It Takes the Love of the Living and the Dead: Indo-Fijian Craft as Embodied Knowledge and Anarchism

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Auckland University of Technology
School of Art and Design



Figure 1. *Ma's tatting*, 2019. Photo: Quishile Charan.

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that the 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 acknowledgements), or 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.



30/06/2024

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Ethics approval

This thesis was granted ethics approval by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) on 23 May 2023, under the application number 23/115.

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Figure 2. *Stamp of Chromodoris Fidelis, Fiji,* date unknown. Image courtesy of Roshni Deo and Quishile Charan.

Abstract

In this practice-led research project, I seek to develop a decolonial framework of Indo-Fijian anarchism and self-determination at the intersections of craft, cultural knowledge, critical theory, and Girmit history and scholarship. Fiji Girmit (indentured labour) scholarship predominantly revolves around my community's trauma, pain, and survival, rendered from colonial state-sanctioned "histories" into the archives and re-rendered in academic writing. This process has created ideologies of Indo-Fijians as bodies out of place, and condemned us to being only objects of labour or niche research subjects.

A core focus of my project is what it means to move beyond surviving and beyond these histories that condemn us to nothingness, towards a place where we can return to the sites of healing and repair first set out by our ancestors. One of these sites is kahaani/khissa, where our stories of belonging and relationship-building can be told in their full complexity. In this project, I establish a language and framework that look towards our futurities. This is important as a non-Indigenous ethnic community whose knowledge, histories, and futures are being actively colonised.

Self-determination within the Indo-Fijian context begins with the story of seeds lovingly hidden into the folds of head wraps and fabric that my ancestors brought with them on the Girmit ships that took them to the violent plantation system of colonial Fiji. These seeds, brought over for survival, have created a thread from past to present; I now plant and wait for these seeds to bloom, then imprint, dye, embroider, sew, and quilt fabrics with these and other collective memories. Through re-narrating and re-storying our own histories, craft becomes the functional vessel of storytelling, of world-building, resistance, memories, and the cultural knowledge our ancestors have gifted us.

This work is significant for how it weaves together a story of futurity where Indo-Fijians can know that they are these seeds that have grown and fruited relationships beyond colonial inventions around who does and does not get to exist. Just as our ancestors left the boundaries of coloniality though modes of resistance, so too does my community and my craft practice, which spans across generations, cultures, time, and space. Revisiting parts of our histories that have been deemed as symbolic of our subjugation, I choose to identify the actions of ancestors as decolonial modes of being such as jahaji, which is reclaimed within the Indo-Fijian context as a cultural framework of whakawhanaungatanga and building futures.

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Figure 87. Quishile Charan, *Chalo suto: quilts* (detail), 2024–ongoing. Quilt 1: Linen, cutch, genda, hibiscus, madder, cotton, and thread. 195cm x 195cm. 226cm x 145cm. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Figure 88. Quishile Charan, *Chalo suto: quilts* (installation view, gallery 2), 2024–ongoing. Quilt 1: Linen, cutch, genda, hibiscus, madder, cotton, and thread. 195cm x 195cm. Quilt 2: Linen, cutch, genda, cotton, and thread. 226cm x 145cm. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Figure 89. Quishile Charan, *Chalo suto: quilts* (installation view, gallery 2), 2024–ongoing. Quilt 1:Linen, cutch, genda, hibiscus, madder, cotton, and thread. 195cm x 195cm. Quilt 2: Linen, cutch, genda, cotton, and thread. 226cm x 145cm. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Figure 90. Quishile Charan, *Ghar* (installation view, gallery 2), 2024–ongoing. Linen, cutch,hibiscus, and thread, 90cm x 150cm. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Figure 91. Quishile Charan, *Ghar* (detail), 2024–ongoing. Linen, cutch, hibiscus, and thread, 90cm x 150cm. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Figure 92. Quishile Charan, *Chalo suto: pillowcases* (installation view, gallery 2), 2024–ongoing. Linen, cotton, cutch, genda, hibiscus, madder, onion skins, and thread. 258cm x 400cm x 400cm. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Stephen Cleland.

Figure 93. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead*, (exterior view of gallery 2 and *At our ghar/whare*, Single-channel projection, 5:27 minutes), Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Stephen Cleland.

Figure 94. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead*, (installation view, gallery 3), Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Figure 95. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead*, (installation view, gallery 2), Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Figure 96. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead* (work in progress SketchUp), Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Figure 97. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead*, (work in progress

SketchUp), Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Figure 98. Quishile Charan, *Phool* (work in progress with Quishile Charan embroidering, 2024), 2019–ongoing. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Figure 99. Quishile Charan, *Phool* (work in progress with Casey Carsel embroidering, 2024), 2019–ongoing. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Figure 100. Quishile Charan, *Chalo suto: quilt 2* (work in progress with Hikiama Taulangaū stitching quilt, 2024), 2024–ongoing. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Figure 101. Quishile Charan, *Chalo suto: quilt 2* (work in progress with Anaseini Peioneti stitching quilt, 2024), 2024–ongoing. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Figure 102. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead* (exhibition poster), 2024, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

Figure 103. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead* (press release), 2024, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

Figure 104. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead* (room sheet, page 1), 2024, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

Figure 105. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead* (room sheet, page 2), 2024, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

Figure 106. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead* (room sheet, page 3), 2024, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

Figure 107. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead* (room sheet, page 4), 2024, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

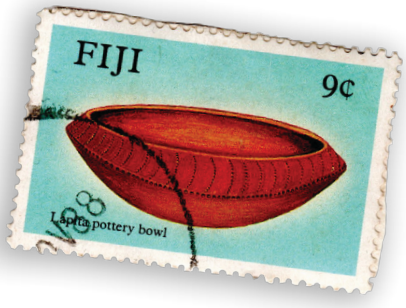

Figure 5. *Stamp of Lapita pottery bowl, Fiji*, date unknown. Image courtesy of Roshni Deo and Quishile Charan.

Glossary

Language does not exist outside of culture. These translations are approximations for better understanding of the exegesis, but should not be assumed to encompass the entire worlds around each word.

aaji	(Fiji Baat) paternal grandmother
aam ke patti	(Fiji Baat) mango leaves
aao baitho, sunao	(Fiji Baat) come sit, listen
amma	(Fiji Baat) mother
araam	(Fiji Baat) rest and or relax
araam karo	(Fiji Baat) literally "rest do"; used to either tell someone to rest or when describing that you are going to rest or relax
aur	(Fiji Baat) and
baat karo	(Fiji Baat) literally "talk do"; refers to the action of conversation
baigan	(Fiji Baat) eggplant
bara	(Fiji Baat) big
Bhagwan	(Fiji Baat) God or many gods, depending on the context
bhaini	(Fiji Baat) sister
bhajan	(Fiji Baat) devotional songs

bhaaji	(Fiji Baat) greeny leaves
bhindi	(Fiji Baat) lady's fingers (okra)
bula	(Fijian) greeting; doesn't directly translate to hello, but is how we greet people
bure	(Fijian) a traditional style of housing made with locally sourced materials such as wood and coconut leaves
chalo suto	(Fiji Baat) come sleep
chandra	(Fiji Baat) moon
chota kahaani	(Fiji Baat) small/smaller story
chula	(Fiji Baat) outdoor cow-dung-fuelled stove
dalo	(Fijian and Fiji Baat) taro
dalo ke patti	(Fiji Baat) taro leaves
dhal bhatt	(Fiji Baat) a lentil-based meal with rice
doikayt	(Yiddish) hereness
drua	(Fijian) a double-hulled sailing boat
dupatta	(Fiji Baat and Punjabi) shawl
fala	(Tongan) mat
fale	(Tongan) house/home
faikava	(Tongan) the occasion of

	coming together to drink grog
Falestin	(Arabic) Palestine
famili	(Tongan) family
feke	(Tongan) octopus
Fiji Baat	the Indo-Fijian language
fonua	(Tongan) can be translated as land, but encompasses much more than that—Fonua is the land, the people, and their community, and is interwoven with their culture
fua	(Fiji Baat) paternal aunty
gaaney	(Punjabi) songs
ganna	(Fiji Baat) sugarcane
genda phool	(Fiji Baat) marigold flower
ghar	(Fiji Baat and Punjabi) house
ghare	(Fiji Baat) home
ghumi-ghumi	(Fiji Baat) journey
Girmit	indentured labour
the Girmit	the indentured labour contract
hapū	(Te reo Māori) kinship group/subtribe
heym	(Yiddish) home

hiva	(Tongan) song
hopa	(Tongan) plantain
ibe	(Fijian) Mat
ika	(Tongan, Fijian, and Te reo Māori) fish
iTaukei	Indigenous Fijians
iwi	(Te reo Māori) extended kinship group, tribe, nation
jahaji	(Fiji Baat) shipmate
jahaji-bhai	(Fiji Baat) ship-brother
jahaji-bhaini	(Fiji Baat) ship-sister
kahaani	(Fiji Baat) story
kaivalagi	(Fijian) a person of European descent
kaise hai	(Fiji Baat) how are you; often used as a greeting
kalapani	(Fiji Baat) black waters; often used to describe the journey on Girmit ships
kapraa	(Fiji Baat) cloth
kapraa chota	(Fiji Baat) small cloth
karela	(Fiji Baat) bitter gourd or bitter melon
karo	(Fiji Baat) the action of doing or telling someone to do something

kasera ke patti	(Fiji Baat) cassava leaves
kerekere	(Fiji Baat) please
khaana	(Fiji Baat) food
khet	(Fiji Baat) farm
khalas	(Fiji Baat) finished/it's done
khissa	(Fiji Baat) story
kokoda	Fijian dish with raw fish and coconut milk
kumā	(Tongan) rat
kumā moe feke	(Tongan) the octopus and the rat (title of a Tongan story)
kumala	(Fijian and Tongan) sweet potato
kumete	(Tongan) the ceremonial vessel for mixing kava
lalanga	(Tongan) weaving
lehengas	(Fiji Baat) a traditional style of skirt
lo'i feke	Tongan dish of octopus in coconut milk
lū	(Tongan) taro leaves
lū sipi	Tongan dish of lamb wrapped in taro leaves with coconut milk
machiri	(Fiji Baat) fish

mamae	(Te reo Māori) pain
maka feke	traditional Tongan tool for fishing/ catching feke, maka being a stone or rock
mātauranga	(Te reo Māori) knowledge
Mohar	(Fiji Baat) a necklace that is strung together using coins; relates to the jewellery worn by Girmitiyas ancestors
naani	(Fiji Baat) maternal grandmother
narak	(Fiji Baat) hell; a term commonly used to describe Girmitiyas ancestors' experience under Fiji Girmit
niu	(Fijian and Tongan) coconut
orhni	(archaic Fiji Baat) Girmitiyas ancestors' shawls
pākeha	(Te reo Māori) people of European descent
papita ke patti	(Fiji Baat) pawpaw leaves
paal	(Fiji Baat) a mat made of hessian sacks, now more commonly made with polypropylene plastic sacks
pariwar	(Fiji Baat) family
patti	(Fiji Baat) leaf or leaves
phool	(Fiji Baat) flower

polopolo	(Tongan) harvest
pitaji/taji	(Fiji Baat) father; the shortened version, taji, is used more in everyday talk, while pitaji is more formal
puipuitu'a	(Tongan) meaning of the story
rest karo	(Fiji Baat) rest (imperative)
rourou	Fijian dish using dalo leaves and coconut milk
saina	Fijian dish using dalo leaves covered in a lentil paste, layered together, and deep-fried
samundar	(Fiji Baat) ocean or sea
suto	(Fiji Baat) sleep
tahi	(Tongan) ocean
talamu	Tongan card game
talanoa	(Fijian and Tongan) talking, conversating, listening, and sharing
tapū	(Fiji, Tongan, and Māori) sacred or taboo
tanoa	(Fijian) the ceremonial vessel for mixing kava
tadka	(Fiji Baat) the action of tempering spices
tangata tiriti	(Te reo Māori) people of The Treaty

	(Te Tiriti o Waitangi, commonly translated to The Treaty of Waitangi); used by non-Māori within Aotearoa to orient themselves and their relationships within this country around Te Tiriti and supporting Māori self-determination and sovereignty
tarkari	(Fiji Baat) curry
tauiwi	(Te reo Māori) non-Māori
te ao Māori	(Te reo Māori) the Māori world
tej patti	(Fiji Baat) curry leaves
te-moana-nui-a-kiwa	(Te reo Māori) the Pacific ocean
te pū o te wheke	(Te reo Māori) phrase referring to how Kaikohe is the heart of the octopus
tikanga	(Te reo Māori) correct procedure, customs
tuna	(Te reo Māori) eel
tūpuna	(Te reo Māori) ancestors
tutuing	(Te reo Māori) slang for playing around
ulu	(Fijian and Tongan) head
vale	(Fijian) house
Vanua	(Fijian) can be translated to land but it encompasses much more than that—

	the Vanua for iTaukei (indigenous Fijians) is land, the people, and their community, and is interwoven with their culture; as an Indo-Fijian, a non-indigenous Pasifika woman whose ancestors were brought to Fiji for plantation labour, it is an honour knowing my ancestors rest and are protected by the Vanua
voivoi	(Fijian) pandanas used for mat (ibe) weaving
Viti	(Fijian) Fiji
vulagi	(Fijian) guest or foreigner
whakapapa	(Te reo Māori) genealogy, descent
whakatauki	(Te reo Māori) Māori proverb
whakawhanaungatanga	(Te reo Māori) the act of relationship-building
whānau	(Te reo Māori) family
whanaungatanga	(Te reo Māori) relationship, kinship
whare	(Te reo Māori) house
wheke	(Te reo Māori) octopus
whenua	(Te reo Māori) can be translated as land but encompasses much more than that—whenua from a te ao Māori perspective is land, the people, hapū, iwi, and whānau

yaad karo

(Fiji Baat) the action of remembering or remembrance



Figure 6. *Stamp of Phaius tancarvilliae, Fiji,* date unknown. Image courtesy of Roshni Deo and Quishile Charan.



Figure 7. *Quishile adding genda to dye pot,* 2024. Photo: Jasmin Singh.

Introduction

A story

There is an etching. Black lines form the textures that create the sky where clouds hang low, nestled into the mountains in the distance. The sea is to the left, with three Drua sailing, maybe coming to dock. As we—me and you, my unknown reader—arrive at the middleground to the right of the sea, there is a clearing, which, I imagine, once was native plant and bush; now, here, it is ganna, the chosen monocrop for plantations in Fiji. You can see the textured movement, imitating the rows in which ganna is planted. In front of the fields is a mill, crushing and processing the raw ganna. Steam billows from the chimney. As we move into the foreground there is a bure house to the right, surrounded by coconut trees. There are figures to the middle and left; one is a plantation overseer, a European, obvious by how he is dressed, even his mannerisms—to me, it looks like he could be telling off or directing a labourer. An air of colonial authority surrounds this figure. The other figures are labourers, unclothed compared to the overseer, with cloth only covering their bottom halves. Everywhere else, their skin is exposed and coloured, while the overseer's skin is white. The way the labourers are dressed/undressed and depicted in comparison to their coloniser literally inscribes a binary of civilised and uncivilised, where the former is clothed, white, while the latter is unclothed and coloured. I can only assume the figures that are being depicted echo the reality of early plantations in Fiji. The labourers presented could be blackbirded iTaukei, Solomon Islanders, or ni-Vanuatu, as at this point in time Girmit had not been officially instituted in Fiji. The labourers are cutting ganna, creating bundles, and then carrying those bundles on their shoulders to the mill. In a more detailed picture, we would be able to see their bare skin, exposed to the abrasive stalks of each ganna and the weight of each bundle, heavy on their shoulders, imprinted with small, deep cuts and other marks from the hard labour enforced onto their bodies.

This scene, drawn then carved on wood, shows technical skill, and is haunting and beautiful all at once. The image has been with me, downloaded and saved away onto one of my hard drives, for four or five years. Scrolling across the digital archives of The Australian National University,

under the business records of Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR, also known as the Company),[1] tucked away in sub-folder after sub-folder, there it was: an etching of Fiji's first sugarcane mill, right in the heart of what is now Suva city.

Years before I stumbled across this etching, a few hours after eating Fiji-style fried rice at Suva's Dolphin's Plaza food court, I would find out from a friend who worked at the Fiji Museum that Dolphin's was where Suva's only sugarmill used to stand. When Dolphin's Plaza—also known as FNPF (Fiji National Provident Fund) Place—was being constructed, old mill parts used to crush and process sugar were discovered buried in the earth, a failed business venture abandoned in 1875.[2] A short time later, Girmit would be officially agreed upon and set in motion, with the first ship arriving on Fiji's shores in 1879.

I hadn't realised that, eating fried rice in the Dolphin's food court, I was sitting above the remnants of this sugar mill.

Another story

I've spent most of this exegesis in insomnia. For as long as I can remember, suto is something unattainable. Sometimes I stay up waiting for the warmth of the day, for the birds and the cicadas. Sometimes I'm stuck in the stories I can't seem to get out of my head. For the past year, I keep returning to that sugarcane mill—the one built in Suva. It's always there in the periphery.

Sometimes the sleeplessness lasts days, weeks, months. Sometimes the periods of no suto are so exaggerated that it all blends into one, so extended I can't remember when it began. I tend to live in a fog of sleeplessness. I often think this is the plantation meta-physical space still haunting me today. Aaji once told me, all the women in our family suffer from shitty sleep. I think it's one of

1 Shaista Shameem, "Sugar and Spice: Wealth Accumulation and the Labour of Indian Women in Fiji, 1879–1930", (PhD Thesis, University of Waikato, 1990), 107: "The settlers who had invested previously had suffered in the cotton crash and were heavily in debt (Knapman 1986 p 7). Although they agitated for more Fijian and Pacific Island labourers they were hardly in a position to inject the massive amount of capital that was needed to enable capitalist transition to take place. There was some capital but not enough, and the state could scarcely generate enough income from taxes to fund its own coffers." And because of the absence of big capital, there was also the absence of big finance houses even though much money had been generated during the cotton boom. There was certainly not enough capital in Fiji to attract banking and crediting facilities on a large scale. Finally, since there were few 'capitals' there was little competition, and certainly not the standard of competition that the Australian firm the Colonial Sugar Refinery Company gave to the smaller firms in the early twentieth century. The result of this competition was the gobbling up of smaller firms and the emergence of CSR as a monopoly."

2 In 1872, two white settlers, William Brewer and Paul Joske, tried and failed to make their fortunes, instituting Fiji's first sugarcane mill. Suva's wet environment ended up being unsuitable for the growing of sugarcane, and in 1875 they ran out of capital and had to shut down their mill. Paul Joske later designed and planned Suva as the capital of Fiji. In 2017, the Fiji-based Coca Cola subsidiary Paradise Beverages released a line of sugarcane spirit-based Ready To Drink (RTD) beverages called Joske's Brew. The company said that the RTD was meant to pay homage to sugarcane and ginger farmers, and Fiji's sugar industry. It's ironic that while Paradise Beverages states it is paying homage to the farmers it instead most overtly privileges the coloniser who had the power of violently shaping Indigenous landscapes in his vision and name.

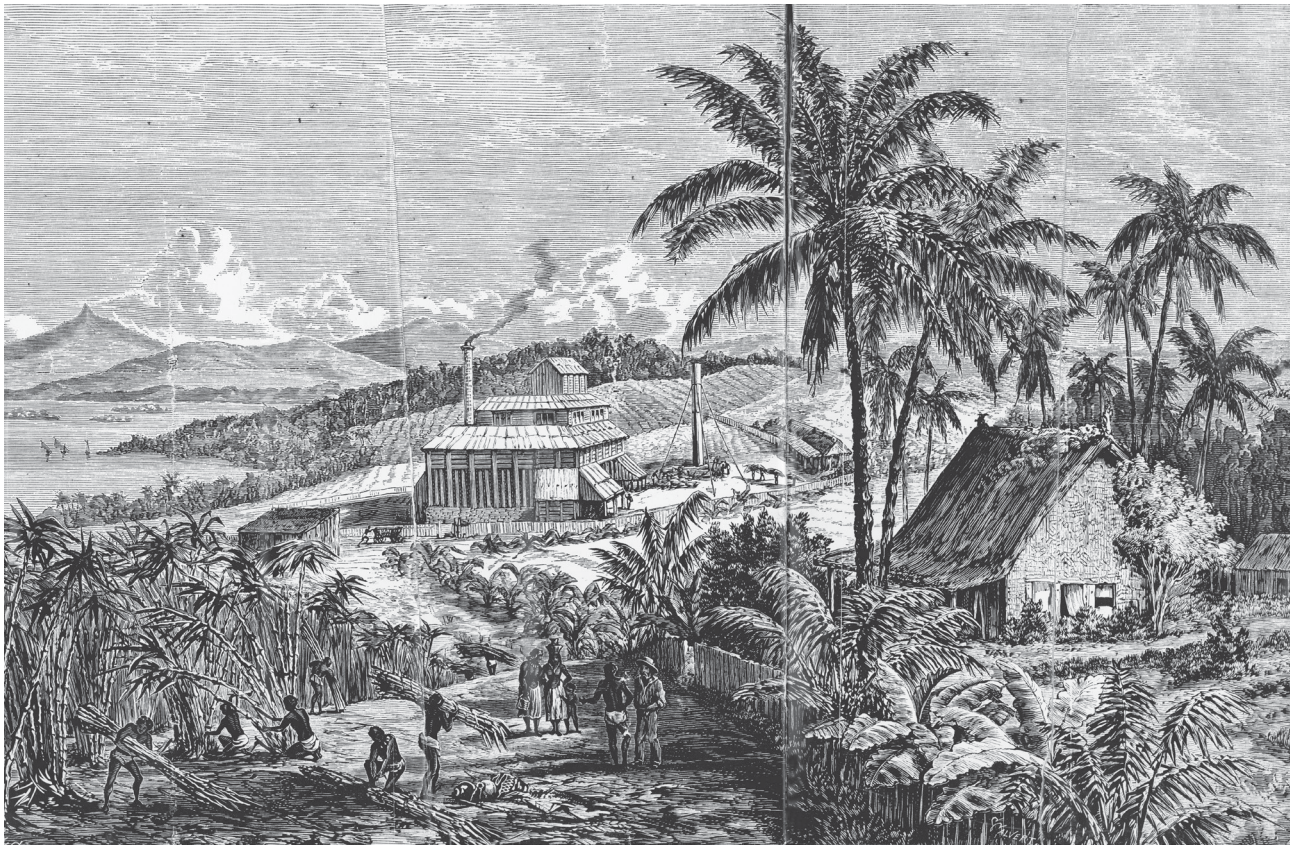

Figure 8. *Brewer and Joske's Sugar Mill Suva*, 1875. The Australian National University Open Research Respository, Canberra, Australia. Photograph of an illustration reproduced from a woodcut and published in the Illustrated New Zealand February 1875. Photographer unknown, maker unknown.

the many inheritances of Girmit, but just not as pronounced or seen as as deadly as our inherited colonial diseases (diabetes and heart disease). Funny how for as long as I can remember, diabetes has been an ongoing discussion with my doctors without my consent, but my lack of suto isn't of any consequence. On one of the many nights of dread about another sleepless night, the movement of a vehicle was suited to soothing my busy mind (sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't). Surveying new parts of Auckland's suburbs in the dead of night has become a pastime now. On this night, something about crossing the Auckland Harbour bridge from Ōrākei to the North Shore made a whole lotta sense.

Driving into some suburbs, I get hit by a self-awareness that I do not belong nor should I be here; that was the growing sensation of entering the Birkenhead suburb that night. Soon enough, we found ourselves at that fucking ugly pink salmon building. We ended up at the big security gates where the graveyard shift had started, watching workers come and go. I've never entered that ugly pink salmon building; sometimes I envision going on their guided tours for tourists and others who want to "learn more about the history", just to agitate the staff. Be that aunty: "hey what about what you did to us?" Why not? If I have to carry the burden of what they did to us, the least they can do is get it right, tell the truth. But I leave those thoughts just as thoughts. Sitting outside in the middle of the night, crying by their security gates, is as close as I think I'll get to Chelsea Sugar.

When I first researched Chelsea Sugar, what always hit me was the visceral physical act of whenua being pulled up from below and turned into the brick[3] that builds what would end up an iconic collection of buildings that, to me, represent nothing but Empire. Those picturesque pink hues are nestled away into a shore line punctured by some of the most expensive houses in Auckland, while we are in the peak of our housing crisis. I say this not knowing when we will ever leave this crisis; this peak may be a new reality for decades to come.

On stories

Stories are funny, how they age with you, travel to new places and make new friends. Even with old friends they find new homes. Stories make up the most intimate parts of my life.
The best way for you, my unknown reader, to engage with these kahaani and khissa[4] is to see

3 Quishile Charan and Esha Pillay, "Coolie Cut Cane: The Sugar Empire of the South Pacific", published on the occasion of the online exhibition *Coolie Cut Cane*, April 2021, Bad Fiji Gyals Collective, https://coolie-cut-cane.badfijigyals.com/.

4 Kahaani and khissa are Fiji Baat terms that will be used interchangeably; they both mean story. The formal outcomes of the khissa/kahani are embodied in the work through both process and outcome, held in the plants with which the works are dyed, in the process through which they are dyed, as well as through the images that are embroidered upon them. They are the forms of home, of the practice of home—cooking, planting, sewing—and the colours, shapes, and feelings that are created from it.

them as constellations—the visible stars that make up a wider pattern. These patterns create webs of stories that are gathered; over time and accumulation, the stories make the constellations more visible, easier to identify and pass on to the next generation. Each star represents a cosmos of smaller pieces that co-exist as a whole. I draw together these pieces, stars, patterns, fragments, kahaani and khissa, to take you on a ghumi-ghumi, a journey through the constellation of Indo-Fijianness, respecting each fragment individually in their own entirety while connecting these kahaani to a much larger one: the varying aspects of Indo-Fijian histories, stories, and culture, and how we as a people are truly a people within our own right.

These kahaani form the grounding for what you are now reading. Just like making, these words, too, are governed by the principles of craft and should not be separated from the cultural world of Indo-Fijian craft or my practice at large—they are all part of the same journey. I write to tell stories just as I make to tell stories. That is to say: I will not be walking you through a tired academic exercise of methods and methodologies; that is simply not how we move in craft. Instead, we sit, learn, exchange or teach in-person and with the guidance of knowledge-holders and elders. Everything is done through talanoa. We do not share our knowledge in distanced forms like PhDs. In an effort to respect the cultural principles of craft, while moving through this space called an exegesis, I will stay staunchly grounded in these principles.

I choose to make you, my unknown reader, a quilt. Some of you will be descendants, some of you will have a deep knowing of what I am trying to express through our shared histories of colonisation, while some of you come as strangers, looking to reckon with these histories and stories. For the ones who come knowing what this existence means, this quilt I make for you first and foremost. I make it as a place of shelter, comfort, hope, knowledge, futurity, and, of course, as a place of rest. Kerekere, araam karo here with me. Just like the Indo-Fijian practice of gifting craft, I hope this quilt is lived in, treasured, and repurposed for other generations.

The process of making a quilt can be broken down into parts: growing, harvesting, and processing the plants for the fabric fibres and dye materials; spinning and weaving the fibres into fabric; preparing the fabric to take on pigment and then dyeing it; and cutting the fabric down into smaller pieces to be sewn into larger wholes again. Finally, these multitudes of fragments, each their own kahaani, their own universes, are quilted, binding the three layers of back, batting, and piecing together. On the surface, not all of the stitches are visible, but they are there. Everything is independent and connected at the same time. This is why I choose to tell stories outside of the dry, academic structure that is expected of me. Instead, I treat them as what they are: interconnected, intersecting memories—the dreams and hopes of loved ones both living and dead. They help us remember what is important. But of course, as with any kahaani, there are lots of smaller ones, chota kahaani, and to physically piece them all together will take me a lifetime.

I am choosing to make you, my unknown reader, a quilt to piece together parts of the fragments I have been gifted, parts I have collected and nurtured while I wait within the confines of PhD time to adorn the ghar. While I carry on with my own ghumi-ghumi, yaad karo, I ask you to remember that nothing is ever finished. Just as in craft, we repurpose, come back and create more, exchange different gifts, and keep expanding our knowledge so that new things exist within the old—so too will these words be crafted into pillowcases, embroidery patterns, new eco-prints, and dye-pots for future fragments that will be pieced into more kahaani.

The quilt is sewn together with many languages other than English, including Te Reo Māori, Fijian, Fiji Baat, Tongan, Punjabi, and Yiddish. These are the languages I and my pariwaruse in our daily lives. These words are not italicised because, as in our lives, these words have the same weight as the words we use in English. They flow between each other without pause. For those who need it, translations are available in the glossary.

One of this quilt's blocks—the smaller pieces of fabric that make one larger quilt piece before the whole is stitched together—is the theoretical framing of this project. I draw upon and look to theorists, academics, writers, story-tellers, crafters, and makers who come from other communities to draw upon a depth of knowledge that has not yet been applied to the lens of Girmit indentured labour for Fijian descendants. Specifically, I am referring to my development of Indo-Fijian critical theory grounded in an anarchist political praxis, all of which is threaded together by culture. In creating this new anarchist and critical theory framework, I am utilising and expanding the theories of Sara Ahmed's *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2013), Keri Lawson Te-Aho's "The Healing Is in the Pain: Revising and Re-narrating Trauma Histories as a Starting Point for Healing" (2014), Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007) and *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (2017), and Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds: Black Women And The Cartographies Of Struggle* (2006), amongst others.

As part of this wider kahaani, I must introduce to you, my unknown reader, the cast of characters that form the colonising forces of this history. The desires and goals of each set—the frontiersmen, eventually bringing their wives and children, who envisioned themselves as settlers;[5] the missionaries and the British elite; the nobles; and the Company—converge as well as diverge at various points. As I noted in "Coolie Cut Cane: The Sugar Empire of the South Pacific" (2021):

> At the time of Gordon being sent to Fiji by the Crown, the colony was in decline. His job was to drag Fiji out of its economic despair. Unlike many of the white settlers in Fiji, Gordon valued a

5 Like any other corporate colony, many of the white people/colonisers settled in Fiji settled temporarily, with others settling longer-term. Settlers accompany all forms of colonisation, but depend on the role and target of exploitation—resource extrapolation vs. land for settlement.

> particular type of enterprise that did not favour the individual settler mentality—his objectives and those of the Crown did not morally align with the growing white settler population in Fiji at the time. Prior to the cession of Fiji to the British Empire, there was an influx of "misfits and brutes from Europe, America and other British colonies sporadically washed up in Fiji". These "misfit" white settlers were predominantly coming from New Zealand and Australia, but at this time, white settlers from these settler nation-states had a bad reputation and were seen as morally different to that of Christian missionaries and the Crown.[6]

Therein are multiple power systems of isolation, built from internal power struggles between the different white colonisers. This particular dynamic/mixture could only happen in Fiji because all these sets of people utilised Fiji's supposed isolation to carry out so-called innovative forms of colonisation, each in their own way.

The frontier communities who acted as middlemen in the plantations of Fiji were fashioning themselves as settlers, hopeful to build capital like others in the settler-colonial projects of so-called[7] Australia and New Zealand. They saw Fiji as an opportunity to build generational wealth. However, their lack of potential for enterprise and the unforgiving nature of the tropical climate of Fiji on bodies who did not belong there saw them leaving in droves, returning to the settler-colonial projects from which they came.

Missionaries saw Christianity and labour as the foundational legs of what was needed to "civilise"—an effort that was their divine calling.[8] They were theoretically supportive of Girmit, but not in its details, wanting instead a more morally correct system that could converge religious institutions and the traditional family hierarchies to course-correct the immorality of Girmitiyas. Missionaries believed that they themselves were sitting outside of the plantation system and its violences, yet they could not see the irony of it all: that they were important political figures in creating the liberal colonial system that enabled order and control. They would go on to be loyal supporters of the tenant farming scheme as they believed this form of colonial ordering was less likely to produce "immoral" colonial subjects.

6 Charan and Pillay, "Coolie Cut Cane".

7 I use this phrase to identify and differentiate between Aotearoa as the unceded sovereign nations of hapu, iwi, whānau, and so-called New Zealand as a settler state, and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. This terminology I borrow in solidarity with Mob in so-called Australia. Always was, always will be aboriginal land. Ka whawhai tonu mātou, āke, āke, āke.

8 For more on this, see: Tony Ballantyne, *Entanglements of Empire : Missionaries, Māori, and the Question of the Body* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2015), 46: "Instruction in these 'useful arts' would provide the missionaries with the opportunity of religious teaching, and while undertaking 'manual labour,' the missionaries could 'instruct the Natives in the great Doctrines of the Gospel, and fully discharge the Duties of Catechists.' Marsden hoped that this blueprint would allow the civilizing forces of the plough and the gospel to remake Māori and the New Zealand landscape in ways similar to those in which he had been able to 'improve' and 'civilize' the landscape of his vicarage at Parramatta and his extensive farms in New South Wales."

The British nobility used the Girmitiyas as a jewel on the crown. As such, they needed us to be shiny and clean for their image on the world stage as colonisers with so-called morals. Because of the close relationship between state and church, and the respectability politics that flow through both, their morals and opinions were best aligned with the missionaries.

Then comes CSR. The Company was about extracting labour and wealth at any cost. Therefore they found the plantation system in Fiji to be inefficient. They saw the plantation class as middlemen who caused more effort than they were worth—fat to be cut out. They wanted to deal with labourers directly, which led to the land-leasing system of tenant farming.

In earlier papers, such as "Unearthing the History of My Female Ancestors in Fiji" (2018), "She Cut Me From Ganna" (2019), "Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women: Counter-colonial Narratives of the Female Girmit Role in the 1920 Labour Strike" (2019), and "Coolie Cut Cane: The Sugar Empire of the South Pacific", I was more preoccupied with how colonialism as a power structure created the inherited trauma that those living under neo-colonialism now experience as generational cycles of violence. Through the process of researching for and writing those papers, I have gained an intimate knowledge of my ancestors' lives under Fiji Girmit as a system of labour exploitation and coercive control. Through this time, I have realised that, not of our own doing, we lack languaging to address context-specific and cultural frameworks that speak to Fiji Girmit and how it continues to impact descendants today. My master's project was a step towards building this languaging through looking to craft as a site of healing for descendants. I continued this work with the collective efforts of the Bad Fiji Gyals in collaboration with fellow researcher and descendant Esha Pillay, focussing on building anti-colonial retellings of our histories and creating frameworks for reading against state-sanctioned histories.[9]

Now, carrying the experiences and knowledges I have developed through these earlier works, in my more recent research (including this exegesis), I look towards a self-determined future for Indo-Fijians with deepened hopes. I look to the works and theory laid out by black and queer anarchists[10] and the important theory-, world-, and future-building these communities have done to envision freedom for all. My anarchism is also deeply rooted in what it means to live a life as a descendent, with many assemblages of oppression that impact me daily. I live in and share a life with community—a community that is not singular, but rather many—where we all live lives that

9 To learn more about the Bad Fiji Gyals collective, please refer to our website: https://badfijigyals.com/.

10 Andrea J. Ritchie, *Practicing New Worlds: Abolition and Emergent Strategies* (California: AK Press, 2023); Anarkarta, "What is Anarkarta?" *Anarkarta: A Statement*. Accessed 10 October 2023, https://anarkataastatement.wordpress.com/what-is-anarkata/; Celeste Winston, *How to Lose the Hounds: Maroon Geographies and a World Beyond Policing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023); Da'Shaun L. Harrison, *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021); Eric Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); Francis Dupuis-Déri & Benjamin Pillet, *Anarcho-Indigenism: Conversations on Land and Freedom* (London: Pluto Press, 2023).

are deeply impacted by our realities as people surviving colonialism; patriarchy; capitalism; gender violence; and queer-, trans-, and homo- phobia. All these systems of violence work in conjunction to continue to harm and maintain control over us. I have engaged in anarchism, long before I knew the word, my whole life as an Indo-Fijian. To my core, I am someone who distrusts and moves against authority and power, even in the private spaces of my life. I do not believe in nor do I seek my recognition, value, or worth in any state entity, I know this can and will lead to the death of my communities, as black academic and anarchist Saidiya Hartman says:

> [Anarchism]...is to abandon the eternal verities and the old orthodoxies in their Marxist and Black nationalist forms, because they make the state the vessel of their ideality. The second is to embrace "poetry from the future" because only it can embrace the vision of another set of planetary arrangements, other possibilities of relation not predicated on hierarchy and centralized authority. The third is to create liberated or temporary autonomous zones, Black geographies of freedom that might be called the commune or the clearing. Anarchism is the "inheritance" of the dispossessed, the legacy of slaves and fugitives, toilers and recalcitrant domestics, secret orders and fraternal organizations. It is the history that arrives with us—as those who exist outside the nation, as the stateless, as the dead, as property, as objects and tools, as sentient flesh. In meeting the heinous violence of the colony and the plantation, we have resisted, we have battled, we have fought to defeat our oppressors, we have struggled to live and to survive. In this protracted war, we have created networks of mutual aid, maroon communities, survival programs, and circles of care. We are Black in anarchy because of how we have lived and how we have died.[11]

Anarchism is a political undertaking; I do not see it as cultural practice, but I do see my cultural practices as informing my political approaches. We were replaced in our own stories of resistance, as to frame us as agitators would shatter the illusion of our supposed immorality, as what was being labelled immoral was actually the very acts of resistance lead by Girmitiyas women. I see anarchism as a necessary response to the specific forms of colonialism that Indo-Fijians still endure today. My anarchism is developed through how I relate to both cultural and ancestral practices that I can mobilise in my everyday life to ensure a political future of liberation. This liberation is in solidarity, and my anarchism includes the ways in which I chose to move in solidarity with other communities dealing with the ongoing impacts of colonialism.

This project—exegesis and making included—contribute to an ongoing effort in my community to establish unique practices that encapsulate the multitudes of complexity in which our stories, histories, and we ourselves live. In my previous work and its dissemination in the mainstream, I have continually been placed into identity boxes and brackets that suit the narrow colonial thinking of galleries and academic institutions alike. This binary has labelled me as either researcher or maker, but never both; this itself is an ethical and cultural issue for me, as I embody

11 William C. Anderson, *The Nation on No Map: Black Anarchism and Abolition* (California: AK Press, 2021), *sec*. Foreword.



Figure 9. Quishile Charan, *She Cut Me From Ganna* (detail), 2019, 114 handmade Mohar coins, 85 dried genda, cotton, textile ink, ganna, full-pot dye haldi (turmeric), eco-print hibiscus flowers, 500cm x 130 cm, Te Wai Ngutu Kaka gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.



Figure 10. Quishile Charan, *She Cut Me From Ganna* (detail), 2019, 114 handmade Mohar coins, 85 dried genda, cotton, textile ink, ganna, full-pot dye haldi (turmeric), eco-print hibiscus flowers, 500cm x 130 cm, Te Wai Ngutu Kaka gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.





Figure 11. Quishile Charan, *She Cut Me From Ganna* (Aaji's hand and installation view), 2019, hand-embroidered textile with appliqué flowers, 150cm x 100cm, Te Wai Ngutu Kaka gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

multitudes of existences that encapsulate researcher and maker as well as many more identities. Others envision clear boundaries between writing (what I would call storytelling) and craft, but I continue to move beyond these limitations. This exegesis is an experimental undertaking that bridges together the many fragments that make up my practice as a whole. I do not see these fragments as oppositional; instead, I weave them—storytelling, research, and craft—together as knowledge systems and stories.

In my past research and writings, I leaned towards an anti-colonial framework, especially when engaging with institutional and state-based archives. In this framework, I looked towards anti-colonial readings as a way to resist the narratives written of Indo-Fijians. My craft acted as an anti-colonial retelling of these narratives by repositioning and rejecting the state-sanctioned histories, especially around Girmitiyas women. I moved through anti-colonial work as critique, resistance, protest, and refusal. Throughout this time, I did not engage as much with decolonisation as a framework, for very complex reasons that I will try to explain now. I have observed decolonisation through the lens of liberatory work for Indigenous peoples, moving towards re-Indigenisation. Re-Indigenisation[12] is the acknowledging of Indigenous pasts and the importance of those knowledges, whakapapa, and ways of living. Re-Indigenisation brings all these things together so that descendents can build futures for themselves that acknowledge how colonialism has impacted and changed them, in order to create new practices and recreate old ones. From a te ao Māori perspective, specifically drawing on Matua Moana Jackson's "Re-Māorification", re-Indigenisation calls on the metaphysical, historical, and contemporary ways of being that allow Māori to manifest mana motuhake with respect to how colonisation, urbanisation, and globalisation has impacted te ao Māori. The state-imposed positionality of deficit narratives and dispossession is counteracted by re-Māorification towards a bold, ever-expanding Māori futurity that embodies adaption, curiosity, the drive to flourish, and both old and new ways of being through tikanga, whakapapa, and mātauranga Māori.

Now when I return to the archives and the reproduction of it—academia—a lot of what I find myself reading is contending nationalisms and the stakes of maintaining them. Can nationalism build a place of belonging? Absolutely not; and yet to continuously assert its dominance, it needs the buy-in that belonging brings in the form of patriotism. In a time of fascisms utilising nationalism globally, the shapeshifting nature of these powers continues, the state's colonial dreams now manifesting as homogenous ordered, controlled, and perfectly boxed-off binary identities.

12 Puawai Cairns, "Decolonise or Indigenise: Moving Towards sovereign spaces and the Māorification of New Zealand Museology" *Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand* (blog), 10 February 2020, https://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2020/02/10/decolonise-or-indigenise-moving-towards-sovereign-spaces-and-the-maorification-of-new-zealand-museology/. Re-Māorification became popular after a talk from Matua Moana Jackson at Ngā Taonga Tuku Iho Conference 2018, but no transcript or video is available. Many people subsequently reference Puawai Cairns as no primary reference is available.

In my experience of academic spaces, there is a binary understanding of two identities: Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The non-Indigenous is coded and understood as white, which has led to the disinclusion of non-Indigenous and non-white communities within decolonial discourse and in envisioning futures, especially when settler colonialism is involved. I want to be clear here that I do not use Indigenous as a homogenous term to lump communities together; instead, I use it within its political construction and intent. Indigenous is a political identity of immense importance to communities that are still resisting state-approved genocide and land dispossession, and as a term should always be held in this significance and historical context.

There was an academic shift in languaging of decolonisation in the West with the publishing of Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang's paper, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor" (2012).[13] In it, they discuss the appropriation of language and how academia empties the meaning of words and terms through theorising that is detached from people and communities—the epitome of the ivory tower. To turn decolonisation into a metaphor is to empty it of its meaning, history, and material reality, turning phrases such as "land back" into something friendly and liberal to throw around, rather than to unsettle the settler. Outside of my own lived experiences of being in community with Indigenous peoples, being welcomed into their mobilising and how they incorporate decolonisation into their everyday liberatory work, this paper has helped provide theoretical grounding for me to begin to include decolonisation within my own expanded practice. Tuck and Yang's paper does come with its own limitations, with both writers being situated in the Global North and within American exceptionalism.[14] While I am grateful for the theory they have developed, it does not support nor hold my own community in their complex entireties.

In the past, I have relied on the work of Linda Tuhiwai-Smith's *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2012) for engaging with a decolonial framework. Tuhiwai-Smith's book allowed me a space wherein I could site and explain my work through cultural understandings and meanings. Throughout my master's exegesis, "She Cut Me From Ganna", this influence is obvious in my citations of cultural practices for my methods and methodologies. While I believe there was relevance in this act and it was a part of my own growth as a young person asserting the significance of what it means to lead a life as a cultural practitioner, I now depart from this position. On reflection, I understand that I participated in the academic institution's desires for me, and disseminated myself into binaries that I now, in this exegesis and beyond, refuse. You, my unknown reader, will see this continual act of refusal and rebellion throughout. My anarchism provides a grounding to this refusal, knowing that to make my work

13 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is not a Metaphor", *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012), 1–40.

14 Tapji Garba and Sara-Maria Sorentino, "Slavery is a Metaphor: A Critical Commentary on Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor'", *Antipode* 52, no. 3 (2020), 764–782.

more consumable through dissecting it into pieces, methods, and methodologies, is to welcome in neoliberal binaries that will destroy the heart and soul of not only myself but my practice.

As a non-Indigenous person whose community was formed through corporate or franchise colonialism linked to settler-colonial projects, I did not see how my community could be a part of a decolonial discourse that was mostly from the background of Indigenous decoloniality, especially within our history of indentured servitude. We would not exist without this colonisation—it is by definition part of being Indo-Fijian—but Girmit does not have to continue to define who we are and our futures. Our ancestors were heavily engaged with what we today call anti-colonial and decolonial liberatory work under the plantation system. Girmitiyas women were staunch in these ongoing acts of resistance, which is why, as an Indo-Fijian woman, I will continue to return to Girmit as a site of radical transformation. While colonial subjugation was taking place, so too was the seeding of our anarchist roots.[15]

I pool together the resources that many other communities have created because for ourselves as a young community, to expand our knowledge for the future, we must critically engage and welcome in other communities' knowledges. We have to gather together the ancestral memories we still have, draw from other communities, and keep moving towards a future building new forms of knowledge. The critical theory that is being developed within this exegesis incorporates both anti-colonial and decolonial work, as a functional multi-pronged tool for my own creation of an Indo-Fijian anarchist framework. Part of this anarchist framework is the actioning of theory, for which defiance and refusal become important tactics of questioning and destabilising power and authority. Through this very act of moving against colonial agendas and towards their eventual destruction in all of our lives, we may reimagine our futures.[16]

Refusal, defiance, and resistance are already part of my embodied existence and how I move through the world. *Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research*, published by Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang in 2014, and *Radical Understanding: Reflections on Knowledge Production, Power, Positionality, and Practices of Refusal within Academic Research*, published by Esfandyar Torkaman Rad in 2023, both provide a framework for this refusal in an academic

15 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 2006; William C. Anderson and Zoé Samudzi, "The Anarchism of Blackness", *ROAR Magazine* (Spring 2017), https://roarmag.org/magazine/black-liberation-anti-fascism/: "...Black people have engaged in anarchistic resistances since our very arrival in the Americas. From slave ship and plantation rebellions during enslavement to post-Emancipation labor and prison camps, to Harriet Tubman's removal of enslaved peoples from the custody of their owners, to the creation of maroon societies in the American South, to combatting the historic (and present) collusion between state law enforcement and the Ku Klux Klan — assertions of Black personhood, humanity and liberation have necessarily called into question both the foundations and legitimacy of the American state."

16 To see an example of how others envision decolonial futures, refer to the work of Matua Moana Jackson. An example of some of his groundbreaking talks: LowjitaInstitute, "Keynote Address: Moana Jackson", 30 November 2016, https://youtu.be/oWjewpB6UX8?si=zHaW432MXiTInK9Q.

context. As Tuck and Yang state: "We start with a discussion of refusal as an analytic practice that addresses forms of inquiry as invasion."[17] Using and incorporating Tuck and Yang's framework of refusal, Torkaman Rad, an Iranian PhD student, reflects from the vantage point of submitting, how refusal was important to maintaining his integrity and personhood as both someone who has lived experiences of colonisation and subjugation and as someone in the institution. He states:

> The epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2009; Grande 2018) practiced through radical understanding as a practice of refusal of dominant ways of knowing, helped me to find an answer to a question that almost all the participants would contemplate during my PhD journey: "Why are you doing that for the university?" The question was fair. Communities of people I was involved in, who are fighting against all kinds of institutions and political authorities, did not wish to become a new subject/object and contributing of *expanding the territory* of knowledge of White capitalist and colonialist academia.[18]

Refusal has been an expansive strategy for my ancestors. I chose to enact the same resistance strategies as a cultural practitioner, a term that encompasses storytelling, research, writing, and making. I locate the university within its context as a neoliberal settler institution—a colonial and hostile territory—and will be moving through this exegesis in a way that both honours Indo-Fijian anarchism and simultaneously rejects the desires of this institution.

