

*Browning the Archive:  
Troubling Normative Formations of South African \*Indian Identity.*

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**ABSTRACT**

My study engages South African \*Indian historiography through a gendered lens. Available archival material is largely owed to the colonial governance of the immigration of Indians as indentured labourers and passengers. Accordingly, \*Indian women were sidelined and defined by colonial and patriarchal structures that constructed them as chaste and subservient wives and daughters. However, they were also exoticized and deemed as deviant and immoral for causing outbreaks of gender-based violence, venereal diseases, and infant mortality in indentured communities. Therefore, notions of \*Indian womanhood was largely overdetermined by the colonial and male gaze. Decolonial strategies of destabilization are critical to this study to subvert the visual and discursive regimes of \*Indians. This study responsively centers the position of women to decipher their sense of agency as opposed to passivity. I therewith consider an artistic practice that combines an engagement with archival and personal material to expose the sublime violence and erasures of the past whilst filling in these gaps of history. Browning is an alternative term for referring to the complexity and hybridity of the South African \*Indian identity outside of its normative formations. Through the indenture narrative and the aesthetics of sugar I work through historic and familial events that can help visualize and speculate a sense of the lived experience of South African \*Indians or being Brown.

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## PREFACE

I am a fourth generation \*Indian<sup>1</sup> woman born in South Africa with my paternal great-great-grandfather having arrived in Natal as an indentured worker in 1906. I have been unable to trace the roots of my matrilineage and can only speculate through the memories of my mother and her relatives. In looking through the archives of indentureship I discovered portrayals of indentured women, as either victims or troublemakers, at the periphery of the colonial gaze.<sup>2</sup> I then took to artmaking as an embodied response to this archive, and as a way to configure counternarratives that could speak to the intimacies and lived experiences of indentured women. Counternarratives entail a decolonial<sup>3</sup> process of 'delinking and relinking' with the fragments of the past that speak to the lived experience and agency of ancestors and the community. In an archive which has suffered improper preservation conditions, and is overall underrepresented, descendants of indentureship have to reckon with what has been left behind, mistaken or erased.

With South Africa's complex history of settler colonialism and apartheid, race and the politics of skin are not neutral, but loaded signifiers of difference.<sup>4</sup> The idiosyncrasies of artmaking allow for meaningful engagements with identity, history and community. As have other artists and art historians who have explored themes of indenture in South African art history, I situate these artistic practices as decolonial strategies that engage subversive and distinguished readings of \*Indianness, troubling normative formations of race, home, citizenship and gender.

The power of representation within South African historical narratives and the country's memorial culture is critical to my study. My research explores the notion that colonial thinking persists within these narratives, and that

<sup>1</sup>\*Indians with an asterisk is used specifically to reference the South African classification that is distinct from the national Indian identity.

<sup>2</sup> Kalpana Hiralal (2020b) study on indentured Indian women as well Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie's (2011) writings reflect on migration as a gendered and racialised institution.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Dignolo's conception of decoloniality is as 'a proliferating project and organisation of disobedient conservatism' (2017:6). Disobedient conservatism pertains to the action of delinking and relinking to establish a new subjectivity and mode of existence. This process calls for re-linking with the past and preserving elements that resonate with modes of existence that one wishes to engage in.

<sup>4</sup> Thoman Blom Hansen (2011:5) articulates the deeper connotations of race as non-neutral and its implications for post-apartheid South Africa.

there is a continuous otherisation of \*Indianness in present day South Africa. There have been efforts to celebrate the history of indentureship alike the digitised shipping lists<sup>5</sup>, but I have found them to be superficial when attending to its historical trauma.

Although I have the privilege of knowing about my grandfather's life from his obituary, I have neither been able to locate his biographical details in the digitised shipping lists, nor the name of my maternal great-grandfather, which my grand-aunt recalls. What is lost remains lost. A point I wish to make here is that greater interventions into colonial archives are needed in order to overcome their limitations and violence. Artistic practices engage with memory and material resources to articulate these complexities, and that becomes an act of 'reparative remembering.'<sup>6</sup> I find that static and Western forms of commemoration are limiting as they cannot account for the intricacies of different lived experiences of \*Indian people and women in particular. Instead, I am drawn to the micro-historical, indeed personal, narratives brought forward by artistic interventions, which can engage broader audiences in discussion.

The final explication is accompanied by a body of artwork in which sugar is used as a medium and discursive instrument to reflect upon and respond to indentureship and post-indentureship experiences. I work across multiple fields to articulate the meaning of my work, with postcolonial, feminist, migration, critical race and visual art studies informing my research.

This explicatory text serves as partial fulfilment of the Master's in Fine Art (MFA) degree at the University of Cape Town. This text aims to contextualise the creative-led research undertaken in the production of visual artworks and installations that form part of my broader study, i.e., *Browning the*

<sup>5</sup> The digitized shipping lists involved the direct translation of the original colonial registers of indentured servants by Joy Brain and Surendra Bhana in 2004. Waentjen and Vahed (2014) detail the difficulties of digitisation, as records were poorly kept and the handwriting of administrators was hard to decipher accurately. The intent of this digitisation was to transform the access to this archive, allowing it to become a genealogical tool for tracing one's roots. However, this digital archive still holds the violence of the original registers in its direct translation of the colonial administrators' erasures and mistakes.

<sup>6</sup> Sonali Thakur (2020) expands on Marianne Hirsch's (1992-1993) concept of post-memory to articulate ethical ways of dealing with violent pasts so that it can become an act of reparative remembering.

*Archive: Troubling Normative Formations of South African \*Indian Identity.* My study is thus a personal and political investigation into my own heritage, which is a part of the broader history of indentured Indians in South Africa.

Working within the parameters of an MFA programme, I implore the reader not to be perturbed by the slight lengthiness of this explication; I feel that such an excavation deserves some degree of capaciousness and depth. Thus, in my attempt to unsettle the power of the dominant \*Indian archive, I foreground *Browning* as a way to at once disrupt the continuous otherisation of \*Indian people and honour the resilience of my ancestors and elders whose efforts have afforded me my sense of home and agency. This reading is not redemptive but reparative. In working through the bitter history of indentureship I wish to contest its sweetness.

## INTRODUCTION

My study offers a contrapuntal reading of the history of indentureship in South Africa, revealing the normative formations of race, gender, class, labour, and the nation-state. I acknowledge the violence of the past in a manner that produces a relational understanding of our past, present and future. My study focuses on visualising the hybridity<sup>7</sup> of the South African \*Indian subject via *Brownness* – a proposed term for articulating the complexities of South African \*Indianness in a manner that destabilises the logic of colonial power. Additionally, this reading of hybridity accentuates the sense of belonging that South Africans of Indian descent have to the land. The experiences of women are also centred in my study due to my own positionality. I symbolically invoke their sense of agency, as opposed to passivity and victimhood. In recognising the inextricable relation between the visual and discursive, I use my artistic practice as a strategy to read against colonial archives, which speaks to my sense of *being Brown*. Accordingly, my practice engages with archival and personal material in order to expose the sublime violence and erasures of the past, whilst filling in these gaps in history. Through the indentureship narrative and the aesthetics of sugar, I work through historic and familial events that can help visualise and speculate upon the lived experience of South African \*Indians – i.e., the experience of *being Brown*.

The presence of recorded history of South African \*Indians is largely due to the regulation of indentureship in the British Colony of Natal. As a result, the archive is composed of colonial acts of governance, as well as documentation such as shipping lists, ledgers, commissions and legislative practices which controlled the lives of Indian migrants, or *coolies*.<sup>8</sup> The settlement of free Indians<sup>9</sup> and the voluntary migration of passenger Indians

7 I employ Homi Bhabha's (2002) reading on hybridity to analyze South African Indian Identity.

8 In the South African context, Coolie is a derogatory term to refer to the unskilled labour of Southeast Asian indentured servants in sugarcane plantations. It actively dehumanised the Indian migrant worker in commissions and laws to restrict the mobility and settlement of workers in the colony. Regarding the South Asian context, Tao Goffe Leigh offers the etymology of the term in different languages and geographical settings that include such dialects as Gujarati 'Koli', Mandarin 'Kuli' and Portuguese 'Cule' all of which denote peasantry, low caste, or menial and hefty labour of crop cultivation (2014:54). The author notes that this actively racialised and desexualised the indentured workers as the male Southeast Asian worker was seen most fit for manual labour.

9 Free Indians are indentured workers that completed their contract period and chose to remain and settle in

the colony as opposed to returning to India. Records thereby constructed stereotypical representations of \*Indians as the *coolie worker*, *Oriental stranger* or *exploitative merchant* in South Africa, which were used to justify the segregation and attempted repatriation of \*Indians.<sup>10</sup> These stereotypes would be further entrenched through visual documentation in media like newspapers, magazines and brochures. Consequently, \*Indian women were sidelined, defined by colonial and patriarchal structures as chaste and subservient wives and daughters. However, they were also deemed deviant and immoral and blamed for outbreaks of venereal disease, gender-based violence, and infant mortality in indentured communities. This contradictory view of women reflects the tensions between the capitalistic interests of the growing sugar economy and White fears of another minority settler in the colony.

Conversely, during the apartheid regime, the state constructed a model minority trope for middle-class \*Indians to frame the benevolence and moral legitimacy of the state. Examples of this include the state-produced brochures, e.g., *Meet the Indian in South Africa (MTISA)* (1949) and *The Indian in South Africa (TISA)* (1975). *MTISA* was written in support of the 1946 Asiatic Land and Tenure Act (Ghetto Act), which relocated \*Indian homes, and disenfranchised businesses of \*Indian ownership. The latter brochure consists of sub-chapters on the socio-economic profile of \*Indians, which promoted the 'opportunity' of indentureship for workers coming to the country in search of a better life. Such misdirected focus on economic upliftment obscured the lucrative recruitment practices of indentureship and the harsh living conditions on sugar estates. Instead, images of \*Indian men and women in blue collar jobs and tertiary education facilities are depicted, along with images of 'Asiatic Bazaars'. The commercial success of \*Indians echoed the *exploitative merchant* stereotype, which fuelled xenophobia and racial tensions amongst Black communities. An example of this were

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the colony as opposed to returning to India.

10 See Kathryn Pillay (2017).

the 1949 riots in Grey Street, Durban, which *MTISA* notably omits. Goolam Vahed writes about the unfolding of this event, which resulted in 142 deaths and 1087 injuries (1997:33). Vahed asserts that Whiteness was staged of as a neutral middleman to mediate Black and \*Indian divisions when in reality whiteness instigated tensions. As a result, this placed \*Indians in an ambivalent position: as both a menace to, and a scapegoat for, White supremacy. The 2021 racial protests following the incarceration of ex-president of South Africa Jacob Zuma further demonstrate the racial tensions in post-apartheid and democratic South Africa.<sup>11</sup> Considering the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, it is uncertain whether the democratic state has effectively addressed identity issues to foster a unified South African identity.

A growing corpus of scholarly research addressing the lived experiences of indentureship – in the form of sociological and historical studies – is being produced.<sup>12</sup> The foregrounding of indentureship narratives and post-indentureship experience exposes the misrepresentation and erasure of the \*Indian populace. Firstly, it acknowledges the violence of indentureship as unfree labour, along with its relations to slavery – which produced normative formations of race, class, gender and labour in the nation-state.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, it reveals how \*Indians were used as a scapegoat for White supremacy and racial segregation.<sup>14</sup> This research further attests to ambivalence of \*Indians throughout colonialism, apartheid and democracy, as the Otherness of \*Indians supports claims of White authority and the boundaries of the nation-state – contributing to racial tensions and hierarchies of inequality that are still felt today.

In responding to this history, there are limitations to using the term \*Indian,

<sup>11</sup> Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2024), Desai and Vahed (2020), and Bhana and Pachai (1984), among other scholars, have explored the impact of these riots on the social consciousness of Black and Indian South Africans.

