

**A DIALOGICAL ANALYSIS OF 'INDIAN' SOUTH AFRICAN IDENTITY AND
REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ARTS, EXPRESSED THROUGH
DATA-FLUID NARRATIVES**

by

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SUMMARY

This study analyses ethnoracial identity formation from the perspective of the self (the artist) and the collective (artists, historians, curators, academics), applying a qualitative mixed methodology within this practice-led visual art research. The enquiry into 'Indian' South African identity is both complex and perplexing. A dialogical approach to both theory and art practice provides intellectual and intuitive responses about ethnic identity in South Africa. I use a reflexive (self-dialogical) methodology based on memory, experiential and historical artefacts to create iterations of personal and collective identity formations. Data from archival records (Indian Indenture Ship Lists 1860-1911) undergoes a digital process of sorting and parsing. Narratives are then extracted and visualised within the aesthetic domain of the visual arts, inextricably bound by geography and shifting ideologies.

The focus of this study is my own generational group (born in the early 1970s), which has lived through the socio-political contexts of colonialism, apartheid, and democracy. It is based on the premise that my social conditioning in South Africa is unique and unusual, being located at the cusp of transition from rigid racial segregation to democratic freedom.

The concept of 'fluidity' is used to describe an intellectual position that is characterised by openness, neutrality and racial inclusivity. This study contributes new knowledge about contemporary 'Indian' identity formations invisibilised within South African visual culture. The exhibition *Afterisms: Excentric Data–Fluid Narratives* further contributes to the global paradigm of technology-based contemporary art and offers a cultural reparative, as well as addresses historical oversight through symbolic action.

LIST OF KEY TERMS:

Race-identity; autoethnography; Natal indenture ship lists; colonial archive; Sarat Maharaj; Ashraf Jamal.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie het etnoras-identiteitsvorming vanuit die perspektief van die self (die kunstenaar) en die kollektief (kunstenaars, historici, kurators, akademici) geanaliseer, deur middel van 'n kwalitatiewe gemengde metodologie binne hierdie praktykgeleide visuele kunsvorsing. Die ondersoek na 'Indiese' Suid-Afrikaanse identiteit is beide kompleks en verwarrend. 'n Dialogiese benadering tot beide teorie en kunspraktyk het intellektuele en intuïtiewe reaksies oor etniese identiteit in Suid-Afrika verskaf. Ek het 'n refleksiwew (selfdialogiese) metodologie gebaseer op geheue, ervarings en historiese artefakte gebruik om iterasies van persoonlike en kollektiewe identiteitsvormings te skep. Data uit argiefrekords (Indiese Kontrakskeepslyste 1860–1911) het 'n digitale proses van sortering en analise ondergaan. Narratiewe is toe onttrek en gevisualiseer binne die estetiese domein van die visuele kunste, onlosmaaklik verbind deur geografie en verskuiwende ideologieë.

Die fokus van hierdie studie was my eie generasiegroep (gebore in die vroeë 1970's), wat die sosiopolitieke kontekste van kolonialisme, apartheid en demokrasie deurleef het. Dit is gebaseer op die uitgangspunt dat my sosiale kondisionering in Suid-Afrika uniek en ongewoon is, geleë op die oorgangspunt van rigiede rasse-segregasie na demokratiese vryheid.

Die konsep van 'fluïditeit' is gebruik om 'n intellektuele posisie te beskryf wat gekenmerk word deur openheid, neutraliteit en rasse-inklusiwiteit. Hierdie studie dra nuwe kennis by oor kontemporêre 'Indiese' identiteitsformasies wat onsigbaar is binne die Suid-Afrikaanse visuele kultuur. Die uitstalling *Afterisms: Excentric Data-Fluid Narratives* dra by tot die globale paradigma van tegnologie-gebaseerde kontemporêre kuns, bied 'n kulturele herstel en kyk na historiese oorsig deur simboliese optrede.

LYS VAN SLEUTELTERME:

Rasse-identiteit; uto-etnografie; Natal-kontrakskeepslyste; koloniale argief; Sarat Maharaj; Ashraf Jamal.

ISIFINGQO

Lolu cwaningo luhlaziye ukwakheka kobunikazi bezizwe ngezindlela ezihlukahlukene kusuka kumbono womuntu siqu (iciko) kanye nombutho (amaciko, izazi zomlando, abagcinimibukiso, nezifundiswa), lusebenzisa indlela exubile yocwaningo oliyikhwalthi ngaphakathi kocwaningo lobuciko obuholwa yimisebenzi. Ukuphenya ngobunikazi 'baseNdiya' baseNingizimu Afrika kuyinselelo kanti futhi kuyadida. Ukuxoxisana ngabo bobubili ubuciko obubhaliwe kanye nobusebenzayo kunikeze izimpendulo eziphusile nezicacile mayelana nobunikazi besizwe eNingizimu Afrika. Ngisebenzise indlela yokuzihlola (yokuxoxa nami) esuselwa kulokho engikukhumbulayo, engihlangabezane nakho phambilini kanye nemifanekiso yomlando ukudala izinguquko zokwakheka kobunikazi bomuntu siqu kanye nobabanye abantu. Ulwazi olutholakala emarekhodini alondoloziwe (Indian Indenture Ship Lists 1860-1911) lwahluzwa ngendlela yobuchwepheshe yokuhlunga nokuhlukanisa. Izindaba zabe sezicashunwa futhi zaboniswa ngaphakathi komkhakha wobuciko obubukwayo, obuhlotshaniswa ngokungenakwahlukaniswa nendawo kanye nemibono eguquguqukayo.

Lolu cwaningo lugxile eqenjini lami engikhule nalo (elizalwe ekuqaleni kweminyaka ye-1970), eliphile ezimeni zomphakathi nezombusazwe ngezikhathi zengcindezelo, ubandlululo kanye nombuso wentando yeningi. Kususelwa ekutheni indlela engakhuliswa ngayo eNingizimu Afrika iyingqayizivele futhi ayivamile, njengoba ngisesigabeni soguquko olukhulu kusukela ekucwasweni ngokobuhlanga kuya enkululekweni yentando yeningi.

Umqondo wokuthi 'ukuguquguquka' wawusetshenziselwa ukuchaza indawo yokucabanga ebonakala ngokuvuleleka, ukungachemi kanye nokubandakanya zonke izinhlanga. Lolu cwaningo lunikeza ulwazi olusha ngendlela yobunikazi besimanjemanje 'baseNdiya' obungabonakali ngaphakathi kwesiko elibonakalayo eNingizimu Afrika. Umbukiso i-Afterisms: Excentric Data–Fluid Narratives wengezelele kakhulu kumqondo womhlaba-jikelele wobuciko besimanje obususelwa kubuchwepheshe futhi unikeza ukulungiswa kwesiko kanti futhi ubhekana nokunganakwa komlando ngokwenza izenzo ezinemifanekiso.

