Where Trauma Resides

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Where is your love? Where do you miss? Where did your heart skip a beat? Where have you hurt? Where is home?

Meditating on these five questions, Andil Gosine produced Wardrobes (2011-13), an experimental process of object- and performance-creation focused on love, loss, and dislocation in Indo-Caribbean diasporas. Inspired at once by his indentured laborer ancestors' experiences of transport to Trinidadian sugar plantations in the nineteenth century as well as by the ending of his own transnational relationship in 2009. Gosine asked in these projects how we might process grief across time and space. The performances pushed audiences to think about where — in what places, at what sites, and in whose bodies-traumas make their home. While the story that drives Wardrobes is one of movement (from rural Trinidad to Toronto to Paris to New York) as well as one of time travel (from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries), Gosine's project is propelled by the settling, the resting, and the taking up residence of grief.

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In this case, as in so many others, it begins with heartbreak. How to apprehend the scale, the depth, the endurance of something as banal yet so life changing as a broken heart? How to grieve? Framing this "Caribbean Queer Visualities" project, David Scott asked us to consider "to

what harms a mode of critique responds," and Wardrobes, not unlike many of the other projects that we consider here, seeks to document and offer critical perspective on conditions of woundedness-its experience and its resurfacing-across generations. Gosine calls his project "both a private and public interrogation of desire, and its relationship to social trauma."¹ Cycling between inaugural macroviolences, at the scale of populations (such as Indo-Trinidadian indenture), to ongoing microviolences, at the scale of individual bodies (such as loves lost and kinships compromised), Wardrobes asks us to consider where trauma resides in queer Caribbean histories. The project is a particularly live example of what M. Jacqui Alexander, borrowing from Ella Shohat, has called a dwelling in "palimpsestic time," a strategy that might offer renewed models for understanding harm (and, too, for forging healing) in the contemporary Caribbean.²

This conventional definition for palimpsest-"something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form"-is but one dimension of the mode of temporality that Alexander seeks to uncover with palimpsestic time.³ In her formulation, it is time that is "neither vertically accumulated nor horizontally teleological"-it is time of a telos unregulated by the conventions of European scientism; it is time that bends, that loops, and that sometimes breaks.⁴ Those palimpsests of yore the papyrus and vellum written upon, subject to "imperfect erasure," and written upon again—are replaced in her example with time itself, with seconds, minutes, and hours bearing the traces of what has come before.⁵ Alexander's analytic of the palimpsest comes to denote instead of a thing a quality (in its transition from noun, *palimpsest*, to adjective, *palimpsestic*), broadening the optic to include objects that we can apprehend not only visually and haptically but also experientially.

Alexander's iconic essay in the field of queer Caribbean studies, "Not Just Any (Body) Can Be a Citizen," is a reading of palimpsests: Trinidad and Tobago's 1986 Sexual Offences Act and the Bahamas' 1989 Sexual Offenses and Domestic Violence Act, legal orders that bore partial markers of, and resemblances to, Britain's 1861 Offences Against the Person Act.⁶ But as Alexander scales outward from those documents to analyze the ways the "new" world order of the late twentieth century not only resembles but *is* the old world order of previous centuries, she extends our understanding of the palimpsest to a formulation in which time too is subject to the palimpsest's material remixings. Riffing off of Alexander, Deborah A. Thomas urges us to understand multiple sovereignties in the hemispheric Americas not as additive but as palimpsestic—to see older forms of sovereignty ("templates," she names them) as they underlay, and may be glimpsed beneath, newer ones.⁷ Similarly, Jovan Scott Lewis offers a reading of "a plantation cosmology . . . replicated in contemporary condition[s]" in Jamaica via palimpsestic time—remarking on the overlain, partially erased but reconstituted ideas about ways of being in the world that continue to bear slavery's mark.⁸ For Thomas and Lewis, as for Alexander, palimpsestic time orients us toward the thickness of social contexts marked by enduring coloniality.