<sup>12</sup> See Fatima Meer (1969), Surendra Bhana (1989), Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed (2010) and Duncan Du Bois (2015) for historical overviews.

<sup>13</sup> Hershini Bhana Young (2017) introduces the concept of 'Illegible Will' to contest the liberal viewpoints of labour practices as either free or unfree but rather as an unfreedom given the ways in which contractual migrant labour was implemented with the pure intent of capitalistic growth and its exploitation of cheap labour.

<sup>14</sup> See Kathryn Pillay (2017;2019a; 2019b), Riason Naidoo (2008) and Jordache Ellapen (2015; 2017).

as it is burdened with the logic of Othering and still conceives of \*Indians in essentialist terms of cultural difference. The ambivalence of \*Indians also makes it difficult to include the community in national discourse and public memory. This speaks to Vahed's analysis of the 1860 monument proposal<sup>15</sup> and its limitations. Several alternative terms are used to include the \*Indian community in national discourse, such as Indian Africans, Afro-Indian, Afrasian, Indo-African. To some extent these terms over-determine cross-racial relations and intimacies that cannot account for the fact that Black, Coloured and \*Indian communities have been discriminated against and disenfranchised differently. A sense of *Brown* or *Brownness* is proposed by Jordache Ellapen (2015) to purposefully speak to the lived experiences of South Africans of Indian descent, without reinforcing the notion of the \*Indian as Other. *Brownness* also speaks to the politics of colour and colourism<sup>16</sup> in South Africa. For Ellapen, *Brownness* is a strategy for destabilising normative formations of race, gender, sexuality and the nation-state. I wish to expand on Ellapen's work in reading Homi Bhabha's (2002) ideas which go beyond colonial thinking around cultural hybridity and cultural differences.

Visual practices offer critical insights into *Brownness* which subvert colonial scopopic regimes of \*Indians as Other. I argue that contemporary artistic practices of indentured descendants engage with fragments of the violent past, while also honouring the resilience of ancestors and the community, by actively finding a means of self-making and homemaking despite the odds against them. These artists utilise variety of media, such as sculpture, photography, performance, painting and mixed-media installation, to delve into themes of memory, displacement, and the fluidity of identity. Some artists' practices entail disrupting the conventional usage of domestic objects, as in the work of Sharlene Khan, who chooses objects and

<sup>15</sup> Goolam Vahed (2021) details the difficulties of constructing a permanent memorial to honour the arrival of indentured Indians in Kwa-Zulu Natal. The initiative remains delayed to the present day, as the monument committee is unable to reach consensus on the design and meaning of the monument, due to the Rhodes Must Fall movement and the reemergence of historical racial tensions.

<sup>16</sup> Jyoti Mistry and Jordache Ellapen (2012:120-22) speaks about the entrenched colourism amongst \*Indians in desirability of Whiteness.

materials associated with Hindu mythology and rituals. Archival and family photographs are juxtaposed in the practices of Jordache Ellapen, Alka Dass, and Ravelle Pillay. Each artist interprets photographs using different methods, such as digital manipulation, cyanotype and painting. These are a few of the artists who critically engage with social issues like migration, colonial legacies, gender roles, and social inequality, contributing a unique perspective to broaden the South African narrative. These practices echo Khal Torabully's (2002) theory of *Coolitude*<sup>17</sup> which reclaims the *coolie* identity as a multiplicity of new social hybrid identities. A key aesthetic of *Coolitude* is the concept of *crossings*. The artists mentioned above cross boundaries between the past and present; history and memory. Each artist offers personal insights that read against the grain of the colonial archive, which contextualises a network of colonialism, slavery, indenture and apartheid. In connecting these histories, the practices open up discourses on racial and national *crossings* too.

*Browning the Archive* builds on this corpus of research and visual work, using sugar as a disruptive medium to narrate and re-present the history of indentureship. The intent of my artistic practice is to envision what has been lost, ignored, or mistaken in the written record. This practice takes the form of sculptures, installations and paintings that encounter aspects of the legacy and lived experience of the South African \*Indian community. Through the use of sugar, I perform acts of *Browning* that disturb stereotypes of \*Indians, and draw attention to the agency of the community in defining its selfhood and sense of home. I have produced a series of prints of archival images stained with molasses titled *A Bittersweet Herstory*, as well as a series of sugar glass windows titled *Looking Through and In-Between*, of which both bodies of work confront the legacies of colonial photography. Installations are also created like *Finding a Sweet e(scape)* – which stages

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<sup>17</sup> *Coolitude* pertains to the poetic reclamation of the historically excluded, and a revision of historic and contemporary processes of globalisation. It maps the complexities of the coolie diasporic identity through the idea of multiple crossings between heritages, cultures, generations, gender, places and myths. The crossing of *Kala Pani* (translated as black waters) is symbolic as it signals the first mobility that marks both the death of 'mother India' and the birth of the diasporic identity (2002:15).

the agency of indentured women on sugar estates – and *The Garden-Scape*, that serve as sites of becoming and belonging for South African Indians. These installations are conceived of in an attempt to reckon with the past, present and future through my own affective response to colonial archival records of \*Indians in South Africa.

## BROWNING THE ARCHIVE

*From the great ghats of India to Port Natal  
Patched together crossing the Kala Pani  
The children of rain and storm*

*Finding no anchors in the wind  
Fated to be vagabonds of identity  
Their histories sinewed to their bones*

*Start to till coolie canefields  
Learning the language and lore  
Of foreigners in foreign shores*

*Producing sugar for an empire  
Their ladoos and rasgoolas  
A remembrance of things past*

*Lighting the family God-lamp  
With suppliant hands  
Watched only by the stars*

*Working with new kith and kin  
They slowly forge a new people  
A new heaven and a new earth*

*A new spirit  
And a new freedom  
A new home in a new land*

- Betty Govinden (2011)

As a born-free<sup>18</sup> South African woman and descendant of indentured Indians, questions of agency and belonging are tenuous. This is due to the \*Indian classification being burdened with a racial psyche that was constructed by colonial and apartheid institutions, and which has remained uncontested by democratic governance and its mandate of multiculturalism. As such, the South African and \*Indian classifications seem incompatible, as each classification signifies a singular and separate group of people based on cultural differences. Kathryn Pillay's (2019a and 2019b) research offers thorough insight into the racialisation of \*Indians, and attests to the point that racial terminology, specifically \**Indian/s*, cannot be neutral as it is ridden with stereotypical discourses. Steve Biko's (1971) Black Consciousness annotates a classification to be all-encompassing of black bodies, including coloureds and Indians. However, in ascribing to these identification markers it compromises Blackness and Indianness for the other. They are constructed to be mutually exclusive, and which remains uncontested in post-apartheid notions of Blackness and Africanness. As a result, present-day South Africans of Indian descent must assert their African-ness and political Blackness to claim South Africa as their home. However, political Blackness cannot account for the different ways in which \*Indians, Blacks and Coloureds have been discriminated against. Ellapen (2015) argues that African-Indian relations overdetermine similarities in the way Black and \*Indian communities have been discriminated against psychologically, geographically and economically. It is important to note these racial differences as they continue to resonate in the material conditions of the post-apartheid society at present. Narratives of multiculturalism and diversity are superficial, relying on essentialist ideas of race and ethnicity. Multiculturalism is also unequivocally 'non-racial' or 'colourblind' which disavows the power of Whiteness, thereby erasing how \*Indians have been racialised.

Ellapen responsively proposes *Brownness* as an alternative descriptive term

<sup>18</sup> Born-free is a term used to refer to the generation born after the democratization of South Africa in 1996.

for Indian descendants in South Africa. According to Ellapen, *Brownness* is “a site of reorientation; it directs us to other modes of being, other histories and experiences, and other sensorial regimes, like the haptic and affect, that can trouble the visual regimes of colonial modernity that have structured and continue to structure the way in which the Indian is known to South African publics.” (2020:107). Ellapen offers a compelling analysis of how a diasporic reading destabilises the boundaries of socio-political identities and the nation-state, as well as providing an analytic framework for how various artists<sup>19</sup> convey a sense of *Brownness* in their respective practices. I wish to further expand on Ellapen’s work and illustrate how *Brownness* successfully expresses the hybridity of South African \*Indian identity, as well as how my use of sugar is an act of *Browning*. In doing so I borrow from Homi K. Bhabha’s (2002) interpretation of cultural difference as subversive to colonial modes of thinking. This reading of *Brownness* troubles the fixity and rigidity of colonial classifications while turning the ‘gaze back onto the site of power’ (2002:160).

What becomes pertinent in colonial documentations of indenture is the otherisation of \*Indians. Kathryn Pillay’s (2017) study reveals how the introduction of the indenture system was meticulously documented by *The Mercury* newspaper.<sup>20</sup> The paper reported on court proceedings and commissions regarding the presence of \*Indian migrant workers in the colony, and would frame debates between sugar capitalist pro-labour interests and colonial anxieties about the ‘Asiatic Menace’ or ‘Asiatic Invasion’. ‘Coolie’ would be used in relation to words like ‘feeble-minded,’ ‘disease,’ ‘contamination,’ ‘oriental,’ ‘strange,’ and ‘comical,’ but also ‘servile’ and ‘docile.’ This dialectical process is analogous with Homi Bhabha’s theorisation of stereotypical knowledge as a modality of colonial power. Bhabha argues that the authority of colonial power relies on a consensus of ‘what is already known’ (2002:94). Therefore, stereotypical discourses

<sup>19</sup> Ellapen analyses the works of Usha Seejarim, Omar Badsha, Sunil Gupta and Sharlene Khan.

<sup>20</sup> *The Mercury* newspaper (formerly *The Natal Mercury*) was established in 1852 by the Robinson family, who migrated to the colony of Natal in 1850. The editor of the publication was George Robinson who would later become Natal’s first prime minister in 1983. The paper would become a daily newspaper reflecting ideals of the White middle class and sugar barons which further attributed to stereotypes of Indians as Coolies.

and the imposition of binary relations must be ‘anxiously repeated’ to reinforce the rigidity of colonial truths and their defined boundaries (Ibid). This is evident in the stereotypes of the *coolie* and *Oriental stranger* that were excessively repeated throughout the Coolie commissions, Mercury newspaper articles and anthropological reports on \*Indians like *MTISA* and *TISA*. However, Bhabha contends that in the excessive enunciation of Othering, lies an unstable urge and anxiety that also holds space for counter-knowledge to be enacted. The coloniser-colonised relation is in fact not binary but ambivalent, as the two elements are in constant negotiation with each other, as opposed to negated against each other. The hybrid identity emerges in this context as an ‘in-between’ space that subverts and refuses the logic of coloniality. This is where *Brownness* comes into play. This articulation of cultural difference is necessary due to the ways in which the *coolie* stereotype normalised the dehumanisation of indentured workers, as well as erasing the lives of women, who were conceived of as surplus.

A reading of hybridity allows an acknowledgment of the violence of the indenture system without re-inscribing the spectre of the indentured Indian. My intention is to read the selfhood and sense of agency of \*Indians in a system that actively tried to intervene in the intimacies of the everyday. It is here that Bhabha’s concept of *hybridity* is most useful to my study:

Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal; (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and original identity of authority). Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. (2001:159-160)

Therefore, I use the term *Brown* to refer to the hybridity of South African \*Indians. A reading of hybridity is also productive as it refuses to place \*Indians in the White/Other binary. This articulation evades the moral

legitimacy and trusteeship that colonial institutions claim to have, thereby exposing the colonial regime of ‘truth’ as anxiety and myth.<sup>21</sup> Hybridity also challenges the cultural diversity of democratic society and its insufficiency in speaking to lived experiences, or accounting for material differences, across race, class and gender. The diasporic identity of South African \*Indians is hybrid, especially in their sense of belonging and rootedness in South Africa, which exists alongside being descendants of Indian migrants. *Hybridity/Brownness* draws a network of routes and roots in connecting the exploitative histories of colonialism, apartheid, slavery and indentureship. This sense of *Brownness* is evident in the works of Jordache Ellapen, Alka Dass, Ravelle Pillay and Sharlene Khan.