UHLU LWAMATEMU ASEMQOKA:

Ubunikazi bobuhlanga; ukuzihlola ngokwamasiko; uhlu lwemikhumbi yezivumelwano zaseNatal; ukulondolozwa kolwazi oluqondene nengcindezelo; uSarat Maharaj; u-Ashraf Jamal.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xv
ABBREVIATIONS	xvii
PREFACE	xix
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background rationale	1
1.1.1 Extraverted process	3
1.1.2 Introspective process	4
1.1.3 Conceptual process	5
1.2 Aims and objectives	6
1.2.1 Primary aims	6
1.2.3 Objectives	6
1.3 Research problem and questions	7
1.3.1 Research problems	7
1.3.2 Research questions	9
1.4 Research methodology	10
1.4.1 Extraverted phase	10
1.4.2 Introspective phase	11
1.4.3 Conceptual phase	12
1.5. Ethics	13
1.6 Literature review	16
1.7 Theoretical overview	21
1.7.1 Art praxis	24
1.8 Summary of creative practice	26
1.9 Summary of chapters	32
CHAPTER TWO: THE ‘INDIAN’ IDENTITY	35
2.1 The Indian Indenture ship lists as a metaphor for collective identity	35
2.2 Sarat Maharaj: decoding the “untranslatable other”	43
2.3 Imagining India: aspects of fluidity and authenticity in diasporic identity	50
2.3.1 The biennale effect: imaginations of the third kind	58
2.3.2 Ranbir Kaleka, Ernesto Neto and Subodh Gupta at Kochi	62
2.4 Africus: The first Johannesburg Biennale	66
2.4.1 <i>Dispossessed in Africus</i>	68

2.4.2 UDW fine art graduates: performances of 'Indian' identity through activism	72
CHAPTER THREE: IDENTITY FORMATIONS IN VISUAL ART	80
3.1 The identity-race paradox in contemporary South African art	80
3.2 The cusp generation: the dichotomy of identity	84
3.2.1 The cusp generation and existential siloing	88
3.3 Invisibility and the contingent-identity.....	91
3.3.1 Reflections on maintaining Brownness	93
3.4 Reflexivity and performance as a qualitative research methodology within the art narrative.....	95
3.4.1 Unmasked: the excentric Sharlene Khan	97
3.4.2 Amita Makan: freedom to be 'in-between'	102
CHAPTER FOUR: CREATIVE PRACTICE.....	108
4.1 Introduction	108
4.1.1 Pre-production phase: re-presenting human data.....	109
4.2 Afterisms: excentric data fluid narratives	116
4.2.1 <i>Journeys</i>	118
4.2.2 <i>Kūli</i>	122
4.2.3 <i>Excentricities</i>	126
4.2.4 <i>Kala pani</i>	129
4.2.5 <i>Chatsworth 29.92.70°S, 30.88.43°E</i>	133
4.2.6 <i>Artefact of origin</i>	137
4.3 The art exhibition as an activism.....	141
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	150
5.1 Introduction	150
5.2 Summary of key findings	151
5.2.1 Chapter One	151
5.2.2 Chapter Two.....	152
5.2.3 Chapter Three.....	153
5.2.4 Chapter Four.....	154
5.3 Theoretical & conceptual contributions.....	155
5.4 Implications of the research	156
5.5 Limitations of the study	157
5.6 Recommendations & future research	158
APPENDICES.....	160
Appendix 1: Professor Sarat Maharaj: biography.....	160
Appendix 2: My family photographs and personal documents of identity.	162
Appendix 3: Glossary of terms.....	169
LIST OF REFERENCES	187

LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1. Lucelle Pillay, *Research Map indicating introspective, extraverted and conceptual processes* (2024). Digital diagram.
- Figure 2. *Ship list: Durban Archives Repository, North Indian ship register, Book M.* Digital photograph. (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:48, fig 3).
- Figure 3. Lucelle Pillay, *Visual journal indicating a nonlinear ideation method* (2020-2022).
- Figure 4a. Lucelle Pillay, *Meta-corridor: information about the data used in artworks* (2023). Installation of drawings, sketches, ink experiments, photostats, data, transparencies, documentation, photos, notes, 5x2m. Digital photo.
- Figure 4b. Visitor viewing data projection map (2023). (Photo: Lucelle Pillay).
- Figure 5a. Sarat Maharaj, Biennale Arte: Creative Time Summit (2015). <https://summit.creativetime.org/author/sarat-maharaj/> (Accessed 24 September 2025).
- Figure 5b. Documenta 11 curators (from left): Carlos Basualdo, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Okwui Enwezor, Uta Meta Bauer, Octavio Zaya, Mark Nash (2002). <https://www.artnet.com/magazine/reviews/wrobinson/robinson6-7-1.asp> (Accessed 24 September 2025).
- Figure 5c. Sarat Maharaj at New Contemporaries (1997). (Photo: Charlotte Marklund). <https://www.newcontemporaries.org.uk/1997/selectors> (Accessed 24 September 2025).
- Figure 6a. Gayatri Spivak. <https://www.chrflagship.uwc.ac.za/fellowship-programme/fellows/gayatri-spivak/> (Accessed 24 September 2025).
- Figure 6b. Arjun Appadurai, *Lecture from the Global South* (2020). (Photo: The Hertie School / Lars Huebner). <https://jcaf.org.za/research/#0> (Accessed 24 September 2025).
- Figure 7a. Lucelle Pillay, *My visual journal: a selection drawings & experiments I* (2021-2023). Digital scans.
- Figure 7b. Lucelle Pillay, *My visual journal: a selection drawings & experiments II* (2021-2023). Digital scans.
- Figure 8. Lucelle Pillay, *Practical art making in studio: India-ink experiments on PVC* (2023). Digital photo.
- Figure 9a. Kevin Leicher (sound engineer) installing surround speakers (2023). (Photo: Lucelle Pillay).
- Figure 9b. Tyla Brassey (3D designer) printing lettering moulds (2023). (Photo: Lucelle Pillay).
- Figure 9c. Jodie Azalea (tattoo artist) engraving data forms on acrylic sheets (2023). (Photo: Lucelle Pillay).
- Figure 10a. Joy Brain with her book *Christian Indians in Natal*. (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:55, fig 5).

- Figure 10b. Boxes containing the ship registers at the Durban Archives. (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:48, fig 4).
- Figure 10c. Items from Joy Brain's archive of microfilms of the ship lists. (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:56, fig 6).
- Figure 11. Lucelle Pillay, *Processes of digitising the paper indenture ship lists* (2023). Digital composite.
- Figure 12a. Sailing ships arriving in Durban Harbour, circa 1890. (Photo: Gerald Buttigieg, 2021a). <https://www.fad.co.za/2021/09/18/durban-pot-pourri-ten/> (Accessed 24 September 2025).
- Figure 12b. Indian Affairs building, Victoria Embankment, Durban, circa 1950. (Photo: Gerald Buttigieg, 2021b). <https://www.fad.co.za/2021/10/17/durban-pot-pourri-fifteen/> (Accessed 24 September 2025).
- Figure 12c. Street view of Durban Archives Repository. Screenshot of Google Maps. <https://maps.app.goo.gl/hTngrCzdqrasTdFH6> (Accessed 24 September 2025).
- Figure 12d. Gandhi-Luthuli Documentation Centre, UKZN. Screenshot. <https://youtu.be/DfetWfRmmw> (Accessed 24 September 2025).
- Figure 13a. Mole's genealogy, detail from page of Indian Immigration Register with 'dotted line' overlay. <https://molegenealogy.blogspot.com/2012/07/indian-immigration-registersships-lists.html> (Accessed 24 September 2025).
- Figure 13b. Example of old immigrant ticket with 'dotted line' overlay indicating ship number. (Harrington-Watt 2019:1777, fig 4).
- Figure 13c. Early Indian immigrants to Natal with tin tickets 'dotted line' overlay indicating ship number. <https://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/brief-history-indian-indenture-south-africa> (Accessed 24 September 2025).
- Figure 14a. Nelson Mandela visits Fatima Meer, after his release in February 1990. (Vahed 2010: 317).
- Figure 14b. Ahmed Kathrada released from prison (1989). (Vahed 2010: 317).
- Figure 14c. A policeman arrests two Indian protestors in South Africa (1983). (Photo: Omar Badsha). <https://sahistory.org.za/node/124410> (Accessed 25 September 2025).
- Figure 15a. Indian students commuting to Salisbury Island (1971). (Ghandi-Luthuli Documentation Centre).
- Figure 15b. *Exterior view of FAD building at Salisbury Island* (2012). (Photo: Herselene Lazarus Charles). (Moodley 2012a:87, fig 3).
- Figure 15c. Library at Salisbury Island (1971). (Ghandi-Luthuli Documentation Centre).
- Figure 15d. Walter Battiss in his office at Unisa (1964). <https://za.pinterest.com/unisaarchives/> (Accessed 27 September 2025).
- Figure 16a. *Metaphysics Coomaraswamy* by, Roger Lipsey. <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1014112> (Accessed 24 September 2025).

