Performative Diasporas Schedule  
March 16, 2018    Stanford Humanities Center

9:30 am: Welcome (light breakfast provided)

9:45 am: Opening remarks by Anna Schultz (Associate Professor, Music, Stanford)

10:00 am - 12:10 pm: Panel 1: Domesticating the Raj through Indian Jewish Song

Chair and discussant: Rishika Mehrishi, Ph.D. Candidate, Theater and Performance Studies, Stanford

10:00 - 10:40 am: Sara Manasseh, Independent Researcher, UK (formerly of Senior Lecturer at Kingston University and Lecturer at SOAS)
  “Call and Response: Iraqi Jewish Musical Responses to the British Raj in Twentieth-Century Bombay”

10:40 - 11:10 am: Joan Roland, Professor of History, Pace University (in absentia)
  “The Bene Israel Diaspora: Transformation of Indian and Jewish Identity in the United States and Israel”

11:10 - 11:50 am: Barbara C. Johnson, Professor Emerita of Anthropology, Ithaca College
  “Kerala Jewish Women’s Songs: Sonic Memories of Portuguese/Hindu/Christian Relations”

11:50 am - 12:10 pm: Panel 1 general discussion

12:10 - 1:30 pm: Lunch

1:30 - 4:15 pm: Panel 2: Race, Religion, and Identity in Indo-Caribbean Encounters

Chair and discussant: Vivek Narayan, Ph.D. Candidate, Theater and Performance Studies, Stanford

1:30 - 2:10 pm: Kavita Singh, Assistant Professor of English, University of Houston
  “‘Grindin’ Masala’ No More: Indo-Caribbean Women’s Masquerade”

2:10 - 2:50 pm: Stephanie Jackson, Ph.D. Candidate in Ethnomusicology, CUNY Graduate Center
  “Manifesting the Supernatural, Sounding the Supranational: Indo-Guyanese “Madras Religion” and the Politics of Transcendence”

2:50 - 3:05 pm: Break

3:05 – 3:45 pm: Aisha Khan, Associate Professor of Anthropology, New York University
“Performance of Shadows: Race through Ritual in the Colonial Caribbean”

3:45 - 4:15 pm: Panel 2 general discussion

4:15 pm: Conference ends

Abstracts (in alphabetical order)

Stephanie Jackson: “Manifesting the Supernatural, Sounding the Supranational: Indo-Guyanese “Madrasi Religion” and the Politics of Transcendence”

Spirit possession, animal sacrifice, and relatively unrestrained styles of music continue to be sources of anxiety and deep ambivalence among Indo-Caribbean religious communities in the Americas in large part due to longstanding hegemonic notions about “proper” comportment linked with human progress and similarities to “African” traditions as promulgated within colonial discourses regarding racial hierarchy. Many scholars agree that such “ecstatic” sonic practices were purged from a wider conglomeration of ritual practices in the process of consolidating and canonizing Hindu beliefs and institutions in British Guiana and Trinidad, particularly during the decades prior to national independence. In Guyana and its diaspora today, these sonic practices have become emblematic of Kali goddess worship, also referred to as “Madrasi” and/or belonging to “Madras Religion.” Though many people view these practices to have been brought by their Madrasi ancestors—the minority of South Asian indentured laborers who embarked for Atlantic sugar plantations between 1838 and 1917 via the southern port of Madras of the British Empire, doubts among practitioners remain as to the origins of various ritual procedures and “correct” practices and their meanings. Furthermore, it is often ambiguous and somewhat problematic when the same sonic practices that invoke the “Divine Mother” in priests can also cause others who “feel vibration” to assert themselves within, and present doubts concerning, current structures of authority and authenticity. In recent years, Madrasi temple leaders and devotees of the presiding deity whom most now refer to as Mariamman instead of Kali, have asserted a new narrative that has become dominant within a transnational circuit comprising New York City and Guyana regarding the “ancient Tamil” origins of these sonic practices. Guyanese Madrasi heritage gains an unprecedented degree of legitimacy as people learn (often through digital media) and reimagine what it could mean to have Tamil ancestry by encountering and engaging with particular religious sonic practices. At the same time, I explain how performative articulations of “Tamil” diasporic identity shift between exclusivity and inclusivity depending on the context and power dynamics. I argue that this performative stance, which involves harnessing ambiguity, reveals an ongoing tension among Madrasi religious practitioners who seek forms of belonging within South Asian American diaspora culture. This case study challenges dominant ethnomusicological approaches that tend to situate Indo-Caribbean music within comparative analyses of formal features and focus on the survival and development of musical styles seen as rooted in Indian/South Asian traditions. Furthermore, I draw from recent scholarship on diaspora that critiques scholars’ attempts to decenter hegemonic ideologies underpinning cultural nationalist of the Indian state, or to give visibility to “East Indians” marginalized within
Caribbean multiculturalist politics, as they ironically reinscribe an idea of diaspora as singular and unilinear that leaves intact a hierarchy between original and derivative cultural formations.