Jordache Ellapen’s *Brown Photo Album (BPA)* (2020), reclaims the family photo as a site of \*Indian women’s agency and futurity (see Figure 1 pp 27). *BPA* consists of a photo-essay focused on studio portraits of Ellapen’s mother, Velliammah Ellapen (née Moodley) taken in the 1950s and 1960s during apartheid. The work builds on the photo-essay traditions by fellow South African \*Indian scholars Fatima Meer (1969), Uma-Dhupelia Mesthrie (2000) and Riason Naidoo (2008). Each of these bodies of work use the photographic medium to expand on the visuality of \*Indian communities.<sup>22</sup> Ellapen considers the value and limitations of these works in that they showcase complexities of \*Indian life but do little to address the normative formations of nation-state, race, gender, sexuality and class. *BPA* expands on this work, to include insights into how Brown people made ‘liveable lives’. *BPA* takes influence from Santu Mofokeng’s *Black Photo Album/Look at Me: 1890–1950* (2013) and Tina Campt’s strategy of ‘listening to Images’ (2017), a method of reclaiming Black subjectivity through portraiture of Black families. Ellapen then takes to the intimate space of his mother’s personal archives, reading her desires and refusals through them.

21 This speaks to Anne Laura Stoler’s (2002) writing on colonial archives, and what can be gained from them in a postcolonial context. An important point that Stoler argues is to read the colonial archive for its secrets and to discover who it ultimately served.

22 With Meer focusing on the universality of South African \*Indian life and Mesthrie looking at the activism of \*Indians in the fight for democracy and freedom. Naidoo’s work was devised in response to the state brochure *Meet the Indians in South Africa* (1949) which constructed the model minority trope of \*Indians.



Figure 1: Jordache Ellapen, *16854|117331* (2020).

Velliammah Moodley's photos were taken in her youth, before she became a wife and mother. This series offers a unique glimpse into South African \*Indian womanhood beyond the common narratives of indentured labourers or passengers. The photographs evoke dignity and mutual respect, in contrast to colonial photography's objectifying lens. Ellapen frames his mother's individuality as a form of resistance against rigid representations of \*Indians in state-sanctioned narratives. His work honours her efforts to create a meaningful and liveable life despite the restrictions of the apartheid regime. It is important to note that \*Indians were only granted citizenship in 1960 by the Union of South Africa, after several Commissions and failed attempts at repatriation schemes. Velliammah, who was born in 1941 in South Africa, was only recognised as a citizen at the age of nineteen in the country that was her place of birth. I recognise \*Indian or *Brown* family photos as a site of defiance and power, attesting to the failures of a repressive regime that saw them as Other. The family photo becomes a symbol of resilience and healing, and reveals the complex, often invisible experiences of the *Brown* diaspora in South Africa.



Figure 2: Ravelle Pillay, *The Gates* (2023) oil on canvas, 200 x 250 cm.



Figure 3: Alka Dass, *Wedding Portrait in Paan* (2024) cyanotype, thread and wool drawing, 100 x 100 cm.

Ravelle Pillay (Figure 2 pp 28) and Alka Dass (Figure 3 pp 28) are both South African \*Indian artists whose practices explore themes of identity, memory, heritage, and diaspora through interpretations of archival and familial photographs. However, they approach these themes in distinct ways, marked by differences in media and style, with Pillay working in paint and Dass with cyanotype photography.<sup>23</sup>

Pillay's practice delves into themes of memory, migration, and the remnants of colonial histories. Boundaries between the past and present; history and memory, are blurred in these paintings, as Pillay overlays archival images with her own imagery. Pillay then renders each layer of these palimpsestic images in colour, giving her paintings an ethereal quality, with soft, dream-like scenes that evoke feelings of nostalgia and loss. Pillay's paintings frequently depict landscapes and domestic spaces, drawing from her family's stories and collective memories of displacement and resettlement within South Africa. Through these serene yet haunting images, she examines the complexities of identity and belonging in the context of her South African \*Indian heritage. Her muted colour palette and delicate brushwork create a sense of fragility, underscoring the transient nature of memory and the fragmentation of personal and historical narratives. By portraying everyday spaces and moments ambiguously, Pillay invites viewers to consider the subtle ways in which past traumas, migration histories, and cultural transitions continue to shape identities in the present. Her practice not only explores individual and familial memory but also contributes to broader conversations about migration and diaspora within contemporary South African art.

In contrast, Alka Dass employs a vibrant approach to her cyanotype prints incorporating red and pink needlework, paying homage to the overlooked history of \*Indian descendants. The cyanotype process, with its rich blue tones, allows Dass to bring a unique, archival quality to her pieces. Cyanotypes are often associated with photography and documentation,  
<sup>23</sup> Dass's practice is multidisciplinary, however in my analysis I focus on her recent developments in cyanotypes and threadwork.

and Dass leverages these qualities to examine personal and collective histories within the South African \*Indian community. The hues of blue evoke a sense of nostalgia and mystery, underscoring the layers of memory and the enduring impact of diaspora. By merging contemporary art-making processes with this historical photographic technique, Dass brings a thoughtful, almost meditative quality to her exploration of identity, linking personal narratives with broader cultural histories. Together with her needlework – executed using pink and red thread and beads – Dass reclaims and honours historically feminine labour, creating mesmerizing motifs that depict the desires and dreams of her and her ancestors. Dass's intimate approach to her work addresses a sense of *being Brown*. It becomes subversive as it disturbs colonial and apartheid images and their ramifications. Dass shifts the gaze to the quotidian and mundane in her thinking about the past and what has come from it. Her work is not merely melancholic but also reparative, reclaiming vernacular imagery and craftsmanship to honour her past.

In essence, Pillay's and Dass's art is reflective and contemplative, centred on the emotional weight of history. Pillay's paintings hold as a haunting of the past in the present while Dass's practice is enchanting and playful in manner that honours the futurity of herself and lineage. Both artists contribute unique perspectives, in their contrasting tones and styles, on *Brownness*, depicting its complexity and resilience.

Sharlene Khan's video piece *When the Moon Waxes Red (WTMWR)* (2017) explores themes of poverty, violence, labour, and migration through performance, digital photography, and needle lace embroidery. The video features three different intercutting scenes: it begins with shots of Khan creating needle lace art from found family photographs (see Figure 4 pp 31), followed by clips of sugarcane fields in South Africa and Tanzania (see Figure 5 pp 31), as well as snippets from a performance piece, *Drowning Durgas*<sup>24</sup>,

<sup>24</sup> Jordache Ellapen (2017) reports that this performance was inspired by the Hindu Pilgrimage ritual performed at Grand Bisson Lake in Mauritius. In this ritual, goddess Durga is covered in cloth and submerged in water. Folklore contends that Durga is drowned to remove sin. Notably this performance is performed when



Figure 4: Still of Sharlene Khan doing needlework in *WTMWR* (2017).



Figure 5: Still of sugarcane scenes in Sharlene Khan's *WTMWR* (2017).



Figure 6: Still of Sharlene Khan performing *Drowning Durgas* in *WTMWR* (2017).

which was created in Mauritius, (see Figure 6 pp 31). Accompanying the footage is Khan's narration, where she reflects upon generational trauma including domestic abuse, her mother's painful experiences as a child bride, her grandmother's suicide attempt, and other attempts to escape from poverty.

The needlework honours Khan's grandmother's efforts to support her family, along with the labour of women both within the home and in the nation more broadly. In this body of work Khan engages her personal lack of family photographs by stitching with white cotton thread over found family photographs from the Gandhi Luthuli Documentation Centre. By altering found photographs, Khan connects them to her family history, creating a personal archive that transcends historical violence. *Strange Fruit II* (2017) is one of the pieces in the needle lace work series in which Khan depicts two unknown women hanging from the branches of a tree. The work mourns the suicides of indentured women, who hanged themselves to escape poverty.<sup>25</sup> The artwork also references Billie Holiday's song *Strange Fruit* (1945), about lynching in the United States. *Strange Fruit II* (2017) is therefore both personal and relational – across the different spatio-temporalities of Black and Brown life, offering further readings of cross-racial solidarities. The lace narratives disrupt the \*Indian model minority trope and linear narratives of progress, as well as visualising the futurity, agency and desires of those lives historically made impossible and invisible.

Khan's engagement with sugarcane and the ocean in *WTMWR* evokes Torabully's (2002) notion of *Coolitude*, which reclaims the Indian diasporic identity shaped by migration. A key aesthetic of *Coolitude* is the ocean which symbolises both death and rebirth, referencing the trauma of indentured migration and the collective memory of lives lost at sea on the one hand, and the creation of hybrid identities in colonies on the other hand. While

the moon waxes, Khan thereby restaged this performance wearing a red sari adorned with mehendi and a flower garland necklace floating in the water.

<sup>25</sup> Suicides by hanging were common in indenture colonies. Several incidents occurred, where women would hang themselves on fig trees with their saris. Khan's work echoes the story of the sisters known as the Toplan Five, who hanged themselves from a garden tree in the 1950s.

stills of water and her floating body appear onscreen, Khan's narration speaks to violent moments of marriage and divorce. In this performance Khan refers to the ocean as a womb, and in doing so critiques normative formations of family, the home-space and nationhood.

In her narration, Khan confronts the audience with the historical trauma of her matrilineage. This confrontational approach challenges the limitations of South African memorial culture, particularly the Truth and Reconciliation Commission<sup>26</sup> which failed to heal the wounds of marginalised communities. The narration demands accountability, as well a deeper socio-political reckoning with the past, present, and future. Khan's work offers a profound exploration of generational pain and the ongoing struggle for recognition and healing within post-apartheid and decolonial movements.

These artistic processes convey a deeper meaning – and practice – of inheritance. Karen Weingarten and Maria Rice Bellamy argue that *inheritance* is not just the passing down of material goods to selected recipients but rather a metaphysical exchange of “inequity, trauma, subjugation, disadvantage, and disenfranchisement” (2020:15). They also consider the gendered aspects of inheritance:

The female body (understood normatively) is often the primary site for generational transfer – even if women are frequently excluded from inheritance – yet women in positions of privilege can also be complicit in maintaining and participating in processes of exclusionary inheritance. In the aftermath of slavery, colonialism, war, and other experiences of subjugation, negative forms of inheritance are passed down through the generations and continue to limit the possibilities of descendants in contemporary society. (Ibid)

The authors conclude that “in order to locate inheritances lost or denied, we must often look in unconventional places, follow unexpected trails, and reckon with the consequences of these losses and discoveries” (2020:23). This is the case in each of the artistic practices discussed above. Together they reflect on a sense of *Brown* as ‘a being with’, which resonates with

<sup>26</sup> Ross Truscott (2017:78-80) contends that the empathy of the commission was hindered by it having to exonerate the state of the violence committed in the past. In essence, the commission's role was to indemnify the atrocities of the past whilst hiding the role of the state in these atrocities.

José Esteban Muñoz's (2018) writing regarding a *sense of Brown*. Below is an excerpt from 'Fragment from the Sense of Brown Manuscript' that expands on the potential of *Brownness* as a post-colonial critique, and a relational understanding of history as a network of violence and exploitation:

Brown Commons is meant to signify at least two things. One is the commons of brown people, places, feelings, sounds, animals, minerals, flora, and other objects. How these things are brown, or what makes them brown, is partly the way in which they suffer and strive together but also in the commonality of their ability to flourish under duress and pressure. They are brown in part because they have been devalued by the world outside their commons. [...] Brownness is a being with, being alongside. (Muñoz, 2018:395)

Ellapen's, Pillay's, Dass's and Khan's distinct artistic practices share overlapping themes of colonialism, migration, displacement, memory and desire. The overall lack of representation of South African \*Indianness fuels their poignant and thought-provoking work. What each of these practices do in different ways is disrupt the legacies of violent imagery, and complicate ideas of \*Indian 'authenticity'. Boundaries between racial, gender and national categories are disturbed in portrayals of religious rituals, iconic signifiers like the worn sari, the labour of needlework and thread work, and the defiant act of home-making and self-making. In each of these works, the artists employ their imagination, encouraging the viewer to look beyond the surface – and to look carefully.