- Figure 16b. *James Joyce: the years of growth, 1882-1915: a biography* by Peter Costello.
<https://www.abebooks.co.uk/book-search/title/james-joyce-the-years-of-growth-1882-1915-a-biography/author/costello-peter/> (Accessed 24 September 2025).
- Figure 16c. *Marcel Duchamp: the afternoon interviews* by Calvin Tomkins. <https://jamesclear.com/book-summaries/marcel-duchamp-the-afternoon-interviews> (Accessed 24 September 2025).
- Figure 16d. *Conversations with Ulrich Beck* by Johannes Willms and Ulrich Beck.
https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/789193.Conversations_with_Ulrich_Beck
 (Accessed 24 September 2025).
- Figure 17. Sarat Maharaj, *Annotated version of The apartheid-era art history room (AAH Room)* (c1971). Photograph. Annotations, graphics and design 2007© Ecke Bonk.
<https://www.documenta-platform6.de/thinking-documenta-doing-documenta-mulling-documenta11-platforms-1-5-2002/> (Accessed 05 April 2021).
- Figure 18. Maternal grandparents: Sylvia & Vincent Pillay (1960-1965). Digital montage.
- Figure 19. Mother: Theresa Anthoniamah Pillay (1950-1960). Digital montage.
- Figure 20. Father: Paul Ganess Pillay (1950-1960). Digital montage.
- Figure 21. World map indicating key biennales (2025). Digital diagram: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 22. *Fort Kochi: Aspinwall House, boats, murals* (2012). Digital montage.
<https://passjournal.org/kochi-muziris-biennale-of-the-people-by-the-people-and-for-the-people/> (Accessed 19 February 2025).
- Figure 23. Map indicating the co-dependencies of diasporic art, activism & imagineering (2025). Digital diagram: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 24. Ranbir Kaleka, *Not anonymous: waking to the obscure fear of a new dawn* (2017-18). Single-channel projection on 6 panels, with one painted panel, 9 min 18 second loop.
https://www.vadehraart.com/art-fairs/24/works/artworks-39260-ranbir-kaleka-not-anonymous-_waking-to-the-obscure-fear/ (Accessed 1 September 2024).
- Figure 25. Ranbir Kaleka, *House of opaque water* (2012). 3-channel projection with sound on 3 panels (extract); 171.6cm x 914.4cm (variable); 10 min 33 second loop.
<https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-subtle-incisiveness-of-ranbir-kaleka-s-works-puts-everyday-events-into-perspective> (Accessed 2 September 2024).
- Figure 26a. Ernesto Neto, *Life is a river* (2012). Installation (cotton fabric, polyamide fabric, and spices). <https://gujralfoundation.org/show-item/kochi-muziris-2012/> (Accessed 19 February 2025).
- Figure 26b. Subodh Gupta, *Untitled* (2012). Installation (found miscellaneous objects in wooden boat). <https://www.architecturaldigest.in/magazine-story/behind-scenes-kochi-muziris-biennale-2016/> (Accessed 19 February 2025).
- Figure 27. Ernesto Neto, *Um dia todos fomos peixes (One day we were all fish)* (2017). Installation (knitted blue net, semi-precious stones and spices). (Photo: Lucelle Pillay at JCAF).

- Figure 28a. Sheela Gowda, *Untitled* (1992). Cow dung on board with cloth, 76.5x56.1cm. (Africus, Johannesburg Biennale 1995:156).
- Figure 28b. N. Pushpamala, *Hidden narratives* (1994). Cane, plaster, string, 122x122cm. (Africus, Johannesburg Biennale 1995:157).
- Figure 29. Nalini Malani, *Media materials installation, view at Max Müller Bahvan* (1993). Acrylic, Anc charcoal on gissod plastin panels, 2.44x11.02m. (Africus, Johannesburg Biennale 1995:157).
- Figure 30a. Nalini Moodley, *Untitled* (1990). Etching, 45 x 35cm. (Moodley 2012a:173, fig 25).
- Figure 30b. Faiza Galdhari, *Conversations in my mind, then and now* (2004). Mixed media, approx. 84x60cm. (Moodley 2012a:234, fig 69).
- Figure 30c. Sandhia Banshi, *Mendhi* (1997). Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown. (Moodley 2012a:184, fig 43).
- Figure 31a. Vedant Nanackchand, *They came from the East* (1987). Oil on canvas, 2x2m. Collection of UKZN. (Moodley 2012a:221, fig 45).
- Figure 31b. Vedant Nanackchand, *The sugar fields* (1987). Oil on canvas, 2 x 2m. Collection of UKZN. (Moodley 2012a:222, fig 46).
- Figure 31c. Vedant Nanackchand, *The merchant* (1987). Oil on canvas, 2x2m. Collection of the UKZN. (Moodley 2012a:222, fig 47).
- Figure 32a. Clive Pillay, *A South African stamp* (1984). Screen print, dimensions unknown. (Moodley 2012a:175, fig 28).
- Figure 32b. Sherene Timol, *Untitled* (2010). Mixed media, 2x80x60cm. (Moodley 2012a:221, fig 44).
- Figure 32c. Avitha Sooful, *Dislocation* (2010). Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown. (Moodley 2012:229, fig 61).
- Figure 33. Lucelle Pillay, *Timeline indicating segregated, contingent and super-identity formations* (2025). Digital diagram.
- Figure 34a. Ed Young, *BLACK IN FIVE MINUTES* (2010). Mural, dimensions variable. Pictured: Athi-Patra Ruga. (Photo: Malibongwe Tyilo). (Jamal 2017:18, fig 3).
- Figure 34b. Ed Young, *ALL SO FUCKING AFRICAN* (2016). Installation view at Frieze, New York. (Photo: Ed Young). (Jamal 2017:26, fig 5).
- Figure 35a. Arena Park Secondary School: matric art class with Lucelle Pillay (1989). Film print. Personal collection.
- Figure 35b. Lucelle Pillay, *My pencil sketch: Chatsworth* (1989). Digital photo. Personal collection.
- Figure 35c. *Chatsworth Tabloid News*, Chatsworth (2024). <https://tabloidmedia.co.za/saluting-a-resilient-community-on-60-years-of-chatsworth/> (Accessed 24 September 2025).

