

Heidi McKenzie

**Reclaimed:
Indo-Caribbean
HerStories**



Exhibition response by Shaneela Boodoo

Heidi McKenzie's artwork exists at the intersection of colonial history, diasporic identity, and intergenerational memory. As a ceramic and installation artist based in Toronto, McKenzie's creative practice is deeply informed by her mixed Indo-Trinidadian and Irish-American heritage, a complex lineage that traces paths of both colonial violence and migration going back to the 19th century. Through her innovative use of ceramics, photography, digital media, and archival imagery, McKenzie's *Reclaimed* exhibition tells a larger narrative about Indo-Caribbean indentureship and the lost histories of Indo-Caribbean women.

A bit of background, for those unfamiliar with this history: following the abolition of slavery across the British Empire in 1833, in the years between 1845 and 1917, a system was implemented called indentured servitude.¹ During this time, more than half a million people from India undertook an arduous three-month journey across the ocean to the British West Indies to cut sugar cane, particularly in the fields of Trinidad, Guyana and Jamaica. Women formed about 30% of the workforce. Unlike slavery, this was a voluntary migration, but it is questionable if the people that left their homelands were fully aware of what they were signing up for.

Heidi McKenzie's ceramic installations and sculptures are some of the first works within the contemporary art canon that attempt to critically examine and share the stories of a lineage of women – Indo-Caribbean indentured labourers – who have been systematically erased. Where discussions of identity often seek simple categorizations, the Indo-Caribbean experience inherently resists such simplification, carrying within it the weight of multiple migrations, the violence of colonial labour systems, and the erasure of language and culture. By transferring colonial photographic archival images onto clay, McKenzie transforms historical documents of objectification into statements of reclamation.

We can turn to the work of a number of scholars to provide context for McKenzie's photo-infused work. Photographer and academic Roshini Kempadoo asserts: "As a colonial process, photography contributed to the operation of repeatedly representing the colonial subject as primitive, childlike, mentally deficient and sexually charged or in need of civilising."² Theorist Ariella Aisha Azoulay also notes that the imperial project often weaponizes photography, usually with men as the camera operators and the spectators of the subjects. The quick motion of the shutter is heralded as the superior purveyor of precision, clarity, recognizability and documentation. The shutter is clean and concise – with the presence of the shutter, other potentialities for archive fall away.³

Using Azoulay's concept of photography as a tool embedded within imperialism, McKenzie's *Looking Back No. 1* and *Looking Back No.2* incorporate "coolie belle" photo-postcards – some of the most well-known images of Indo-Caribbean women. Historically, the term "coolie" comes from the Tamil word *kuli*, which means "wages

1 "The Experience of Indian Indenture in Trinidad: Arrival and Settlement," in Romain Cruse and Kevon Rhiney (editors), *Caribbean Atlas* (2013). <http://www.caribbean-atlas.com/en/themes/waves-of-colonization-and-control-in-the-caribbean/waves-of-colonization/the-experience-of-indian-indenture-in-trinidad-arrival-and-settlement.html>. Accessed February 17, 2025.

2 Roshini Kempadoo, "Defining Women Subjects: Photographs in Trinidad (1860s–1960s)", *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, Issue 7 (2013), page 4. https://sta.uwi.edu/crgs/december2013/journals/CRGS_7_RoshiniKempadoo.pdf. Accessed January 30, 2025

3 Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London & New York: Verson, 2019), page 2.

or hire”.⁴ The word was used as a derogatory reference to someone’s status as an indentured labourer. It is important to note that while coolie can be considered a term of endearment in some contexts between Indo-Caribbean community members, it

is still a word that is considered a slur in many parts of the Caribbean. The front and back sides of these historical photo-postcards are transferred in McKenzie’s work onto matte ceramic tile and held together by two wooden window frames, transforming these images into something more permanent and fixed. Shown as an installation suspended in the middle of the gallery, viewers are able to walk around each window and see different collages within each frame. The window panes are opaque, obstructing the viewer from seeing through them, except for a few cracks, thereby illustrating the obscured and concealed histories at play that are not fully transparent upon first glance. The opacity also mirrors the deception inherent in the postcards –

these women were actually labourers who were removed from their gruelling fieldwork to be staged, posed and dressed up for these photos. In effect, what is portrayed is a manufactured version of the reality of life in the Caribbean that these women experienced.

A large part of *Reclaimed* grapples with the inherent complexity of Indo-Caribbean identity through clay, a medium that is characterized by its malleability and ability to transform. McKenzie constructs and reconstructs her own history through this method of making. She is able to shape these contradictions into form, while making tangible the intangible aspects of cultural memory and inherited trauma. She manifests these entanglements into the objects that she creates – objects that refuse simple categorization – much like the Indo-Caribbean identity itself. The sculptures *Bangle*, *Coinage*, and *Crescent Moon* are oversized, deconstructed forms of jewellery that were commonly worn by indentured Indo-Caribbean women. These pieces of jewellery were hugely important, as they were fundamental adornments that influenced how these women read their relationship with the world.⁵

Indentured Indo-Caribbean women earned their wages through the distribution of silver shillings. They would often melt the money and transform it into jewellery, essentially wearing their earnings on their bodies to show others how much they were “worth.” This was known as an “‘Indian way of banking,’ a way of storing wages.”⁶ These pieces of jewellery were often worn in excess, “understood by indentured

4 Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), page xx.

