

She Cut Me from Ganna

Quishile Charan 2019

**Exegesis in support of practice-based thesis
Master of Visual Arts
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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the 1 If the research has been resubmitted for examination, then it would be this date that is recorded. 106 Doctoral Masters/Honours acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Quishile Charan

10th May 2019

Abstract

This project involves an embodied practice of healing through craft that speaks of hands, emotions, spirituality, and of women who resisted indentured labour during colonial Fiji. As a female descendent of indenture, I undertake my responsibility to build counter-narratives for my female ancestors. My project explores how textile narratives can stitch and thread together active forms of love, care and hope that function as a contemporary form of resistance to the present-day realities of existing under neo-colonialism. This project also seeks to develop textile methods that challenge the colonial occupation of knowledge that pertains to the history of women's bodily and mental experience of indentured labour in Fiji. The central methodology in my project arrests the value and significance of craft as a language, identity and hope through the inter-generational love shared between myself and the women in my life.

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Introduction

*The wounding left behind from indenture punctured deeply, the flesh kept festering.
Will this body ever heal?*

The intersections of oppression which dominated the lives of my female ancestors, their ethnicity/race and gender, are the same structures of violence that define my life today. My present-day neo-colonial context has changed from the ganna¹ plantations in Viti² where my ancestors once sought their right to be alive. The insidious nature of this specific colonialism, the indentured labour system (ILS), has manifested itself into the present through intergenerational trauma and loss of ancestral knowledge. This context establishes my project's drive and urgency: to keep my histories and ancestral craft actively in the present. My practice searches for ways generational healing can be built for myself and by extension other females within my community by positioning our³ voices and counter-narratives as valuable for continuing our growth as both a collective and as individuals. My project asks from where do we begin a process of healing? How can ancestral craft enable counter-narratives of resilience, hope and strength for Indo-Fijian (giritiyas) female descendants of indentured labourers? How can ancestral craft dismantle the idea that my female ancestors were passive to their colonisation?

My project's key methodologies look to the self and to the tacit knowledge that my hands hold as part of an ancestral body. Through undertaking cultural and traditional methods of crafting, encompassing emotion, the body and the spirit as central to agency, I aim to enact a restorative process of healing. Healing unfolds throughout this project through actions of pyaar.⁴ This project looks at how pyaar is an intergenerational labour that forms its own insights and intelligence.⁵ Pyaar as knowledge is woven into my textile-making through my relationship to

¹ Sugarcane

² Fiji

³ The use of "our" is in reference to Indo-Fijians.

⁴ Love

⁵ See Bell Hook's *Hooks, All about love: New visions* (2001). Harper Perennial, 2001.

my Aaji⁶ and Fua,⁷ women who introduced me to craft and physically showed me craft's value as an emotive language, a place of expression and identity through their own making. Craft situates itself in this exegesis as a multifunctional tool that incorporates strategies and tactics used by my female ancestors during the ILS such as "go-slow"⁸ labour as means of survival-as-protest. "Go-slow" labour is reapplied into the durational nature of textile-making to allow a space to stitch and thread my female ancestors close, to affirm the value of craft labour and to continue to build a network of care and pyaar that allows the time I/we need for healing.

What transpires in my hands is also what has transpired in the hands of my female ancestors. My hands embody spiritual connections with the heart of resistance that lives on beyond Fiji's colonial sugar plantations. Female-girmitiyas rebelled through a constellation of small agitations⁹ that disrupted plantation productivity. Craft becomes a continuation of female-girmitiyas resistance and adaptation. Craft practices were limited by the demands of plantation life and were taken up again after the abolishment of Indenture in 1920 when Indo-Fijian women were pushed to the domestic sphere. Craft shifted from its traditional practices in India and was amalgamated into cultural knowledge as a means of agency for Indo-Fijian women. This history of craft and resistance moves through my body and is an ongoing ritual of healing, of remembrance and pyaar.

The first two chapters of this exegesis, 'The Inheritance of Naming: Consciousness of Trauma Narratives' and 'I Wanted to Create Something with my Hands: Emotions, Spirituality and Rituals', establish the motivational contexts for which this project has emerged. Chapter one explores the role of naming-as-responsibility, and raising consciousness as related to inherited and new trauma. Chapter two addresses the agency of craft and the role of emotions, spirituality and rituals that embody a process of healing. While the first two chapters of the exegesis provide a contextual framing to my research, the remaining two chapters address how

⁶ Paternal Grandmother

⁷ Paternal Aunty. My Fua took on the role of being my amma (mother), she is a shining light of love in my life.

⁸ "Go-slow" labour was a tactic employed by female-girmitiyas against the Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR) company. Undertaking slow labour was to resist capitalist demands on their bodies. For a discussion on the various methods female-girmitiyas used as plantation resistance, see Shaista Shameem's PhD dissertation, *Sugar and spice: Wealth accumulation and the labour of Indian women in Fiji, 1879-1930* (1990).

⁹ The abolishment of indenture (1920) has been presented as a top down history, placing the Indian Government as the rescuer to indentured labourers. In reality, without agitations like sabotage, absention from work (women had the highest rates of absention during the indenture period), and physically and verbally attacking overseers, indenture could not have been abolished: "... women's petty acts of resistance were just as important as the wider forces of nationalism in India in precipitating the demise of the system" (Nicole 2006, 367). For further reading, see Robert Nicole's *Disturbing history: aspects of resistance in early colonial Fiji, 1874-1914* (2006).

these contexts function as methods through my textile-making. Chapter three, ‘The Archives: the Personal, what is Felt, what is Written and What Cannot be Forgotten’, looks at how archival data and photographs are recontextualised to disrupt colonial narratives. Counter-narratives are layered into textiles as an action to break the cycle of silence and invisibility that my female ancestors were historically confined to.

The last chapter, ‘ee ghaoo maange acha ho jai: these wounds must heal’, will look at my experience and textile-making for my Clark House Initiative (Mumbai, India) exhibition. This was a significant exhibition context as India is a historical space to which the stories of my female ancestors have long been subsumed into victimization. The exhibition provided me an opportunity to build new narratives of resistance not only for my female ancestors but for female descendants. This exhibition nurtured my growth and firmly established the importance of my making as a place to foster connections and relationships and how the relationships I am making feed into methodologies which enable me to be a stronger Indo-Fijian woman.

Writing Female-girmitiyas back into History

It has been 140 years since the first ship, the *Leonidas* landed on the shores of Levuka, Fiji, in 1879. The first immigration ship brought 498 people—273 men, 146 women, 47 boys and 32 girls.¹⁰ Over the course of indentured labour, over one million Indians were taken to British colonies¹¹ to meet labour demands on plantations after the abolishment of slavery in 1833.¹² With the abolishment of slavery, a void was created in the Western empires’ labour market; economic stability could only be possible with a new system of corruption, a system of bonded labour. With the ongoing colonisation in India and its concentrated effects on the Northern districts,¹³ labourers were ripe for the taking. Recruitment proved bountiful with people seeking to alleviate poverty, to provide for family, to escape the harsh conditions of living, social pressures, landlords and famine; in some cases people were kidnapped. The *Girmit* was a five-year contract that included an option to be extended to ten years. If a labourer chose the

¹⁰ Lal, Brij V. *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji*. ANU Press, 2013. 73.

¹¹ Such as: Mauritius, British Guiana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Grenada, St Lucia, Natal, St Kitts, St Vincent's, Reunion Island, Surinam, East Africa and Seychelles.

¹² Naidu, Vijay. *The violence of indenture in Fiji*. No. 3. (Suva: World University Service, 1980). 7.

¹³ The majority of labourers in the first half of the ILS came from areas in North-East India like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. South Indians were recruited in the second half of indenture, leaving the ports in Madras (now known as Chennai). For an in-depth discussion on areas of recruitment, see Brij Lal's chapter “Origins of the Girmitiyas” in his book *Chalo Jahaji* (2013).

first option they had to pay for their own passage home, but if they extended their contracts, return trips to India would be paid for.¹⁴ The English language acted as an exploitative tool within the system, as most of the labourers were illiterate and could not read their contracts.¹⁵ Many relied on the words of *arkatis*¹⁶ who spun stories of Fiji to be Ramnik Dvip, “Islands in paradise”¹⁷ where easy money could be made. When *Leonidas* embarked on her three-month journey across kalapani, the black waters, water from mother Ganga¹⁸ was brought aboard in cauldrons.¹⁹ The holy water was there to wash away the wretched sins of those who dare break Hindu customs and cross samundar.²⁰ Over the course of indenture in Fiji, 87 ships would follow. Cholera, smallpox, dysentery, diarrhea, typhoid and measles would plague those in transit, marking the beginning of my ancestors’ journey into narak.²¹

¹⁴ Charan, Quishile. *Unearthing the History of my Female Ancestors in Fiji*. Matters Journal Aotearoa, Issue 8 (2018). 43-44.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ recruiters

¹⁷ Lal, Brij V. *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji*. ANU Press, 2013. 27.

¹⁸ The river Ganges.

¹⁹ Anjali, Manisha, “*Kalapani*” (2019). Blindsight website.

²⁰ Ocean

²¹ The word used by my ancestors to describe indenture in Fiji, hell.



Archival image courtesy of Fiji Museum. Photographer and date unknown.
Detail: Girmitiyas working on sugarcane plantation (above) and inside sugar mill (below)

During this conception of indenture an understanding of female *girmitiya* was born. She was to be the counterpart to her male, there to fulfill his needs outside of the sugarcane fields, both domestically and sexually. There was a reluctance in bringing female labourers to Viti as “Fiji employers did not want to be burdened with the expense of women immigrants” and “childbearing” workers.²² As the system uprooted male labourers from their cultural context within India and into a situation of brutality on plantations, women were used to create a sense of stability through upholding “Indian family values”.²³ Emigration Laws and Regulations of India agreed upon 40 women to every 100 men. This disproportionate ratio resulted in women accommodating multiple men in the coolie lines.²⁴ Targeted murder and domestic violence towards female-*girmitiyas* became commonplace within plantation life. To excuse and absolve both men and employers from the abnormally high rates of crime, murder and suicide²⁵ that arose in Fiji’s plantations, a narrative of “sexual jealousy” resulting from the supposed unruly sexual nature of female-*girmitiyas* was perpetrated.²⁶

The indentured woman’s existence in Fiji was situated within a dichotomy: first, she was chosen for her supposed passiveness and docile nature, to be subordinate to male labourers and to the plantation to which she was bound by law, and second, she was contextualised as ungodly, impure and shameful, a whore of lower-caste values. These narratives existed simultaneously to protect the interests of the coloniser and of sugar production in Fiji.²⁷ Of the 68,480 Indians brought to Fiji only 13,696 were female.²⁸ The women in their small numbers were condemned as the wretched of the earth,²⁹ something to be controlled and dominated. As they were tied to a stake to be burnt, the coloniser watched from the vantage point of written history.

²² Chapple, William Allan. *Fiji: its problems and resources*. Whitcombe & Tombs, 1921. 55.

²³ “In the British Empire’s mind, this made sense within a Hindu structure of marriage and chastity found in India. But, with gender ratios radically disproportionate, it became common practice for one woman to house four men” (Charan, Quishile. *Unearthing the History of my Female Ancestors in Fiji*. *Matters Journal Aotearoa*, Issue 8 (2018). 53-54).

²⁴ Housing/barracks

²⁵ Between 1884 and 1925, 259 male *girmitiya* suicides were recorded, with victims being between the ideal labouring ages of 20 to 30. CSR and the colonial government saw that their productive labouring force (male) was dying out slowly at the hands of the “femme fatale”, who welded the power to bring about an economic downfall. Lal, Brij V. *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji*. ANU Press, 2013. 215.

²⁶ “[I]t is not possible for an Indian woman to keep her chastity in the coolie ‘lines’... A word which I have often heard Indians using to describe the coolie ‘lines’ is ‘Kasbi ghar’, literally, ‘prostitution house’. There can be little question that Indians usually regard them as such and act accordingly” (Andrews, Charles Freer, and Florence E. Garnham. *Fiji Indentured Labour: A Supplementary Statement*. 1919. 6).

²⁷ Mishra, Margaret. “The Suspicious Death of Depot Baby 7480: ‘Maternal Negligence’ in Colonial Fiji.” *Australian Humanities Review* 59 (2016): 45.

²⁸ Mishra, Margaret. “A History of Fijian Women’s Activism (1900–2010).” *Journal of Women’s History* 24, no. 2 (2012): 116.

²⁹ Fanon, Frantz, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Constance Farrington. *The wretched of the earth*. Vol. 36. New York: Grove Press, 1963.

she crawled back out of the depths of narak

Aotearoa theorist Linda Tuhiwai Smith states: “Under colonialism indigenous peoples have struggled against a Western view of history and yet been complicit with that view. We have often allowed our ‘histories’ to be told and have become outsiders as we heard them being retold.”³⁰ Indo-Fijian histories have always existed within a power dynamic based on who has had the access and the means of writing history. Existing historical documents and academia have upheld the monumental violence committed against female-girmitiyas and ensured generations of silence.³¹ This “double colonisation” that my female ancestors lived under cast them into the role of villain or lowly submissive woman, a body incapable of resistance or strength. These narratives have lived on in contemporary scholarship where the victimisation of female-girmitiyas is the central focus of retelling specific parts of Indo-Fijian histories.³² Western historical scholarship produced a cyclical legacy of erasure that removed the agency of my female ancestors and masked their rebellion against indentured labour and what it stood for – capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. These acts of rebellion were not small feats, nor should they ever be forgotten.