- Figure 36a. Student protest meeting. L to R (standing): Jerry Coovadia, Zac Yacoob, Rector SP Olivier, and Ramlal Ramesar (undated). *The Post*. <https://thepost.co.za/2025-09-25-the-university-of-durban-westville-classrooms-of-memory/> (Accessed 27 September 2025).
- Figure 36b. The "heart" of the UDW campus, showing the pond, quad, cafeteria, MH Joosub Hall (*far left*) & library (undated). *The Post*. <https://thepost.co.za/2025-09-25-the-university-of-durban-westville-classrooms-of-memory/> (Accessed 27 September 2025).
- Figure 36c. Art Gallery at UDW (2012). Photo: Colin Sabapathy. (Moodley 2012a:90, fig 6).
- Figure 37a. A young Gandhi arrives in South Africa. Photo: National Geographic. (Beyer: The Collector). <https://www.thecollector.com/gandhi-south-africa/> (Accessed 25 September 2025).
- Figure 37b. Indian lawyer leads mineworkers in march to Transvaal, 1913. Gettyimages. <https://www.gettyimages.in/photos/gandhi-south-africa> (Accessed 25 September 2025).
- Figure 37c. Statue of Mahatma Gandhi, Pietermaritzburg. (Wikipedia). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statue_of_Mahatma_Gandhi,_Pietermaritzburg (Accessed 25 September 2025).
- Figure 37d. Statue of Mahatma Gandhi, Johannesburg. <https://www.orissapost.com/mahatma-gandhi-legacy-grows-in-south-africa-through-his-statues/> (Accessed 25 September 2025).
- Figure 38. Sharlene Khan, *What I look like, what I feel like* series (2010). https://sharlenekhan.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/sharlene-khan_WILL_WILF_full.pdf (Accessed 19 June 2025).
- Figure 39. Sharlene Khan, Selected images from *What I look like, what I feel like* series with embroidered detail (2010). https://sharlenekhan.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/sharlene-khan_WILL_WILF_full.pdf (Accessed 19 June 2025).
- Figure 40. Tracey Rose, *Ciao bella* series (2001). <https://www.artthrob.co.za/02apr/reviews/goodman.html> (Accessed 20 June 2025).
- Figure 41a. Amita Makan, *Loose ends: a story about my mother* (2009). Hand embroidered with silk thread on silk with brocade, beads & crystals, 106 x 88, 3cm. <https://www.art.co.za/amitamakan/evanescence06.php> (Accessed 17 June 2025).
- Figure 41b. Amita Makan, *The last portrait* (2009). Oil on canvas, 85 x 85cm. <https://www.art.co.za/amitamakan/evanescence09.php> (Accessed 22 June 2025).
- Figure 41c. Amita Makan, *Self-portrait: African Renaissance* (2013). Embroidery with silk thread on tulle, vintage sari and sequins, 153.2 x 99.3 x 3 cm (recto and verso). chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/<https://www.art.co.za/amitamakan/Amita-Makan-Nomalungelo-Catalogue.pdf> (Accessed 17 June 2025).
- Figure 42a. Amita Makan, *Miriam Makeba, 1965* (2011). Oil on canvas. <https://www.art.co.za/amitamakan/makeba.php> (Accessed 9 January 2026).

- Figure 42b. Amita Makan, *Nomalungelo (After Jurgen Schadeberg and Gustav Klimt)* (2013). Embroidery with silk thread on dupion silk and vintage sari, silk cord, sequins and Swarovski crystals, 140.5 x 208.5 x 9.5cm. <https://www.art.co.za/amitamakan/nomalungelo03.php> (Accessed 9 January 2026).
- Figure 42c. Amita Makan, *Phatha Phatha: For Miriam Makeba and Dorothy Masuku* (2014). Embroidery with silk and metallic thread on silk organza with Swarovski crystals, sequins and vintage saris, 156 x 123 x 24 cm. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/<https://www.art.co.za/amitamakan/Amita-Makan-Nomalungelo-Catalogue.pdf> (Accessed 9 January 2026).
- Figure 43a. Amita Makan, *My black president (after Sally Shorkend)* (detail) (2014). Hand embroidered with silk thread on silk tulle and organza, vintage saris, sequins and Swarovski crystals, 93x73x3.5cm. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/<https://www.art.co.za/amitamakan/Amita-Makan-Nomalungelo-Catalogue.pdf> (Accessed 9 January 2026).
- Figure 43b. Amita Makan, *Vasant / spring II* (detail) (2016). Hand embroidered with silk, viscose, metallic thread and recycled nylon packaging threads on silk organza, 69x107x3cm. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/<https://www.art.co.za/amitamakan/amita-makan-vasant-2016.pdf> (Accessed 17 June 2025).
- Figure 44. Cold Data Sample indicating allocation types & absent data (2025). Digital diagram: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 45a. Michael Friendly, *History of data visualisation-graph* (with overlay indicating the era of ship list origin) (2006). (Friendly 2006:3, fig 1). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226400313_A_Brief_History_of_Data_Visualization (Accessed 6 July 2025).
- Figure 45b. Ship list: Durban Archives Repository, *North Indian ship register, Book M* (with overlay indicating nine volumes as Excel spreadsheet icons) (2025). Digital composite: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 46. Positionalities of the artist (HITL), Paper Ship List Artefact (Data-object) & 'Indian' Indentured Labourers (Entities) in the construction of an art narrative (2023). Digital diagram: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 47. William Kentridge, *The Refusal of time* (2012). Five-channel video projection, colour, sound, 4 megaphones, breathing machine, 30 minutes. Made in collaboration with Phillip Miller, Catherine Meyburgh, Dada Masilo, and Peter Galison. Installation View, Thick Time, Whitechapel Gallery, 2017. Image courtesy the artist and Whitechapel Gallery (Greslé 2017:264; 265, fig 2; fig 3).
- Figure 48. *Journeys: Segmented data narrative* (2025). Digital diagram: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 49. *Artefact of origin: projection map details* (2025). Digital composite: Lucelle Pillay.

- Figure 50. Data: Shifting states of materiality & ether-reality (2025). Digital composite: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 51. Exhibition entrance (panoramic view) (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 52. Main gallery with *Journeys* and *Kala pani* (panoramic view) (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 53. Lucelle Pillay, *Journeys* (2023). Engraved light-transmitting acrylic, wooden bases, LED lights, 3x1.5m. Digital photo.
- Figure 54. Lucelle Pillay, *Journeys (detail): engraved pixels in the form of a mankolam (paisley)* (2023).
- Figure 55. Lucelle Pillay, *Journeys (detail): ship names and arrival dates* (2023).
- Figure 56a. Larry Bell, *Solar fountain* (1983). Glass sculpture. https://larrybell.com/the_work/#standing-walls/2 (Accessed 3 July 2025).
- Figure 56b. Larry Bell, *Untitled* (1966). Coated glass, 15-inches square. https://larrybell.com/the_work/#cubes/2 (Accessed 3 July 2025).
- Figure 56c. Larry Bell, *Wind wedge* (1982). Coated glass. https://larrybell.com/the_work/#standing-walls/2 (Accessed 3 July 2025).
- Figure 56d. Larry Bell, *Pacific red II* (2017). Laminated glass, 12x6x6 foot panels. https://larrybell.com/the_work/#standing-walls/2 (Accessed 3 July 2025).
- Figure 57a. Jodie Azalea tracing projected mankolam pattern on paper template (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 57b. Laser cut acrylic sheets with protective film (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 57c. Jodie Azalea engraving individual pixels using Dremel tool (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 57d. Completion of the first engraved sheet (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay
- Figure 58. Lucelle Pillay, Attendees viewing *Journeys* on preview evening (2023). Digital photo.
- Figure 59. Recessed space off main gallery (panoramic view) (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 60. Lucelle Pillay, *Kūli* (2023). Red light-transmitting acrylic, acrylic mirror, wooden base, LED lights. Top section: 1.5x1m; bottom section: 1.47x80m. Digital photo.
- Figure 61. Lucelle Pillay, *Kūli (details)* (2023). Digital photos.
- Figure 62a. Viewing my reflection in mirror framed by negative forms (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 62b. Play of light and reflection on *Kūli* word form (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 62c. Viewers taking photos and discussing artwork (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 62d. Play of light and reflection on *Kūli negative form layers* (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.