But the palimpsestic time at work in Gosine's *Wardrobes* is not just about coloniality; it is also about a broken heart, a despair that he equates with trauma. Scott's opening query about the constitution of harm is crucial here: Gosine, in his focus on the multiscalar dimensions of grief, joins a coterie of scholars who have been shifting our understandings of trauma away from the exceptional and the massive—the so-called singular event—and toward the conditions of the everyday.⁹ Rather than understand catastrophes, massacres, genocide, and war solely as the sites for the generation of trauma, we are pushed to apprehend harm as it is made manifest in the mundane, to pain that is no less immediate for its landing at a smaller, more intimate scale. Gosine's interest in trauma's transgenerational transmission trains our attention on the project's fourth guiding question: "Where have you hurt?" The hurt that Gosine diagnoses is not only the grief of a single subject but a mapping of that grief across bodies, communities, generations. Time bends around this grief. It carries this grief through decades, centuries.¹⁰

Perspectives brought to bear in psychosomatic and biomedical studies of posttraumatic stress have generated a vibrant set of inquiries about the stuff of trauma, about its materiality and about its manifestation in the body. These studies have focused attention on what Masud Khan calls "cumulative traumas" and on Bessel van der Kolk's later contention that traumas are stored, and later transmitted, in somatic memory.11 Wardrobes takes brokenheartedness, both at the scene of diasporic migration and at the scene of love's ending, and calls it all trauma. Gosine asks that we consider how pain-major or minor, proximate or distantcourses through our lives in similar registers. Van der Kolk argues that "the body keeps the score," that "the memory of trauma is encoded in the viscera, in the heartbreaking and gut-wrenching emotions, in autoimmune disorders and skeletal/muscular problems."12 Trauma, then, not only takes up residence in the psyche but also has physical effects. It resides in the body that is subject to harm at whatever scale it is experienced, but it also resides in the bodies of those descended from them. Wardrobes is inspired by just such a pair:

> In 1845 Savitri leaves Calcutta for Trinidad. She boards the *Fath Al Razack*, and is ordered to change into the stockings, woolen trousers, shoes and a petticoat provided. In 2009 Jimmy leaves Paris with a broken heart and four suitcases of couture. Jimmy meets Savitri in Trinidad, New York, and Toronto in 2017. WARDROBES happens in palimpsestic time. Savitri and her descendant meet in Toronto, on the 100th anniversary of the end of the British system of indentureship that had brought Savitri and others to Trinidad and elsewhere in the Caribbean.¹³

Savitri and Jimmy meet across time and in diasporic space, sharing not only a bloodline but also an association of displacement with sartorial change. Savitri, whose presence reverberates throughout *Wardrobes*, is the namesake of a series of fabled



women, all distinguished by their deep romantic attachments and their sacrifices in the face of love's loss. The epic Mahabharata's tale of Savitri and Satyavan, which has itself been retold countless times across media as varied as opera and film, offers us a Savitri who sacrifices—food, wealth, and free-dom—for the life of her husband.¹⁴ Gosine's Savitri reveals less of her own story, but she too is subject to sacrifice, as she boards the *Fath al Razack* (or *Fatel Razack*), the first ship to carry indentured laborers from India to Trinidad, and is transformed by the *kala pani* (dark waters) and by her induction into the Caribbean's labor regime.¹⁵ Jimmy is the inheritor of Savitri's woe, but he carries his own too: a broken heart, unhealed by a suitcase of couture. Of their baggage, Gosine says, "Savitri's new wardrobe turned her into an Indenture [*sic*]. Jimmy will have new wardrobes, but that does not mean he will stop being clothed in hers.^{*16} Swathed in these garments of grief, many layers deep, Jimmy's traumas are not only his own; they are also those that once belonged to Savitri. Touching through time, the traumas emanate from Savitri's nineteenth-century dislocation to Jimmy's own at the dawn of the twenty-first.¹⁷