Whilst the central inquiry of this project looks at how traditional craft can enact a process of healing, I also question how I can reclaim Indo-Fijian histories from Western academia and scholarship, thereby contributing to the ongoing process of claiming agency for my community. The action of writing this exegesis does this reclaiming. Footnotes are used to stitch history into this academic document to give voice back to my female ancestors. This body of writing is not only an extension of my making but is a living breathing document of female-girmitiyas resistance, a history that has been forgotten. My exegesis ruptures and challenges the role of passivity that my female ancestors have been cast into via colonial framing of experience and knowledge. The words of this exegesis, like my hands, perform acts of resistance against colonial institutions. My hands are central to this resistance. My hands are active as we, Indo-Fijians, are active as a people. In building textile landscapes and writing,

³⁰Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Zed Books Ltd. (2013). 34.

³¹ See C.F. Andrews and W. W. Pearson report *Indian Indentured Labour in Fiji* (1918) and C.F. Andrews and Florence E. Garnham report *Fiji Indentured Labour: A Supplementary Statement* (1919).

³² See Vijay Naidu’s book, *The Violence of Indenture* (1980). Oral accounts collected from male girmitiyas in the book uphold the idea of female girmitiyas as whores (Naidu 38). For further discussion on Naidu’s book and this type of academic violence see Quishile Charan’s “Unearthing the History of my Female Ancestors in Fiji” (2018).

consciousness is given to the exploitation and oppression of female-girmitiyas. My project speaks of the social disobedience, organising and mobilising that my female ancestors enacted to counter physical and social violence within colonial Fiji.³³

³³ “[Women] shamed the men again and again into holding out for higher wages and not betraying the cause. They organised themselves into “Strike Committees” and would not let their men surrender... They used the moral force of openly and publicly disgracing the men, in their own eyes, they dared to play the coward where women were so brave.” C.F. Andrews quoted in Robert Nicole’s book, *Disturbing history: aspects of resistance in early colonial Fiji, 1874-1914.* (2006) 369.

Chapter One:

The Inheritance of Naming:

Consciousness of Trauma Narratives

The enduring deadly and destructive effects of colonisation can be re-created in each generation as the legacy of destructive colonial histories rips through kinship, wounding each subsequent generation in ways the present generation may not even be aware of. With each generation, the source of the wounding becomes more difficult to see and name, creating a necessity for de-colonisation, a psychological tool to place colonisation impacts in a consciousness framework or context.³⁴

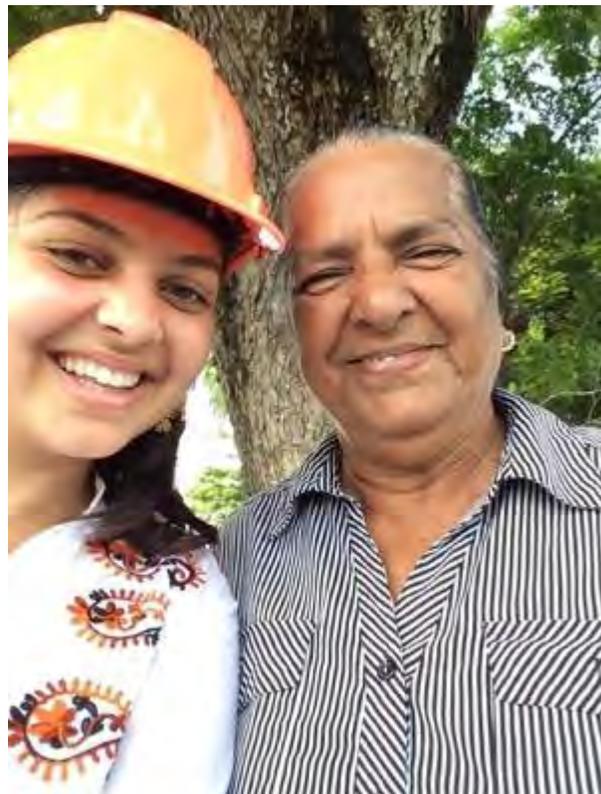
The impact of survival being a constant urgency has left imprints on the psyche of my community, with my elders choosing silence as a means of separation from trauma. “The past is the past, so leave it behind beta”, are worn out words routinely spoken by elders seeking to bury the pain of ILS. Keri Lawson-Te Aho, in her essay ‘The Healing is in the Pain: Revisiting and Re-narrating Trauma Histories as a Starting Point for Healing’ (2014), discusses the importance of the consciousness of trauma as a beginning point for healing. Lawson-Te Aho connects how the ongoing effects of colonisation are linked to personal and family trauma for current generations. She states the necessity for indigenous (and colonised) people to have the autonomy to reclaim historical narratives to build counter-narratives of hope and resilience. For my project, Lawson-Te Aho’s “consciousness of trauma” is a pivotal method to creating textiles that speak of not only my individual trauma but the trauma I share within my community. The type of consciousness I choose to undertake is done through a cultural framework of love, which encompasses responsibility, care and labour. The labour is done in two ways: retrieving and storing histories within my body to become a personal archive, and the labour of craft. This method disrupts and inverts the colonial narratives associated with my ancestors. As Lawson-Te Aho states:

...having been through the fire, having seen the mamae (pain) that ravaged my whānau, having awareness that somehow my tūpuna (elders) lived through it, and knowing it is still threatening my mokopuna

³⁴ Aho, Keri Lawson-Te. "The healing is in the pain: Revisiting and re-narrating trauma histories as a starting point for healing." *Psychology and Developing Societies* 26, no. 2 (2014): 183.

(grandchildren), I am older, wiser and can see mamae (pain) for what it is...it is an opportunity for recovery, to rebuild, reclaim and heal ourselves. Without the mamae, the will to fight is not needed and yet the fight is good for us, it needs our commitment, our courage, fierce hope, single mindedness and determination.³⁵

My project began at a point of great pain in my life; born out of unknowns, it seemed as if my body was in a constant state of grief. The pain, even though it was and still is exhausting, offered a place of reflection to who and how I wanted to support myself and my family. I wanted to reclaim our histories and retell them from my hands, the hands of a female descendent – a body that is the living memory of those who came before me, a living embodiment of my ancestors. “As long as my name exists in yours, I will always be remembered, I will always live on through you”³⁶



Aaji and Quishile 1999, Nadi (left) and Aaji and Quishile 2016, Lautoka Sugarcane Mill (Right).

³⁵ Ibid., 200.

³⁶ Aaji in conversation with me about the importance of being her namesake.

My naming was the cosmic bond that wove me to my Aaji – Shila/Sheela, meaning good character or good conduct in Sanskrit and rock or stone in Hindi. Her name sits within mine: Qui-shile. This moment chosen before my birth defined the rest of my life and set out my responsibilities. I am bound to her as she is my earth from which I grow. Charan, my last name, is passed down from my Aja,³⁷ meaning god's feet, and is suggestive of a metaphorical place for receiving blessings. My names, developed over generations, set about embodied knowing/knowledge system that is fused to my core, to my being. When this body was born into the physical world, my hands already knew how to stitch, how to thread, the way a needle moved through the weave of fabric. My relationship to craft grew as my understandings of who I am as an Indo-Fijian woman grew, as well as through the love and care my Aaji instilled in me and physically showed me through her own making. Aaji is known in Fiji for her artisanry, a master of craft. Each dress I wore as a child and my baby blankets were made by her; her hands built; her hands cooked; her hands tended the ganna fields; her hands nurtured.

As intergenerational pain occurs so do narratives of resistance. Both oppression and uprising occurred at the same time,³⁸ as my female ancestors chose (whether consciously or unconsciously) to respond to the environment of ILS induced violence. It is within this context that I chose to create and make textile narratives as my own forms of resistance — a fight that I have inherited from my ancestors. Craft prioritises our knowledge systems while upholding our values and histories. Resistance, as Lawson-Te Aho states, involves spiritual forms of refusal to ever lose hope.³⁹ Pain has become my transformative resistance tool that guides me to re-centre a narration of love for the women in my life and for other Indo-Fijian women.

Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman (2018)⁴⁰ was a solo exhibition at Firstdraft gallery in Sydney. The exhibition marked a transition within my making where female-girmitiyas become central to my research and to recontextualising this history. This transition was discussed in the exhibition text: “Charan stitches a personal story of indenture together with the Indian indentured woman as the central figure, in an action to undo their colonial erasure.”⁴¹

³⁷ Paternal grandfather

³⁸ Aho, Keri Lawson-Te. "The healing is in the pain: Revisiting and re-narrating trauma histories as a starting point for healing." *Psychology and Developing Societies* 26, no. 2 (2014): 189

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ The title for this exhibition was taken from the seminal paper 'Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman': Revisiting Female Deviance in Colonial Fiji' (2016) written by Margaret Mishra.

⁴¹ Please see <https://firstdraft.org.au/2018-program-pt-1/yourwoman> for full gallery text.

Producing this work made me think critically about how my community may not want to engage with historical trauma that leaves them open for re-traumatisation. As a cultural practitioner, carrying my community's histories, I need to be hyper-aware of the physical and emotional consequences my practice may have on my community. Using craft as a site of love, pride and joy, I aimed to look at materials and forms of labour that are familiar to my community's personal connection to "home"⁴² as beginning points or invitations into confronting our histories of trauma.

The choice of imagery on the textile came from conversations with female elders and Indo-Fijian women. I asked what they wanted to see in textiles that represented Fijian female histories; their answers always revolved around visibility. The five-metre-long textile became a visual language of accountability of forgotten female-girmitiyas labour. This visual language exhumes images of female-girmitiyas, thereby allowing them to exist again. The machete knife becomes an important motif to print, as this was not only a tool used in the field but also a weapon against and by female labourers. The act of placing the machete back into the hands of my female ancestors, was a gesture of placing them at the forefront to their own histories. The placement of the textile on the ground in the gallery represented the space in my aaji's lounge where mats are brought out for us to sit and talanoa.⁴³ This placement echoes my personal intimate rituals of exchange, meaning the passing of craft knowledge from an Aaji to her granddaughter.

⁴² Due to being landless, home becomes an embodiment of Indo-Fijian connections between family and the physical domestic site. I personally see home as the embodiment of the people I love and care for and am not attached to a land or physical space but rather home is something that I carry with me and grows within me.

⁴³ Talanoa is used in relation to a space where knowledge is exchanged orally.



Aaji examining our shell necklaces for rethreading (left and right). Nawaicoba, Fiji. 2018.

The shells stitched into the edges of the fabric function as a contemporary crafting of the edges found on woven Fijian mats. The threading of the shells was a shared labour between my Aaji and me in my family home in Nawaicoba. The pattern of the shells followed a number sequence to create a wave responding to kalapani, the black waters my ancestors once travelled. The use of the shells explored the different craft techniques of adornment as a representational object. This method also considers how samundar, the waters that surround Fiji, have shifted from the times of indenture to a landscape that is now home.⁴⁴ Surrounding the textile with shells was a personal ritual of protection⁴⁵ for the fabric printed images of female-girmitiyas, which comes from the care shared between my Aaji's and my hands. Within this making and the shared

⁴⁴ The use of shells is also important for asserting a clear Indo-Fijian aesthetic in crafting or textile making. The crossing of the kalapani was the cutting of the umbilical cord to India and new traditions emerged. Most of the labourers did not believe the ocean to be a safe place, physically or spiritually as it broke customs and religions that were land based. I wanted the shells to be a craft technique symbolic of how our views have changed from that of our ancestors. The kalapani once was a dreaded and unknown world but is now welcomed and cherished as a part of our lives as Fijians who live and are surrounded by the ocean.

⁴⁵ This ritual of protection I had used with the shells was also representative of a childhood memory, where evil spirits had entered our house. The local iTaukei (Indigenous Fijian) community brought a healer to our house. Shells were used to cleanse the house and offer protection. I remember the back of our doors and window sills being covered in seashells for weeks maybe months. This early experience with spirits at the age of 5 or 6 informed much of my understanding of how healing properties lay within the environments around us.

labour of threading, a generational exchange of respect took place: for my female ancestors, for the women they birthed and for my Aaji and the knowledge of craft she has gifted me.



Shell threads for install (left) and installation of *Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman* at Firstdraft Gallery (right). Photographed by Quishile Charan. Sydney, Australia. 2018.



Quishile Charan. *Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman*, Firstdraft Gallery. Sydney, Australia, 2018. Installation: textile mat with shells.

Chapter Two:

I wanted to Create Something with my Hands: Emotions, Spirituality and Rituals

Fiji is a place where traditional spiritual practices are maintained, where ghosts can grab the free-flowing hair of women at night, where the evil eye still lurks. I once asked my Fua about the ghosts of indenture, did they still exist? She looked to the setting sun and replied, “We must only talk of these things at the house and not at nightfall. But beta, they are everywhere.”