- Figure 63. Lucelle Pillay, *Excentricities* (2023). Engraved light-transmitting acrylic, wooden base, LED lights, 1.47x1.26m. Digital photo.
- Figure 64. *Excentricities*: Radial data map of the artwork (2025). Digital composite: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 65. Lucelle Pillay, *Excentricities (details)* (2023). Digital photo.
- Figure 66. Attendees viewing *Excentricities* on preview evening (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 67. Main gallery with *Kala pani* and *Kuli* (panoramic view) (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 68. Lucelle Pillay, *Kala pani (black water)* (2023). India ink on PVC, 1.47x1.26m. Digital composite.
- Figure 69. Casey Reas, *Emergence Series* (2012). Screenshot. https://youtu.be/_8DMEHxOLQE (Accessed 29 June 2025).
- Figure 70. Lucelle Pillay, *Kala pani (black water)* (detail) (2023). India ink on PVC, 1.47x1.26m. Digital photo.
- Figure 71. *Kala pani (black water)* (as installed at the group *Vice versa*, at Aardklop 25 Visual Arts Festival) (2025). Digital photos: Adelle van Zyl.
- Figure 72. Main gallery with *Chatsworth 29.92.70°S, 30.88.43°E* (panoramic view) (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 73. Lucelle Pillay, *Chatsworth 29.92.70°S,30.88.43°E* (2023). Print on vinyl, 3D printed numerals cast in cement, 3x2m. Digital composite.
- Figure 74. Attendees viewing *Chatsworth 29.92.70°S,30.88.43°E* (2023, 2025). Digital photos: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 75. Main gallery with *Artefact of origin* (panoramic view) (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 76. Lucelle Pillay, *Artefact of origin* (2023). 3-channel video, 11min,16sec. Digital projection map area: 10x2.5m. <https://youtu.be/4DI4SfkXisI> (Accessed 29 September 2024). Digital photo.
- Figure 77. *Artefact of origin*: Artist within 3D projection (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay. <https://youtu.be/4DI4SfkXisI> (Accessed 25 September).
- Figure 78. Lucelle Pillay, *Artefact of origin (still)* (2023). Video still.
- Figure 79. *Artefact of origin*: detail with audience (2023). Digital photos: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 80a. The Presidency, *Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki* (2025). <https://www.presidency.gov.za/former-president-thabo-mvuyelwa-mbeki>. (Accessed 29 September 2025).
- Figure 80b. Nelson Mandela with Thabo Mbeki. *Emerson Kent*. https://www.emersonkent.com/speeches/i_am_an_african.htm?utm (Accessed 29 September 2025).

- Figure 80c. Origins Centre: a research institution of archaeology, anthropology, and palaeontology. <https://www.wheretostay.co.za/topic/6378-> (Accessed 29 September 2025).
- Figure 80d. *Dance of death & life: central ritual of the San*. <https://www.wits.ac.za/gaes/sa-geographers-student-conference-2019/fieldtrips/> (Accessed 29 September 2025).
- Figure 81a. Origins Centre Temporary Gallery - first floor (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 81b. Staircase to gallery (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 81c. Reception area - ground floor (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 81d. Floor Plan indicating the position of artwork (2023). (Original floor plan courtesy of Dr Tammy Reynard). Digital composite: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 82. Kevin Leicher working on sound design (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 83a. Floorplan: Indicating sound design & circumambulatory path (2023). Digital composite: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 83b. Thirteen-day Hindu death ritual (2025). *Cremation Institute*. <https://cremationinstitute.com/hindu-cremation-funeral/> (Accessed 2 October 2025).
- Figure 83c. Christian funeral in Kerala, India (2023). *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-65023059> (Accessed 2 October 2025).
- Figure 84a. Ground floor: media screen showing an introductory video (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 84b. View of guests in the reception area from the first-floor gallery (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 84c. Ground Floor: guest viewing the introductory video (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 85. Lucelle Pillay, *Afterisms exhibition poster* (2023). Digital composite.
- Figure 86. Sequence of digitising ink fingerprint using Photoshop (2023). Digital composite: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 87a. Guests ascending stairs to meta-corridor (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 87b. View of exhibition poster from the gallery (first floor) (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 87c. Greeting guests entering the gallery (2023). Digital photo: Lucelle Pillay.
- Figure 88a. Lucelle Pillay, *X2 Mirror figures* (2023). Acrylic mirror, printed vinyl decal, corrugated plastic, 150x40cm. Digital photo.
- Figure 88b. Printed QR code: online catalogue (2023). 60x42cm. Digitally generated.
- Figure 88c. Artist's website: online gallery (2023). Digital template: Lucelle Pillay.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABR	Arts-based research
ADERN	African decolonial research network
AI	Artificial intelligence
ANC	African National Congress
BEE	Black economic empowerment
BUSSIN	Building global Sout-South solidarities to redress inequities
CAD	Computer-aided design
CHAT GPT	Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer
CPU	Central processing unit
DAP	Design & performance laboratory
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic acid
CRT	Cathode ray tube
ELT	Experiential learning theory
ER	Entity relationship
FAD	Fine art department
GIS	Geographic information system
GPS	Global positioning systems
GPU	Graphic processing unit
GUI	Graphical user interface
HCI	Human interface design
HITL	Human in the loop
ICT	Information & communications technology
IoL	Internet of Life
JCAF	Joburg Contemporary Arts Foundation
KMB	Kochi-Muziris Biennale
LED	Light emitting diode
LP	Long player
MoMA	Museum of Modern Art

NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NSA	National School of the Arts
OOO	Object-orientated ontology
PIO	Person of Indian origin
PLR	Practice-led research
PMMA	Polymethylmethacrylate
PR	Public relations
PSS	Performative social science
PVC	Polyvinyl chloride
QR Code	Computer-readable code
RAM	Random access memory
ROM	Read-only memory
SAHO	South African History Online
UI	User interface
UCT	University of Cape Town
UKZN	University of KwaZulu Natal
UNISA	University of South Africa
USR	University social responsibility program
UX	User experience
2D	Two-dimensional
3D	Three-dimensional

PREFACE

Where do I belong? Does the country whose ground I dig my feet into define me? What does it mean to be 'here', to be 'present' in this world? Which world? A world defined by gravity or by the imagination? Why do I feel estranged in this world, why conscripted against my will? What are the rules I find myself – strangely – complying with?

Am I a helplessly acculturated and indentured being?
(Jamal 2017:12).

All academic research begins with a question or a defined problem. Ashraf Jamal's¹ (2017:12) series of Kierkegaardian-inspired questions accurately describes my reasons for this enquiry into my ethnicity. His notions of conscription, acculturation and indenture resonated with me as a person of colour in South Africa. This catalysed a scholarly analysis, an unpacking of self-identity and its implications for me as an artist in South African society. It was a journey I was reluctant to take; I did not want to delve into the "sticky opaqueness" (Maharaj 1994: par1) of my 'Indianness' and all its entangled disparities, caught in an obscure and "congealed history" (Appadurai 2006a:15). This is the insidious consequence of being born into a rigid racial system, which can condition and normalise a psychology of self-loathing and self-erasure of one's past. I relate to Gayatri Spivak's² (cited in De Kock 1992:35) words, when she states, "So there are all of these problems I carried on my shoulders without giving myself the right to think that these were problems". Similarly, the problems of racial division and otherness have scarred my psyche, yet I pretend that those wounds have healed or, imagine that they never really existed.

I am of a cusp-generation: I was born during apartheid's system of racial engineering and have survived the birth of African democracy. There are many others like me, born in cultural silos and then released into a 'rainbow-nation'³ without a roadmap. The deep-seated doctrines of division and difference inculcated into my being were now apparently rendered void. I have lived most of my adult life under the banner of freedom, but I still remember a time when it was illegal for me to enter a grocery store or enrol at a 'white' university. I have struggled with reconciling my previous social status with my current civil

¹ Ashraf Jamal is a Cape Town-based academic, writer and cultural theorist. He is a Research Associate in the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre, University of Johannesburg, and teaches in the Media Studies Programme at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in Cape Town.

² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was a key speaker at the New Nation writer's conference: Johannesburg during the pre-dismantling of apartheid in 1991. She is an Indian scholar, literary theorist, and feminist critic. She is a University Professor at Columbia University and a founding member of the establishment's Institute for Comparative Literature and Society.

