread of AIDS, and the disenfranchisement of workers. One example of a song that obliquely references the historical and material conditions of Indo-Caribbean people is the extremely popular "Rum 'Til I Die" (2002). This song can be read as a parody of the popular stereotype that Indians drink themselves to death because of failed relationships, a view that ignores the fact that the social marginality and poverty of Indo-Caribbean people bear the most responsibility for their depression, psychological trauma, and high suicide rates. Samaroo starts with: "Rum 'til I die, Is Rum 'til I die / She tell me she don't love me / And that's the reason why." By the second verse, however, this song shifts from perpetuating a fatalistic Indo-Caribbean ethos to one that can survive anything, and the narrator reveals that he is happy that his lover has left him: "Each day pass without you is getting better and better / I don't know why yuh couldn't leave me a little sooner." At the end of the song the phrase "rum 'til I die" is imbued with intentional irony and humor that simultaneously questions and rejects the notion that Indians kill themselves because of failed relationships, and invites whoever is really listening to this song to confront and analyze the social and political conditions of the Caribbean that make "rum 'til I die" a viable option for survival.

"Rum 'Til I Die" is routinely read as a celebration of rum and the song has been condemned by several social critics in Trinidad. Commenting on this, Samaroo points out that the same radio stations that banned his song continue to run commercials advertising rum:

You have this station ... which says they can't play ... *Rum 'Til I Die*, because it immoral and encourages people to drink; and they can't play *Rajin* because they say it's a bhajan, yet that same radio station plays the commercial I did for White Oak Rum ... So, tell me, what is their agenda. (qtd. in Boodhan)

Admonitions and debates about the evils of rum have been well-rehearsed in Trinidadian society since the late nineteenth century. In the 1890s, Canadian Presbyterian missionaries working among indentured laborers noticed a sharp rise in the consumption of alcohol. One of these missionaries, William Green, lamented:

Every facility for drinking is given to our Indian people. No sooner does a prosperous little village of Indians spring up than some Chinaman applies for a rum licence and before anyone knows what has happened a rum sign is hung out and the village debauched. (qtd. in Samaroo 12)

Green is careful to point out that British plantation owners, not Chinese immigrants, owned the majority of rumshops and were the primary beneficiaries of Indians' dependence on rum: "It is bad enough that [the Indians'] labour is taken cheaply but when estates set up rum shops and directly make money of out of their benefactors' ruin, it is a great shame" (qtd. in Samaroo 13).

While this early Presbyterian missionary accurately locates the rise of alcoholism in economic and social factors, recent critics have blamed alcoholism on chutney music itself. In an article in the *Trinidad Guardian* after the Carnival 2008 season, the secretary of the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha Hindu sect, Satnarayan Maharaj, attacked chutney music for promoting alcoholism:

Chutney ... has developed into promoting alcoholism and has followed calypso in many regards. In recent times chutney has been actively glorifying rum ... One chutney promoter has canvassed the government to introduce chutney in the nation's schools. We will resist this new corrupted form of song and dance that does nothing but degrade human behaviour to that of the shamelessness of animals. No chutney in schools! ("Real Cost of Carnival")

These attacks on chutney have not deterred the singers who joined Samaroo in his celebration of rum. In recent years there has been a proliferation of songs about rum by chutney artists, and some very popular compositions include Rikki Jai's "They Drinking Rum" (2006), Ravi Bissambhar's (with Karma) "Rum is Meh Lover" (2006), Lalchan "Hunter" Babwah's "Bring It (Rum in De Morning)" (2007), Neeshan "Hitman" Prabhoo's (with Bunji Garlin) "Bring De Rum" (2007), and Sandradai "Girley" Persaud's "Rum is Meh Husband Tea" (2008).