To create life again for your female ancestors, to bring their breath back into spaces where it was once marginalised, is difficult when “Indentured women featured in colonial exchanges, often in passing as a footnote or afterthought, and other times as objects of much deliberation, especially when they transgressed the neatly demarcated boundaries of femininity.”⁴⁶ Language can escape me at times (and maybe there will never be a spoken language for it) when re-tracing, retrieving and reclaiming histories that exist in the shadows or within an absence. As Guyanese-American writer Gaiutra Bahadur states about her experience of writing *Coolie Woman: An Odyssey of Indenture* (2013):

How could I write about women whose very existence the official sources barely acknowledged? To enter their unknown and to some extent unknowable history, I had to turn to alternative, unofficial sources. I looked for clues in visual traces and the oral tradition: folk songs, oral histories, photographs and colonial-era postcards, even a traditional tattoo on the forearms of elderly Indo-Caribbean women. Perhaps most daringly, I turned to the self and wrote about my own journeys: to India, to visit my great-grandmother’s native village in order to uncover why she left; and back to Guyana, where I was born, to explore how gender-based violence there – currently a problem of disturbing proportions – could be a legacy of indenture. In weaving myself into the narrative, I was tracing not only roots but also the inheritance of harm. I was calling on my own experience in two ways, both as a former newspaper

⁴⁶ Mishra, Margaret. "Between women: indenture, morality and health." *Australian Humanities Review* 52 (2012): 60.

reporter and as a child immigrant: my professional and personal background converged to suggest a strategy, a gambit for restoring the stolen voices.⁴⁷

Turning to the self, as Bahadur did as an adult, with the insight and privileges of new and lost knowledges of indenture, the unseen forces of ancestors guide me, letting me feel and giving me opportunities they did not have. Working from this position, with my ancestors close to me, my project aims to de-shroud the silence surrounding female indentured labour. Traversing this landscape of socio-political emotions as a cultural practitioner living in a neo-colonial body is:

To be haunted and to write from that location, to take on the condition of what you study, is not a methodology or a consciousness you can simply adopt or adapt as a set of rules or an identity; it produces its own insights and blindnesses. Following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look. It is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a counter-memory, for the future.⁴⁸

As American sociologist Avery Gordon suggests in her paper, 'Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity' (2011), haunting and ghosts are the product of neo-colonialism and the build-up of trauma. Such trauma is not just individually felt but is the shock and repression of the experience of living after the event of colonisation. Within this context, haunting is both the past and the present, and involves harm and loss sustained by social violence.⁴⁹ Gordon argues that the ghosts that live among us are repressions that can no longer be forgotten; they become an emergent state that produces a "something-to-be-done". The urgency or move to "something-to-be-done", within my project, comes from recognising that trauma can produce a time of itself, where one can feel trapped or consumed. Intergenerational trauma cannot be sustained without causing more wounding. My practice becomes an action of shifting from this state through my exploration of reclamation, disruption of colonial narratives, and craft as a protest-of-survival to produce an activeness, to look towards a future where healing is possible for my community.

⁴⁷ Gaiutra Bahadur. "How could I write about women whose existence is barely acknowledged?" (2016). The *Guardian* website.

⁴⁸ Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination*. U of Minnesota Press, 2008. 22.

⁴⁹ Gordon, Avery. "Some thoughts on haunting and futurity." *borderlands* 10, no. 2 (2011): 2.



Quishile Charan. Close up of embroidery work; the month of December, 2018.

Repetition as a method is key to all craft techniques but repetition within this project is a ritual of untwining and de-rooting colonial ideologies so entangled with my present body and the bodies of my ancestral past. As a fifth-generation Indo-Fijian woman, I don't carry one set of trauma; rather, my body is a converging point, a collapsing of time. I carry my ancestors' wounds and the history of indenture, the trauma of the women in my family alongside my own. Repetition is the emotional ritual of binding and bonding to the spirit-self, the truth of my female ancestors and the ramifications of indentured labour. Repetition involves regrowth; where we create our futures, where we exist in our full eternity, where we are not just colonised bodies festering from our wounds.



Quishile Charan. Close up of embroidery on applique; the month of April, 2019.

To make from the site of wounding means that a place to sit with grief and emotions has to be created. When discussing with Fua why craft was important to her as a young woman, she stated, “I wanted to create something with my own hands”. She pulled out photo-albums, and with pride, showed me fifteen-years of making, of doilies, lacing, sewing, embroidery and drawing. In one photograph, there is a lounge space at my Aaji and Aja’s house in Savusavu in the 1980s; it is covered in white ornamental cord twisted and looped into designs and shapes that made a space distinctively my Fua’s. Craft became an active tool of emotion and expression for her, a ritual between the self, the hand and generations of Fijian women who worked with craft as embodiment of emotions, of their environments, of history and who they are. It was something felt in the personal, something that was theirs. Craft created a place of autonomy, it was their own language, their own identity made through the labour of the hands. In that same sense, craft is an active agent for me. It is through craft that I create and produce worlds and imaginings that hold hope, whether that be to adorn the home or as an active participant in the making of my own histories, of Indo-Fijian histories, which are both a healing practice and a counter-colonial act. As my Fua said about my practice:

writing people don’t fully understand, craft explains it in a better way to people, it helps them better understand the history you are communicating. The history is stronger when done with craft and a sense of you wanting to assist and help is present.

Craft holds and communicates an emotional weight of making that has been inherent in my community before the first ship arrived in Fiji; craft is emotional knowledge that is continuously growing and adapting as my community and I grow.

The understanding or need to return to the technologies of our ancestors as a means to heal can be seen in the work of Katie West, a Yindjibarndi woman who grew up in rural Western Australia. Her dyeing practice has been a means to return to generational tools of ‘repair’. West binds the spiritual and healing properties of the land to fabric, telling a history of her community and upholding the importance of indigenous knowledge systems in Australia. As West states, “Being an artist is the way I am carving a path home, working toward the moment

where it will feel as if I am simply resuming the work of those before me. Working at the pace of our old people and tending to good relations with non-human kin is where I wish to dwell.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Katie West, “*Living Well*” (2018). Artlink Website.



Katie West. Nyinyart Yinda: *Natural dyeing at artist-in-residence*, Juluwarlu Aboriginal Corporation, Roebourne, Western Australia. July, 2017.

West discusses⁵¹ how tending to good relations with non-human kin through her dyeing is akin to the same return to traditional modes of making. This forging of relationships for healing is similar to the exhibition *and my heart is soft* (2018) by Aotearoa artist Bronte Perry and their mother Ange Perry at Enjoy Public Art Gallery. Two taniko woven by Ange trace the relationship of her Māori Grandmother and Croatian Grandfather. This process of learning weaving was her reconnection to Te Ao Māori, as well as a rejection of the assimilation that colonialism and religion has enforced. Sitting below these works are Bronte's Pohutukawa and swamp Kauri timber slabs with engravings of psalms taken from Te Paipera Tapu and Novi Zavjet i Psalmi. The significance of the Kauri to both mother and child is its spiritual connection as tāonga from the whenua that is representational of the specific colonisation that their family went through. When talking to Bronte further, they went on to explain:

The importance of working with my mother was whanaungatanga,⁵² as the wood came from Northland they are seen as bodies. The wood was reclaimed and became the re-embodying of my dead ancestors as a means to connect to my tūrangawaewae,⁵³ my place to speak from was in trying to rebuild and maintain connections to my dead. My role within that work and by extension, within my life, is to help my mother connect to her dead.⁵⁴

These artists and I seek to find understandings of the self through ancestral inheritance. An understanding emerges that we come from colonial frameworks that have sought to rip our histories and ancestors from us. Assimilation in thoughts and beliefs is central to these practices; it is how we understand what has been lost and might never be regained. We are not looking to return to a romanticised past, but instead aim to repair the damage, thereby shifting Gordon's "something-to-be-done" to the present tense of 'something-to-do', which involves returning to our dead, connecting to traditional knowledge systems and embodying our emotions.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Relationship or kinship.

⁵³ Your place to stand.

⁵⁴ Bronte Perry, In conversation with artist, April 22, 2019.



Bronte Perry and Ange Perry. *and my heart is soft*, Enjoy Public Art Gallery. Wellington, New Zealand, 2018. Image courtesy of Xander Dixon.

When I began this project, one of my central questions was: “how can ancestral craft enable counter-narratives of resilience, hope and strength for Indo-Fijian (giritiyas) female descendants of indentured labourers?” Through this question, a concern rose, stemming from the anxiety that this body has held for years. How could one talk to their dead? Was this possible, if your legacy as a descendent of indenture has been severance from your past? If one does not know their dead, can they truly know themselves? Can we know our futures when we live in the shadows? Egyptian British sociologist Amal Treacher Kabesh states that the “present does not exist, or rather the past is so omnipresent that it has more reality, stuff and resonance than the present time.”⁵⁵ Disconnection and loss was not something that grew from a sociopolitical void for descendants of indenture. Rather we had been living in disconnection since our ancestors left India. Repression grew from isolation, as my fuffa has said of our ancestors, “they all suffered in silence”. These shadows of my ancestors, of pain, and of trauma occupy my present. To begin a process of knowing myself and bringing their shadows to the forefront of my life was also to understand how to start a process of healing. I wanted to understand why the names of my ancestors had been lost to time.⁵⁶

The counter-narrative of resilience, hope and strength within the use of ancestral craft is my conscious act to create something with my own hands: my hands are merging points, the resonance of emotions, where my ancestors are heard. Crying seems to have taken up a huge emotional space in my life even while making and writing about this project; as a dear friend told me, “tears are the truth leaking out.” Emotions are the full embodiment of the spirit and inflicted colonial violence. My resilience and hope is in the courage to want to undertake this project, in wanting to be both a meeting point for myself and for other Indo-Fijian women. I want to give others the opportunity to know our female histories and to know our dead, to let them live on in us as bodies consciously aware of how our roots are strong, through resistance.

⁵⁵ Kabesh, Amal Treacher. "On being haunted by the present." *Borderlands* 10, no. 2 (2011). 6.

⁵⁶ In my family we do not remember the names of our giritiyas ancestors. My elders that are living in Fiji were children when the last giritiya in our family died. I have talked with my Aaji about her memories but so much has been lost to time and to trauma.

Chapter Three:

The Archives: The Personal, What is Felt, What is Written and What Cannot be Forgotten

Exhuming my female ancestors from State archives started from an urgency to find and retrieve life: to build from the remnants that my female ancestors left on history and allow the spiritual entity of resilience to breathe beyond the page. I entered the temperature-controlled store rooms on 25 Carnovan Street, Suva,⁵⁷ nearly two years ago, filled with a rage that is ever-present in my body. Here lay the record of power where I, as a descendant, had the obligation to disrupt and disturb colonial languaging and legacies of violence. Re-contextualising, re-reading and exhuming minor histories from the archives are central to this project. They are methods established to care and love for the “condemned women who deviated from colonially and patriarchally imposed norms”,⁵⁸ who became permanently scarred by written records.⁵⁹

Margaret Mishra’s⁶⁰ essay ‘Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman: Revisiting Female Deviance in Colonial Fiji’, forever changed my understanding of how archives could be accessed and repositioned.⁶¹ The brutish manner of overseers and *sirdars*, absurd laws, ordinances and “draconian” control functioned as state-induced violence because my ancestors were perceived as posing a threat. The Agent General of Immigration in 1911 commented that girmitiyas people are “of emotional temperament [who] have low moral standards, [are] prone to trickery, and under certain excitement to crimes of violence, even under the discipline of

⁵⁷ The National Archives of Fiji

⁵⁸ Mishra, Margaret. "Your woman is a very bad woman!: revisiting female deviance in colonial Fiji." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17, no. 4 (2016): 68.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Margaret Mishra is a senior lecturer in the School of Government, Development and International Affairs at the University of the South Pacific. Her published articles aim to recover minor historical fragments relating to women in Fiji during the period of indenture and colonialism more generally.

⁶¹ As Ann Stoler has said of her own research with archives, “these archives are not simply accounts of actions or records of what people thought happened. They are records of uncertainty and doubt in how people imagined they could and might make the rubrics of rule correspond to a changing imperial world.” (Stoler 4) This understanding Robert Nicole talks in his book, *Disturbing history: aspects of resistance in early colonial Fiji, 1874-1914* (2006), where he states, “My intention in this study is to demonstrate that control was consistently breached, undermined or postponed by the actions of the colonised. Agency was real, not merely rhetorical, and resistance was widespread if equally messy and imperfect as the attempts to control it” (Nicole 11).

continuous labour.”⁶² This statement, when placed in context to the abuse of the Indentured Labour System (ILS) shows that my ancestors were never passive but were active in dismantling the system, even while under the “discipline of continuous labour.”⁶³

My first engagement with subverting colonial narratives was with my exhibition, *Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman* (2018). I had been working with the Fiji Museum, which gifted me access to the images they had of female-girmitiyas. Colonial images were taken and staged for observation and documentation of the “other” or “otherness”, with some being turned into exotic postcard commodities. The camera was an object of control and produced images to suit colonial narratives; yet these images, now existing in The Fiji Museum, were the only remnants I had left of my female ancestors. They were my first encounter in seeing their faces, how they dressed and their adornment. The oral histories I had been told were exactly, word-for-word, present in these images. My hands became tools to remove the violence these images replicated.

These images are some of the only remaining public sources of girmitiyas women. Just as our history has been in the shadows, so too were these images. I wanted to utilize Mishra’s technique of historical recovery to disrupt the power of the archives and place Fijian female histories in the context of “rule-breaking behaviour as a reaction to colonial and patriarchal efforts to regulate female behaviour and sexuality” to re-label “these alleged acts of deviance as survival strategies emerging out of women’s experiences of ‘double colonization’.”⁶⁴ Instead of approaching Mishra’s method solely through writing, I applied it through textiles that gave visibility to the faces of women often forgotten, layering them with craft techniques to uphold and celebrate their resistance.

⁶² Lal, Brij V. *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji*. ANU Press, 2013. 176.

⁶³ The fragility of Empire is a thread I chose to stitch together as a combative act, to echo the refusal of my female ancestors to be subservient. By showing the “messiness” of control during indenture, visibility is given to show how colonial Fiji was rife with women who cut themselves free from the belly of the beast.