³ In the discourse of contemporary visual art, the term is regarded as an empty platitude that serves little purpose in promoting cultural unity (Goniwe *et al* 2011:27, Moodley & Adam 2000:54). It was a term created during the rise of democracy by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and became the PR cornerstone for the ANC party (Vahed & Desai 2010:2; Galloway 2020).

liberties and have therefore engaged in an analysis of 'Indianness'. This analysis within the unique social condition of South Africa becomes imperative to me for an understanding of my identity.

Research asserts that a textual reading of the racial descriptor 'Indian' conveys problematic notions of essentialism and racial categorisation based on physical appearance (Pillay 2019:80). Postcolonial theory argues that,

Indian identity as an intrinsic aspect of minority politics continues to reflect the difficulty in ridding themselves off the legacy of Apartheid...the very term 'Indian' denotes a common identity which is a contested assumption...the signifiers are far from stable and as sites of contestation, cause anxiety amongst the said group (Govinden cited in Moodley 2012a:26).

This statement identifies the term 'Indian' as a contested label rooted in apartheid politics and separatist thinking. The continued use of the label in the democratic era further stigmatises identity with colonial dislocation and difference (Maharaj 1999:1). Therefore, within the context of this study, the term 'Indian' is placed within single quotation marks, to denote an imposed racial category that may have limited bearing on the complexities of identity itself. It is essential to differentiate South African 'Indian' (in single quote marks) from the term Indian without quote marks, which I will use to refer to Indian people who reside in India. This research does not speak for the entire heterogenous population of 'Indians', but focuses predominantly on the narrative of indentured labourers and their descendants who were translocated to Natal during the height of British colonialism to work in the sugar plantations (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:49-52).

Essentially my study is about identity, first and foremost, with race being discussed as a facet of a greater whole. It is my intention to attenuate the dominance of race as I have encountered it in South African society. By unpacking the layered complexities of 'Indian' identity I hope to demonstrate that human value extends beyond the socio-political apparatus of race. It is a fact that race is not a valid biological category as humans share more than 99.9% of their DNA (Umek & Fischer 2020). Colonialists inculcated the construct of race based on visible traits such as skin colour and hair texture. Their historical system of human classification unfortunately remains till this day and warrants studies such as mine.

In this thesis, I refer to racial groups using the monolithic categories of Black, White, and Coloured, as delineated within the current governmental classification system. I recognise that deploying these labels may appear counterproductive to my broader objective of deprioritising race in favour of more nuanced understandings of identity. However, its use remains unavoidable, as these labels retain indexical relevance within the South African sociohistorical context. I therefore affirm that the application of these terms in this study

functions solely to reference the racial classifications instituted during the apartheid era, rather than to reinforce their conceptual legitimacy.

I use the medium of art as a tool of self-reflexivity and self-expression in my theoretical and practical research of identity. From my observations in the field of visual art, very little reference material exists that focuses on 'Indian' South African artists, historians and curators. Contemporary art discourse rarely includes the contribution of 'Indian' academics and art practitioners. I am hoping that this study will catalyse public interest in 'Indian' art production and theory within the larger paradigm of neglected minorities. These race groups, such as Coloureds, Asians and African immigrants, sit uncomfortably within the dominant Black versus White narrative⁴ in South Africa. This form of marginalisation renders our realities and traumas invalid by our invisibilising our histories and silencing our stories. Through art, my study provides a platform that restores human value, healing and dignity by making visible our erased narratives.

⁴ Within the context of South African global art history, the broad sociopolitical narrative perpetuated is that of the Black native and the White settler (Jamal 2017:19; Serote 2019:2; Pissarra 2011a:189). This narrative dominates both internal and external perceptions of what post-apartheid art should look like.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background rationale

This study may be described as qualitative and interdisciplinary research into the phenomenon of ethnic 'Indian'⁵ identity in South Africa. The research scope focuses predominantly on the discipline of the visual arts but is supported by social science, specifically 'Indian' South African ethnography. It is situated broadly within the postcolonial⁶ paradigm, but is theoretically scaffolded by critical race theory, identity theory and data theory. It is a practice-led visual arts study, informed by a literature review and textual analysis. As primary researcher and artist, I position myself within an onto-epistemological⁷ framework: thus I challenge the traditional Western view of knowledge as separate from what exists and how I know it. Onto-epistemology asserts that our⁸ understanding of the world is shaped by our diverse cultural backgrounds, lived experiences and the assumptions we make about reality (Johnson et al 2023:584; Kamlongera 2023:652-653). To support this research framework, a mixed methodology is applied, which includes practice-led frameworks such as autoethnography, dialogism, reflexivity and performance.

My research aims to make visible more contemporary iterations of 'Indian' identity operating within the local and global visual arts arenas, in order to dispel stereotypical notions of otherness. Having identified that there exists a gap in the acknowledgment and representation of 'Indians' within South African visual culture (Moodley 2012a:10; Vajifdar 1991:1-7; Pillay 2014:2), this study seeks to contribute ethnographical insights into this minority. Art practice and the colonial archive bears witness to the struggles, diversity and tenacity of the 'Indian' narrative. During apartheid, the descriptor 'Indian' was applied with impunity to all peoples from India; however, these communities were diverse, stratified and heterogenous in nature (Desai & Vahed 2013:5). It is therefore important to mention that the scope of this research focuses predominantly on the narrative of indentured labourers. This disenfranchised group were translocated to Natal between 1860 and 1911 during the height of British colonialism, as cheap labour under the indenture system (Vahed & Waetjen

⁵ Within the context of this study, this term is placed within single quotations, to denote an imposed racial category that may have limited bearing on the complexities of identity itself.

⁶ This study applies mostly postcolonial theorists to arguments and introduces decolonial practice within the artmaking phase (Chapter 4). The stratified and often contested discourse between postcolonial decolonial scholars are not argued. For the purposes of the study postcoloniality within the South African and Indian (India) context is discussed as an aftermath to British imperialism. The exhibition component, through activism explores a psychological "delinking [and] 'relinking' with [new] modes of thinking"(Georgi: 2024) in the field of visual arts.

⁷ Note that although I haven't made explicit reference to onto-epistemology methodology throughout this thesis, this positionality is implicit in how I approached both theoretical arguments and practical artmaking.

⁸ The possessive adjective 'our' denotes collective humanity.

2014:49-52). For the purposes of this study, their story is delineated from the many 'Indian' histories intertwined in South Africa's rich cultural tapestry.

As a researcher, I seek alternative frameworks for identity that are fluid and open-ended in nature, on the premise that this condition encourages the enrichment and accessibility of signs of identity (Lategang 2015: 81). For these reasons, this study positions the descriptor 'Indian' under erasure (Nayak cited in Erwin 2012:97), as inapplicable to contemporary identity discourse, on the basis that it was generated within a paradigm of racial inferiority (Pillay 2019:80; Hall 1996:1). Paradoxically, although problematised, the term 'Indian' remains socially prevalent as its deconstruction has not been "dialectically superseded" within identity discourse (Hall 1996:1). The term, therefore, serves as proxy within this analysis, to denote a minority ethnic group of 'Indian' origin living within the socio-political milieu of South African society.

Under a decolonial lens, the collective 'Indian' identity was formed within very distinctive social conditions, that set it apart from the other minorities. Having no entitlement to place and heritage from either indigeneity or colonial occupation, 'Indians' have never truly felt they belonged in Africa (Vahed & Desai 2010:8). They were construed as inconvenient 'foreigners' within the macro Black and White narrative (Pillay 2019:79, Moodley & Adam 2000:57-58). A dialogical unpacking of 'Indian' marginalisation within the local context bears relevance to all minorities, and forms part of a discursive healing that has never been formally addressed. This study aims to contribute to the gap in cultural and historical knowledge of the 'Indian' identity in South Africa.