On plantations, rum made it possible for many indentured laborers to survive arduous labor regimens by offering temporary solace, but at the same time contributed to alcoholism and early death. Many chutney songs therefore complicate the celebration of rum by a poignant awareness of the way alcohol has ravaged the Indo-Caribbean community. In "Rum is Meh Lover" (2006), Ravi Bissambhar sings:

Rum kill meh mother  
Rum kill meh father  
Rum kill meh whole family  
Rum kill meh brother  
Rum kill meh sister  
Now it want to come and kill me.

To read chutney compositions about rum as simply celebrations of drinking is to miss the conceptual function of rum in these songs. On deeper analysis it is clear that in all of these songs rum is related to a poetics of space because rum functions as a code and metonym for survival, and to invoke rum is to conjure a representational space of survival for Indo-Caribbean subjects. If rum is mentioned in chutney or in chutney-soca lyrics, there is either direct or implicit reference to an entire sphere of historical, social, political and cultural survival that includes survival of the perilous journey across the *kala pani* or dark waters of the Atlantic passage, survival of indentureship, and survival in the colonial and post-colonial Caribbean. Samaroo has continuously acknowledged the link between rum and survival in the titles of his albums that

followed *Rum 'Til I Die* (2002), including *Rum Didn't Kill Meh* (2003) and *Rum Cause This Success* (2004).

Perhaps one contributing factor to Adesh Samaroo's popularity in the Caribbean is his own physical survival after a serious car accident in April 2005. For a Caribbean audience that understands the Carnival aesthetic, or playing mas, Samaroo is seen as embodying the same aesthetic of survival that resonates in his lyrics and music, and this is what possibly positions him in a more favorable sphere of reception when compared to other chutney-soca artists. Samaroo has always commented on the crowd reaction when he performs, and he is aware that his popularity does not reside with only an Indo-Caribbean audience, but a wholly Caribbean one. He says in a *Trinidad Guardian* interview:

When I perform with Destra and Bunji and the crowd takes off, the feeling I have is unbelievable and unexplainable. It's about being Trinidadian ... When I perform abroad the crowd is a West Indian one which is thirsty for their culture and I feel good to see that my music has crossed over to the masses and is appreciated by all. (qtd. in Boodhan)

If chutney compositions about rum are linked to a space of survival, then in a sense one can argue that Adesh Samaroo's songs also evoke a representational space of survival because chutney itself, as a musical form, arose from such a space: the space of the *matikor*, or the woman-dominated celebration of music and dancing performed at night as part of a Trinidadian Hindu wedding ceremony. Many social critics highlight the *matikor* as a major source of chutney culture, although, as musicologist Tina Ramnarine has pointed out, the *matikor* is not the only source, and chutney's Indo-Caribbean specificity is due to its genesis from diverse forms including the *matikor*, Indian film and folk songs, bhajans, calypso, and rap (9). As the *matikor* evolved in Trinidad and other parts of the Caribbean, it offered a space of survival where women could create songs and dances that explored relationships, sexuality, labor relations, and independence; a space that subverted the restrictions of colonial society and the patriarchal structures of Indo-Caribbean culture itself. So even when men sing chutney songs the representational space created is always linked to female Indo-Caribbean subversive spaces of survival. Chutney singers continually acknowledge the importance of such spaces, as chutney-soca artist Rikki Jai does in "Friday Evening (Maticoor Time)" (2006):

Friday evening is Maticoor time  
When the tassa playing  
Dem old ladies singing  
I does love to see  
When dem young girls start to wine

Rikki Jai has also identified other Indo-Caribbean female-centered spaces as influencing chutney culture, including the *lawa* ceremony performed on the Sunday morning of a Hindu wedding ceremony. He sings in “Mor Tor” (2005):

Every Sunday morning  
In dem Indian wedding  
Dem old ladies singing  
See how dem young girl winin’  
*Mor tor mor tor*  
*Lawa milai*  
*Sakhi lawa milai*

Chutney culture highlights the historical efforts by Indo-Caribbean women to find spaces of survival encoded with distinctly female modes of singing and dancing. The joyous ambience and overtly sexual lyrics and dancing associated with the *matikor* and chutney culture in general have been referenced in the novels and poetry of some Indo-Caribbean women writers, but there are no such representations in Das’ work. Reading through Das’ poetry, it is as if spaces of pleasure for Indo-Caribbean women do not exist. Instead, the poems direct us to consider the social conditions that existed for Indo-Caribbean women in post-indentureship society when, according to sociologist Patricia Mohammed, there was an increase in rape, domestic abuse, and wife murders as the sexuality and independence of Indo-Caribbean women came under deliberate control by the renewed imposition of patriarchal models of Hindu womanhood (“Creolization of Indian Women”).