For you, my unknown reader, it may feel that there is an absence of writing about craft in certain, expected ways. But, within the Indo-Fijian context, craft is not something you write about; instead, it is something you do, make, and share space and community with. It is a dangerous act to simply hand over my knowledge without any cultural exchange or safeguarding. Not everything is up for being consumed or known, and I will try to maintain a boundary with respect, upholding what is sacred and tapū.

The craft of craft

What I will tell you about craft is this: craft is the doing—a functional form of healing. Girmit deprived our ancestors and descendants, Indo-Fijians, of our complexities and denied our depths of knowledge. The value of craft in an Indo-Fijian context is as an intelligence of its own; it is connected to tacit and embodied cultural knowledge from our ancestors.

17 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research", *Qualitative Inquiry* 20, no. 6 (2014), 811.

18 Esfandyar Torkaman Rad, "Radical Understanding: Reflections on Knowledge Production, Power, Positionality, and Practices of Refusal within Academic Research", *Fennia-International Journal of Geography* 201, no. 2 (2023), 258.

I am deeply grounded in a practice of making and the love of craft because it shatters the historical narratives and stereotypes of us and functions as acts of resistance and refusal led by Indo-Fijian women. Craft has been part of the alternative economies in Fiji for generations where women sought their autonomy, creativity, community exchange, and financial freedom. In parallel to how Girmit is constructed in mainstream discourse, craft operates in the private, intimate spheres of Indo-Fijian lives, which includes spirituality, gardening, cooking, music, poetry, and relationship-building. The worlds of craft weave in and out from the individual and to the communal, and both work in conjunction and tandem with each other. Within my family's understanding of craft principles, we believe in embodied knowledge—in producing new knowledge in craft—but beyond all that, we do it for the love of it. You can't divorce the love from craft. When you come to our private, intimate lives, you'll find our desires, hopes, and dreams in the textile memories that adorn our homes.

Even though my aaji didn't get a choice to be a farmer or housewife, she gets a choice to make, imbuing all the history and hopes and knowledge and care onto the people she creates for and gifts her textiles to. Craft in the Indo-Fijian context is the embodiment of world-building—to create and envision beyond oneself. Craft becomes a functional embodied practice that holds the heart of what I believe my community is. To be a craft practitioner is to reject the ways we're portrayed in mainstream narratives. It becomes a functional tool of everyday life for someone who's still engaging in re-remembering our self-determined histories, with our agency and autonomy.

If you, my unknown reader, do not think this is part of the craft, well, it is. All of it is part of how craft functions.



Figure 12. *Stamp of Grand Pacific Hotel*, *Suva*, circa 1970s/1980s. Image courtesy of Roshni Deo and Quishile Charan.





Figure 13. *Two images of family's Ganna Khet, Nawaicoba,* 2023. Photo: Quishile Charan.

Kahaani: Seeds aur kapraa

There is a story of seeds I was once told. To this day, as much as I try to sharpen the memory, try to form it into something I can hold onto, its origins—which family member told it to me, when, where—disappear again. I don't have those specifics, but it remains a constant throughout my life and, as I grow older, its significance grows, too.

The story is of seeds nestled away in head wraps, in kapraa chota, part of the few belongings my ancestors of Girmit brought with them to what they would eventually call home: Fiji.

It's an enormous feeling—the realisation that that choice, the choice to carry seeds of home, has contributed to the landscapes that I understand today as one of my homes, one of my ghare. It's the understanding that my ancestors created their own type of space-time continuum, and that I get to move through it now.

On our khet, there's a section behind the corrugated iron where we have a lonesome cotton tree growing. When I was young, I didn't understand the history that this cotton tree held. I only knew it as the tree that aaji would ask me or one of my cousins to pluck small pieces of fluff from for craft projects that needed stuffing or to restuff our pillows.

Later, I would realise that this tree would have been a lingering remnant of the cotton boom, which means that the land would have been used for cotton during that boom. Once kept as small shrubs for plantation-style cultivation, this cotton tree, an offshoot of the monocrop, outgrown and outlived of its original use, has left the boundaries of colonialism on our khet, as both it and we renegotiate our relationships to each other and to the colonisation that brought us here. These stories of seeds, ones brought with autonomy and ones of plants leaving their histories of subjugation, form the wider tapestry of the intimate stories of our lives and how we navigate the complex realities of being descendants of Girmit.

Unlike this tapestry, archival records and academic writings about the conditions on the Girmit ships have created a visual image of pain and violence. Some of these ships were repurposed from slave ships and the ships used for blackbirding to transport new human cargo—this time for Girmit. And yet, many moments of humanity are omitted in this image. The middle passage or, as some of the ancestors of Girmit called it, the crossing of kalapani, was a brutal journey, but oftentimes I envision those seeds, how in all the unknowns and colonial violence they reflect these everyday moments in the lives of my ancestors and the ways they had to navigate these new colonial spaces. Those ships are also where jahaji (shipmate/friend, which became jahaji-bhai and

jahaji-bhaini [ship-brother and -sister]) was formed.[19] I often think of the stories they exchanged, the songs they sang, tightly grasping these seeds in their hands or keeping them comfortably nestled away in the fabrics of their headwraps. Animals were transported too. There were mynah birds in wooden cages; their chirps would have shaped the soundscapes onboard and later, on the plantations, and now, in contemporary Fiji.

These stories and memories weave a larger tapestry of survival and resistance that I now see as the core of what it means to be Indo-Fijian. They created a new time-space continuum, and catalysed further movement within it. Maybe the very humanness of these acts of carrying vessels of memories, cultures, homes, plants, and flowers wasn't conducive to the dehumanisation needed to maintain total control. That control required my ancestors to be nothing more than agricultural implements, tools, disembodied entities instead of storytellers who create and envision and build new worlds. Maybe that's why these stories never make an appearance in the so-called official histories of Girmit.

The stories I want to tell are of those seeds nestled in headwraps carried on ships to Fiji, the very same seeds that were planted and still continue to grow in Fiji today, the seeds planted in my own garden that then dye the fabrics I work with. A legacy of seeding knowledge and relationships.

For as long as I've been doing this dance (academic research) I've always found the pre-occupations of the institution—the pursuit of "true" knowledge—alarming. What qualifies as a history and the evidence required... yawn. I've spent most of my life as a researcher retelling, correcting, and giving anti-colonial readings of our stories because we have been rendered frozen in a colonial interpretation that keeps getting regurgitated. For what purpose have we been rendered like this? To maintain control over our self-determination as a community. I guess we are here because I am exhausted—that part I cannot emphasise enough. I'm tired of finding myself here again and again, but more importantly of being bound to these theoretical jesterings. Even while serving as an exegesis, these pages are an act of defiance and the creation of Indo-Fijian anarchism because I do not believe in nor do I seek my refuge of representation from an institution, academic writings, and what are considered state-sanctioned histories, nor do I believe in the propaganda of nation-states and their preoccupation with codifying and classifying

19 This quote is from Shaista Shameem's maternal grandfather Sahu Khan, who was 14 during the journey on one of the Girmit ships on its way to Fiji. Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 184–185: "To begin with, one and all felt attached to each other, more as members of one family with so many factors of their lives being common to all. Men addressed each other as 'Bhai' (brother) and the women as 'Bahini' (sister). The younger folks were taught by their parents or guardians to address the older men as 'Chacha' (paternal uncle) or Mama (maternal uncle). The women were likewise called 'Khala' or 'Mausi' (maternal aunt) or Chachi (wife of paternal uncle), depending upon whether the women were with their husbands or single. I have often wondered how these newly-made relatives could be remembered, as to whether one was a 'Chacha' or a 'Mama' or a 'Phupha', but what stronger proof would one need than the established fact that these relationships thus continued not only within the belly of the giant 'Elbe' but for the remained of their respective lives... Then again, apart from the relationship thus created by personal contact, there was the general feeling among all that they were Jahazi Bhai (ship-mate brothers)."

their so-called subjects to binary identities. I find that pursuit of nationalism a boring and scary endeavour into maintaining the far-reaching tentacles of colonialism. If that is the blueprint of existence, I refuse.

Frequently the question of identity and belonging has been positioned and leveraged against Indo-Fijians as a means of further silencing/invisbilising us, and as a means of assimilation. But why? The very mechanism of colonial control that exists for Indo-Fijians is, in my opinion, two forms of neo-colonial power: a history of indentured labour, which has created institutional racism for Indo-Fijians, and the denial of our rights to self-determine our identities and futures.

To start this story, we must come to understand the all-encompassing power of being rendered (under plantation colonialism) and re-rendered (in the archives and academia) as a labouring body, and the ongoing impacts of this act on those descendants, Indo-Fijians. Aao baitho, sunao.



Figure 14. *Stamp of Old Town Hall, Suva,* 1991. Image courtesy of Roshni Deo and Quishile Charan.

The birth of the archives and academia as hostile territory

The desires of coloniality and its hold over knowledge production has metamorphosed into a continuous cycle to the extent that it's hard to tell what is an actual retelling from a descendant and what has been taught to be seen as a retelling.

This so-called tradition, first born from a colonial drive towards a scientific form of knowledge accumulation, moves beyond the colonial occupation and dispossession of land, knowledge, and culture into the academic institution, which expanded colonialism's psychological territories while using that knowledge accumulation to hoard and withhold. Indian elites followed suit, replicating the archives to produce their own understandings and desires from their privileged vantage point. In contemporary times, we as descendants replicate the archives in pursuit of belonging and recognition, while academics mine us as a niche research subject to advance their careers.

The placement of authority in the archives has created a domino effect towards a pattern of control, a language of violence, and a belief in absolute truths told through digital screens that further the distance from the actual, varied lived truths of my community. Archives, now operated by universities, state entities, or independent personal collections, rely on exclusive access based on a system of requests and permissions. Part of the continual replicating of those archives occurs when descendents mistake the visibility of our ancestors in those institutional spaces for representation, for a redress to the invisibility we feel our histories and identities have been placed into. It is forgotten by almost if not everybody that the visibility in question is one of violent hyper-surveillance; even when ancestors are not present in official records, the maintenance of absolute power over them is.

These archives only ever afford a means of our existence through the violence inflicted onto us. The plantation system set up between the settler states of so-called Australia and New Zealand and connected to many other indenture colonies is documented, recorded, and accounted for in a sprawling web of interconnected colonial trash. Even at its most boring moments—the accountancy documents—violence is present. The banality of it all is deafening. These temperature-controlled rooms now exist outside of a physical space. Colonial-turned-academic archives stretch out across phone and/or computer screens and spill into social media. The colonial spectre lives on and manifests itself across our digital lives. We can now access our histories in ways we have never before; that access is both a good and a bad thing, as the access is situated outside of a critical framework. This aspect of inheritance is scary: are the stories, still and

always, colonial myths told of us?

The reality of existence as a descendant of Girmit is to live in a precarious relationship to knowing. Part of the ongoing trauma of Girmit is how many of us have been separated from our own histories and enforced into a dynamic wherein we rely on archival and state-stantioned histories as **the** history. Carine Zaayman asks in her seminal chapbook *Anarchival Practice: The Clanwilliam Arts Project as Re-imagining Custodianship of the Past* (2023): how can descendants of apartheid South Africa challenge this totality of the archive as a bureaucratic tool to codify the record of power so that true custodianship of the past can take place? While discussing the Clanwilliam Arts Project[20] and developing her theory of anarchival practice, Zaayman states that archives should be identified for their absences, the very things they cannot contain, "including the full sensorial experience of lived life".[21] In introducing this anarchival practice, Zaayman, citing the work of Jason Lustig, questions the formalisation and officialisation of knowledge production within the archives:

> Lustig holds that even if archives were understood to be indirect and incomplete records of the past, they were nevertheless employed, even privileged, as sources uniquely able to provide access to the past: "It constitutes an unspoken assumption underpinning claims to knowledge of the past that sources, especially but not exclusively those held in archives, present a means to encounter semi-reliably a past that otherwise would remain inaccessible and even of the present." Lustig argues that due to the way archives were positioned in the nineteenth century, they are still granted special epistemic status, even if their fidelity to the past has always been understood to be partial and indirect.[22]

The totalising nature of the archives as a construction of true knowledge and official history has flattened Girmit history. At the same time it has trapped us descendants into a dynamic wherein many believe ancestors can be excavated from this colonial site and saved from their supposed shame and lack of morality. The lack of our ancestors' voices should instead be a catalyst for further critical reading of the archives. What does it mean to recreate knowledge from colonial and state archives? What does it mean for a people to have so many aspects of knowledge trapped and rendered against us again and again? That critical reading itself is important to a community's

20 Magnet Theatre, "Clanwilliam Arts Project" Magnet Theatre, accessed 10 March 2024, https://magnettheatre.co.za/project/clanwilliam-arts-project/: "[the Clanwilliam Arts Project is] an annual project co-ordinated by Magnet Theatre and includes student facilitators from UCT Drama School, Michaelis School of Art, UCT Music School, ComNet and other independent practitioners who all use the project as a site for community arts training. Workshops in art, drama, dance, lantern making, storytelling, drumming, stilt walking and fire performance are run with 700 learners from the schools in Clanwillliam over the period of a week in early September. The project culminates in a lantern parade and performance of a /Xam narrative (chosen from the Bleek and Loyd collection) by the children and the facilitators and is attended by between 2 500 and 3000 audience from the town."

21 Carine Zaayman, *Anarchival Practices: The Clanwilliam Arts Project as Re-imagining Custodianship of the Past* (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), 14.

22 Ibid, 8.

collective knowledge too, as we should have the right to self-determine our own knowledge—its formation, creation, and keeping.

The archives then become hostile territory and should be engaged with as such. They continually operate through the intentional act of deciding what, when, and how a community comes to its own colonial histories. In this, they paternalise, in turn infantilising us through our supposed lack of knowing. To control our histories is to control us as a people—not just our present and past, but our futures too. Our potential futurities are squeezed into state-approved, homogenised narratives in which we can only identify ourselves through pain and trauma. I identify these as deficit narratives, or what Tuck and Yang call pain narratives.[23] These narratives create a reality of their own, wherein descendants only see themselves as a problem to be solved—how our ancestors were framed from when they first entered the global colonial history of sugar and bonded plantation labour.[24]

This act of separation from our history, oversimplified categorisation, and homogenisation is made easier by the fact that we are continually rendered disposable in our own stories while being denied our resistance movements, anti-colonial and decolonial struggles, and even our place in history as the agitators towards and instigators of the end of Girmit. The scientific nature of the archives has placed us in an ongoing intellectual debate, moving us from voiceless labourer to voiceless academic subject, wherein we are picked apart and reconstructed into identity binaries without our consent. How, then, do we determine ourselves, our identities, and communities? Even in the very histories that would not exist without us, we are denied our autonomy. The Girmitiyas women who led our anti-colonial and decolonial struggles are replaced by elite nationalist Indian men and their counterparts (white missionaries and middle-class, upper-caste women). We were never afforded the leading role in our own histories, instead outsourced into the passive and subservient racial identity constructed of us, but not for us or by us.

23 Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang, "R-words: Refusing Research" in *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2014), 226; Tuck and Yang, "Unbecoming Claims", 813.

24 An earlier iteration of this problematising of a population was India's supposed overpopulation, which was framed as a partial justification for indenture.

These days, the archives are seen as a resource-rich site for academics,[25] where we, the descendants of Girmit, are still dissected and dismembered, the pieces retrieved as if we are cadavers. Academia becomes the "noble" voicing of the voiceless, an autopsy of our death under colonialism. Now, instead of existing just inside the physical walls of the colonial archives, remnants of our histories are sprawled across published research and stored away in newer, shinier archives, or in academic institutions, where further dissections and dismemberments take place. And still, life cannot be found here. We cannot become relics of the past while building our futures.

The dominant archival narrative is then re-rendered by academics[26] who deny our resistance, focusing instead on how we were violated, entrapping us into a dynamic that only ever recreates and re-triggers an all-consuming trauma-related narrative, a narrative of being oppressed, being something that inherently has been, is, and will be violated. This act of re-rendering is made easier by how the archives are framed as post-colonial artefacts—a place in which an event was captured, contained, and made exclusively accessible in temperature-controlled rooms that are disembodied from time and space. This paradigm lends an understanding of Girmit as a "happening"—a discrete, independent moment in history. This understanding of the archives sends communities and their ancestors to an administrative and bureaucratic death. Voicelessness is our grave. Like museum artefacts, we are placed into glass boxes to be observed and fetishised during the post-death autopsy. This death of sorts maintains the authority of the archives and, by extension, contemporary colonialism and neo-colonialism, by using languaging such as "post-colonial". When you break it down, it is absurd to frame colonialism as being merely in the past, as if we can isolate and separate it from our present.

The state-sanctioned histories of the archives render us as anything but Indo-Fijian—a term that, while contentious (which I will discuss later), holds our placehood in Fiji. In the cannibalistic dissemination of these histories into mainstream culture, with the now-globalised market of information, the digitisation of archives into online repositories, and the continual demand of institutions to produce "new" information, our fight for self-determination continually gets lost.

25 Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You* (Santa Barbara: Punctum Books, 2018), 22: "...undoubtedly held out a kind of promise for each of us [academics] that kept us tethered to academia. The archive was an elusive hope of our individual salvation. If we could find the right archive, the right stash of materials that was sexy enough to sell ourselves, we could be spared the depression, the anxiety attacks, the pre-mid-life crises that would come when, one by one we realized we were not going to be chosen. When, in the face of that brutal rejection, we had no idea what the fuck to do with ourselves. If only we could stumble upon the right archive, the secrets that no one else had yet discovered, we might still be one of the chosen ones. The archive was an opaque hope, yet it kept slipping away as though it didn't want to be found, plundered, excavated. It became outright seductive in its evasiveness, and it kept making clear that it didn't want our masturbatory desire for it. The archive was pure tease, and we were unabashedly shoving borrowed dollar bills down its skimpy thong."

26 See Brij V. Lal, *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey of indenture through Fiji* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2012); Kenneth L. Gillion, *The Fiji Indians: Challenge to European Dominance 1920–1946* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1977); Rajendra Prasad, *Tears in Paradise: Unveiled: Suffering and Struggles of Indians in Fiji 1879–2004* (Auckland: Glade Publishers, 2006); Robert Nicole, *Disturbing history: Resistance in early colonial Fiji* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010); Vijay Naidu, *The violence of indenture in Fiji* (Suva: World University Service, 1980).

Are we going to continue replicating these myths? And then what are the stories we do want to tell, as a community with self-determination?

In my master's exegesis, I identified the archives as a functional site to read against the grain[27] of colonial power. At that time, it was important for me to bring our counter-colonial narratives and images of ancestors out of the archives to share with other Indo-Fijians. I looked to care and love for our ancestors through cultural frameworks of craft, adorning ancestors in Fijian plants used for natural dye and eco-printing as a way of imbuing them into cosmologies of an existence they deserved. I used the labour of craft, which I chose with my own agency, to honour and cherish the forced labour of my ancestors, especially women's work. Over the course of that project, I emphasised the importance of revaluing women's labour as the living pulse of our communities, even though so often it is not deemed as possessing the same significance as men's work.

While that research and theoretical framing was important for me to engage with, it produced its own limitations, which have become more apparent to me as I have grown as both a maker and researcher. While I do understand the necessary work of recontextualising and continuing to build counter-colonial narratives, I find the notion of continually returning to the archives as the only site of resistance concerning. I acknowledge that I, too, will return to the archives as a physical repository, but it is not of our ancestors; rather, it is an enduring space that has collected and stored our histories in a process against us, again not for us and by us.

As a working practitioner, publishing and exhibiting work within the public realm, I have noticed the archives' general positioning as a material-rich basis for producing work, and as the only authoritative site of knowledge. These aesthetic and research trends, removed from any critical lens, enforce a belief that our jobs as descendants is to constantly "talk back to" the archive—to exhume ancestors from these bureaucratic and institutional graves. My previous textile works that brought forward archival documents, official colonial correspondence, and images of ancestors, operated within an anti-colonial realm of protest. The archive is not a space that can hold the full expansiveness of our histories because, at its core, it will never relinquish its finite boundaries, which rely on our narratives and figures being frozen in time.

While to find belonging as descendents is often understood as going back to the archives to find ancestors, to reduce our histories to the beginning and end of the archives denies the existence and value of histories outside of colonial productions of knowledge. So much of Indo-Fijian culture exists in private spaces, in the intimate aspects of our everyday lives. The everyday is also

27 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008); Quishile Charan, "She Cut Me From Ganna" (master's exegesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2019), https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/items/52b3d9aa-07b0-482e-aacb-ccaedff6b297.

an intergenerational space where our cultural practices both exist in the knowledge of those who have passed and are carried on through the daily actions of the living, such as gardening, cooking, and craft.

To understand our ancestors better, unconsciously, we have become observers of their pain first and foremost. Because of this globalised, corporatised market of information I have mentioned above, our histories become subsumed into algorithms of dominance and power. Even social media is a part of the colonial enterprise, where pain, outrage, and shock are all marketable and saleable as content. I diverge from many other descendants in that I approached the archives as a space to understand power, and still return to the archives to address power dynamics and challenge colonial knowledge systems. As I develop a decolonial and anarchist framework, I have expanded towards the knowledge that my ancestors are present in my everyday cultural practices.

To create textiles only focussed on the archival is literal and finite in a way that craft is not. During my master's, it felt important to explore the disruption of colonial narratives through craft interventions, but, as a craft practitioner, these were not the stories I wanted to continue to tell. Relying on the physical presence of ancestors felt too similar to the desires fed to us about what representation can embody, when some of the most important ways we as descendants live with our ancestors is through the spiritual.

The body is present in craft through the labour that is required to undertake it and through the communities that must nurture craft, as craft is a non-human entity that exists in many relationships of connection to people. Craft becomes a choice towards the autonomy to create my own stories.

My thinking has also drastically changed due to the internet's use as a tool of colonialism and fascism—the rise of mis- and dis-information not only affects politics but our histories, cultures, and understandings, with information becoming more and more conveniently available to suit the needs of the dominant power structures. In the struggle against these systems, I look to Indigenous communities who have been leading important conversations around data sovereignty.[28] Suspicious of how our data is mobilised and mined, their conversations have become ever more urgent in the swelling free market of information. In the supposedly neutral social media space, algorithms of control and dispossession are marketed as personal pursuits of self-actualising. Since my work is about developing a framework of self-determination for Indo-Fijians, I must also call into question and critically engage with how Indo-Fijian data is being

28 Emele Ugavule, "Pause and Think Before You Rush Online", *Witness Performance*, 9 April 2020, https://witnessperformance.com/pause-and-think-before-you-rush-online/; Te Mana Raraunga Māori Data Sovereignty Network, "Our Data, Our Sovereignty, Our Future", accessed 20 May 2024, https://www.temanararaunga.maori.nz/.

Figure 15. *Main arch, vestibule and two sets of double doors at the entrance of CSR Ltd's Head Office, corner O'Connell and Bent Streets, Sydney,* 1961. The Australian National University Open Research Respository, Canberra, Australia. Photo: Maxwell Spencer Dupain.

produced, collected, and cared for. Social media and the digital archives are two major examples of arenas in which descendants need to be critical of the histories they are consuming and replicating if we want to break these cycles.

The archives, both analogue and digital, can function as dangerous territories of recognition, especially if they are the only place our communities and ancestors are to be discussed and identified. To be identifiable is to be represented, to be represented is to be recognisable, and to be recognisable is to be known; this whole process then becomes easily confused with a genuine knowing of our histories. For the archives to maintain their position, they need to widen their territories of knowledge, and allow communities to contribute new knowledge, continuing the pattern of consumption and hoarding. Social media becomes an accessible site where this absorption can occur.

This type of inheritance of the archives subsumes us into a wider neoliberal discourse of diversity and inclusion frameworks, which leads to representational and identity politics. The work of the archives was to locate us as colonial subjects; the job of the academic institution was to further locate us within "Indianness", but this neoliberal model of recognition as liberation moves towards assimilation and the destruction of Indo-Fijianness. As Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel state in their paper, "Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism" (2005): "...we live in an era of postmodern imperialism and manipulations by shape-shifting colonial powers; the instruments of domination are evolving and inventing new methods to erase Indigenous histories and senses of place."[29] Indo-Fijian identity is withheld and denied, but our state-sanctioned histories are nevertheless deployed to create moveable and pliable subjects that are either a type of nothingness or smothered underneath a generalised Indian identity.

Other sources—specifically, institutions where one is required to have a state-recognised identity (to list a few: the state, political parties, the healthcare system, the education system)—debate and argue about how to locate us on these terms. Every time, we are placed back into oppressive neo-colonial structures that label themselves as reformist. In actuality, this reformist process is part of the denial of self-determination. As Glen Coulthard states: "...the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples' demands for recognition have sought to transcend."[30] While we are not Indigenous and our relationship to nation-states is context-specific as non-white and non-Indigenous, I too reject diversity and inclusion frameworks.

29 Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, "Being Indigenous: Resurgences against contemporary colonialism", *Government and Opposition* 40, no. 4 (2005), 601.

30 Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 3.

Colonialism is an ever-present structure that undergoes metamorphosis to maintain itself as an all-encompassing power and control structure. In Alfred and Corntassel's discussion of settler colonialism as a shapeshifter, they dive deep into neoliberal diversity and inclusion models wherein identities can be moulded and structured into state-constructed identities to be weaponised against the very people the state claims to be "including". This supposed care is a process of further stripping away Indigenous identities and sovereignties, as they state:

> Contemporary Settlers follow the mandate provided for them by their imperial forefathers' colonial legacy, not by attempting to eradicate the physical signs of Indigenous peoples as human bodies, but by trying to eradicate their existence as peoples through the erasure of the histories and geographies that provide the foundation for Indigenous cultural identities and sense of self. The geographer, Bernard Nietschmann, has demonstrated the need for critical translations of the artificial, state-created identities (such as 'ethnic group') that are imposed on original peoples in this colonizing process of redefinition from autonomous to derivative existence and cultural and political identities. State-imposed conceptions of supposedly Indigenous identity read to Indigenous peoples, from perspectives rooted in their own cultures and languages, not as moves towards justice and positive integration (as the strategy is framed in colonial discourses) but as indicators of an on-going colonial assault on their existence, and signs of the fact that they remain, as in earlier colonial eras, occupied peoples who have been dispossessed and disempowered in their own homelands.[31]

While Alfred and Corntassel write specifically of Indigeneity in the settler state of Canada, here I would like to expand their discussion towards how other settler states negotiate non-Indigenous and non-white communities through these identity models. Identities in the neoliberal state need to be categorised according to state-aligned definitions to maintain the racial hierarchy and continue colonial divide-and-conquer politics. Indo-Fijians come from staunch histories of leaving colonial boundaries; we have throughout our history in Fiji forged an identity firmly rooted in relationships. This type of belonging and self-determination framework, within the Indo-Fijian context, becomes dangerous for these states, as within our history we have a roadmap of resistance and inter-community solidarities. The denial and erasure of a history of anti-colonial and decolonial struggle and resistance attempts to take this map out of our hands.

Girmit history is plagued by the reformist liberal politics of the times and has become a useful tool for neo-colonial and neoliberal agendas to continue to withhold agency from descendants. It makes us moveable and exploitable, makes it easy for nation-states to pull and push us in whatever direction they want. I am specifically referring to the Western settler states of so-called Australia and New Zealand, and the Indian state.[32] All three states operate at different levels and have their

31 Alfred and Corntassel, "Being Indigenous", 598.

32 Due to the limitations of this exegesis, I cannot speak to other indentured labour colonies and Western nation-states such as the United States of America and Canada.

own colonial agendas while being occupied with the neo-colonial project at varying degrees, including nationalism and settlerism. The Indo-Fijian identity ping pongs between these powers, wherein there is no allowance for self-determination to create and be something new, to move beyond standard colonial inventions of identity. To have the right to determine our own identity in this political climate is an assault on the centralised power structures that need definable, codified, loyal subjects.

All three of these nation-states prioritise and weaponise state-sanctioned and elitist versions of Indo-Fijian history, leaning into a mythical, romanticised return to an "Indianness" that never existed. This push of return is a myth of pre-colonial excellence and purity that functions as a strategy to displace us of our contemporary sense of belonging and snuff out our histories of dissent.

As a descendant who works and lives in the settler state of so-called New Zealand, my primary focus is on how power operates in this particular context. Specifically, I position and identify New Zealand as both a colonial soft power[33] within the Western global powers and a site of regional exceptionalism[34] in the South Pacific. What I mean by this is that New Zealand positions itself in this region as the "good" coloniser, compared to so-called Australia's brutishness. New Zealand uses this passive identity to both mask and weaponise itself as a non-colonial, kind, and positive entity. This is embodied in attitudes like, "it just wasn't that bad here" or "we weren't as violent as other colonial powers". Both the settler states of Australia and New Zealand look to the Pacific island nation-states as needing a paternalising hand, and because of the framing of New Zealand as the young, "good" coloniser, its actions don't look as insidious when compared to older powers.

So-called New Zealand succeeds at this branding as kind and caring with the support of its various centrist governments and the media. The 2019 Christchurch terror attack is a particular contemporary example of media propaganda to affirm New Zealand's soft power status. Subsequent to the attack, a national social media campaign erupted around a rallying call of "This is not who we are" and "They are us" by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who adorned a Hijab when meeting Muslim communities. But in reality, Islamophobia is a byproduct of a violent colonial state that still polices and harms Muslim bodies and attacks their personhood.

This campaign and how it unfolded was violent for how it expected various communities to remain silent around colonial oppression. The fact that so-called New Zealand is founded on

33 Chris, Drew, "Soft Power: Examples And Definition", *HelpfulProfessor.com*. 8 October 2023, https://helpfulprofessor.com/soft-power-examples/.

34 For an example of how others have used this term in relation to so-called New Zealand please see: Miles Fairburn, "Is There a Good Case for New Zealand Exceptionalism?", *Thesis Eleven* 92, no. 1 (2008), 29–49.

Indigenous genocide and occupation seemed to conveniently disappear. But many of us, through our lived experiences, cannot so easily forget how we have come to understand the New Zealand state—through the complex ways it both conceals and chooses to openly target and racialise our communities. As stated in Nishhza Thiruselvam's paper, "Care Ethics and Narratives of the 'Grateful Refugee' and 'Model Minority': A Postcolonial Feminist Observation of New Zealand in the Wake of the Christchurch Terror Attacks" (2019):

> [Non-white people's] critique of colonialist discourse is dismissed, as the media continually reminds us that according to global rankings, Aotearoa/New Zealand is the second-most peaceful nation, that it has the third-most trusted politicians and the sixth-most reliable police services, and that it is world's best place to be an expat (Cohen 2018). These rankings are used by the media to reinforce the idea that Aotearoa/New Zealand is almost a paradisiacal place to live (Cohen 2018). They likewise portray settler-colonial Aotearoa/New Zealand as a product of Enlightenment achievement and success. Moreover, given the international praise accorded to our government for the manner in which it responded to the Christchurch terror attacks, our paradisiacal image becomes all the more impenetrable.[35]

The settler state of so-called New Zealand uses its geographical location—far away from other, bigger Western powers, a position where it can only accumulate so much power—and its small size to brand itself as minor and inconsequential in impact. I recall Epeli Hau'ofa's paper, "Our Sea of Islands", where he talks about the framing of the region, Oceania, as small due to perceived land scale against the vast oceanic spaces, saying: "There is a world of difference between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a far sea' and as 'a sea of islands.' The first emphasizes dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centers of power. Focusing in this way stresses the smallness and remoteness of the islands."[36]

This idea of "smallness" maintains so-called New Zealand's power at a global scale and weaponises it against other island nations in the region. To occupy the position of a "small" and "soft" power is to conceal how power moves and operates within the region. It also undermines the level of power New Zealand truly has, in the implementation and maintenance of the militarisation

35 Nishhza Thiruselvam, "Care Ethics and Narratives of the 'Grateful Refugee' and 'Model Minority': A Postcolonial Feminist Observation of New Zealand in the Wake of the Christchurch Terror Attacks", *Women's Studies Journal* 33, no. 1/2 (2019), 64.

36 Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands", *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994), 152. Later, on page 153, Hau'ofa states: "It may not be coincidental that Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, anglophone all, have far greater interests in the Pacific and how it is perceived than have the distant European nations."

of the South Pacific,[37] and as a settler state that extracts both resources and labour from within and outside its borders in the region. The framing has, in contemporary mainstream discourse, formed the backbone of the quirky Kiwi identity. Weaponising a type of white saviour passivity, New Zealand draws attention to the violence of other nations to illustrate how much better it is here, especially so when Māori colonisation is brought into question. To identify and apply a context-specific framework of colonial ideology to New Zealand then becomes a necessary action as both a descendant of Girmit and as an anarchist, as the New Zealand state was an enabler and benefactor of indentured labour in Fiji—through Chelsea Sugar—and continues to engage in corporate colonialism to support its endeavours as a settler-colonial state. This pattern of paternalising exists in many other colonial agendas committed against my community—namely upper-caste, Indian nationalist[38] patriarchy from both within the nation-state of India and across the Western migration hubs of India's diaspora.



Figure 16. *Stamp of Sigatoka sand dunes, Fiji,* date unknown. Image courtesy of Roshni Deo and Quishile Charan.

37 Tina Ngata, "Sex, Filth, Violence, and the Pacific: A Text on Exploitation", 30 June 2018, https://tinangata.com/2018/06/30/sex-filth-violence-and-the-pacific/: "As a region, the Pacific has always underwritten the consequences of the West's behaviour. The RIMPAC exercises being held off the coast of Hawai'i, and held every two years, is possibly one of the most extreme cases of this. New Zealand has been participating in these exercises since 2012... Over a month, armed forces from 26 nations, including 25,000 personnel, 47 ships, 5 submarines, and more than 200 aircraft will engage in wargames that will be hosted by the US Navy, upon stolen lands and waters. These wargames include live fire, missile launches, microwave and sonar weaponry that destroys coral reefs, sea mammals, turtles. Over 5 years of these weaponry tests marine ecologists tracked over 9 million instances of death or injury to marine wildlife. The optics around the event are quite consistent – with the most common phrasing being that RIMPAC reinforces the US, and world, commitment to a 'free and open Indo-Pacific'. But of course, the majority of the Pacific is not free. Hawai'i is not free. Guahan is not free. Aotearoa is not free. Tahiti is not free. Tokelau is not free. Australia is not free. Canada is not free. West Papua is certainly not free. And were we to pursue our right to freedom – it will be these very armed forces that are enacted against us."

38 When I write "Indian nationalism", I am denoting the precursor to the formation of the present-day Hindutva state.



Figure 17. *Prymont Refinery New South Wales CSR Mill Stacks of Bagged Raw Sugar*, circa 1930s. The Australian National University Open Research Respository, Canberra, Australia. Photographer unknown.

The construction of a racial identity: The docile coolie

An important site of Girmit, and the place in which the process of constructing a new racial identity began, is at the depots—Calcutta in the North and Madras in the South. The depots, within Indo-Fijian academia, are identified and condemned as the place that began to defile and degrade us through the officials' lack of care for "Indian" cultural values and beliefs. Here all castes, genders, ages, and religious backgrounds could move freely among themselves, waiting for their shipment to the colonies. This is one of the many places where I depart from the tradition of Indo-Fijian academia in seeing and highlighting the supposed loss of caste as detrimental to our spiritual well-being or lack of culture in contemporary times.

The depots were the site where Girmitiyas were processed as labouring bodies, numbers replacing their names. It is where my ancestors were ordered and categorised to maintain our subservience. The way that I see it, these depots functioned as a space for the creation of a new subjugated racial identity based on European constructs of race and the already extant power structure of caste within the subcontinent.

As with any form of colonialism, race and racial hierarchy is required to maintain an ideology and power structure, allowing the British Empire to divide and conquer.[39] The British Empire continued to create and enforce racial hierarchy, expanding it beyond their occupied territories, such as India, and bringing new racial identities to colonies to help embolden and strengthen the other forms of colonialism they employed on a global scale. The British were aware of the complex construction of caste in India, and did not hesitate to use it to control and manipulate the Girmit labouring body.

Into this conception of racialised bodies and racialised hierarchies enters the creation of the labourer: the Indian coolie. The Indian coolie as a racial identity sits outside other racialised identities of India, and the coolie of the sub-continent and of the colonies became two separate identities. In the subcontinent, the word "coolie" implies lower caste status and movement. Usually referring to travelling or wandering manual labourers who worked at various large-scale hubs such as port and train stations, the term "coolie" as a labouring construct was created as a catch-all for multiple forms of labour that were required both within and beyond existing caste-hierarchised forms of labour.

39 As with India, Britain used divide-and-conquer tactics specifically because the British Empire could recognise the various ethnicities that now make up India.

At the depots, a single thumbprint began a process of the Girmitiyas being racially reconstructed and rendered into the "coolie" of the colonies, regardless of their social identities within India.[40] From this point in time, we as a people have been continually re-rendered into this racial identity. The negative connotations of this new racialised identity, "coolie", leaves a mark that carries with it the history of the subcontinent and its construction of the subservient labourer as a way to subjugate my ancestors in the colony. This is why, in contemporary times, the misconception that our entire community comes from lower-caste origins needs to be continually challenged; it negates the fact that people came from various caste backgrounds and invisibilises those within our community who have to deal with the very real realities of caste in contemporary times and how that took place across North and South divides. I would argue that this historical understanding that we were all lower caste is more to do with how our new racial identity was always intended to carry the markers of being lowly, backwards, and in general completely othered—it did not matter that we came from different backgrounds, that was all pointless once we were rebirthed into the coolie of the colonies.

The coolie identity was created from pre-existing caste systems, gender oppression, religious separatism,[41] and the class and social dynamics of feudal India,[42] mixed in with European colonial ideas of race hierarchies. In the colonies, this identity was needed to support the shift in control from regional to global. Caste ties an individual into identities and labour and knowledge systems based on purity and pollution hierarchies. Leaving India and entering the British colonies, the Empire needed to claim its territory i.e. people, i.e. Girmitiyas, i.e. coolies, to reinforce the superiority of their own racialised systems over the already existing power structures, creating a new global totality. This sinister method of colonial racialisation is complex—the British knew that this new racial identity, rather than ending caste hierarchies, would now embed the same systems as social beliefs.

Due to recruitment quotas and the increasing movement of people in India—displacement

40 Within official records and colonial documents, the use of the catch-all term "Indian" becomes deceptive in a contemporary reading, as the idea of "Indian" as a construct during the British Raj was about creating a racial identifier for Empire, rather than this being a term that people themselves chose to identify with. In the formation of the state after independence, "Indian" then becomes a national identity.

41 The British Empire simplified "Indian" into the religious identity of "Hindu". This has caused a major problem in archival records as it flattens and simplifies ethnicity and spiritual practices, both inside of the Indo-Fijian context and beyond it, erasing a range of other cultures and peoples. As Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd notes in *Why I Am Not A Hindu*: "Suddenly, since about 1990 the word 'Hindutva' has begun to echo in our ears, as if everyone in India who is not a Muslim, a Christian or a Sikh is a Hindu. Suddenly I am being told I am a Hindu... Having been born in a Kuruma (shepherd caste) family, I do not know how I can relate to the Hindu culture that is being projected through all kinds of advertising agencies... I, indeed not I, but all of us, the Dalitbahujans (united Dalits) have never heard the word 'Hindu'... But today we are suddenly being told we have a relationship with the Brahmins and Baniyas (merchants considered an upper caste). This is not merely surprising, it is shocking." Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, *Why I Am Not a Hindu* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 1996), xiii.

42 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 141: "Economically and politically the concept of servitude was already accepted in India."

caused by British colonialism and occupation—Girmit took in an influx of people from varying backgrounds. What has survived this history are two catch-all (mis)understandings: 1) that to be taken carries the marker of being lower caste, and therefore all ancestors of Girmit were of low-caste backgrounds; 2) that the one good that Girmit did was eradicate the evils of the caste system. This second understanding lends itself to the colonial idea that instituting Girmit supported the "betterment" of my ancestors—that they were offered a way to work themselves out of/civilise themselves out of dire poverty and famine that was inflicted through the British Raj.[43] We all love a "bootstrap" narrative.[44]

Indo-Fijian academics are incorrect to state that caste disappeared at the depots and on the Girmit ships.[45] Caste as an institutionalised system remained in India, but caste as a social construct travelled with our communities. The very fact that the British recognised caste and still maintained caste and its social constructs in the plantations reveals the skill with which they divided and conquered.[46] This becomes most prevalent through our replacement in our own histories with classed and caste-elite Indians. Discussing our differences as a people through the loss of caste is a misrepresentation of our histories and the lived experiences of our ancestors. Most oral accounts that Indo-Fijians reference regarding the depots are stories from upper-caste male labourers in sorrow over the loss of their caste. The replication of this loss of caste is amplified by the fact that academics place this too in a good/bad binary—good that we escaped caste, bad because it was morally degrading. Fijian academic and feminist Shaista Shameem's analysis of Indo-Fijian history introduces a feminist lens and was seminal at the time of publishing for how it reframed these histories and the supposed loss of caste as harmful to some while liberating to others—women in particular.[47] Because of these debates around who caste did and did not serve, the creation of this new racial identity has failed to be sufficiently critically investigated up

43 This logic, that Girmit was a good system for "workers", was obvious in how Europeans engaged in plantation colonialism in Fiji, stating that Girmitiyas were better off in Fiji. Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 143: "The wage that these people asked for in India was merely one-sixth of one penny, so desperate was their situation. It was this kind of evidence that planters in the colonies eventually used against immigrants when they agitated for higher wages on sugar plantations."

44 The problem with Girmit being framed as "workers' issues" is that it erases the fact of the system being colonialism. To label Girmit as "work" turns the narrative into the workers' struggle to work their way up, constantly enforcing a rags to riches story, which is dangerous as it turns colonial subjugation into a hero story of class ascension as the morally right action. This narrative will only favour those who worked themselves into assimilation, becoming the supposed "civilised" subject.

45 See Ahmed Ali, *Plantation to Politics: Studies on Fiji Indians* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 1980); Lal, *Chalo Jahaji*; Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji*; Prasad, *Tears in Paradise*.

46 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 156: "Fairer Indians, seen as Aryans, were often allocated work in the household, away from the plantations, and sometimes even in the mills as semi-skilled telephone operators or clerks, whereas darker Indians were considered fit for plantation labour only. While evidence of this is not documented explicitly in the literature, there is enough oral material collected in my own fieldwork to suggest that favouring of fairer women and men over those of darker hue occurred."

47 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice"; Quishile Charan, "Unearthing the History of My Female Ancestors in Fiji", *Matters Journal Aotearoa*, no. 8 (2018), 55.

to this point. Indo-Fijian academics have failed to analyse the part that caste politics of purity and impurity/pollution played in the construction of this new racial identity. In the replication of state-sanctioned histories, these academics (Ali, Lal, Naidu, and Prasad) use the lens of upper-caste Brahminical heteropatriarchy as the lens through which they read—and, in effect, misrepresent—their/our own histories.

The supposed breakdown of caste is an interesting fallacy of our highly complex histories and how they are misinterpreted and disseminated in their most basic, reductive, 101 Indo-Fijian history form. What I mean by this is that the supposed erasure of caste is discussed frequently in Indo-Fijian academia, and the way in which each writer deals with it is reflective of their own relationship to ancestry. Some are saddened for their ancestors' loss[48] of the respectability of upper-caste status; others are offended by this so-called loss of caste as it becomes representational of how the British/coloniser disrespected the spiritual lives of Girmitiyas.[49] Others still, like Shameem, identify both this breakdown of caste and the traditional family hierarchies as being liberating to women, who through this development became more able to exist in different types of power and control compared to male labourers.[50] Women negotiated this new racial identity very differently to men, but I would like to remind you, my unknown reader, that this new racial identity was still racialised, meaning that it was still created to subjugate and oppress; it was the Girmit resistance led by women that created these new negotiations of identities to find liberation and contributed to the many ways our ancestors would leave the boundaries of coloniality.

During my time as a researcher, I too have come to Shameem's conclusions, discussing in my own research[51] how Girmit in the context of women is different in making decisions around

48 I am thinking specifically here of how these poems reinforce an idea of crossing kalapani as traumatic for the loss of caste. While I acknowledge that the crossing would have been traumatic as part of the colonial violence that Girmitiyas experienced, what is hard to reconcile is that this specific part of Girmit history is constantly written from the viewpoint of descendants whose ancestors were Brahmin or from the perspective of Brahminical heteropatriarchy. Therefore, an idea has formed that the loss of caste was the traumatic aspect of crossing, instead of colonialism itself. For an example of this, please refer to Sudesh Mishra, "Confessions of a Would-Be Brahmin", accessed 10 April 2024, https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poems/poem/103-18455_CONFESSIONS-OF-A-WOULD-BE-BRAHMIN.

49 The point here is that because we view caste through the narration of descendants who have upper-caste ancestry, or the oral histories of Brahmins under the Girmit system (for example, Totoram Sanadhya's *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands*), we replicate this viewpoint, and at times speak for ancestors who would have not seen caste the same as a Brahmin, due to how caste abuse would have impacted middle- to lower-caste ancestors. For some, being able to freely share space and eat with one another would have been an odd but exciting new possibility. There is some sort of mythologising historical fiction-fantasy that many Indo-Fijians still hold for caste, where it is not thought of as an institution of ethnicity-based abuse and hierarchy, and instead it is seen as a positive cultural norm, my younger self included. What happens in this process is that we cause a lot of harm to those in the subcontinent living through the generational violence of caste and Hindutva state violence; this impact reveals an urgent need for caste analysis of our own histories.

50 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 164–165,181.

51 Charan, "She Cut Me from Ganna"; Charan, "Unearthing the History of My Female Ancestors in Fiji"; Quishile Charan and Esha Pillay, "Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women: Counter-colonial Narratives of the Female Girmit Role in the 1920 Labour Strike", published on the occasion of the exhibition *We Do Not Have Enough to Satisfy Our Bellies* (Melbourne: SEVENTH Gallery, 2019).

leaving—taking one subjugation for another in the hopes of finding freedom,[52] which clearly shows the relationship of Indo-Fijian resistances to a long legacy of looking towards building a future.[53] Taking Shameem's argument further, I would suggest that because Girmit functioned as a colonial labouring time-space, Girmitiyas' life was only dictated by labour; they could not "indulge" in cultural practices and a family life, as these aspects fell outside of Girmit. Existing under multiple intersections of oppression, they negotiated these realities differently. The act of collapsing "traditional" aspects of life—the family unit within strict hierarchies, Brahminical heteropatriachy, gender roles, caste oppression—would have created new modes of agency in a multitude of ways.

Even before we left the sub-continent, we had ancestors negotiating the complex realities of what it meant to live under British colonialism and older systems of power in which they constantly defied the boundaries placed upon them. These included the mutinies led against the East India Trading Company, the famines, and the British Raj's collapsing of the traditional industries of India.[54] I would like to pinpoint this defiance as an act of liberation, rather than the system having aspects that are liberating. These systems are designed to enact full control, but what I am suggesting is that our ancestors of Girmit also come from a legacy of ancestry that was looking to renegotiate what it meant to live under any structure of power and how that impacted their lives.