Gosine offers some insight into his relationship to these figures, and into his avatar-like connection to Jimmy and his broken heart:

WARDROBES did not begin with Savitri. I was simply heartbroken, devastated by the sudden end of a decade-long relationship with my first love. To live, I followed a passion for Yoko Ono's art and Rei Kawakubo to New York, with a plan to figure out my sense of a connection between and my lust for Ono's cut piece [*sic*] and contemporary Japanese couture. . . but the project would become an insufficient vehicle for processing grief. I wanted my own wardrobe.¹⁸

The wardrobe that Gosine ultimately produced contains four objects: a white-gold brooch forged in the shape of a cutlass, a bag designed to carry both rum and roti, a lace and cotton *ohrni* headscarf embroidered with a gold image of an anchor (resembling his grandmother's tattoo), and a set of cotton doctor's scrubs, screen printed with a repeating image of his parents from the early years of their courtship. Each item for his wardrobe was inspired by kinship, not only the blood-relation between Savitri and Jimmy, or Gosine's own family ties, but also in reference to the biological and nonbiological kinship ties forged—and rended—by experiences of diaspora. Each object is also a palimpsest that makes traumatic inheritances visible, though only partially so. The cutlass, for example, calls up immediate references to the machete that indentures used to cut cane on Caribbean plantations. But the object carries another layer of meaning for Gosine: he reflects on his association of the object with his childhood in rural Trinidad and with the "entwinement of pleasure with violence." He tells the story of the cutlass: "My grandmother Ramadai used her cutlass to carve sugarcane treats for me, but it was the same instrument used in the murder of her mother, and that my Uncle used to kill a boa constrictor that almost killed me."¹⁹

item. Fashioned in gold, it retains but reworks the violence embedded in the commodity form, referencing the histories of divining and assigning value produced by the colonial project. Gosine's cutlass is a decorative object, an accessory for everyday wear, and its innocuous pinning to a lapel, scarf, or collar belies the layers of meaning of which it is made and to which it refers.

In addition to creating the cutlass, bag, ohrni, and scrubs for his wardrobe, Gosine also used each object as a launching point for a collaboration and public performance. He called these partially scripted but mostly improvisational endeavors "previews," honoring a final aim to join all four in later incarnations into a single staged opera. He understood each gathering as part of the drafting process for this final performance, and as such they relied heavily on audience participation, serving to dialogically refine the questions that guided his endeavor.

For the first preview, Made in Love, Gosine made the scrubs printed with the photograph of his parents. Then, at the Indo-Caribbean Alliance gala in Queens, New York, he set up a photo studio in front of an image of sugar cane and "people waited long queues to get their photos taken, all the while reminiscing about the collections of studio images in their own family albums." Wearing his scrubs, Gosine asked participants to pose for portraits with their kin, the sugarcane evoking at once nostalgia for tropical landscapes and the brutality of the plantation. The second preview, Cutlass, further centered the interface among pain, inheritance, and intimacy. Gosine opened that gathering with an offering to five generations of Indian women who faced violence, before bringing to the stage his collaborator, Haitian Canadian Parisian singer-songwriter Mélissa Laveaux, who played music referencing their shared ties to the region. For this preview Gosine issued "an invitation to the audience to try

CQV Caribbean Queer Visualities to drown their grief by dumping paper boats into a pool of water; [noting that] the boats, of course, usually stayed afloat for a long time."²⁰ In the third preview, *Rum and Roti*, the audience watched the premiere of Richard Fung's 2012 film *Dal puri Diaspora* and then entered a reception by passing through a structure Gosine built to resemble a conjoined hut/ coffin/boat, after which they exchanged paper boats for *rotis*. Participants were invited one by one to a therapy exercise, and seated on a couch in front of an image of crowds at a point of embarkment, Gosine posed the project's five guiding questions: *Where is your love? Where do you miss? Where did your heart skip a beat? Where have you hurt? Where is home?*