⁶⁴ Mishra, Margaret. "Your woman is a very bad woman!: revisiting female deviance in colonial Fiji." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17, no. 4 (2016): 67.



Archival image courtesy of Fiji Museum. Photographer and date unknown.
Detail: Girmitiya woman with her children, standing next to European missionary.

The centre of my textile *Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman* (2018) has an image of a female-girmitiya surrounded by her five children and adorned in what looks to be traditional Rajasthani attire. This image is placed between two printed machetes and conch shells that enclose and protect. In the original photograph there is a European female missionary sitting next to the girmitiya-woman and her children. She is sitting on a chair and dressed in white, which is indicative of the 'holier than thou white saviour'⁶⁵ narrative that is riddled throughout colonial indenture.

⁶⁵ "Britain stands alone at a high and noble pre-eminence amongst the nations of the earth, in her almost hypersensitive interest in the moral and material welfare of the races that Providence has committed to her care. She not only keeps an unsleeping eye upon all that goes on, through her official administrators, but self-appointed societies organise themselves as protectors, standing guard over all who might be exploited or injured or neglected, in their contact with trade rivalries and commercial interest" (Chapple, William Allan. *Fiji: its problems and resources*. Whitcombe & Tombs, 1921. 50).



Quishile Charan. *Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman*, Firstdraft Gallery. Sydney, Australia, 2018.

My decision to edit the female missionary out of my artwork was to remove the violence and hierarchy visibly attached to the image⁶⁶, allowing the spirits of those girmityas to be central to their own histories, thereby producing agency for women past and present. At opposite ends of the textile I created the repeat image of a girmitya-woman holding her baby, her nose ring large and covering the side of her face, just as my great-great-aaji⁶⁷ would have worn hers. It was important to me for this textile to have motherhood present, as female-girmityas birthed my community. During indenture, one of the many hardships faced by women was the denial of their maternity.⁶⁸ It was believed that Indian women due to their low character bore a mark of evil which would be inherited by the next generation.⁶⁹ It was nearly impossible for

⁶⁶ Conversion to Christianity was a huge civilising project during indenture. Many missionaries believed that if they could convert the Indian coolies, they could their souls that held much evil. These missionaries were largely unsuccessful and many girmityas remained faithful to the religions they had brought with them from India. For further reading, see Brij Lal's *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji* (2013) 239-260.

⁶⁷ Great-great-grandmother.

⁶⁸ Denial of maternity was also a byproduct of sugar companies and plantations not wanting to be burdened with the cost of pregnancy and children. Immigration of able bodied labourers proved more beneficial to sugar production than family units, or rather, than mothers with obligations their children. Motherhood under indenture thus can be read through the opinion of European overseers as unproductive activity for their labouring units to partake in. For further reading see Vicki Luker's paper, "A tale of two mothers: colonial constructions of Indian and Fijian maternity" (2005).

⁶⁹ Prostitute became synonymous with Indian women in Fiji; with the belief that prostitutes made up a large number of recruits of single women travelling to the sugar colonies, coolies were a "matter of greed and lust." Another assumption of indentured women was that they were infectious, that their children watched much evil, as the Methodist Missionary Hannah Dudley wrote: "But, what of the children - what of the girls - who are to be brought up in such pollution? What is the heritage of their [girmityas] children?" (Naidu 83) For further reading please see Quishile Charan's "Unearthing the History of my Female Ancestors in Fiji" (2018).

motherhood to exist under indenture due to poor working and living conditions.⁷⁰ Having images of mothers visible aimed to shatter the assumption that female-girmitiyas were the “criminal class of India.”⁷¹ I also wanted to connect the struggle of motherhood to colonial government mistreatment, undernourishment, callous over-tasking, inadequate medical care and other environmental aspects.⁷²



Archival image courtesy of Fiji Museum. Photographer and date unknown.
Detail: Girmitiya woman holding her baby.

⁷⁰ Between 1890 to 1900 a death rate of “15 percent for infants and 10 percent for children per annum. Children often died from dysentery, bronchitis and bronchopneumonia, infants... fell to asthenia, marasmus, rickets, convulsions, debility, malnutrition, premature birth, tetanus, neonatorum, enteritis and congenital syphilis.” With female children more likely to die than males due to more value being assigned to a male body. Mishra, Margaret. “The Suspicious Death of Depot Baby 7480: ‘Maternal Negligence’ in Colonial Fiji.” *Australian Humanities Review* 59 (2016): 49.

⁷¹ Andrews, Charles Freer, and Walter Washington Pearson. *Report on indentured labour in Fiji: An independent enquiry, February 1916*. Star Printing Works, Calcutta, 1916. 30.

⁷² Mishra, Margaret. “The Suspicious Death of Depot Baby 7480: ‘Maternal Negligence’ in Colonial Fiji.” *Australian Humanities Review* 59 (2016): 49.



Quishile Charan. *Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman*, Firstdraft Gallery. Sydney, Australia, 2018.

These archival images were placed onto cotton dyed with marigold flowers. The flowers are symbolic of Hindu pooja⁷³ offerings where they are given as the purest part of nature. This ritual that I have grown up with, now bound to the textiles through dyeing process, was an offering to acknowledge my female ancestors who against the odds gave life to generations of women like myself.

The disruption of archival images to assert agency and produce female-centred narratives was further explored in the exhibition, *like a lotus flower that grew from mud* (2018). For this exhibition, I was drawn to an archival image of two women outside a marketplace. The way that their saris are wrapped suggests that they had been labouring, as can be seen in the folds and ties of the fabric. The image was edited, and one of the girmitiya-woman⁷⁴ was screen printed onto naturally dyed fabric, as an act of protection and healing for this spirit. Kumkum seeds are used as a tikka, a mark of protection and strength worn on the forehead after pooja – a ritual of marking protection and strength that I fused to the fibres through dyeing so that these women could flourish outside of imposed pictorial boundaries of colonial images.

⁷³ Prayer

⁷⁴ Due to the nature of archival images sometimes it is difficult getting the quality high enough for screen printing. With this image in particular I was going to use both the women but only one of them was clear enough to print.



Archival image courtesy of Fiji Museum. Photographer and date unknown.
Detail: Two girmitiyas women outside a marketplace.

In my textile, the girmitiya-woman is seen as growing from a lotus flower, an image usually associated with the Hindu goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati. The lotus within Hinduism is seen as pure beauty; it grows through mud or pollution and appears in its divine form, a flower. This divinity is something that could never be obtained for my female ancestors, as they were confined identities of labourers, bad women and whores. Embroidering the lotus was an offering; my placing it at the feet of an ancestor was to unravel colonial beliefs that had been attached to these women. I used a flower that represents purity and beauty to deviate from the weaponization of Hinduism in indenture against my female ancestors and place cultural practices back into their hands.



Quishile Charan. *Like a lotus flower that grew from mud*, close up (left) and installation view (right). Corbans Art Estate. Auckland, New Zealand, 2018. Installation: textile print with embroidery hanging from bamboo.

My action of giving back aimed to dismantle the belief that the breakdown of moral sanctity was due to the degradation of the female Indian soul. I wanted to challenge the colonial arguments that positioned Hindu marriage against Indo-Fijian women.⁷⁵ Missionaries amalgamated Christian ideals of purity and chastity while Indo-Fijian women were seen as sexually free, impure and unclean.⁷⁶ I subvert these narratives to reclaim my female ancestor's identity. Stitching love into the textile was an outcome of my going home to Fiji to learn the embroidery cross-stitch from my aaji. She monitored my crafting as my hands became busy rewriting our histories with a needle and multi-coloured purple threads.

Using textile love and exhuming lost voices and images from archives created a methodological framework for me to reclaim and build narratives of agency for Indo-Fijian women. I was invited to create a new textile work for a group exhibition, *Full Circle* (2018), at the Lock-Up in Newcastle, Australia. The exhibition considered the inheritance of family cultural traditions and how artists delve into the past to navigate their futures. This opportunity allowed me to consider producing a large-scale textile similar to a protest banner. In this context, I considered Aotearoa artist Nathan Pohio's *Raise the anchor, unfurl the sails, set course to the centre*

⁷⁵ All marriage outside of civil marriage was illegal during indenture.

⁷⁶ This opinion of Hinduism to save the girmitiyas female soul was taken from a christian colonial viewpoint and only went to further implement patriarchy. The problem with indenture was and always will be the system itself not the women oppressed under it. As Margaret Mishra as pointed out in her paper, *Between women: indenture, morality and health* (2012) "Middle-class Indian women became the benchmark for assessing morality among Indentured women in Fiji." (Mishra para.7) See C. F Andrews and Walter Washington Pearson, "Report on indentured labour in Fiji: An independent enquiry" (1916) for full discussion of indenture women and their immorality.

of an ever setting sun! (2015). Pohio reproduces a 1905 image from the *Canterbury Times*, that depicts Māori leaders on horseback in full ceremonial dress, korowai and kākahu (cloaks), surrounding the Crown’s representative in a motor car. This image is cropped, reminiscent of heroic lineups seen in posters for early Western movies, printed at billboard size and illuminated. In this action Pohio has subverted the colonial gaze of the image and transformed it into his own movie, his own narrative, an illumination of heroic survivalism. “The mana (dignity) of the tangata whenua (people of the land) is legible in their dress and bearing, but also in their holding onto and enacting their tikanga (protocols).”⁷⁷



Nathan Pohio, *Raise the anchor, unfurl the sails, set course to the centre of an ever setting sun!*, 2015. Commissioned by SCAPE Public Art. Image courtesy of the artist and Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch. Photo by Hannah Watkinson.

Just as Pohio upheld his tūpuna (ancestors) and their cultural practices as acts of heroism and survival, I wanted to provide for myself and the women in my community, our own heroes, something that history has denied us.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Jon Bywater, “*Seeing documenta 14 from the other south*” (2017). Contemporary Hum Website.

⁷⁸ As this research has been developing, I have frequently traveled back home to Fiji to re-visit archives, but more importantly to keep an open dialogue with the women in my family and my wider female community. Stories are always exchanged; of marriage, of the women we grew up with, craft, but more importantly, of labour. These stories echoed the same invisibility of our female ancestors. It was disheartening to see how colonialism and patriarchy still had a firm grip, but it was humbling seeing generational exchange and support in those lounge spaces, in the homes I visited with my Fua. Strength radiated from them.



Quishile Charan. *to grieve among the sugarcane fields*, The Lock-Up. New Castle, Australia, 2018. Installation: 11.4 metre long textile dyed with haldi and kawakawa leaves.

to grieve among the sugarcane fields (2018) was an 11.4-metre-long textile made for *Full Circle*. A two-part process of dyeing was enacted to hold a space of healing and love for female-girmitiyas, with the first dye bath using kawakawa⁷⁹ leaves, allowing a process of mourning to take place. As in Māori culture I wanted to connect with my dead and give them back the pyaar⁸⁰ they deserved. The second dye bath was haldi.⁸¹ Haldi is both significant as a colour and for its herbal properties in Fiji. Haldi is used as an antibiotic, for sickness, clearing blockages in the blood and for cleansing or purification in Hindu rituals. Haldi as a colour means pyaar; I wanted haldi to be illuminated and shining from the fabric, to adorn the spirits in the archival images with pyaar. Going home and being embraced by the women in my

⁷⁹ Kawakawa is associated with mourning and has various medicinal uses.

⁸⁰ Love.

⁸¹ Turmeric.

community has been pyaar as healing, this love is monumental and is an inheritance. *to grieve among the sugarcane fields* was a protest using monumental pyaar as resistance to colonial violences that still lives and breathes.



Quishile Charan. *to grieve among the sugarcane fields*, The Lock-Up. New Castle, Australia, 2018. Installation: 11.4 metre long textile dyed with haldi and kawakawa leaves.

Dismantling colonial silence through pyaar became a refusal to forget and to reclaim my/our identities. To pay homage through declarations of love became the centre of a collaborative exhibition,⁸² *To Uphold Your Name* (2018),⁸³ with Tongan/Samoan artist and friend Salome

⁸² The first iteration of this exhibition was *Namesake* (2017), shown at Enjoy Public Art Gallery, Wellington.

⁸³ Gallery text for exhibition: "Born of great women, we take our place in long lines of those who struggle, who resist, who endure. We are the fruit that wakes the earth when we land, grown from trees that hold up the sky, trees whose roots run deep into the earth. Their songs and tales are carried by the wind, but the ears of man do not hear, nor do they listen. 'To Uphold Your Name' is a collection of works by Quishile Charan & Salome Tanuvasa. It is an homage, an acknowledgement, a declaration of love to honour the multitudes of women whose strength makes it possible for us to be here - for us to continue. From the enactment of indentured labour in Fiji to the Dawn Raids of New Zealand, this exhibition looks at colonisation in the Pacific, the displacement of our peoples and the determination of our women to survive, to ensure a better life for the generations who would follow. 'To Uphold Your Name' tackles the silencing of women by our governments, in our communities and in our homes. It gives an ear to those once forbidden to speak, whose struggles are told through craft and

Tanuvasa. This exhibition had a big impact on me, as a Pasifika woman, as a daughter to my family and as a woman making bonds of sisterhood with other Pasifika women. The collaborative element within the making for the exhibition was communication, support and love shared between Tanuvasa and me; without each other we would not be the women we are today. We translated our personal histories to a gallery context and offered free workshops over the duration of the exhibition.⁸⁴



Quishile Charan and Salome Tanuvasa at opening of “To Uphold Your Name”, Mangere Arts Centre, 2018.
Image taken by Raymond Sagapolutele.

domestic work, whose stories are woven into fabric and textile that adorns our houses. To listen and translate the histories and experiences of ancestors, ‘To Uphold Your Name’ is a refusal to forget them.” To Uphold Your Name Website (2018).