For a moment I would like to turn your attention to how settler colonialism functions, wherein the process of colonisation took the form of emptying land and committing genocide against Indigenous people to make the land alienable and consequently enable its theft and occupation. Under the British Raj's conception of India, the land was not desirable for settlement but was desirable for temporary occupation to extract resources, industry, material, and people. These lands were too "exotic", too "foreign", too "oriental" and "queer".[55] This process in India of colonisation[56]—corporate or franchise—made it possible to create new hybrid identities for the purpose of racial subjugation: instead of land being alienable, people were made alienable. As all forms of colonialism inform and feed into each other, like the ouroboros imagery of the snake eating its tail, colonialism constantly cannibalises itself anew.

52 Charan, "Unearthing the History of My Female Ancestors in Fiji".

53 Charan, "She Cut Me from Ganna"; Charan and Pillay, "Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women".

54 To learn more about the de-industralisation of India, please refer to: Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). To understand how a history of cotton and sugar is connected please refer to: Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

55 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003); Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

56 Patrick Wolfe, "The Settler Complex: An Introduction", *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 37, no. 2 (2013).



Figure 18. *Colonial Sugar Company Display at the International Exhibition in the Garden Palace,* 1879. The Australian National University Open Research Respository, Canberra, Australia. Photographer unknown.

Debilitation and maiming in the Indo-Fijian context

In the many mainstream and state-sanctioned histories of indenture, there is an overwhelming problem with not understanding the weight or power that language carries. In contemporary settings, the (mis)understanding of indentured labour is split into two ideologies: 1) Girmit was a new system of slavery;[57] 2) because of the contract being connected to a time limit of five years, with an option to extend to ten years to gain a right of passage to India,[58] and because ordinances included specific languaging that constituted indenture as "work", Girmit was an older form of immigrant labour that supported non-white settler interests.[59] Within both ideologies lie many of the misconceptions about us and how we were colonised.

At the time of indenture being conceived, colonisers began constructing our identity as unfree bonded labourers. We were cast as emigrants; as contractors bound by law, supposedly to ensure our rights; as settlers; and as Indians. These narratives are still used to define Indo-Fijian identities today and don't reflect the true nature of things. As Fijian academic Vijay Mishra states while commenting on the 2000 coup and its connection to the 1987 coup in Fiji: "Thirty years ago, the Indians in Fiji were blamed for everything, now they are seen as possessing the same spirit that drove the white men to open up new frontiers and colonise new lands."[60] This is the catch of Girmit: it is a history never truly understood in its entirety, only ever in its parts, making this history one that can be pushed and pulled in whatever direction of whoever, for their own personal agendas.

57 Academics such as Hugh Tinker in his book *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas* misrepresent indenture as slavery. While I am a staunch advocate for indenture being understood as a reformed system of labour from both the transatlantic slave trade and blackbirding, I would never identify indenture as a new form of slavery. Rather, it is the reformed liberal model of extracting bonded and unfree labour. Indenture would eventually become reformed—when colonialism and capitalism required another shapeshift—to inform and create the very labouring models under which all workers exist within contemporary neoliberal late-stage capitalism. If we only frame Girmit as slavery or an older form of immigration, we will never capture the extent of how power works and how these colonial entities normalise the totality of their power through reformist liberal logics. To offer these histories inside an expanded frame is a deliberate act of allowing for real destruction of the colonial order.

58 It was put into the initial contract and ordinance that the duration of "work" was for five to ten years; the latter option would provide the "labourer" right of passage back to India. In reality, due to amendments made to the Indian Immigration Ordinance, many were trapped into contracts for much longer periods due to what were consider labour offences, such as showing up late, absenting from work, not completing tasks, and not completing tasks to satisfactory level. All these offences resulted in penalties, such as pay being docked, being jailed with hard labour, or extensions of Girmit. The whole system of Girmit in Fiji worked to trap Girmitiyas into contracts to maintain labour output at all times.

59 As stated by Ordinance No. 1 of 1891, an ordinance is defined as: "...to amend and consolidate the law relating to Indian immigration." The languaging of immigration used by British colonisers and in official documents hides the colonial intentions of what Girmit is. The issue with framing this as "immigration" implies free movement that was not available to my ancestors. Whilst it is not slavery, it is not work nor is it a system of migration. I am wary of Girmit being lumped into either category of slavery or immigration.

60 Vijay Mishra, "The Feudal Post-Colonial: The Fiji Crisis", *Meanjin* 59, no. 3 (2000), 147.

When Girmit was invented and instituted as a different form of colonisation, it entered the world stage during a time of major change, with liberal colonial agendas in full swing. Settler colonialism was the more desired face of colonialism at the time, with corporate and franchise colonialism setting the stage to divide the world into the Global North and Global South. Girmit sits in this awkward period of time, when systems of power are changing rapidly and the nation-states of the region are beginning to be created.[61] It is right in the middle of two very important and ongoing histories that overlap and are inherently connected. The first—the transatlantic slave trade and blackbirding—informs Girmit, while later the second—the contemporary neoliberal globalised working structures under late-stage capitalism and its connection to biopolitical agendas—is informed by Girmit. You cannot have one without the other. I highlight this specifically to illustrate that both the act of colonising and the history that is created to understand colonisation and its many varied forms, within an Indo-Fijian context, are structures of debilitation.

Here I draw from and include Jasbir Puar's framework of queer assemblage theory and homonationalism from *Terrorist Assemblages*, further expanded upon in *The Right to Maim*, as important grounding to critically unpacking Indo-Fijian histories. In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Puar coins "queer assemblage theory" and "homonationalism", using both terms to move beyond and expand on intersectionality.[62] She argues that, when viewed through an intersectional lens, identities and histories enter a neoliberal process of categorisation that fixes them in place. Assemblages, on the other hand, allow a sprawling web of identities and histories to intimate coexisting. Puar goes on to apply this framework to homonationalism, where Western nations weaponise their provision of equal rights to queer people against other marginalised communities and the non-West, recreating nationalist and imperialist narratives instead of addressing their queer- and homo-phobic roots.

Following on from this, the essay collection *The Right to Maim* both critiques and draws attention to the complex ways the neoliberal settler state enacts policy and law through a biopolitical lens of control and bodily harm to afford rights to one community at the cost of another.[63] Each essay draws upon different laws and policies within the context of Israel's ongoing genocide of Palestinians, using the complex nature of power as it operates across nation-states;

61 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 189: "Britain's reasons for the acquisition of new territories certainly did not arise as a consequence of some sort of official conspiracy. British imperialism appears to have passed through various stages and each stage was marked by annexation of new territories for different reasons. Some were acquired because they were of economic importance while others were annexed because of their strategic positioning with regard to trade. Still others were colonised because their acquisition could protect the older more established colonies in the area. It could be suggested therefore that the annexation of Fiji came about because of its geographical proximity to Australia and New Zealand. Fiji also provided a haven for British settlers in Australia and New Zealand who might be in trouble because of land theft."

62 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages.*

63 Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

territories of the non-West as opposed to the West; and how bodies move across and navigate those spaces, with some being granted more rights than others. Puar discusses the contradictory politics of the desirable body and how that fits into structures of power and the desires of fascism. The desirable and valued bodies, regardless of citizenship status, accept their participation in the maiming and debilitation of whole communities in exchange for upholding and asserting their own rights—what these bodies trade for their complicity is the preservation of their own status as "persons" with the human rights that have been denied to those so objectified. The significance of Puar's writing is in its identification of how the liberation and freedom of one group, within the neoliberal colonial-capitalist model under which we exist, will always come at the expense of the liberation and freedom of another, as the conditions of both exist in complex webs of debility and control globally.

Debilitation is one of the tools of colonialism, and reveals a useful framework in understanding the specific forms of Girmitiyas' subjugation and Indo-Fijian structural racism.[64] Debilitation as a structural form of violence used to maim a people was executed in the Indo-Fijian context in multiple layers, through multiple spheres of people. Within these spheres are microcosms with different and unique interests in the maintenance of this debilitation. As Puar states:

> But, more perniciously, capitalism is also invested in producing and sustaining disability and debility. That disability creates more disability and relies on, if not engenders, a deeper entrenchment of debility in disenfranchised sectors of society, of the globe, is indeed one of the most insidious facets of a capitalism that normalizes "shock" rather than overcoming it, in order to sustain disaster capitalism. That is quite simply to say that disability, and creating and maintaining these patterns of disabilities to debilities, is good—meaning, profitable— for neoliberal capitalism. Beyond interrogating for whom identity politics benefit and for whom are they detrimental, this mapping gestures to how identity- and rights-based frames sustain the relation of perpetual, normalized crisis in relation to debility. Disaster capitalism becomes the norm that promotes the maintenance of the "disaster" of disability as debility— endemic, durational, and profitable.[65]

In contextualising how debilitation works on the racialised/non-white body, Puar brings forward the transatlantic slave trade as a form of colonialism that operated through both debility and disability at a large scale, inflicted across generations and multiple black communites who were stolen:

64 I come to understand the theory of debilitation that Puar lays out in *The Right to Maim* through the theory of necropolitics, coined by Achille Mbembe to denote how racialised people are constructed within different spheres of power operating between macro- and micro-structures, and how these spheres of power relate to each other, conferring death upon certain bodies over others. To read more, please refer to: Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

65 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 87–88.

> It is precisely the historical moment when one class of human beings was transformed into cargo that black bodies become disabled and disabled bodies become black. Racialization here is a form of impairment unto itself (black flesh as disabled flesh), as well as an invitation and solicitation to visibilize debilitation as a marking of this symbolic relationship (disabled flesh as black flesh).[66]

Debilitation in the context of the transatlantic slave trade, then, is a useful critical lens to apply to Girmit, but in the case of Girmit as a system of bonded labour that had debilitation built into every step.[67] To begin to understand the specific forms of debilitation that impact Indo-Fijians, we must return to the Girmit—the contract—that my ancestors signed, marking their supposed consent to this labouring system. Each Girmit lists my ancestors'—soon to be Girmitiyas or, as the coloniser would identify them, coolies—name, caste, religion, age, gender, next of kin, and any physical marks or physical disabilities that the surgeon general found during the medical inspection, documenting the physical conditions of the agricultural tools of Empire. There is no trace of the person who is being examined—they are broken down into parts to judge whether this body could and would withstand the impossible labouring standards.[68] To this end, each potential labourer at the depots had their skin inspected to determine softness or hardness—hardened skin being the desirable marker of a body seasoned to manual and hard labour.[69]

The Girmit is an important aspect of debilitation but is also one of the historical myths leveraged against my community in contemporary times to dismiss the extremity of this plantation violence, and to deny corporate colonialism in Fiji. This historical myth encompasses everything that misrepresents our histories. By way of a contract, the Girmit separated its unfree bonded labour from the transatlantic slave trade of the Americas and blackbirding within the South Pacific region and the settler state of so-called Australia. The sensibilities of Empire had changed; both at home in Britain and within the Empire's colonies, anti-slavery abolitionists groups were leading campaigns to call for the end of enslaved labour, lobbying to place pressure on colonial officials.

66 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 81.

67 As I have drawn from black anarchists in the formation of my own Indo-Fijian anarchist framework, I too draw from the histories of the transatlantic slave trade to produce theory for Girmit that can critically look to the complexity of colonial logics to dehumanise and fully transition a body into a labouring implement. Again, whilst I am staunch on acknowledging these two histories as specific in their contexts, I do find a sense of belongings in the writings and theory developed by descendants of the transatlantic slave trade, and I will continually return to their writings.

68 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 219–220: "CSR was working its labourers too hard, not paying them enough, and not providing adequate housing. Moreover it was recognised that surplus was being appropriated without much of it going back to the workers, even for food. The debility and the incapacity of the returning workers proved that exploitation of the worst kind was going on."

69 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 182: "As the examiner of emigrants in the depots, Laing pointed out that the examination of 'coolies' should include checking for diseases and the general state of the skin and muscular development, and 'note that if a coolie has a soft smooth skin he has probably been employed in housework and not as a field labourer; the arms and hands, making him move all the joints to see that he has free use of them; and look at the palms of his hands to see whether the skin is hard, as of one who has used them in labour..'"

A process of liberal reform took place wherein nothing was ever really abolished, just reformed and refined for different sensibilities. Britain recast itself as the "good" coloniser—a liberal, God-fearing leader of her subjects.

This single piece of paper, the Girmit, was meant to maintain the "rights" of the labourer, ensuring that indenture would not succumb to enslavement. In the case of Fiji, this piece of paper was only symbolic in nature, while laws and ordinances were used to reconstruct what was acceptable as "rights" for Girmitiyas and place constant pressure to ensure brutal labour extraction for big profit. The law became an extension of the process of dehumanisation by both recognising and identifying the labourer—the coolie—and strategically stripping them of their "rights" while also targeting the supposed lack of "rights" to create new norms around acceptable forms of labour extraction under colonialism.

When a person finally completed the process of "recruitment" and finished their medical inspection, they were to sign their contract. It was a simple inking of the thumb and pressing it to paper to stand for "consent". I see this single thumbprint as an absolute removal of personhood that began a process of racial reconstruction into the coolie. From this point in time, we as a people have been continually re-rendered into this racial identity, so much so that many of our own academics chose to self-identify our ancestors as "illiterate peasants".[70] For elite nationalist Indians, we were the hapless victims turned immoral by a system that destroyed the Hindu family and by extension the sanctity of an honourable life. We were enslaved, our women turned into "common prostitutes". We became a rallying cry for the Indian independence movement,[71] a movement that rendered us the voiceless victim, our pain and lived experiences appropriated for political agendas. Missionaries followed a similar logic to Indian elites, but instead of using us as a tool of the independence movement, missionaries looked to mould Girmit into the complex system of their own ideological orders. In the missionaries' narrative, our enslavement and degradation was used to amplify the missionaries' benevolent mission, upholding their divinity and noble cause.[72] The white settler population of Fiji saw us as anything but human—we were animals. Colonial officials saw our ancestors as "things" that needed to be accounted for—part

70 This usage of "illiterate peasants" is ever-present in lots of Indo-Fijian academia and appears to be stated as a fact aligning with the academic conventions of Western historiography. Please refer to the works of academics such as Vijay Naidu, Vijay Mishra, Brij Lal, and Ahmed Ali. I take issue with this framing being deemed as academic history or fact, as it uses derogatory language used to place our ancestors as lesser-than.

71 Charan and Pillay, "Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women", 30–39.

72 To see this white saviour logic that is rampant in C.F. Andrews's belief of himself, please refer to: Satendra Nandan, "Charles Freer Andrews (12 February 1871–5 April 1940): The Abolition of Indenture, A Centennial Essay", *Fijian Studies: A Journal of Contemporary Fiji* 15, no. 1 (2017), 130: "[Andrews] became obsessed with the fate of these indentured labourers... Like Gandhi he began to identify himself with them. 'One morning', he writes, 'about noonday while i was thinking of these things, lying on a chair on the verandah, I saw in front of me the face of a man in a vision. I was not sleeping; my eyes were quite open. It was that poor run-away coolie I had seen in Natal. As I was looking, the face seemed to change in front of me and appeared as the face of Jesus Christ. He seemed to look into my face for a long time and then the vision faded away.'"



Figure 19. *Four stamps of sugarcane,* Fiji, date unknown. Image courtesy of Quishile Charan.

and parcel of the bureaucratic colonial system, we were numbers. To the Company, we were an experimental testing ground for new forms of colonialism and extreme capitalist extraction; eventually, the Company would succeed in this new experimental form of colonialism by creating the tenant farming scheme, moving my ancestors into another sphere of voicelessness. Since the conception of indentured labour, every person who had vested interests worked to create layers of voicelessness and debilitation. The absence of personhood is overwhelming, to the extent that the accounts of our ancestors' resistance, refusal, and self-determination to create futures are consumed, marked, and maimed by the deficit narratives of our history.

The creation of the coolie racial identity is key here in understanding the constant rendering, re-rendering, and casting of bodies into controlled racialised masses—a type of moveable nothingness. I mention nothingness as for our bodies to have value they had to be dehumanised and then reconstructed into objects that are nothing, ready to have meaning reinscribed onto us. For Girmitiyas to exist, to have meaning, to be something, is for Girmitiyas and descendants to desire desirability—to desire to reject what they tell us is our history and to hyper-correct towards what we are told we should become—through the facade of security offered in being a subject of the state. To achieve this, we are debilitated, conveyor-belt-style. The nation-states and CSR had vested interests in profitability, selecting our bodies for extreme productivity; however, to ensure that we stayed in our place, they had to maim and debilitate us, confining us to a racialised hierarchy of labour executed for the Global North quietly within Fiji, part of the Global South. As Puar states: "The work machine and the war machine both need bodies that are preordained for injury and maiming, often targeted maiming".[73]

When this piece of paper—the Girmit—was conceived, it was known that the majority of our ancestors did not speak English. I cannot confidently state how many spoke a standardised Hindi or Urdu—the languages of Indian officialdom at the time. It was more likely that they mostly spoke regional dialects. To form the bridge between us and our colonisers, arkatis[74]—racialised non-white middlemen—were introduced. Arkatis were involved in recruiting, at times going directly to labouring hubs and into villages to bring desirable labourers to the depots. It is often stated throughout our histories that they fabricated the truth of the Girmit's conditions and, in more extreme situations when they needed to meet recruiting quotas, kidnapped and entrapped my ancestors. These middlemen were important in ensuring the flow of bodies.

Within the context of Girmit, the targeted maiming occurs in the continual rendering of bodies into a coolie for the means of production and profit. The means in which to maim a people

73 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 65.

74 To understand the process of supposed "recruitment" under Girmit, please refer to Lal, *Chalo Jahaji*.

looks different in certain contexts; for other peoples, debility looks different, but within an Indo-Fijian context, being replaced by Indian elites in our own histories of resistance blocks us from being able to see our own autonomy. But if we cannot be identified within our own histories, how will we ever understand our colonialism and how it is still impacting us today? The specific debility of my people is an entrapment into a belief that we can, within colonial capitalism, use careerism (which has now replaced manual labour and tenant farming as the pathway to class ascension), to escape cycles of oppression. It's the idea that if we just work harder, get another degree, we'll be able to escape, be liberated. But this entrapment just feeds the beast, harming our communities and, ultimately, each and every one of us. In a contemporary setting, we too can feed into the various forms of settlerism, because our colonisation created so many dimensions of undesirability, leading us to turn to the state to assert that desire and ascend our labour into different spheres of value.

The debilitating of a people keeps them "productive" or as bodies the state maintains in their disposability. This debilitation occurs through the execution of a narrative of the hapless male victim and immoral women who need to be saved from their own lives of degradation, and is extended under the narratives of tenancy farming, where Girmitiyas were supposedly given sufficient rights to continue as productive workers but not what we need to really survive, let alone thrive. Whether these narratives are deployed from the European settlers of Fiji, CSR, or the Indian elites, they all serve different functions of debilitating, controlling us in specific ways. To maintain a labouring body is to debilitate it to stay as a labouring body; we then understand our only function as through this desirability of state subject or mythical return to "pure Indianness". Both forms of desirability lead to debility, requiring that we remain as labouring bodies but under specific requirements—as either loyal subjects of our colonisers or loyal subjects of the soon-to-be Indian Hindutva state, with labour again being the defining feature of the prerequisite. The construction of these narratives and their deployment is intentional, as Puar states: "disability is a product—not a byproduct, but a deliberate product—of exploitative labour conditions, racist incarceration and policing practices, militarization, and other modes of community disenfranchisement."[75] Even in contemporary times, when many of us have left manual or hard labour, some of us ascending the class ladder, our histories are still products to be sold and bought. As some of us move into the migration hubs of the West—places like so-called Australia and New Zealand—the rights we receive here are used to help maintain a lack of rights and resources for our communities back home. Even the relative safety of being in the West extends to the acceleration of climate change in our Pacific nations, wherein those back home live with the ongoing realities of disaster capitalism that myself and others in diaspora don't experience on the same scale, with Girmit being a form of colonialism that hyper-accelerated climate change in Fiji.

75 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 65.

Impossibility of labour

> In dealing with the coolie - I have had 18 years experience and the more I see of the coolie the less I like him. Morally and socially I am, I think perfectly free from chance and contradiction when I say he is one of the most if not the most undesirable human being(s) in the wide world. Only for the labour of his hands and usually grudgingly given—if not forced—is he of value to us and only for this reason should he be tolerated or encouraged. We should consider this before letting him into the white man's sphere.[76]

Girmit as a colonial system of forced or bonded labour, functioned around the impossibility of labour.[77] Girmitiyas were awoken daily to an overseer numbering them off as they entered the fields. Labour was measured through a unit called a chain— roughly measuring 21 metres, with the expectation that seven to ten chains should be completed daily.[78] These chain measurements were the hallmark of over-tasking under Girmit, a tactic that kept labourers in perpetual contracts as non-completion resulted in heavy fining, wages being withheld, imprisonment, and extension of Girmits. *The Right to Maim* provides a critical lens with which we can better understand the impossibility of labour under Girmit, and how its eventual transition into the tenant farm system through the production of sugarcane quantities ensured extreme exploitative demands for increased profit. As Puar states:

> [Mitchell and Snyder's claim] situates the disabled body as the site of extreme productivity—and thus, profitability—precisely through its lack of conventional productive laboring value. Once excluded from the labor system because of their "unproductivity," disabled bodies have become the "sites for the exercise of the primitive accumulation that fuels capitalism." This productivity is thus not "measured by his or her ability to produce goods and services that satisfy social/human needs," as Erevelles points out, but rather "based solely on capitalist exploitative demands

76 Duncan, Manager of the Labasa Mill, in a letter to Edward William Knox, General Manager of CSR as quoted in Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 193–194.

77 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 211: "Thus plantation production was always characterised by violence for without violence or the threat of violence workers were unlikely to expend their labour for the benefit of their employers. The plantation production process in Fiji was no exception. Cane cultivation and harvesting required the expenditure of much energy and resourcefulness. Sugar cane production involved clearing the ground for planting, sowing the cane 'seeds', weeding the young crop, stripping the leaves prior to harvest, harvesting the cane by hand, taking it to the mills and then into bags which were carried to the waiting ships for transport to the refineries overseas. It was always hard work, and by the end of the day all labourers were exhausted. At the end of their 11-14 hour day, most workers dropped into their beds for a few hours of exhausted sleep before being woken at 4 or 5 am the next day to start all over again. During the slack season when cane did not have to be looked after quite diligently, there were always other types of heavy work to do around the plantation. Since the pay of workers hardly ever covered their costs of reproduction, there was no economic compulsion to work to earn a decent living. Under such circumstances it was inevitable that the indentured labourers would be unwilling and reluctant workers. The employers always complained about 'lazy' Indians and attempted to force them to work through violence."

78 Charan, "She Cut Me from Ganna"; Charan, "Unearthing the History of My Female Ancestors in Fiji"; Lal, *Chalo Jahaji*, 176.

for increasing profit."[79]

The cornerstone of British imperialism was the logic of forcing a non-white body through a process of hard labour to civilise them. Girmitiyas entered this process, but we did not possess "noble savagery"—a sinister, exotifying, and racist trope that Fiji's Governor General (1874–1880), Sir Arthur Gordon, used during the implementation of his Native Policy (1875). Gordon cast himself as the saviour to iTaukei, with iTaukei cast in turn as "saveable", and with some believing his policy to have stopped iTaukei from being sentenced to the same genocidal actions experienced by Indigenous peoples of settler states such as so-called Australia and New Zealand.[80] Gordon was also depicted as having protected iTaukei from systems like the transatlantic slave trade of the United States. Enter the Girmitiyas, put into this process to support the British civilising mission towards iTaukei while keeping Girmitiyas and descendants in cycles of debility. This very logic of saviourism wherein the subjugation of one group is utilised to subjugate another and vice versa, is designed to function as localised divide-and-conquer rule. The particular systems of subjugation for both iTaukei and Girmitiyas work in parallel, where different racialised groups, their labour, and their assigned value are pitted against each other in the service of colonial capitalism. Both the colonial pursuit of trying to "save" iTaukei and the implementation of Girmit operated as palatable and acceptable forms of violence on a global stage.[81]

79 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 77.

80 Bruce Knapman, Fiji's *Economic History, 1874–1939: Studies of Capitalist Colonial Development*, Canberra, ACT: Development Studies Centre, Research School of Pacfic Studies, The Australian National University, 2017, 3: "[t]he imperial impact was not a story of ruthless exploitation and dispossession of an indigenous people. It would have been had the white settlers had their way." For in depth conversation into Gordon's use of the Native Policy in Fiji, please refer to: Charan and Pillay, "Coolie Cut Cane".

81 Charan and Pillay, "Coolie Cut Cane": The question of labour for these plantations became an issue as Gordon's native policy had set about the regulations on iTaukei, restricting their movement outside of their villages. He believed that "immobility" was also part of saving them; this Native Regulation would continue to restrict iTaukei movement to and from urban centres until its abolishment in 1967. This restriction of movement in conjunction with the introduction of a native taxation scheme, where iTaukei would grow cash crops such as vegetation and other goods for the Government to sell for state revenue, would enable the Government to maintain "immobility" outside of the village. By implementing and enforcing the native taxation scheme and cash crop production on iTaukei, the Government was preventing them from seeking the more lucrative labour that was available to other non-white labourers in the colony.



Figure 20. *Stamp of Islands of Monu and Monuriki, Fiji,* date unknown. Image courtesy of Roshni Deo and Quishile Charan.

The development of an Indo-Fijian anarchism

Applying critical theory from various other spaces and communities is essential to my own creation of Indo-Fijian knowledge grounded in critical theory, critique as care, and anarchism. As a young community, it is important that we look to the anti-colonial, decolonial struggles of other communities who have been engaged in self-determination work for longer. Within the Indo-Fijian context, unpacking our histories through more expansive frameworks will, I hope, produce different ways of understanding not only our histories but ourselves and the futures we want to create. We are the formation of a new people because of what happened; there is no return to any mythical homeland because it never existed. Building a more succinct and recognisable Indo-Fijian anarchism is also about grounding ourselves as a people.

I identify the archives and academia as a site of maiming and as an intentional act of debilitation. Indo-Fijian history—its rendering and re-rendering—sits in a dynamic where entities of power and individuals who can accumulate power use and manipulate histories of unbelonging to transform them into constructed belongings, intended for further power accumulation. This construction is a state-recognised form of identification that provides more power to the institutions, and continues this process of bordering and ordering[82] bodies through the production of "history". This process informs many other types of debilities that are enacted on us as a people: the means of production; the authority and power to create, produce, and disseminate knowledge; and the means of self-determination are all withheld from us, to disable and de-capacitate us.

When considering the many ways in which my ancestors' self-determination has been hacked away from them, we must return to the site of the original wounding, beginning with the official narrative—archives-turned-academia—created as the authoritative story of Girmit. As I have identified earlier, our existence within the record of power is as binaries: either numbered-off possessions or as troublesome deviants. When we fail to fulfil our role as passive tools, we appear in official records as the "Indian problem" to our European colonisers and the "woman problem" to the Indian nationalists and missionaries. Beyond that, colonial officials and settlers also framed Indian Nationalists and elites into the "Indian problem". To the white frontiersmen and

82 Nadine El-Enany, "Bordering and Ordering", *In (B)ordering Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 17–35.


COMPANY
60¢
KA RAJ
'COOLIE-CUT' CANE SUGAR
THE COLONIAL SUGAR REFINING Co LTD

Figure 21. *Previous page:* Quishile Charan, *Company Ka Raj* (Company is King), 2021, full-pot dye avocado seeds and dandelions, archival images of CSR factories in Sydney, Australia, and Chelsea Sugar in Auckland, New Zealand, textile ink, cotton embroidery thread, and appliqué work, 164cm x 125.5cm, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū. Image courtesy of Quishile Charan.

settlers that made up the frontier societies[83] of Fiji, Indian nationalists became of grave concern, only because they were afforded more personhood than our labouring ancestors through their proximity to whiteness and class, which includes their Western education, abilities in English, and understanding of the colonial bureaucratic system and political mobility. Within settlers' fears of non-white invasion and occupation (a fear they could only have through their implicit understanding of their own violence under colonialism), they saw Indian elites as a legitimate threat to colonialism in Fiji, and they saw this threat as a microcosm of the global stage. While other observers, whether white or not, saw the Indian elites' presence in Fiji as anti-colonial defiance, in actuality Indian elites arrived in Fiji as a means of mobilising power for themselves. It has been hard for many who now come to observe and write about the history of Girmit, as its initial creation set in motion the intentional acts of our ancestors' assimilation to Indian Hindu-nationalism.

Throughout my research, I have continually returned to the "problem" of women.[84] Girmitiyas women were debated, condemned, and punished for the multitude of ways they fought back and resisted. I have and still to this day remain grounded in the reality that Girmitiyas women are the reason why Girmit was officially abolished. This is contrary to the academic tradition of labelling and identifying nationalist Indians—Gandhi, Dr Manilal and his wife Jaikumari, and their token white missionary C.F. Andrews—and the campaigns led by middle-class, upper-caste Indians in the subcontinent as our "saviours".[85] This prevailing myth of Girmit—that others had a hand in "saving" us—contributes to separating us from our own struggles, resistance, and, most importantly, our presence in our own histories. We were invisibilised to create space for European missionaries and privileged Indian ideals to compete with each other. Our histories became a battleground of competing superiorities between British Imperialism and the creation of Indian nationalism, Hindutva.[86] The best way I can describe how we were used is in the political mobilisation of our narratives of colonisation as either a justification for our colonisation (British colonisers) or the use of subjugation and oppression of others to embolden and enrage another

83 The traditional reading of most white people in Fiji at the time of Girmit is as settlers, but they were only temporary settlers, as Fiji was not a settler state but rather a corporate colonial state. It is very important to label Fiji history accurately as a frontier endeavour. There are white people who "settle", and settlerism is still a colonial dynamic that exists in Fiji, but to label the plantation class of colonisers solely as settlers, I believe, lends to a historical misreading. It is more appropriate and better encapsulates their sheer violence to label them as a frontier society instead.

84 Charan, "She Cut Me From Ganna"; Charan, "Unearthing the History of My Female Ancestors in Fiji"; Charan and Pillay, "Coolie Cut Cane"; Charan and Pillay, "Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women".

85 Charan and Pillay, "Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women"; Margaret Mishra, "'Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman': revisiting female deviance in colonial Fiji", *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17, no. 4 (2016), 67–78.

86 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 250: "One of their senior officials had already published similar opinions a few years previously when the Indian public could not have cared less about their compatriots in Fiji. But after the war years the situation was different. Indian nationalism was developing and so were local Indian-organised and owned industries needing surplus labour. An attack on indenture was part of the political manipulation of the new elite in India. The officials in Fiji were aware of the political implications of the publicity about morality on the plantations. The labour supply would be affected."

group of people for a national movement (Indian nationalists).

Here I would like to introduce Sara Ahmed's analysis of pain as an emotional landscape in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*—wherein power can be sought and accumulated through appropriating others stories of pain and trauma—as a useful framework in critically engaging with Girmit history. Ahmed discusses how emotions move in the world and how they have the power to shape politics, history, and the way we come to understand and view people and communities. The archive and its re-renderings in digital spaces and academia then become the emotional landscape that people keep drawing from, informing how people come to view us and how we view ourselves. This is the consumption of our pain as a politic of emotions that can be mobilised—the emotions of hate and fear towards us. As Ahmed states:

> Through emotions, the past persists on the surface of bodies. Emotions show us how histories stay alive, even when they are not consciously remembered; how histories of colonialism, slavery, and violence shape lives and worlds in the present. The time of emotion is not always about the past, and how it sticks. Emotions also open up futures, in the ways they involve different orientations to others.[87]

Being perceived as coming from a history only of pain and trauma, and having those pain narratives mobilised for communities other than our own has resulted in our younger generations "post-"Girmit seeing only their pain and trauma, and that understanding becoming an all-encompassing space-time itself. The absorption of Girmit as this narrow history has enabled the reconstruction and reordering of both our people and our histories within the archives and academia. I use the cultural politics of pain as a way to counter dominant narratives of my ancestors and place these misconceptions of both a people and history within their actual context: the appropriation of Girmitiyas' lived experiences to empower the Indian independence movement and the creation of the Hindu state.

Personifying pain as their own is one of the biggest characteristics of how Indian nationalists and missionaries engaged with indenture. I would also argue that during a time of trying to articulate to the world what the British had done to India, there was value in using Girmit stories to create a global image of the "enslaved Indian". Utilising the global consciousness of the transatlantic slave trade, the comparsion of Girmit to slavery became a common practice in newsprint media. Slavery already had an emotional landscape that people could identify and sympathise with, and this was a useful strategy in mobilising a nation towards the Indian struggle for freedom from the British. As Ahmed identifies:

> ...we feel sad about their suffering, an "aboutness" that ensures that they remain the object of

87 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2013), 202.

> "our feeling'". So, at one level, the reader in accepting the imperative to feel sad about the other's pain is aligned with the other. But the alignment works by differentiating between the reader and the others: their feelings remain the object of "my feelings", while my feelings only ever approximate the form of theirs.[88]

I want to discuss two pain narratives. The first is of women being defiled, taken away from the ideals of womanhood as a symbolic raping of the soon-to-be Indian nation-state.[89] The second—intimately interconnected to the first—is of male labourers during Girmit and the supposed loss of their morality to a system that both dehumanised them and corrupted "their" women. In both cases Girmitiyas were violently enforced within their respective essentialist modes of gender.

The first pain narrative mobilises rape stories and immorality as a cautionary tale of the nation of India being invaded, penetrated. It would become the grounds upon which reformists would argue for the end of indenture—not because the system itself was inhumane but because the system did not support the moral lives of its labourers, Girmitiyas. This was a strong belief of the British missionary C.F. Andrews, who was one of indentured labour's most famous reformers, friend of Gandhi, who funded him to travel and write reports on indenture in Fiji. During his second trip to Fiji in 1919, he would write his second report, the now-famous "Fiji Indentured Labour", which became the grounds for condemnation by Indian nationalists. In it, he states:

> By far the strongest ground, in my opinion, for the immediate closing down of the present indentures,—**thus making all Indians free**,—is the moral one. Here higher considerations of statesmanship come in, rather than legal rights or money payments. It has been proved up to the hilt that the coolie 'lines' of Fiji lead directly to the prostitution of the Indian women, and also that there is no possible remedy while women are forced by law to remain against their will in what are, for all practical purposes, brothels.... This moral argument is further strengthened by the fact, that the Indian community in Fiji, owing to the long years of past indenture, has reached demoralised condition. The cancellation of the remaining indentures will bring relief, not only to the indentured labourers themselves, but to the **Indian community generally, whose recovery of self-respect is the most vital factor to be considered**. I have seen with my own eyes the depression which has come to the Indians in Fiji and how they have been despised even by the Fijians themselves on account of their semi-servile status. This outlook of subjection and depression, which is so often apparent in spite of prosperous natural conditions, would vanish and a new attitude of recovered dignity would supervene, if once it were understood by all in the islands,—Fijians, Europeans and Indians themselves,—that not one single Indian was any longer under the bondage of indenture, but that every **Indian in Fiji was free** [emphasis

88 Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 21.

89 The immoral ideology of women in Fiji's plantations is also linked to the construction of the racial identity of the coolie of the colonies. Unlike men, women bore the mark of shame and demoralising traits of the system itself. Lal, *Chalo Jahaji*, 46: "Much has been assumed about the recruits themselves, much of it unflattering. 'Flotsam and jetsam of humanity', 'riff raff picked up from the streets of Calcutta', 'dregs of Indian society' are only some of the epithets used to describe them. G.A. Grierson wrote in 1882: 'I have been assured by every native from whom I have enquired, and by most Europeans, that only the lowest castes emigrate, and that nothing will ever induce men of higher class of life to leave India.'"

mine].[90]

In this report, what is of importance is how Andrews conflates the immorality of Girmitiyas as being the immorality of all Indians. Girmitiyas became a territory of India, our stories no longer ours, instead consumed into a catch-all category of the "Indian" experience. Girmit is the lived experiences of a specific community that has been racially constructed (marked and maimed) as labourers. Andrews continually states that to be free is to have morality reinstated. What a twist of events: a white man who never knew what it meant to be colonised deciding the conditions of freedom.

It is important that I am clear about this not being a story of abolition; instead, this is a story of a colonial system shapeshifting from one form into another—from Girmit to the farm tenant scheme. This scheme suited the sensibilities of nationalists and missionaries who saw the fixing of the "women" problem as moving them from the vices of the coolie lines and the "kasbir ghar" (prostitution house) to a home life, the idealised womanhood of the dutiful wife and mother.[91] This is the "freedom" that missionaries and nationalists become concerned with: freedom from being something of utter disgrace. In reality, this created more complex issues for descendants as it moved us into a colonial system that was not identified as colonialism; to the viewer/outsider, it was seen as the "settlement" of "Indians".

The academic Panchali Ray, in the foreword of the anthology *Women Speak Nation* (2019),[92] discusses the formation of the Indian nation-state and its use of women as its moral trump card. While the book focuses on religious gender constructions as they contribute to and embolden nationalist ideology, I extend this to include how these ideas reach their extreme in the lead-up to the Indian independence movement within the constructions surrounding Girmitiyas women and their supposed immorality. Nationalists used piety as their point of superiority to the Western powers, who spent much of their occupation of the subcontinent creating racial identities based upon backwardness and barbarism. The nationalist response to this was to create a domestic image of the dutiful, devoted, domesticated wife and mother as the benchmark of humanity and the national image of pride and strength. We see this ideology on a global stage in the lead-up to the Indian independence movement (1947 being when India gained its independence officially),

90 Charles Freer Andrews and Florence E. Garnham. *Fiji Indentured Labour: A Supplementary Statement* (Calcutta: 1919), 13.

91 Florence E Garnham, *A Report on the Social and Moral Conditions of Indians in Fiji* (Sydney: The Kingston Press, 1918), 18, quoted in Shaista Shameem, "Sugar and Spice: Wealth Accumulation and the Labour of Indian Women in Fiji, 1879–1930", PhD Thesis, University of Waikato, 1990, 236: "It is just here that the greatest mistake was made, clearly the introduction of families would have obviated much of the evil of Fiji to-day."

92 Panchali Ray, "Women Speak Nation: An Introduction", in *Women Speak Nation*, pp. 1–16 (New York: Routledge, 2019).

when these extremist ideologies were used as motivation towards noble saviourship in their push for the supposed abolition of Girmit. The personification of the nation-state as a Hindu, middle-class and -caste woman intentionally positions India as innocent and chaste, in need of protection as "invaders" attempt to penetrate the surface of the soft feminine and divine. Ray states:

> The fixing of territories as the "motherland" is not just an affective gesture but rather a political act that freezes both land and women as static "objects" to be possessed, guarded, and defended but never to be allowed any subjectivity. Thus, the nation-as-woman/mother (Bharat Mata) is to be protected by male citizens (her sons), which is a reinforcement of the imagination of "men-as-protectors" in the public sphere and "women-as-reproducers" in the private domains.[93]

Our ancestors never achieved divinity status like the middle- and upper-caste women of the subcontinent. We were never likened to gods and goddesses. We were only ever discussed as ignorant peasants who needed a guiding hand by the nation-state. Divinity would never be obtainable by a labouring population, especially one of forced labour extraction, but what we did possess in abundance was narratives of pain, trauma, violence, and of being violated. With these narratives, our ancestors and ourselves (Indo-Fijians) by extension became the perfect victim to stimulate a mobilisation on a global stage that still specifically disincludes the people who actually went through that colonial violence. In the grander scheme of things, this tactic distanced us further from our own stories. It reframed how these stories should be told, so that when stories of how we fought our oppressors under plantation colonialism do appear, they are disregarded for their dissonance with the image of us as hapless victims.

Of the specific forms of resistance that came out of Fiji Girmit, led by both women and men, the more militant tactics were led by women—a reflection of their specific role as both labourers and women expected to fulfil the domestic and sexual needs of others in the plantations. Women were not included in the recruiting for the earliest Girmit colonies, and men turned to the feared, queered activity of sodomy,[94] which white colonisers likened to acts of beastiality; to ensure the supposed stability and moral lives of men, women were later brought over. Women became required only for their fixed gendered roles as sexual objects, free labour of the domestic sphere, and to birth a new generation of labourers. On top of these demands, women came to Fiji obligated to also participate in plantation work. They were paid less than their male counterparts, reflecting how colonisers viewed women—as bodies who could not perform hard labour, labour of value. Women became both desired and despised; this dichotomy would become the binary through which women were seen, replicated, and debated for generations to come.

93 Ray, "Women Speak Nation: An Introduction", 1.

94 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 139: "For example, Captain Knox, the master of the John Calvin told of the practice Indian women had of 'changing their husbands' and also of the 'sodomy' that prevailed among the men 'to a dreadful extent'."

Women under this system were always framed as a problem, similar to the overall treatment of Girmitiyas except within a wider assemblage of structural oppression than men. Navigating two patriarchal worlds—the one of the subcontinent and the one of the new world they entered—the Girmitiyas women on the plantations were at the whims of European colonisers and their Christian morality. Women became the bearers of all immorality, seen as having the nature of animals, petty thieves, prostitutes, women with bad reputations, et cetera.[95]

These gendered ideals enforced onto women resulted in an underlying assumption that Girmitiyas women's bodies were of free use for both Girmitiyas and white men of the plantations. This resulted in rampant sexual assault and physical violence towards women. Women negotiated this reality of gendered violence by demanding that their sexual servicing, whether it be from assault or through consensual agreement, was paid for. As they were recruited in much smaller numbers, women began utilising refusal: picking their partners, divorcing, and remarrying at choice, or refusing to get married altogether. In stark contrast to the social constructs of India, they could negotiate autonomy as labourers under Girmit. While Girmit is a system of devastating violence, and not to be read here as romanticised, it is important to point out that Girmit in the women's context was negotiated and seen much differently to men, wherein women were constantly fighting to assert what agency they could.

Women demanding to be paid for sexual labour, leaving men of their own accord, and actively choosing not to marry became some of the biggest scandals of indentured labour. They left men—Girmitiyas and otherwise—both shocked and disgusted as to how Girmitiyas women were leaving the boundaries of what colonialism dictated of them.[96] Missionaries reported that Fiji's Girmitiyas 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."[97] Even Girmitiyas

95 Charan, "She Cut Me From Ganna"; Charan, "Unearthing the History of My Female Ancestors in Fiji"; Charan and Pillay, "Undoing History's Bad Spell on Women"; Margaret Mishra, "'Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman'"; Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 262: "There was no doubt that both colonial state and employers knew that in Fiji prostitution was rife. But the bartering of women's bodies was not defined as prostitution by them because to do so would place under scrutiny the colonial officials' handling of social life on plantations. But people like Andrews went to the other extreme. He labelled all women's associations outside of marriage as prostitution, thus muddling the boundaries for everyone, including contemporary scholars. Although Andrews' comments served to sensationalize and publicise the 'immorality' on the plantations, CSR and other employers were only able to act on what they knew within the context of overall profiteering. CSR officials offered few opinions about the extent of prostitution on the plantations but one, Hughes, eventually pledged that the company would increase the wages of women beyond ninepence (CSR F4.0.2.1)."

96 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 234: "This served to make the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' women. Good women were those who were married and had children with their husbands, did housework and were involved in religious duties (Andrews ibid), whereas bad women were those who flaunted their sexuality, refused to be married to one man, had children out of wedlock, and ran their own affairs. Even if women were not 'prostitutes' in the strict sense of the term they were labelled as such, leading many individuals into defining Fiji plantations as 'brothels', and the women as alley cats'"

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



Figure 22. Quishile Charan, *Company Ka Raj* (Company is King) (detail), 2021, full-pot dye avocado seeds and dandelions, archival images of CSR factories in Sydney, Australia, and Chelsea Sugar in Auckland, New Zealand, textile ink, cotton embroidery thread, and appliqué work, 164cm x 125.5cm, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū. Image courtesy of Quishile Charan.



Figure 23. Quishile Charan, *Company Ka Raj* (Company is King) (detail), 2021, full-pot dye avocado seeds and dandelions, archival images of CSR factories in Sydney, Australia, and Chelsea Sugar in Auckland, New Zealand, textile ink, cotton embroidery thread and appliqué work, 164cm x 125.5cm, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Photo: Seth Siope. Image courtesy of Quishile Charan.

men affirmed this perception of Girmitiyas women's "sexual promiscuity" and of Girmitiyas women using their numbers to their benefit and to take advantage of men. One interviewee, Hausildhar, stated: "For every one woman, there were four men and you know woman's habits. They changed men as they changed their lehengas."[98] These oral accounts appear in Vijay Naidu's *Violence of Indenture* (1980), a book considered part of the core 101 Indo-Fijian history syllabus. After Shaista Shameem addressed this ongoing historical sexism in her 1990 PhD thesis, she went on to identify how this historical-turned-academic sexism is now carried out by male descendants.[99] Twenty-four years on from the first issue of the book in 1980, Naidu addressed Shameem's critique in his 2004 reissue, stating in the foreword that his depictions of Girmitiyas women who "...used their sexuality to their advantage" were "gaps and weakness in the study". He goes on to note that "glaring in this regard was my uncritical acceptance of the view expressed in official documentary sources and the oral accounts of my male informants that women took advantage of their smaller numbers".[100] What is startling here is the time between the missionary account "Report on indentured labour in Fiji: An independent enquiry", published in February 1916, and Naidu's book in 1980—a span of 64 years. If we add the other 24 years between his first issue and reissue, that totals 88 years of this same tired, misogynistic narrative being regurgitated.

For their demand for fair compensation of their labour, Girmitiyas women were labelled as "prostitutes". Even the differentiation between consensual and non-consensual sex was conflated into this catch-all understanding, in which the only acceptable sex is the sex of a married husband with his wife; everything else was prostitution. This set a precedent for a binary in Fiji's plantations between good and bad women. The only time sexual assault is framed as rape is when disputes arising between labourers are discussed in the "official record"—where white men try to figure out what Girmitiya man has the territory over the troublesome woman in question. Beyond this, rape appears when Girmitiyas men chose to physically punish, through beatings or machete, white overseers for assaulting Girmitiyas women; when they reported these offences as overseers were "using their women" without paying; and at times for engaging in any paid sex

98 Vijay Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji*, 39; Charles Freer Andrews and Walter Washington Pearson, *Indentured Labour in Fiji* (Perth: The Colortype Press, 1918), 33, quoted in Shaista Shameem. "Sugar and Spice: Wealth Accumulation and the Labour of Indian Women in Fiji, 1879–1930", PhD Thesis, University of Waikato, 1990, 235: "One Indian man pointed out mournfully: Sahib... our women have lost all shame; they change their husbands as they change their dress."

99 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 246: "Contemporary scholars dealing with indenture echoed sentiments of the AGI's. Scholars such as Naidu (op cit) and Ali (op cit) maintained that women asked to be killed by taking advantage of their scarcity value on the plantations by leaving one man for another, or by willingly having sex with several men at the same time. Quite apart from the fun they appeared to have had in the process, they were also able to accumulate funds which served as the basis of their wealth. Indian men were unable to cope with women's 'promiscuity' and killed women out of jealousy and unhappiness. Many men frequently committed suicide as well. Thuswomen were to blame for their own murders and for the suicide of their men. Men's izzat or honour was being affected by women's dalliances. This is a sexist view which denies the historicity and diversity of women's experiences as workers."