Finally, with the preview *Ohrni*, Gosine enlisted Gaiutra Bahadur, author of *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*, as his collaborator, reflecting that

> Coolie Woman shows the deep scars of indentureship and colonial violence, and also the post-Indenture reassertion of patriarchy in Indo-Caribbean communities in particular. The problems of domestic violence and wife murder, alcoholism, high suicide rates in Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago have long stories, and are wrapped up in both the systemic dehumanization of those who would be Indentures [sic], anxieties about their bodies and "barbaric" sexual and cultural practices, as well as in the post-Indenture effort to "belong" again. To reclaim humanity, to belong again ethnically, nationally, women were called to submit their agency, queers to bury their desires, to weigh ourselves, again, against Oppressors, be they British or Indian, rules of civility.21

Dwelling on points of anchorage and the makings of home,

with *Ohrni* Gosine brought the twinned figures of Savitri and Jimmy to the fore. To accompany the ohrni headscarf—the garment that most powerfully calls on associations not only with Savitri but also with his own grandmother as well as with generations of Indo-Trinidadian women—Gosine also produced Jimmy's new garment: a T-shirt with the word *Parisien* rendered in Hindi and surrounded by the colors of the French national flag. Gosine later remarked that this phase of the project "was a kind of resolution to this search for a new home to replace all the ones [he] lost, especially in love."²²

In each iteration of *Wardrobes*, Gosine experimented with the possibilities of the palimpsest: overlaying his own story on Jimmy's, and Jimmy's on Savitri's, he invested each object with their varied experiences of pain. In another version of *Made in Love* he superimposed a picture of himself and a male companion over of the image of his parents—both couples looking knowingly in the other's direction, standing at the same distance, their bodies melding in and through each other as Gosine's companion sings a cover of Procul Harum's "Whiter Shade of Pale." There is a queer time at work in *Wardrobes*, a living within an echo, a perpetual recurrence. Gosine says that Savitri's and Jimmy's stories "keep repeating because of a failure to grieve": "And all of it that happened before, all that began with this severe dislocation that brought [Jimmy's] ancestors on ships, that reconfigured them as labourers alone, pulses through Jimmy's body, in his most intimate contentions with his pleasures and fears, and in his negotiations with the social institutions that still haven't grieved enough, that still fail to memorialize pain truthfully."²³ Jimmy is the inheritor of this failure to grieve, but its effects do not travel in a straight line. They reverberate from Savitri to Jimmy, to Gosine, to Ramadai, outward to their kin and back again—a not quite linear, and not quite cyclical, unfolding of pain.

Gosine's process-oriented concern in *Wardrobes*, the slow accretion of significance to each of its objects, is critical to the ways palimpsestic time emerges in his work. The palimpsest is not just a reference to the cutlass or to the ohrni, nor is it just a reference to the experience generated by each performance; it is also as a reflection upon his art-making practice. The palimpsests at work in *Wardrobes* are at once things, qualities, and method. Gosine's palimpsest is also a verb.

While *palimpsest* is conventionally employed only in the former two forms—as a noun or as an adjective—Jafari Allen's "For the Children: Dancing the Beloved Community" offers another turn of the phrase. In a call to make anew the ephemeral archives of Black queer life, Allen writes, "Certainly we must all pick up the weapons and pens and tools and steps of our sisters and brothers. Perhaps to remember is also to spin where s/he shimmied, rewrite, correct, alter, improve—palimpsest."²⁴ Here, Allen employs palimpsest as a purposeful action. Rather than observing and analyzing a palimpsest before us or experiencing the enfolding of experiences that might be labeled palimpsestic, Allen calls for the creation of palimpsests as praxis. *Wardrobes* does precisely this work, stepping into a process

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for documenting trauma and opening space to mourn as a strategic intervention. Gosine's decision to create a wardrobe was an act of self-care in the interest of social healing, a reminder of the co-implication of both collective and individual memory and collective and individual experience.²⁵ To palimpsest in this way is a curative undertaking—one that allows the doer to process grief not just as it emerges in the painful events of a single life but as it echoes in the social worlds of a transhistorical and transnational kinship line.