Therefore, hybridity/ Brownness disturbs colonial scopic regimes of \*Indians as Other and alludes to their sense of belonging in South Africa. A reading of hybridity helps read cultural differences of \*Indians in a manner that does not reinforce colonial constructions of race but allows for agency of \*Indian communities in defining their sense of self and home. *Brownness* reads cultural differences as productive as \*Indianness came into being through ambivalent relations with colonial and apartheid institutions. Notions of \*Indianness is not static but ever-changing across generations. Accordingly, my body of artwork mimics this dynamic process of negotiation. The exhibition is responsively composed of ephemeral and changeable artworks, this malleability serving as a metaphor for the fluidity

and hybridity of \*Indianness. I use the materiality of sugar to trouble linear narratives of indentureship as a form of voluntary labour, exposing the violence of the plantation system and the hidden lives of \*Indian women within it. Various sculptural works and paintings that have been produced through the stains of molasses, the crystallisation of a dense sugar-water solution and the casting of sugar glass, form larger installations which stage disruptive moments against the colonial archive of indentureship. The visual works are created through my own affective response to the archive and what has been hidden. Through my use of sugar, I can *Brown the Archive* and offer a glimpse into the lived experience of South African \*Indianness, or *being Brown*.

## SWEETENING: ACTS OF SUGAR

*We know for sure our grandmothers who survived the plantations, so we exist today to reflect on their stories. Their survival strategies are a common thread between people throughout the history of slavery. Perhaps within this is the language to continue this process of decolonisation.*

– Shiraz Bayjoo in conversation with Ilaria Conti (2021)

My use of sugar expands on its cultural economy to include the lost history of indenture, connecting the nuances between slavery and indentureship. Michael Green describes how the sugar crop in Natal exemplified “ingenious ways of recreating pre-emancipation labour conditions” (2007:43). Green observes that crop cultivation in Natal featured much trial and error, with attempts to grow tea, arrowroot, sesame, coffee and cotton – however, the failure of these harvests would be surpassed by the success of sugarcane, and Natal would come to compete against other sugar colonies in its production and output. Notably, indentureship occurred during the post-abolitionist period which made it important for colonial institutions to assure the moral legitimacy of their labour practices as distinct from slavery. These pressures influenced the gendering of the indenture system, as the presence of Indian women was crucial for assuring the social lives of the Indian migrant community. However, these gendered conditions of indentureship were obscured by colonial attitudes towards Indian women, as male labourers were preferred for sugarcane cultivation, contributing to male-dominated and bachelor societies.

The introduction of contract agreements or *Girmitiyas*<sup>27</sup> was another means to institute the legitimacy of indentureship (Nafisa E. Sheik, 2005:4). The contract framed indentureship as a practice of free labour, as it ostensibly demonstrated the free will and consent of the labourer. This framing underestimates the bondage of slavery. The overdetermination of indentureship as voluntary led to a false teleological progression from slavery to freedom (Hershini Bhana Young, 2017:152). In South Africa, Whiteness was situated as a ‘master’ race, superior to both the \*Indian coolie and Black native. These differences would be internalised and instill racist

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<sup>27</sup> Girmitiyas is the Southeast Asian terminology for contracts/ agreements.

and colourist attitudes that fuelled tensions between \*Indians and Black Africans.<sup>28</sup> In this way, indentureship marked a new era of racialisation, that placed \*Indians, Blacks and Whites in a triangular relation where tensions between Blackness and \*Indianness were constructed to supplement the White imaginary. Reclaiming this history of indentureship through the use of sugar unveils the normative formations of labour, race, and gender.

Glenda Carpio (2017), in her article on the sculptures of Kara Walker, offers a compelling analysis of the insidious nature of sugar as a murderous and exploitative commodity. The violence of sugarcane cultivation lies in its expansion of capitalism, as its addictive quality influenced colonialists’ exorbitant sugar manufacturing demands. In highlighting the racial complexities of these labour practices, Carpio elucidates how the crystallisation of molasses, which gets separated into refined white sugar, functions as a racial metaphor for the ways in which Whiteness is produced at the expense of Blackness (2017:554). I wish to unpack this meaning of sugar and investigate how it has also implicated the lives of Brown people. I also seek to use sugar to reference the gendered experience of the plantation. Judith Carney observes the economy of sugar through a gendered lens, wherein “women are pivotal for the extension of the contemporary sweetener-based commodity chain as mothers, wives, labourers, cooks, and consumers of purchased groceries.” (2008:128). I am interested in sugar’s implicit characteristics, using it to reveal the concealed history of indentured women in Natal.

I make use of sugar as a stain, layering molasses onto digital scans of archival prints. I am interested in the bittersweetness of molasses, and the sticky residues it leaves behind. The stickiness and bittersweetness serves as a useful anecdote for the violence of indentureship and the process of envisioning its afterlife, as not everyone was able to flourish under such

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<sup>28</sup> Heather Hughes investigates the relations between Africans and \*Indians in Natal during the dispensation of indentureship (2007). The paper notes the role of customary laws, African missionaries and chiefdoms, and Mahatma Gandhi’s political career in evoking attitudes of resentment amongst \*Indians and Africans, who were pitted against each other.

conditions of indenture. The viscosity of molasses – thick as well as liquid and runny – is also materially compelling when applied to surfaces, slowly infiltrating them. I am not in full control of the molasses: once it's smeared off my paintbrush it either sits on the surface, or spreads over and pools up in areas I might not have intended it to. The molasses is also sensitive to weather conditions, where it 'sets up' in my cold studio and holds its form, but melts and drips under the heat of gallery lights and surrounding viewers. It encompasses the complexity of agency concerning hybrid identities.

Sugar glass – which is a sugar and water mixture heated to a 'hard crack' stage, causing the sugar to resemble a 5mm thick glass – is another important component of my work. Often referred to as break-away glass, the sugar glass becomes a useful metaphor for disturbing the colonial gaze on \*Indianness and womanhood. Even the term break-away glass makes potential metaphorical reference to women's acts of defiance and subversion on the plantation and against the state. I use sugar glass in my window-scape sculptures as a lens through which to engage with visual material from archives and family photos. In these sculptures, the windowpane is replaced with a sugar glass sheet, which allows viewers to look through and in-between the castings. Each sugar glass frame is unique, with variations in opacity due to the different points of crystallisation in the casting. The sugar browns as it ages due to the Maillard reaction<sup>29</sup> – in this sense literally performing an act of *Browning*. The melting and the fluidity of the sugar glass also becomes yet another analogy for the ambivalent notions of belonging for South African \*Indians.

The submergence of materials in a dense sugar water solution also reorients the spectator's to the capitalistic expansion and consumption of sugar. Submerging causes crystallisation over a long period as the solution gradually saturates the material and seeps into its surfaces. The slowness of crystallisation disrupts any sense of temporal linearity, subverting the

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29 "The Maillard reaction is a type of non-enzymic browning which involves the reaction of carbonyl compounds, especially reducing sugars, with compounds which possess a free amino group, such as amino acids, amines and proteins." (Ames, 1992: 99).

fast pace of capitalism. Subhalakshmi Gooptu (2022:54) offers a useful reading of submergence as means of reorientating spectator's modes of interpretation and consumption. Gooptu demonstrates this with Andil Gosine's *Our Holy Waters, and Mine* (2014) work and use of water as an aesthetic of indentureship. Gooptu contends that the use of fluidity of water allows for "a relational study of material and aesthetic practices that displaces the hyper-visibility of marginalised bodies and instead emphasizes the circularity of ideas and knowledges, and healing." (2022:54). This reading of fluidity allows for a path of interpretation that engages the personal and collective experience. Fluidity also echoes the metaphorical symbolism of *Coolitude* and the crossing the *Kala Pani*, marking the social death and rebirth of the ships passengers. The physical state of fluidity is dynamic and therefore transgressive, which also symbolically evokes a sense of hybridity.

Lost in this archival history are the stories of the courageous women who dared to escape, pursuing their own desires and means of living and being. Although these brave stories would have bittersweet journeys and endings, it is still worth noting these women's sense of agency. I find it crucial to centre the presence and role of \*Indian women, along with their dreams and desires, against the backdrop of a violent, Colonial capitalist system that fed off their labour. Gaiutra Bahadur (2018) argues for the important and ethical work required of descendants of indentureship to restore their histories. Bahadur contends that the act of 'conjuring' allows for an engagement with the past and present – similar to the practices of Ellapen, Pillay, Dass and Khan. In using imagination and memory-work, one can envision alternative experiences to the violences of the past. Bahadur's work resonates with Saidiya Hartman's (2021) proposal of a radical intimacy to articulate the desires and dreams of Black women, liberating them from colonial imagery and discourse. Another form of 'conjuring' is Hershini Bhana Young's (2017) call for the use of historical fiction and creative speculation to engage alternative experiences to the death-worlds of capitalism. The use of creative speculation allows one's thinking to expand beyond the violence of

the plantation system, and critically re-imagines the possibilities of agency, creating potential for healing and recovery from historical trauma.

I seek to use sugar as a means of conjuration and creative speculation. In my use of sugar, I refer to the aesthetics of indentureship while creating a picture of an afterlife; depicting the agency and futurity – once intended to be impossible – of descendant communities. I use sugar, in its varying liquid and solid properties, to reflect upon the sticky residues of the archive. I extend the medium of sugar as a marker of mourning and strength. The ways in which sugar reacts to different materialities represents the slow violence of indentureship. However, the sweetness of sugar also speaks to the desires of descendant communities to work through their historical trauma and find a means to be seen and recognised. Bahadur's writing speaks to the difficulties of recovering legacies of \*Indian women, as their experiences must be retrieved indirectly, through the eyes and tongues of colonial officials. This process requires an intermingling of the self and sources. As Bahadur reflects on her own process, she writes that "I talked back to the archive, gave it some lip..." (2018:248). Similarly in my use of sugar and its different stages of fluidity and crystallisation, it speaks back to the archive in seeping through, staining, obscuring and revealing its imagery. Therefore, like Bahadur, I wish to give my work some sweetness too.



Figure 7: Detail of Zenaéca Singh, *Silhouettes* (2024)  
sugar-glass, resin and collage in found window  
frame, 49 x 49 cm.

Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel.

*A BITTERSWEET HER-STORY*



Figure 8: Installation view of Zenaéca Singh, *A Bittersweet Her-story* (2024) series of six molasses stained prints, 48 x 60 cm each (Framed). Photo credit: Mia Thom.

## A BITTERSWEET HER-STORY

*A Bittersweet Her-story* (2024) is a series of six molasses-stained prints of colonial documentary photographs from brochures and magazines, depicting \*Indian women as indentured labourers, subservient housewives, dutiful daughters and *Oriental strangers* (see Figure 8 pp 42-43). These works prompt the viewer to reckon with these documents and their everlasting gaze. As a descendant and inheritor of these images, I question how their legacy should be dealt with. A result of these colonial archives is an excess of violent photographs that cannot be erased, and perhaps should not be erased, as their legacies are still felt today and cannot be expunged. Therefore, they need to be reconsidered. Weingarten and Bellamy's (2020) concept of *Inheritance* serves as a theoretical framework for my molasses-stained photographs. *Inheritance* in this instance is not just the physical exchange of valuables and family traits but also the bequeathing of debt, disenfranchisement, emotional burdens and the psychological transmission of historical trauma across generations. The authors question the greater implications of inheritance beyond material bequeathment such as historical trauma of wars, genocide, epidemics slavery and in my case, indentureship. Caroline Hong (2020), Tahneer Oksman (2020) and Sonali Thakkur (2020) separately features in Bellamy and Weingarten's volume on *Inheritance*, and each uses Marianne Hirsch's (1972-3) concept of post-memory to consider the decolonial, ethical and healing properties of resurfacing and recontextualising violent historical imagery within the present moment. In looking back at these selected images in *A Bitter Her-story*, I wanted to bring attention to its violent context but also attend to the subject's agency. These images have been digitised and will exist forever in this manner, I want the re-viewings of these images to be an act of care as these image will resurface through time.