⁸⁴ Lavalava and T-Shirt printing workshop (August 25); Spoken word workshop with Lastman So’oula (September 1); Introduction to Zines workshop (September 1); Textile block design workshop (September 8); Cook Islander dance class (September 15); Plant swap for donations (September 22).

My central point of making for this exhibition was to look at how the humanity of my female ancestors was stripped from them, not only through ILS but also through words and ideas. I looked at the data I had been collecting through the National Archives of Fiji and compiled five textile documents: a female immigration pass, two newspaper clippings from different articles in the *Fiji Times and Herald* (1920), archival images of jewelry and a letter sent to government written of behalf of *The Indian Women's Imperial Association of Fiji* petitioning for higher pay and better food prices. Hung on a Fijian-style clothesline, the material objects were used as multi-dimensional representations: a play on airing out the dirty laundry of Empire, but also a way to pay homage to how the women in my community built and maintained their homes. Nurture produces hope, which helps build a revolution. Each textile document was indexical to important moments in indenture but also invoked moments of resistance or violence.

616/20

THE INDIAN WOMEN'S IMPERIAL ASSOCIATION OF FIJI.
G.P.O. BOX 19,
Suva, Fiji
14th. January 1920

To
His Excellency
The Governor,
Suva.

Your Excellency,

On behalf of the Indian Women's
Imperial Association of Fiji I have been asked to represent to your
Excellency the fact that foodstuffs, ~~xxx~~ Clothing and other
necessaries have in many cases trebled in price whilst the wages
that ourmen are accustomed to get have remained stationery.

We as women who have to keep the home going find it
impossible to make both end meet. And we most respectfully submit
that the time is fully ripe now for legislation to come to our
assistance and fix a minimum living wage (we say five shillings)
and enable us to live a decent life.

I beg to remain
Your Excellency
Yours most obediently,
Sushila
secretary.

COLONIAL EMIGRATION FORM No. 44.

**WOMAN'S
EMIGRATION PASS.**

HEALTH CLASS.

DEPORT No. 1849
For Ship. S.S. "MUTLAH" II. PROCEEDING TO FIJI.
No.

Fiji Government Emigrations Agency,
21, GARDEN REACH,
CALCUTTA, the 20 July 1911 1911

PARTICULARS (Place, Date, No. in Register, NAME, Father's Name, Age, Caste, Name of Next-of-kin, If married, name of Husband, District, Thana, Village, or Town & Mahalla, Bodily Marks, Occupation in India, Height, Feet, Inches)

CERTIFIED that we have examined and passed the above-named Woman as fit to emigrate; that she is free from all bodily and mental disease; and that she has been vaccinated since engaging to emigrate.

DATED The 1911 .
L. W. P. P. P.
Depôt Surgeon.
Surgeon Superintendent.

CERTIFIED that the Woman above described has appeared before me and has been engaged by me on behalf of the Government of Fiji as willing to proceed to that country to work for hire; and that I have explained to her all matters concerning her engagement and duties. This has also been done at the time of registration by the Registering Officer appointed by the Indian Government.

DATED The 2-7-1911 .
S. S. S.
Government Emigration Agent for FIJI.

PERMITTED to proceed as in a fit state of health to undertake the voyage to FIJI.
DATED The 25 July 1911 1911 .
H. H.
Protector of Emigrants.

J. N. Searge & Son, Printers, CALCUTTA.—1024-1911.

Letter from the Indian Women's Imperial Association of Fiji 1920 (left) and Women's Immigration Pass 1911 (right). Scans courtesy of The National Archives of Fiji.

The thumbprint on the immigration pass was the signature of the Girit. This thumbprint was both a marker of bondage and silencing of the body. In addition the archival letter to government was important to bring forward as it shows the various ways in which girmitiyas-women took action – one being through their use of a language (English) that was used against them. This letter written on 16 January 1920 by Sushila is significant as it highlights the urgency of the women’s revolt in Fiji and the precursor to the 1920 strike: “We as women who have to keep the home going find it impossible to make both end[s] meet... the time is fully ripe for legislation to come to our assistance... and enable us to live a decent life.”⁸⁵

Amongst the clothesline were two textile documents with scans of articles taken from the *Fiji Times and Herald* (1920) with commentary on one of the largest organised labour strikes led by Indo-Fijian women in Suva, Rewa and Navua.⁸⁶ This event is testament to the strength of Indo-Fijian women and their resilience. Using these articles showed how a European male-centred newspaper positioned my female ancestors and how media was an instrumental tool in propaganda and control.⁸⁷ “The Indian Question: The Female Horror”⁸⁸ was printed alongside “Indian Riot: Women the Cause” (1920).⁸⁹ My replication of these articles was to reposition a minor history back into a major narrative of resistance. Women were active during this strike in making sure their men did not go to work until demands were met.⁹⁰

The exhibition contained a textile that was a print of traditional jewelry, laid out to embody how the adornment was once worn. Next to this textile hung two sets of red glass bangles to pay homage to an oral history of Indo-Fijian women taking a stand against policemen, when

⁸⁵ CSO file 616/20

⁸⁶ Mishra, M., 2008. The emergence of feminism in Fiji. *Women's History Review*, 17(1), 46.

⁸⁷ This altercation started on the 11th of February 1920 and caused a riot with women beginning to beat policemen, followed by Indian males with sticks coming to fight in support of the women. The fight dispersed when soldiers and guns arrived; one hundred and seventy-five men were arrested, and fourteen women were arrested. Leading up to this, Indo-Fijian women had been used as a target for fear mongering among the European population, to quote Governor Cecil Rodwell: “Gangs of women of the lowest class were organized to intimidate workers with obscene language and filthy practices.” Ali, Ahmed. *Plantation to politics: studies on Fiji Indians*. University of the South Pacific: Fiji Times & Herald, 1980. 48.

⁸⁸ Full excerpt from *Fiji Times and Herald* article “The Indian Question: The Female Horror”, (February 11, 1920): “Something must be done to put a stop to the Indian women suborners. Theirs is not a case of mere intimidation. They use cruel filthy and hideous methods. They are not women, they are ghouls, who ought to be gaoled [jail] at once. They are too awful to be at large. Last night they hunted in packs, chasing ‘boys’ into their very homes. If any of them get seriously injured, no one could reasonably be blamed. This thirteenth century sort of business must be stopped. Can the police or the military not devise some way of stopping it? If it were not for these fiends who have lost all sense of sex, there would be hundreds of men at work.”

⁸⁹ An extract from the article, *Indian Riot: Women the Cause* (1920): “As we anticipated yesterday Indian women were the cause of quite a lively little scrap in Toorak about 4 o’clock yesterday afternoon... There was a crowd of women about, and one of the ringleaders, a woman with a bad reputation, came up to Reay... She then used a lot of insulting words to him and Reay ordered the sergeant to arrest her. At once the party were surrounded by a great crowd.”

⁹⁰ To fix a minimum wage of 5 shillings a day and high food prices. CSO file 616/20.

they heard that the Indian activist and fellow supporter of female empowerment, Jaikumari, had been arrested.⁹¹ Indo-Fijian women ceased work and attempted to walk twelve miles to reach the jail but were stopped at a police barrier. In protest the women raised their arms and smashed their bangles.⁹² Traditionally glass bangles are worn by married women and only broken at the deathbed of a husband as, a sign of mourning. This gesture of breaking is both beautiful and courageous. They took a Hindu ritual and turned it into an act of solidarity and strength. Jewelry in this way became an active act of visibility and resistance. By referencing jewelry in my work, I show how our cultural practices are acts of survival.

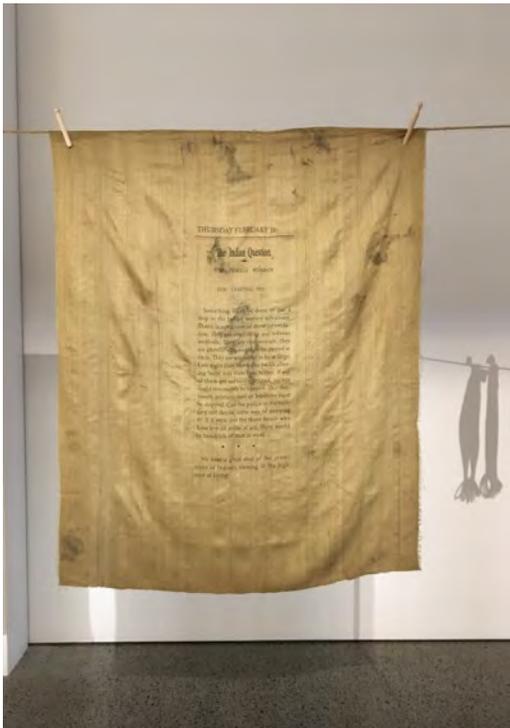
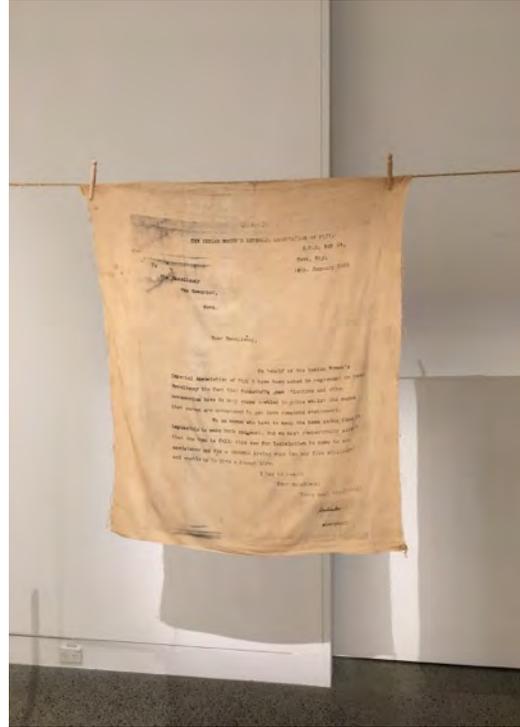
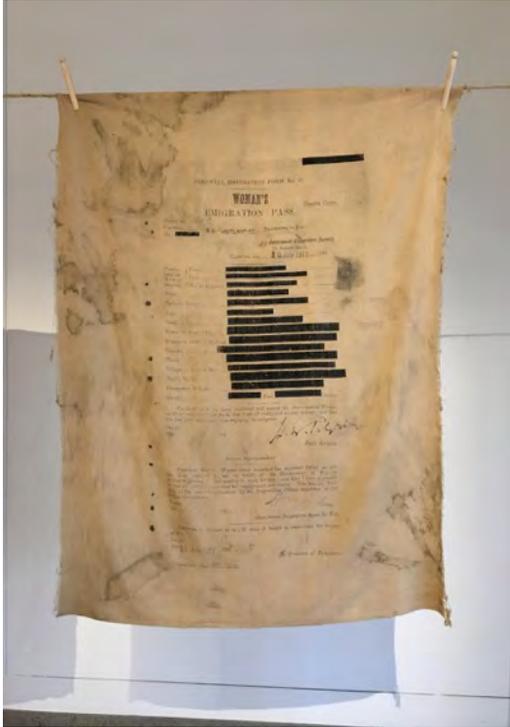


Quishile Charan. *To Uphold Your Name*, Mangere Arts Centre. Auckland, New Zealand, 2018. Installation: Naturally dyed textiles hung on Fijian clothesline.
Image taken by Raymond Sagapolutele.

⁹¹ Evidence shows Jaikumari was never arrested. Oral accounts from female-girmitiyas state that the rumour was started to upset the Indo-Fijian populous, to dampen their rebellious spirit.

⁹² Full oral account referenced on page 47 in Margaret Mishra's paper "*The emergence of feminism in Fiji*" (2008).

For me, to bring these minor histories forward and place them in environments of love and care - through natural dye, printing, shell adornment - is to endure just as my female ancestors did. One of the biggest joys in piecing this exhibition together was talking to the women in my family and sharing these stories. The excitement from them was heartwarming as was the responses from many women coming to visit the show. When talking with my fua about making female narratives she told me, "women are always the first ones to get up in the morning and the last one to go to bed at night. Women's work is always the hardest work." I carry her words with me; I make textiles to show the women in my community how fundamental they are in creating and maintaining life, freedom and love.



Quishile Charan. *To Uphold Your Name*, Mangere Arts Centre. Auckland, New Zealand, 2018.
Installation: Naturally dyed textiles hung on Fijian clothesline.



Quishile Charan and Salome Tanuvasa. *To Uphold Your Name*, Mangere Arts Centre. Auckland, New Zealand, 2018. Installation view.

Chapter Four:

ee ghaoo maange acha ho jai: these wounds must heal

When thinking about bringing an exhibition to Mumbai, via Clark House Initiative,⁹³ I had to consider the lack of presence my community had within India and how I wanted to represent us as Indo-Fijian. We are a culture made from remnants of our ancestors' pasts and the act of survival under ILS. Our cultural identity grew from those two points in history and kept growing against the turbulence of post-indenture, of Fijian independence,⁹⁴ of military coups⁹⁵ and of migration and diaspora. The title for the exhibition (and this chapter), *ee ghaoo maange acha ho jai*, was pivotal in linking my textile works to my experience of being Indo-Fijian for audiences in Mumbai. Naming the work in Fijian Hindi⁹⁶ asserted our unique identity to an audience that would otherwise render us as the same or as children of Indians who migrated from the sub-continent. I did not want our histories to remain as a monolith serving the master narrative of Indian colonisation.