In a project that riffs further on *Wardrobes*, Gosine's *Coolie, coolie, viens pour curry / Le curry est tout fini* (2016) pares down this project to its essence.²⁶ A diptych study in white on white, every word of the children's taunt—save for "fini"— is rendered so as to be barely perceptible against its background, visible only to the attuned eye or to the viewer willing to move in such a way that the words emerge from their surroundings. It too is a palimpsest, the provocation itself under erasure. It too dwells in palimpsestic time, collapsing mockery from Gosine's own childhood into broader forms of derision of Indo-Caribbean people. And it too is about a praxis oriented toward healing, with "Fini"—" finished"—rendered in gold, not only as a conclusion to a question about the availability of curry but also as a demand, an insistence, that the causes of trauma, both present and past, come to an end.

Gosine's commission for "Caribbean Queer Visualities," *Coolie Colors (I could have been fabulous/ But then we moved to Canada)* (2016) approaches queer Caribbean childhood from a different vantage. Rather than focus on Trinidad as a site of trauma, here Gosine references the island as a site of gender experimentation and creative intensity. Canada, by contrast, is the place that gives rise to unrealized potential. He infuses this palimpsest with color—a Pantone fan, overlain by childhood photographs of a confidently gender-playful Gosine, is set against a backdrop of deeply saturated proximate shades. The colors are matched by a set of Hindu *jhandi* flags anchored in a clay pot: common markers of Indo-Caribbean homes. Circling back to the relationship between migration and loss that was the focus of *Wardrobes, Coolie Colors* returns viewers to the endurance of the indenture-migration experience and to a nostalgia for what might have been. Gosine's protagonist blames emigration for the missed opportunity to be fabulous, inverting the homonationalist trope whereby a queer or trans*person must leave a "backward" homeland to find their "true" self in the metropole.²⁷ Gosine's childhood photographs demonstrate that fabulousness is always already available in a space like Trinidad unsettling flattened representations of queer life, stripped of layers of experience and meaning, and makes comprehensible our protagonist's disappointment about having been moved to Canada.

In an essay on palimpsestic time, Marc Singer observes that novelists (I read him to mean artists more generally) have "the potential to rearrange time," a complicated "freedom" that both affords an opportunity and lays bare a problem: with all of that time to think of and through, the choices that an artist makes to structure a narrative have tremendous consequences.²⁸ Gosine's rearrangements of time in In-

do-Caribbean diasporas are enormously consequential: they reveal the capacity of wounds to make themselves resound beyond the bodies and sites on which they are first inflicted. Savitri's pain reverberates through Jimmy's body, but that pain also cycles from their invented worlds through Gosine's own, including the artist's experience alongside those of the participants in his *Wardrobe* previews. His temporal rearrangements call for a careful accounting of the distribution of harm, and this is what Gosine's art-making practice offers us. Through creation, collaboration, and public performance, through the making of objects into which he invests multilayered meaning—Gosine's is a strategy for palimpsesting and for documenting where trauma resides, how it accumulates over time, and how it accretes in parchment-like layers, in embodied experiences, across generations.

Endnotes

- Gosine's reflections on *Wardrobes* are drawn from his 2015 (unpublished) artist's statement as well as from our conversation about the project during the *Small Axe* symposium "Caribbean Queer Visualities I," held at Yale University, 14–15 November 2014. I thank Gosine for his deep generosity in sharing this work with us.
- 2 See Jacqui M. Alexander, Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 190. Alexander quotes Ella Shohat, Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 15.
- 3 Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. "palimpsest," www.oxforddictionaries.com.
- 4 Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 190.
- 5 On time's enfoldings, memory written into the fabric of the world, and the ghosts to which we are accountable, see Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