5 Joy Mahabir, “Communal Style: Indo-Caribbean Women’s Jewelry,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, Volume 21, Number 2 (53): page 115. [https://read.dukeupress.edu/small-axe/article-abstract/21/2%20\(53\)/112/129681/Communal-Style-Indo-Caribbean-Women-s-Jewelry?redirectedFrom=fulltext](https://read.dukeupress.edu/small-axe/article-abstract/21/2%20(53)/112/129681/Communal-Style-Indo-Caribbean-Women-s-Jewelry?redirectedFrom=fulltext). Accessed January 29, 2025.

6 Ibid.

women as 'a text that made visible their role in the economic and social systems of indentureship.'⁷ These pieces also have another significant meaning attached to them. Joy Mahabir writes: "During indentureship there were several estate strikes in



south Trinidad, and the silver jewellery of laborers is part of the iconography of these protests."⁸ In *Bangle*, we see the details of a style of bracelet called a *churia*, magnified and deconstructed down to its basic form. McKenzie's sculpture repeats the original transformation of indentured women's labour into jewellery. She uses her own physical labour by working the clay to create something entirely new, enlarging the details of the jewellery to draw greater attention to her foremothers' labour.

McKenzie further deconstructs colonial narratives about Indo-Caribbean women in her light box installation, *Holding Ancestry*. This series of ten luminous photo-portraits interrogates the relationship between contemporary Indo-Caribbean women and their ancestral stories. Each female subject, photographed by McKenzie, appears in self-selected environments and attire while holding photographic evidence of their maternal lineage. The photo-portraits are transformed through a process of decal transfers onto hand-rolled porcelain tiles and then illuminated from behind. This illumination is a technical choice that serves both aesthetic and metaphoric functions, suggesting the way historical memory glows through present-day identity. These backlit ceramic portraits command attention upon entering the gallery, their presence both questioning and assertive. A QR code on the wall beside the installation links to *HerStories*, an accompanying series of short videos where each woman narrates a story of her connection to her ancestor. The videos create a personal and participatory dialogue between the viewer and subject, dissolving the traditional



7 Ibid.

8 Joy Mahabir "Indo-Caribbean Women's Jewelry: Traditions and Innovations," *Story: An Online Publication by the Indo-Caribbean Canadian Association*, Volume 11 (November 2023). <https://www.indocaribcdn.com/indo-caribbean-womens-jewelry-traditions-and-innovations>. Accessed January 30, 2025.



passive consumption of colonial photography and instead inviting active engagement with these women's lived experiences and histories. *Holding Ancestry* creates a feeling of a large family photo album that will exist in perpetuity, unable to be erased.

The last work in this exhibition is *Illuminated*. *Illuminated* is two sets of three LED light boxes in the shape of lanterns with postcard photos of "coolie belles" on each side of the lantern on handmade porcelain tiles. The catalyst for this series was the discovery of a photograph depicting Roonia, McKenzie's great-great grandmother, at the age of 105. Like many indentured women of her time, Roonia made the journey from India to the Caribbean alone.⁹ The rest of the "coolie belle" images selected by McKenzie for *Illuminated* were sourced from private, public, and online collections. In this work, McKenzie removes the images of these women from an exploitative tourist's gaze. She reclaims their identity, building familial relationships for them across the sides of the lanterns while also respecting their individuality. McKenzie literally sheds light upon these women. Glowing from within, the lanterns signify that these women are not merely artefacts of colonial violence – they are worth being lit up and celebrated.

The artworks in *Reclaimed* are powerful interpretations that shed light upon often-erased Indo-Caribbean women's histories and celebrate the resilience of these women. Through her innovative use of ceramics and multimedia, Heidi McKenzie transforms vestiges of colonial artefacts – "coolie belle" photographs and indentureship jewellery – into familial acts of resistance and remembrance. In doing so, she asserts the enduring presence of Indo-Caribbean women in the cultural landscape.



⁹ Many indentured women were single or widowed. They may have chosen to leave India to escape economic hardship and acquire funds for themselves and their families. Others may have sought to escape social constraints and patriarchal practices. Some were sex workers. See Makiya Davis-Bramble, "Women in Indian Indentured Labour," London Museum: Blog (April 29, 2023). <https://www.londonmuseum.org.uk/blog/women-in-indian-indentured-labour/>. Accessed February 7, 2025.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Heidi McKenzie is a ceramic and installation artist based in Toronto. Heidi completed her Master of Fine Arts degree at the Ontario College of Art and Design University in 2014. She is informed by her mixed-race Indo-Trinidadian/Irish-American heritage. Heidi uses ceramics, photography, digital media, and archive to forefront themes of ancestry, race, migration and colonization, as well as body and healing. Heidi has exhibited internationally in Europe, Scandinavia, Asia, Oceania and North America. The recipient of numerous grants, Heidi has created work in Ireland, Denmark, Hungary, Australia, China and Indonesia. Her art has been collected by the Royal Ontario Museum, Global Affairs Canada, and the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery, among others.