Once the digital scans were printed, the prints were stained with a generous coating of molasses that slowly dripped off the corners of the images, setting in the coldness of my studio space. The molasses initially concealed fine details of the archival image, but through the heat of contact with viewers the prints started to drip again and reveal a clearer layer of the image behind.

In this way, the viewer helps to activate the work and gives a new life to the image, further shifting and animating the usually static dichotomous relation between observed and observer. This process of careful looking articulates the inheritor's/descendant's sense of agency in how they wish to be remembered and re-presented. Thakkur (2020) describes this engagement as *reparative remembering*. Reparative remembering challenges dualities of victim and perpetrator in the image and instead demonstrates how the past inflicts an affective experience of the world. The past cannot be forgotten, and it is our responsibility is to uphold and honour the past as it bears reason to grow a hopeful future. For Thakkur, accounts of the past must demand recognition of the agency of inheritors/descendants, which is what I intend to do in this work.

The series has been divided into different sets, with *Coolie Mary* (2024) and *Three's a Dream Team* (2024) portraying indentured women (see Figure 9 pp 46). It honours the resilience of these women who were pushed to the margins of history. The bitterness of molasses speaks to the unfreedom of indentureship and the ambivalence of \*Indian women in the plantation system. While the construct of the contract/*girmit* certainly illuminates the nuances between slavery and indentureship, the conditions under which the agreements were made were problematic, with them being stipulated in English despite the recruited workers not being literate in said language.<sup>30</sup> Kalpana Hiralal's (2024) study examines the gendered dynamics of indentureship, as well as the lucrative and fraudulent practices of recruitment, which were enacted at the discretion of agents. The recruitment process was conducted through a bureaucratic structure of European emigration agents, protectors of emigrants, sub-agents, doctors, interpreters and other personnel in the depots. Recruiters would be remunerated per head, with 45 rupees per man and 55 rupees per woman. Hiralal (2024:22) writes about *Arkatias* – illegal operators who

<sup>30</sup> Nandini Dhar (2017) gives insight into the ways in which servants were 'recruited' or captured for indentureship, such as people being taken abroad in captivity, tricked into signing contracts, or duped into enlisting while seeking an escape from the caste system and other restrictive societal structures. Dhar further argues that liberal discourses of freedom are limiting in reflecting upon indentured experiences.



Figure 9: Zenaéca Singh, *Coolie Mary* (2024) molasses on German etching hahnemuhle, 48 x 60 cm (Framed) (on left) and Zenaéca Singh, *Three's a dream team* (2024) molasses on German etching hahnemuhle, 48 x 60 cm (Framed) (on right). Photo credit: Mia Thom.

targeted vulnerable women and children, coercing them into boarding under false pretences, even resorting to blackmail and bribery to meet sex quotas.<sup>31</sup> Medical examinations and other procedures were also falsified to claim that standards were being met. Indian women were placed in precarious positions because their reproductive labour was essential to the maintenance of the plantation system, while they themselves were regarded as dead weight. The framing of the worker's free will is also problematic as it obscures the exploitative measures of indentureship and its gendered dynamics.<sup>32</sup> The Natal colony ranking second highest in suicide rates<sup>33</sup> further attests to the devastating effects of indentureship practices, and calls into question the claims of indentured servants' agency and freedom of choice. Given the violence of this system that governed livelihoods of indentured women, I look carefully at these images and see their resilience, their dignity and humility to make ends meet as the molasses drips away revealing their stern faces and smiles of three women.

*Beauty is in the eye of the beholder* (2024) stands on its own (in Figure 10 pp 48), depicting a digitally mass-produced image of an \*Indian woman. The source image was first shown on the cover of *The Indian South African* (1975) – with few details pertaining to the woman herself included. The caption bluntly describes her as a 'traditional Indian woman in customary dress and eastern jewellery' becoming face of the *Oriental stranger* trope. The lady is also presenting a classical Bharathnathyam hand gesture - mudras<sup>34</sup>, further reinforcing ideas of 'Indian traditions'. Young (2017;168-

<sup>31</sup> The recruiters were under pressure from abolitionist demands for sex quotas, that stipulated that an equal ratio of men to women must board ships. However, these quotas would be difficult to fulfil as for many people sea travel was considered taboo and signified the breaking of caste identity. Ancient religious practices also prohibited women from travelling, which interfered with boarding schedules and sugar planters demands. Therefore, sex quotas would be adjusted to 100 men to 40 women, but this still posed challenges for recruiters needing to meet standards.

<sup>32</sup> Meer (1969), Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2000). Naidoo (2008) and Lidner (2016) have given greater insight into the acute forms of violence that formed part of these recruitment processes, such as sexual assault, floggings, unsanitary housing conditions, withheld wages, and food rationing, along with extensive work hours.

<sup>33</sup> Surendra Bhana and Arvinkumar Bhana (1989) provide a qualitative analysis into the suicides of indentured workers in Natal that offers greater insight into the inhumane conditions of indentureship.

<sup>34</sup> Hand gestures of classical Indian dances (Vasugi Singh, 2019:104).



Figure 10: Zenaéca Singh, *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder* (2024) molasses on German etching hahnemuhle, 48 x 60 cm (Framed).  
Photo credit: Mia Thom.

170) reflects upon the colonial administrations' voyeuristic gaze of Indianness and its overdetermination of Indian tradition and cultural authenticity, so as to define and justify the Otherness of \*Indians as well as a racial hierarchy between White, \*Indian and Black peoples. Singh (2019) also points out how British colonialism in India had defaced and prohibited the classical practice in India, however the practice persisted and evolved with time across different contexts. In South Africa, indentured workers would revive this cultural practice and endured this practice despite of cultural boycotts in Apartheid South Africa (Ibid). I thereby find the portrayal of this woman as defiant of colonial and apartheid repression tactics. In reproducing this image I chose to highlight the hypocritical role of commissions and public media in constructing the *Oriental stranger* stereotype, as the strangeness of \*Indians was used to justify discriminative policies, however here the woman's image is presented as an image of cultural pride and authenticity of the 'Indian Other' as a scapegoat to oppressive Colonial and Apartheid regimes. The title, 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder' takes a jab on how the colonial gaze constructed stereotypes in response to anxieties around the sociality of \*Indians.

The last set of three works (in Figure 11 pp 50), *Middle Class Dreams I* and *II* (both 2024), and *Defiance* (2024) responds to the imagery of \*Indian housewives and motherhood in general as defined by colonial institutions. Notably, this imagery exclusively depicts the wives of passenger Indian migrants, obscuring the lives of indentured women. Passenger Indians had come to Natal of their own expense in search of work due to growing socio-economic disparities in India. The Coolie Commissions of 1872 sparked several public debates like the 'Coolie Problem', 'Asiatic Invasion' or 'Asiatic Menace' which were actively reported in Mercury Newspaper (see Pillay, 2017). These debates put in place other court inquiries and Commissions to investigate the false claims of losses accrued by Whites in competition with passenger and Free Indian enterprises. While these Commissions disputed the false statistics which claimed that \*Indians were taking over local enterprises, they did not motivate for the permanent settlement of



Figure 11: Zenaéca Singh, *Middle Class Dreams I* (2024) molasses on german etching hahnemuhle, 48 x 60 cm (Framed) (on left), Zenaéca Singh, *Defiance* (2024) molasses on german etching hahnemuhle, 48 x 60 cm (Framed) (middle), and Zenaéca Singh, *Middle Class Dreams II* (2024) molasses on german etching hahnemuhle, 48 x 60 cm (Framed) Photo credit: Mia Thom.

\*Indians (Pillay, 2017:38-9). Commissions instead instated several laws taxing \*Indian housing and businesses as \*Indians were nonetheless seen as a threat to white security and comfort, as well as a foreign entity, belonging elsewhere (ibid). The idea of the *Oriental stranger* alluded to the notion that \*Indians could not be integrated into civil society, and reinforced the push for repatriation programs returning \*Indians back 'home' to India. These legislative practices were gendered too as Hiralal (2018:208-216) maps out restrictive immigration laws on passenger Indian wives, who were prohibited from emigrating to South Africa, as Indian customary rites were not recognised by immigration officers. Hiralal (2018:206) argues that judicial officers became a law unto themselves, acting as official gatekeepers who determined who was and was not a 'wife'. As a result, \*Indian life remained under great scrutiny during colonial governance as well as the apartheid regime.

The model minority trope of middle class \*Indians was used to frame the state's paternal benevolence in providing Indians the opportunity to migrate and find work in South Africa. This contradiction – of being both a model minority and menace – further demonstrates the ambivalence of the \*Indian identity and turns a critical eye back onto the power of coloniality. The trope also made hyper-visible the gendered dynamics of \*Indian communities as it portrayed the \*Indian man as breadwinner with his supportive wife behind him. \*Indian wives were regarded in patriarchal terms as subservient bearers of tradition. Hiralal's (2020) study subverts patriarchal beliefs about \*Indian communities by demonstrating how women played a critical role in sustaining rural households while their husbands were away as migrant labourers. This trope not only erased the violence of indentureship but also obscured the extensive measures that the colonial government and Union of South Africa took to restrict the immigration of Indian wives and family members attempting to reunite with relatives in South Africa. Kinships and familial relations were impeded and, in some instances, severed by anti-Indian immigration legislation. In this regard, the simple presence of \*Indian families and descendants, and their resilience, is defiant in itself.

The tensions between capitalist interests in indentured labour and White social and political anxieties around Indian immigration framed the \*Indian identity ambivalently. Added to this were external pressures from the abolitionist movement that required colonial administration to establish the moral legitimacy of the indentured labour system as distinct from practices of slavery (Sheik, 2005:4). This influenced the indenture system to be both racialised and gendered, as Indian women were regarded as crucial indicators for assuring the social lives of indentured Indian men in the colony. Nevertheless, colonial attitudes considered Indian women as deviant due to cultural and caste differences. A consequence of this was the voyeuristic colonial imaginary of the \*Indian subject, that contributed to ideas around tradition and cultural authenticity (Young, 2017).

The bittersweetness of molasses reflects how the \*Indian subject has been seen and unseen over time. The twofold nature of colonial governance created ambiguous laws governing \*Indian migrants. However, these ambiguities presented loopholes for indentured women to navigate and seek whatever means of living they could. The images in my work attest to how indentured women sought their agency and rejected the violence of indenture. In my artwork I avoid romanticising their hardships, focusing instead on using the selected forms of the bittersweetness of molasses to symbolise the complexity of both their subjectivity and their sense of agency.



Figure 12: Detail of Zenaéca Singh, *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder* (2024) molasses on German etching hahnemuhle, 48 x 60 cm (Framed) Photo credit: Mia Thom.

LOOKING THROUGH AND IN-BETWEEN



Figure 13: Installation view of Zenaéca Singh, *Beyond the Collection* (2024) sugar-glass, resin, and collage in found window frame, 48 x 130 cm (on left) and Zenaéca Singh, *The Collection* (2024) sugar-glass, resin and collage in found window frame, 102 x 89 cm (on right).  
Photo credit: Mia Thom.

## LOOKING THROUGH AND IN-BETWEEN

In my artwork series *Looking Through and In Between* (2024) I use sugar glass in my window-scapes as a lens through which to distort the colonial imagery and its legacies to emphasize the deprivation of rights inflicted on indentured women and communities. Starting with found window frames from salvage and refuse sites, I replaced the frames with sugar glass and installed photographic collages within them. The sweetness of the sugar glass sheet touches upon the desirability of being seen, while the fragility of the break-away glass connotes the need to subvert and disrupt. The collages are made of multiple layers of colonial and familial imagery embedded within, or placed behind and on top of the sugar glass sheet. The multiple layers of the image trouble the binary of looking in or out, emphasising the need to look in-between. I also engage with Tina Campt's (2017) strategy of *listening to the image* to decipher alternative narratives within the selected images, as well as giving a sense of privacy to those I cannot obtain consent from for being re-presented. Campt's strategy also allows looking to be an act of care when dealing with precarious images.