100 Charan, "Unearthing the History of My Female Ancestors in Fiji", 46–48.

work with Girmitiyas women.[101] There was tension between male labourers and white men in the plantations: women, in their opinions, were to be owned and controlled by their men, but which men? These ideas of gendered territories and ownership resulted in women continually being blamed; even the accounts of male labourers attacking white overseers are vastly outnumbered by the accounts of male labourers attacking Girmitiyas women.[102]

I would argue that self-determination for our community starts with the women of Girmit and their many acts of resistance. This resistance was organised around the structures of plantations known as ganging, where labourers were split off into gendered groups for task work to be completed each day. These groups (gangs) became essential, especially for women, who used their numbers as both a means of protection and intimidation, targeting any man in the plantation setting that attacked them.[103] You could call out during an assault and the Women's Gang would be there, or you could tell another woman and the next day the Women's Gang would be there to physically beat and verbally call out men for their abuses.[104] Even though the Women's Gang makes a small appearance in the "official" record,[105] I have heard many an oral story among descendants of women fighting overseers and Girmitiyas men; it has become commonplace when I talanoa/baat karo with my community to hear of the Women's Gang.[106]

Abject disgust as a framework of resistance is important when coming to understand how

101 Charan and Pillay, "Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women", 9–10; Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 239–240.

102 Despite the occurrence being far less frequent, the murder of white overseers was taken more seriously due to them being seen as more human. I bring forward these examples to show how gendered violence is one of the main forms of violence and continues into the archives, and that it was not only white people participating in this gendered violence. For an example of this, I point you towards the oral accounts of white Australian overseer Walter Gill, who would remind Girmitiyas men about controlling their women. Comments of this type were common throughout the official record. As quoted in Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 253: "An account by Walter Gill who was the overseer of a woman's gang is also revealing. He dealt with a potential go slow strike of women by not letting them leave the field until each woman's task was finished. This resulted in the appearance of wrathful men who came to see why 'Their women were not in the "lines" preparing the evening meal. I told them...When a man complained that he had not eaten all day, I said that except for a small and hurried breakfast it had been like that with me, adding that if any one of the lazy troublemaking bitches were mine, I would whip the hide off her when I got to the "lines". Still angry, the men moved away to talk among themselves. More came. The moon rose. At nine a woman had my permission to go. Immediately she crossed the boundary-drain her man beat her with a stick. She was the first of many' (Gill op cit p 35). By telling the men how he (a sahib) would treat 'his woman' he was outlining the appropriate behaviour of Indian men towards the women."

103 Charan and Pillay, "Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women", 22.

104 hameem, "Sugar and spice"; Margaret Mishra, "The Emergence of Feminism in Fiji", *Women's History Review* 17, no. 1 (2008), 45: "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 Indian and European men who sexually and/or physically violated indentured women."

105 Charan and Pillay, "Undoing History's Bad Spell on Women".

106 When speaking with elders and at community events, it's common to hear the women talk about Girmitiyas women throwing overseers off their horses so that they could beat and attack them for their violence towards our community. For us, this makes up the landscape of Indo-Fijian resistance, first led by women.

Girmitiyas women used tactics of shame. Just as their bodies had been marked so they could be maimed, they too marked bodies and shamed them in retaliation. Since women were constantly characterised as criminals, prostitutes, or animals with the "morals of the poultry yard"[107] and the "uninhibited instincts of animals",[108] it was fitting that their resistance utilised abject disgust. Piss and shit became a way to humiliate; using ganging, in one account, women would encircle and isolate men, pinning them down to piss on them, one by one.[109] In another account, women walked over an overseer again and again until he shat himself. And in another, they threw an overseer in a sewer drain and threw shit at him repeatedly. Even the missionaries who worked with the elite Indians were aware of Girmitiyas women's ongoing resistance and, more importantly, the strength of women in the fight for self-determination for themselves and, by extension, decolonial action:

> The power of individual initiative has certainly become greater in Fiji than in India itself. The men are more self-reliant. I also met with a strength and vehemence of character among the women which I had not seen in India. Indeed it was so strange as to appear at first sight a dangerously adverse factor. It has certainly led more than anything else among free Indians to the constant repudiation of the marriage tie. But, all the same, it may be regarded in one sense as a "woman's movement" towards freedom, away from the extreme submissiveness under the caste system. The Indian women in Fiji, being in the minority, have learnt their power, and no husband can ill-treat his wife with impunity. The pity is, that nothing whatever has been done to increase their intelligence, and this new-found freedom appears to lead them more than ever to be the dupes of every charlatan in an ochre coloured dress.[110]

Enter the second pain narrative: the men's. This narrative was not by coincidence the more dominant narrative appropriated by both Indian nationalists[111] and European colonisers, as it utilised patriarchal fantasies of women's gendered ideals to enforce both colonial ideology and liberal reformist logic—a toxic mixture.[112] During the Girmit era, the stability of male labourers was of great concern to all involved in Girmit, including Indian nationalists. Due to the hierarchy

107 Charles Freer Andrews and Walter Washington Pearson, *Report on Indentured Labour in Fiji*, 31.

108 Walter Gill, *Turn North-East At The Tombstone* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1970), 36

109 Charan and Pillay, "Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women", 28.

110 Charles Freer Andrews and Florence E. Garnham, *Fiji Indentured Labour: A Supplementary Statement* (Calcutta: 1919), 25.

111 I would like to point out that Indian nationalism also harms Indo-Fijian cis-gendered straight men by racialising them as coolies but also emasculating them under that identity; there is a pay-off in achieving and maintaining patriarchy to accumulate power but, at the end of the day, these structures are harmful to all.

112 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 237: "Andrews and others were perhaps quite aware that plantation women were challenging male authority in a variety of ways and their impressions were reinforced by the unhappy complaints of Indian men. The solution for all of them was to make conditions appropriate for the restructuring of employment practices so that women could take care of their 'duties' in the home."

of labour production, men were seen as most genetically predisposed[113] to hard labour; their very maleness made their bodies stronger, firmer, harder to break. It became almost beyond human how colonisers envisioned Girmitiyas men, how their bodies were designed for brute force. Sugarcane as a monocrop is hard to work with—the labour is extremely extensive and intensive—and therefore they became the more desired labourers under the system, so much so that the documenting and retelling of labour under Girmit is mostly focussed on men. It is worth pointing out here that European colonialism worked on a logic that labour had the force to civilise colonised subjects, and that therefore this project was more for Girmitiyas men rather than women, women being placed instead in supporting roles of antagonist or dutiful wife.

Being turned into a civilised subject was more reserved for men. Even though colonisers did refer to Girmitiyas men as being animalistic and criminal too, they were still framed as more redeemable and worthy of being saved. Even under racialised hierarchies, gender was intersecting continuously and played a major role in how colonisers engaged with their subjects, both across racial and gender lines.

Of the many abuses of Fiji Girmit that helped the system earn its name as one of the most brutal colonies for indentured labour, the issue of high suicide rates was of grave concern.[114] Suicide rates in Fiji were the highest among the colonies and, at the time, higher than India itself. What was of concern was that men were dying at higher numbers and these suicides were claiming men of good labouring ages, with most being between 20 and 30 years of age.[115] The prime labour force was dwindling; good money had been spent in transporting them to Fiji, so this loss of assets and investment was a real issue. If male labourers kept dying, the fields would empty out and who would sow the seeds, and grow and cut the cane?

It was common practice to lay the blame of suicides committed by men under indenture not at the impossible labouring conditions placed on them—beatings, whippings—but rather at the feet of women's immorality. Eventually, the "official record" would change from labelling some women as "bad women" or a woman with a "bad reputation" to "prostitute".[116] The first pain narrative is linked to the second as the "bad" behaviour of women was framed as affecting

113 Charan, "Unearthing the History of My Female Ancestors in Fiji", 48–49.

114 Although suicide made up five percent of overall Girmitiya deaths during indenture, the nature of these violent deaths overshadowed their small percentage (for more information, please refer to: Lal, *Chalo Jahaji*, 216).

115 Charan, "Unearthing the History of My Female Ancestors in Fiji"; Lal, *Chalo Jahaji*.

116 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 254: "All sexual associations entered into by women and men outside wedlock were viewed as examples of prostitution. Even 'sexual promiscuity' was defined as 'prostitution', the chrioniclers refusing the mention whether any money or other goods actually changed hands in return for sexual favours. This bias is also evident in the work of contemporary scholars. In the literature no distinction is made between actual prostitution (i.e. where payment was made) and that which was mere sexual dalliance and adventure. Sometimes serial monogamy was also defined as prostitution."

Girmitiyas men, who had no chaste and devoted wife to keep the symbolic heart of the home and her husband healthy and happy.

Both CSR and the colonial government of Fiji took it upon themselves to wash their hands clean of their offences, entering people into a system of absolute dehumanisation. They recast themselves from colonisers to concerned parents, and Girmitiyas women the villain, cartoonish in their supervillainy and their plotting and scheming. The narrative of Empire was that Girmitiyas women were causing the suicide of men through controlling their sexual power in the plantations—a classic femme fatale fantasy.[117] Men were falling into perpetual melancholy or running off into the arms of another man because they could not obtain the affection or warm embrace of a woman, or the Girmitiya man, emasculated, had let his woman become the authority over him, or that he could not "keep his woman", or that "his woman" was exploiting herself through sex work or for mere possesions. As the narrative continued, it was justified that suicide was part of restoring an Indian man's honour. Even when the murder of Girmitiyas women was documented, it was excused away through the same ideas of shame and honour—that murdering an unfaithful and shameful woman was how honour must be restored.[118] And maybe if honour was maintained, then the cane could continue to be cut. This is how the "official record" kept narrating the abuses of Girmit, constructing an important trait: that women were the bearers of a shame/honour dichotomy, they were the ones at fault, and they needed to be reprimanded. Indian nationalists took these colonial narratives and furthered them through their own conservative ideals of patriarchy, deciding that if marriage is restored as an institution then women would surely give up their depraved lives.

Both pain narratives were used strategically: one recast women as victims who needed protecting and saving; the other framed men as victims needing their dignity restored as husband, sole income earner, man, and Hindu. Rape narratives of hapless women circulated in mass media, but instead of the stories of women fighting overseers, pissing on and throwing shit at men, the stories the media loved best were the ones of women who would rather kill themselves than be raped, hearkening back to the older tales and mythologies of a mystic, medieval era of India, of Maharanis and Maharajas and Mughal invaders, just as some epics have depicted women who would be married young to save their chastity from Mughal men,[119] or in religious texts such as

117 Charan, "She Cut Me From Ganna", 17: "These narratives revolved around women wielding some magical power over men within their small numbers, men dying."

118 Charan, "Unearthing the History of My Female Ancestors in Fiji", 52–54; Charan and Pillay, "Undoing History's Bad Spell on Women", 9–10.

119 Swapan Chakravorty, "The Verma Committee report, 2013: Notes on nation, gender, and crime", in *Women Speak Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 33: "...who applauded the khap because it had taken steps to save Hindu women like the males in their community had reportedly done heroically in the Mughal era by getting their young women married before the Mughals could lay their hands on them."

the Ramayana, where Sita, Rama's wife, walks through fire on return to her home after being kidnapped for years to prove her chastity. What was emerging was a tale as old as time, warlike in its personification of a valiant warrior trying to stop women from being raped and children from being slaughtered.

In my previous writing with Esha Pillay, "Undoing History's Bad Spell on Women", we discussed how Indo-Fijian men within academia reinforce misogynistic writing of rape narratives, such as Brij Lal in his chapter "Kunti's Cry" from *Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji* (2000), and, as I have discussed earlier, Vijay Naidu in *The Violence of Indenture*. These texts frame women's promiscuity causing depression and suicidal ideation in men. These two academics, who are also descendents of Girmit, and whose work is considered foundational to an understanding of Girmit history, replicated and adopted colonial and conservative Indian nationalist values towards Girmitiyas women, by extension maintaining patriarchy for Indo-Fijian women[120]. These are the ongoing impacts of forcefully taking a voice and a history away from a people: that we too will replicate and believe these colonial falsehoods.[121]

When we take a closer look at the circulation of media, specifically newsprint media of this era, we have two parallel realities that exist in tandem. One is from newsprint media targeted to frontier and settler European populations both back in Britain and in her colonies. Then we have the newsprint media that circulated India. Here I would like to point out that while there was a genuine interest in Girmit/indentured labour as a system of abuse that relied on the forced and extracted labour of those who left the sub-continent, the primary focus, in my belief, was to generate targeted outrage, to produce a feeling of empowerment through those suffering under Girmit to embolden the independence movement in India. The desire for these narratives of pain, where the rape of an "Indian" woman was likened to the violation of the nation, Mother India, meant mass circulation of rape stories in the colonies.

120 Charan and Pillay, "Undoing History's Bad Spell on Women", 21: "What is deeply upsetting about Kunti's story is that it was chosen precisely for how she maintained upper-caste Indian values of womanhood; the action of throwing herself into the water, choosing death over degradation, confirmed Kunti's "bravery, patience and strength of mind." The reactions in India to Kunti's story implied that for other Girmitiyas women who had lost their chastity, their lives had essentially stopped; they were incurable. Because Kunti is chaste, she can have a life after indenture."

121 White academics, too, have reinforced these narratives, such as Robert Nicole's *Disturbing History: Resistance in Early Colonial Fiji*, which at the time of publishing did provide an acknowledgement of resistance but the framing of it was negative, as "petty acts of resistance". Charan and Pillay, "Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women", 26: "The positioning of these acts of survival by academic Robert Nicole as 'women's petty acts of resistance,' or the fact that Brij Lal does not see these reactions to labouring conditions as resistance, highlights how the smallest acts of female resistance—conscious or unconscious—continue to be undermined. The dominance of ideologies of passivity as a trait of female Girmitiya clearly indicates the damage that has been done by allowing a non-colonised and/or cis-gendered man of colour to try to write and make sense of the lives of female Girmitiya—a "double colonised" body—and what they perpetually had to go through to survive. These agitations, moments of rebellion and resistance may be small acts but over time they accumulated and had some of the biggest effects in the fight against indentured labour."



Figure 24. *Cane Fields, Nadi District,* 1947. The Australian National University Open Research Respository, Canberra, Australia. Photographer unknown.

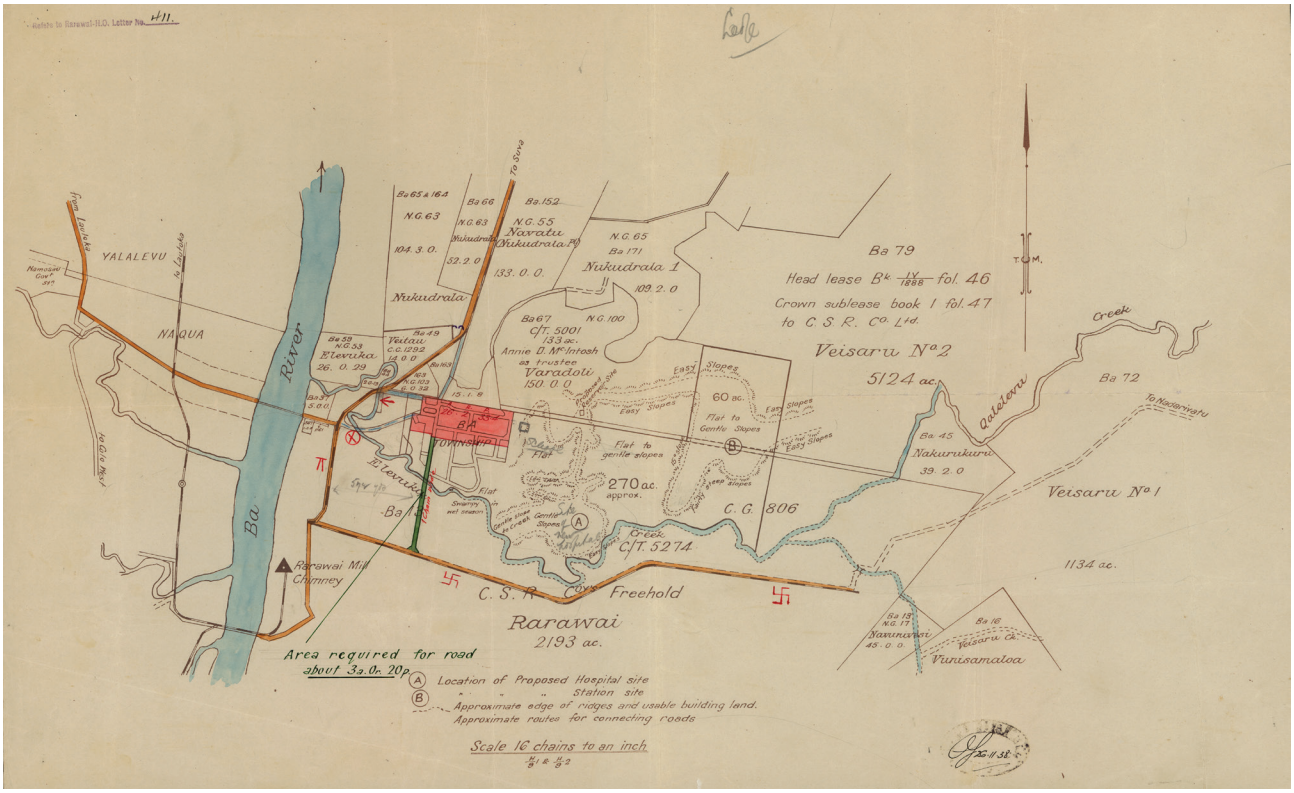

Figure 25. *Rarawai - Plan of Ba Township,* 1938. The Australian National University Open Research Respository, Canberra, Australia.

Tenant farming scheme: Kissan aur khet aur CSR

In considering how these pain narratives carried political currency in enabling and justifying liberal reformist logic, we must return to how the same liberalist logics re-formed (not abolished) the transatlantic slave trade globally, metamorphosing labour exploitation into Girmit. Even within the United States, slavery continued under shapeshifting forms;[122] so, too, did Girmit eventually enter into a new form: the tenant farm system.[123]

Implemented by the colonial government and CSR, with the encouragement of anti-indenture bodies and Indian elites, the tenant farming system provided labourers with 10-acre plots, subdivided down from the plantations, and a quota for production of sugar at a set price. The tenant farming scheme and the evolving Marriage Ordinance Act[124] were deemed as suitable amendments to Girmit, resulting in Indian elites, missionaries, and anti-indenture commentators to misidentify this reformist act as abolition. But it only succeeded in satisfying their sensibilities as observers of oppression, without actually rectifying the injustices experienced by those who lived through plantation colonialism. Because we were deemed to have sufficient rights under the tenant farming system, this transition onto 10-acre farms has largely not been identified as colonialism to this point.[125]

This scheme is a by-product of India's emergence as a nation-state, its desires for geopolitical engagement with Fiji, and its Hindu-nationalist agenda. The dangerous liberal reformist logics that pleased anti-indenture missionaries and Indian elites demanded a new, more acceptable, system, and labelled it as abolition. In reality, these supposedly revolutionary acts were a collection of men with power sitting in councils, running Imperial Britain and the colonies, using law, legislation, and liberal logics to create acceptable forms of violence where they could hide the colonial-capitalist production that was needed in circulating and maintaining wealth, not only

122 To understand this better I would recommend the book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarnation in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander, and the Netflix Documentary *13th*.

123 The tenant farming system officially began in 1920, with experimental forms of the tenant system being conducted by CSR throughout Girmit.

124 The conditions of marriage under Girmit were first outlined under the Indian Immigration Ordinance 1891. The ordinance covered all laws relating to Indian immigration throughout the Girmit period and continued to be revised throughout Fiji's history.

125 Another form of this liberal reformist logic was the Masters and Servants Act, which was an ordinance that transferred "free" Girmitiyas to tasks and labour outside of the plantation system, as it was illegal for Girmitiyas to not "work". This act still functioned as bonded labour. Many Girmitiyas, if they did not move into the tenant farming system, would enter this labouring "contract" instead. Note that the Masters and Servants Act was in effect during and after Girmit.

of CSR and its shareholders, but of the settler states of so-called Australia and New Zealand. Girmitiyas became the acceptable labouring force outside of these Western countries, providing cheap labour and raw sugar, because we were already maimed as bodies for labour.

I identify and include the tenant farm system among the territories and injustices of colonialism committed against my community, as an intentional act of debilitation. Part of this debilitation occurs through denying that tenant farming, within the Fijian context, devastated the land through monocrop plantation colonialism, which accelerated and continues to accelerate climate change, and ushers in disaster capitalism by entrapping Fiji into monocrop production and labour as industry. As Puar states: "[The Americans with Disabilities Act] ironically desires assimilation of people with disabilities into some of the very structures that debilitated them initially".[126] The most appealing aspect for CSR of moving to the tenant farm system was sending the abuses of sugar exploitation, which were much more public under Girmit, into a new sphere of privacy and isolation, moving them into a neoliberal model of "choice" in entering into leases. The contract that would bind men as labourers (and their family as a free source of labour) to their plantation and set task work was replaced with a lease agreement that defined and set out by law the terms for production, quotas, and quantities, in effect setting a labour standard, including output and production for the conditions of living.[127]

I would like to be clear here that while there are similarities between how we and Indigenous communities were treated, we experienced specific racialisations based on coming from our supposedly shameful forced labouring history. Our transition into other colonial modes of coercive control through farming (the full implementation of corporate colonialism in Fiji) is seen more within terms of "settling". The haphazard tendency of colonial officials to lump people into homogenous groupings meant that as we were no longer "native" (when our ancestors were still in the subcontinent), we were conflated into the roles of emigrant and settler. Both terms are clear and well-documented throughout the official records of the administration and CSR, but in reality they have no meaning to Girmitiyas. Not all colonial subjects exist the same way within the colonial hierarchy; at this time and under their conditions of arrival, Girmitiyas were not emigrants or settlers. Girmit in fact predates immigration as a concept, as noted in "The Agreement and the Girmitiya" (2021): "That the government of India could even authorize migration to another colony was itself a legal innovation that predates the modern conception of

126 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 75.

127 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 150: "...the production of sugar still required a large labour force if only during planting and harvesting, and it was this that encouraged the industrial planter eventually to lease out plantations to small peasants, thus passing on the costs of production to the entire peasant family."

immigration regulation."[128] On a technical level, Girmit cannot be immigration, because that's not how it works as a system of colonialism.

Being contracted or on a lease, or not, was an important distinction in the changing landscape, but the conditions of freedom still differ between those Girmitiyas who could buy their way into stability (through class, business, and owning land) and those who were in abject poverty due to the impossible labouring standards of Girmit. There needs to be a revisiting of all Girmit writing to reevaluate the false equivalencies made around terms like settler, immigrant labourer, migrant labourer, free and unfree labour, and Girmit. In particular, the binary of unfree vs free labour is important to consider in this shapeshifting colonial landscape. Girmit is labelled as an "unfree" system of labour, while tenant farming is framed as a "free" system of labour that could be "chosen". As John Bates Thurston, colonial official and Governor of Fiji (1888–1897), wrote in response to the Agent General of Immigrants in relation to a discussion of the future of "free" Girmitiyas and how they were already freely negotiating spatial realities openly with iTaukei: "The primary object of introducing Indian immigrants for ten years was, and I take it still is, to secure a working population and nothing more".[129] The observation indicates that it was understood openly among colonial officials, those in charge of governance, and CSR—the Company with the money—that the condition of freedom for Girmitiyas was upon being and continuing to be only labourers.[130]

The only way for most Girmitiyas to continue living was through the facade of choice this scheme presented. But in reality, where else are we meant to go? This aspect of our colonisation is always conveniently forgotten by almost all involved. This intentional act of debilitation, then, is used as the basis to grant others rights that we weren't even afforded, such as the Free Immigrants Act, which opened Fiji's borders to a merchant class of upper-caste Punjabi and Gujarati communities to conduct trade in Fiji.[131] Further pushing our young community, Girmitiyas, now Indo-Fijians, who were shuffled, alongside merchant class and upper-caste migrants, into a general racial bracket of "Indian", despite our communities' crucial differences in every way: ethnicity, cultural background, and so on. While capitalism and wealth accumulation was blamed on Indo-Fijians, the free migrant communities were not targeted for maiming to maintain debilitation as a labouring body, which informs their privileges and relative mobility.

128 "The Agreement and the Girmitiya", *Harvard Law Review* 134, no.5 (2021), 1836, https://harvardlawreview.org/print/vol-134/the-agreement-and-the-girmitiya. Please note the author has not been attributed in the original.

129 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 365.

130 Within the confines of this exegesis, I do not have the time or space to further break down the various forms of labour exploitation that took place in Fiji after the supposed abolition of Girmit, specifically of the Masters and Servants Act.

131 For more information about the Free Immigrants Act please refer to: Kenneth Lowell Oliver Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: A History to the End of Indenture in 1920* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962).



Figure 26. *Rarawai Mill - Indian Tenant Farmer's Homestead,* circa 1940s. The Australian National University Open Research Respository, Canberra, Australia. Photographer unknown.

Colonialism is generally understood in the context of Fiji to be the British Empire, but at the stage that the tenant farming was implemented, the colonial power changed hands from the British Empire to the colonial state of Fiji, based on the same systems and structures but rebranded, whilst also pushing earlier problems on the new nation to solve. It is generally understood that colonialism was a project undertaken by the Empire solely, but this understanding forgets that colonialism requires capital, and a lot of it. Enter CSR, the company of so-called Australia that has managed to evade its brutal and violent histories of colonising through being solely seen as a business. In this case, the two are true at the same time: CSR is a business and CSR is a coloniser.[132]

Part of the racism that Fijians as a whole experience is how people continually misrepresent our histories and lack any knowledge of colonialism and the context-specific forms it took on in Fiji. One of the biggest failures of most academics looking at indenture in Fiji is the complete absence of the narrative of how CSR became the sole colonising body. Other entities strengthened CSR's colonialism over time through frontiers and plantations, helping to camouflage CSR as a neutral institution over time in Fiji as almost everyone came to rely on the Company. White planters, government, overseers, investors, and to a degree I can imagine my own ancestors being happy when they first moved to tenant farming, hoping this would be welcomed progress from Girmit. But I find it hard to wrap my head around this liberal wet dream that supposedly wraps up this complicated history by painting heroes and villains in broad strokes. After this so-called abolition, where were all the supposed reformists who were so concerned with the morality of indenture? They dabbled in being moral heroes, then more or less washed their hands clean once they got the idea of reform they desired so dearly.[133] When the end of Girmit came into view, as it inevitably would, CSR was happy to provide an "alternative" that suited their growing business model and drive to cut out the middlemen who caused expenditure waste.

This scheme cut out the plantation and plantation owners as the middlemen between the colonial government and CSR. This way, CSR could engage directly with labourers. The Girmit became the lease, which defined the terms and agreements of living on that land, including a commitment to being a perpetual and generational labourer. Calls for abolition of indenture resulted in the colonial government of Fiji also amending the Marriage Ordinance Act, an especially insidious move, as it was altered to state that married women were not allowed to be employed, leaving

132 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 75: "it has become evident that one of its shortcomings is that it uses capitalist logic to solve a problem largely created by capitalism. It mistakes the demands for greater incorporation into economic circuits of productivity as a tacit acceptance of current structures of laboring and workplace conditions, and transposes and thus dilutes a systemic critique of structures of employment into a liberal identity politics focused on inclusion and recognition."

133 Britain lets India claim this history of abolition because it suited Britain's desire to brand itself as a "good coloniser", plus it lets them avoid admitting that they ran out of money to continue with indentured labour.

husbands the only employable body.[134] This incentivised people to only hire married men, undermining the financial independence of single women and forcing many Girmitiyas women into marriages for survival.

The historical denial of the tenant farming system as the continuation of colonialism and as debilitation is part of the institutional racism experienced by Indo-Fijians today. CSR trapped Indo-Fijians in cycles of perpetual debt, with CSR functioning as land leaser; employer; decider of the price of purchase (which was decided upon a racial basis, with the prices for white planters during Girmit being set as higher), quotas, and farming materials used; and the sole purchaser of raw materials.[135] This transition—plantation to farm—is historically viewed as our community receiving "rights", masking the violence of the tenant scheme and our debilitation as a community harder to pin down. Even at an international level, moving us to the tenant farming scheme was seen as good enough for the world as it watched the liberal reform metamorphosise plantation to farm. We were "settled" and that was enough.

This reform of Girmit was smart in how it concealed itself through this lens of "settlement" and "employment". Specifically, it set Girmitiyas up as "freed" subjects after the completion of their contract and then at a mass scale at the officially recognised abolishment of Girmit in 1920. This supposed abolishment created an idea that the system of Girmit was finished, khalas. It helped that the settlers who operated the plantations were leaving in mass numbers due to their debts—they were going broke, so they returned to either so-called Australia or New Zealand. Because CSR's main operations existed in Sydney, Australia, with Chelsea Sugar in Auckland, New Zealand,[136] CSR as a company could hide behind its indirect rule strategies—CSR worked remotely from its headquarters in Sydney, sending a revolving door of representatives that travelled between the two countries, maintaining a constant flow of hyper-surveillance on employees in both countries.

As I have discussed earlier, through this ongoing misrepresentation, and misinformed ideas of

134 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 409: "Indian men were only too pleased- they were busy reconstructing their identity in Fiji and the domestication of women was a necessary part of the reconstruction ideology." Shameem continues on page 421: "After 1920, Indian women disappeared from the public arena. Most were denied paid work after indenture was over, and others were absorbed into farms and settlements that were deliberately set up by CSR to encourage 'family' production. The development of the Marriage Ordinances after 1920 exacerbated the domestication of women on farms, and as 'housewives' women were removed from the official figures on 'productive' workers. Thus their work, which was already unpaid, also became invisible, and their protests silenced. Despite the failure of the official statistics to discount women's work as 'productive' activity, it is obvious that what women did on farms and in the home was 'work'. Without their labour in the gardens and homes men would have found it impossible to run the farms, the individual size of which was calculated on the basis of 'family' labouring capacities."

135 Girmit moving into farm tenant leasing is about our assimilation. As per Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 75, it:"dilutes a systemic critique of structures of employment into a liberal identity politic focussed on inclusion & recognition."

136 Charan and Pillay, "Coolie Cut Cane".

what and how Fijian colonialism functioned, the complexity in which it worked is not understood well. For example, there is belief that the plantation system in Fiji worked off of smaller, privately owned plantations, but in reality Fiji was one company's—CSR's—monopoly. The monopoly was achieved through phases:[137] first they just owned the mills, later buying land and leasing it to settlers who were broke and trying to make their fortunes in Fiji; then they started to absorb plantations or farms that financially destitute settlers had deserted. The reality of sugar as a viable industry in Fiji meant that only big capital—the money and resources that CSR as a corporation could provide—could sustain its experimental form of indirect or corporate colonialism.[138] Officials commented that the transition from the plantation to the tenant farm system was "'the boldest experiment in Colonial agriculture during the present century".[139]

Part of our debilitation is the misidentifying of our colonialism as forms of liberalist positive change. In reality, the tenant system was a more palatable and acceptable form of violence. The transition from Girmit to the tenant system over time has become subsumed into a wider discourse around colonial settlerism in the Pacific region. This is why I find it so urgent to recognise the significance of being able to understand Fiji's colonial histories through corporate and franchise colonialism, rather than settler colonialism. But make no mistake: Indo-Fijians, in contemporary times, do participate in settlerism, albeit differently to white settlers. White settlers arrive with the free movement to be settlers, but in contemporary times, we view liberation as having the same access to privilege as white people, so we do engage in settlerism as a function of neo-colonialism at a global scale but it's the very condition of our colonialism that has made us want to desire settlerism. Settler colonialism and corporate colonialism inform each other, but they operate in different contexts. The white settler dream of so-called New Zealand, of the 10-acre lifestyle block, or how farming was a colonial endeavour carried out by white settlers

137 Michael Moynagh, "Brown or White? A History of the Fiji Sugar Industry 1873–1973" PhD Thesis, Australian National University, 1978, 8: "The history of the industry can be divided into three phases. The first, the European planter phase, lasted from about 1870 to 1916. During this period the Colonial Sugar Refining Co. acquired its dominant position in the industry, building the Nausori, Rarawai, Labasa and Lautoka mills. Of the other mills in the colony, only two - at Penang and Navua - survived the fall in raw sugar prices in the 1880s and '90s. Cane was grown either by European planters for sale to the mills, or by the mill-owners themselves. In the 1890s the Colonial Sugar Refining Co. began to lease its estates to overseers of the company, and after 1905 the process of leasing was accelerated so that by 1916 the bulk of the company's cane was obtained from European planters. Estates were worked mostly by Indian indentured labourers, who after serving their indentures began to settle on the land, often as cane farmers. The second phase started in 1916, when the end of the indenture system put upward pressure on wage rates. In 1920 efforts by employers to prevent a sharp and permanent rise in wages resulted in a strike by labourers on the southeast of Viti Levu. The following year there was a strike by Indian cane growers on the west of the same island. The shortage of labour was solved by settling Indians on land formerly cultivated as estates, so that they would grow cane on plots averaging about ten acres each."

138 Moynagh, "Brown or White?", 1: "No other sugar industry in the world has nearly all its cane grown by such a large number of small growers—now numbering over 16,000. Nor can there be many which for almost their whole history have been so dominated by one company, the Australian based CSR Ltd, formerly known as the Colonial Sugar Refinery Co. Ltd. From 1924 to 1973 it was the sole miller of sugar in Fiji."

139 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 372: "The gradual adoption of what officials themselves called 'the boldest experiment in Colonial agriculture during the present century' (Potts: Pam 384 p 6)."



Figure 27. *Nausori Mill - Indian Cane Growers Home, Naselai,* circa 1940s. The Australian National University Open Research Respository, Canberra, Australia. Photographer unknown.

when coming to New Zealand; in Fiji, this is a different reality, with the 10-acre farm acting as a functional form of indirect rule over Fiji, where we still cut parts of the world's cane (mainly Europe).[140] This history of debilitation has, in turn, impacted Fiji through ensuring that one of our main industries was sugar. The country still holds onto this industry even though we cannot compete with newer forms of indentured labour taking place in countries such as India and Brazil.[141] But Fiji is stuck, still figuring out what's next for this industry.

The tenant farm system helped to maintain a divide-and-conquer tactic, wherein it placed Indo-Fijians and iTaukei on opposing sides. I would argue having us lease the land made us the face of the land dispossession in place of the company that ran it. Our particular position made us voiceless but also feared, placing us into new geographies of isolation (more on that later) that were seen as a necessary action for our rebellion, especially where women are concerned.

I identify both the tenant farm system and the Marriage Ordinance Act of colonial Fiji as historical acts of punishment towards our communities for their refusal and rebellion, again especially where women are concerned. It is of no coincidence that both schemes targeted Girmitiyas women and pushed them into the private sphere. Just as all the colonial characters under Girmit expected Girmitiyas men to keep "their women" in check, moving the "women problem" into the private sphere was about re-enforcing this dynamic of control over women, making them bound to a husband as married men became the benchmark of employable bodies in Fiji. As my aaji says, "they say housewife, I say self-employed." This transition into a new colonial system became a new reality women negotiated. As they had done with Girmit, they continued to transform that colonial space to seek what autonomy they could, and so too did these acts of resistance and rebellion continue.

One such act was the 1920 strike, which took place across Suva and Rewa, and was one of the largest labour strikes ever in Fiji. Girmitiyas, knowing that Girmit was soon to be legally "abolished", were concerned with their human rights.[142] They had questions of citizenship and wages that no one was answering. At the time, our community was also going through another period of being starved, with rations having been drastically cut and food prices raised to new

140 Charan and Pillay, "Coolie Cut Cane": "Through this land-leasing system, costs could remain low, which meant CSR could still compete with global prices, with New Zealand benefiting from this enormously due to the discounted rates for sugar they received in this period, for which the New Zealand Government thanked the company. Through using a landlord system, controlling all aspects of production, the long racist history of CSR amalgamated into a more complex system of capitalism and colonialism. A CSR official pointed out that 'From the number of women and children working on the smaller farms it is evident that the leasing of the land has increased the number of workers in the industry.'"

141 Charan and Pillay, "Coolie Cut Cane".

142 It is often mistaken that the 1920s strike was a workers' strike, but I would frame it more as an uprising by those coming from plantations who were concerned about their future.

unaffordable heights.[143] So they striked.[144] The 1920 strike catalysed the sugarcane strikes that followed in 1921. Academic texts often frame Dr Manilal and his wife, Indian elites, as the instigators of the 1920 strike—the brains behind the operation, leading my foolish people to rebel. This misremembering has emboldened the narrative that figures such as Dr Manilal were the leaders of resistance at large instead of us. However, in my own research, both in my master's and later on in an essay written with Esha Pillay, following a deep history of resistance led by Girmitiyas women, specifically looking at the newsprint media that circulated the colonies at the time, it became obvious that women were the ones who led the strikes.[145] As Andrews noted:

> [They] 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, if they dared to play the coward where women were so brave.[146]

Women were feared by European settlers, as the possessors of sexual powers and as ghouls and goblins supposedly terrorising Fiji[147]. Framed as worse than savages, our resistance efforts were seen as only being able to be met with brute force. The small European population that did remain in Fiji—the settlers of Fiji—called on help from the state of so-called New Zealand, which responded with a Navy ship that set up a barricade between Suva and Nausori, and opened fire

143 With food prices being determined by race, my community was charged higher prices for the same food items compared to white settlers.

144 Charan, "She Cut Me From Ganna"; Charan and Pillay, "Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women", 34: "Anxieties were rising in the Suva-Rewa (Central Division) area of Viti Levu for the Indian community and, on 15 January 1920, Indian Labourers at the Public Works Department in Suva started striking. This was followed by Suva Municipal Council employees four days later and on 21 January the strike reached the Rewa area, where labourers at the CSR stopped work. Finally the strike reached new heights when 2–3,000 labourers at the VancouverFiji Sugar Company in Navua stopped showing up for work."

145 Charan and Pillay, "Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women", 35: "Written on 16 January 1920, Sushila's letter represents the collective voice of the Indian Women's Imperial Association of Fiji. Sushila highlights that 'We as the women who have to keep the home going find it impossible to make both end[s] 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.'"

146 C.F. Andrews, quoted in Nicole, *Disturbing History: Aspects of Resistance in Early Colonial Fiji* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 143, 145–146, 369.

147 *Fiji Times and Herald*, "The Indian Question: The Female Horror", *Fiji Times and Herald*, 11 February 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 [jailed] 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."

on protestors.[148] Dr Manilal and his wife, depicted as the agitators of the dumb labourers, were deported. The Girmitiyas women and men who were a part of the strike were valued as labouring bodies, and so were imprisoned and condemned to hard labour instead. There are only a few surviving stories about the individuals who participated in and survived the strikes. The rest would probably have changed their names and been reabsorbed into other parts of Fijian society.

Meanwhile, the white missionaries of Fiji settled into their charitable works, especially in schools and orphanages, and the Indian elites continued and expanded their nationalist agendas into a clean-up phase of making us respectable again. Because of this collision of interests, missionary Indians were imported from India to battle the white missionaries in religion and education on the grounds of contending spiritual superiorities, and became a common feature during this time in Fiji. These purity and pollution politics continue to plague us today through an inherent belief of us as bearing the markers of shame. The confining of us and our histories to these frameworks continues to force descendants into dynamics of assimilation as they are pressured into a "clean" and "acceptable" identity to this day.



Figure 28. *Stamp of Sugarcane, Fiji*, date unknown. Image courtesy of Quishile Charan.

148 Charan and Pillay, "Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women", 38: "Governor Rodwell sought support from Australia and New Zealand and by 12 February New Zealand troops with Lewis gun sections arrived and were placed at the Suva and Nausori police stations. On 14 February the Australian government's warship—the Marguerite—arrived. They were armed and ready to 'overawe coloured population and reassure [the European] public.' Fiji was placed on Marshall law for the year of 1920."

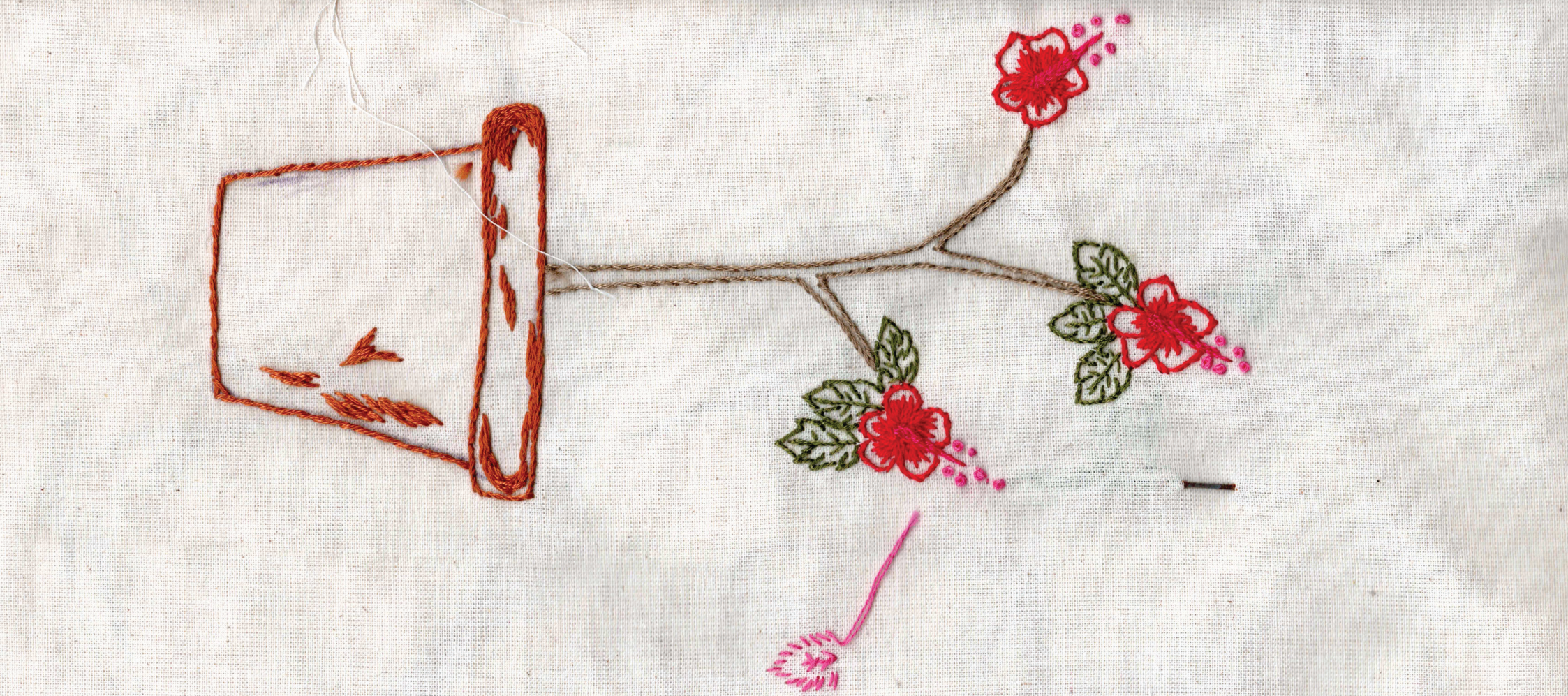

Figure 29. Quishile Charan, *Hibiscus pot plant embroidery sampler,* 2023, cotton embroidery thread on cotton. Image courtesy of Quishile Charan.

All things have whakapapa—colonialism is no exception[149]

It is common to hear people suggest that what connects Indo-Fijians to Fiji is our colonial past of Girmit—a history of subjugation. I find this positioning of colonialism as a means of building a community problematic, to say the least. To re-narrate our histories only through trauma narratives helps produce an understanding of us today as being solely defined by acts of both historical and generational violence and pain. It is not sustainable to build community and relationships from trauma. As I have discussed in previous research papers, including "She Cut Me From Ganna", to have the agency to discuss generational trauma and revisit the site of pain is an important beginning point for healing. But if this is not a conscious and critically engaged effort for self-determination, our sense of belonging will continue to be built from only our historical colonial trauma. While it has been important to be able to recognise and give words to these histories, it is not all we are. To focus only on these histories is reductive and will at a certain point pull us towards only the past—and the most painful parts of the past—rather than giving us the opportunity to see our futures.

Expanding upon my initial readings of Keri Lawson-Te Aho, I return again to her paper "The Healing is in the Pain: Revisiting and Re-narrating Trauma Histories as a Starting Point for Healing". In this paper, Lawson-Te Aho discusses the way that trauma flows down through generations, in which one generation, traumatised by a particular set of colonial violences, with the shame enforced upon them by the coloniser's master narrative, may perpetuate the trauma towards the next generation, who will not necessarily be able to see the roots of it—that it came from colonisation, rather than any inherent moral corruption on their part. As Lawson-Te Aho states: "consciousness as a healing strategy (through narrating trauma) does not assure cultural continuity. In fact, cultural continuity is challenged by the realities of trauma that has taken root in the spirit and psyche of Māori, fragmenting Māori identities."[150] Without seeing these roots, it becomes difficult for the next generation to believe that it was not something they did wrong or something they deserve. My hope in building a critical theory and anarchist framework for Indo-Fijians is to provide forms of existence that don't look to fracture us and our psyche—that instead cultural continuity will be part of our futures.

These fracturings are contributed to by the way in which we are presented in mainstream

149 Hone Sadler, *Ko Tautoro, Te Pito o Toku Ao: A Ngapuhi Narrative* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2014), 152.

150 Keri Lawson-Te Aho, "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), 186.

discourse and state-sanctioned histories: as a problem, a threat, an invading virus that infects.[151] We are reminded that our histories mark us as the bearers of shame and as a community we still enter contemporary discourse as shameful and fearful subjects. This is evident when member of Fijian parliament Mosese Bulitavu erupted national outrage by stating on his Facebook page in 2019:

> This foreign behaviour is not iTaukei nor Christian. Murder and stabbing in the past were only done by Fijians who are descendants of the indentured labourers from British India and was never part of Fijians who are iTaukei. Indigenous Fijians are now slowly sharing some foreign behaviour. We, iTaukei do not engage in romantic relationships like this to the extent where it leads to murder. We have customs and traditions based on respect. It is not iTaukei to murder if a relationship breaks down because we have our bulubulu custom or tradition of seeking forgiveness.[152]

This inherent belief of biologically determined racial traits, as evident in Bulitavu's statement, is a colonial myth created to maintain our continual debilitation through the fear of who we are and what shameful acts we commit. To return to Sara Ahmed's *Cultural Politics of Emotions*, shame and fear as emotional responses become the foundations of the perceived Indo-Fijian body. As Ahmed states: "Of course, we are not just talking about emotions when we talk about emotions. The objects of emotions slide and stick and they join the intimate histories of bodies, with the public domain of justice and injustice. Justice is not simply a feeling. And feelings are not always just."[153]

Although Ahmed discusses fear and shame as emotions that are discrete and individual responses that inform political movement, I extend this to also include how fear and shame are complexly bound together to create distinct racialised bodies. We were always objects of disgust to our colonisers and, through the colonial invention of our racial identity, this was made "scientific" fact. Girmit became an act of colonisation that could be deployed and weaponised, wherein we and our genetics were the determining factor of our violence and the violence that is inflicted onto us. Immorality then is seen and understood as a genetic trait—a dangerous, eugenicist discourse

151 Andrews and Garnham. *Fiji Indentured Labour: A Supplementary Statement*, 8: "The Indian woman, who has become utterly depraved and taken to a life of prostitution, is a dangerous source of future infection for the Fijian, whom she seeks for gain of money."