In societies like the Caribbean where women inhabit spaces of violence, Das shows a disjuncture between the body and the poetic voice. In the poem “Beast,” for example, the female body first undergoes rape and mutilation by “pirates in search of El Dorado,” an allusion to colonialism and its violent systems of slavery and indentureship:

In Gibraltar Straits,  
pirates in search of El Dorado  
masked and machete-bearing  
kidnapped me.  
Holding me to ransom,  
They took my jewels and my secrets  
and dismembered me. (48)

The body is mutilated until even its gender is erased:

In the cave where they kept me,  
a strange beast grew.  
With his skin of glistening jewels

and his deadly tongue,  
even I was afraid of him. (*Bones* 48)

The female narrator undergoes physical and psychological alienation, but the concept of survival emerges in the ability of the narrator to articulate the violent mutilation and erasure of the body. In the poem “Resurrection,” for instance, the poetic voice is only released after the body has disintegrated: “In earth’s opaque jar, hair, / bones and my teeth remained” (*Bones* 14).

Maggots crawled through my hair  
between my teeth and eyes,  
ate at places, which, in life’s profane vanity,  
I guarded with passion and suffering. (*Bones* 14)

The poetic voice in most of Das’ work is described as soft and flute-thin, emphasizing the tenuous nature of Indo-Caribbean women’s writing in general. Indo-Caribbean women writers are still relatively few; their work was published for the first time in the late twentieth century. As Brinda Mehta states, “Indo-Caribbean women writers have had to assert themselves in extenuating circumstances. The fact that they continue to write undauntedly, sometimes at tremendous personal cost, testifies to their sheer grit and to their determination to carve safe spaces of self-affirmation for themselves and their sisters” (23).

Das and Samaroo use representational spaces of survival to articulate the social conditions of Indo-Caribbean people. For many Indo-Caribbean artists, the postcolonial problematic raised by Gayatri Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is not primary, since for these artists social transformation does not reside only at the level of academic discourse; their words or lyrics are articulated as first steps in the struggle to change the social and political conditions of the Caribbean.

### **Spaces of Labor**

If Mahadai Das and Adesh Samaroo try to find spaces of creation as well as to establish representational spaces of survival, then the relationship between their poetics of space and contemporary spaces in the Caribbean is important. According to Mimi Sheller, the Caribbean today is being restructured by the demands of tourism, and the new tourist spaces are possible because of the ease of spatial restructuring through innovations of fluid and mobile architecture, and virtual concepts of space. Although Sheller describes this spatial restructuring as new, the tourism industry has in fact been continuously restructuring Caribbean spaces since the early twentieth century. Sheller claims that the “new” spatial restructuring of the Caribbean for intensive tourism development is “simultaneously producing enclaves of intense violence, withdrawal of governance, and collapse of civic life” (17), and she adds that “new metropolitan spatialities and urban restructuring” (19) actually shape the movement of migrants, tourists, and

refugees. This analysis is exemplary of post-capitalist spatial theories that suggest that restructured spaces, new spatialities, and controlled borders and boundaries create social life. Das' poetry and Samaroo's chutney-soca compositions are important for addressing current post-capitalist spatial theories such as Sheller's because the work of these Caribbean artists reminds us that Caribbean spaces — mobile, physical, virtual, urban, rural, and global — are not only spaces of intense transnational flow and highly policed boundaries as Sheller suggests, but are important spaces of labor. Without a conception of Caribbean spaces as essentially spaces of labor, the relations of production and the labor of Caribbean workers that structure Caribbean spaces will remain invisible, as they are in Sheller's analysis of Caribbean spatialities.