**Barbara C. Johnson:** “Kerala Jewish Women's Songs: Sonic Memories of Portuguese/Hindu/Christian Relations”

Throughout at least eleven centuries the Kerala Jews lived as respected residents and participants in the cosmopolitan culture of the Malabar Coast, on the southwest coast of India. Dwelling in the independent kingdoms of Kochi and Travancore, they did not experience direct colonial rule by the British, in contrast to the Bene Israel and Baghdadi Jews of India, though they did suffer persecution by Portuguese colonial rulers during the 16th-17th centuries. One Jewish contribution to the cultural mix of Kerala was a repertoire of more than 300 songs in Malayalam, the local language, sung by Jewish women and preserved in their handwritten notebooks. Most are folk songs of anonymous composition, sharing musical and literary elements with the music of their Hindu, Christian and Muslim neighbors. This paper focuses on one example - a set of three Malayalam Jewish songs associated with the springtime holiday of Purim, which usually coincides with the Hindu holiday of Holī. While the Jewish song narratives are grounded in Hebrew sources from the Bible and Talmud, several of their melodies were borrowed directly from performances of a Kerala Christian dramatic genre that was originally introduced by Portuguese missionaries to the area. Known as Caviṭṭunāṭakam (foot-stamping dance), this European genre was “domesticated” into a Kerala art form incorporating elements from classical Hindu dance dramas and South Indian martial arts. Jewish singers in Kerala who recorded their songs for me in 1977 pointed out the borrowed Caviṭṭunāṭakam melodies, enthusiastically describing neighborhood performances by a Christian drama troupe 30-40 years earlier. My presentation includes audio excerpts from those 1977 recordings, in addition to analysis of thematic and stylistic elements shared with Caviṭṭunāṭakam.

**Aisha Khan:** “Performance of Shadows: Race through Ritual in the Colonial Caribbean”

It is a truism of Caribbean plantation societies that labor, whether Indian indentured or African enslaved, had to be monitored and controlled. Discipline, in its numerous forms, was a central preoccupation and challenge for colonial authorities. Methods to coerce work from physical bodies were geared toward the production process, but they were not enough to preserve the colonial social and moral orders. What colonial authorities could see, they could try to contain: absenteeism, shirking, mass gatherings, open conflict. However, it was what they could not see, but knew was there, that arguably most troubled them. Perhaps foremost in this state of epistemic haze were subalterns’ rituals involving the supernatural and the ineffable. Colonial authorities typically attempted to suppress these and yet knew they never really could, because so much of these rituals’ power lay in the unseen - the elusive and fantasized practices that stoked colonial fears.