152 Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, "Daily Hansard, August 8th 2019", *Parliamentary Debates* (Suva: Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, 2019), 2749, https://www.parliament.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Thursday-8th-August-2019.pdf. He continues: "...I was brought up in Labasa and it was common to hear an Indo-Fijian man murder his wife if she is caught in an affair in the cane settlement. These affairs are common amongst married Indo-Fijian women in rural areas. A Hindustani language in Labasa *qhatai maro* or hit the neck was a slang that the *juri* in other words knife (there is a knife emoji) is well sharpened. For iTaukei, assaults of women were common given their build. In rural Vanua Levu communities, they use the "juri" (and there was a knife emoji), or *patar* (stone) was common with Indo-Fijian boys when we get into a fight. But again, it is uncommon or vulagi for iTaukei men to use knives or stones."

153 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 202.

that uses the emotions of fear and shame to mark bodies as desirable and undesirable, and to isolate Indo-Fijians as we are seen as infectious.

In his statement, Bulitavu identifies Indo-Fijian patriarchy and gendered violence against women as a "vulagi" trait brought to Fiji, rather than the function of the colonial heteropatriarchal system enforced onto us. Indo-Fijian patriarchy is informed by Girmit; while it is different from the ways in which iTaukei patriarchy functions, we cannot erase patriarchy from this conversation but must locate colonialism as a catalyst for these shapeshifting forms of violence. If we are the objects of shame and fear, why then would other communities want to engage with Indo-Fijians? To be continuously re-rendered into bodies of immorality and the bearers of physical violence is a way of historically punishing us through exclusion and annihilating our relationships of belonging. This trauma narrative enforced onto us and the ignorance of its colonial origins is, as Lawson-Te Aho identified, the very thing that will "fragment cultural continuity" and replace it with shame.[154]

Even shame has become a lucrative emotion within Indo-Fijian language debates around Fiji Baat[155]—the language of our ancestors, formed during the violence and subjugation of Girmit as a language of practical resistance. As stated by Rajendra Prasad and Fiona Willans in their 2020 paper "Debunking Ten Myths about Hindi in Fiji: Taking Some of the Hot Air Out of the Mirchi FM Debate": "FH [Fiji Hindi] formed during the indentured labour (Girmit) period. However, what appears less well known is that the Girmitiya did not start out speaking SH [Shudh Hindi] and then simplify it."[156] They reassert this misremberance of Girmit history in their 2021 paper, "From Hindustani to (Fiji) Hindi and Back to Fiji Baat? Metalinguistic Reconstructions of the National Variety of Hindi in Fiji", where they state that: "Any attempt to describe the language currently spoken in Fiji as resulting from a gradual corruption of an earlier (superior, pure) variety of Hindi is thus based on faulty assumptions about the homogeneity of those recruited."[157]

I locate and position Fiji Baat as an intentional act of decolonial community-building and stress the urgency and importance of Fiji Baat in creating a hopeful future, and as part of our ongoing struggle for self-determination.[158] The colonial violence of Girmit stripped people of language, so to then bring forward and carry seeds of your mother tongue, care for it and plant it into new soil

154 Lawson-Te Aho, "The Healing Is in the Pain", 186

155 Throughout my discussions of our language I will use "Fiji Baat" instead of "Fiji Hindi" as we don't speak Hindi.

156 Rajendra Prasad and Fiona Willans, "Debunking Ten Myths about Hindi in Fiji: Taking Some of the Hot Air Out of the Mirchi FM Debate", *Te Reo* 66, no. 1 (2023), 42.

157 Fiona Willans and Rajendra Prasad, "From Hindustani to (Fiji) Hindi and Back to Fiji Baat? Metalinguistic Reconstructions of the National Variety of Hindi in Fiji", *The Journal of Pacific History* 56, no. 2 (2021), 102.

158 While I do acknowledge that Fiji Baat is our community's language, I also do acknowledge and understand that for descendants, we still want to hold on to our ancestors mother tongues, which are regional languages such as Tamil, Malayalam, Bhojpuri, Kannada, Telugu, Nepali etc.

is an act of care. We grew a new plant.

The Indo-Fijian identity being the bearer and marker of shame re-entered public discourse both nationally and internationally in 2019, when the Fijian radio station Mirchi FM made the conscious decision to switch all broadcasting from Manak Hindi[159] to Fiji Baat. The decision triggered a multitude of responses from descendants in the public discourse. These debates were most prominent in Fiji, with the Indo-Fijian diaspora weighing in via social media platforms, showing how the history of Girmit has truly created colonial emotions that "stick".[160] I bring these public debates forward as a way to illustrate the power of emotions like fear and shame in maintaining control over a body of people. Yes, these debates were also about maintaining a relationship to the Indian Hindutva state and, by extension, Indian nationalism, but the fact that descendants now undertake the work of the coloniser in their criticism of this decision is important to highlight as one aspect of how colonialism survives. These debates were alarming in the fact that it turned a positive decision for descendants to embrace the language of their ancestors into a debate of a religious death of sorts. We have historically been made to believe that we should uphold the state of India—that we are meant to be "Indian" in order to have value, including in how we speak (a fallacy even inside India). It would be a disservice to my values as an anarchist and ancestry as a descendent of Girmit to not locate these debates within the neo-colonial violence of what they are: assimilation and eradication.

Fiji Baat is weaponised against us for its supposed impurity and "brokenness" as a language born of and to labourers, and as an "incorrect" version of shudh ("pure") Hindi[161] that represents the brokenness of our identities. Fiji Baat—more commonly known and referred to as Fiji Hindi—has been debated and contested for as long as we, descendants of Girmit, has been debated and contested. The argument made here was that if we didn't have the language of the subcontinent (a myth), we could not remain as cultured people. What signifies culture here is not just language—the underlying message is that Hinduism is the culture.

What became alarming about the Mirchi FM debates that took place was the situating of Fiji Baat as a non-language. To uphold Fiji Baat was seen by many as recognising a language that is

159 Prasad and Willans, "Debunking Ten Myths About Hindi in Fiji", 103: "...Standard or Manak Hindi, a written variety (using the Devanagari script) that was maintained in their collective consciousness as the 'original' and 'shudh' (pure) version of the language of their heritage."

160 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 202: "the past persists on the surface of bodies."

161 Prasad and Willans, "Debunking Ten Myths about Hindi in Fiji", 42: "On the one hand, it is a fully-fledged language in the sense that it is the mother tongue of virtually all Indo-Fijians and enables them to express any concept they need. If we had no knowledge of SH to compare it to, we would simply describe FH as a language, just like any other. On the other hand, it is a dialect of Hindi, in the same way that SH is a dialect of Hindi. These are two differentiable varieties that are both Hindi-like in nature, so we can call them both dialects of Hindi if we wish. What we cannot say is that FH is a dialect of SH, because there is no direct continuity between the two."



Figure 30. Quishile Charan, *Lettering embroidery sampler, Viti,* 2023, cotton embroidery thread on cotton. Image courtesy of Quishile Charan.

at the detriment of the Hindu religion. The discourse of denigrating Fiji Baat as a non-language also erases the diverse cultures and languages that made up the jahaji that journeyed together under Girmit to be here.[162] In their paper on the debates, Prasad and Willans identify multiple quotes around the impurity of Fiji Baat, I bring your attention to three: 1) the Fiji Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry noted that "It is a gratuitous insult hurled at the Indians, particularly the followers of the Hindu religion";[163] 2) a blog post comment noting the use of Fiji Baat as "'injecting aids virus into Hindu religion and culture' with the certainty that 'there is no cure and sure demise of the foundation Hindutva is founded on'";[164] and 3) National President of Then India Sanmarga Ikya (TISI),[165] Sadasivan Naicker stating the use of Fiji Baat as "the rape of the Hindi language".[166]

This specific framing shows the success of Indian nationalism and Hindutva ideology in Fiji, contributed to by the white missionaries and their preoccupation with returning Girmitiya ancestors to a "pure" identity, which has also had ongoing and grave consequences for my community. The major problem with it is that it is an ahistorical reading of both a history and a people, and consumes language into religious far-right agendas. Many of the statements around the Mirchi FM debates are confronting and sad to read as they erase the large parts of our community who are not Hindu and not of North Indian heritage. Fiji Baat is the language **all** Indo-Fijians speak, so to turn this into a religious argument is extremely reductive. Fiji Baat also connects us to iTaukei, as many in the rural communities in Western Viti Levu and Vanua Levu speak fluent Fiji Baat.

Fiji Baat, to me, is a clear action of our ancestors to determine their own futures, and to mobilise

162 Romitesh Kant, "Fiji Baat: Oral Histories and Interviews", interview by Esha Pillay and Quishile Charan, *Bad Fiji Gyals Collective*, 2020, 25, https://badfijigyals.com/fiji-baat/episodes/masculinity-and-contemporary-politics-in-fiji-with-romitesh-kant: "This ... of Hindi, has actually led to that deterioration of your cultural heritage. Which doesn't get talked about much, it's a shame. And this whole Islamophobia, as well, that creeps in within this whole Hindu nationalism movement in Fiji, the failure to recognise or, ignorance to the fact that Muslim descendants of Girmit, also have their own histories and their own language and their own culture. That is what makes us as Indo-Fijians a very rich community, is that our diversity in itself. Our histories stand to unite us. But this whole Hindu nationalism movement is trying to divide us. With this whole, I like the way you framed it, 'the Hindu colonialist agenda,' neo-colonialist agenda of Modi."

163 Thakur Ranjit Singh. "Fusion of Hindi Dialect". *The Fiji Times*. 15 February 2020, quoted in Rajendra Prasad and Fiona Willans, "Debunking Ten Myths about Hindi in Fiji: Taking Some of the Hot Air Out of the Mirchi FM Debate", *Te Reo* 66, no. 1 (2023), 48.

164 Thakur Ranjit Singh, "An open letter to Fiji PM: The great Fiji Hindi debate - an assault on Fiji culture through stealth", *Fiji Pundit* (blog), 26 January 2020, quoted in Rajendra Prasad and Fiona Willans, "Debunking Ten Myths about Hindi in Fiji: Taking Some of the Hot Air Out of the Mirchi FM Debate" *Te Reo* 66, no. 1 (2023), 48.

165 Ironically enough this comment was made by a cultural group representing the descendants of South Indian Girmitiyas who spoke Dravidian languages.

166 Arieta Vakasukawaqa, "TISI upset with move", *The Fiji Times*, 25 January 2020, quoted in Rajendra Prasad and Fiona Willans, "Debunking Ten Myths about Hindi in Fiji: Taking Some of the Hot Air Out of the Mirchi FM Debate", *Te Reo* 66, no. 1 (2023), 44.

and resist against our colonisers. Our language will always be the grounding of who we are, as its creation was one of necessity. The debate represented what Prasad and Willans describe as "tensions surrounding identity, belonging and heritage. These tensions are embedded in networks of power and politics, but it is not a politics of 'us' versus 'them'. It is a politics of how to identify as a Fijian of Indian descent, a grappling with a sense of being Fijian in the present without losing a grip on linguistic, cultural and religious heritage."[167] While I do agree with Prasad and Willans to a degree, I question their use of language and the uncritical use of "Indian" when talking about Indo-Fijians. The national identity of Indian, invented and intended for homogenising the diverse communities of the subcontinent, did not even exist at the time that my Girmitiya ancestors left the subcontinent. The unquestioned use of this term to describe our ancestry is problematic—misinformation and a misremembering. Applying this identity uncritically and unquestioningly feeds the beast of Hindu-nationalism, wherein our communities are at risk of harming other marginalised communities within the sub-continent who are also fighting Hindu-nationalism. We should see the embracing of Fiji Baat as an act of resistance to colonialism and as an extension of standing in solidarity with those still in the subcontinent.

The comments on the Mirchi FM debates and how Bulitavu could label us as violent and a virus infecting the iTaukei population, are not independent, coincidental occurrences. Rather, they are part of a historical repatterning of subjugation, erasure, and violence towards us. It is like an original sin: we were born from immoral women whose infectious bodies we genetically inherited. The Bulitavu statement and this language debate carries an undertone that to be Indo-Fijian is to be an infectious, dirty, polluted identity.

Amongst this debate we also see the recycling of rape narratives, this time weaponised against Fiji Baat, where our community is framed as taking something pure and tainting and dishonouring it. It is startling how history repeats itself here, with the same metaphor, as well as publication of actual instances, having been used in the Indian nationalist arguments I mentioned earlier (in which Girmitiyas women's distance from the ideals of womanhood were positioned as a symbolic raping of the Hindu religion and what would soon become India). The narrative extends even further back than that, though, with Indian men (Indo-Fijian men in the context of this debate) again deployed as the sons of Bharat Mata, needing to protect her from being raped by invaders. The implication is that we—descendants who embrace their Indo-Fijian identity—are invading and raping the chaste, upper-caste, Hindu woman, who is fashioned as the Indian nation. This is the maintenance of us as a virus—something that infects and corrupts the "pure" body and rapes the innocent woman, India. This idealisation of the supposedly untainted also lends to the historical retellings of India in which anyone who wasn't Hindu was an invading foreign or

167 Prasad and Willans, "Debunking Ten Myths about Hindi in Fiji", 54.

other, as ongoing Hindutva propaganda positions India as a Hindu nation. The erasing of other histories and communities is essential in the remodelling of India in this fascist retelling. This narrative mirrors the nationalist sentiments of India that somehow Hinduism is "under attack" and is being "threatened" by both globalisation and westernisation.

I also see in the descendants responding in this way—the emotions they carry of themselves—how our culture and language is only made possible through a history of debilitation. The attack on Fiji Baat is an attack on Indo-Fijianness as it renders our identity as nothing of value—impure, a scrambled up culture and language. We only gain value through assimilation into an Indian nationalist identity. It is well known among our community that our ancestors could not read or write, and our framing as "illiterate" is linked to a connotation of our moral failings, too.[168] The learning of Hindi then becomes the great moral fixer to this past—a way of purifying our ancestors.

Because Indo-Fijian history has had external protagonists—elitist Indians and nationalists—cast as our heroes, it is seen as a noble act for us to align ourselves with the language of those heroes good enough to be remembered, to be written about. The idea here is that there is power in being able to write and read histories, and because we are discussed as having no agency and autonomy, we do not see the language our ancestors created as one of agency and autonomy, therefore not having the significance to narrate our histories now. So maybe, if we too spoke Hindi, we too then can be "pure" again. This is how caste politics still impact descendants today and how we, too, feed into caste politics of the subcontinent.

There is nothing broken about us—not our history or culture. This is why these words I am telling you, my unknown reader, matter so much. We are a collection of various ethnicities that left the subcontinent, with different lives and stories to tell. We forged a type of communal identity on the plantations, and while that of course comes with its own tensions and conflicts, we all showed up differently and built something together; that should be cherished rather than demonised. To highlight the Fiji Baat conversation that has been taking place in Fiji recently and its historical challenges in the public domain is to show a connection of sorts—an emotional response to an ongoing history of being denied personhood, identity and the right to self-determination. The very fact that we are so openly debated as a community feeds into this prevailing logic of displacement and brokenness or wrongness. If we let ourselves only be talked

168 *Report of the Education Commission* (Suva: Fiji Government Printer, 1926), 29, quoted in Willans, Fiona, and Rajendra Prasad, "From Hindustani to (Fiji) Hindi and Back to Fiji baat? Metalinguistic reconstructions of the national variety of Hindi in Fiji", *The Journal of Pacific History* 56, no. 2 (2021), 105: "It was pointed out that the Hindi spoken in the Colony was not the Hindi of the educated classes and of literature, but was a language developed in the bazaar. Accordingly, it was argued that a debased form of language was unsuitable for a school course."

of as fragments to other identities, we will never be allowed to call our unique identity as Indo-Fijians, the identity that we have fostered for generations, our home and who we are. The very real reality is that it has been a concentrated effort of generations to assimilate us into other identities that suit the nationalist agenda of the time. At the time, India made the most sense as it was the lost mother, the parent or loved one who never returns affection, who is out of reach of her children in exile.[169]

As Lawson-Te Aho says, the mamae of colonialism is an important emotional landscape to hold onto, as it is a reminder of all the things that are wrong and were done to us. We must never forget that understanding historical wrongdoing helps inform us of contemporary wrongdoings, informs other types of relationships of solidarity, and strengthens our fight for self-determination, as this history is an ongoing subjugation of our personhood.

It is easy to look at Fijian history and see how we've never been afforded the time or means to heal. But now is the time to do that work: to stop the cycle and instead build narratives and stories of hope for the future. Our trauma is not stagnant, but we cannot let our people become enmired in it. This is why I take such issue with how white academics have framed us thus far and how Indo-Fijian academics didn't question the ways in which they have replicated colonial narratives—never fully within the beauty and complexity of what it means to be Indo-Fijian. They never propose a way to move forward, never looking to build a future.

In the words of Lawson-Te Aho:

> ...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 (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.[170]

Here, amongst these words and stories, I expand that initial exploration, now beginning to explore

169 Jeff Siegel, "Indian Languages and Identity in Fiji", *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication* 3, no. 1 (1992), 120–130 quoted in Willans, Fiona, and Rajendra Prasad, "From Hindustani to (Fiji) Hindi and Back to Fiji Baat? Metalinguistic Reconstructions of the National Variety of Hindi in Fiji", *The Journal of Pacific History* 56, no. 2 (2021), 113: "Fiji Indians were more and more beginning to feel that their roots lie in their adopted country, not in India, and that Fiji Hindi, not the Hindi of India, was an important part of their social identity. Thus, Fiji Hindi began to be perceived not just as a substandard, corrupted form of Hindi, but as a language in its own right, a unique symbol of Fiji Indian identity, suitable for writing, radio broadcasting and even education....With regard to the future of FH, it may be that, as Fiji Indians feel themselves under siege, their unique language may become more important as a badge of social identity and focusing may continue. It may also be that as Fiji Indians look to English-speaking countries and India for security, English and Standard Hindi will increase in importance, perhaps leading to greater language shift."

170 Lawson-Te Aho, "The Healing Is in the Pain", 200.

what structural frameworks look like for Indo-Fijians in our fight for self-determination through our own histories of resistance and cultural practices, which I name for myself as a political praxis of anarchism that is undertaken through Indo-Fijian cultural ways of existing. While we can look to our trauma and histories of colonialism as a means to help us know how we want to build our futures and how to move towards them, I propose that our site of belonging is not through a colonial history but rather a challenge and reclamation of our histories beyond colonialism, which is clearly woven throughout the history of my ancestors' fight for self-determination.

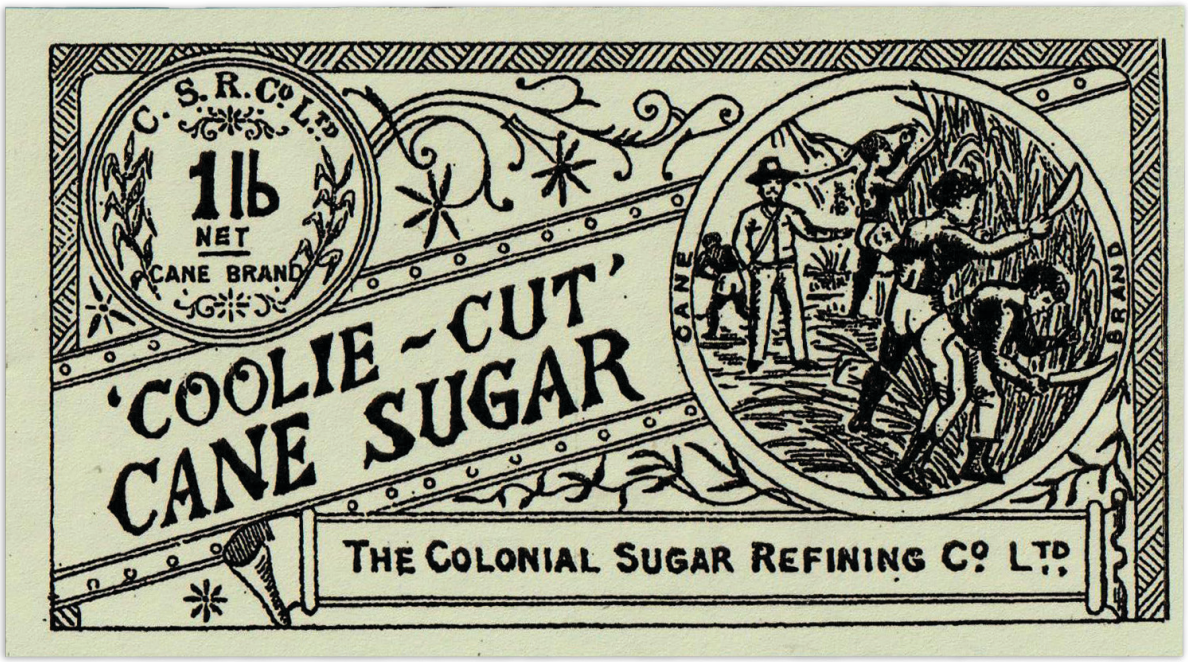

Figure 31. *Coolie-cut cane sugar label (woodcut)*, date unknown. Image courtesy of Quishile Charan (personal collection).



Figure 32. *Stamp of Fiji, Rewa Bridge, Nausori,* 1990. Image courtesy of Roshni Deo and Quishile Charan.



Figure 33. *Three images of Amma with sewing machine,* 2023. Photo: Quishile Charan.

Craft and plants as the space-time for determining futures

I find in Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds: Black Women And The Cartographies Of Struggle* an essential theoretical grounding for understanding how colonialism creates geographical terrains of control through processes of ongoing violence, and how these terrains of dominance are constructed in both the private and public spaces we inhabit. McKittrick addresses how the transatlantic slave trade for black women in America still impacts their everyday movements in space, as slavery created spacial relations of domination. She states:

> ...our present landscape is both haunted and developed by old and new hierarchies of humanness. If past human categorization was spatialized, in ships and on plantations, in homes, communities, nations, islands, and regions, it also evidences the ways in which some of the impressions of transatlantic slavery leak into the future, in essence recycling the displacement of difference.[171]

McKittrick continues throughout the book to identify how black women have resisted these legacies of violence through opposing assigned geographical terrains of control and creating their own geographical spaces—the conceptual spaces of black feminism and knowledges—even when blackness in America has been incorrectly rendered as "ungeographic" terrain, in which their knowledges are seen as philosophically undeveloped. She also explores how black women, while in terrains of domination, create and produce space both public and private within these geographies of control and that these are important sites of protest and resistance. She goes on to state:

> Within the context of historical and contemporary geographic expansion and the profitable displacement of difference, the surprise is an ongoing black refusal of a passive relationship with space and place; it is a dynamic interest in how geography is made and lived, through and beyond practices of domination. It could be argued, for example, that given the white colonial and geographic contexts of Canada, it is a surprise that black people are geographic at all due to spatial constraints that have an interest in sustaining black subordination and exclusion. More compelling, however, are the unexpected ways in which black geographic subjects differently produce space within this context of domination and objectification: specifically, the seeking out of alternative geographic options, and the coupling of geography with black matters, histories, knowledges, experiences, and resistances.[172]

I identify craft and gardening within the same theoretical framing that McKittrick does above: as alternative geographies. The plantation functioned as a site of total domination that was neither

171 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xvii.

172 Ibid, 92.

private nor public, but both a space of hypervisibility and invisibility. While yes, in the transition from Girmit into the farm tenant scheme, we do see women forcefully taken out of waged labour and, by law, enforced into the institution of marriage, we still had a voice—it just took on different forms. What's never sat well with me is that, when it comes to academia or Girmit research, the supposed abolition of Girmit is where our stories and resistance end.

To punish Girmitiyas women for resisting and transforming the uninhabitable geographies of Girmit, they were moved into "acceptable" geographies (still governed by the same oppressive structures of Girmit)—into new spatial realities as wife and mother. As with Girmit, this became a geographical space that was under negotiation by women. Enter into the narrative: the love of making, creativity with purpose, relationship-building, and plants as sites of healing. Craft and gardening functioned as a space of culturally significant alternative economies, where intercommunity exchange and knowledge took place, and where women negotiated being forcefully disincluded from paid labour. Craft was one of the few outlets of independent labour production—making and selling—and became the unofficial job market of a lot of Indo-Fijian women. I find comfort in the histories of craft and gardening in my family as I can see how elders inherited from our ancestors a way of locating grey areas of colonialism and labour production. Like my aaji, who is categorised by law as a housewife, but in actuality is a farmer, a labourer, a craft practitioner, and my knowledge-holder.

I position craft as the continuation of both resistance and autonomy for Indo-Fijian women and our ancestors. Craft is a part of the intimate spaces of Indo-Fijian women's lives where they can still have and express their agency to create their own visions. It encompasses a constellation of choices, colour schemes, patterns, and the intentional gifting and care that comes with creating with one's own hands, adorning spaces to transform them into homes, and, of course, making for the love and beauty of it. This is who I come from: women who built worlds.

Anything made comes with a story. I carry the histories of women in my family through their gifting and making. Plastic storage containers in my cupboard hold saris, salwar kameez, and dupattas from the last 50 to 60 years of women from my life. At their most intimate levels, these textiles are stories. Kapraa becomes a form of inheritance and yaad karo. I come from a very specific history of makers and farmers. My family is one quilting block that is sewn together with others in my community to form a larger quilt of Indo-Fijian knowledge and knowings.

Craft has become my place to stand, a place in which I create and envision my own worlds. Making grounds my connection to my ancestors and their memories through the echoing of the movement that their hands made when stitching, embroidering, sewing, and doing natural dye work. For me, this is sacred; hands become the site of ceremony. Craft is about futures that are not

bound by our trauma. Creating and building textile memories is how I choose to tell my stories.

Craft requires layers of intentional understandings of the environment. There are the seasons, daily weather patterns. There is also the inherent knowing of who you are making for: their relationship to colours; what is representative of the the person and our shared relationship; their relationship to the plants that have been used for the dye work and eco-prints; embroidered motifs they would love; and their own cultural histories of making, even if these practices were only held by an older generation, in which the work then also becomes an access point for my loved ones to their own stories and histories and from me to their own cultural practices, creating a continuous flow and exchange between us all, including between both the living and the dead.

Farming and craft are two practices that share deep cultural relationships to each other and encompass a knowledge around movement—each informing the other—that is essential to my own understanding of how I need to move in my own making. When we were starved on the coolie lines, given rations below a human standard for survival,[173] we planted on those coolie lines the seeds we brought with us. That would have been the first Indo-Fijian garden. We continued to deepen our relationships to plants when plantations withheld any form of payment for work completed—though the wages were barely enough to subsist on anyway—and we sold or gave away plants for others to sustain themselves.[174] Others who left the plantation would come back to visit, bringing khaana with them.[175] These practices continued again under the tenant farm scheme—we grew and nurtured ourselves from what our hands sowed into the Vanua. The action of planting and growing one's own khaana may seem small, insignificant, and mundane, but, within the Indo-Fijian context, building relationships to plants is the act of reclamation and resistance—an extension of self, our ghar.

173 "The Agreement and the Girmitiya", 1843–1844: "The Indian ration Mitchell referenced was known as the 'Temple wage,' named after Sir Richard Temple, who devised the ration to feed relief workers in famine-stricken Mysore in 1877. In Temple's words, the famine rations were 'subordinated . . . to the financial consideration of disbursing the smallest sum of money consistent with the preservation of human life.' To reach this goal, the rations provided 1,627 calories per day to those completing hard labor in the relief camps. Compare this amount to the 1,750 calories provided each day to Nazi concentration camp prisoners in Buchenwald in 1944, or the ration of 3,900 calories for hard labor recommended by modern standards. The consequence of the Temple ration was a ninety-four percent annual mortality rate in the Mysore relief camps. So bad were conditions there that famished Indians committed felonies for the purpose of being imprisoned, during which they would receive more food. By the final round of letters exchanged, Batten dropped the point, and Fiji moved forward with the Temple ration."

174 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 266: "Until the early 1890s rations were given by the employer for twelve months but the Indians begun to run a flourishing blackmarket in foodstuffs, resulting in the authorities cracking down on the rationing period by cutting it in half, the wage being given initially to supplement the rations."

175 Suruj Kali, "Indo-Fijian Oral History Records", interviewer unknown, Samabula Suva, 4 September 2003, interview tape No: 11/03 (Tape 1), transcript, *Fiji Museum*, Suva, Fiji, 3: "My father was smart in making sweets so he used to make it and sell them to people. Also he used to plant crops from his own and the left over of the vegetables he sells them to people and this is how he was looking after the family. My mother also gave hand in making sweets, helped my father in planting the vegetables and all other things because she was a very hard working lady."

To:beta

Subject:

From:Amma

Send: Attach

Hi beta,

Check this ...hope it helps... In the context of marriage laws, there could have been provisions or implications that had affected women's rights, roles, and labor within the institution of marriage. For example, certain legal frameworks may not adequately address issues such as property rights, inheritance, spousal support, or domestic responsibilities to list a few in a way that is fair or equitable for women.

Additionally, traditional gender roles and societal norms can also play a significant role in shaping how laws impact women's labor within marriage. It's possible that historical laws like the Fiji Marriage Ordinance Act may have reinforced traditional gender roles or failed to recognize and protect the contributions of women within the family and household.

Due to this act which had invisibilised women's labor, **craft** played a significant role in empowering Indo-Fijian women maintain their cultural identity, earn a livelihood, and connect with their community. Craft also helped **Indo-Fijian women's financial autonomy in various ways**.

Some specific examples of crafts that helped Indo-Fijian women during the colonial era include:

- **Embroidery:** Indo-Fijian women used embroidery to create beautiful designs on clothing, fabrics, and other materials. This craft helped them maintain their cultural heritage and create unique products that were highly valued.

- **Weaving:** Weaving was another important craft that helped Indo-Fijian women create essential items like clothing, bags, and mats. They would often use traditional looms and techniques passed down from their ancestors.

- **Pottery:** Pottery was a vital craft that helped Indo-Fijian women create functional items like cooking vessels, storage containers, and decorative pieces. They would often use clay from local sources and decorate their creations with intricate designs.

These crafts not only played a crucial role in the daily lives of Indo-Fijian women but also helped preserve their cultural identity and connect them with their community. Even today, many Indo-Fijian women continue to practice these traditional crafts as a way to honor their heritage and connect with their past.

Here are some ways in which craft helped Indo-Fijian women that time and also have been connected to their financial autonomy:

1. **Income Generation** - Craft provided an alternative source of income for Indo-Fijian women, who were often restricted to domestic work or limited to traditional occupations like farming. Craft skills have been a source of income for Indofijian women from generations. By creating and selling their handmade crafts/products, such as embroidered clothing, woven baskets, and handicrafts, to supplement their family's income, women had generated their own income, thereby contributing to their financial independence. This has been particularly important in Indofijian communities where women had limited or nil access to formal employment opportunities.

Figure 34a. *Email from Roshni Deo to Quishile Charan,* 2024. Image courtesy of Quishile Charan.

2. **Entrepreneurship** - Engaging in craftwork has empowered Indofijian women to become entrepreneurs. Gradually by starting their own craft businesses, women took control of their financial destinies, made business decisions, and potentially expanded their enterprises to create more income-generating opportunities.

3. **Preservation of Cultural Heritage** - Craft helped Indo-Fijian women preserve their cultural heritage by passing down traditional skills and techniques from one generation to the next. They continued to make traditional items like embroidery, weaving, and pottery, which were essential to their daily lives. Hence the Indofijian crafts are deeply rooted in cultural traditions and heritage. By preserving and promoting these traditional crafts, women have been able to generate income and also contributed to the preservation of their cultural identity.

4. **Skill Development** - Craft helped Indo-Fijian women cope with the challenges of colonialism, including forced labor, poverty, and displacement. By engaging in craftwork, they were able to find solace in their traditional practices and create something beautiful and meaningful. Through this the Indo-Fijian women developed valuable skills such as creativity, designing, marketing, and financial management. These skills were not only important for their craft businesses but also were transferred to other areas, opening up additional opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship.

5. **Empowerment** - Craft provided a sense of empowerment for Indo-Fijian women, as they took control of their economic and social lives. By creating their own products and selling them, they were able to assert their agency and independence.

6. **Community Empowerment** - Craft helped Indo-Fijian women maintain social connections within their community. In many cases, craftwork is a communal activity that brings women together (women's club, women's group) share stories, and exchange knowledge and skills. This social bonding was essential for maintaining their sense of identity and belonging. By working collaboratively on craft projects, Indofijian women had been able to build strong social networks, support each other, and collectively advocated for their economic rights and empowerment within their communities.

These crafts not only played a crucial role in their daily lives but also empowered Indofijian women's financial autonomy by providing them with income-generating opportunities, fostering entrepreneurship, helped preserve their cultural identity and connected them with their community.

Even today, many Indo-Fijian women continue to practice these traditional crafts as a way to honor their heritage and connect with their past, developing valuable skill and promoting community empowerment.

Feel free to o amend as you see fit...
Rgds

Figure 34b. *Email from Roshni Deo to Quishile Charan*, 2024. Image courtesy of Quishile Charan.

To:beta

Subject:

From:Amma

Send: Attach

Beta ..

In addition to what I sent you earlier... That was about crafts ..but beyond craft women did a lot of other activities to generate income for the family...have a read through.. you might have captured some .. you might have missed out some .. so feel free to edit as you see fit.....

Back then the Indo-Fijian women roles in the household and community were multifaceted, and their contributions went beyond crafting and domestic duties. While many women did engage in crafting and other domestic activities to support their families, they also played important roles in other areas which have been connected to their financial autonomy. These were:

1. **Beadwork and Jewelry Making**: Indo-Fijian women were skilled in beadwork and jewelry making, creating beautiful pieces like shell necklaces, beaded belts, and other decorative items.

2. **Farming and agriculture**: Many women worked alongside their husbands or alone on family farms, tending to crops, livestock, and gardens. This was especially true in rural areas where women's labor was essential for food production.

3. **Gardening and food preservation**: Women were responsible for growing and preserving food for their families. They would often tend to gardens, harvest crops, and prepare food for storage or preservation through methods like canning, pickling, and smoking.

4. **Animal husbandry**: Women helped with animal care, such as feeding, milking, and breeding livestock. This was especially important in rural areas where meat was a staple of the diet.

5. **Childcare and education**: Women played a crucial role in educating children, teaching them basic skills like reading, writing, and arithmetic. They also cared for younger children, ensuring their physical and emotional well-being.

6. **Healing and medicine**: Women often served as caregivers, providing medical assistance to family members and neighbors. They might have knowledge of traditional remedies and herbal medicine passed down through generations.

7. **Business and trade**: Some women owned and operated small businesses, such as shops, taverns, or inns. They might also engage in trading goods like grains, textiles, or other commodities.

8. **Laboring outside the home**: In some cases, women worked outside the home as laborers, servants, or apprentices in industries like textiles, manufacturing, or construction.

9. **Domestic service**: Women worked as servants or maids in wealthy households, performing tasks like cooking, cleaning, and childcare.

10. **Market trading**: Women would often sell goods at markets or fairs, trading items like produce, dairy products, or handmade crafts.

Figure 35a. *Email from Roshni Deo to Quishile Charan*, 2024. Image courtesy of Quishile Charan.

11. **Community leadership**: Women played important roles in community leadership, serving as leaders in religious organizations, charitable organizations, or community groups.

12. **Spinning and weaving**: Women were responsible for spinning yarn and weaving cloth for their families' clothing needs.

13. **Baking and brewing**: Women were often in charge of baking bread and brewing beer or other fermented beverages for their families.

14. **Fish Trading**: Women would purchase fish from fishermen and sell them in local markets, providing a vital source of income for their families.

15. **Cotton Ginning**: In some areas, women would help with cotton ginning, processing raw cotton into usable fibers.

16. **Food Processing**: Women would process food items like coconut oil, coconut milk, and dried fruits, which were sold or used as ingredients in traditional Fijian dishes.

These activities were not mutually exclusive; many women engaged in multiple roles simultaneously. Their contributions were essential to the survival and prosperity of their families and communities during the colonial era.

These activities not only generated income but also helped maintain social bonds within the community. The skills and knowledge passed down from generation to generation helped sustain the Indo-Fijian culture and traditions.

It is also essential to note that these activities were not limited to women alone; men also contributed to the family's income through various means. However, women played a significant role in supporting their families' economic well-being during the colonial era

Figure 35b. *Email from Roshni Deo to Quishile Charan*, 2024. Image courtesy of Quishile Charan.

My aaji and aaja, too, come from this practice, growing and selling their vegetables at the markets. My aaji holds deep knowledge of iTaukei plants and has been a healer for many years. From extracting plant-based knowledge to benefit the violence of plantation colonialism, to our ancestors redefining this relationship to plants, my dye practice is an extension of not only my aaji's craft and dye knowledge but of the many practices my family and elders embody, plants becoming a site of reclamation and healing. The way that I engage with plants in my dye practice is an acknowledgement that agriculture has been a colonial tool of oppression but also forms so much of who we were and who we are today. This is a reclamation of our cultural practices away from colonial inventions of identity.

My practice reclaims the expansiveness of our knowings and cultural knowledge; this history of subjugation is not our defining feature, but rather it is the very fact that before we ever were Girmitiyas we were farmers, we were gardeners, we created with our hands.[176] These constant circular motions, paralleling in time between us and our ancestors occur through engaging with craft and gardening, and are the functional action of moving beyond survival and towards self-determining futures.

176 This is in reference to "Once Were Gardeners", Matua Moana Jackson's important keynote at the 2009 Cutting Edge conference: https://youtu.be/HfAe3Zvgui4.



Figure 36. *Stamp of Dendrobium mohlianum, Fiji,* date unknown. Image courtesy of Roshni Deo and Quishile Charan.



Figure 37. *Ma's tatting, phool placemat,* 2024. Photo: Quishile Charan.

This name holds the memories of your ancestors

I remember the day, sitting in my Aaji's lounge in Nawaicoba, she explained the significance of my name, "I will always live on through you".[177]

There are often moments where I feel so overcome by my emotions, by sadness and grief. These moments are triggered by knowing or being reminded that I will never know my dead, their names or their lives and stories. The names have become forgotten, buried deep in memories as life has had to keep moving forward; across generations, through military coups, cyclones, migrations, and the rapid escalation of climate change impacting Viti. There has been no time for lingering thoughts about plantations and what happened to my ancestors. Being born to abusers has drastically shifted that relationship to knowing, as has coming from a working-class background and having family still in the ganna fields. We have—collectively—had to focus on our survival. I wonder where my ancestors are now; somewhere in the Vanua, Aaji once said, the ganna will always remember, I think so too. Sometimes when it is quiet and I look across my family's khet in Nawaicoba, the wind blowing through the rows of ganna, I wonder if they can see me. These moments are peaceful. Sometimes I will get glimpses from stories, a name at the tip of the tongue; usually elders will remember in passing thoughts and stories. These glimpses, these moments, have always been precious to me.

When I was born I was given my aaji's name—Shila or Sheela. Shila became (Qui)shile and for the last 30 years I have carried her with me. It is only recently that I have grown into my name, grown and understood my responsibility in upholding our histories and ancestors. We have a shared relationship in her craft, and for the longest time that was what kept me moving forward—my making. Out of being a namesake, I was bound to Aaji and through this relationship I met my chosen mother, Roshni. Within our cultural framework of family she is Fua. Somewhere between conception and the naming, my ancestors birthed me for her. For so long it was me and then she was there, my amma.[178]

Lately I cannot help but linger on these thoughts of ancestors. I thought I needed a name, to hear their stories to know what love and coming from them meant. The truth is, it is so ingrained and embedded within my body, I think it started with my name. My aaji is a bridging point, to family

177 Quishile Charan, "Quishile/Shila/Sheela: To Uphold My Aaji's Craft as a Namesake" *Runway* 41 (2020), https://new.runway.org.au/issues/issue-41-love/quishile-shila-sheela-by-quishile-charan.

178 Amma, I'm only me because of you, hum pyaar tum. Thinking about it, Ma, I always come home to you first. When we first saw each other again, and every other trip home, is you first and foremost. It is always a journey of homecomings, those homes, always you.

members, to elders, to ancestors gone. Maybe I will never hear all my ancestors' stories from my elders, from Aaji, they are lost to memories of other times, but within my name they continued living, just like her craft. I wonder who I would have become if I was named after someone else. In this name— Quishile—time, history, and ancestors have lived and are living with me. These things are not stagnant; they are living and breathing. I thought for the longest time that I was alone, but in reality I had them with me, in my hands while I made, as I grew into Quishile. Every time I say my name, every time my name is spoken, it is their names that echo within mine. I am bound to my aaji as she is bound to them and to ancestors gone and ancestors to come.



Figure 38. *Aaji's embroidered placemat with Amma's tatting*, 2019. Photo: Quishile Charan.



Figure 39. *Stamp of Scarlet Robin,* date unknown. Image courtesy of Roshni Deo and Quishile Charan.



Figure 40. *Five images of Ma and Taji's garden, Nadi,* 2023. Photo: Quishile Charan.

Home garden stories—kahaani/khissa

Pot plants and gardens are portals. They collapse the time between the present and the past, becoming little portals to times before, the movement of people, of homes, stories, and relationships. In our garden at home, in a bara terracotta pot, karela is growing. This plant was a gift from my friend Jasmin during her parents' visit from Malaysia, bought from an Indo-Fijian grocery store in South Auckland. Such movement—seeds from Fiji, travelled and nurtured in an Indo-Fijian uncle's backyard in South Auckland, bought as a gift from my friend who carries her own cultural relationship to karela, which her parents grow in their own garden in Ipoh, Malaysia, to our garden in Kohimarama. Long before all these connections and movements, both Jasmin and my own ancestors brought karela seeds—hers from Punjab and mine from Bihar/the north-eastern states—with them as they left the subcontinent of what we know today as India. Once the karela grows big enough and is ready to eat, I will make the same chutney my amma makes for me back home in Nadi, Fiji. Amma usually pairs this with dhal bhatt, a staple recipe in our home. At our ghar, dhal is a cultural meal that is Fiji-style when I cook it, and Malaysian-style when Jasmin makes it. Her recipe, as with mine, is handed down to us from our ammas, and it was handed down to them from their ammas, going all the way back to when the first set of hands washed the rice and lentils, prepared the chula and tempered the spices for the tadka. Dhal bhatt is made for everyone we love, shared with the many other cultures that make up our ghare.

Our garden is cared for and nurtured by Bronte. Gardening—growing and nurturing herbs and veggies for us to eat—is both something they love deeply and is their love language with us at home. For the last four or five years, they have always planted genda phool for me. It's always taken me aback, these physical gestures of love, that the planting of phool is one of the many ways in which Bronte chooses to love and care for me. When our karela plant first came home, it became Bronte's undertaking to nurture our new plant while I finished this PhD. Oftentimes they will go off and research, trying to understand this new plant and its tropical needs in the colder climates of Tāmaki. We often joke about how I run cold because I need the heat of the islands but they're built for this weather, their ancestors' bones grounding them in this climate.

Back home in Nadi when someone has an unspoken relationship with plants, can grow anything, even when the plant is dying, we call it having a green thumb. That's how I see Bronte—they have the Ngāpuhi green thumb. Etched into their hands, their whakapapa is threaded with deep knowledge of plants. From their hands to my ancestors' seeds, two cultures converge at a meeting point of sorts, where two peoples can exist. Within Bronte's culture, to cultivate the land is to cultivate the people, which is to say the land and the people are deeply intertwined. When I think

about it, it feels like a homecoming of sorts, in which this seeding and planting in this whenua forges connections and builds relationships from their tūpuna to my ancestors. Throughout our relationship—mine and Bronte's—we often have dreamed and envisioned ways in which our ancestors could have stumbled across one another; maybe in other lives, they too could have lived together. Even if they didn't, the act of nurturing my cultural practices and growing the plants I eat is a thousand homecomings and more. This love is our ancestors meeting each other again and again, maybe not in Fiji or Kaikohe, but in this lifetime here in Tāmaki Makaurau.

I think of my other relationships too, that maybe between those borders of Punjab and Bihar, two states that made up the sugarcane belt of Northern India, maybe Jasmin's ancestors met mine, maybe they too could have shared meals and stories with each other as we do today, made dhal bhatt. Maybe they had their own version of Aunty's Night, but instead of coming together Friday nights to share khaana and watch our favourite films they gathered to sing their bhajan or gaaney. All of us are aware that the forms of care our ancestors needed were not always afforded to them, but maybe through the care we enact in these "new" relationships, there is a type of love that reverberates into the past. These relationships are both old and new. Just as my ancestors built relationships to place and people as a grounding to home and belonging, I too engage in these very old practices.

In a garden in Kaikohe—Te pū o te wheke, the centre to the many arms of Ngāpuhi—my mother-in-law's house sits. Her garden forms a portal to her other home on Mango Island, Tonga. Here she grows kumala, potato, chillies, tomatoes, spinach, courgette, hopa, watermelon, oranges, feijoa, and dalo ke patti. Recently, she started growing bhindi and baigan for me, because these are two of my favourite Fijian vegetables. Ana's love language with me is sending cuttings of plants, growing plants for us to eat, and cooking together. Every month or so we are sent a polystyrene box full of her polopolo. The one thing that is always a staple in these boxes is chillies, dalo ke patti/lū, and watermelon. While I am writing this, we still have remnants of her latest polopolo—plastic bags filled with dalo ke patti line the bottom of our deep freeze. Next week I will cook the bhaaji down to make my amma's recipe of rourou—one of my favourite Fijian dishes. Before the dalo ke patti was stored away in our deep freeze, we used the bhaaji to make lū sipi to celebrate a milestone for Hikiama, one of my many loved ones, in December last year. Ana's dalo patch, grown in the whenua of Kaikohe, is connected to the fonua she grew it in when she was younger on Mango, which is in turn connected to the many voyages of her Tongan ancestors and other ancestors of the islands like Viti, where iTaukei grew dalo on their Vanua, and to when my ancestors arrived on the Girmit ships, and to last year, the last time I ate rourou back home in Nadi after cooking it with Amma, eating it with bhatt while we watched our Hindi films on a Sunday afternoon, and to when Amma makes saina, which is one of my favourite snacks—deep-fried dalo ke patti layered with dhal paste then rolled, frozen, chopped into segments, and fried.





Figure 41. *Two images of Ana's Garden in Kaikohe,* 2022. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Just as my ancestors included dalo into their lives, it became part of my family's recipes and cultural practices now, making it a part of these journeys. These stories make up the many meals I eat and are a part of the daily food practices that I share with my loved ones today. Often when Ana and I talanoa, we share the similarities and the slight variations in our recipes; usually the biggest difference is the spices and chillies I use (nearly everything is better spicy), but there is always a common thread between food practices across the Islands. Like with rourou or lū—you add lemon to keep the colour green, baking soda for the itchy feeling in your throat, and always remove the veins at the back. My amma always clips the tip of the patti.

When I think of the ways Ana is connected to Kaikohe, the place where she gave birth to many of the people I now call famili/parivar, I remember the story of kumā moe feke, which Ana has told us many times when she is making lo'i feke. It is a story told to yaad karo puipuitu'a that we never forget those hands who feed us, that we respect and pay gratitude to those who support and help us.

The story goes:

There was once a kumā who grew sick and tired of how it was being treated by the other kumās. One night the kumā sat out on the beachside contemplating what life would be like on the other side of the tahi. Suddenly a feke appeared. Noticing the kumā deep in thought, it leaned in to ask what's on its mind. The kumā proceeded to explain its current situation. After hearing the kumā, the feke felt sad for the kumā and offered its help in hopes of becoming friends. The kumā's face lit up and it immediately nodded its head. The feke leaned in with its arms stretched down so the kumā could climb up and sit on its ulu. The two voyaged over to the other side, exchanging their stories and enjoying the beautiful view. Arriving at their destination, the kumā quickly jumped off the ulu of the feke and began singing. "Feke na, feke na. Fafa ki ho'ulu na. Oku fonu te'e kumā." Realising what the kumā was singing, the feke reached for its head feeling all the excrement left behind. As the kumā ran off, the feke was left there sitting on the tahi, feeling heartbroken and used. The two separated and never saw each other again. This story to me means that one should show gratitude when someone offers help.