In her poetry, Das emphasizes those capitalist relations that exploit women's labor for profit shape spaces of labor. In "For Maria de Borges," the exploitation experienced by a female laborer in a factory can be seen as relevant to the economic and sexual exploitation experienced by Caribbean women who currently work in the tourism industry. Das represents exploitation as a series of progressive actions that begins with the theft of what is intimate and personal:

He takes all my jewels.  
He takes all my rings.  
He steals my rubies,  
my rope of pearls. (*Bones* 22)

In spaces of employment, stripping the worker of her femininity and limiting her options for work enhance the theft of her labor:

He grabs my tiara, my bangles  
of silver. He gives me tokens  
to send me to his factory,  
send me to his store,  
cage me in his offices,  
keep me in his kitchens. (*Bones* 23)

In these lines the owner of the factory owns the means of production as well as the products needed by the laborer, so the narrator effectively has to return her wages to her employer by purchasing necessary goods from him. Labor exploitation also includes sexual exploitation:

At gunpoint, he steals rubies in my cheeks,  
my full curve of hip.  
He bestows me coppers -  
  
so I may buy  
a jacket for my shoulders  
from his huge garment-store,  
hose from his hosiery, wine from his cellars. (*Bones* 23)

In this poem Das presents a clear understanding of global capitalist relations and the exploitation of female labor under these relations. The concepts emerging from a poem such as “For Maria de Borges” speak directly to some theories on the subject of Caribbean female workers that emerged in the past decade. Kamala Kempadoo, for instance, claims that “sex work” is a term that advances the agency of female workers in the Third World because it emphasizes their freedom to choose “necessary sexual labor” (“Slavery or Work?” 226). Kempadoo argues that once “sex work” is legalized by the State, then “sex workers” will be entitled to the same rights as other workers. Kempadoo and others who make the same argument in *Global Sex Workers* accept the power of the capitalist state and the legitimization of labor by the state in the name of workers’ rights, and they argue that if the moral and legal restrictions on “sex work” are removed, then women will be free to sell their labor. Against such arguments, Das’ poem shows that labor exploitation is intrinsic to capitalist modes of production within the state, and exploitation occurs whether the state legitimizes some forms of labor and delegitimizes others. In other words, if the state legalizes “sex work” in the Caribbean, it will only mean that women will be free to choose what form their labor exploitation will take, but they will not be free from labor exploitation itself. Legitimizing “sex work” in the Caribbean will only benefit the tourism industry and the state, not women. If “sex work” is legitimized to serve the needs of tourists, I suggest that this will intensify the sexual subordination and exploitation of Caribbean women as the tourism industry’s demand for profits from “legitimate sex work” inevitably increases.

Das’ poetry makes a connection between contemporary labor exploitation of Caribbean women and past systems of slavery and indentureship. In her poem “They Came in Ships,” colonial dreams and desires for profit lead to “wooden missions of imperialist design,” and results in the creation of spaces of slavery and indentureship including “logies, barrackrooms, ranges, nigga-yards:” “I alone today am alive / I remember logies, barrackrooms, ranges, nigga-yards. / My grandmother worked in the field” (303). Within these spaces, labor conditions are extremely oppressive:

Des Voeux cried,  
“I wrote the queen a letter,  
for the whimpering of coolies in logies  
would not let me rest.”  
The cry of coolies echoes round the land.  
They came, in droves, at his office door  
beseeching him to ease their yoke. (303)

The line “cry of coolies” alludes to labor unrest and strikes, and the Indo-Caribbean workers awareness of the exploitative conditions of their indentureship.