In this presentation I argue that policing these ritual practices necessarily relied on the performance of shadows: the retrospective inferences drawn by colonial authorities from material evidence; a sort of forensic investigation of the traces of these ritual practices from which the rituals might be reconstructed so that they, in turn, could be policed. I also argue that these shadows cast another light: that of characterizing the racialized groups in large part by the rituals they purportedly embraced. Addressing the key question of how rituals in diasporic
flux both shaped and were shaped by the stable models of colonial race and its hierarchies, I explore two examples taken from 19th century British colonial texts. One is from official correspondence in the mid-19th century about British Guiana’s indentured laborers’ “hook-swinging” ritual, policed and soon banned despite its likely never having been viewed by colonial authorities. The other example draws from Hesketh Bell’s 1893 memoir, “Obeah in the West Indies.” Although the rituals and performative dimensions of “hook-swinging” and obeah practices are quite different in other ways, they are both defined by the materiality of the unseen and its role in the mutual constitution of religion and race.

Sara Manasseh: “Call and Response: Iraqi Jewish Musical Responses to the British Raj in Twentieth-Century Bombay”

The Iraqi (also “Baghdad”) Jewish community in Bombay (Mumbai) was defined by its adherence to the Babylonian religious tradition (minhâgh babli). The community included Jewish settlers from Central Asia - Bukhara, Meshshed, Afghanistan - who also followed the Babylonian tradition, and a smaller number of Cochin Jews living in Bombay. The three Sassoon synagogues established in the nineteenth century, in Bombay and its sister city, Poona (Pune), were a focus for the community. Cosmopolitan Bombay sported British and Euro-American lifestyles in myriad ways, including fashion, cinema, music, dance, language. Many Jewish settlers had encountered British, French and German influences in their home countries, in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria.

In Bombay, diasporic religious life at home and in the synagogue, including prayers, chants and hymns, retained Babylonian melodies, performance style and attention to Hebrew pronunciation. The love and enjoyment of music performance, instrumental and vocal, remained faithful to its Middle Eastern roots - musicians maintained the châlghi (instrumental) tradition, playing and singing Iraqi and Egyptian popular Arabic song, in addition to Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic songs for life cycle celebrations.

At the Magen David Synagogue (Byculla, Bombay), a male voice synagogue choir, singing in unison, was established (mid-1930s), performing on Sabbaths, festivals and life cycle events; dressed in gowns and mortar boards - a nod to the British establishment - the choir existed until the mid-1950s when it comprised members from the Iraq, Cochin and Bene Israel communities. At the Keneseth Eliyahoo Synagogue (Fort, Bombay), a mixed voice choir, established late-1940s, performed at weddings, sometimes singing in harmony, and later included items from the Ashkenazi tradition.

The main colonial influence on Iraqi Jewish musical life in Bombay was at communal and social meetings not solely related to religious observance. In 1935, the youth group Habonim, was established by Albert Manasseh together with Solomon Ezra, in Bombay; a religious organisation, it expanded to Calcutta, Cochin and Poona. Membership, open to all communities, included a few European Jewish youth from war-torn Europe. Habonim in India was based on the South African and British model, and introduced songs in modern Hebrew - inspired by biblical texts, festivals, other Jewish themes, the land of Israel, or purely secular texts. Most were compositions from British Mandate Palestine, some melodies reminiscent of European song, others in modal or quasi-Yemenite style, or based on Arab or Jewish melodies.

The major musical influence of colonialism was in secular life, from Euro-American classical and popular music. Jewish children attending Christian missionary schools became
well-versed in hymns, British folk-song and major choral works. At home, lessons on western instruments were popular, as were recordings of wartime hits, and listening to jazz and popular music on radio or at concerts by visiting artists. The community included professional musicians, some of whom composed popular music, performing in hotel bands in Bombay and other cities. Many community members were great fans of Indian cinema and its music, itself a mirror of Euro-American popular music; even songs from Mandate Palestine, from the Habonim repertoire, were reworked and reinvented for Hindi movie scores by expert Indian film composers and arrangers.

**Joan Roland: “The Bene Israel Diaspora: Transformation of Indian and Jewish Identity in the United States and Israel”**

The Bene Israel, the largest of the three Jewish communities in India, numbering at its peak perhaps 20,000, constituted a microscopic component of the population of India. Never experiencing anti-Semitism at the hands of their hosts, they survived and maintained their identity as Jews over a period of possibly 2000 years. Nevertheless, starting in the 1950s, the Bene Israel began to leave India, for a variety of reasons. Many went to the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and the United States, but the vast majority went to Israel. The emigration peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, but continues today. In all of these countries, where Jews of European origin dominated, they faced challenges.