Identity, as a lens of human experience, is both complex and diverse (Hannula *et al* 2005:68); contextually it is acted upon by the erratic doctrines and ideologies of its specific geography (Ehrnrooth 2002:140). Within these erratic inconsistencies of the world, identity seeks fluidity (Kamlongera 2023:654), a state of equilibrium with its internal dialogue and the external environment (Batory-Ginda *et al* 2010:50), as opposed to its current position of "fixedness" (Pillay 2019:86) to the past and its stigma of foreignness. To negate this position, the concept of 'fluidity' becomes critical to my reflexive practice as primary researcher and artist.

The concept of fluidity is expanded psychologically, theoretically and practically within my art. My search for ethnic identity becomes a negotiation between the inconsistencies and chaos inflicted by the external world and my internal formation of self. All phases of my research are based on the premise that contemporary art can become fluid, meaning that it possesses the characteristics of "mouldability, formability and plasticity" (Bergande 2014:39). Within this premise, visual art can become a vehicle for the contemporary

representation of 'Indian' identity, thereby contributing to a more nuanced formation that dispels stereotypical notions.

As the artist and autoethnographer, I am the catalyst to creative (practical), and intellectual (theoretical) activities; I therefore initiate, facilitate and evaluate the varying facets of research. I have identified three separate yet interrelated processes within my research model (fig 1). These processes or phases are referred to as the extraverted, introspective and the conceptual. They occur proximal to each other on a lateral axis that negates a hierarchical dominance of any process. The conceptual process is cyclical and ongoing; it is considered the ideation generator. In order to find a stable formation of ethnic identity, I maintain a balanced lateral axis, a fluid equilibrium (Batory-Ginda *et al* 2010:50) between my internal dialogue and external knowledge.

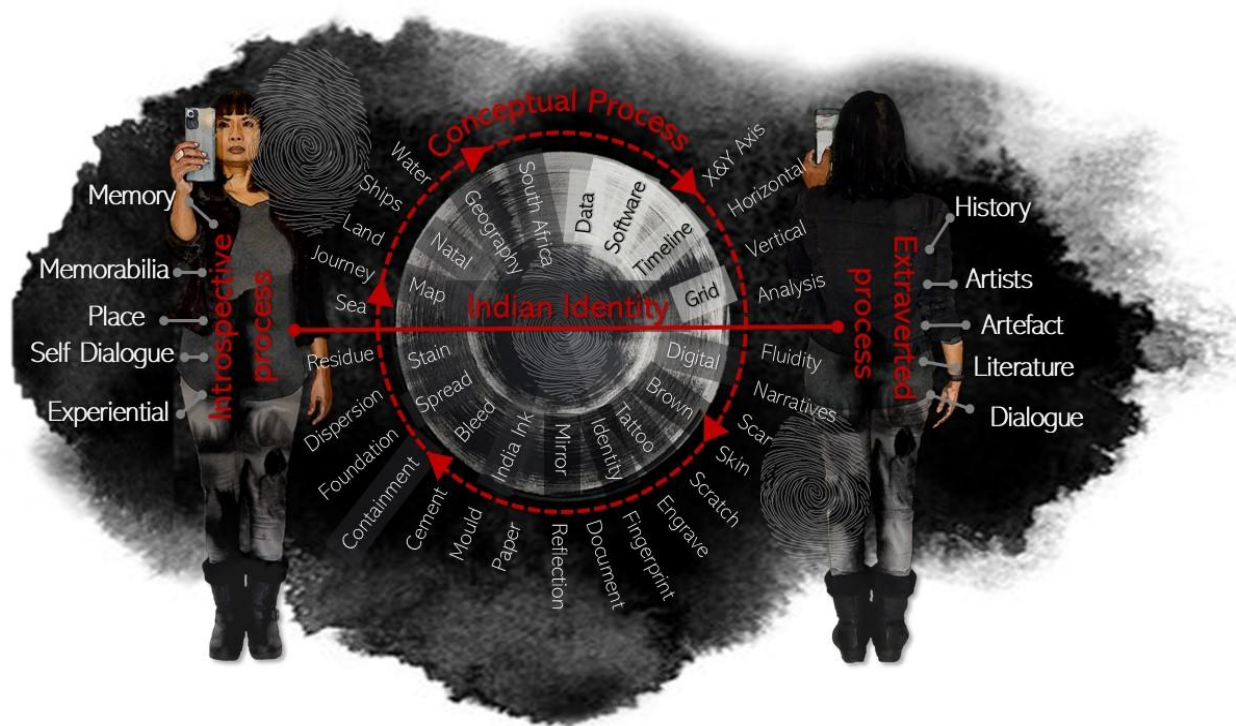


Figure 1. Lucelle Pillay, *Research Map indicating introspective, extraverted and conceptual processes* (2024).

1.1.1 Extraverted process

The extraverted phase of my research entails looking outward for external signs of identity. An extensive textual analysis is undertaken, which includes a literature review, artist biographies, artwork, art biennales, art critique and historical artefacts. On the premise that identity is an “irreducible” complex sign (Hall & Du Gay 1996:2), the extraverted processes examine the set of problems from which identity has emerged. Sociologists have traced the

[illegible]

1.1.2 Introspective process

⁹ Durban, a coastal city in eastern South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province, is known for its African, Indian and colonial influences. It holds geographical importance within this study as the place of birth of the artist, as well as being the city that houses the greatest number of Indian diasporic descendants.

“grand narratives”¹⁰ (Lyotard 1984:xxiii-xxiv) cannot serve as an accurate historic record of all people. Claiming democracy over one’s own life experiences is a powerful tool for confronting the grassroots realities that have formed and informed identity.

1.1.3 Conceptual process

The activities of the conceptual process occur concurrently with the extraverted and the introspective. They are a personal imaginarium¹¹ or an ideation generator that synthesises both the intellectual and intuitive drives. Hinged onto the introverted and extraverted, the conceptual seeks patterns and forms connections using cognitive methods that are non-linear, generative and expansive. I employ these methods to engage with ideas, experiments and mediums in unconventional ways. The creative ‘inter-play’¹² of theory, artefacts, and traditional and digital art mediums creates discursive and visual iterations of identity that are multidimensional and nuanced. One such iteration is the extraction of human narratives from archival data. I apply software visualisation techniques to transmute data from its original quantitative function into intimate qualitative ethnographic expressions.

This study seeks to start an intimate conversation on the ‘invisibility’ of minority identities, caught in the crossfire of the macrocosmic racial fixation, endemic in the broader South African society. I question whether the current veil of nation-building described by Kogila Moodley & Heribert Adam (2000:52-55) could be transformed into a more effective tool towards the cultural inclusivity and representation of minorities. I propose that art could be a medium that fosters reparation and rehabilitation, by raising moral consciousness through shared yet separate histories (Moodley & Adam 2000:67; Erwin 2012:93). I view my art practice and exhibition as an autoethnographic performance¹³ of identity (Ladson-Billings 2013:39) and a form of art activism that challenges hegemonic power structures (Nkosinkulu 2023:397) in cultural spaces.

¹⁰ Refers to modernism’s assertion of ‘enlightenment’ as being the foundation of the Western-Eurocentric knowledge systems of science literature and the arts. Lyotard (1984 xxiii-xxiv) states that the apparatus of philosophy and history are metanarratives that legitimise this grand narrative as “truth”.

¹¹ The term ‘imaginarium’ when situated within postcolonial discourse holds a dual-edged potentiality. It holds positive overtones when used to describe a cognitive space in which diasporic people like, ‘Indians’ could re-imagine their future identities and place in the world. However, it is weighted with more dystopic undertones when applied to the imaginings of Western powers that has materialised into systemic control over the third world and the previously colonised.