- 6 Jacqui M. Alexander, "Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality, and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas," *Feminist Review*, no. 48 (1994): 5–23.
- 7 Deborah A. Thomas, "The Problem with Violence: Exceptionality and Sovereignty in the New World," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 5, no. 1 (2013): 7, 12.
- 8 Jovan Scott Lewis, "A So Black People Stay: Bad-Mind, Sufferation, and Discourses of Race and Unity in a Jamaican Craft Market," *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (2015): 339.
- 9 I am thinking here of Thomas, both in her Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) and in more recent interventions about "what sovereignty feels like" in her 2013 Tivoli Stories project; Veena Das, who in Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) writes about the ways everyday life absorbs traumatic collective violence but also asks us to think critically about mobilizing patho logical frameworks, like trauma, to apprehend experiences of violence; Ann Cvetkovich, whose Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) reworks current and historical conceptualizations of trauma from the vantage point of lesbian countercultural formations; Rob Nixon and his Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), in which he asks that we consider violence as chronic and incremental rather than only spectacular and immediate; and Saidiya Hartman and her ever-challenging theorizations about the "afterlives" of traumatic events, as explored in, for example, her Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007).
- 10 The transgenerational transmission of trauma is compellingly charted in Marianne Hirsch's work on "postmemory" and the Holocaust. See, for example, Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
- 11 See Masud M. Khan, "The Concept of Cumulative Trauma," *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 18 (1963): 286–306; and Bessel A. van der Kolk, "The Body Keeps the Score: Memory and the Evolving Psychobiology of Posttraumatic Stress," *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 1, no. 5 (1994): 253–65. In my own scholarship, I have been reworking the toxicological term "body burden" to account for the varied scales and forms of toxicity with which a body must contend.
- 12 Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014), 86.
- 13 Andil Gosine, artist's statement, Wardrobes, 2015.
- 14 These Savitris include the protagonist of the 1933 popular film *Savitri*, directed by Chittajallu Pallaiah (East India Film Company), and the more recent 2016 film of the same name, directed by Pavan Sadineni (Vision Filmmakers). Both are inspired by the Savitri and Satyavan story.
- 15 On the Fatel Razack, see Kalpana Kannabiran, "Mapping Migration, Gender, Culture, and Politics in the Indian Diaspora: Commemorating Indian Arrival in Trinidad," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31 October 1998, WS53–WS57; and on the *kala pani*, see Aisha Khan, *Callaloo Nation: Metaphors of Race and Religious Identity among South Asians in Trinidad* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 123.

- 16 Gosine, artist's statement.
- 17 On "touching through time," see Mathias Danbolt, "Touching History: Archival Relations in Queer Art and Theory," in Jane Rowley, Louise Wolthers, and Mathias Danbolt, eds., *Lost and Found: Queerying the Archive* (Copenhagen: Nikolaj, Copenhagen Center of Contemporary Art and Bildmuseet Umeå University, 2010).
- 18 Gosine, artist's statement.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Gosine, CQVI conversation.
- 21 Gosine, artist's statement.
- 22 Gosine, CQVI Conversation.
- 23 Gosine, artist's statement.
- 24 Jafari Sinclaire Allen, "For 'the Children': Dancing the Beloved Community," *Souls* 11, no. 3 (2009): 321.
- 25 On transgenerational memory, across collectivities, see Michael Haworth, "Bernard Stiegler on Transgenerational Memory and the Dual Origin of the Human," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 33, no. 3 (2015): 151–73.
- 26 One translation of the children's taunt might be "Coolie, Coolie, comes for curry / The curry is all gone." For Gosine's purposes, "the curry is finished" is more apropos.
- 27 On this dynamic, particularly narratives of teleological development and their associated liberal rights paradigms, see Vanessa Agard-Jones, "Le Jeu de Qui? Sexual Politics at Play in the French Caribbean," *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* (2009).
- 28 Marc Singer, "A 'Slightly Different Sense of Time': Palimpsestic Time in *Invisible Man*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 49, no. 3 (2003): 388.