Similarly, Patricia Hayes (2020) examines the 'Other lives' of the image, as its reappearances and re-viewings allow the image to be unfixed and dynamic, and to accumulate new meanings. This engagement places the photograph in a *liquid time*<sup>35</sup> as it awaits its next reappearance. Hayes contends that a certain level of obscurity and opacity is needed when reworking images in order not to perpetuate dominant narratives (2020:19). She suggests that reworking the image across different media and languages "places attention on how and why images are redeployed and reimagined, unveiling the question of the medium to be, among other things." (2020:21). A result of this is a palimpsestic image, which creates an open dialogue between images, displacing the retrospective gaze of predetermined violence and allowing the viewer to return to the colonised subject captured in the photograph. I use sugar glass to find the other lives of the image. Embedding images in sugar glass alters their opacity, which heightens the construction of the image as its point of return – turning the gaze back onto the site of power.

*The Collection* (2024) and *Beyond the Collection* (2024) depicts The Saunders collection<sup>36</sup> in Tongaat (both in Figure 13 pp 57). *The Collection* consists of a diptych that stages an entry-point into the collection of Charles Saunders, who was the son of James Renault Saunders and his wife

<sup>35</sup> Term coined by Marianne Hirsch.

<sup>36</sup> The Saunders Collection is an art collection housed in the Tongaat Sugar Estates office at Amanzimnyama.



Figure 14: Detail of Zenaéca Singh, *The Collection* (2024) sugar-glass, resin and collage in found window frame, 102 x 89 cm.

Photo credit: Mia Thom.

Katherine. The collection – consisting of ‘Africana’ and Chinese antiques, as well as Dutch colonial furniture and botanical paintings by Katherine – was housed on their sugar estate in Tongaat. I have sourced images of Saunders Collection in various volumes of *The Condenser* magazines, which published extensively on this collection and the trusteeship of the Saunders family. The magazine was dedicated to shareholders of sugar-estates in Natal, and its articles reported on the colony’s agricultural activity in relation to its growing competition in Mauritius and the Caribbean. Technical and economic reports of the sugar estates would be included alongside biographies of the Saunders family and tales of their arrival. The magazine also framed the model minority trope of the successful \*Indian family and workforce. \*Indian life would be documented with the support of separate development in Tongaat. Accompanying articles also paid a great deal of attention to the role of art and gardening as part of the material traditions of the built environment in Tongaat, along with occasional writings on the style and dress of \*Indian women. Peter Merrington (2006) gives insights into the role of sugar barons, particularly the Saunders family, in shaping the notions of heritage through the design of sugar estates and workers’ housing – referred to as ‘the Tongaat experiment’. These material initiatives were underpinned by an ideological understanding of *heritage*, which supplemented ideas of separate development and nationalism, which overlooked once again the material inequalities and disenfranchisement of communities across race, class and gender. I wish to confront viewers with the sugarocracy<sup>37</sup> of indentureship in *The Collection* and how its material traces remains. In doing so, I edited the image of the Saunder’s Collection’s entry-point, which displays Katherine Saunder’s botany studies, along with her co-authored book with Adolf Bayer (1979) which published Saunder’s paintings and journey to Natal. I erased the contours of Saunder’s paintings and book before embedding the image within the cracked sugar glass which slowly ages and eats away at the image. The slow-paced crystallisation of the sugar also disrupts the details of the image, subverting the material itself. The cut out frames becomes space for something else to take place – for something else to be remembered.

Accompanying the diptych is *Beyond the Collection* (2024) which begins to imagine personal memories and photographs that would not conventionally be seen in such a space. The work intends to pay homage to \*Indian families who preserved the plantation system in creating a liveable life. Moving from

<sup>37</sup> Mervyn D. Lincoln (1985:5-6) defines sugarocracy as a "... group of dynastic families which is subsumed in capitalist society under a social class, namely a bourgeoisie."



Figure 15: Detail of Zenaéca Singh, *Beyond the Collection* (2024) sugar-glass, resin and collage in found window frame, 130 x 48 cm.  
Photo credit: Mia Thom.

*The Collection* and its empty spaces, *Beyond the Collection* disturbs the interior design of the rooms that make up the sugar estate's gallery. I worked with family photographs from my first family home on my grandparents farm<sup>38</sup> where I spent my first two year and a half years, sharing memories of birthday celebrations, Diwali get-togethers, Christmas and New Year parties with extended family, and older memories of my parents starting their newly-wed lives together. I cut out silhouettes and domestic objects like chairs, heirlooms, cabinets and decorum from these memories and collaged them onto the rooms of the collection. Where those white spaces in *The Collection*, become spaces for these familial and sentimental objects of mine to reside. My interest in family photographs takes influence from Ellapen's *Brown Photo Album* which considers \*Indian family photographs as images of defiance. Glimpses into these personal, intimate memories become subversive as it reads against the ways in which commissions and laws actively intervened in the intimacy and everyday life of \*Indian communities. *Beyond the Collection* holds space for these memories, the varying transparency and opaqueness of the sugar-glass offers small glimpses into these intimate moments that still give privacy to these private moments and memories. Post-indentureship narratives, or the *afterlives* of indentureship, articulate a deeper understanding of the past, present and future through the lens of descendants and the memories of their ancestors. The windows blur the boundaries of history and memory, as well as insider and outsider relations, as viewers look through the details and obscurities of the sugar glass.

In other works of *Looking Through and In-Between*, viewers can find a glimpse into lived experiences of *being Brown*. Accompanying sculptures of this series are *From every nook and cranny* (2024) (in Figure 16 pp 61) and *Silhouettes* (2024) (in Figure 18 pp 64) that re-present archival imagery of \*Indian women, and lastly *Finding my self* (2024) (in Figure 19 pp 65) is a triptych which displays a map of my family photos.

*From every nook and cranny* (2024) shows a rare image of indentured women boarding a ship, whose silhouettes have been cut out. The title refers to recruitment processes and how agents would need to search 'from every nook and cranny' to find women to fulfil sex quotas (Hiralal, 2024:21). Their silhouettes echo the precarity of indentureship but also mark their social death and cultural rebirth. In boarding indenture ships women defied taboos of sea travel and endured the myths of the Kala Pani to escape or

<sup>38</sup> My maternal grandfather inherited this plot of land from his grandfather who was allotted it as a Free Indian.



Figure 16: Zenaéca Singh, *From every nook and cranny* (2024) sugar-glass, resin and collage in found window frame, 49 x 89 cm. Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel.

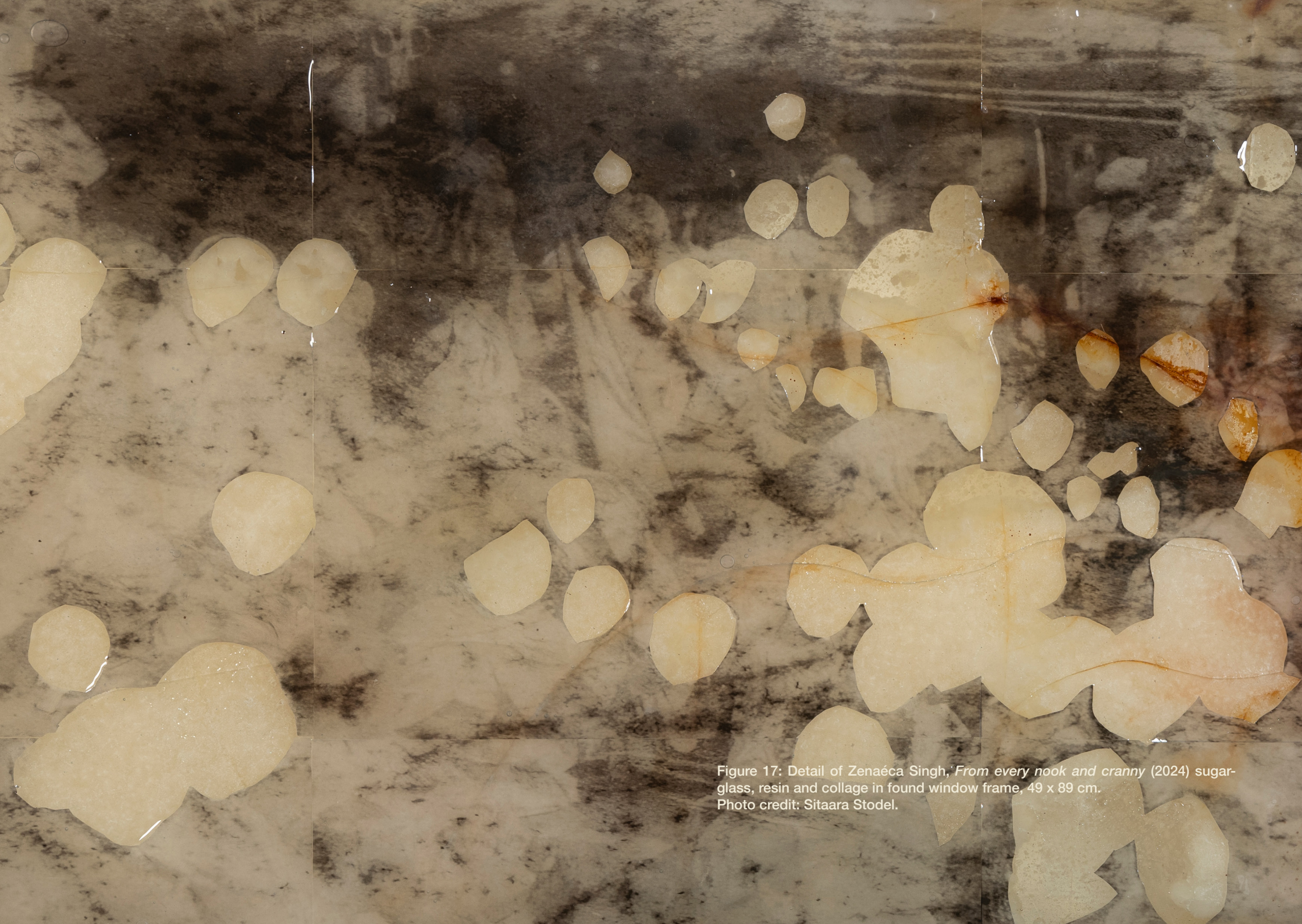


Figure 17: Detail of Zenaéca Singh, *From every nook and cranny* (2024) sugar-glass, resin and collage in found window frame, 49 x 89 cm.  
Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel.

make a new life - this first crossing marking the death of Mother India and rebirth as coolie women.



Figure 18: Zenaéca Singh, *Silhouettes* (2024) sugar-glass, resin and collage in found window frame, 49 x 49 cm.  
Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel.

*Silhouettes* (2024) focuses on selected images of 'Indian' women as wives and mothers in the household from *The Indian in South Africa* brochure and the *Condenser* magazine. Their silhouettes have been cut out and layered on top of each other, creating a collage to draw attention to their roles and presence. In displaying these archival images in the cracked sugar glass, I wish to acknowledge their sense of agency in breaking away from the gaze. They appear in a *liquid time* and will gradually age and change over time within the crystallised sugar.

*Finding my self* (2024) maps out a large-scale family archive from three generations of family albums. The intent of this work is parallel to *Beyond the Collection* in depicting the afterlife of indentureship. The selected imagery and its presentation honours my mother's and grandparents' curation of family photos and memories in their albums. Working with images of memories across three generations – my grandparents, my parents and my sister's and my own – of our birthday celebrations, beach days, first family vacations to Johannesburg and Cape Town, photoshoots of our special outfits in our home garden, and the building of the family home on the Farm. The sugar-glass are mostly transparent but range in the colour and tones of the heated sugar. The deeper caramelisation of the sugar-glass speaks to my desire of being seen and offers a glimpse of *being Brown*.



