

QUISHILE CHARAN

Temporary Vanua

A Journey Begins

Casey Carsel

Temporary Vanua, 2016, by Quishile Charan, is thirty-one metres of calico fabric, dyed with clay of Aotearoa and woodcut-printed with images of Fiji's flora and fauna in traditional patterns. In the print's paralanguage, removed from both the weakness of words and the controlled narrative of Western historical perspectives, Quishile creates a site wherein her story can mingle with the stories of her ancestors. On the cloth, historical and emotional facts held deep in cultural memory find tangible external space; the story of a people is reclaimed and cherished.

I am an Ashkenazi Jew of American parents, who were of American parents, who were of parents from somewhere in Eastern Europe whose name can no longer be said. My mother tells me that no more than two generations of our family has lived in the same place. We both hate leaving the house.

Something is always left behind.

When Quishile speaks of diaspora, I feel a connection to her experiences, which I draw from here. But I want to note from the outset that while we can draw parallels between our experiences, they are not the same. I can feel, but I cannot know.

My mother has tapes of her grandfather talking to my grandfather. She has piles of stories written about the old country and coming to America. The paper is crumbling.

My family deals in words. Quishile's family uses textiles. While I read the stories of my family to feel near home, Quishile wears the saris of her family to hold them close. Carrying objects that hold feelings, a tangible fluidity is grasped through distance and time.

You've got this contract.
The stories to lure them in were filled with lies.

India had been bled dry by Britain's greed for resources. Famine was quickly destroying vast swathes of the population. Colonisation forced many into previously unthinkable circumstances.

Once your freedom has been stolen it takes a long time to get it back.

A journey begins.

The girmitiyas believed they were in exile. They believed that they brought
this suffering upon themselves.

This is our karma. We deserve this.

They saw the hardships as somehow of their making.
But the dehumanising effect of indenture was always part of colonisation's
controlled narrative. My ancestors were only cogs in the machine of Empire.

Most didn't know where they would be taken. Many had never spoken the names of these countries. There was much silence. Before they went on the ships to the sugar colonies, they had to wait.

There was a saying among the girimitiyas that once they had reached the recruiting ports in Calcutta, the communities and homes they once had were broken and there was no going back.

They carried this shame. When there is no room for grief, it continues to replicate itself. It's still so fresh. It's always there.

The trauma of indenture is now carried inter-generationally.

Quishile is in a double-displacement: from India, from Fiji. But she takes this sense of landlessness as a strength. Like the fabric and its images, she is adaptable, able to locate her identity in a temporal and emotional field as much as a physical one.

Constantly on a boat, rocking backwards and forwards, never really moving, but feet not on the ground either.

Temporary Vanua has been installed in four locations. I have seen it in two spaces. Each time it stretches out to share its story, it considers its environment slightly differently. Each time it finds its feet again. It is rolled up with care and stored away between these showings, resting.

Mourn sufferings, celebrate triumphs.
Carry those dear to you in stories and feelings.
This is the way we have learnt.

The traditional knowledge frameworks and technologies of India were persistently undermined by Britain.

You say you are the only ones that can progress, evolve. You tell them it's worthless compared to what you've done because you're civilized.

Eating away at a cultural memory and pride, history was altered and controlled to aid a quest for dominance.

A narrative isn't rerouted all at once. It is taken away and reassembled, piece by piece. With each piece you think, *it is safer to not question, the truth will be known to those who matter*. But when it is done over years, over generations, the truth becomes shrouded in secrets and lies. The controlled narrative is upheld because all too soon nothing else is known.

There is safety in continuing on with pain left unprocessed, because it is a passive pain—an unexplained nagging in your gut. But reach back, not just one generation but many hundreds of years. Find the truths that have been buried to hurt, to shame.

You need to understand it is not your fault.

Temporary Vanua returns to traditional knowledge systems, ones that hold what words cannot express. In its visual narrative, *Temporary Vanua* locates the past and carries it forward to the present, to tell both one individual's story and a collective history.

Talking without speaking, reaching, connecting. The cloth holds images of belonging, attachment. But it itself floats in the air, unattached. It is able to move with Quishile, as her history moves with her: both intangible and tangible but ever-present.

Generations talk to each other about it.
But the stories are not passed down any more.
You would only hear small bits, but you would know.

There are oral histories but there are also emotions: the heartache, the pain, the sense of not being able to grieve. I want to give the history of indentured labour, but I also want to encapsulate the emotions I have felt and we are still feeling.

There is a burden of shame, grief, wrongs never made right. With so many weights on one's back it is hard not to sink to the floor.

Something held in the spirit. That's how it's been for so long.

When we cannot return, new stories must appear: stories of how to move forward.

How do you fill these gaps with something beyond your burden, with something that strengthens rather than crushes?
Permeate the silent spaces with moments where we loved and were loved.
Not a monument, but a letter home.

Temporary Vanua is a taking-control of the space. Hung in a stairway during its first installation, it altered the air of the building from the bottom floor to the top. Hung the second time, diagonally across a room, it defined the flow of everyone and everything around it.

You had to duck, you had to turn, you had to go this way, to move in the space.
That's been my entire life. That's been my family's life, my ancestors' lives.
This is my control over the spaces I feel detached from.

The fabric holds the space but does not crowd the viewer out. It stands its ground in the open air with determination (more than aggression) to say
I am here, here is my story, it is not over yet.

Home isn't given to us, we make it.
Cloth is the space of a fleeting homecoming.
In an Indo-Fijian context, home is more than solid ground.