Becoming central to our own narratives

Presenting Indo-Fijian female resistance through craft is essential in the retelling of indenture through a female perspective. Empowerment was fought for tirelessly, and even though my female ancestors were pushed back to the domestic sphere, they continued to fight via other means.⁹⁷ The domesticity⁹⁸ associated with female craft is framed through a western positioning

⁹³ Clark House Initiative Bombay is a curatorial collaborative concerned with ideas of freedom. *ee ghaoo maange acha ho jai* was the last exhibition in the iconic location before the collective moved.

⁹⁴ Fiji gained independence from the British Empire in 1970.

⁹⁵ Our first military coup was in 1987 followed by a second coup in the same year. Our third was in 2000. I still remember the day it happened. I was living in Suva when the military stormed government house. Our last coup was in 2006 with a constitutional crisis in 2009. These military coups, born out of colonial rule, brought about a new set of trauma for all Fijians and is something we as a country and people are working through today.

⁹⁶ Fijian Hindi or Fiji Baat is a language that comes from the various dialects spoken by the girmitiyas, mixed with English and Fijian. It was a language born out of our specific colonisation and stands as a legacy of how our ancestors worked to survive. Hindi speakers have been known to call our language broken Hindi or "lazy" Hindi, but it is neither; it is testimony to how our ancestors made a new community in Fiji: Indo-Fijians. To uphold Fijian Hindi was my conscious decision to reject colonial understandings that people have of my community. As a community we maintain and build our culture outside of India.

⁹⁷ "In line with the post-indenture reformism that was taking place during this period, women from this society attempted to alleviate poverty by fundraising to feed the needy and the destitute and encouraging women to flexibly combine domestic work with income-generating activities such as sewing or cooking. Economic empowerment was the cornerstone of women's

of craft as a lower art. This framing, in combination with how neo-colonialism maintains the hierarchy of western knowledge, offered me an opportunity to disrupt colonial positioning. My research aimed to demonstrate how the techniques I had learned through ghar, by the hands of the women in my family, have the same capability and the same importance as scholarly literature. The women who craft in Fiji function as foundational to making and maintaining material history. Craft also demonstrates how protest from the indenture period survived, while enabling visibility and empowerment of the self, indicating how our hands and bodies exist and can create.⁹⁹

A Protest Banner of Female Girmityas

The biggest textile work in the exhibition was a 2.45-metre-long protest banner hung from bamboo. The protest banner is a recurring form of visual resistance in many Fiji protest movements. This is an image (circa 1960s) of peace protests in Nadi led by women;

activism during this period." Mishra, Margaret. "A History of Fijian Women's Activism (1900–2010)." *Journal of Women's History* 24, no. 2 (2012): 119.

⁹⁸ I use this word to place more emphasis on ghar (home) as a point of love and care. Ghar became a transformative element of resistance and empowerment from the coolie lines (barracks) in which my ancestors lived in during indenture. As Margaret Mishra has referenced Amrita Basu, "When activities like cooking and sewing are transformed into public domain activities and become the basis of social recognition, they may actually contribute to the transformation rather than the reinforcement of gender activities." Mishra, Margaret. "A History of Fijian Women's Activism (1900–2010)." *Journal of Women's History* 24, no. 2 (2012): 50.

⁹⁹ My context to craft comes from seeing women being visible in creative environments such as the Fiji Women's Council and the Women's Expo, one of Fiji's largest national craft events. Women artisans are invited to display their works and the event holds a great source of joy and pride for the women involved and the people who attend. Organisations such as the Fiji Women's Council work in assisting women through craft and local markets. Fiji as a neo-colonial state holds much of its history in the hands of women who have knowledge of traditional craft.



Image of peace protests in Nadi, Fiji. Taken in the 1960s, exact date unknown.
Image from my Aaji's photo-album and used with permission.

I wanted to continue this spirit/legacy of material engagement with a visible symbol of resistance. I made a collaborative textile with artist Sancintya Mohini Simpson, a descendent of indenture of South Indian heritage. Unlike me, Simpson's ancestors were brought to South Africa. Her series of miniature paintings, *Women of Indenture* (2018) and *Natal Landscapes* (2018), were important works both in Simpson's approach to using traditional techniques¹⁰⁰ and as accurate depictions of the everyday lives of female indenture. Her paintings are raw in their honesty and hold an emotional weight that resonated in my own body as a female descendant. The motif of indenture women cutting sugarcane, holding children and ploughing are screen printed in a repeat pattern as the inner border. Surrounding Mohini's indentured women is my own hand-carving of ganna in flower. In the middle of the fabric are two archival images of Fijian female-girmitiyas and their adornment. Our collaborative textile was an extension of jahaji bhai¹⁰¹ and the Women's Gang¹⁰² - are forms of friendship and community that were instrumental to the downfall of indenture.

¹⁰⁰ That being her learning about and how to make miniature paintings.

¹⁰¹ Word for ship brother, ship mate/friend. These relationships formed during the journey across kalapani and served as lifelong blood bonds of friendship and support. The plantations and Empire saw jahaji bhai relationships as dangerous to their institutional control: "As a pre-emptive measure, labourers from the same ship were often scattered among different plantations. The few who kept their jahaji bhai bonds were better organised and occasionally succeeded in having vicious employers removed." Nicole, Robert Emmanuel. "Disturbing history: aspects of resistance in early colonial Fiji, 1874-1914." (2006). 295.

¹⁰² "The individual ordeals of indentured women fostered the need for a collective forum where women could come together to articulate their grievances and challenge their maltreatment by *sardars* and overseers... the Indian (Indentured) Women's Committee, colloquially known as the 'women's gang' In the late 1800s and early 1900s, [was a] Committee set out to confront



Sancintya Mohini Simpson, *Women of Indenture* (left) and *Natal Landscapes* (right), 2018.

Indian and European men who sexually and/or physically violated indentured women." Mishra, Margaret. "The emergence of feminism in Fiji." *Women's History Review* 17, no. 1 (2008): 45.

Protest was not solely done through strikes, riots and sabotage. It was fostered through maintaining community, becoming the strongest form of anti-colonial action.¹⁰³ Mohini and I stand as living embodiments of those female friendships once formed. She and I acted as a site of female tradition, shared across kalapani and between countries,¹⁰⁴ using sisterhood and friendship as a means to continue to unravel colonialism.



Quishile Charan and Sancintya Mohini Simpson, *ee ghaoo maange acha ho jai*, Clark House Incitative. Mumbai, India, 2019. Image courtesy of gallery.

¹⁰³ Indo-Fijian women included and worked alongside Indo-Fijian men often drawing them into the orbit of plantation resistance. The double colonisation for Indo-Fijian women meant they were leading the way for resistance. “During the 1920 strike the Indo-Fijian Women’s Committee often spoke officially and publicly on the behalf of female and male labourers.” Ibid., 46.

¹⁰⁴ Simpson lives in Brisbane, so while making the textile we had to communicate through Facebook Messenger. I travelled alone to India with the work while Simpson was present through our work spiritually.



Quishile Charan and Sancintya Mohini Simpson, *ee ghaoo maange acha ho jai*, Clark House Incitative. Mumbai, India, 2019. Image courtesy of gallery.

Adornment during indenture was also an essential part of creating visibility for the women and was central to the remaining oral histories of female-girmitiyas. Great pride can always be seen across the faces of elders as they recall memories of Aajis and Naanis¹⁰⁵ and women clad in traditional jewellery. They maintained cultural heritage and turned it into visible armour. I am stitching, dyeing and printing this armour once again to maintain that resistance.¹⁰⁶

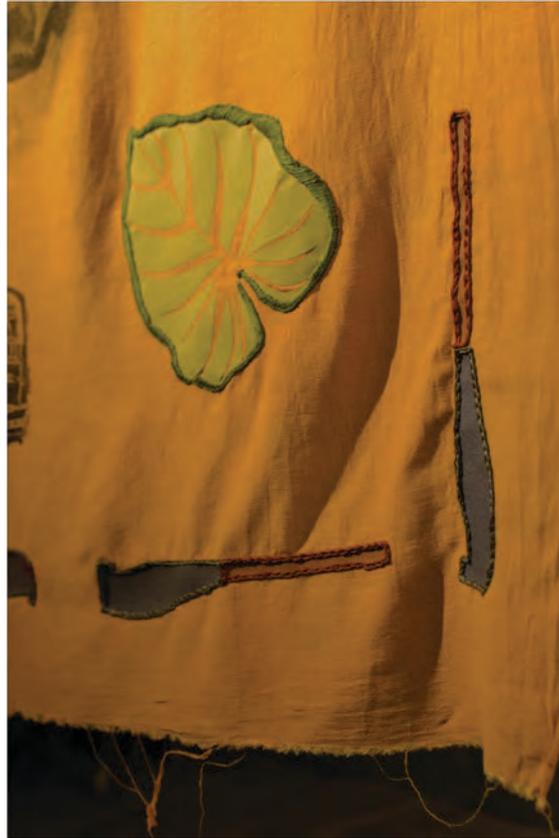
In our exhibition, a small hallway leads to a room where two textiles face each other, hanging above offcuts of ganna. One textile has an archival image of girmitiyas women crowded together, enjoying their time with one another. Surrounding this image is applique work of a machete knife border, monstera leaves and a hand-carved print of the leonidas. The other textile¹⁰⁷ has a family image of my Fua and me in 1995, taken at my family's sugarcane farm in Nawaicoba, Nadi. Applique hibiscus surround my Fua and me. This was my first attempt at the technique, which is used predominantly by my Aaji to make blankets for births, weddings and other significant events. Applique functions as a place of celebratory love, a love that I wanted to adorn my ancestors and my Fua with. Without the actions of my female ancestors I wouldn't have my Fua; I would not be who I am today. That tradition of living, existing against the odds, needed to be respected, upheld and continued through my hands.

¹⁰⁵ Grandmothers

¹⁰⁶ "Indo-Fijian artist Quishile Charan's work urges the utmost respect for the once-hidden histories of the girmitiyas' resilience—the looking and looking again at their stories of survival. Quishile respects these stories as a counter-colonial act. She re-stitches history into armour." Casey Carsel, *ee ghao maange acha ho jai: gallery text* (2018).

¹⁰⁷ "Quishile creates a space where time collapses and two generations of women come to face each other. In one direction she respects her female ancestors and their resilience; in the other, she respects the present relationships and ties to her female Indo-Fijian community. In both, she creates narratives that centre around Indo-Fijian voice and strength.

"In these images, Quishile connects the past to the present in a chain of unbreakable women. 'Even though that disconnection brought us to Fiji, it also created us and that's beautiful,' Quishile said in a recent interview. 'The kind of strength it took for those women to do what they did in the sugarcane fields... it can't even be put into words. They went through all that for their community. Strong women birthed these strong women.'" Casey Carsel, *ee ghao maange acha ho jai: gallery text* (2018).



Quishile Charan, *ee ghao maange acha ho,jai*, Clark House Incitative. Mumbai, India, 2019. Installation view.
Image courtesy of gallery.



Quishile Charan, *ee ghaoo maange acha ho jai*, Clark House Incitative. Mumbai, India, 2019.
Installation view. Image courtesy of gallery.



Fua and Quishile 1995, Nawaicoba, Fiji.

The last textile work of the exhibition, *Indians Working On Sugarcane Farm*,¹⁰⁸ is a drawing done by my close friend Kris Prasad¹⁰⁹ when he was a child.¹¹⁰ I had always wanted to embroider this drawing as it is a representation of how descendants came to know their histories: through unknown snippets of memories from ancestors. These memories never escape our bodies. We, as the youngest generation, became the personal archive. Even if our histories were not spoken to us, we had an intuitive knowing, much like the muscle memory held in the hand for craft. Even the absence left from the colonial era provided a place of knowing. Carrying the weight of our elders' years of silence, our bodies became a space of healing for spirit-selves screaming out. This child's drawing was a beginning-point for Kris, to become the person he would be as an adult; his ancestors, our ancestors, were always guiding him, like they did that day when his coloured pencils touched the paper. The drawing is a place where generations met, where Kris came in contact with the *giritiyas* and an open dialogue grew, inviting a healing not for just himself but for his family. This drawing represented a reality, not only Kris's or mine, but of many younger Indo-Fijians who want to engage and re-establish relationships to their ancestors and history.

¹⁰⁸ "An embroidered image hangs on the first floor of Clark House Initiative. In the image, indentured labourers toil in a sugarcane field next to their bure houses. Quishile's close friend Kris Prasad made the original drawing this embroidery was based on when he was eight years old. Like many drawings by children that age, a yellow sun gleams, though the reality it shines down on is grim. No one is smiling here. Like most Indo-Fijians, Kris hadn't been told about his community's past, but he inherited it anyway." Casey Carsel, *ee ghaoo maange acha ho, jai: gallery text* (2018).

¹⁰⁹ Kris Prasad is an Indo-Fijian queer activist and is currently a final year university student of sociology and politics. He also works as a human rights trainer for a feminist NGO, The Fiji Women's Rights Movement, conducting community trainings on gender and human rights. Kris has also been actively involved in youth and pro-democracy movements in Fiji.