For the many years I have known Ana, she has often shared the stories, songs, and dances that her elders taught her. On her island, Ana grew up fishing feke, using maka feke, and drying the feke to make lo'i feke. Lo'i feke—niu milk mixed with dried feke—is a staple when Ana comes to visit or when we are home in Kaikohe. There are also two sets of stories of feke/wheke that become points of belonging and grounding. One is of Kaikohe—the heart of the wheke whose tentacles reach out as points of connection—and the other is Ana's stories of feke as creatures of guidance

in Tonga. Sometimes I think that Ana's relationship to feke is the very thing that brought her to Kaikohe; maybe those tentacles drew her from fishing on her island on Mango to her garden in Kaikohe. Every time the story of kumā moe feke is told, it reminds me how feke builds a connection to Aotearoa—that across these oceans, even though we have different stories, we relate to our environment, peoples, and places through how we remember and what we pass on. Now the story of kumā moe feke in our fale/ghar/whare is one of connection and a lesson of how to exist together. Maybe as those Girmit ships left the ports of Calcutta and docked in Levuka my ancestors were greeted by sea creatures they had never seen before; maybe feke guided their journeys, watching over them from the depths of the sea. For so long, Indo-Fijians have never been viewed in our expansiveness—how, like the feke's tentacles, we spread across Te-moana-nui-a-kiwa and samundar. We too have forged pathways and connections across the Pacific, our stories being one of the many tentacles that are attached to the heart of who we are.

There is a kahaani in my pariwarof my great-great-uncle, who was a Girmitiya. One day, he escaped from his plantation, fleeing to the docks in Vanua Levu and hopping onto a ship he believed would take him back to India, hiding in the hull, not knowing that the ship was bound for Tongatapu, Tonga. When they found him, the ship's crew were confused, seeing this brown man who was clearly not Tongan. I am not certain if at the time they understood he had escaped plantation violence in Fiji. My great-great-uncle was brought to the King, George Tupou II. He decided my uncle could stay and he became the King's royal gardener. Eventually the King and my uncle became friends, playing cards in their spare time. I imagine they would have drunk grog, kava, while staying up late to talanoa, exchange and share stories, and hiva around the tanoa/kumete, that they must have spent many nights doing faikava together.

Eventually my great-great-uncle returned to Vanua Levu, where he would pass these stories on and on, to when my pitaji would hear it, to when he told me this story, to the day my amma took me to sit with one of my great-great-uncle's direct descendents, Brij Singh, who passed the whole story onto me when I visited him and his wife on my last trip to Savusavu. Some days when I'm in our lounge in Tāmaki and we're playing Talamu, I wonder if my great-great-uncle played Talamu with King Tupou II, just as I sit here playing with my Tongan famili/parivar. There are echoes to each of these layers of building relationships. These are ancient ways of moving and co-existing.

One day, standing at Achilles Point, looking out towards Rangitoto, a good friend recalled the migration of the tuna, how at the end of their life they leave the waters of Aotearoa to swim towards the Pacific Islands, where they give birth to the next generation as their last act of living. Their final resting place is in those oceans, while their babies eventually return to the shores of Aotearoa through ocean currents. Standing there, as the warmth of the day disappeared into night, and the dark volcanic rock of Rangitoto started to blend into the sky, we both recognised

that this story of tuna migration is a story of connection, that it shows the movement of people and stories across these oceans for generations.



Figure 42. *Genda threaded into mala for drying*, 2023. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.



Figure 43. *Genda from garden drying in courtyard,* 2023. Photo: Siakini Taulangaū.



Figure 44. *Two images of Quishile eco-printing,* 2021. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Belonging and manufactured un-belonging

These stories of plants, of people and places weave intricate connections. I tell them to you, my unknown reader, despite your unknown-ness, to express how I move through and see Indo-Fijian existence. We are a people of relationships who have built a wide tapestry of intricate connections to people and places, both existing in ancestral knowledge and building off of that scaffolding into other forms of embodied being. The rendering of Indo-Fijians as a type of nothingness, of people who do not belong anywhere, constantly wandering and longing for a homeland, I do not see as my history. That rendering is a convenient way of isolating us to state-sanctioned histories and state-issued identities.

One of the many successes of the colonial plantation system in Fiji both on a global and local level was the physical isolation of Girmitiyas from supposed known lands and familiar landscapes, and isolating Girmitiyas from each other locally. It was a well-known tactic of both the plantation class and the colonial government to separate rebellious Girmitiyas and split up jahajis on the ships, worried that these friendships would result in revolt. This isolation also worked within Fiji, and the overseer and plantation owner class (Europeans) utilised it to engage in frontier violence. The physical isolation of Fiji from other plantation colonies during the Girmit era further helped to ensure that extreme violence could be enacted upon us at various levels.

Though the plantation system created one set of isolations, the farm tenant system could be described as even more isolated, physically and bureaucratically fracturing collective efforts, including collective mobilisation. Getting rid of the middleman, it became even easier to blame the farmers, who once were Girmitiyas and were now in the process of becoming Indo-Fijian, for the inherent flaws of the system. This corporate colonialism, remote-controlled, furthered isolation and invisibilised the culprit.

Another isolation is placed onto us through a perceived disconnection from a supposed homeland. This framework positions us as only ever a people coming from a mythological "somewhere else." This narrative of coming from "nothingness" and our disbelonging is a tactic to make us malleable to the assimilationist projects of nation-states, and I see it as an ongoing effort to punish my ancestors for the ways in which they left the boundaries of colonialism.

We have a clear whakapapa, but isolation is constantly used to control us as a body of people under plantation colonialism. Historically we have been subjugated and robbed of agency through various forms of isolation, rewritten into the Pacific as having no sense of culture, no

history. This tactic has funnelled through to a contemporary isolation of us as a people, which we struggle against as we push towards self-determination, to building a collective and communal identity for ourselves.





Figure 45. *Two images of Ana teaching Quishile lalanga,* 2022. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.



Figure 46. *Stamp of General Post Office, Suva,* 1983. Image courtesy of Roshni Deo and Quishile Charan.



Figure 47. *Ana teaching Matavai lalanga,* 2024. Photo: Quishile Charan.

Restoring and re-storying our belongings

One contemporary encapsulation of how we are denied agency in determining our identities is through the paternalising treatment of Indo-Fijians by the state of so-called New Zealand. Conflating national identity and cultural identity, New Zealand has supported the creation of the colonial identities through which Indo-Fijians are debilitated and maimed today. While we determine a community and collective identity for ourselves in relation to this history of Girmit and our relationships of belonging, New Zealand seeks to render us as anything but Indo-Fijian and instead return us to "Indianness"—a national identity that did not even exist when we left. When Indo-Fijians migrate to New Zealand for the first time in their lives, we are told that we are not Fiijan. When our babies are born here, they are constructed into "Indianness". As our community has entered contemporary forms of migration into the Global North, specifically the settler states of so-called Australia and New Zealand, community elders have been engaged in conversations of concern for our future identities if we cannot maintain, cherish, and nurture Indo-Fijian identities within these diasporic homes. Other indentured labour communities, like the Indo-Caribbean community, have also been engaged in similar conversations around identity and naming. As Ro(u)ted by Our Stories Collective states in their paper, "Stories the Mangroves Hold" (2021):

> How communities choose to name themselves reveals a great deal about how they are positioning themselves in relation to other people. By naming ourselves in relation to other people. By naming ourselves as a collective of Indo-Caribbean women and gender expansive people, we locate ourselves within a long legacy of resistance by our communities, while acknowledging that the stories that come from our communities can both subvert and be complicit in reinforcing historical oppression.[179]

One component of institutional racism against Indo-Fijians is the ongoing denial of our community as non-Indigenous Fijians by the settler state of so-called New Zealand and its transition into categorising us as Asian. This debilitation is informed by and continues beyond the archives and academia because we urgently need the state to place us within the approved identities that would give us access to the structures of care work, such as healthcare, that we need. New Zealand also uses these bureaucratic categories in order to erase its participation in Fiji indentured labour, even though it too, through Chelsea Sugar, participated in environmental disaster, speeding up climate change in Fiji through supporting plantation colonialism. Now New Zealand opens its borders for both unskilled and skilled labourers, emptying Fiji of people whilst

179 Ro(u)ted by Our Stories Collective, "Stories the Mangroves Hold: Reflections on Indo-Caribbean Feminist Community Archiving, "*Journal of Indentureship and Its Legacies* 1, no. 1 (2021), 70

desecrating the Vanua by supporting corporate colonialism and foreign aid and business in Fiji.[180]

Recently the concerns of identity and naming within the Indo-Fijian context have moved towards how the state of so-called New Zealand identifies our Pasifika-ness. Various Indo-Fijian community members in New Zealand have sought to assert a clear "Fiji Indian" identity. This struggle is most notable in the census debate revolving around which ethnic marker Indo-Fijians belong to. The debate began when Census New Zealand settled on "Asian" as our ethnic marker—a shift from the previous ambiguous demarcation where we are left to choose for ourselves between Fijian, Pacific Islander Other, Indian Other, South Asian Other, and Asian Other.

Here I want to state my own position on the terminology of "Fiji Indian" and why I do not identify with or use the term, specifically also from the perspective of an anarchist and as part of a younger generation of Indo-Fijians.[181] I use the term Indo-Fijian as an act of solidarity with those back home who are engaged on the ground in the fight for our self-determination. To begin this positioning I must return to the misinformation and the ahistorical beliefs that surround the formation of the Indian nation-state, specifically an idea that "India" as we know it today has always existed. When Girmitiyas left the subcontinent, India as a nation-state and Indian as a nationality did not exist.

I want to be clear that as a community we always acknowledge our ancestry, but what we are fighting for as a community is the recognition and the right to exist within our unique identity of Indo-Fijianness. Our histories did diverge from those in the subcontinent and we are a new community because of our colonial histories. Just as I discussed in relation to *Demonic Grounds*, Girmit and plantation colonialism became the transformational space in which our community was born; to deny this is to deny our ancestors' fight for self-determination. To deny our identity is to deny our histories and we must not, as a community, let that happen. As stated by Fijian academic and political analyst, Romitesh Kant:

180 Charan and Pillay, "Coolie Cut Cane": "Gordon [now known as] Stanmore used Fiji as an experimental space so that he could sharpen his skills for colonial and imperial economic conquest across the Pacific and it's time that we place him within his true context. Gordon/Stanmore's true success was in displacing and learning how to put different non-white or Indigenous communities in opposition to each other to allow the expansion of big business. Gordon/Stanmore did not need to abide by a settler-colonial framework when there were more opportunistic and covert ways to colonise. Pacific Phosphate Company would eventually create ecological dead zones, with soil that held the bones of ancestors gone, crushed and processed with rock to become topsoil that would be used as fertiliser across farms in New Zealand and Australia. Gordon/Stanmore did not work alone; similar to his colonial administration in Fiji, he was aided by the business interests of New Zealand, Australia, and Britain."

181 To allow the nuance and complexities of this conversation around Indian versus Indo- in the naming of our identities would require more in-depth analysis beyond the scope of this exegesis. For further discussion around how other coolie diasporas understand, exist with, and identify themselves, see: Rajiv Mohabir, "On Organizing the Coolie's Karahee: The Diaspora's New Literary Directions", *Manoa* 36, no. 1, 2024, ix–xv, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/man.2024.a937294.

> You're not an Indian national, so why would you want to take up the Indian terminology anyway, at any point? And the fact that, the whole Fiji Indian or Findian terminology, actually, does not take into account, or fails to take into account, the Girmit history, the violence, you know? It also subsumes this whole idea of Hindu nationalism within it because Hindu's are a predominant group that many Girmit descendants are from. It just takes - there's so many layers, because the moment you say you're Indian or Fiji Indian, there is a link to India and then you subscribe to Indian politics. And this whole Modi's Hindu nationalism, it just distracts us from this whole idea of like let's have a conversation in Fiji, about our place in Fiji, our place in the region. The move also is that Indians - this whole idea of Indianness is linked to popular culture in Bollywood.[182]

As Kant highlights, proximity to "Indianness" then becomes about the allure of power, alongside caste and class aspirations. It cannot be stressed enough how much being cast solely as a labouring body under plantation colonialism damages our psyche, our beliefs of ourselves, and where we seek our value. The "Indian" identity then becomes one of value in contrast to the Indo-Fijian identity, which is constantly rendered as of even less than no value—as a marker of shame. The "Indian" identity, in that context, can be seen as safe because it is a national identity, fully formed, aligning to a global powerhouse[183] that is free of the implications of maiming and debilitation under the Girmit system. Globally, "Indian" is a clearly defined, homogenised identity; whether it be a nationalist identity or not, it is recognisable. For a community who carries the trauma of invisibility and erasure, even to a point where we have been made absent from the histories we created, to be recognised in whatever capacity the state decides to assign can be mistaken as liberation, as belonging. But we, Indo-Fijians, must recognise that there is no belonging in state "recognition", as belonging is **not** the impartial objective of colonial nation-states; instead, their goal is to border and order.

This shifting of our histories and how Girmitiyas are misremembered as "Indian" is also the distancing of our ancestors from their relationships of belonging, which we as descendants must continue to nurture and grow. To deny our identity is to sever our connection to iTaukei and the recognition that as a community, we want to continue to build relationships with their communities.[184] One of the many sets of Girmit oral histories that the official record conveniently

182 Kant, "Fiji Baat: Oral Histories and Interviews".

183 India is a militarised state and the South Pacific is a military hub. India trying to claim Indo-Fijians and framing Indo-Fijians as "Indian" is a way for the Indian state to gain easier access to military imperial powers. To understand the complicated nature of the Indian state's power please refer to: Arundhati Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014); Shepherd, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*. For a list of resources about the history of caste and conversations around Dalit liberation please see: https://www.equalitylabs.org/research/reading-list/.

184 Kant, "Fiji Baat: Oral Histories and Interviews", 26: "Because our history as Girmit descendants is very different from the Girmit experiences in Mauritius or in Guyana. What differentiates us is the fact that our ancestors came to Fiji, were brought to Fiji - and where does that situate Indo-Fijian histories within the Pacific Studies as well. Because our identities, our culture, is formed by our geography. Because there is this move to place our histories within the diaspora studies kind of thing, it sort of misses that whole point."

leaves out are the stories of Girmitiya ancestors running away from plantations and being safely hidden away in iTaukei villages.[185] These stories show how iTaukei have historically been part of supporting us in resisting plantation colonisation, and illustrate why the state would want to sever the connection.

Seeds and plants also enter these oral histories and forge relationships through the sharing of knowledge. When motherhood entered the demands of the Girmit system, Girmitiyas women were seen as breeders for a new generation of labourers. This became more urgent to the colonial administration and CSR as importing labourers was becoming cost-heavy, and with the farm tenant scheme approaching, children became an ideal stock in future unpaid labour. Girmitiyas women recognised this and actively looked to control their reproduction autonomy and ensure the safety of themselves and future generations. To decide to not birth children into such a violent system became a site of protest, and women looked to plants to control contraception. What is of importance about this oral history is that our ancestors did not have intimate knowledge of Fijian plants yet.[186] These oral histories are a reminder that iTaukei women have had long-standing relationships of solidarity with the women in our communities and together seed the important moments in the history of Girmit that create new relationships of belonging for future generations. There are many instances of us engaging with iTaukei plant and food practices, just as they engage in ours.[187] Plants have been a site of intercommunity exchange and relationship building for generations, with my aaji being one of these women who have intimate knowledge of Fijian plants and has worked with them as a healer since ages ago.

iTaukei have also engaged in relationships of care for our dead. One story of this is in the provinces of Rewa and Tailevu, where, on 11 May 1884 , the people of Noco sent their vakas/druas out in an effort to rescue Girmitiyas from the wreckage of the Syria ship on Nasilai Reef. Some Girmitiyas were saved, while others drowned. Following iTaukei customs of death and burial rites, the people of Noco collected bodies of the dead from the water, bringing them to

185 Charan and Pillay, "Coolie Cut Cane".

186 Shameem, "Sugar and Spice", 294: "Again women defied the efforts of those in authority to condemn them to permanent motherhood. This was done through various means: women first of all attempted to control their fertility by contraception. Although there is no official documentation of contraceptive use among Indian women on plantations, oral accounts reveal that women's knowledge of certain herbs and potions for the control of fertility was vast. Much of their knowledge was however doomed to oblivion because of their failure in Fiji to find the plants they had known in India. However, despite the attempts of the authorities to keep native Fijians and Indians apart there was always some social interaction. The reported cases reveal interaction only among men, but Indian women's present day knowledge of Fijian herbs and medicine indicate that Indian women would have very quickly found out from Fijian women the appropriate medicines they needed for their survival in Fiji. This would have been shared among women and then passed through the generations."

187 For example, see: Charan, "She Cut Me From Ganna", 77: "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 [Amma] she said it is a source of protein, iron and vitamins. The plant itself can be turned into fibres for weaving or rope and the red hibiscus is used often in pooja for offerings."



Figure 48. Quishile Charan, *Hibiscus embroidery,* 2024, cotton embroidery thread on cotton. Image courtesy of Matavai Taulangaū.



Figure 49. Quishile Charan, *Two images of hibiscus embroidery* (detail), 2024, cotton embroidery thread on cotton. Image courtesy of Matavai Taulangaū.

shore to be buried in the Vanua with care, ensuring that the ancestors of Girmit that they could recover would always have a resting place with them. This act of care has been carried on across the generations in their village. The story is passed on as a reminder, and these practices continue today.

Alongside this, the survivors of the wreckage remained in the village of the Noco people, where they were looked after and allowed time to recover. Sadly, after two weeks, they had to leave to be distributed to plantations across Fiji. This story is one that the record of power has tried to erase, with colonial officials at the time not accounting for or acknowledging that these rescue efforts were led first and foremost by iTaukei.[188] Founder of Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises and Development Sashi Kiran led a major effort with other descendants of Girmit to reestablish connections to these ancestral relationships, with a traditional ceremony welcoming all descendants of Girmit to the Vanua taking place during the Rewa Day celebrations in 2017. Tui Noco (High Chief) Ratu Isoa Damudamu, stated: "The bodies of our dear beloved Indo--Fijian relatives who were buried in those special burial sites for 132 years turned into soil and have become seeds of everlasting relationship, establishing that they belong to Noco, the Ratu na Tui Noco, the people of Rewa, the Gone Marama Bale na Roko Tui Dreketi and the people of Fiji".[189] To be welcomed to the Vanua by the people of Noco was and still is an emotional act guided by care and love. To now have a name that was established through relationships of belonging, Kai Noco, is an important step forward for Indo-Fijians, not only our relationships to iTaukei, but for the continuation of our community.

I share these kahaani with you, my unknown reader, to express that even though colonialism dictated our arrival to Fiji, it does not have to determine our identity and futures in Fiji. The colonial administration, CSR, and the frontier societies of Fiji purposely tried to create racial division between iTaukei and Indo-Fijians. Regardless of this divide-and-conquer tactic, both our communities have engaged in our own autonomous decisions. iTaukei chose to intervene, to care for Girmitiyas both living and dead, to hide Girmitiyas in their villages, and continue to build relationships with us today. I think of my own pariwarwho do Taukei Baba Pooja to the Vanua and high chiefs that our ganna khet is on. Our khet being a subdivision farm from colonial plantations, my elders know that death had taken place here on this Vanua, and they have been doing this pooja for decades. This relationship-building and these acts of care through spiritual practices are part of jahaji and whakawhanaungatanga.

All this is why, in the conversation of Indo-Fijian as a name for our community, I am a staunch

188 Ganesh Chand, "Whose Story Is It? Colonialism, Syria Ship Wreck, and Texting Race Relations in Fiji", *Fijian Studies* 15, no. 1 (2017), 63–92.

189 The Fiji Times. "A People Reunited", *The Fiji Times*, 14 July 2016.

advocate for asserting our Fijian identity while acknowledging our whakapapa to India. If that means we need to create a completely new term for our young community, I encourage it. This is the important work we must now undertake so that we have self-determined futures. As Romitesh Kant states:

> ...[we, Indo-Fijians, must ask] questions about identities, questions about histories and questions around unpacking our own histories that have been written by other people...But what does it mean to be Fijian? What does it mean to have conversations amongst ourselves around what it means to be Indo-Fijian? And knowing our history and also talking to other Indigenous Fijians, Rotumans and other groups as well you know. What does it mean for us to be sharing this space?[190]

The concerns of my community about what the shift in our identity marker from Census New Zealand means for our self-determining futures can be heard through the speech of Girmit Foundation New Zealand president Krish Naidu, addressing community members during the 2021 Girmit commemoration day:

> ...Fiji Indians are blessed to have multiple identities. While we honour and respect our Indian, Asian roots and ancestry, that does not mean our Pacific identities should be denied or ignored. We are Pacific people, we are not asking for a favour, we just wish to be recognised for what we are.[191]

I find Naidu speaking of "not asking for a favour" deeply sad, as it shows his self-awareness for how our calls for our identity can be seen as such passive throw-away gestures. But we aren't asking for favours—we're asking for a historical correction of the narratives surrounding us and who we are. He carries on:

> Fiji Indians need to be acknowledged as an inclusive Pacific community where diversity within the Pacific community is embraced and celebrated, and official recognition is needed from the government beyond the role of Stats New Zealand to classify us as Pacific Peoples. The Ministry of Pacific Peoples role is to improve outcomes for Pacific Peoples by bringing Pacific voice, perspective, and understanding into policy. To do this effectively, the Fiji Indian voice must be heard. Our people need to be part of the official policy framework for the Pacific peoples. We must be part and parcel of it, not just when it suits, you cannot be Pacific when we have to come to New Zealand under Pacific skill migration only.[192]

Naidu here is discussing that when we are considered "Indian" and disincluded in the frameworks

190 Kant, "Fiji Baat: Oral Histories and Interviews", 28.

191 Arvind Kumar, "Fiji Indians Escalate Fight for Pacific Identity, Race Relations Commissioner Hopes for Resolution Soon", *Stuff*, 20 May 2021, https://www.stuff.co.nz/tarana/125169326/fiji-indians-escalate-fight-for-pacific-identity-race-relations-commissioner-lends-support.

192 Ibid.

and policy-making of this country for Pacific Islanders, it is a denial of how our histories of plantation colonialism inform our contemporary inheritance of those violences, such as health outcomes. I would go further and say that the state of so-called New Zealand needs to acknowledge its heavy hand in Fiji Girmit. Chelsea Sugar, an iconic staple in Pākeha/Kaivalagi "kiwiana", was built and enabled by CSR. During the Girmit era, my ancestors' labour was what made CSR so profitable. If we cannot be discussed as having a colonial history and relationships of belonging within Fiji, then we are denied very important avenues of structural support that are needed to enable important change in our communities. Naidu also brings up the alarming point that we are still considered Pacific when it suits this government's needs for Pacific migrants' skilled labour. To me, this is a very real parallel to our Girmit histories: we are only ever seen as something of value when we are labouring bodies. This raises a concerning question: does this nation-state only want to cast us into the role of labourer? Is the only time that this government cares when we carry on the legacy of cutting cane? Are we still cutting your cane, New Zealand?

Naidu joins our ancestors in their historical calling-out of the inadequacy of government structures. He reminds the audience that these very ministries are meant to be serving the public who pays for these services:

> The taxpayer-funded Ministry of Pacific is for all Pacific people. It is not a ministry for Indigenous Pacific people alone. The bias, the institutional, the structural bias must stop and for that we need real political leadership. It is also a human rights issue: the research, the design, the delivery of services for Pacific peoples should include Fiji Indians. In areas like education and health to name a few, our people also feature negatively with issues like diabetes, heart disease, and mental health. Certain diseases could be linked to Fiji and our lifestyles back home. Real gains for the New Zealand Health system can only be achieved if we capture the diversity of all Pacific peoples.[193]

Naidu reminds his audience of the weight of history, calling to the power of naming under the colonial project. Pacific peoples—a term not of our choosing but one invented by the colonisers for us—is historically a term of locating and positioning people to a geography. I see this naming too as one of the many homogenising tools the state uses to make people easier to identify, as the nation-state's—especially the settler state's—power comes from its ability to border, order, and code its citizens.[194] This is part of how the state can identify communities by desirability or undesirability, playing into the caste and purity politics that plague our history. To homogenise communities into wider and broader identity terms and identifications also helps the assimilationist projects of the neoliberal settler state. In this instance, Naidu states his awareness that how the state envisioned this "Pacific" label does not reflect the Pacific that the state of so-

193 Ibid.

194 El-Enany, "Bordering and Ordering".

called New Zealand is trying to codify.

We are a community who is very conscious of not being Indigenous. We do not build our belongings through Indigeneity. Even for us to claim Indigenous status to the subcontinent of India would be an ahistorical rendering of how India culturally and politically existed and exists. Within the contemporary landscape of India today, "Indian" is a nationality that defines the many ethnicities that make up the area of the subcontinent. The Indian state has clear structures and terms to identify what they consider Indigenous to that history and landscape. That is to say that what the New Zealand state versus the Indian state considers Indigenous are two very different political positionings. In both contexts and histories, we as a community are not Indigenous. A lot of our understanding today about how colonisation works is based on the very important research that Indigenous communities have created and fought for under settler states in the Global North—the centre in which power operates in our globalised worlds. Trying to impose settler colonialism as a structure of relation on the rest of the world creates lazy understandings that position an "us" (read: white) and a "them" (read: Indigenous) that misrenders and invisibilises non-white, non-Indigenous communities. Naidu pointing out that the "Ministry of Pacific is for all Pacific people; it is not a ministry for Indigenous Pacific people alone" calls to the very fact that colonialism is the root of the problem and should never be the place in which we seek our refuge and resolution. I also see Naidu's specification of us as not being Indigenous as an important illustration of how aware we are as a community that one of the many relationships we nurture is with the Indigenous communities of the Pacific, including, for myself, to Aotearoa. While to be able to exist under the classification as Pacific peoples is, in my opinion, a very small token gesture in the longer journey of anti-colonial and decolonial work that needs to take place, it is a gesturing towards our, Indo-Fijians', right to self-determination and a continuation of the relationships we want to tend to within the Pacific.

Naidu concludes by reminding us that the colonisation of this specific region, the South Pacific, deeply impacts our community today. Through these histories and relationships, we too can contribute invaluable knowledge and knowings to the ongoing anti-colonial and decolonial struggle and fight for all our communities:

> Pacific peoples are over-represented in suicide stastics including Fiji Indians, and I've been to three funerals in the last two weeks alone, and of course Sam Achary from Sam's funeral homes will vouch for that, the sad issue facing our community. Why should the 12 million dollars set by the Government for suicide prevention exclude Fiji Indians? Why should Pacific language week exclude Fiji Indians? Why should the definition of Pacific learner not capture our children in the education sector? It is shameful. Fiji Indians should be included in the design and development of workforce incentives aimed at increasing the number of Pacific peoples working in the health workforce. This includes increasing the capability of a workforce on Pacific peoples issues. The

list goes on and on and on and on and on.[195]

This census decision and other historical events has had pervasive and ongoing impacts on our manufactured un-belongings. While I do feel the imposed weight of what it means to be placed into a category of belonging nowhere, I choose to look towards building a sense of self through the stories passed onto me. I find my place to stand through my relationships and I know too that I belong to Fiji through a unique relationship of being a descendant of Girmit. This unique relationship also sets out a responsibility, to both iTaukei and the Vanua, that while this isn't a land I was born to through Indigeneity, I still must honour and respect the Vanua. To borrow from terms I have learnt and come to use here in the context of being a non-white settler on stolen lands in Aotearoa, I am Tauiwi, I am tangata tiriti.[196]

A lot of historical work has been done to make us feel separated, to other us. Not many of our stories of connection seem to be the ones that circulate in dominant discourse, yet we have made so many long-lasting relationships that situate us in types of belonging. This is exactly why I tell these stories: these are our stories of belonging.



Figure 50. *Stamp of Air Pacific 1951–1991, Boeing 767, Fiji*, date unknown. Image courtesy of Roshni Deo and Quishile Charan.

195 Arvind Kumar, "Fiji Indians Escalate Fight for Pacific Identity".

196 Lincoln Dam, "Be (com) ing an Asian Tangata Tiriti", *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* 18, no. 3 (2023), 228: "'Tauiwi' is another Māori term for non-Māori. I do not see 'tauiwi' and 'tangata tiriti' as mutually exclusive since tauiwi are tangata tiriti and vice versa. However, I prefer the term and identity 'tangata tiriti' for its immediate and apparent orientation to Te Tiriti."



Figure 51. *Ana in lounge, lalanga, Kaikohe,* 2001. Image courtesy of Quishile Charan and Matavai Taulangaū.

We once crossed kalapani, we now call oceania our place of belonging

As I have discussed, Girmit histories often get flattened down and read through strict binaries within mainstream and traditional discourse. Our literary devices follow a similar pattern, wherein, intentionally or unintentionally, oral histories are brought forward to reinforce these binaries, and writers then utilise stories from the vantage point of those who got to narrate and voice their experiences publicly.[197]

Kalapani is a recurring literary metaphor, used by many—my past self included—to discuss our history as one of violence and disconnection from a "homeland". It was a common term to describe the oceanic crossing and Girmit itself, which has made it into state-sanctioned and oral histories as narak. This singular interpretation of an expansive and descriptive term cuts off the multiple meanings for different Girmitiyas and how they negotiated the spatial realities of their colonialism.

Kalapani has layered meanings in the context of Girmit due to individual cultural references to what the ocean means. For the upper-caste Girmitiyas, travelling across the ocean was considered a severing of caste while, I would argue, for others it was more of a literal and metaphorical representation of the brutality of those three months. Maybe it was just a descriptor of the colour of the water itself.[198] Kalapani, in the Indo-Fijian context, is used as both a physical and symbolic gesture to describe the violent journey across black waters of the middle passage. To remove kalapani from its use as a descriptive term, to only ever view it through negative symbolism is a return to casteism. What I mean by this is that the "blackness" of kalapani is given the connotation of impureness through this lens, making the grief not about being colonised but about losing caste. Invoking kalapani, the crossing of water, as the marker of impurity and shame is the return to casteist logic within our stories. This is more apparent when water, for many, was the pathway of liberation—choosing Girmit, one form of subjugation, over another in the subcontinent, in the hopes for freedom.

197 Such as the use of Totoram Singh's oral history *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands & The Story of the Haunted Line* by writers including Brij Lal and Vijay Mishra.

198 Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, "Kala Pani Revisited: Indian Labour Migrants and the Sea Crossing", *Journal of Indentureship and its Legacies* 1, no. 1 (2021), 49: "with Ganga Din Misr of Adampur, a return emigrant from Demerara who 'came to see me and tell his story, . . . [and] gave a curious account of his voyage: how he went not only over the kala pani, but also a sufait, lal, nila, and hara pani'. Surely Misr, in visiting Pitcher to recount his adventures, was wanting to articulate – in describing the waters as not only black, but also white, red, blue and green – that the realities of going overseas (as explained to recruits headed for British Guiana) were far more complex than the simplistic arguments propounded by proponents and detractors of the indenture system alike."

As I have stated, pain narratives have become one of the key authoritative and legitimated accounts within the Indo-Fijian context. Fijian academic Vijay Mishra observed that this has developed a "Girmit ideology", where we narrate pain through our disbelongings, with Girmit—specifically that pain narrative—becoming a device for legitimacy[199] to produce our belongings without regard for all the other aspects of our identity that make us who we are. That's to say, Girmit is not what makes us belong to Fiji; it is us—our relationships, our ancestry, our unique culture that is inherently part of a wider Fijianness. As with the Girmit, this Girmit ideology is not a universal experience. People came to Girmit with different backgrounds and histories that informed their contexts in India as well as Fiji. From the dominant (read: male) perspective, Girmit became the enforcer of their degradation, dehumanisation, and victimisation. In contrast, Girmitiyas women experienced Girmit with more brutality, but chose to negotiate these colonial worlds differently. This is where I depart from Mishra's "Girmit ideology", which I would situate as a male narrative of a pursuit of legitimacy based on their pain narratives.

Girmitiyas women were not afforded the same positioning as men, and their stories are largely missing from official and authoritative histories and oral accounts. You, my unknown reader, and I must return to the reality of Girmit and the plantation system as a spatial reality organised through the racialised **and** gendered management of bodies. Girmitiyas women and their spatial realities of Girmit were defined and lived very differently to men. These spatial realities for women meant that even the narration of their colonisation and gendered violence was co-opted and reauthored into men's pain narratives; in these narratives, they were cast in the supporting role of women who degrade themselves and women who are degraded.

For some of us, women in our communities have passed on oral stories, generation after generation, and for many daughters and granddaughters, we have become the keepers of these stories of their pain and their resistance. For others, we embody these stories every day in our contemporary realities of being descendants and the ongoing impacts of that state. Women's stories have become part of the intimate fabrics woven across our everyday lives. Girmitiyas women have continually moved against their colonisation and included these new worlds into how they were creating futures. Beyond the violent colonial realities of Girmit, women transformed these uninhabitable spaces into habitable spaces.[200] These actions and negotiations are erased through solely focusing on pain narratives.

199 Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2007), 42: "...the word *girmit* turns up whenever the question of legitimacy arises. And here one is conscious of legitimacy as indicating belonging to the land."

200 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 133.

This perpetual looking to the past through the lens of violence and disconnection without a hopeful look to the future encases us into the glass box of history, doomed to live continuously through colonial trappings of who we should be. During my time living, growing, and continuing to build community in Aotearoa, a whakatauki (Māori proverb) I keep coming to is:
Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua:

I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past[201]

Matua Moana Jackson has also pointed out how "the greatest disservice colonisation has done to our people is to rob our ability to dream."[202] In the above whakatauki and Moana Jackson's recognition of how dreaming and imagination was taken away from us, I see my own responsibilities as a cultural practitioner: that to dream, to create, and to envision are the most important aspects of creativity and world-building for our futures.

I contest kalapani functioning solely as a symbolic and violent pain narrative of severance, disconnection, and no return, and re-narrate it as a story of new homecomings, new beginnings, just as those seeds were carried and planted for new futures. Oral histories of no origins that I carry with me throughout my life, of seeds that I see today across the landscapes of Fiji—this is where I build my belongings, not through pain. Just as Fijian poet Mohit Prasad gives life to the journey across the middle passage and kalapani for his ancestor:

I caress an empty thought
as I clean out a brass plate
of thin dhal and broken rice bits,
I am carrying a mango seed
to plant at the end of this voyage.[203]

201 Lesley Rameka, "Kia Whakatōmuri te Haere Whakamua: 'I Walk Backwards into the Future with my Eyes Fixed on My Past'", *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 17, no. 4 (2016), 387–398.

202 This is a well-known quote of Matua Moana Jackson's, quoted many places, including: Kahu Kutia, "Astronesian Futurisms", *Pantograph Punch*, 26 September 2021, https://www.pantograph-punch.com/posts/astronesian-futurisms.

203 Mohit Prasad, *Eating Mangoes* (Suva: Pacific Writing Forum, University of the South Pacific, 2001), quoted in Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2007), 40–41: "Mohit Prasad's poem does not seek 'forgiveness' as Nandan's does possibly because he, Nandan, feels that the elegy he has written cannot capture the original pain. And unlike Sudesh Mishra the legacy of the journey has not broken the poet's heart in twain. In Mohit Prasad's poem the journey is envisioned as that of a traveller, the slave Bomma of Amitav Ghosh's In an Antique Land...The woman's gaze and the mango seed carry a narrative of creative possibilities as signs both of the renewal of life and the stamping on the landscape of a flora that is meaningful. The labourer's proud secret ('carrying a mango seed') is captured by Mohit Prasad through the present continuous form of the simple present in the original Hindi. The use of the present continuous carries the future in the present and holds out a certain kind of promise. It is this promise and the degree to which indentured labourers transformed the landscape, 'naturalized' the alien, re-visioned the nation in terms of their own experience and believed that theirs, too, was one of the founding narratives of the nation, that underpin the trauma of loss that comes with subsequent political upheavals and denial of the diaspora's legitimacy."

Once a journey that marked oppression, kalapani, it is now samundar: a place we call home. Oceania and its vast landscape connects us to the many other communities of Oceania and Te-moana-nui-a-kiwa. Imagining new futures means the storying of how relationships have changed, never forgetting our pasts but instead turning to them for guidance to light a path so that each generation that comes can see the way forward to our futures. I want to create stories of our past that acknowledge, respect, and honour Girmit while looking at how self-determination can be traced to us now, just as the waters of these oceans are a part of the environments we find comfort in, are part of what is considered home. Now the ocean means a place where we form kinship. Neither one—kalapani nor samundar—is disconnected to the other; these things flow organically into each other, they inform one another. I see the efforts that Girmitiyas women—my ancestors undertook, from dreaming beyond kalapani to samundar, forming Fiji Baat as a language of belonging and resistance, and the carrying of seeds on Girmit ships as the sprouting of futures as the efforts where my roots of craft are born.

This traumatic crossing of the ocean will always be an integral part of who we are as a people, but it is not the centre of who we are. Once my ancestors lived in landlocked states, now my elders all have different relationships to the ocean because of Fiji. My pitaji, born and raised in Savusavu, comes from swimmers, people who fish and build boats. The ocean makes up the landscape of my pitaji's identity. This love of the ocean was nurtured through his relationship to his own pitaji, my aaja, and together they have shared this great love with me through their own stories of fishing trips. My amma has told me of her own memories of nights when Pitaji and Aaja arrived home in the early morning to show her their journeys of the ocean, the fish they had caught. Pitaji has been a big catalyst in me understanding how I can move in non-human relationships. As he says: "We are not greater or more important than Bhagwan's smallest creations, a bee or ant; we are all equal, we are not greater than our environment, our purpose is to find peace and live among all of Bhagwan's creations." He is also the one that tells me the stories of the moon, Chandra, and how the moon and its cycles have intimate relationships to plants and when we plant, to how and when we fish. Machiri or ika make up the many food practices of our households today, Amma's tarkari and my pitaji's kokoda being part of my most treasured food memories.

These changes in relationships and meanings over generations that I am discussing are not new. They might look new, these ways in which I chose to engage with these ancestral knowings, but in reality, our ancestors forged this way of existing that continues to be forged today. I see one of these important points of connection as jahaji, jahajibhaini, and jahajibhai—terms our Indo-Fijian ancestors created and the beginning of Fiji Baat, which I consider a language of resistance and anti-colonial struggle. Girmitiyas were not a homogenous community, as Naidu states: "They did not have a common identity. This was to emerge through their experience of recruitment, transportation, quarantine and work as plantation labourers or 'Indian coolies', and in their

struggles against racism of the colonial order".[204]

The conscious act in creating the term jahaji/s, can be seen in how the term itself is not reflective of just its literal meaning but rather historical context and solidarities. This understanding shows how my ancestors chose to counter their colonisation and how they envisioned their survival: through relationships and community.[205] For us today, jahaji is an encapsulating term that marks the past. I see jahaji as being the defining way of how we can imagine and envision our futures. Through reclaiming these ancestral frameworks and cultural practices of kinship and relationship-building, we can continue to live in expanded and complex relationships, just as I share my stories, which are the storying of my jahaji, my shipmates, sisters and brothers.

It is important to sit and consider the enormity of these acts, and to utilise languages that existed in one context—the subcontinent of India—and then were remoulded, creating new life. These acts are not small or insignificant; they are acts of humanising. As I have mentioned, even though Girmitiyas were dehumanised, we developed a new language—Fiji Baat, which encompasses jahaji—both recognising our cultural differences under the system of Fiji Girmit and building a new collective community. We are one of the only communities that holds this deep knowing of jahaji as a term of kinship.[206] It does not exist in the past or today in the subcontinent like it does in Fiji. It encapsulates the acknowledgement of what makes us culturally different as Indo-Fijians and builds relationships through differences and through the act of storytelling as connection.

To acknowledge the history of jahaji is important because it shows us how to build these relationships. As the whakatauki I mentioned earlier offers, we must know our histories in order to build our future and to know that this blossoming futurity is a hopeful one created by and for us. Knowing what it means to be Indo-Fijian in the contemporary context, we need to turn back to jahaji. We already have these in-built frameworks of how to be in community across differences. These frameworks are how I come to understand how to be in a relationship to my own histories of colonisation; jahaji to me asserts that we are Indo-Fijian not because of our trauma and colonisation in Fiji, but rather we are Indo-Fijian because of the relationships we built—jahajibhaini and jahajibhai—on those ships and extended beyond them. Jahaji was a way to connect across the ethnic, religious, caste, classed, age, and gender lines. It was a very conscious effort of whakawhanaungatanga. As per Arama Rata and Faisal Al-Asaad's

204 Vijay Naidu, "From Indian Coolies to Fijians: Culture and Identity Change Among Indo-Fijians." *Fijian Studies* 15, no. 1 (2017), 13.

205 Ibid. In a section title, Naidu's article names Girmit the Great Leveller: "Early Colonial Era: Loss of Caste, Jahajibhais, and Girmit, the Great Leveller".

206 Descendants in the Caribbean also have a history of jahaji as a relational term. To learn more please refer to: https://www.saada.org/thethingswecarried/part-ii.

"Whakawhanaungatanga as a Māori Approach to Indigenous–Settler of Colour Relationship Building" (2019):

> The root word of whakawhanaungatanga is whanaunga (kin, relation), which, when the suffix tanga is added, becomes an abstract noun denoting the state or quality of being related, encompassing "kinship and the rights, responsibilities, and expected modes of behaviour that accompany the relationship" (Benton et al., 2013, p. 524)....What might distinguish whanaungatanga from relationships more generally is that these non-kin whanaungatanga relationships are forged through shared experiences (Mead, 2003, p. 28), and imply a "special social solidarity" (Benton et al., 2013, p. 524).[207]

As Rata and Al-Asaad both envision whakawhanaungatanga as an important aspect of relationship-building between Māori and Tauiwi of Colour (ToC) that is grounded in creating structures of real solidarities, they conclude in their paper:

> ...through our analysis we suggest that strengthening Māori–ToC [Tauiwi of Colour]solidarities requires us to subvert the settler colonial lens, deconstruct identity binaries, recognise our distinct yet interrelated experiences of settler colonial racialisation and oppression, accept the conditional nature of inter-group solidarity, and align compatible Indigenous sovereignty and anti-racism movements.[208]

Leaving the boundaries of colonialism is about questioning how our bodies are codified into the states' structures of order and control. These very identities that are imposed onto us and set out for us are both an act of severing our connections and isolating us. Our stories can be the strongest connections of whanaungatanga or jahaji because they enable us to maintain our connections and belonging while ensuring our differences are always honoured and respected.

I've been conscious in teaching everyone in our whare, ghar, fale, vale, heym, how to move with my people, to say bula and kaise hai to Indo-Fijians. We have historically been so disincluded that engaging in conversations of inclusion become especially significant. The relationships we are repairing in our lifetimes are also about the lateral violence, racism, colourism, texturism, featurism, et cetera that exists across our non-white communities. After these many years of sharing Indo-Fijian stories and colonisation, my jahajis know how to move, how to express to others a history of resistance to the system of Girmit, to remind others to yaad karo, and the many ways that Indo-Fijians have unique cultures that inform the wider network of what we call Pasifika identities in this oceanic space.

207 Arama Rata and Faisal Al-Asaad, "Whakawhanaungatanga as a Māori approach to Indigenous-Settler of Colour Relationship Building", *New Zealand Population Review* 45 (2019), 220.

208 Rata and Al-Asaad, "Whakawhanaungatanga as a Māori approach to Indigenous-settler of Colour Relationship Building", 229.

One of those loving ways that my gang keeps Indo-Fijian memory and stories alive I see in my partner, Matavai, who lovingly and sometimes annoyingly reminds his own Tongan community that curry as they know it is from Tarkari in Fiji. That to make your version of a Tongan curry, Fijian Tarkari comes first. Of course he also knows to tell everyone that Fijian Tarkari is the best. He tries to remind people of how their own food practices come from other cultures and histories and how they must be honoured and yaad karo. Just as my ancestors brought seeds with them so too were spices brought to the South Pacific via these journeys. These connections and ways of knowing how to nurture I see in my loved ones as they return home with new stories, stories from work, school, or simply from being out and about in the world, of how they met someone Indo-Fijian and how in their exchanges with one another, they get to co-exist together because of what I have taught them. I watch them care in ways for us that once upon a time I didn't really understand were possible. Just as stories can, love too produces new realities of existing together, new knowings. Now they too are out in the world advocating for Indo-Fijian self-determination. Just as Bronte for many years has shared about the colonisation of Ngāpuhi and Māori. Just as Jasmin has explained state-based violence committed by the Indian government against her Sikh community in Punjab and her people's treatment in Malaysia. Just as Casey has spent many years telling stories of Jewish history and sharing the possibilities of doikayt and cultural inheritance in diaspora towards a Jewish identity outside of the Zionist state of Israel, because from the river to the sea Falestin shall be free. Just as Matavai, Hikiama, Siakini, and Fe'ao share their many stories of how Christianity has impacted their Tongan culture. I tell stories of my jahajis to also show how I build off their knowings, their communities who struggle for their own self-determination and have existed in that generational struggle longer than my community. We share our stories to learn how to be with one another, how to nurture one another while we live these complicated existences. Continuing to build and hold that identity is to continue to resist assimilation, whether that be into the West or into the Hindu-nationalist trappings of Bharat Mata.



Figure 52. *Stamp of Fiji International Telecommunications Building, Suva,* 1988. Image courtesy of Roshni Deo and Quishile Charan.



Figure 53. *Stamp of Mango, Fiji.* Image courtesy of Roshni Deo and Quishile Charan.

Am I still cutting your cane? Paradigms of institution: Acts of refusal

> Inquiry as invasion is a result of the imperative to produce settler colonial knowledge and to produce it for the academy. This invasion imperative is often disguised in universalist terms of producing "objective knowledge" for "the public." It is a thin disguise, as most research rhetoric waxes the poetics of empire: to discover, to chart new terrain, to seek new frontiers, to explore, and so on. The academy's unrelenting need to produce "original research" is what makes the inquiry an invading structure, not an event. Social science hunts for new objects of study, and its favored reaping grounds are Native, urban, poor, and Othered communities. [209]

As I've discussed, Indo-Fijians have not been seen as possessing the capacity to create knowledge, or to create and tell our own histories and stories. The tensions surrounding knowledge-production, and how that exists as its own conversation in the arts, parallels my own reality, as both a descendant of extracted labour and a maker. I am speaking in particular of the history of the artist as a profession and position within the European tradition. While the arts is not academia, both institutional spaces operate within the same paradigm: colonialism. Under the banner of this paradigm, these institutions dictate what is and isn't knowledge, and who does and doesn't have enough value assigned to create, to story, to share. Both colonial spaces have desirability frameworks, are fetishistic, and purposely appropriate our histories, movements, and struggles, watering down the very real realities we live in as colonised peoples and our resistance to these systems of oppression. Just as colonialism and Girmit have shapeshifted, so to do these institutions, selling neoliberal dreams of diversity and inclusion models, peddling middle-classed settler fantasies of "lifestyles", these spaces are conveyor belts towards assimilation.