To reframe one's own understanding of a history is a labour-intensive process that requires resolve. But in doing so—in repeating methods of textile making passed down between generations of women—a connection is regained and a conversation may build over generations in the language most suited to it.

Home is family. When I step off the plane in Nadi, I smell the air,
that's home.

Home is flora and fauna. We have always told our stories this way. To stamp
with a textile, that is my language. I'm going to write our histories our way.

Parts of this essay record conversations between Casey Carsel and Quishile Charan. Charan's speech is aligned to the right of the page.

In Brief: Indentured Labour in Fiji

Quishile Charan

What I have learnt over my twenty-two years of living has brought me closer to finding home, to finding self-love and the understanding that my power is in taking back ownership of my histories. I wear it [sari and salwar kameez] with pride because the girmitiyas birthed me. For years, colonial ideologies have buried lived experiences under the guise of academia, separating people from their own histories in a ploy to forget. The cloth is a form of communication, a grassroots language of grief, pain and healing absorbed into flora and fauna, the environment that has cradled us, given us shelter and protection. Trapped in the memories of haldi¹-drenched soil, found only in places where temporary space forms itself. Each metre of cloth produced has become an offering, a symbolic mode of labour on my own body to represent the bodies of many. The pounding and rubbing of clay to cloth for hours and days becomes a repetitive action to find myself.

Somewhere in the pigment my histories were hidden, and I had to re-discover myself, I had to learn that being an Indo-Fijian woman was something made from pure strength. To encase a stairwell with 31 metres of my textiles was a way to protest and produce a metaphysical place of belonging, building a foundation that rejects colonial shame... Creation becomes the tool to continue to dismantle the post-colonial state of being. Here sits the cloth of indenture, the language of labour, adorning space to create the beginning of healing, to start to unravel narak from the spirit.²

Indentured Labour was a system established to counteract labour and money lost in sugar colonies after the abolishment of slavery in 1833 in the British Empire.³ This system was made in the hopes of regulating the abuses and ill treatment of slavery, while also providing capital for settlers in new colonies and the Empire. This new system, bonded labour, was a framework in which a labourer was required to complete work and was paid at the end of the contract. The Gimit⁴ was a five-year period of work to be undertaken on sugar plantations. At the end of this duration there were two options for the girmitiyas, they could return to India on their own, or remain for another five years and the colonial government would pay for their return home. Recruiters used many methods to gain a labour force, some workers were kidnapped, lied to, or they came on their own accord. Most could not read

their contracts and had no idea of where they would be brought, whilst others were told that they would be working in another part of India. They were never told the type of labour that they would have to endure. The brutal experience of indenture can be best described as *narak*,⁵ a word which labourers used often to talk of the conditions on plantations and in the coolie lines.⁶

Set tasks were given each day to labourers, an average day of work consisted of seven to ten chains,⁷ with each chain being roughly twenty-one metres.⁸ Task work was physically impossible to complete and with penalty sanctions in place a large number of labourers lost their hard-earned wages. Penalty sanctions were a major abuse used on many plantations to gain control and ensure an obedient workforce, some *girimitiyas* were kept constantly in debt due to laws and regulations that were in favour of plantation owners. A form of corporal punishment was enforced to stop the strikes as workers fought for their freedoms, many were either imprisoned, fined or had their *girit* extended,⁹ this system was designed to enforce the notion of silence.

Contrary to many people's beliefs, Indian labourers came from many different castes and from both North and South India, as both the political and economic climate of India, with a combination of multiple colonisations, left the country in dire poverty and famine. With harsh colonial rule from the British East India Company and the British Raj, many people needed to leave the village unit to support themselves and their families. Sixty-thousand women, men and children came to Fiji from a wider one million Indian indentured labourers of other colonies such as the Caribbean, Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica, South Africa, Mauritius, Natal and Suriname.¹⁰

Indenture morphed bodies for profit, with no consideration of workers as human. Violence shook the lives of the *girimitiyas*. With the disappearance of the cultural framework and the complete re-structure of a group of people into a new community the social fabric forever changed.

Is it possible to create a system of labour out of a history of slavery and not replicate abuse? A culture of silence and shame has been something many Fijians who are descendants of indenture have experienced. For many of us our histories have been told for us, history has been a destructive tool of misrepresentation and further colonial rhetoric. The stories of Indenture still live with us today, some will be forever lost but what has been passed down is resilience. During these hardships, the *girimitiyas* fought—down in the coolie lines, in the plantations, when striking—for the right to be called a citizen.

- 1 Turmeric.
- 2 Quishile Charan, 'Temporary Vanua: Decolonisation and Textile Making,' revised version published in *The sea brought you here*, Enjoy Gallery, Wellington, 2017, pp. 43–44.
- 3 Vijay Naidu, *The violence of indenture in Fiji*. No. 3. World University Service, Suva, 1980, p. 7.
- 4 Derived from the agreement that brought the Indian workers to Fiji. Girit or giritiyas is now commonly used in Fiji as the word for our ancestors.
- 5 Hindustani equivalent of hell.
- 6 The name of the housing for the labourers. The conditions of the lines were harrowing.
- 7 A chain was the unit of measurement that was used during indenture. One chain was 22 yards.
- 8 Brij V. Lal, *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji*, ANU Press, Canberra, 2013, p. 176.
- 9 Lal, pp. 180–181.
- 10 Lal, pp. 27–28.

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