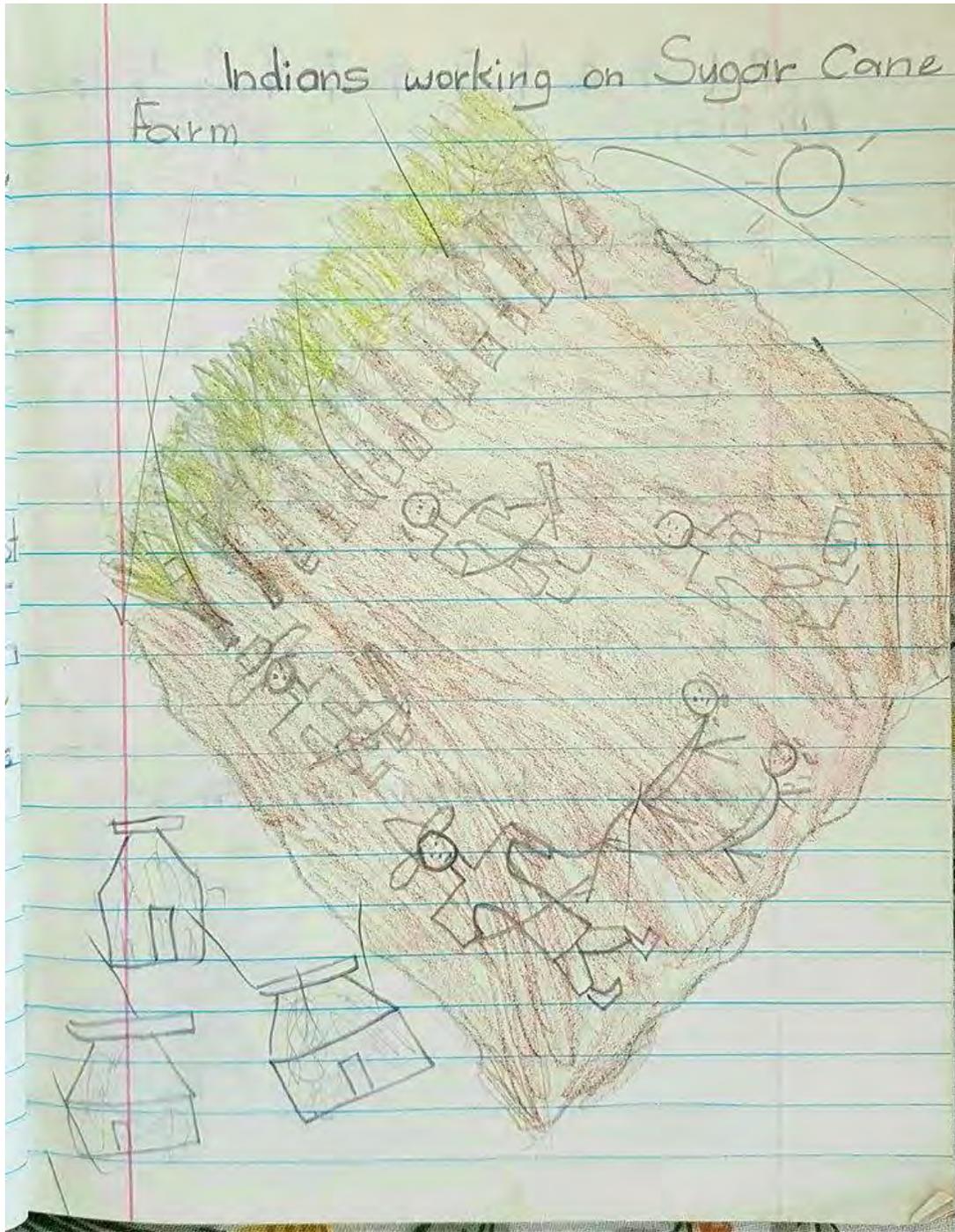
¹¹⁰ "Like me, he grew up with Indo-Fijian elders who spoke very little about how our ancestors arrived in Fiji through the colonial Indian Indenture System. Yet, this child who had no prior knowledge of indenture somehow still knew the treatment of our ancestors. Growing up in silence played a key role in my own understanding of indenture. Not talking about it was just natural and if someone did mention it the response was always short: "*what happened to the giritiyas was horrible...*" The conversation would never move past that ominous idea of violence. It would just sit stale in the air until, again, it was forgotten." Charan, Quishile. *Unearthing the History of my Female Ancestors in Fiji*. Matters Journal Aotearoa, Issue 8 (2018). 43.



Quishile Charan, *ee ghaao maange acha ho jai*, Clark House Incitative. Mumbai, India, 2019. Installation view. Image courtesy of gallery.



Quishile Charan, *ee ghao maange acha ho jai*, Clark House Incitative. Mumbai, India, 2019.
Installation view. Image courtesy of gallery.



Kris Prasad, "Indians working on Sugarcane Farm" childhood drawing.
Drawing used with permission.

Spending the month in Mumbai provided an important opportunity to better understand myself as a cultural practitioner and how that role incorporates education. As this wider project has been unfolding since the beginning of 2018, textile workshops and sharing textile knowledge have become a big part of my life not just as maker but also as an Indo-Fijian woman. Kris¹¹¹ travelled to Mumbai to be with me while we installed the exhibition, and to be part of the lecture series, “Viti and Sugarcane: The History of Girmitiyas”,¹¹² where we covered as much of Fiji’s history as we could across three nights. Being able to present with someone who is my jahaji bhai¹¹³ was a powerful act of growing and teaching. To orate our histories in a place where our ancestors once left, where their names are forgotten, was to breathe life back into Indo-Fijian histories as they continue to strengthen their roots in our bodies.¹¹⁴

In conjunction to these lectures I spent time with female students at Sir J.J. School of Arts and presented my own lecture at SNTD Women’s University¹¹⁵ on reclaiming traditional practices and how I translate these through art. This overall experience galvanized an understanding of myself as a multi-functional platform fostering important relationships.¹¹⁶ When thinking of healing through craft, I am starting to realise that the people craft connects me to speak to a bigger mechanism of hope that I have built for myself. Just as my textiles are tools and have utility, I myself am a verbal marker of resistance. My body is inseparable, an extension of the textiles, and stands as the personal archive to reclaim and store our histories that will be passed on for the next generation.

¹¹¹ Kris provided free labour in documenting our trip through social media. I managed to connect Indo-Fijians globally through Kris’s own online presence. The amount of love and support that was shown by our global community was beautiful. I remember after the opening night I started to receive an array of messages through Facebook and Instagram. I had to sit in my room and take a moment to process it all: “I never imagined I would see our histories represented like this, I always wanted to see us in the arts more and now we have an Indo-Fijian woman doing that.” I cried a lot that day because I never imagined in my own life that this work would reach this far, travel to India and reach a global audience like it did in that month.

¹¹² These lectures were apart of Mumbai Gallery Weekend, a major art event that happens once a year. We presented our lectures inside the gallery in a more informal style, as a mix between open dialogue, shattering colonial narratives of indenture and oral histories. Most of the lectures ran over-time as the audience would want to discuss more of Fijian history, similarities of indenture to local colonial histories and gender-based violence stemming from colonialism.

¹¹³ I use this term as an extension of friendship and the strength of that bond

¹¹⁴ Being able to spend those first two weeks in Mumbai with another Fijian was an experience that I am so thankful for. I could not have done this exhibition without Kris and his own knowledge of indenture and the contemporary issues we face in our community. It is such an amazing and humbling moment when you actively see your community involved in your work and something that I will continue to foster and nurture.

¹¹⁵ Art university for women.

¹¹⁶ I can’t help but recall the 1920 strike led by Indo-Fijian women and the significance it had for female organising and the strengthening of friendship as a revolutionary act as something I continue today. Indo-Fijian women with the help of an Indian female activist, Jaikumari Manilal (the wife of Fiji’s first Indian barrister), petitioned government for higher wages and demanded an official inquiry be made into high food prices. When demands were not met it led to the strike led by Indo-Fijian women, Fiji was placed on Marshall law for that year and the government asked for navy enforcements from New Zealand and Australia.



Kris Prasad and Quishile Charan hosting the lecture series “Viti and Sugarcane: The History of Girmitiyas”. Clark House Initiative. Mumbai, India, 2019. (Above)
Quishile Charan with the students from SNDT Women’s University. Mumbai, India, 2019. (Below)

Conclusion:

Moving Towards Futurity

Women left their husbands for the sake of jewellery and went to live with other men. They seemed to do just what they pleased, and to live just as they liked.¹¹⁷

I entered my Master's degree with a fire stoking in my body. I believed that to heal and to ease this scorching pain I needed to produce research that looked equally at craft as it did academic historiography. I had envisioned my 18 months unfolding through critiquing and recontextualising academic texts and colonial documents exhumed from archives. I had placed an enormous weight on recounting female indenture, as a means to find a sense of justice for my female ancestors and for myself. As in the history of indenture, social value was never assigned to my female ancestors. This has been our inheritance, our legacy as female descendants, as Indo-Fijian women. I wanted us to have our importance asserted, the labour of our women at the forefront of these histories. What this research has shown me is the failure of western languages and their dominance in the narration of history. As a result, my roots in craft have grown stronger. My project has transformed my practice into an embodied inter-relational one, connecting my making to the women in my family and my female ancestors. My hands have become the functional methodological tool to healing.

Coming towards the end of this project, my practice is evolving to take on new forms of traditional techniques in order to maintain their function and survival among my community. This was realised through my decision to help revive the Mohar. The Mohar was aneclace worn by my female ancestors – 21 coins bound with holy thread. Traditionally worn as protection and strength, the Mohar and its use shifted to the locality of plantation life, where a new spiritual layer was added to the meaning of its wearing. The necklace became a place to store what little material value the women received and became treasured items that

¹¹⁷ Andrews, Charles Freer, and Walter Washington Pearson. *Report on indentured labour in Fiji: An independent enquiry, February 1916*. Star Printing Works, Calcutta, 1916. 32

represented their physical labour. Empire never saw the value in Indian female labourers, so they visibly adorned themselves and built jewelry of value that operated as a spiritual armour. The ordinances of the indenture period that penalised girmitiyas for not finishing tasks, showing up to work late, absenting and using “harsh” language towards employers caused a cycle of debt and poverty that continued post-indenture.¹¹⁸ Many girmitiyas-women could no longer hold onto their Mohars and exchanged their jewelry for money¹¹⁹ so they could survive.

It is rare to see Mohar today in Fiji, with female elders holding onto the last remnants of Mohar through single coins. My exhibition, *ee ghao maanga acha ho jai*, gave me an opportunity to find out more information on adornment and its importance in the lives of my female ancestors. I meet with director Deepthi Sasidharan of *Eka Archives Service*, a researcher with in-depth knowledge of Indian adornment and jewellery. Sasidharan sat with me and looked over my archival images, gifting me insight into where, how and why my female ancestors wore particular adornments. This exchange affirmed an important thread I had been weaving throughout my project: the pattern, design and physical use of jewelry as attached to spiritual mechanisms of protection, strength and hope. I spent that month in Mumbai talking to as many people as I could to source the same coins that would have been stitched into the Mohar, which lead me to Chor Bizarre,¹²⁰ where I found fake coins that I could replicate through casting.

¹¹⁸ See Robert Nichol’s book, *Disturbing history: aspects of resistance in early colonial Fiji, 1874-1914* (2006) for more discussion of the colonial Ordinances of Fiji and how it helped the plantations enable stricter control over their workers.

¹¹⁹ My family is amongst the other Indo-Fijian families that decided to sell our Mohar necklaces for money. My Aaji is the last one in my family to hold and wear a traditional Mohar. My Fua has told me that my Aaji inherited a collection of Mohar necklaces from different female elders. The only encounter I have had with Mohar is the necklace stored at the Fiji Museum, the Mohar necklaces I have seen in archival images and the coins that female elders kept and re-stitched into new necklaces.

¹²⁰ Chor Bizarre translates to thief’s market, nearly anything can be found or replicated here. Through the assistance of a fellow artist in Mumbai, we kept revisiting this market place until we found someone who had fake coins of the original Indian Pound that had King George’s head on the back. Without these fake coins I would never have been able to start to revive the tradition of Mohar.



Close up of Mohar necklace (above) and Mohar necklace from the Fiji Museum collection. Image courtesy of Fiji Museum.

For the last three months I have been learning casting techniques to rebirth the tradition of Mohar. As there is no foundry in the technical labs, I have had to approach this through unconventional methods similar to how the Mohar would have traditionally been made.¹²¹ It has been one of the hardest methods I have learnt. Through various technical mistakes, this process has shown me the beauty of reviving lost traditions. I have discovered that I am at the beginning of a deeper project that will be a life's work. Every coin that is birthed from my moulds shows my hands conducting labour to understand and embody tacit cultural knowledge. Through my hands, the knowledge of Mohar can continue to grow. The “go-slow” labour of making coins has become interconnected to my craft techniques as each method embodies different aspects of ancestral knowledge. My project has come to encompass healing in all aspects of the making through strengthening my understanding of Fijian traditional practices and its healing energy for the spirit and body.

¹²¹ It has been a process of continuous troubleshooting, through two-part moulds, investment moulds and understanding how technical casting works. Learning about metal and heat has been a huge part of building my knowledge systems. Heat has been a technical issue to overcome. At first, I was using the kiln, but due to the oxidation of pewter that was affecting the kiln directly. I have been using a blow torch and small crucible. This has meant that producing the coins has been a “go-slow” labour, similar to craft.



Quishile Charan. Casting coins and heating up moulds. Month of March, 2019.



Quishile Charan. Casting coins and heating up moulds. Month of April, 2019.