Heidi curated *Decolonizing Clay* at the Australian Ceramics Triennale in 2019 and participated in the World Indian Diaspora Congress in Trinidad in 2020. She was inducted into the International Academy of Ceramics in 2022. She serves as a volunteer board member with NCECA, the National Council for the Education of the Ceramic Arts.

Heidi's installation, *Division*, which highlights the division of class between plantation owner and worker in the Caribbean, was invited to tour in the US alongside works by Ai Wei Wei, Theaster Gates, Simone Leigh, and Magdolene Odundo in the exhibition *Underneath Everything*. Heidi's solo exhibition *Reclaimed: Indo-Caribbean HerStories* – exploring the little-known migrant and labour histories of Indo-Caribbean indenturedship through a feminist lens -- was first shown at the Gardiner Museum in 2023 and is remounted in Winnipeg at Gallery 1Co3 in 2025. She presented *Girmitiya HerStories* at the 2024 Indian Ceramics Triennale in Delhi – bringing the Indo-Caribbean diaspora “home.”

ABOUT THE ESSAYIST

Shaneela Boodoo (she/her) is a graduate of the University of Manitoba with a BFA (Honours) in Design and a graduate of the University of Winnipeg with an MA in Cultural Studies. She is a second-generation Indo-Caribbean immigrant, born and based in Winnipeg, MB. As an emerging artist, designer, and curator, Boodoo's current research interests are exploring the complex entanglements of themes such as colonialism, displacement, and womanhood through a lens of Caribbean identity and aesthetics.

LIST OF WORKS

Works are listed on the wall in order of their appearance, beginning along the east side of the gallery, continuing clockwise and concluding with the works suspended in the middle of the gallery. All works by Heidi McKenzie are collection of the artist.

Holding Ancestry, 2023, ceramic pigment, photo decals, fired onto hand-rolled porcelain, wood frames, LED fixtures, series of ten pieces, each measuring 13" x 16" x 3".

Bangle, 2023, stoneware, porcelain slip, underglaze, metal stand, 20" x 22" x 8".

Coinage, 2023, stoneware, porcelain slip, underglaze, metal stands, series of five pieces, variable measurements of 9" to 14" x 3".

Crescent Moon, 2025, stoneware, coil built, acrylic, silica, steel stand, 17" x 15" x 6 1/2".

Illuminated, 2021, light boxes, porcelain, wood, metal, LED fixtures, series of six pieces, variable measurements of 6" to 9".

Looking Back No. 1, 2023, ceramic pigment, photo decals, fired onto hand-rolled porcelain, cedar frame, 18" x 14.

Looking Back No. 2, 2023, ceramic pigment, photo decals, fired onto hand-rolled porcelain, cedar frame, 18" x 14.

EXHIBITION HOURS

Monday - Friday between 12:00 and 4:00 pm from February 27 until April 25, 2025.
Closed April 18, 2025. Viewing also available by appointment outside of these hours.

AFFILIATED EVENTS

Artist talk on Zoom: Tuesday, March 11 at 4:00 pm

Register to attend on our website www.uwinnipeg.ca/art-gallery.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Gallery 1Co3 is located on Treaty One Territory, heartland of the Red River Métis, and ancestral lands of the Anishinaabe, Ininew, Anishinew, Dakota Oyate, and Denesuline. We acknowledge that our water is sourced from Shoal Lake 40 First Nation.

Gallery 1Co3 wishes to thank the University of Winnipeg Library, Department of History and Department of Women's and Gender Studies and Margaret Laurence Endowment Fund Community Grants for their support of this exhibition program.

We are grateful to artist Heidi McKenzie for the opportunity to present her conceptually and technically outstanding work at Gallery 1Co3. Heidi's creations are important avenues through which to start and continue conversations about the strength and courage of Indo-Caribbean women. We thank the individuals who participated in Heidi's *Holding Ancestry* photographic installation and *HerStories* series of videos for sharing impactful stories of their Indo-Caribbean foremothers; their images and words broaden and enliven the exhibition experience and extend learning pathways. This exhibition would not be complete without the context provided by Shaneela Boodoo in her astutely written essay, and we thank her for her important contribution and insights. We deeply appreciate partnerships within the University that have helped us enrich this exhibition program: our thanks to Danielle Bitz and her team in the Library for preparing a research guide, to Dr. Emma Alexander in the History Department for sharing her knowledge and connections, and to Dr. Sharanpal Ruprai and Dr. Aarzo Singh of the Department of Women's and Gender Studies for hosting the artist talk and sharing their perspectives. Thank you to University Art Gallery and Collections Technician Jamie Wright for installing the exhibition with great care and attention to detail, to Ian Lark for designing promotional and interpretive materials, and to the gallery attendants for welcoming visitors to the exhibition

Gallery 1Co3

1st floor of Centennial Hall | The University of Winnipeg
515 Portage Avenue | Winnipeg, MB R3B 2E9
Phone: 204.786.9253 | www.uwinnipeg.ca/art-gallery

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