Figure 19: Zenaéca Singh, *Finding my self* (2024) sugar-glass, resin and collage in found window frame, 116 x 132 cm.  
Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel.



Figure 20: Installation view of Zenaéca Singh, *Silhouettes* (2024) (on left), Zenaéca Singh, *From every nook and cranny* (2024) (middle) and Zenaéca Singh, *Finding my self* (2024) (on right).  
Photo credit: Mia Thom.

FINDING A SWEET E(SCAPE)



Figure 21: Installation view of Zenaéca Singh, *Finding a sweet escape* (2024)  
Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel

## FINDING A SWEET E(SCAPE)

*The cracked hours sound  
the disappearance of women.  
I hear your tired bones  
encased in barrels, gold  
rings on your arms.  
Your unsundered eyes  
burning eighteen hundred fires.  
The cutlass swung  
too close to the check.  
Vessels of violence, disorderly  
fields in the shadow of empire.  
Colonies, fabricated in postcards  
for posterity in a Frenchman's propaganda  
to mute and make pornography  
of your history.*

– Amilcar Santan (2022)

*Finding a sweet e(scape)* (2024) is a large-scale installation that pays homage to the indentured women who deserted plantations in search of a better life (see Figure 21 pp 68-69). This installation takes inspiration from accounts of how indentured women, who escaped or tried to run away, would be heard and sometimes caught because of the sound of their jewellery clinking in the distance (Hassankhan, Lal and Munro, 2014). I created this installation using multiple components: jewellery and marigold garlands cast in sugar glass and fabric sculptures of white cotton saris with either sugar-paste embroidery and crystallised ends. I have chosen to work with these mundane objects which have come to be iconic signifiers of \*Indianness and its *Oriental strangeness*. In re-presenting these works in sugar, I draw attention to stereotypes of \*Indian women, disrupting essentialist readings of their cultural differences.



Figure 22: Detail of Zenaéca Singh, *Cheeñee ke Maala* (2024) sugar-glass and gut, 35 x 50 cm each.  
Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel

Different types of jewellery are staged using sugar, with bangles resting on horizontal Perspex sheets, and face jewellery consisting of *jhumkhas* (earrings), *maatha patis* (forehead jewellery) and nose ring on vertical Perspex sheets (see Figures 23 and 24 pp 72). The sheets hold the sugar arrangements with thin layers of resin which captures the melting sugar glass. The interaction between the resin and sugar glass is peculiar, as the sugar glass disturbs the resin's structural integrity, slowly seeping through tiny pockets in its surface. The jewellery starts to bleed and blur into slightly abstracted forms that go beyond my control, becoming something else. The *Cheenee ke Maala* (literal translation of Sugar Garland in Hindi) are hung on the wall and gradually drip onto the floor (see Figure 22 pp 71). The flower garland is common in Indian Hindu marriage customs. The flower garland here speaks to the precarity of marriage and the vulnerability of Indian wives. The garlands and empty photo frames also recall a common tradition in Indian homes of honouring the deceased with their portrait and a garland to offer them blessings. My *Cheenee ke Maala* sculptures pay homage to the lives lost as a result of indentureship.



Figure 23: Detail of facial jewelry sculptures in Zenaéca Singh, *Finding my self* (2024) installation. Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel.



Figure 24: Detail of bangles sculptures in Zenaéca Singh, *Finding my self* (2024) installation. Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel.



Figure 25: Detail of Zenaéca Singh, *Fleeting Moments* (2024) sugar crystallized cotton, 90 x 500 cm each (set of 2). Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel.

The sari is a popular garment that has come to define Indian womanhood and femininity. In the installation *Fleeting moments* (2024) sheer fabric saris are held down by the weight of the crystallised *pallu* - the end of the sari which gets draped over the wearer's shoulder (see Figure 25 pp 73). Together with the cotton saris with sugar-paste – *Let's make a run for it* (2024) and *The Fade* (2024) (see Figure 26 pp 75) – *Fleeting moments* stages that last glimpse of indentured women running away, with their saris flowing in the wind. The use of cotton is intended to create a relation to slavery and its common use on cotton plantations. The colour of the fabric is intentional: white to mark the social death of indentured women, as white clothing is associated with Hindu funerary rites. My act of re-presenting the aesthetics of the sari in sugar delinks it from the myths and stereotypes of womanhood, revealing the complexity of women's lived experiences. In acknowledging the violence of indentureship, I do not wish to present women as merely victims but also as rebellious and defiant in seeking any sense of agency in the colony. Nafisa E. Sheik (2005) analyses cases of desertion of women as an act of rebellion and fighting loopholes of contracts for indentured women that viewed them as dead-stock. Kalpana Hiralal (2024) paints a bigger picture to the lucrative practices of recruitment, and despite these dismal conditions indentured women took any means to escape in search for a better life. The presentation of these sculptural works, with the saris and jewellery being suspended and floating in the space, evokes the liminality of \*Indian women in the plantation system. The suspension engages the precarity of indentureship and the women's sense of agency.

Nafisa E. Sheik (2005) and Kalpana Hiralal (2020) offer a critical reading of the role of women in the indenture system and how they sought their senses of agency. Sheik's study concludes that the "importance of women should not be seen simply as a way of legitimating a system of labour, but also as agents in a system that derided their existence yet still expected – and at times depended on – their labour." (2005:24). This meant discursive threads between colonial patriarchs and the patriarchal religiosity of Indian men would come to describe the gender stereotypes



Figure 26: Zenaéca Singh, *Let's make a run for it* (2024) sugar-paste and cotton, 90 x 500 cm (suspended on left) and Zenaéca Singh, *The Fade* (2024) sugar-paste and cotton, 90 x 500 cm (suspended on right).  
Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel.

of \*Indian women as submissive, while relying heavily on their reproductive labour. Hiralal (2020:5-6) also observes the socialisation of patriarchy and how it establishes a hierarchy of relations across age, generations and gender to justify women's subordinate position. Ancient religious strictures like the *Laws of Manu* mandated the role of women as dutiful wives and mothers, while the concept of *Stridharma* defines the ideal woman as chaste, submissive, loyal, and hardworking – a reservoir of culture and a guardian of the home (ibid). These religious expectations actively controlled female sexuality and reproductivity. Further legislative measures were put in place to control and regulate the activities of \*Indian women as wives and workers (Hiralal, 2018).<sup>39</sup> Sheik (2005:13-14) contends that these legislative measures were ambiguous in nature, as the state constantly had to revise Indian customary laws in response to the tensions between preventing the settlement of Indian families in South Africa and ensuring the moral legitimacy of indentureship as voluntary labour. Ironically, it was in these legal discrepancies, Sheik argues, that women were able to testify their agency in court against counts of labour exploitation, sexual abuse and marriage disputes. Therefore, it becomes necessary to acknowledge the role of women in the plantation system, to better understand its violent implications and historical trauma.

This research reveals the danger of the domestic space with its institution of marriage, labour and family, and how women sought to desert it in search of comfort and ease. Similarly, Sharlene Khan disrupts normative conceptions of marriage as safe and pure in speaking through her familial experiences of child marriage and domestic abusive relations in her video piece *WTMWR* (2017). Jordache Ellapen reflects upon how Khan's work associates marriage with death as opposed to "happiness, reproductivity and purity" (2017:97). According to Ellapen, Khan "maps the bond of relation between subjects and communities outside of recourse to blood,

<sup>39</sup> Hiralal (2018) highlights the implications late nineteenth and early twentieth century laws governing the migration of Indian wives and children. Legislation such as the the Immigration bill of 1897 and its strengthened policies concerning domicile status in 1906-7, as well as the 1913 Immigration Act and 1914 Indian Relief Act which required tedious documentation had placed Indian wives in precarious positions.

biological reproduction, and patrilineal genealogy." (ibid). I take influence from Khan's work and visual register in confronting coloniality and its networks of power. In *Finding a sweet e(scape)* I intend to read against the ways in which colonial institutions actively tried to restrict and control the lives of indentured women – who were seen as merely as dead weight or concubines. The installation shows how women, by any means they could, defied a system that dehumanised them. The use of the word 'scape' in the installation's title focuses on the relation between land and people while not centering it on a specific spatial root – allowing the work to be relational in different contexts. The *scape* highlights the liminality of women, both in their precarity but also in the brief moments they could escape.



Figure 27: Detail of Zenaéca Singh, *The Fade* (2024) sugar-paste and cotton, 90 x 500 cm.

Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel.



Figure 28: Installation view of Zenaéca Singh, *Finding a sweet escape* (2024)  
Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel

THE GARDEN-SCAPE



Figure 29: Installation view of Zenaéca Singh, *The Garden-scape* (2024)  
Photo credit: Mia Thom

## THE GARDEN-SCAPE

*The Garden-scape* (2024) (Figure 29 pp 80-81) attempts to depict the *afterlives* of descendant communities and their sense of belonging in South Africa. The installation features juxtaposing landscape paintings of my home garden with colonial documentations of plantations, along with two large-scale flower installations in hand-sculpted sugar pots. The intention behind my use of landscape painting is to reckon with my sense of belonging and home, and how it has been formed through the resilience of my elders and ancestors. The agency exercised here is of paramount importance, given the context of South Africa's settler-colonial past and how indigenous and marginal communities have been dispossessed and disenfranchised by colonial and apartheid administrations. It further speaks to the nuances of South African \*Indian identity and its ambivalence: Meg Samuelson (2010) writes that the \*Indian community are ontologically insecure with how their homes were built through acts of exclusion as opposed to from the soil. The garden in this case signifies the site of becoming and belonging for South Africans of Indian descent, with the planting of seedlings into South African soil marking their act of rooting/ belonging. I play on the words 'route' – of indenture ships – and the 'root' of garden seedlings in framing this sense of belonging. Accordingly, my paintings disturb fine art conventions of the landscape painting genre, as they have been either stained with molasses, crystallised or sugar-coated. I intentionally make the paintings ephemeral in nature to speak to fluidity of *being Brown*. The act of landscape painting also responds to the numerous studies produced during the colonial era, which honoured the talent of the painter while obscuring the ways in which the land has been exploited.<sup>40</sup>

*Seedlings: Now and Then I* and *II* (2024) are double-sided, suspended paintings, in which the canvas has been stretched onto a found window frame. I have made use of both sides of the painting, rendering my mother's garden in oil paint on the one side, while the other side holds the molasses stains depicting life on indentured plantations. The compositional elements of the plantation image and the garden image mimic each other. *Seedlings:*

<sup>40</sup> See Nigel Hughes (2001).

*Now and Then I* (Figures 30 and 31 pp 83) features a painting of a two-point perspective of my home garden, which mimics the pathway of a photograph taken of two young girls walking up to their home in Tin Town.<sup>41</sup> *Seedlings: Now and Then II* (Figures 32 and 33 pp 84) composes of a large front view of my home garden which mimics the composition of a busy plantation scene where Indian men and young boys are working in the plot. In creating these landscape paintings, I wanted to acknowledge the violence of the past and the hardships and efforts gone into moving past that image. I thereby produced a palimpsestic image by layering and staining the back of the painting with molasses, rendering the colonial past behind the painterly present and future of my own garden-space.



Figure 30: Detail of the present image painted with oil paint in Zenaéca Singh, *Seedlings: Now and Then I* (2024) oil paint and molasses on canvas in found frame, 90 x 60 cm.

Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel.



Figure 31: Detail of the past image painted with molasses in Zenaéca Singh, *Seedlings: Now and Then I* (2024) oil paint and molasses on canvas in found frame, 90 x 60 cm.

Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel.

<sup>41</sup> Tin Town is an Indian settlement that formed in present-day Phoenix.