While Das’ poetry directly addresses labor conditions in the Caribbean, Adesh Samaroo’s treatment of labor relations is subtle and camouflaged, conforming to the classical tropes of

calypso music. As the novelist Earl Lovelace once commented, “We have learnt too well from the calypsonians that when we do say one thing it is safer if it appears to sound like another” (qtd. in Warner 107). In the song “Caroni Close Down” (2004), Samaroo uses the *double entendre* popular in calypso, where going into the cane fields “for cane” is used to describe the sexual encounter. Instead of a lament over the plight of thousands of mainly Indo-Trinidadian workers who lost their jobs when the Trinidadian government closed down the sugar factory Caroni Ltd. in 2003, Samaroo, with typical irreverence, reconstitutes the space of labor as a space of humor and sexuality:

Cyar go for cane  
 Cyar go for cane  
 Cyar go for cane, girl  
 We cyar go for cane  
 Caroni close down  
 Whey we go for cane

In the second verse the sexual humor is somewhat muted by the suggestion of arduous labor:

No matter if the sun hot  
 No matter if it rain  
 No matter if the sun hot  
 No matter if it rain  
 No matter if the sun hot  
 No matter if it rain  
 No matter the weather  
 We still going for cane

For a Caribbean audience, the image of rising early in rain or sun to work hard in the cane field is all it takes to invoke what is already known about the socio-economic relations associated with sugar cane plantations. The contradiction in this verse, between working in the field and humorous sexual encounter, is asymmetrical, with lyrical emphasis on the harsh labor conditions workers are forced to endure. This allows Samaroo to inject his music with what calypsonian David Rudder calls “a cutting kind of laugh;” speaking about Trinidadian music, Rudder says, “Our music laughs — a cutting kind of laugh” (qtd. in Espinet 12). He implies that there is a strategy of juxtaposing images of celebration with those of socio-economic adversity so that the music can at once entertain and provide social commentary. In Rudder’s calypso “One More Officer,” this “cutting laugh” when Trinidadians speak of their hardships and at the same time say, “de living sweet!” is evident:

It was the kind of time when we economy tight  
 The people they were sad but my people did not cry

They flock into the towns and lose themselves in the beat  
Mixing up the bitter truth with “de living sweet!”

Rudder offers here a theory of how to read the contradictions in Adesh Samaroo’s songs. If images of Indo-Caribbean people and culture are imbued with humor, lightheartedness, and the sense of celebration intrinsic to chutney culture, then underneath the humor one finds the “bitter truth” that when the sugar industry closed down, thousands of workers became unemployed and were unable to access basic food, housing, health-care, and educational needs.

In his other compositions Samaroo addresses the realities of Caribbean people as a whole. In “Fighting AIDS” for instance, the subject is not limited by racial identity:

I forming an army  
To fight a disease  
‘Cause AIDS-HIV  
Has no place in society

AIDS has no boundaries  
It don’t care ‘bout nobody  
Look in the hospital  
And in the cemetery

Das makes a similar gesture in her work, where the references to women are not limited by race or location. Both Das and Samaroo seem to share a vision of the Caribbean that is wide and inclusive, similar to definitions found in Édouard Glissant’s and Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s conceptions of Caribbean space, in contrast to those representations that market the Caribbean for tourists. In his study of tourism and culture in the Anglophone Caribbean, *Paradise and Plantation* (2002), Ian Strachan argues that tourist brochures and advertisements today use images to create a Caribbean reminiscent of plantation society. Such portrayals are economically profitable because they reduce the Caribbean to an uncomplicated space easy for tourists to access. Yet, as most Caribbean cultural forms suggest, Caribbean spaces are complex spaces uniquely produced and reproduced by those underlying class, gender, and labor relations that Das and Samaroo make visible through their poetics of space.