For you, my unknown reader, I continually locate these institutional spaces and neoliberal centres of so-called "culture", museums and galleries, as hostile territories, to show you how colonialism constantly seeks to feed itself by expanding its territories in an effort to widen the net of control and power. The arts is a clear extension of this framework, dangerous in particular for how it performs neutrality, reducing beautiful objects, abstract thought, and conceptual making into ironic experimental thought processes, removing weight, history, and purpose in the process. Because of this, the arts (arts education, galleries, and the industry itself) escapes its colonial

209 Tuck and Yang, "Unbecoming Claims", 813.

intentions and inherent embodiment of class, nobility, decadence, and opulence.[210] Unlike the academic institution's desires for written knowledge, data collection, and archival research, the arts desires aesthetics, and even though most understand aesthetics to be the way something looks, its design, colours, and styles, aesthetics are not surface-level, they are not a neutral afterthought. Aesthetics have the power to disguise colonial and fascist ideology in pretty packages. Just as the arts uses objects, concepts, and ideas, so too did the imperial project use these forms to dehumanise and subjugate whole communities and peoples to justify and enable their violent colonial pursuits. The colonisers too controlled the narrative by regulating creative expression: painting, photographing, filming, and drawing us as exotic objects, objects of disgust, things of science, or all three at once.[211] The institution of the arts is no less a colonial hostile territory than the academic institution.

McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds: Black Women And The Cartographies Of Struggle* is an important connection point to exploring the complex realities of being descendants of plantation colonialism through the transatlantic slave trade for black Americans. No space is neutral, just as safety is relative. The arts and academic institutions, then, are a tricky site of domination, posing as both private and public space, conflating its "educational" (university) and "cultural" statues (the arts) with its true business-capitalist-colonial desires, hiding behind saviour mentality, itself a missionary mindset. I extend McKittrick's theoretical understandings to how I am trying to navigate the legacies of Girmit as an Indo-Fijian, especially while I am inside the institution.

210 To read criticism of how art institutions, including arts education, continue the job of colonialism through liberalist frameworks, please refer to the art criticism of *The White Pube*, as stated by co-founder Zarina Muhammad in her essay "What I've learnt from being a brown critic on the Internet (and what i need now from our readers)" (2019):
"The institution has realised that it must perform the gestures of liberatory or emancipatory politics, to appear to meet the groundswell of our collective demands, but in this performance, it believes we haven't noticed that nothing has changed. We still experience a sector that demands rigid conformity to its values; which are overwhelmingly that of a centric-liberalism. This politic seeks not to overhaul or rapidly make itself accessible to those on the margins, but to absorb, neutralise or re-consolidate itself off the backs of these criticisms that hit it, by letting in a few exceptions that conform to its systemic philosophy. If this is the case, then any inclusion or ~representation~ we might see is token, as defined by Ash Sarkar, 'in which people of colour must assimilate to oppressive ideologies in return for representation'. The way we experience the effects of this politic are collective, and our responses must be collective in turn. We do not only experience institutional racism individually; it is a pressure that is felt collectively, with collective affect & collective outcome."

211 In the context of indentured labour, colonial photographs-turned-postcards were visual productions of claiming power and territory, as stated by Gaiutra Bahadur in her paper "Postcards of Empire", in discussion of postcards in the Carribean context: "Morin's portraits performed a similar function: the youthful, lovely, lavishly ornamented women in his photographs were meant both to entice and to reassure potential travelers to the Caribbean. His creative collusion with the rhetoric of empire was eventually rewarded with a bronze medal at the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London and an honorable mention in the 1878 Paris exhibition. It is perhaps fitting that Morin was both photographer and land surveyor; before staking a claim to territory, one has to map it. In a sense, his photographs of resplendent, thriving Indian women offered visual affirmations of imperial expansion: 'coolie belles' were no doubt sexualized ethnic types, but in Morin's photographs, they also appeared wealthy, suggesting that Indian women in the West Indies had done well to leave India. By portraying prosperous outcomes, the photographs arguably justified indenture while simultaneously erasing the fact of its existence. The women were posed in the studio against painted backdrops rather than in their lived landscapes of sugarcane fields and ramshackle plantation barracks. The postcards mostly airbrushed the squalor and the exploitation, effacing the physical background where they worked and lived." Gaiutra Bahadur, "Postcards from Empire", *Dissent*, Spring 2015. https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/postcards-from-empire/.



Figure 54a. *Aaji's embroidered pillowcase,* 2022. Photo: Quishile Charan.

McKittrick talks about how black Americans are more often seen and placed into geographical spaces and understandings of dispossession and social segregation,[212] where even the idea of home becomes a site and geography under attack. If certain communities and peoples are only ever seen through histories of violence and subjugation, while those systems continually reshape themselves into other forms of violence against us, the production of our knowledges then becomes about pain narratives for consumption. Just as the archives and the academic institution produce these realities—the replication of pain and trauma narratives—the arts is not immune from these desires either.

During my master's degree, I participated in critique sessions. One day, walking into the gallery space where my textiles were installed I was met with three academic staff members, all of them white. On a make-shift Fijian-style clothesline I constructed with wooden dowling cemented in place in buckets, I had strung up a collection of textiles that honoured the resistance of Girmitiyas women, repairing the misremembered history of the 1920 labour strike in Fiji. Among these textiles of resistance and protest, I had screen printed one textile with the jewellery of my ancestors and a mohar necklace bordered by two machetes. Printed onto cotton dyed with genda phool I embellished the images at the border with threaded shells and bells like how some dupatta or orhni are decorated.

One of these staff members told me they would care more about my work if my aaji's oppression were front and centre, because they could use her pain to relate to themselves as an older person who doesn't experience racial or colonial subjugation. This staff member needed the physicality of pain to feel something, to be moved, as if my job as a maker is to move white audiences. This very same staff member, only days after the Christchurch attacks, during a milestone check-in for my master's hand-in, used the time to forcefully tell me that "this is not us"—that so-called New Zealand does not have a problem with racism. Even though I sat in that room expressing my grief, pain, and fear of what the future might hold for our communities, that this severity of violence is too commonplace generationally, especially so for the Muslim community. I heard this staff member repeat "this is not us", again and again, ironically not understanding that what they so firmly chose to not back down from—their denial of racism at both an individual level and a structural level—is the legacies of colonialism. This thinly veiled care, which, in reality, revealed an implicit belief that I only exist through my pain and suffering, also revealed what I've earlier referred to as New Zealand's regional exceptionalism—in this case a sense that racism only exists in the past and/or elsewhere, rather than the ongoing structure of power that it is. The latter is unacceptable for this individual who chooses not to see it, as it shatters the illusion of neoliberal racial harmony in the settler state of New Zealand.

212 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 4: "Often, but not always, the only recognized geographic relevancy permitted to black subjects in the diaspora is that of dispossession and social segregation."



Figure 54b. *Aaji's embroidered pillowcase,* 2022. Photo: Quishile Charan.

Earlier, during my honours hand-in, when I received my (read: white) markers' comments, I was told I was not angry enough. The work in particular that triggered this demand for anger was a banner, hand-dyed with clay. On this banner, I screen-printed my oral histories with all my pain and grief, but there I also chose, with intention and care, to weave together my hopes of the future. Even from a young age as a maker, I have always looked towards creating stories of love and hope, creating a visual language and landscapes for Indo-Fijians where we are cherished and nurtured. When confronted by my ability to hold complex realities as a descendant, especially so within my material making, my markers pushed back, unable to relate or even care without my anger. Girmit is a constant reality for descendants, but our joy, love, hopes, and dreams have always been placed second to colonial narratives, hence my resistance to reducing the frame of myself and my community to these colonial limitations.

Roughly two years ago, I was invited to undertake a residency programme. Over the course of this residency, during an event where white supremacists were rallying to great public risk, the institution ignored their duty of care and chose to not look after my physical safety. Even when I experienced racial slurs being yelled at me in public, I was told that my concerns around my safety were the responsibility of brown staff members, not the (read: white) staff members that were actually in legal charge of my care. One of them told me that they felt like they understood racism because they took te reo classes. On returning from this residency I found out that I was paid a quarter of what other (read: white) artists in residence received for their labour. The abundance of institutionalised racism and consequential lack of care I've experienced throughout my tertiary education has been astounding and I'm still reckoning with its impact. The saddest part about these stories is that they are not uncommon, and not even the worst of the worst I could tell you, my unknown reader. These stories are not unique; many of us experience the institution as violent and abusive—non-white staff members included.

I tell you these stories to give you a glimpse into the exploitative and consumptive nature of this industry. I reference these experiences as they forced me to create boundaries around myself and my practice. You, my unknown reader, will hopefully see these boundaries as urgent acts of care, rebellion, and refusal; this is why I will not share my cultural knowledge systems and processes that reflect my craft and natural dye practice with an unknown public. The knowledge and processes that make up the dye tests and samplers of my practice are seedlings—planted, grown, and nurtured for specific purposes and for specific people and peoples. This is not knowledge for universal purposes or for the university. It is a knowledge set that belongs to a specific community; one must be welcomed into these knowings. We share together and in person, through the act of making itself. To place dye and craft processes here on these pages would be an act of cutting myself off from an important cultural practice: how and who I decide to pass my knowledge onto.

Even the act of "writing an exegesis" (more accurately, making you a quilt of stories), to document and defend my research over the last four years, to prove its value through dissecting and disseminating myself with methods and methodologies, has no function, culturally and in craft. That is not how we make or sustain our making. What are four years to the thousands of years that have come before, lived by me and my ancestors, my loved ones and their ancestors, their stories and ours, weaving and diverging and weaving back together again across millennia. To write an exegesis is not making; that is why even my approach to writing is to reject the act, instead embracing storytelling as a functional form to make you a quilt. These fragments of stories, some mine and some from others, pieced and sewn together, thread replaced for paper, are to give life; just as my textiles are living, breathing entities, so too are these words.

Therefore I work in my relationship to my practice of craft to constantly afford my textiles an existence outside the frameworks set out by galleries and institutions alike. In this approach, an arts contract—an exhibition or the completion of this PhD project—is not an end point, not the determining factor in how I come to create my textiles, as it becomes increasingly in contrast with who I am as a cultural maker. Producing content to suit the demands of deadlines creates false urgencies that limit the extent of my practice's existence and produce false definitions of "achievement". Making for a singular event stands in such contrast to who and what I am and the long line of makers I come from. We create in continuation, for our homes, loved ones, culturally important moments. We create to tell our stories and for the practical purposes of skills and techniques. Even though our craft may be observed as a collection of singular objects, this surface-level interpretation flattens down how infinite craft is within the Indo-Fijian context. In my act of refusal, I return again and again to the principles of what craft is: skill, technique, purpose, intention, utility, and functionality. These core principles orbit around the community that craft comes from, that craft is inseparable from. To staunchly maintain the principles of craft is to show through doing, to show my family, chosen family, and community that I choose us, that I will continue to choose us, in all lifetimes. It is of immense importance to have a cultural knowledge that is ours, as we are a people who have had so much taken from us. My amma, aaji, the aunties, and other Indo-Fijian women who created worlds for me, to which I carry on this legacy in my own building of worlds.

Removing the limitations and contradictions of making for a singular event has meant that both my thinking and making has been able to expand, to look towards sci-fi fantasies, stories of the future, ancestral muscle memory, and embodied practice to create a cultural ethic that safeguards cultural practice, honours the makers I come from, and supports my dreams of futurity. I am aware of the generational shift of privilege that occurs for many people, mine being: I am Western-born and -educated; I have multiple tertiary degrees and, if all goes well, very soon will be the

only one in my family to hold a PhD degree; even though I moved between Fiji and so-called New Zealand frequently as a child, and still move between these spaces now as an adult, English has become the language in which I can speak more freely; I am fair-skinned and, while other, darker-skinned members of my community and I share a history of racism and its daily personal and structural consequences, I am not as impacted by the system of oppression called colourism as my darker-skinned family members are; I hold one of the strongest passports in the world—a New Zealand passport—that gives me free entry into almost all nation-states, while my family members still have to apply for visas to enter the very countries that colonised us. I tell you this to explain how both the state and institution can use these generational shifts of privilege to make me believe that to use me to propagate neoliberal ideals at the expense of others, to exist by the state and institutions' desires, is my liberation. That to be chosen to exhibit, to be in gallery and university spaces is the peak of what my making and its existence should and could be. That me being "represented", through these token gestures, is freedom from oppression for not just myself, but my whole community. That to be assimilated and incorporated into these institutions is a good thing. In reality, it is done to alleviate the tension surrounding how these spaces are born of and remain agents of colonialism.

The arts is a spectacle. It is about the events, the networking, the lifestyle that comes with it. It is materially and spiritually extractive and wasteful in its intent to consume. My unknown readers familiar with these worlds I am discussing know that many have come to this industry undertaking radical and disruptive work, projects, collectives, spaces, and art; to these practitioners, I am deeply thankful, but this has not dismantled the colonial and fascist nature of the industry from the foundations up. We cannot build our movements off of the few who are engaging in radical anti- and decolonial work and we especially cannot build our movements off of reformist logic. Just as you cannot decolonise a museum—a structure born of a violent history of colonial theft and dispossession—you cannot decolonise a university, arts education included. I extend this perspective to the arts industry too. To be clear, I have no interest in reforming colonial systems—that preoccupation is neoliberalism that leads to white supremacy and fascism. To bring a whole system down, we need traitors, betraying class, privilege, comfort, settler fantasies, and the state and institutions alike.

In "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor", Tuck and Yang discuss how decolonisation, now utilised as a term in liberal educational spaces, is employed to relieve, virtue-signal, and pretend at real change. Shallow use of the term sets a standard that to write and use such terms, is the same as the actual work of decolonisation. I expand what they term, the "settler moves to innocence" to include the institution's (academia and the arts') move to innocence. As Tuck and Yang state:

> Settler moves to innocence are those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having

> to change much at all...Yet settler moves to innocence are hollow, they only serve the settler.... Because of the racialized flights and flows of settler colonial empire described above, settlers are diverse - there are white settlers and brown settlers, and peoples in both groups make moves to innocence that attempt to deny and deflect their own complicity in settler colonialism.[213]

It becomes easy to forget that a process of re-categorisation has happened, given the relative freedom of the arts as a soft power to engage with liberal reformist logic around "inclusion". What I mean by this is that for many of our creative and cultural practices that have been traditionally isolated and disincluded from what is considered "art" during the era of contemporary arts (the transition from liberalism to neoliberalism), this process of so-called inclusion has become welcomed and seen as liberatory work of representation. Forms of expression, storytelling, counter-narratives, anti-colonial work, and decolonial work done through creative practice, which was never intended or envisioned to be co-opted by institutions, is now included into the arts as "acceptable" and consumable knowledge—meaning it is useable, sellable, and helps draws others into neoliberalism and by extension neo-colonialism. In the Indo-Fijian context of making, we do not make so power structures can come to know us at an intimate level; instead, we make first and foremost for our loved ones, as cultural practice, dedication, worship, remembrance, relationship-building, and for the love of making. If we continue to not question how power operates in these spaces, we will continue to hand our knowledge over to these institutions and they will continue to use it against us in a continual process of power and control. This is what I see as the process of the institution's moves to innocence.

To be in this position at the academic and arts institution, it is important to engage in the necessary work of critique and refusal. For myself, this becomes more immediate as someone who comes from a history plagued with abusive extraction under both racial and gendered capitalism for colonial expansion. As someone who comes from labourers, to not question how my labour is being used and extracted in a contemporary sense is an enabling of the continuation of the very same structures that abused my ancestors. To then refuse the desires of the university, academia, and the arts, is to remove these institutions from their self-imposed pedestal. To not feed the beast then is to purposely refuse these systems and them imposing themselves onto my body, my life, culture and community. Within this, anarchism becomes the tool of revolutionary change wherein these converging histories of colonialism and resistance can be honoured and the differing power structures can be held accountable. To avoid the superficial exercise of decolonial practice meant to call into question my own acceptance of a term such as artist, a term that was imposed onto me at a young age as an easy label that erases the complexity of my practice.

To refuse the assimilation that accompanies the act of being named and identified through

213 Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor", 10.

homogenised identities—the artist, Indian, Fiji Indian, Asian, the "Other"—are all connected acts of resistance. I do see benefits in embracing our non-state associated identities, here at these margins, where new realities can be negotiated. To reject and self-determine is to refuse the ever-expanding territories of colonialism. Even within a name is the knowing that we are constantly in a process of recategorisation—not just our knowledge and creative practices but our personhood. Colonisation has taken so much but doesn't get to take this, this name included and my right to determine and choose.

Girmit history is significant, and I will continually return to it, not because of what was inflicted upon us, but for what we opposed and transformed. Girmit marked our bodies, but we still built our dreams and hopes. The fight continues. To renarrate and re-story our histories and identities is to maintain and continue these anarchist practices in contemporary settings. Through my body and the embodiment of not only craft practices but anarchist practices too, memories are stored for the next generation and alternative forms of resistance and existence are created. As Anderson and Samudzi state:

> While bound to the laws of the land, Black America can be understood as an extra-state entity because of Black exclusion from the liberal social contract. Due to this extra-state location, Blackness is, in so many ways, anarchistic. African-Americans, as an ethno-social identity comprised of descendants from enslaved Africans, have innovated new cultures and social organizations much like anarchism would require us to do outside of state structures. Black radical formations are themselves fundamentally anti-fascist despite functioning outside of "conventional" Antifa spaces, and Black people have engaged in anarchistic resistances since our very arrival in the Americas.[214]

To subsume craft into a term such as art and me as the artist, requires a death of sorts—the cultured body does not belong here. I am not an artist, and the rejection of that term is essential in the maintaining of the integrity of my cultural practices. I am a maker, craft practitioner, and storyteller, building futures from the same knowledge my ancestors did. Simply put, I am fighting for the freedom to exist on my own terms. My practice, because it is my entirety, also reflects the desires of not only myself but of my own community's struggle for self-determination, as this struggle is one that is both individual and collective. This process of refusal and anarchism is me working towards determining my place, my own identity in all its complexities, and a way of existing that both honours and continues to build on the futurity that my ancestors set out. I refuse to fit my craft and textile practices into a Western contemporary art lens, thereby satisfying an institution that has more access to my history than my own community in Fiji.

This act of resisting is an unravelling of both generations of violent subjugation and decolonial

214 Anderson and Samudzi, "The Anarchism of Blackness".

defiance, to see a sprawling mycorrhizal network, where memories are encoded into my body. I want to be staunch in my assertion that craft is not art, and that knowledge needs to be protected for community. As Tuck and Yang discuss in their paper, *Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research*:

> There are some forms of knowledge that the academy doesn't deserve. This axiom is the crux of refusal. The university is not universal; rather, it is a colonial collector of knowledge as another form of territory. There are stories and experiences that already have their own place, and placing them in the academy is removal, not respect.[215]

This mapping of sorts across my ancestral and physical body provides a framework of both expansiveness and known boundaries. To ask, am I still cutting your cane?, then, is both an invoking of the history of Girmit and signal to a rebellion.



Figure 55. *Stamp of Peale's pigeon, Fiji,* date unknown. Image courtesy of Roshni Deo and Quishile Charan.

215 Tuck and Yang, *Unbecoming Claims*, 813. While Tuck and Yang provide important critique, their paper does a disservice in not addressing the colonial history of fine arts, visual arts, and arts education as a colonial discipline like theirs. Their paper chooses to pedestal arts as a way to engage with refusal, which is not true of all of the arts—the arts is another colonial territory, operating through control and occupation of creative expression.



Figure 56. Quishile Charan, *Genda dye sampler*, 2023. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Fiji time: A place to move on my own terms

I share with you, my unknown reader, fragments of the plants, stories, and my jahajis to build a grounding that expresses Indo-Fijian ways of knowing and moving—what we call Fiji time. The term, to me, encapsulates a space-time continuum, firstly created by iTaukei and their ancestors, eventually welcoming Girmitiyas—my ancestors—into a type of existence that is inherently a part of who we are today, and expresses how we move and relate to the world around us. As this term has moved into Fiji's diasporas, a generic way of looking at Fiji time has developed, in which it becomes synonymous with slowness. Sometimes it can carry the connotation of being lazy too, but in reality it's beyond these conceptions. Fiji has its own understanding of time that does not follow a linear structure set by the demands of capitalism. What's mistaken for being slow is the prioritisation of the family and cultural life that capitalism does not view as productive or of value and instead relegates to the zone of "private life"—a zone that is separated and cordoned off from public existence.[216]

Back home, I'm always taken aback and filled with joy watching how the communal and collective moves as an everyday aspect of life. Even when working, family and culture is ever present, nurtured and cared for by a wide network. Every time I fly back to Tāmaki Makaurau, the first thing that hits me as I step off the tarmac and step back into my life here in this settler nation-state is a deep sense of longing for cultural ways of existing that are communal in all aspects.

The best way to describe Fiji time is that things happen when they need to happen. Nothing moves any faster or slower than it needs to. Fiji time ebbs and flows, just as the tide returns to the shore each day. I position Fiji time here as an embodied knowing and the maintenance of cultural boundaries. I apply it as a conceptual framing to my craft, making, storytelling, and knowledge-sharing and -exchange. Time and place are interconnected within this conceptual framing and cultural ways of moving. There is a time and place for stories, and not all of them are to be told. Fiji time then becomes an inherent understanding: when the time is right, then the right story will be told.

To move through Western capitalist structures denying the speed and urgency in which the West functions is necessary for myself as a descendant and as someone who also exists in a consumptive industry. The capitalist accumulation and production that defines the plantation system is now a metaphysical space that went through a process of retranslation to the hunger and urgency for

216 I want to acknowledge that these frameworks—individualisation of the West and communalisation of the non-West—can also be problematic when placed into strict binary forms, and I am not trying to romanticise them. Here I am seeking to acknowledge the cultural framework that informs my practice, especially when I am working in the West.

knowledge production and accumulation in neoliberal capitalist structures, both within academia and the arts. As a descendant, I have to remain aware of how my body, embodied knowledge, and ancestral memory can be unconsciously subsumed into this shapeshifting colonial power structure.

This urgency in knowledge production and accumulation is also a part of the replication of the record of power and how it must accumulate and hoard to expand its territories of colonialism—today, neo-colonialism. I've identified the archives as a site of the record of power that is re-rendered into digital spaces. This rapid pacing is now part of the algorithms through which we live our lives, and functions to establish authority through excessive production of data, which the record of power then stores and hoards. The continuous re-rendering of these archival narratives fulfils desirability models and frameworks under capitalism. To keep producing to remain relevant is an endless spiral of attempting to establish and maintain authority through the belief that excessive production defines a person's worth and value.

When existing as a craft practitioner, time becomes shaped by practice. While I too feel the weight of urgency towards telling our stories because I know they are the bridges between our elders, a younger generation, and a generation yet to come. Fiji time needs to be applied here in its deep knowing and understanding that stories have a time and place. While holding this reality of how stories can and should move through the world, the stories I consciously chose to share here in this exegesis are to build connections. Just as we see time culturally in circular forms, these stories, too, take on circular forms, orbiting past, present, and future. This act of storying is to illustrate through the lyricalness of words our connections across multiple ways and forms.

Stories also come with boundaries. Elders always voice who and how we should pass on these stories. Silence within the Indo-Fijian context is complicated, and I want to acknowledge that silence cannot be placed into strict binaries of good and bad. Girmit is my community's collective trauma, but the way it has impacted us informs our lived realities at an individual level and there does need to be room for both collective and individual forms of trauma to exist. What I mean by this is that as much as I want to hear all my ancestors' stories of Girmit, I do not have the right to them just because I am their descendant. I know the significance and responsibility of receiving these stories with intention, but it is still their choice to voice their experiences or not. The fact that we even have to live in aspects of silence is saddening and induces grief—there is and should be room to acknowledge that. What we have survived is not humane nor is it right; our emotions are extremely important as they remind us of these injustices. Silence as a place of navigation is acknowledged by Ro(u)ted by Our Stories Collective, who discuss how this takes shape in how they engage with other Indo-Carribeans, stating:

> For the storyteller, the act of remembering can be evidence of resilience and a will to survive, but it can also jeopardise already fragile and tentative coping strategies. Speaking one's truth requires vulnerability, and silence is often used as a coping mechanism to repress memories that are too painful to remember. Research that attends to the functions of silence makes visible the ways in which silence is practised in order to resist efforts to co-opt and commoditise one's stories. Silence can indicate refusal to participate in a process that reduces complex lives to stories of trauma.[217]

I apply Fiji time and the ancestral knowing of boundaries and silence to the construction of physical making, wherein visual language becomes coded. Simply put: to fully understand the visual language in which I am communicating, you do need to come from the Indo-Fijian community or come from communities that have similar histories of colonialism. I am careful with how I use silence. I understand in some contexts it is a necessary action—the requirement of writing an exegesis as an example—but in other contexts, it is necessary to give voice (when I am with other descendants). Because my practice exists in public spaces and online platforms with wide access, silence and coding also becomes a mode through which to maintain cultural boundaries. Even at a technical level, I work with ancestral practices that are time-consuming and require not months but years of developing and strengthening muscle memory. Now that I have shifted my practice towards making in a similar way to my ancestors and elders, I cannot exist in an accelerated timeline. Craft skills and technique require patience and care, which is a type of discipline that is embodied through the action of making. Repetition is extremely important here, functioning as ceremony, where through the patience of deepening knowledge and technique, I come to meet my ancestors.

I also bring forward slow labour as a functional response in my own practice. Slow labour was a tactic under Girmit resistance, wherein my ancestors would purposely slow down their labour production, refuse to show up to work, and sabotage labouring equipment. I know there is a demand on my body to continually produce and stay entrapped in a cycle of chasing desirability, notoriety, and careerism. I acknowledge slow labour as a resistance strategy against colonial-capitalist structures, as well as how I honour my cultural ways of moving in Fiji time.

I tell you, my unknown reader, all this to show how I move and engage with my practice. Over the course of my public-facing "arts career", it has changed drastically. I turn down more and more contracts that demand me to move at unimaginable paces. I only work with galleries that allow me to exist within my cultural frameworks and respect the space-time continuum of craft. The end goal is not to be exhibiting; instead, it is that my craft lives on in the homes of my community and my loved ones.

217 Ro(u)ted by Our Stories Collective, "Stories the Mangroves Hold", 75.



Figure 57. Quishile Charan, *Genda embroidery sampler*, 2024, cotton embroidery thread on linen. Image courtesy of Quishile Charan.

Phool, Burning Ganna Khet, Araam

My unknown reader, I would like to baat karo, talanoa with you about three significant projects that provided me the cultural, political, and spiritual shift required to make work for community and to live a life with community: *Phool* (2019–ongoing), *Burning Ganna Khet* (2021), and *Araam* (2023). The construction of all three works also marked a significant shift in my practice wherein the use of archival images—imagery that has a one-to-one relationship to the histories of Girmit—were no longer necessary for me in the storying of Indo-Fijian histories, memories, and experiences.[218] Instead, I turned to the craft aesthetics of the women in my family—specifically from the 1980s and 1990s—and how design, construction, and gifting informed how textiles were made and moved through community.

Phool: A garden not bound to physical soil

I first began the conceptual thinking that would later become *Phool* with an inherent knowing that after completing my master's, I needed to return and re-orient myself to the principles of what craft is: skill, technique, purpose, intention, utility, and functionality. Of these principles, the repurposing of textiles as functional forms of memories that continue to live lives through construction, reconstruction, and continual making, was of particular importance to me. I wanted to imbue my work with life, with the capacity to grow and evolve like we, the people attached to these textiles, grow and evolve. I wanted to create textiles whose lives don't end once the exhibition begins; instead, I add to them all the time, over years, so they can live and breathe as an extension of us. Being able to engage with one textile work across the many seasons of my life was an intentional act to embody and carry the memories of loved ones and the spaces we have inhabited. Just as clothes, blankets, pillowcases, and scraps of fabric will continually be made anew from older forms and memories, this existence, to create a textile that was never-ending in its construction and reconstruction, was a challenge I wanted to undertake. Within the Indo-Fijian context, we continue to contribute to our inherited, ancestral craft knowings and knowledge through adding new skills and knowledge. To engage with a long-form project, a textile I will be creating my whole life—*Phool*—has provided an experimental space in which these intersections

218 Now that I am older and have these understandings, these textile works do not get loaned to any exhibition or gallery and will not in the future. They are ceremonial textiles that only go to community events, celebrations, or the homes of Indo-Fijians and loved ones. This boundary is essential in maintaining that Indo-Fijians are allowed to have respected and sacred practices, textiles being one of them. As a cultural practitioner, these aspects to being in community matters—that I now can provide for us the ceremonial textiles of worship, cherishing, dedication, and remembrance. That is just for us, no one else. The faces of our ancestors are for us, first and foremost.

could be explored, becoming a site of dedication to Indo-Fijian craft principles.

I began constructing *Phool* in 2019 with the invitation from Hastings Art Gallery to create a commissioned work for inclusion in the group show *Softly Spoken*. This was the first instance of contract negotiations where I set strict boundaries for what and how much I would give, and what and how much I would not. The biggest shift in these contract negotiations was how I became clearer in the intentions of my work and its life as primarily outside of the exhibition form. What is being paid—artist, loan, or commission fee—is not for work made towards a group exhibition theme, not work made for a collection, not work for sale to anyone.[219] Instead, it is for the creation of textiles for community purposes. And if an exhibition such as *Softly Spoken* could provide those resources and respect the cultural boundaries attached, then we could find a momentary middle ground.

After the completion of my master's and after the contract was signed, as many Fijians do, I returned home to Nadi to spend a few months with family and friends. There, I began the process of making *Phool* with the support of family members. Piecing together elders' memories of eco-printing, we created a dye experiment wrapped up in leaves of aam ke patti, tej patti, kasera ke patti, papita ke patti, and genda phool. We did this dye experiment, with my aaji, her bhaini, and my amma and taji to see if we could find colour in the leaves of plants that are a part of our everyday khaana. Across the middle of the cotton fabric you can see these moments—glimpses into this memory of our eco-printing. After the eco-printing, while still in Fiji, I drew and stitched red and yellow hibiscuses between my parents house, my family's farm, and my friend's house in Suva.

I came to inherit natural dye work through my aaji. Over the many years of reclaiming this knowledge, dye recipes appear and disappear in patches across her and other elders' memories. By working across a wide network of family members and their own memories and stories, I've created an intergenerational blueprint. That is not to say that the knowledge is finished and closed; it is something I will be coming to know for the rest of my life. I continue to stitch together my family's collective knowledge of dye work to ensure that there will always be a present and future for Indo-Fijian making and dye practices.

In considering how to grow my technical skills, *Phool* became a textile site where my young hands—still too soft—needed to harden from my crafting labour and unfold more embodied knowledge from the crevasses and creases. I chose to focus solely on natural dye and embroidery work as *Phool*'s technical entirety. The embroidered hibiscuses reflected my elders' and ancestors'

219 To this date, I have not sold any of my work, and I intend to keep it that way.







Figure 58. Quishile Charan, *Phool* (work in progress), 2019, dye and embroidery work with family, Nadi, Fiji. Photo: Quishile Charan.

many loved ones floating in and out to visit, talanoa, and share space with *Phool*. On some nights we would karaoke while I stitched, serenading *Phool* before it had to leave for another exhibition. When the needle would not move through the many layers of fabric, duct tape became my functional thimble. The yellow thread that created this new border is a vessel of memories and the presence of those who sat with me in the garage those many hours.

As of 2024, when you look across *Phool*, you can see the years of growth. This textile landscape has changed immensely—embroidery styles are more complex, with much of the new threads and patterns stitched without the support of embroidery frames or hoops, my hands becoming the weave's tension. Working off-hoop/frame is technically difficult and has called for me to move slower and become more intentional and aware of the fabric's weave, density, and movement in reaction to my stitches.

You, my unknown reader, should know that in any Indo-Fijian household, first we greet you, and then you are greeted by our gardens and plants. Our plants are an extension of our selves. They are a site of repair where descendants reclaim ancestral practices that were used against us for colonial agricultural violence. This relationship to plants as spiritual places of healing, building relationships to culture and ancestors, has continued across the generations through our gardening and cooking. On the one hand, our relationship to plants is embedded in the seeds we carried with our own autonomy to Fiji and the plants that we engaged with in Fiji as iTaukei welcomed us into their own ancestral knowledges. But on the other hand, our inherited and embodied knowledges of plants were weaponised against us as we were made into tools of agricultural labour. In continuing to navigate these complex realities, I have come to understand the significance of growing gardens as developing part of our cultural autonomy. Knowing what it means to now plant seeds with our own agency,[220] it was important to me to grow a garden of hibiscus phool—a garden not bound to the physicality of soil and pots, but rather a free-moving textile form that will continue to grow this intimate relationship I now hold to plants and flowers. Hibiscus will always carry multiple layers of meaning, and to adorn this textile for the last five years is an act of remembrance and commitment. I mention commitment because this work does carry a dedicated love of craft.

The gardens of phool I create remind me of my parents and their garden, remind me of how

220 I would like to acknowledge the important craft practice of Indo-Fijian maker Zaiba Khan, especially her jewellery practice, where she works at an intimate level with people's stories of seeds, stemming from her own relationship to seeds in the Indo-Fijian context and Girmit. In describing her work, she states: "Khan seeks to translate the oral histories of her ancestors into visual language. Intricately detailed, labour intensive works are made using organic matter and sacred materials. As a descendent of Fiji Girmit, these materials hold particular significance, as does the labour of the body and hands. Exploring the divine potential of the seed and its fruit, Khan sows them into her work as her ancestors did into the land, except this time with autonomy; in the hopes of creating portals for connection and healing." To learn more, see: https://www.zaibakhan.com/about.





Figure 59. Quishile Charan, *Phool* (top: installation view; bottom: detail), 2020, eco-print middle of fabric, cotton thread, and fabric, 500cm x 175cm, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, New South Wales, Australia. Photo: Chantel Bann.

acts of care involved in the making and gifting of pillowcases, blankets, and quilts embroidered with flowers and/or the name of the person destined to receive the gift. This practice has been carried out in my family for generations to mark milestones, birthdays, weddings, births, and as personal gifts for loved ones. My family's own collection of textile gifts still adorn our homes and beds and make up my own treasured textile memories.



Figure 60. Quishile Charan, *Phool* (installation view), 2022, eco-print middle of fabric, border onion skin dye, cotton thread and fabric, 525cm x 200cm, Corban Estate Arts Centre, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Photo: Ralph Brown.

I continued to find momentary middle ground with galleries who sought to loan *Phool*. Instead of engaging with a standard loan agreement, I requested galleries to include in their exhibition budget a budget line for material costs, so I could continue expanding and growing the work and my technical skill with embroidery and natural dyeing. Additional purple hibiscuses were added to all four corners in 2020; a border dyed with brown onion skins, collected from loved ones who kept their scraps after cooking, was added in 2022; and in 2023, the original border was unstitched and repurposed for quilting pieces, replaced by a new border created with eco-printed hibiscus and genda phool. The genda was grown and harvested from our garden in Tāmaki Makaurau, and the hibiscus was collected from public spaces and loved ones' backyards across the city. Each phool was stored, dried, and pressed by many hands to create an imprint across the fabric. This new border encapsulated the change and growth in the complexity of my dye work; where before the border was a simple one-colour full-pot dye, now I was layering different techniques, beginning with a full-pot dye and then adding eco-printing on top. Also in 2023, I added embroidered swirls at the inner border of either end of the textile, with the new border being hand-stitched in yellow thread on the edges. The stitching took place in my garage, with



Figure 61. Quishile Charan, *Phool* (top: installation view; bottom: detail), 2023, eco-print middle of fabric, border eco-printed with cutch, genda, and hibiscus phool, 525cm x 200cm, SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin. Photo: Marvin Systermans.

many loved ones floating in and out to visit, talanoa, and share space with *Phool*. On some nights we would karaoke while I stitched, serenading *Phool* before it had to leave for another exhibition. When the needle would not move through the many layers of fabric, duct tape became my functional thimble. The yellow thread that created this new border is a vessel of memories and the presence of those who sat with me in the garage those many hours.

As of 2024, when you look across *Phool*, you can see the years of growth. This textile landscape has changed immensely—embroidery styles are more complex, with much of the new threads and patterns stitched without the support of embroidery frames or hoops, my hands becoming the weave's tension. Working off-hoop/frame is technically difficult and has called for me to move slower and become more intentional and aware of the fabric's weave, density, and movement in reaction to my stitches.

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The gardens of phool I create remind me of my parents and their garden, remind me of how gardening is part and parcel with our lives and conversations, remind me of them in the myriad ways they show care. In this, *Phool* is ceremonial in its intention, too. I cannot create a physical garden of hibiscus because I don't have the means, but I still wanted a garden to tend and care for, a garden that would, just as my parents' and my mother-in-law's gardens, sustain me and my loved ones.

The embroidery works that can be found throughout Indo-Fijian history were an extension of the plants and the flowers that the women in my family wanted to include in their gardens, but because they lived in Fiji a lot of the plants were not suited to Fiji's humid climate. Things like roses were not impossible, but not ideal. The embroidery patterns were partly a display of skill and trend, but another big part of it was world-building, envisioning the present world and a more beautiful future. I noticed at a certain point that we don't embroider our own environments—I've never seen ganna embroidered, for example. I wanted to create new and expansive worlds from within the worlds that we already occupy, for them it was roses and daisies, for myself it is hibiscus and genda phool.

While I'm still held in a network of elders who hold me to standards of technical precision, I'm not bound to the conventions of Fiji's women's crafting groups and the handicraft market in the same way as my elders. From this position, I choose to expand this world-building of embroidery practice towards embroidering things that are a part of the textural landscapes of my life and homes in Fiji and Aotearoa in order to re-value the everydayness of our lives, and to show the significance and beauty of the environments we are surrounded by and the plants that we live with. I do not perceive this practice as sitting outside of the work of my aaji and amma; instead, it is a continuation. Their technical journey has led me to our own backyard, renegotiating again what home means and how to carry it with me, bringing the beauty of my home into the intimate spaces in which I and my loved ones live. The embroidery patterns created are wrapped up in the style and aesthetics within my inheritance and act as a continuation of the knowledge towards my own experiences, setting a standard and drawing a new picture of what Indo-Fijian aesthetics are and can be. When I think of those seeds nestled in head wraps or held inside small pieces of fabric, I think of the hibiscus and genda phool that is part of our everyday lives in Fiji, and that is where I continue to build my textile worlds from.



Figure 62. *Process images of Quishile embroidering Phool,* 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.



Figure 63. Quishile Charan, *Burning Ganna Khet* (work in progress), 2021. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Burning Ganna Khet: The collective memories of my parivar

Following the grounding and cultural frameworks I set up for myself within the making of *Phool*, I continued in later textiles to create gardens and landscapes not bound to the physicality of soil. In considering Indo-Fijian futures, khet was of significance because, as a durational lease, our time on the farm is finite. My family lives on and continues to lease a subdivided 10-acre farm from a colonial sugar plantation that once was a cotton plantation. I do not know how many more generations will be on ganna khet or even if farming will remain a cultural practice within our futures. Farming, in my family, is still something we cherish and acknowledge as a cultural practice. Even though ganna was part of our subjugation, ganna is also representative of our Indo-Fijianness and how we move in non-human relationships—that we as a community have been engaged in long-term healing practices with plants.

In considering how to capture complex histories of ganna khet in the Indo-Fijian context, I decided to source my cotton fabric from textile villages in the Northeast of India, from a residency I went on years ago. The reason it was important to source cotton directly from the villages that grow and create it on the loom was being able to pay artisans and growers directly, and honouring the dual relationships and histories to cotton—both of culture and colonialism—and how this history of cotton also informs the history of sugar, which also informs my own community's complicated relationship to ganna.

In creating *Burning Ganna Khet*,[221] I was intentional in my choice of embroidering ganna onto cotton fabric. This choice was to show the relationship that both monocrops have to one another and how the communities who were forced into plantation labour, enslaved, or indentured are still to this day renegotiating and choosing their own relationship to these plants. Just as we do not need to be bound to a history of trauma, so too can these plants exist beyond the colonial frameworks created of them.

The process of creating *Burning Ganna Khet* involved first dying the fabric with avocado seeds and skins collected across many months, homes, and people. The avocado dye created a brickish-pink colour. After the dye process was completed, the embroidery process began: a 7- to 8-month journey, of making my memories of the harvest into a tangible design and pattern. From there, thread was stitched, creating the base shapes, then colour blended for flames that turned into smoke, filling up the textile space that represented the sky of Nawaicoba.

A border was added, made from cut up hessian sacks that were originally used for exporting and

221 This work was initially made and exhibited online for a project by the Bad Fiji Gyals collective, in conjunction with the publication of "Coolie Cut Cane".





Figure 64. *Two images of Quishile and Ana doing embroidery on Burning Ganna Khet and appliqué on Company Ka Raj,* 2021. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.





Figure 65. *Two images of Quishile and Ana stitching border on Burning Ganna Khet and appliqué on Company Ka Raj,* 2021. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

importing coffee and sugar, then gifted to me by many people, eventually turning into a private collection of hessian sacks waiting to be repurposed. Adding the hessian border was important in forming part of a visual narrative of Indo-Fijian craft aesthetics. The by-products of sugar production have always been used as functional material that we incorporate and use in our daily life. Paal is one of these functional items, originally made as mats, insulation in bure houses, and as a surface that worked in assisting with food preparation. Even as hessian sacks have transitioned to woven polypropylene plastic sacks, we continue to incorporate these materials into our lives, creating the same paal but with different materials.

As I am still a young maker, my hands do not yet know all the practices and techniques of my family, with weaving being one of the skills I am still developing and deepening. My mother-in-law Ana, a respected and treasured knowledge-holder of Tongan lalanga, came and stayed for a whole month at our house in Tāmaki Makaurau. In our lounge, we both sat on the ground hand-stitching the hessian sacks onto the fabric to create the border. Ana unravelled the edge of the fabric's weave to lalanga a pattern. Similar to Indo-Fijian aesthetics of the 1970s to 1990s, where borders on textile creations were stitched with tatting or lacing, Ana used lalanga to weave the pattern of her home, Mango Island, where this style of weaving is used to create fishing baskets. *Burning Ganna Khet* was special for capturing this memory of two craft practitioners—Ana with her Tongan lalanga and craft knowledge and me with my Indo-Fijian dye practice and craft knowledge. This shared space of exchange was representative of how craft has moved within the islands for generations, where women have been exchanging craft knowledge within and outside of their communities. This coming together to create the border was a continuation of these long-held relationships across Oceania.

Ganna holds an inherent sense of familiarity. When I come back to Nadi and I see fields of ganna, I know I'm home. Ganna is tied into all my memories of what home is in Fiji with my family. Now I can't see ganna without thinking of us, our culture, farming, craft, gardening, and Girmit, all converging at once inside one plant. Within an Indo-Fijian context, the site of home can transition with extreme speed, with homes able to change meaning between two different generations still living with each other. Because I do not live full-time in Nadi, I needed to figure out a way to honour and carry khet with me as part of the specific cultural practices of my family and of myself. I do not ever want to build a future that forgets that we are farmers and that farming makes up our unique identities. In this, *Burning Ganna Khet* is a textile of both remembrance and memorial. *Burning Ganna Khet* rebuilds the ceremonial function of kapraa, creating a space in which to hold and exchange stories, where they continue to live and be passed on. In this way, I honour our collective memory: how each person—each ancestor, elder, family member—has our own experiences and emotions when we see and are a part of the harvest. We have seen the flames and smoke licking the sky across time, across generations.





Figure 66. *Left and right:* Quishile Charan, *Burning Ganna Khet* (detail), 2021, full-pot dye avocado seeds, emboridery thread, cotton, hessian sacks, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.



Figure 67. Quishile Charan, *Burning Ganna Khet*, 2021, full-pot dye avocado seeds, emboridery thread, cotton, hessian sacks, 153cm x 152cm, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Ganna has not been embroidered in my family on kapraa, but through my intentionality in ensuring that my making and practice is grounded in the principles of craft my elders taught me, this embroidery work still looks like something my amma or aaji could make. If I am adequately ensuring that my making is grounded in the principles and aesthetics of Indo-Fijian craft, my work should create feelings, emotions, and memories just as much as it tells stories. We often have set ideas of how history and stories should be engaged with, but sometimes for me it's more about feeling it than chronicling it. I wanted a clear visual languaging for Indo-Fijian aesthetics, but I also wanted to make sure my work looks like who it comes from—that an aunty, amma, aaji, or naani, could make the same work with their hands. I do not want to create textiles that are abstracted forms of our culture. What I love the most about creating textiles heavily coded with Fijian and Indo-Fijian aesthetics and cultural symbolism is that my community greets my works and myself with their own stories. *Burning Ganna Khet* has heard many generations and people's stories—those living at home and those in our diasporas.

To embroider the burning, a significant undertaking during the harvesting seasons, was to acknowledge the collective memory of Girmit, its shift to tenant farming, and the reclamation of farming as cultural practice. This is a part of my inheritance. What more could I ask for when we all—ancestors, elders, myself—have looked at the same sky, the same moon, the same ganna fields, each generation. The way we do the harvest has been the same across these generations. With craft, too, my family does the same thing my ancestors have done. In my mind, I see it as a floating landscape. This landscape has changed with colonialism, but it has also changed because of us, because of our relationship to Vanua, to iTaukei, to plants, to our relationships with others in our community.

Like *Phool, Burning Ganna Khet* is a work that I envision I will continuously keep constructing and reconstructing, but at the moment, it's living its life in our lounge, accompanying us as we watch movies, cook, and play games. Our guests who visit and stay over, too, are greeted and wrapped up in the world of ganna khet.



Figure 68. *Studio visit with Robbie Handcock and Ruth Buchanan from Artspace Aotearoa and Quishile Charan*, 2023. Photo: Robbie Handcock.



Figure 69. *Process image of the construction of* Araam, 2023. Photo: Fe'ao Taulangaū.

Araam: Rest karo

Araam was an important textile experiment in understanding how both construction and installation can be mechanisms to my refusal and commitment to creating beyond an exhibition or singular event. Practicality and functionality was the basis of the making for this project, designing a structure that could exist as a larger whole for the exhibition and be deconstructed afterwards into new forms that then could be reconstructed into gifts for my loved ones. Creating a textile that exists for a brief moment of time before transitioning to a different form was intentional in ensuring cultural boundaries. In recognising the intimate lives textiles live with us as people, having two forms, the exhibition textile and the deconstructed form for textile gifts, helped maintain these boundaries.

> *Araam* is a snapshot of time, of the past, our present, and our future. It provides a glimpse into our home at a specific point, imbued with the deep joy, roaring laughter and the infinite care and support we experience living an unconventional life with chosen family. The works shown at Blue Oyster will never exist again in this form. Once pillowcases, they will become a surface on which we can safely rest our heads and a quilt in our current home and whatever home we build going forward. There is no finality to Quishile's work, which is exactly how craft and clothing exists within the home, as items that are used, added to, mended, or altered. When you see the work at Blue Oyster, they are different to what they were before and what they will be after.[222]

Being commissioned to create this new textile for the group exhibition *Scores for Transformation* (2023) at Artspace Aotearoa (a public contemporary arts gallery) became an important site of oppositional resistance, where I looked towards both construction and installation as the rearranging of spatial hierarchies within a gallery setting. As with *Phool* and *Burning Ganna Khet*, the thinking and sprouting of ideas continued with *Araam*, a 5m x 4m textile that consisted of 24 individual pieces dyed with genda phool in the middle, and with three larger pieces, dyed first with cutch then layered with eco-printed hibiscus phool to create the border. At the time of writing this exegesis, *Araam* has been deconstructed and unpicked, re-ironed and pinned, and is waiting to be sewn into pillowcases for my loved ones. To return to McKittrick's book, *Demonic Grounds*, while in discussion about the works of Sylvia Wynter, McKittrick highlights how "[i]t is, then, new forms of life, imagining, expressing, and living geography that put demands on spatial

222 Jasmin Singh, *Mera Tabbar* (Ōtepoti Dunedin: Blue Oyster Art Project Space Te Tio Kikorangi, 2023), https://blueoyster.org.nz/writing/writing/mera-tabbar/. This text was written upon the presentation of the second iteration of *Araam*: "This second iteration of *Araam* features new textiles dyed with cutch tannins and genda phool in preparation for quilt squares and diamonds that will be pieced together to accompany the pillowcases." *Araam*, in its second iteration, was requested by Blue Oyster Art Project Space Te Tio Kikorangi, Ōtepoti Dunedin, to be exhibited. When this invitation was offered to re-exhibit *Araam*, I requested a budget line to create new textiles for quilting purposes: https://blueoyster.org.nz/exhibitions/araam/.

arrangements, that contest, respatialize, and inhabit the uninhabitable."[223]

Creating a textile that was focussed on dye work only was an enormous moment as it was the accumulation of four years dedicated to dye testers and experiments. This persistence and patience—the slowing down to sit with dye practice as ceremony—accumulated into variations of yellows and hibiscus prints of blue-ish purples and greens. The dye process I followed in creating these textiles were based on years of listening to stories and my own dye experiments to bring myself closer to the dye recipes of my elders and ancestors. *Araam* was a pause, a reflection on how far I had come as a maker, that the colours I was creating were the colours on kapraa I had seen in my own family members' creations.