Figure 32: Detail of the present image painted with oil paint in Zenaéca Singh, *Seedlings: Now and Then II* (2024) oil paint and molasses on canvas in found frame, 90 x 60 cm.  
Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel.



Figure 33: Detail of the present image painted with oil paint in Zenaéca Singh, *Seedlings: Now and Then II* (2024) oil paint and molasses on canvas in found frame, 90 x 60 cm.  
Photo credit: Sitaara Stodel.

The crystallised painting '*Untouched*' (2024) responds to an image I found in *The Condenser* magazine, captioned 'untouched lands' (Figure 34 pp 85). I was drawn to the way this image, and its framing of colonial relations to land, presumes the authority of colonisers. I wished to draw attention to the ways in which land remains a contested issue due to South Africa's complex history of colonialism and apartheid. I re-painted the image and soaked it in a sugar-water solution which crystallised in certain areas of the painting. The sugar crystals, which are subtle from afar, slowly infiltrate the painting in clusters.



Figure 34: Zenaéca Singh, '*Untouched*' (2024) crystallized oil painting, 80 x 130 cm  
Photo credit: Mia Thom.



Figure 35: Detail of Zenaéca Singh, *'Untouched'* (2024) crystallized oil painting, 80 x 130 cm  
Photo credit: Miá Thom.

The last painting is of my mother's garden at home (Figure 36 pp 88-89). The background has been sugar-coated. The composition depicts a typical boutique garden with a row of shrubs and colourful flowers. The garden-space here subverts colonial landscaping practices in its recognition of the garden as a labour of leisure and pleasure for the marginal subject. Madeyoulook's *black gardening project* (2021) offers a useful lexicon to think through and reclaim the labour of gardening as affective rather than colonial. The Black garden is asserted as a labour of pleasure and aesthetic cultivation but also a potential reclamation of alienated labour in the suburbs, which is then reoriented as affective labour for the self. It symbolises a genealogy of care, self-sustenance and growth. Furthermore, it attests to the complexities of what it means to make a home. The association of gardening with *making a home* is striking to me in relation to the notions of belonging for the \*Indian community. The garden space also connects me to childhood memories of helping my mother create her dream garden, and its ever-growing process. I recognise the garden space as vital for my mother, who experienced multiple spatial shifts, having to move homes many times to suit her family's means of making a living during apartheid. The years of work invested into this garden honour the space of my mother's desires and pleasure.



Figure 36: Zenaéca Singh, *My Mother's Garden* (2024) sugar-coated oil painting, 80 x 130 cm  
Photo credit: Mia Thom.



Figure 37: Installation view of Zenaéca Singh, *The Coolies Seedlings* (2024) sugar-potted plants, dimensions variable.  
Photo credit: Mia Thom.

Accompanying my landscape paintings are two flower installations: *The Coolie Seedlings* (2024) (see Figure 37 pp 90-91) and *The Caster's Offering* (2024) (see Figure 38 pp 92-93). *The Coolie Seedlings* installation was inspired by stories of indentured workers gardening in their make-shift homes on sugar-estates, where they planted the seedlings that they brought with them on their passage to Natal. Meg Samuelson writes that "their homes were surrounded by mango, avocado, jackfruit, banana and custard-apple trees, curry leaf bushes, hedges of granadilla and double bean vines." (2010:276). The rooting of these seedlings marks one of the first few acts of creating a home and having one's own space. In making this installation I collaborated with my mother to stage this first rooting using her mango, banana, granadilla, curry leaf and chilli plants. Geri Augusto (2017) introduces the terms *limbo plants* and *liberation flora* to honour the innovation, creativity and beauty of the cultivation practices of the once-enslaved. The term *limbo plants* refers to 'gardens of the dispossessed', characterised by the mix of plants carried by slaves into the colonies. *Liberation flora* pertains to flora and crops cultivated by maroon communities using their plant knowledge and traditions while also borrowing from indigenous peoples for their own trade and sustenance. *The Coolie Seedlings* installation exhibits the liberation flora of my elders and ancestors. I connect these seedlings to the history of indentureship and present them in hand-made sugar pots. The sugar-potted Coolie Seedlings are dispersed asymmetrically throughout the exhibition space, in varying clusters in between and amongst the suspended double-sided paintings. This curatorial arrangement of ambiguous placements echoes the manners in which \*Indian homes were being built.

*We are gathered today*

*to offer marigolds to the Indian Ocean*

*the Seas that churned our ancestors to this land ...*

*Scattered in the gales of*

*Continents*

*In the currents of colonies ...*

– excerpt from Betty Govinden (2024)

In contrast to *The Coolie Seedlings*, is the symmetrical arrangement of marigolds in *the Caster's Offering*. This installation consists of 164 marigold seedlings that have been individually planted into sugar pots, each pot and seedling representing a year that has passed since indentureship began in South Africa. The marigold flower is commonly used in Hindu funerary and commemorative rituals (Govinden, 2024). The ordered arrangement of these plants *mimic*<sup>42</sup> the manner in which indentureship was actively organised through the bureaucracy of its administrators, i.e. its sugarocracy and barracks of workers housing. However, the installation is ephemeral as once the marigolds get watered, the sugar-pots will dissolve, and the sugar-water is nutritious for the plants growth and prosperity. The juxtaposed arrangements of *Coolie Seedlings* and the *Caster's Offering* further speak to the ambivalence of South African \*Indian identity: while there were several attempts throughout colonial governance, the Unionisation of South Africa and the apartheid regime, \*Indians remained defiant in creating liveable lives in South Africa despite the odds against them – their roots grew deeper.

42 Homi Bhabha's (2002) theorisation of mimicry.



Figure 38: Installation view of Zenaéca Singh, *The Caster's Offering* (2024) sugar-potted plants, dimensions variable. Photo credit: Mia Thom.

## DOING THE UNFINISHED WORK

This study offers new perspectives on South African \*Indianness along with the role of art as a subversive medium for rewriting history and reclaiming agency. I use sugar as both a material and metaphor, to include the complex history of indentured Indians in South Africa. My artworks and installations disrupt traditional narratives and create space for new forms of self-representation. Molasses and sugar, with their viscous and transformative qualities, engage viewers to consider the lingering residues of the colonial gaze and how it has shaped, and continues to influence perceptions of \*Indian's identity in South Africa. Nalini Mohabir (2017:84) writes that embodied responses in the form of visual art and other modes of storytelling become an alternate archive that animates lived experience and contests the scopical regime of colonial archives. Through *Browning the Archive* I have attempted to engage the viewer with a narrative that is simultaneously about survival, self-making, and the ongoing struggle for visibility and recognition. My study calls for a continuous, engaged relationship with history – one that honours both the struggles and the triumphs, inviting future generations to connect with this bittersweet heritage in meaningful, personal ways. My work is in no ways fixed, but ephemeral and liminal.

My research critically interrogates selected aspects of the historical representations of South African \*Indian identity. In *Bittersweet Her-story* (2024) series I have contextualised how archival material that is available is largely due to colonial acts of governance including shipping lists, ledgers, Commissions and Indian immigration laws which regulated the migration patterns of indentured Indian workers and passenger Indians. These records resulted in the voyeuristic gaze of the coloniser, which essentialised the \*Indian subject as different, foreign, and unassimilable in order to justify repatriation schemes and policies of segregation. Aggressive legislation during apartheid both racialised and gendered \*Indians in South Africa. Documentations constructed stereotypes of the \*Indian subject as the *coolie*, *Oriental stranger* or *exploitative merchant*. Consequently, \*Indian women were sidelined by colonial and patriarchal structures that construed them as chaste and subservient wives and daughters, as well as embodied

cultural signifiers of the \*Indian race and its differences. In response to this, I have undertaken a contrapuntal reading of the history of indentureship in South Africa in order to reveal the normative formations of race, gender, class, labour and the nation-state. The molasses stained prints of archival images are intended to confront and acknowledge the violence of the past in a manner that does not reinforce colonial modes of thinking.

My study insists upon visualising the hybridity of the South African \*Indian subject, using *Brownness* as an expanded term to articulate the nuances of South African \*Indianness in a manner that challenges the logic of coloniality. I take inspiration from Jordache Ellapen's (2015) conception of *Brownness*, which destabilises colonial binaries and allows the community to be seen outside of imposed racial hierarchies. In *Looking Through and In-Between* (2024) series of five window-scapes (*The Collection*, *Beyond the Collection*, *From every nook and cranny*, *Silhouettes* and *Finding my self*), viewers are encouraged to look through and between the crystallising layers of sugar-glass encasing a range of colonial and familial images and memories. Binaries of insider/outsider are disturbed and blurred, mimicking a sense of *being Brown*. In another vein, the double-sided paintings *Seedlings: Now and Then I* and *II* (2024), offer a palimpsestic image of the plantation and the home. The layered juxtaposition from plantations scenes to scenes in my home garden speaks to the complexities of both being and belonging for South African Indians, as the molasses stain of the past are still felt today but it is also with the resilience of the community that has allowed for its presence and sense of home in South Africa. These varying perspective reveals a community with a rich and adaptive identity forged through resilience, agency, and a strong sense of place within South Africa, despite centuries of exclusionary policies. This is critical as it allows for an examination of history with the potential to heal historical trauma and ancestral suffering.

The reading of hybridity also accentuates the sense of belonging South Africans of Indian descent have to the land, as well as offering a relational

understanding of our past, present and future. The landscape paintings *My Mother's Garden* (2024) and *'Untouched'* (2024) and flower installations *The Coolie Seedlings* (2024) and *The Caster's Offering* (2024) reflects on \*Indians sense of belonging and their sense of *Brownness*. The traditional fine art conventions of landscape painting and colonial traditions of the garden space and practice are subverted in these varying bodies of works and are reclaimed to simultaneously expose the exploitation and dispossession of land and honour the affective labours of those to make a home despite repressive laws that heavily controlled mobility and migration of people across race, class and gender. *'Untouched'* (2024) confronts how land remains a contested issue in South Africa, where lives of workers and land remain a commodity and tool of capitalism. *My Mother's Garden* (2024) honours my mother's pleasure of gardening, and which becomes a picture of the afterlife of Indenture for its descendants and inheritors. The flower installations play on the route of indentured ships and bodies and the rooting of \*Indians, marking their multifaceted sense of belonging in South Africa. *The Coolie Seedlings* (2024) honours the first act of Indians making their home despite odds against them, growing and sprouting wherever they can. *The Caster's Offering* (2024) is a commemorative installation of the arrival of Indentured Indians in South Africa that echoes its violence of control but is also ephemeral. The sugar-pots are impermanent as the plants get watered and benefit from the sugar-pots dissolution.

Women's roles are centred in my study due to my positionality, and my lack of ability to trace the roots of my matrilineage. I sought to highlight women's experiences as complex and active, presenting them as agents of change. I also sought to honour their reproductive and affective labour in making homes despite the odds against them. The visual works become a form of reparative remembering as a method to reclaim and re-present marginalised subjects. Through this work, my study acknowledges the limitations of the colonial archive as a static repository of biased knowledge, and contributes to a more dynamic reading of history that accounts for the personal and collective experiences of those the archive once sought to

subjugate. *Browning the Archive* is an approach to both confront and repair – along with acknowledging historical trauma – while creating a space for healing, community, and self-representation. *Brownness* reframes the visual and discursive elements of the colonial archive, shifting from stereotypes to a fuller, more humane account of identity and memory. In engaging the colonial archive through a decolonial lens, my study urges an ethic of looking with care, which involves recognising not just the archival document but the silences and subtexts it contains. Viewers are prompted to look beyond the surface, reconsider how they interact with history, and make space for the personal stories, memories, and emotions embedded within the archival material. This reimagining of the archive acknowledges its gaps and silences as sites of inquiry, rather than as fixed truths. In doing so, it transforms the archival gaze from a mechanism of control into a vehicle for self-determination and a mode of collaboration.

Figure 39: Detail of Zenaéca Singh, *The Coolies Seedlings* (2024) sugar-potted plants, dimensions variable. Photo credit: Mía Thom.



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