### Works Cited

- Babwah, Lalchan "Hunter." "Bring It (Rum in De Morning)" 2007. *Chutney Soca Monarch* 2008. Trinidad, 2008.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. NY: Orion, 1964.
- Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*. 2nd Edition. Trans. James Maraniss. Durham: Duke UP, 1996.
- Bissambhar, Ravi and Karma. "Rum is Meh Lover." *Destiny* 2. Trinidad, 2006.
- Boodhan, Adrian. "Adesh to release third music album." *Trinidad Guardian*, September 1, 2004. <http://www.legacy.guardian.co.tt/archives/2004-09-01/features1.html>.
- Das, Mahadai. *Bones*. Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1988.
- . "They Came in Ships." *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*. Eds. Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh. NY: Routledge, 1996. 302-03.
- Espinet, Ramabai. "From the Belly of the Bamboo: Interview with David Rudder - Part 2." *Trinidad and Tobago Review* Vol. 10, No. 5 (Carnival February, 1988): 12-13.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Trans. J. Michael Dash. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1989.
- Hitchcock Peter, *Oscillate Wildly: Space, Body, and the Spirit of Millennial Materialism* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999.
- Jai, Rikki, "Friday Evening (Maticoor Time)." *Rikki Jai presents the Soca Chutney Warriors*. NY, 2006.
- . "Mor Tor." *Aashish – From Father to Son*. NY, 2005.
- . "They Drinking Rum." *Rikki Jai presents the Soca Chutney Warriors*. NY, 2006.
- Kempadoo, Kamala. "Slavery or Work? Reconceptualizing Third World Prostitution." *Positions* 7.1 (Spring 1999): 225-237.
- . and Jo Doezema, eds. *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Ladoo, Harold Sonny. *No Pain Like This Body*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 2003.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. 1974. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991.

- Maharaj, Satnarayan. "Real Cost of Carnival." *Trinidad Guardian*. February 14, 2008. <<http://www.legacy.guardian.co.tt/archives/2008-02-14/sat.html>>.
- Mehta, Brinda. *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani*. Kingston: U of West Indies P, 2004.
- Mohammed, Patricia. "The Creolization of Indian Women in Trinidad." *Trinidad and Tobago: The Independence Experience 1962-1982*. Ed. Selwyn Ryan. St. Augustine, Trinidad: ISER, UWI, 1988. 381-413.
- Mootoo, Shani. *Cereus Blooms at Night*. New York: Grove, 1996.
- Naipul, V.S.. *A House for Mr. Biswas*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Persaud, Sandradai "Girley." "Rum is Meh Husband Tea." Trinidad, 2008.
- Prabhoo, Neeshan "Hitman." "Bring De Rum." *Chutney Rum Splash 2K8 Mix*. Trinidad, 2008.
- Ramnarine, Tina K. "Historical Representations, Performance Spaces, and Kinship Themes in Indian-Caribbean Popular Song Texts." *Asian Music*, Vol. 30, No.1 (Autumn, 1998-Winter 1999): 1-33.
- Rudder, David. "One More Officer." *David Rudder: The Gilded Collection Vol. 1, 1986-1989*. LP. Trinidad: Lypsoland, 1993.
- Samaroo, Adesh. "Fighting Aids." *Adesh Samaroo*. NY: Masala Records, 2007.
- . "Caroni Close Down." *Soca Gold, 2004*. NY: VP Records, 2004.
- . "*Rum Cause This Success*." Trinidad, 2004.
- . "*Rum Didn't Kill Meh*." Trinidad, 2003.
- . "Rum 'Til I Die." *Adesh Samaroo*. NY: Masala Records, 2007.
- Samaroo, Brinsley. "C.F. Andrews and the Movement for the Abolition of Indian Indentureship." Paper presented at East Indians in the Caribbean Symposium, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, 1979.
- Sheller, Mimi. "Virtual Islands: Mobilities, Connectivity, and the New Caribbean Spatialities." *Small Axe* 24 (2007): 16-33.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988. 271-313.

Strachan, Ian Gregory. *Paradise and Plantation: Tourism and Culture in the Anglophone Caribbean*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2002.

Warner, Keith Q. *Kaiso! The Trinidad Calypso: A Study of the Calypso as Oral Literature*. Washington: Three Continents, 1982.