In considering how I wanted a public audience to engage with *Araam*, the construction of the physical work was another step towards deepening Indo-Fijian visual aesthetics and also the development of coded visual language. In the context of craft being exhibited in public galleries, value can be assigned through easy access points. That's why, when I entered discussions with the gallery about what I would exhibit and they asked to loan previous textile works that featured the imagery of my ancestors, and motifs, patterns, and designs that were more figurative and easy to relate to Fiji, I decided that this was not the right space or audience for them. Instead, we reached a momentary middle ground, where the gallery agreed to find a material budget for me to make a textile with dye work as its entirety. I told the gallery that if they supported me in making this work that it would contribute towards pillowcases and quilts that I was making for my PhD exhibition, which they were happy to support.

The challenge with constructing a textile solely of dye work was how it would engage with physical space. I did not want my work installed as domestic objects or things to be displayed on walls. As site-specific installation is something I utilise in drawing respect to my work, and in guiding audiences in how they should move with my making, it was obvious to me that *Araam* should be large-scale in its creation. Scale within the context of exhibition-making and installation is pivotal to how I undertake oppositional resistance in these spaces. It is also important to me to do it in a way that ensures cultural safety, wherein I do not need to physically be there to ensure the safety of my work but rather it is inbuilt into construction and installation.

Because dye work is explicit in what it is, it requires an audience member to come to it with their

223 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 165: "...she also insists that creatively communicating this reconceptualization formulates geographic options in a way that is more humanly workable; she makes us think hard about what we imagine, what we want to imagine, and what we can imagine for human geographies. It is, then, new forms of life, imagining, expressing, and living geography that put demands on spatial arrangements, that contest, respatialize, and inhabit the uninhabitable. If 'there is no end/to what a living world/will demand of you,' 47 how are we living this present world? If our expressive demands can demonstrate a new worldview, in what ways can ethical human geographies, or interhuman geographies, be mapped?"





Figure 70. Quishile Charan, *A metal drum, a lovo pit & my pariwar*(stills), 2023, single-channel digital video, 20:05 minutes, looped, Blue Oyster Art Project Space Te Tio Kikorangi, Ōtepoti Dunedin. A film shot and edited by Matavai Taulangaū.

own understanding and care of craft, its technicality, stories, cultures, and the people who are dedicated to a life of making. To come engage with my work means you do have to enter with that love of craft, the beauty of all the creations we make with our hands, and, of course, the love of women's work and the intimate lives they create and share with craft.

As audience members are bound to their own constructs, desires, and proximities to power, not all who enter these spaces know or care for the sacredness of craft and making. I do not desire to nor is it my intention to make my work fit into audience members' conceptions of "art". When I entered into this public exhibition, carrying this apprehension of an unknown public, scale, and space were important functions to installing and acknowledging that gallery spaces are not neutral. Returning to large-scale textile installation provided an important space for my dye practice to continue to deepen and grow, but it also was the action of my oppositional resistance in ensuring that I gave voice in a space that would usually render me voiceless and disembodied. *Araam* demands the attention of its audience through its vibrant colours that recalled the colour palette of the islands, of Fiji. The work itself had a type of confidence grounded in its own knowing of its history, stories, significance, and value.

In creating *Araam*, I was intentional in maintaining craft's core integrity around making sure whatever is created is functional, but at the same time that meant that the dye work could stand in that world, too.



Figure 71. Quishile Charan, *Araam* (hanging out our two-storey whare), 2023, cotton-linen, naturally dyed textile, genda full-pot dye, cutch and hibiscus eco-print. Photo: Jasmin Singh.



Figure 72. *Top and middle:* Quishile Charan, *Araam* (detail), 2023, cotton-linen, naturally dyed textile, genda full-pot dye, cutch and hibiscus eco-print, Blue Oyster Art Project Space Te Tio Kikorangi, Ōtepoti Dunedin. Photo: Lindsey de Roos.

Figure 73. *Bottom:* Quishile Charan, *Araam*, 2023, cotton-linen, naturally dyed textile, genda full-pot dye, cutch and hibiscus eco-print, Artspace Aotearoa, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Photo: Andreas Müller.



Figure 74. *Eco-printing with genda at our whare*, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Conclusion: Chalo suto

I concluded my master's—and continue to move towards my futures—with these words:

> 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 [Amma]....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 [Amma] 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 door mats. You will know everything my hands know."[224]

My textile practice creates landscapes that hold the continuation of Indo-Fijian cultural practices and how they inform one another, from gardening, cooking, craft, storytelling, language, and music, to caring and being in relationships with one another. From seeds nurtured on Girmit ships to the gardens of the coolie lines, khet, our households, and pot plants, to sprouting and growing this garden in a new form, embroidery, and textile work. Since the beginning of conducting this PhD, I have always had a clear vision and intention with my making. My graduate exhibition has functioned, in its lead-up, in two modes: one of resistance and the other of continuing my responsibilities of craft to my elders, the responsibility to learn everything they know. The latter is deeply and intrinsically tied to Indo-Fijian self-determining futurities. In considering how these two modes of making can exist at once, making gifts of textile memories for loved ones became an intentional grounding. Craft can only exist within the communities that nurture and care for it; it functions specifically through living and building a life with the community from which it comes. I honour my family and my chosen family, weaving them into the infinite fibres of the textile worlds and landscapes I create.

> The quilt is Quishile's next step in learning everything her aaji can make. I will support her in this work with the quilting knowledge I have gathered from my own explorations of the form. In the process, family and chosen family will both leave traces of our presence on this quilt.
>
> We pool our knowledge and build upon our intersections in moments when our elders cannot themselves physically pass all their knowledge on. Together, we will sew the fabrics into a form that will be huddled under, slept with, loved, darned as needed, and eventually made into something new again.[225]

Craft is immensely important in site-building, in creating a place to stand, a place of storying,

224 Charan, "She Cut Me from Ganna", 82–83.

225 Casey Carsel, *To Build a Home* (Melbourne: Westspace Gallery, 2022), https://offsite.westspace.org.au/work/to-build-a-home/.

because craft exists beyond the confines of existence set out by colonialism and institutions alike. I create to tell my stories; the story I wanted to narrate over the course of time that makes up this PhD was of those seeds carried by my ancestors that gave life, sprouting the expansive worlds we now live in as Indo-Fijians. Part of these worlds was the creation of pillowcases and quilts for my loved ones. Against those mainstream histories, there is always life in our stories. That was and is where I want to continue to grow my craft. Since the realisation that this is how I was going to move for the next few years, everything became about honouring and living a life fully immersed in craft principles and community.

As maintaining cultural integrity is a core component of how I move through my practice, when I come to institutional spaces that are neither intended nor designed for a maker, cultural practitioner, and thinker like myself, or when I am invited into these spaces to work, how then do I ensure boundaries of cultural safety are enacted? In the violence of Girmit experienced by my community, our colonisers got to tell their stories, but what about the stories I want to tell? How do I avoid the record of power, and the ideas of who does and doesn't get to be a storyteller?

It became obvious to me, through our colonisation and debilitation, that up to this point we have only been surviving, and that it is now time to move beyond this. I refuse to write stories that are reliant on pain narratives; instead, I focus on writing stories from the vantage point of hope. Over the years, I have returned to the everyday of our cultural lives, because this was one of the most prevailing aspects of our colonial subjugation—that we were seen as devoid of culture, only labouring bodies. To come back to plants is to recognise that we have always had deep relationships to one another, but that plantation colonialism entrapped us to monocrop production. Asserting the significance of gardening, seeds, and plants is a healing practice—one we have been doing for generations. It is common in Indo-Fijian households that someone is growing vegetables for tarkari and phool for spiritual practices and cultural aesthetics. Gardens are living memories of ancestors and generational cultural knowledge. Gardens are also sites of resistance and refusal in the Indo-Fijian context. We do not see plants as passive things, or in an arts context of aesthetics; rather, plants make up our expansive worlds, and are vessels of our pasts, presents, and futures.

Words, I find, fail me in how to express this boundlessness—that craft moves freely and cannot be tethered to Western constructs of what constitutes living a life. Craft has a thousand histories of the past, a thousand histories of the future, and more; with our limited ways of understanding time, it is not measurable. Focusing on futurity is a core component to how craft works, and it is functional in this way too—that it continuously looks towards building futures.

I think a lot about the history in which our subjugation was formed. The plantation, as I have

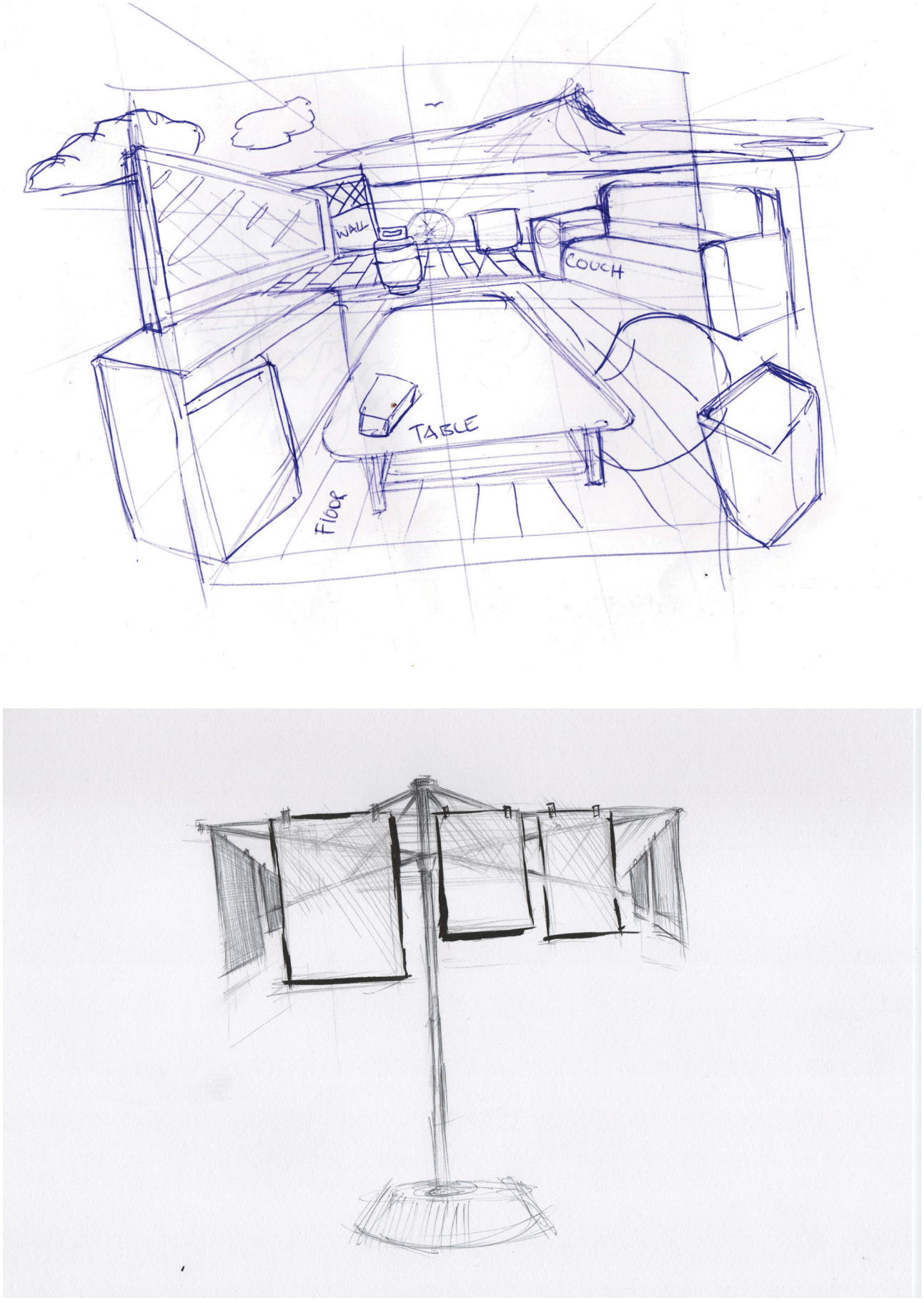

Figure 75. *Top: Drawing of our whare*, 2024. Drawing by Fe'ao Taulangaū. *Bottom:* Drawing of clothesline, 2023. Drawing by Matavai Taulangaū.

stated earlier, was neither a public nor private space. It functioned as a space of colonial violence in both its hypervisibility and invisibility. CSR's hyper-surveillance was built into my ancestors' time, crammed into the coolie lines like animals in pens, as well as under the tenant farm system. In reality, Indo-Fijians have had a relatively short history of a home life that isn't controlled by labouring structures. This is part of the reason why my work is always site-specific to home—because that wasn't afforded to my ancestors. Just as my ancestors, my elders, and now I myself enter into relationships of repair with plants, so too do I return to the home as another site of repair, hope, and different forms of resistance. Our colonisers, the Girmit "reformists", and the frontiersmen and settlers who observed our subjugation tried to weaponise our lives. Our existence—investing in our homes and futures—is a counter-weaponisation of their attempts against us.

To go back and reclaim the home because we do deserve a place of rest, then, becomes a site of positioning, as the textile works themselves continually return again and again to their homes, stories, and peoples. They carry a knowing to them that the exhibition space is not a final resting place as it is for so many projects and research that have come to only exist in those murky institutional archives or only leaving a digital footprint. I do not exist in these spaces to be consumed. Refusing and moving against the institution and bringing forward my loved ones, imbuing them into all my making, creates a network of protection. Working with other entities—whether that be textiles, plants, or even the relationship which I have to craft—nurturing and tending to these relationships is important and grounded in the cultural practices of home-making for Indo-Fijians. That's why I want to make quilts and pillowcases. In making these objects for the people I love, I can never forget the women in my life while at the same time adorning things that we have not really had until recent generations. Pillowcases and quilts hold this infinite connection to the practices of my elders, going all the way back. It is how we cherish the intimate spaces of our lives, to araam karo aur chalo suto. I love pillowcases and quilts because they are what they are *and* so much more. To adorn someone's place of rest is important, and is part of craft practices within an Indo-Fijian context that include pillowcases sewn and embroidered, and quilts pieced and stitched together.

To make is the very act of living, the very act of finding ways of making a life. It requires looking towards the future as the source of creative inspiration when decorating domestic space—when sewing, mending, tailoring, pattern-making, tatting, lacing, doily-making. It makes the spaces we occupy not just rooms but spaces of imagination, expanded hopes and dreams, of comfort and rest, of liberatory spaces, to move things beyond its own physicality. That has always been one of the most alluring aspects of craft—its ability to continuously live lives beyond the physical. Each textile made is imbued with histories so expansive there is no way to quantify its totality. There is no totality. It is a living, breathing knowledge that branches off and extends into the next universe







Figure 76. *Eco-printing with hibiscus at our whare,* 2023. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

and generation.

My cultural practice is protected when, for some people, a pillowcase and a quilt is just that, while others who share cultural relationships to these histories will understand the different ways pillowcases and quilts are interconnected. There's a safeguarding there.

In the institution, certain value and meaning is placed upon the objects it presents. I'm tutuing with this notion, with the knowledge that the university and its galleries would not exhibit something my aaji or amma made. So I will do it—create a space that feels like Fiji, feels like my family (my chosen one, too), and is surrounded by networks of care. Through this network of care, I already know what the value is. It's up to the person who enters the space as the viewer to see that or not.

In the ghar/whare that I share with my chosen family, craft is a daily practice. It truly exists in the space-time continuum both of ancestral ways of existing and Fiji time. As a collective of many who come from various cultural backgrounds, we have all come to find each other in Tāmaki Makaurau. And isn't it a beautiful thing, that in this city our pathways merged with each other. Sometimes we stay up late, on the woven voivoi of our fala/ibe in our lounge, dreaming of how our ancestors may have come across one another, that for a love like this to exist, ancestral bonds must have been forged across generations long before our births. Even if not, those ancestral belongings exist now, in old and new ways, in the meeting and creating a life together.

Part of my networks of care are phone calls and WhatsApp messages from Nadi, with Amma working across digital spaces to support me with my sewing techniques, or Ana travelling from Kaikohe to Tāmaki to offer her knowledge of lalanga and how that knowledge system can support me in my own knowledge of craft. Sosefina, has for years shared her deep knowledge of Samoan craft, weaving and sewing, oftentimes visiting the house to sit and find solutions to sewing problems. Casey has filled in the gaps of knowledge around quilting that some of my elders cannot teach me due to what it means to live in different countries. My many other loved ones who are not makers offer their experiences of sitting and living with their own elders and exchanging stories of their memories; at times when I cannot find ways to communicate a specific idea or technique through my making, these loved ones will be calling family members to piece together intergenerational and international networks to gain the skills needed or find another solution. This movement of people and knowledge is an intentional extension of my own dedication; everyone who shares a life with me is also committed to my craft practice and shares in the processes of creating with me.

Existence moves for me as someone who is Indo-Fijian in the connection to people and place. I



Figure 77. *Two images of genda and hibiscus harvest,* 2024. Photo: Fe'ao Taulangaū (top), Casey Carsel (bottom).



Figure 78. *Three images of everyone helping Quishile eco-print at our whare,* 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

carry many homes. Once upon a time, I too, like others in my community, grieved for something physical, something I could feel with my own fingers. I too saw home as ownership of property. But home is whatever I define it to be, and, in a way, that is the freedom of my identity as Indo-Fijian. We are still creating what that cultural idea of home is, and Fiji time allows me the patience to determine this.

In the pursuit of finishing this PhD, I could have easily lost focus and become distanced from the very community I love so dearly, that I advocate for, that I am choosing to dedicate a life and practice to. Keeping myself grounded, humbling myself, means a constant renegotiation of these dynamics—to continually refuse the desires of these institutions, galleries, and even state-sanctioned history and the upholding of it through the replication of archives and state-approved identities. To exist in these colonial spaces means to be aware that they mean to separate people from their communities and assimilate me.

We don't have a term for art. We still have beauty but within a paradigm of function. "Art" is not something separate or somewhere else, it's part of how we move through every corner of our day. We talk about it as knowledge. It's not separated off into creativity—it is simply intelligence, just as cooking is seen as a creative intelligence. Whilst I do work towards the recognition of Indo-Fijian craft as its own knowledge system—a knowledge system interconnected to the various other forms of knowledge we have in our culture—I'm not fighting to be represented in these institutional spaces. These spaces both lack the imagination and care to do that work—you cannot take a colonial model and expect our anti- and de-colonial ways of existing to somehow be able to coexist in harmony. I do not want to exist alongside systems of oppression; I seek to dismantle them. At the core of my anarchism, this is truly what I believe in: the end of all systems of power.

Because pillowcases and quilts are inherently ours and not the institution's, the intention to gift each pillowcase and quilt acts as a type of refusal. It is an assurance that the act of making these works for people is not symbolic, that it will get to them. If I made in a different way, with no intention towards how and with whom who my craft lives, my making would easily be consumed into the rotating conveyor belt of post-graduate degrees the university pumps out. It may seem like a simple gesture—to make "domestic objects", to embroider flowers and names of loved ones onto cotton and linens, to thread beads and shells for orhnis—but these very acts hold the intention of loving on us, in all our stories and entireties. The intention of naming and gifting for my loved ones was about setting clear boundaries. I know these works will leave my home and enter the public space and sphere, entering a dynamic of power. To reject both the desire and theft of these spaces meant to engage in conscious acts of naming and storytelling.

Within the Indo-Fijian context, naming is of significant cultural meaning. When our ancestors were stripped of their personhood in so many aspects, naming became about remembrance, stories, relationships, and people. The thumbprint that marked the signing of a Girmit also symbolised the stripping of people's names. While many did carry their names to Fiji, after such a degrading experience under plantation colonisation, many chose new names that reflected their hopes and dreams.

One's name can become a decolonial atlas—a site of converging meanings and cultural shrines of remembrance. We tattoo our dead onto our bodies to yaad karo; following this tradition, I embroider the living onto pillowcases. I name the intentions through naming us. To name my loved ones is to redefine these spaces of hostile territory, to bring forward the memories of sitting up late together occupying the different rooms of our house, where one person is drawing quilting diamonds and squares while I'm sitting in the garage cutting up the shapes, where others are coming in and out through the day to check in on me, to offer support with half an hour of cutting. Everyone works around craft—it is one of the many central points of our household. Just as words have weight, carry meaning across time, and can be the determining factor in how a history is read, remembered, or forgotten, the craft languaging that I utilise is both a collaboration and medium to conjure strategies of resistance.

When I make for my loved ones, it's a gifting of whakapapa as well—that here we meet each other. Their whakapapa and their ancestors walk alongside my whakapapa and my ancestors. We continue our own journeys, walking side-by-side into the future. Here in this exchange, we meet one another again and again, in an infinite loop of homecomings, of returns, of dedication and love for one another.

To know that I am entering hostile territory—the university and its mapped spaces of colonial power—with vessels that carry generations of people and knowledge through their naming, is also a means of unsettling settler spaces. Access to these stories and histories requires your own sense of knowing; to understand this work in its wholeness means to live and coexist in the same relationships that make up this project. These relationships sprawl across infinite networks throughout time, in my life, the lives before me, and the lives that will come after me. In this way, these connections also become networks of boundaries. Carrying so many of my loved ones' names with me, it becomes a collective effort of safeguarding, as we all understand the weight of colonialism and its impacts. That mutual understanding, which formed the ground in which acts of solidarity could take root, was the beginning of how we formed our bonds. Dyed textiles embroidered with names, flowers, and plants, aren't for the sake of frivolous decoration. Rather, it holds agency and collective care work, as each person knows how to care for these textiles and knows both the dangers of the institution but also the love and joy that comes from telling our



Figure 79. *Genda full-pot dye setup,* 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

own stories with our own autonomy. My work will never become uncharted territory for the university to claim because my cultural practices are held through a network of safety through my loved ones.

Why then is it important to bring the private into these public spaces? Everything I create, I try to make it look like home because the familiar holds a sense of care. To create a space that feels like our homes helps to draw in communities like mine, while intentionally disorienting and alienating those it is not for. It's pretty funny that I'm putting clotheslines in the gallery space; heartwarming but ironic, it pulls the space to our level. We know that the university and fine art means respectability, but the ideas of domestic and home don't hold the same esteem. So it brings the university to something it couldn't possibly understand—comforting us while discomforting them. They don't get to live in our homes, our lives, so for them to walk in these spaces set in the comfort of our homes creates a sense of distance.

As I note in this exegesis, there is a clear understanding that to break apart my practice, my life, my culture, my people, and my communities into terminology such as methods and methodologies is an arbitrary act, something that only serves the institution. If the end goal is to create an understanding of my practices, then I am doing a disservice to my knowledge and my knowings. I do not want the institution to understand me better; why would I hand over my ways of existing to be consumed by colonial territories? Even if its territory is that of education, that Western endeavour is not a system of knowledge that I or this practice belong to. If these stories can't build a connection to you, my unknown reader, these stories are not for you. If you cannot find points of relation in the textile works that will come to make up my graduate exhibition, if you cannot see the moments of connection and shared understandings, the beauty of making for community, then they too are not for you.

It occurs to me how we are living a lot of what we dreamed of. All the talanoa, baat karo, has accumulated in a support network that is intergenerational, brown, and queer. While I had to put aside one of my greatest loves and joys—my making—to complete the requirement of writing this exegesis, my loved ones held me with such care, keeping the dye pots on rotation without me. Sometimes I don't see the enormity of how so much of my intention in how I pass on knowledge has built up to this point, that I can be here writing while new hands undertake the ancestral practices of generations before me and before them. How I share my stories and envision how we can create this future together—both here and in the exhibition, as the university calls it—for me is a marking of a moment, a moment of us. I chose us, and I return again and again to us and a dedication to the various ways we exist in this world.

For me, one of the most important aspects of world-building, belongings, and

whakawhanaungatanga is jahaji. Jahaji is my place of relational kinship-building and is about queer love. Queer love was my first place of belonging; it was the first time I learnt what unconditional love is and where I have grown and let the legacy of my ancestors continue to bloom. I, like my ancestors, had to make difficult decisions when it came to what "blood" had inflicted on me and I too chose to leave. Even though their choices were bound to a violent plantation system, we cannot and should never forget that they, within their own contexts, made choices in the hopes of something better. That hope was a driving factor, and is something I chose to never lose sight of.

The sharing of kahaani or khissa, in all its forms, is an act of love and trust. I plant seeds, and others draw in the soil and water to sustain them. Together, we create an ever-growing garden that sprouts new collective modes of being and knowing.



Figure 80. *Phool hanging in back deck,* 2024. Photo: Fe'ao Taulangaū.



Figure 81. *Two images of Quishile setting up genda dye pot,* 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.





Figure 82. *Two images of setting up genda dye pot,* 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

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Appendix



Figure 83. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead*, (installation view, gallery 2), Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Stephen Cleland







Figure 84. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead*, (installation view, gallery 2), Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.



Figure 85. Quishile Charan, *Phool* (installation view, gallery 2), 2019–ongoing, eco-print middle of fabric, border eco-printed with cutch, genda, and hibiscus phool, cotton, and thread. 525cm x 200cm. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Stephen Cleland.



Figure 86. Quishile Charan, *Phool* (detail), 2019–ongoing, eco-print middle of fabric, border eco-printed with cutch, genda, and hibiscus phool, cotton, and thread. 525cm x 200cm. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.



Figure 87. Quishile Charan, *Chalo suto: quilts* (detail), 2024–ongoing. Quilt 1: Linen, cutch, genda, hibiscus, madder, cotton, and thread. 195cm x 195cm. 226cm x 145cm. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.



Figure 88. Quishile Charan, *Chalo suto: quilts* (installation view, gallery 2), 2024–ongoing. Quilt 1: Linen, cutch, genda, hibiscus, madder, cotton, and thread. 195cm x 195cm. Quilt 2: Linen, cutch, genda, cotton, and thread. 226cm x 145cm. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.



Figure 89. Quishile Charan, *Chalo suto: quilts* (installation view, gallery 2), 2024–ongoing. Quilt 1: Linen, cutch, genda, hibiscus, madder, cotton, and thread. 195cm x 195cm. Quilt 2: Linen, cutch, genda, cotton, and thread. 226cm x 145cm. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Figure 90.Quishile Charan, *Ghar* (installation view, gallery 2), 2024–ongoing. Linen, cutch, hibiscus, and thread, 90cm x 150cm. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.





Figure 91. Quishile Charan, *Ghar* (detail), 2024–ongoing. Linen, cutch, hibiscus, and thread, 90cm x 150cm. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

Figure 92. Quishile Charan, *Chalo suto: pillowcases* (installation view, gallery 2), 2024–ongoing. Linen, cotton, cutch, genda, hibiscus, madder, onion skins, and thread. 258cm x 400cm x 400cm. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Stephen Cleland.



Figure 93. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead*, (exterior view of gallery 2 and *At our ghar/whare*, Single-channel projection, 5:27 minutes), Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Stephen Cleland.



Figure 94. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead*, (installation view, gallery 3), Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.



Figure 95. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead*, (installation view, gallery 2), Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

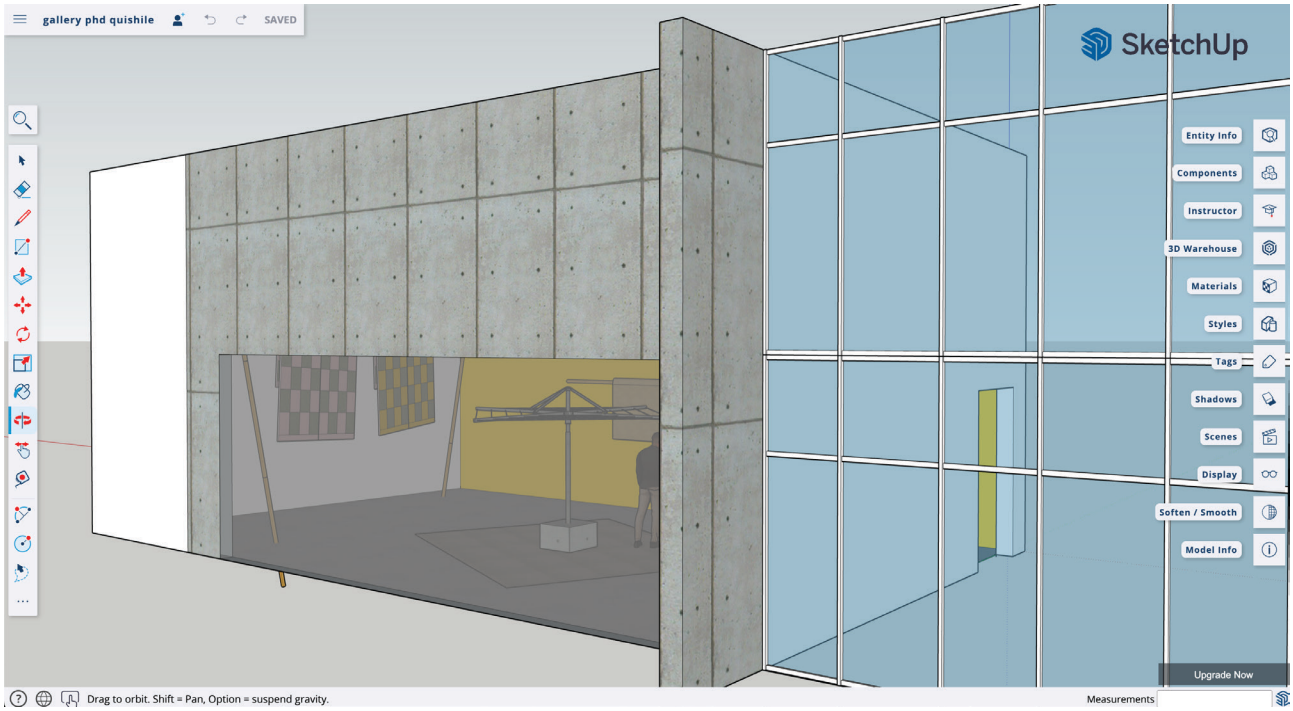


Figure 96. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead* (work in progress SketchUp), Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.



Figure 97. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead*, (work in progress SketchUp), Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2024. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.



Figure 98. Quishile Charan, *Phool* (work in progress with Quishile Charan embroidering 2024), 2019–ongoing. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.



Figure 99. Quishile Charan, *Phool* (work in progress with Casey Carsel embroidering, 2024), 2019–ongoing. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.



Figure 100. Quishile Charan, *Chalo suto: quilt 2* (work in progress with Hikiama Taulangaū stitching quilt, 2024), 2024–ongoing. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.



Figure 101. Quishile Charan, *Chalo suto: quilt 2* (work in progress with Anaseini Peioneti stitching quilt, 2024), 2024–ongoing. Photo: Matavai Taulangaū.

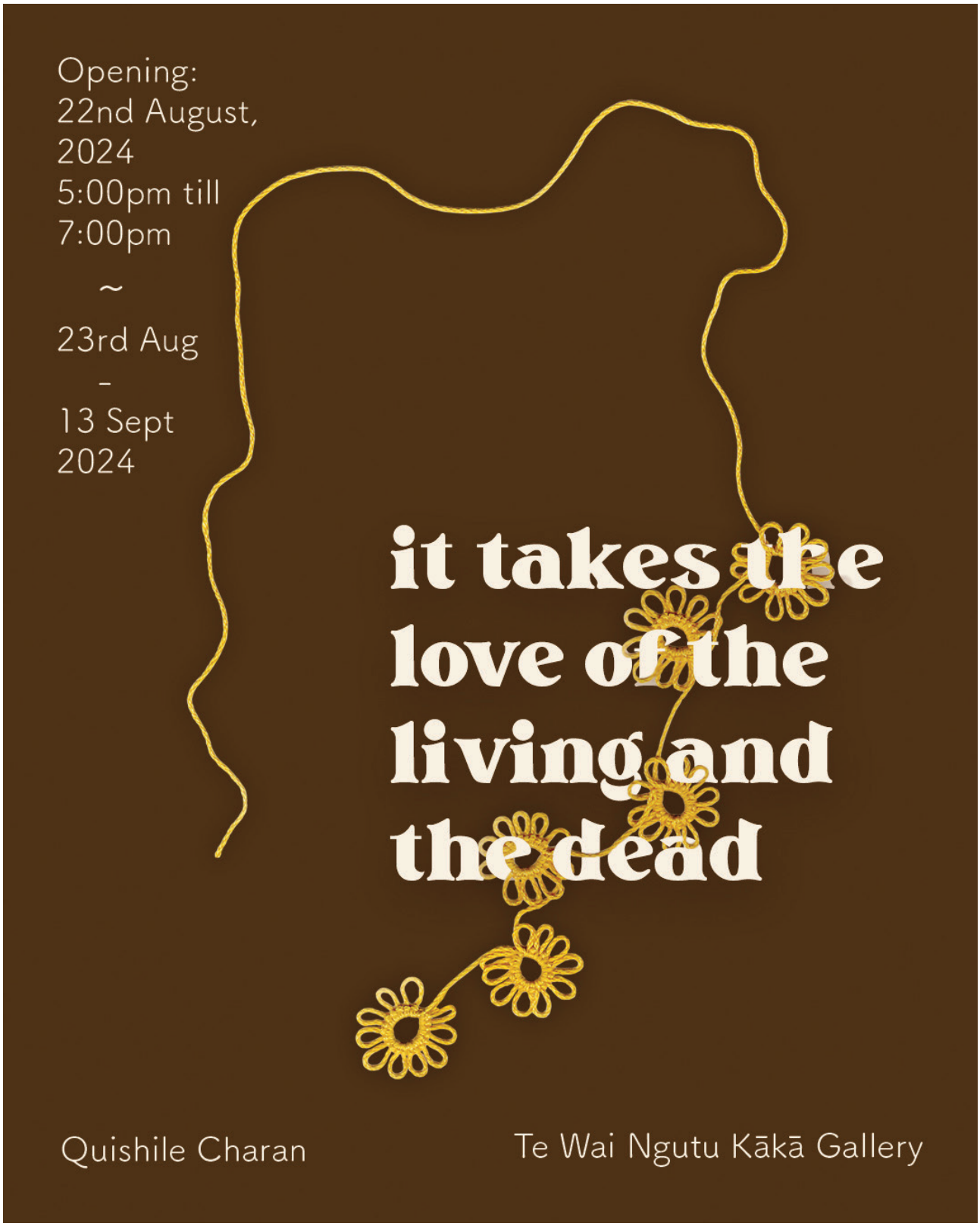


Figure 102. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead* (exhibition poster), 2024, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

To make is the very act of living, the very act of finding ways of making a life. It requires looking towards the future as the source of creative inspiration when decorating domestic space—when sewing, mending, tailoring, pattern-making, tatting, lacing, doily-making. It makes the spaces we occupy not just rooms but spaces of imagination, expanded hopes and dreams, of comfort and rest, of liberatory spaces, to move things beyond its own physicality.

This has always been one of the most alluring aspects of craft—its ability to continuously live lives beyond the physical. Each textile made is imbued with histories so expansive there is no way to quantify its totality. There is no totality. It is a living, breathing knowledge that branches off and extends into the next universe and generation.

It takes the love of the living and the dead, is the accumulation of a making practice that establishes a framework of Indo-Fijian knowledge centred in craft, grown from generations of makers in Quishile's family—generations of resistance, of world-building, of kahaani. Making for the love of it, for the joy of it, this exhibition is a celebration of Indo-Fijian histories that come from the folds and creases of the hands that hold it.

Figure 103. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead* (press release), 2024, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

Tātaki Whakakitenga
Exhibition Guide

It takes the love of the living
and the dead

—

Quishile Charan
23 August - 13 September 2024

NGUTU KĀKĀ

Figure 104. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead* (room sheet, page 1), 2024, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

IT TAKES THE LOVE OF THE LIVING
AND THE DEAD

Quishile Charan
23 August - 13 September 2024



To make is the very act of living, the very act of finding ways of making a life. It requires looking towards the future as the source of creative inspiration when decorating domestic space—when sewing, mending, tailoring, pattern-making, tatting, lacing, doily-making. It makes the spaces we occupy not just rooms but spaces of imagination, expanded hopes and dreams, of comfort and rest, of liberation, moving things beyond their own physicality. That has always been one of the most alluring aspects of craft—its ability to continuously live lives beyond the physical.

Each textile made is imbued with histories so expansive there is no way to quantify its totality. There is no totality. It is a living, breathing knowledge that binds together all those who carry it forward across whenua/vanua, universes, and generations. This binding forms the foundations to build a life that is grounded in the love of living, of those who have past on, and of those yet to come. To craft is to dream this life into reality, built on joy, love, and solidarity, while upholding the shared resposibilty of knowledge protection.

It takes the love of the living and the dead is the accumulation of a making practice that establishes a framework of Indo-Fijian knowledge centred in craft, grown from generations of makers in my family—generations of resistance, of world-building, of kahaani/khissa. Making for the love of it, for the joy of it, this exhibition is a celebration of Indo-Fijian histories that come from the folds and creases of the hands that hold it.

I invite all those who share community with me to come and talanoa. Kere/please reach out at quishilecharan@gmail.com.

Acknowledgements

Vinaka va levu to all of the hands that hold this practice. It truly does take the love of the living and the dead.

An Indo-Fijian craft and social practitioner, Quishile Charan approaches craft as a science-fiction practice of building new worlds from the seeds of reality. As a descendent of Girmit (indentured labour)—part of a history and present in which autonomy was/continues to be denied to her people—Quishile holds close a core set of anarchist—anti-colonial, anti-institution, and anti-authority values.

In her experimental, relational pursuits, Quishile expresses these values while seeking to form different visions of home with her own hands. Melted into Indo-Fijian gardening, cooking and living, it's a family effort that prioritises the anti-colonial work of nurturing and caring for each other outside of Western hegemony. Quishile's practice cannot function without the people in her life. A lot of her work lies in these relationships—choosing her family, holding them in the fabric of community, and moving beyond historical systems of harm.

Quishile has an MVA from Auckland University of Technology. She has exhibited at institutions including Artspace Aotearoa, Tāmaki Makaurau; SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin; and Kunsthalle Wien Museum. You can find Quishile working at her whare, which she shares with her chosen family in Aotearoa, making tarkari for loved ones, deep in talanoa while tending to her dye pots, and sewing in the garage.

It takes the love of the living and the dead is Quishile Charan's PhD exhibition.

Figure 105. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead* (room sheet, page 2), 2024, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

LIST OF WORKS

GALLERY 2

1 ***Ghar***, 2024- (ongoing)
Linen, cutch, hibiscus, and thread.
900 × 1500mm

2 ***Chalo suto: pillowcases***, 2024- (ongoing)
Linen, cotton, cutch, genda, hibiscus, madder, onion skins, and thread. 2580 × 4000 × 4000mm

3 ***Chalo suto: quilt 1***, 2024- (ongoing)
Linen, cutch, genda, hibiscus, madder, cotton, and thread. 1950 × 1950mm

4 ***Paal***, 2024
Hessian sack and natural fibres.
2600 × 2600mm

5 ***Chalo suto: quilt 2***, 2024- (ongoing)
Linen, cutch, genda, cotton, and thread. 2260 × 1450mm

6 ***Phool***, 2019- (ongoing)
Cotton, cutch, genda, hibiscus, and thread. 1870 × 4620mm

EXTERIOR (NIGHTLY)

7 ***At our ghar/whare***, 2024
Single-channel projection, shot and edited by Matavai Taulangaū; additional shots by Fe'ao and Hikiama Taulangaū. 5:27 minutes

Additional stitches and dye support by Casey Carsel; Bronte and Niamh Perry; and Ana, Fe'ao, Hikiama, Matavai, and Siakini Taulangaū.

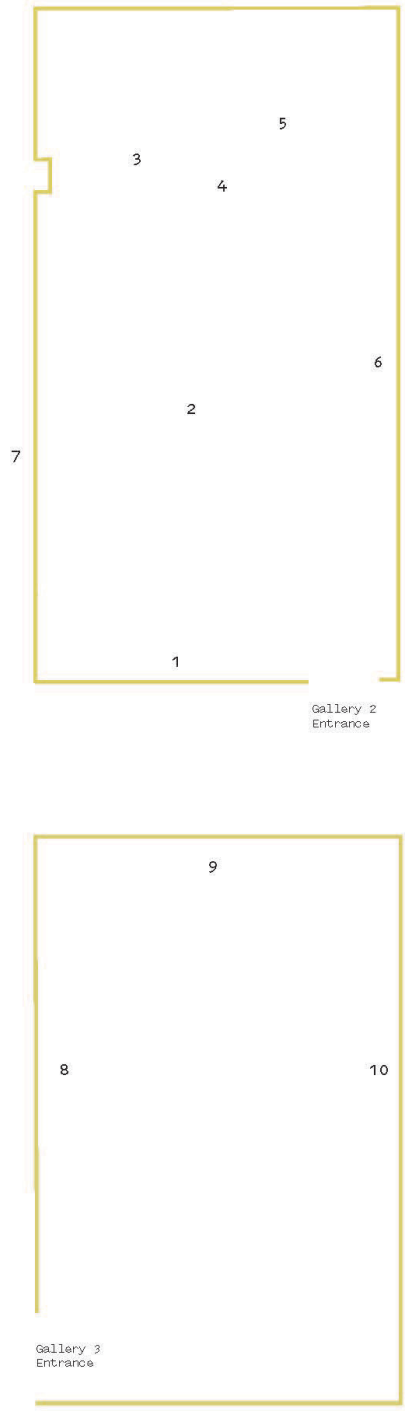
Throughout this exhibition, Mirchi FM will be playing in Gallery Two. The first and last thing you will hear in our houses is always the radio, connecting and grounding two homes–one in Nadi, Fiji; the other in Tāmaki Makaurau.

GALLERY 3

8 ***Ghar par lovo***, 2022
Single-channel digital video, shot and edited by Matavai Taulangaū. 20:06 minutes

9 ***At our ghar/whare***, 2024
Single-channel digital video, shot and edited by Matavai Taulangaū; additional shots by Fe'ao and Hikiama Taulangaū. 70:44 minutes

10 ***A steel drum, a lovo pit & my parivar***, 2023
Single-channel digital video, shot and edited by Matavai Taulangaū. 20:05 minutes



Exhibition Guide
Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery
Auckland University of Technology
2024

Wāhi
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Figure 106. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead* (room sheet, page 3), 2024, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

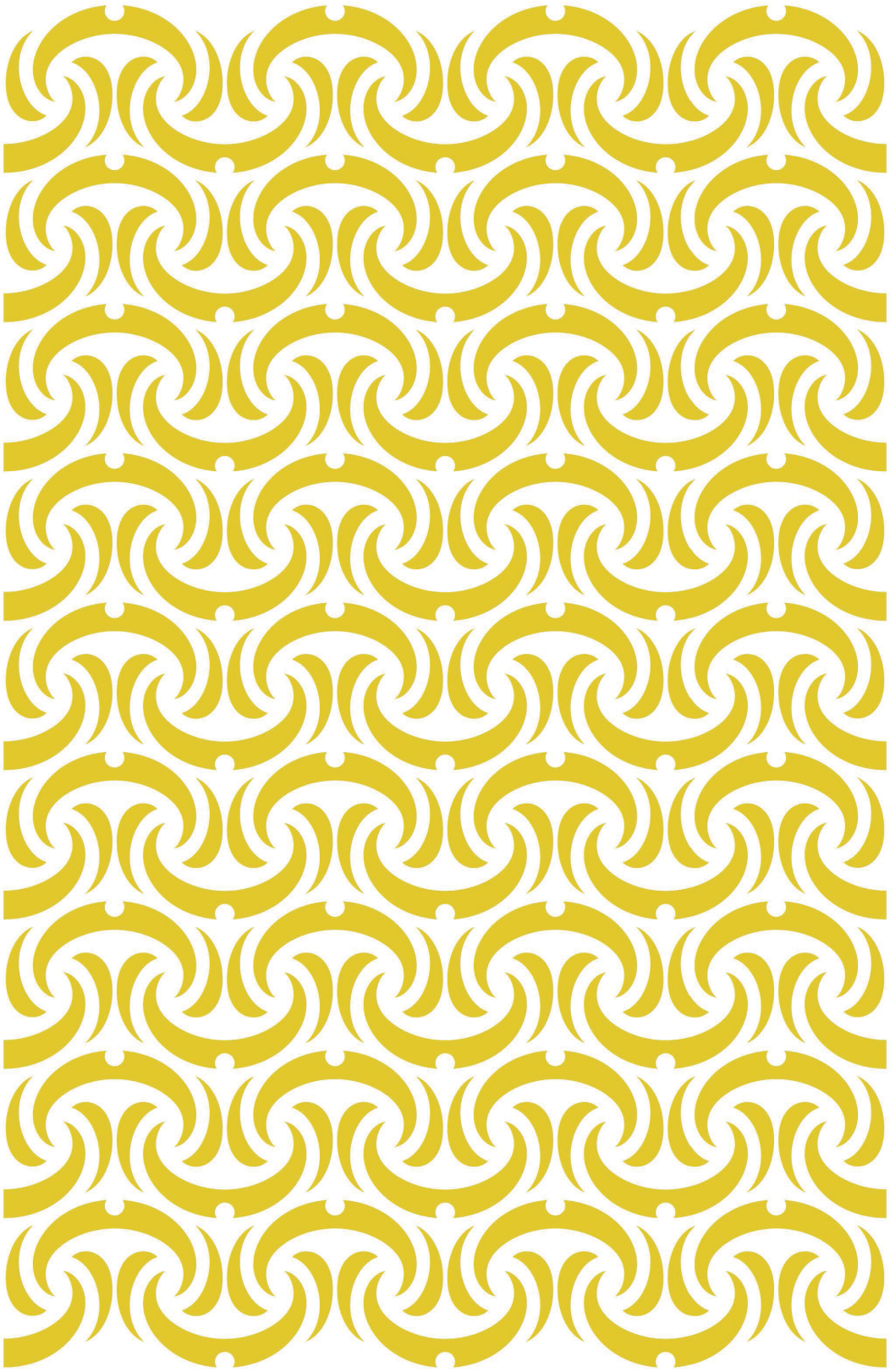

Figure 107. Quishile Charan, *it takes the love of the living and the dead* (room sheet, page 4), 2024, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.