Quishile Charan. Coins for Mohar. Month of April, 2019.

Alongside making the coins, I have returned to dyeing, moving away from dye baths to look at the healing properties of eco dye.¹²² The imprint of hibiscus flowers, kawakawa leaves, marigolds and other flowers collected from my garden, drives and walks around Auckland were laid onto a cotton cloth sprinkled with haldi and bound to my new textile with steam. Discussing this process with my Fua gave me insight into hibiscus flowers and the many medicinal uses we have for the plant in Fiji.¹²³ In conjunction with eco dye I have been growing

¹²² The biggest technical difference between dye baths and eco dyeing is that the process produces different outcomes and imprints from the pigments. Previously, my dye baths were producing one solid colour or two-tone fabrics. The shift to eco dye was so that I could leave the imprint of flowers and leaves onto the fabric, binding their healing properties to the fibre and having their life force more present visually. The flowers were collected seasonally with whatever could be found growing in my own garden or locally around Auckland.

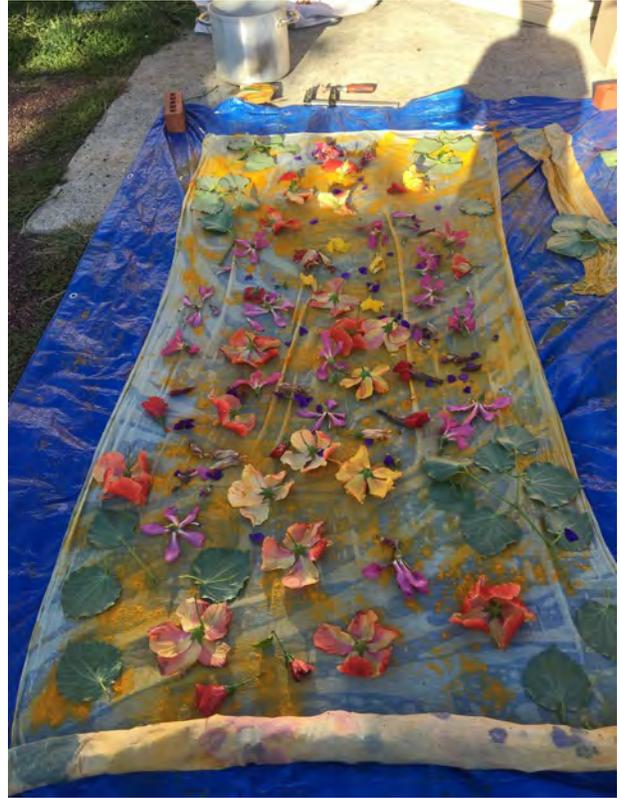
¹²³ The most common use of hibiscus in Fiji for medicinal healing is by mixing the leaf with water for stomach pains. You can use Bele leaves, a species of hibiscus plant, in cooking for many different health benefits. When discussing Bele with my Fua she said it is a source of protein, iron and vitamins. The flower itself can be turned into fibres for weaving or rope and the red hibiscus is used often in pooja for offerings.

marigold flowers in my garden and drying them so that they can be stitched into my textiles as offerings to the women in my family and my female ancestors. Flowers within my practice have been a form of spiritual re-growth, using the medicinal properties and spiritual beliefs surrounding these different plants has taught me how Fijian women¹²⁴ have worked with nature and their environments to aid and support healing.



Quishile Charan. Collecting hibiscus flowers for eco dyeing.
Month of April, 2019.

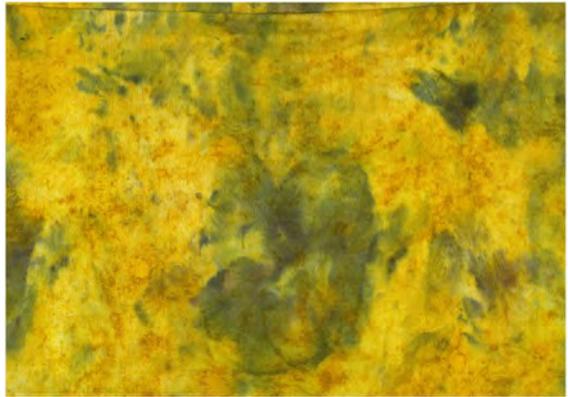
¹²⁴ I use Fijian to include both Indo-Fijian and iTaukei (indigenous) women.



Quishile Charan. Laying out flowers and kawakawa for eco dyeing.
Month of April, 2019.



Quishile Charan. Marigolds collected from garden in preparation for drying and being stitched into textiles. Month of April, 2019.



Quishile Charan. Scans of eco dyed fabric. Month of April, 2019.

Hands have become a meeting point; for the women in my family, for my female ancestors, for craft, for a history of resistance and now for future healing. I reflect on what I would tell the five-year-old girl I once was. If I could show her who she would become, what she built from her hands, the hope she would stitch and thread into textiles, she would see her value and significance; she would see a future for herself. This is why I make: to show my ancestral past, my present body and future self that we are interconnected with other Indo-Fijian women: “you are the lotus flower that grew from mud.”¹²⁵

In my family there is a belief: when you find yourself up at night, when sleep has escaped your mind and body, it is a sign that someone in the family is sick, in harm's way, upset or in danger. This restlessness and worry is like a family warning system, shared across generations of bodies in a network of care. I see this family warning system as stemming from indenture due to the enforced silencing of our voices. We translated them into other means – feelings and intuitions. My spirit has been restless for so long now; my own sleeplessness stirs past, present and future bodies, and I respond with an embroidery thread that encompasses a spectrum of emotions that my female ancestors evoke in this body. I am mourning, I am grieving, I am looking to build from the wrinkles and folds in my skin, from the hardening calluses that sit on my fingers from working with needles that puncture cotton textiles. Memories are stored here in my hands that are returning to the work of my elders, of my Aaji and Fua.

¹²⁵ Said by my Fua in Sydney while discussing my life and the trauma I hold. She told me that my work and the woman I have become is the “lotus flower that grew from mud”. Against all odds, against colonialism, gender-based violence I still grew. I am the part of nature that pushed through the swampy mud waters and flourished.

The labour I conduct is different to the labour of my female ancestors; however, it operates as an exchange and acknowledgement to them. My labour puts our knowledge systems as central to my community's ongoing healing. There lies the potential, to understanding healing and hope through craft as a practical application: threads that want to speak of love and labour, coins that want to offer protection, the collecting of marigolds as offerings, hibiscus-dyeing to heal the body, moments that represent textile love. My hands will continue to make and grow, to build resistance and counter-narratives of hope and strength for the women in my community. My Fua told me that it is time now to return home so my hands can continue her work. "Beta when my hands can no longer make, then you shall take up my place. I need to teach you every single technique I know, crochet is next, then tatting, doilies and how to make fabric doormats. You will know everything my hands know."



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Fua and Quishile 2019, Savusavu, Fiji

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Appendix:

She Cut Me From Ganna Installation

Visual Documentation

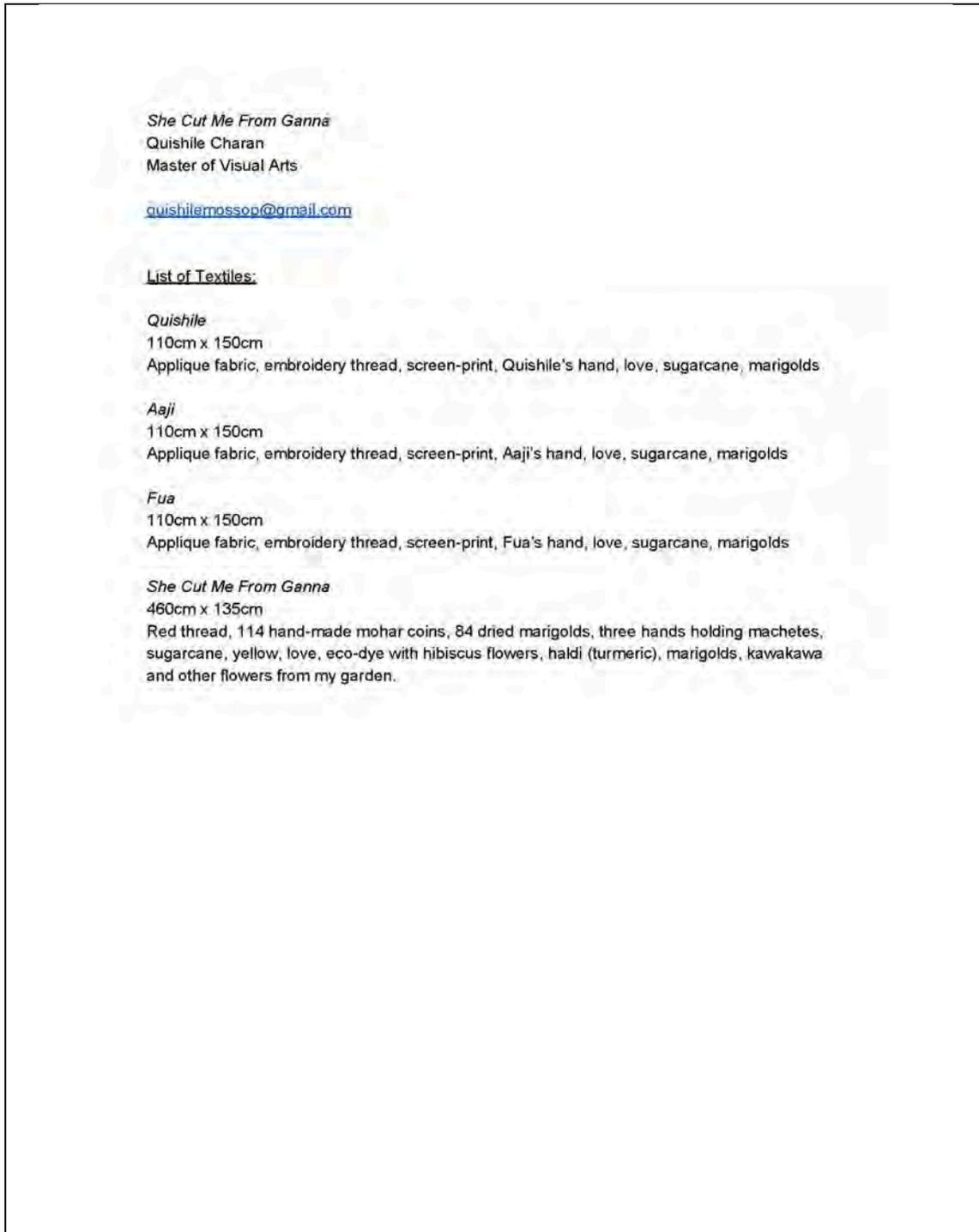


Image of list of works with textile details and materials:



Aaji (image above and below)



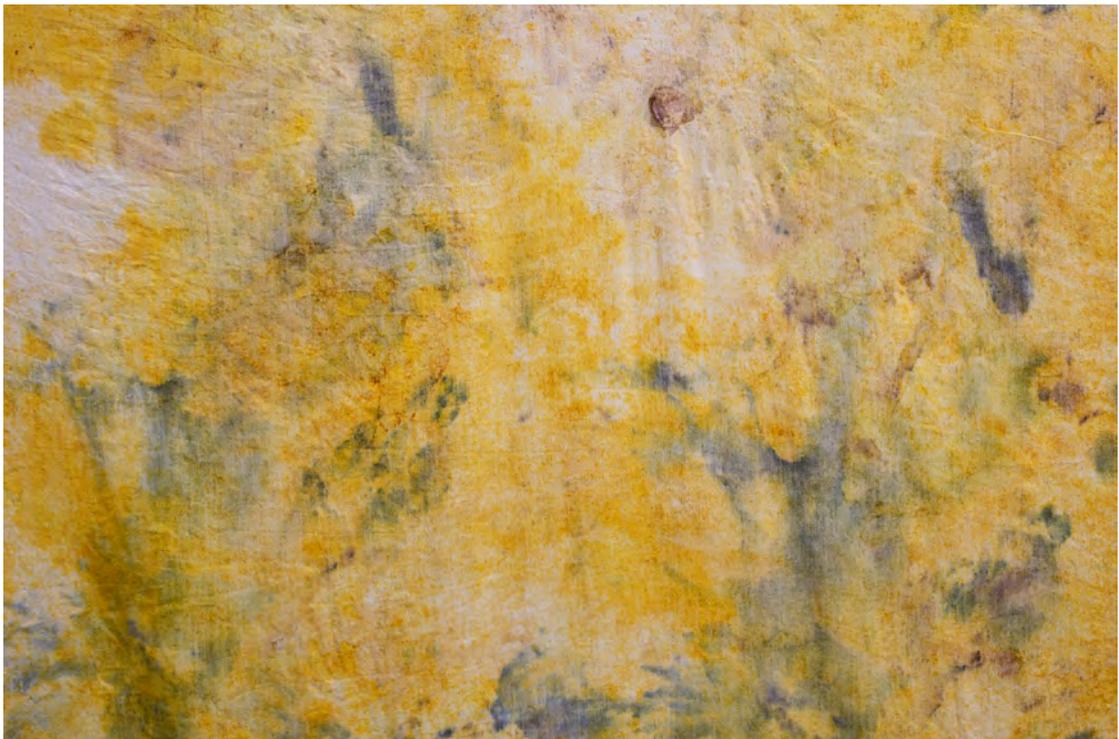
Fua (Image above and below)



Quishile (above) and installation view (below)



Installation view (above) and She Cut Me From Ganna (below)



She Cut Me From Ganna (above and below)