Perhaps no more than one thousand Bene Israel live in the United States, most coming directly from India, some via Israel. Here, both an ethnic and religious minority, they have endeavored both to become American and to be accepted as Jews by the primarily Ashkenazi American Jewish community. To what extent do different generations feel a connectedness to India? How have they retained, or transformed, Indian and/or Indian Jewish identity? What is the primary identity of the second generation: Indian? American? Jewish? Some combination thereof? I conclude that in their strategy of adaptation to align themselves with Jews in America, many Bene Israel negotiated a transcendence of Jewish over Indian ethnicity.

With fewer than 5000 remaining in India, the preservation of the unique Bene Israel heritage may rest with the 60,000 to 70,000 Jews of Bene Israel descent currently residing in Israel. And yet the persistence of Indian cultural markers among the Bene Israel has impeded at times their full integration and absorption into an Israeli society which initially privileged European culture. To what extent have these immigrants, known as a “quiet community” retained Indian languages, values and culture, social and religious customs, family relationships, dress and cuisine? Here, too, the attitudes of second and third generation Bene Israel toward their heritage are also explored. I conclude that having been Jews in India, their “motherland”, the Bene Israel are now Indians in Israel, their “fatherland”, and in some ways have experienced more prejudice and marginality in their new home than they ever did in India, because of their “Indian” characteristics. Whether the resolution will be the proud assertion of an Indian-Israeli identity by the younger generations within the context of new, more tolerant, Israeli perceptions of ethnicity, multiculturalism and pluralism, or the shedding of Indian identity through intermarriage is still an open question.

**Kavita Singh: “Grindin’ Masala’ No More: Indo-Caribbean Women’s Masquerade”**
During Carnival in 2011, in two different cities in Trinidad, one Afro-Trinidadian and one Indo-Guyanese mother excitedly intervened in their daughters' masquerades, demanding and desiring their best performance as dancers and bikini-clad revelers. Carnival has been seen as a national, if not regional, ritual. For those “at home” in the Caribbean and those of the transnational Caribbean diaspora, the festival is not only a symbol of local belonging, but it is how their local culture is presented to the rest of the world. Yet, Carnival in Trinidad has traditionally been ethnically specific, an Afro-Creole festival with few Indian participants and even fewer Indian women. As Rosanne Kanhai describes Indo-Caribbean womanhood, ""ethnic gender roles and customs can be contrary to national, regional and global models."" However, as per the mothers and daughters above, the Carnival demographic is shifting, and rapidly. We not only see more Indian women participating in Carnival, but the festival has become a family affair.

While African and Indian women are scripted as divided and in competition, the shared desire to become visible within narratives of national belonging undermines such divisions, revealing priorities held in common: the search for modernity, the desire for personal independence, and the pursuit of cultural legitimation. As Pamela Franco has shown, working-class black men in traditional costumes have been seen as the bearers of the “true” national culture of resistance. Middle-class women in skimpy clothes are presented, on the other hand, as illegitimate perpetrators of a consumerist turn away from history, and their performances are seen as compromised by inauthentic and amoral desires. In this presentation, I will argue that Indian and African women have responded in comparable ways to these narratives of patriarchal control, which mis-represent and dis/empower both groups. Carnival, an opportunity to exhibit the self on one’s own terms, allows Caribbean women, regardless of ethnicity, the representational power usually denied them.

I start with the two mothers mentioned previously, then I analyze the Carnival practices of one Indo-Trinidadian woman whose relationship with Carnival has dramatically changed over the past eight years. In the process, and through comparison with the histories of black women’s Carnival feminism, I identify the shared terms of these Indo and Afro-Caribbean women’s kindred performances. The homogenization of Carnival expression, although consumerist, is nonetheless accompanied by a powerful collective action: women laying claim, across ethnic divides, to corporeal and cultural independence.