¹² The terms ‘interplay’ and ‘play’ speaks to the complex and often intuitive processes undertaken by the artist during the conceptual and artmaking phases.

¹³ An analysis of performance as a human activity reveals it to be a work of imagination, as well as a tactic of intervention within an alternative space of struggle. Performance could then be defined as a conscious act of knowingly displaying one’s actions for an outside audience or viewer (Malinen 2022:8). Based on this definition, performance within the visual arts denotes film, video, photographic and installation-based artworks through which the actions of artists, performers or the audience are conveyed.

1.2 Aims and objectives

1.2.1 Primary aims

1.2.1.1 This study seeks to qualitatively analyse the phenomenon of self-described identity formations among 'Indian' South Africans, specifically artists, curators, and academics. The analysis is situated within both local and international contemporary visual art frameworks.

1.2.1.2. This study seeks to dialogically explore the possible reasons for the low representation of "Indian" artists, curators, and academics within the visual arts and the broader national cultural narrative. This exploration will encompass public platforms such as art exhibitions, revisionist art history, and art literature.

1.2.1.3 This study seeks to apply decolonial methodologies within my art praxis.

1.2.3 Objectives

- i. To review literature pertaining to 'Indian' identity and representation within the fields of visual art, art history, and sociology (specifically 'Indian' South African ethnography). This review will be framed through postcolonial, decolonial, identity, and data theory perspectives.
- ii. To construct a metaphorical relationship between the social value of the indenture ship list archive or artefact and the collective 'Indian' identity.
- iii. To analyse the writings and theories of South African-born art historian and curator Sarat Maharaj¹⁴ through a theoretical triangulation of his art education under apartheid, his keynote addresses at the advent of democracy, and his co-curation of Documenta 11 with Okwui Enwezor.¹⁵
- iv. To conduct a textual analysis of the artworks of South African artists Sharlene Khan¹⁶ and Amita Makan,¹⁷ critically discussing aspects of self-described identity and representation within their practices.

¹⁴ Sarat Maharaj is Professor of Visual Art and Knowledge Systems, Lund University/Malmö Art Academy, Sweden. Previously he was the Professor of Art History/Theory at Goldsmiths, University of London, 1980-2005, and the Rudolf Arnheim Professor at the Philosophy Faculty of the Humboldt University in 2001-2. In 2018 he accepted the nomination of Berlin and Stedelijk Fellow at the University of Amsterdam.

¹⁵ Okwui Enwezor was raised in Enugu in eastern Nigeria. He relocated to the United States where he earned a B.A. in political science. His most acclaimed curatorships include: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid, Trade Routes: The 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, Venice Biennale and the Documenta 11.

¹⁶ Sharlene Khan is a South African visual artist and the Associate Professor at WITS department of Fine Arts. She works in multi-media installations and performances, which focus on the socio-political realities of a post-apartheid society and the intersectionality of race-gender-class.

¹⁷ Amita Makan is a South African textile artist. She is a descendant of Indian migrants who arrived in South Africa during British colonial rule. Her art reflects on past and present; it explores both evolving identities in an uneven globalised world and such social concerns as migration and environment degradation.

- v. To reflect on my autoethnographic narrative as an 'Indian' South African artist within this dialogical analysis, applying the discursive concepts of fluidity and authenticity to my own experiences and family history.
- vi. To theoretically analyse the phenomenon of the European biennale within the Global South contexts of India and South Africa. This will include a review of the *Kochi-Muziris* (2012) and the *Johannesburg (Africus)* (1995) Biennales as critical sites for the emergence, of postcolonial identities within the global art gaze. As points of cultural cross reference, a selection Indian artists who participated at *Africus* will be discussed alongside the artwork of the fine art graduates of UDW.
- vii. To conceptualise and exhibit artworks that reflect aspects of 'Indian' identity and history in a manner that challenges racial labelling and cultural exclusion.
- ix. To apply biographical data within the art narrative to decolonise the colonial archive, thereby positioning 'Indian' identity within the contemporary and fluid space of the exhibition.
- x. To use the mode of exhibition to re-present 'Indian' identity and thereby transform the space into a site of excentricism and personal activism. A written reflexive analysis will accompany this process.

1.3 Research problem and questions

1.3.1 Research problems

I have identified five primary problems that challenge the impartial research of race and identity in South Africa:

- i. Insider-positionality
- ii. Systemic bias
- iii. Identity-race paradox
- iv. Self-othering
- v. Cultural gatekeeping

1.3.2 Short summary of research problems

Insider positionality refers to researchers who locate themselves within the classification of a specific cultural, ethnic, or racial group (Kamlongera 2023:652-653). The challenge of this position lies in negotiating a balance of power between the researcher's academic objectives and the lived realities of stratified and marginalised communities. As an artist of 'Indian'

descent who has undergone tertiary training, I risk privileging an academic worldview and inadvertently framing identity through the lingering lens of colonial sameness. I may also bring assumptions and preconceptions based on personal experience and cultural proximity. This could result in what Paulo Freire (cited in Kamlongera 2023:652) calls “narration sickness,” in which I speak on behalf of a monolithic ‘Indian’ identity rather than co-creating new knowledge around fluid iterations of Indianness.

Systemic bias refers to the inherent prejudice and social classification embedded within Western research models (Erwin 2012:101; Becker 2017:5; Pillay 2012:395; Johnson *et al* 2023:583-584). Decolonial discourse has identified latent epistemological bias as a major obstacle to positioning race and identity within local visual arts and art history (Nkosinkulu 2023:397; Becker 2017:5-6). The colonial epistemic value system privileged so-called scientific objectivity over contextual values such as morality and accountability (Mohamed *et al* 2020:661). This hallmark of Western research underpins the fixed and hierarchical identity labels still in use today. Challenging these modalities requires a subjective, situated approach, that is often misconstrued as unscholarly or inferior (Crowley 2022:164-165). Researchers often struggle within systems that measure difference over moral and ethical reasoning. Decolonial theories therefore attempt to use colonial tools to dismantle their own apparatus, creating an epistemological tension within which this study is situated.

The identity-race paradox (Smedley, cited in Ladson-Billings 2013:39) describes the condition of living under the ideology of civil freedoms while remaining subject to systemic racism across all levels of society (Erwin 2012:98). The enduring sensitivities surrounding race reflect the violent legacies of British colonialism and Afrikaner white supremacy (Becker 2017:41). Post-apartheid democracy, while transformative, has at times fostered a retaliatory form of freedom marked by creative censorship and restrictive notions of political correctness (Klopper 2013:137-140; Jamal 2017:21). Majority Blackness has claimed a form of immunity from accusations of racism, leaving other minority groups navigating complex racial vulnerabilities (Jamal 2017:22; Glez 2025; Vahed & Desai 2017:156). Paradoxically, at a time when equality is constitutionally enshrined, racial categorisation continues to be legitimised and applied by both the state and the private sector (Raggunan *et al* 2022:254; Erwin 2012:96). The identity race-paradox is an absurd ‘catch twenty-two’ scenario in which identity is said to no longer be defined by race, yet in reality still is.

Self-othering (Mangcu, cited in Jamal 2017:24) refers to the risk of reinforcing difference by isolating a single identity. A focus on Indianness as a discrete racial category can inadvertently essentialise and separate this group from the wider social fabric (Gunaratnam, cited in Erwin 2012:97). This outcome appears counterproductive to the aim of destabilising

racial tagging. However, I position this risk against the more urgent imperative of long-term social transformation and inclusion. My core argument is that the descriptor 'Indian' is outdated, separatist, and undemocratic, as it relies on physical appearance. Yet this label remains viable and often mandatory within South Africa's sociopolitical framework (Erwin 2012:96–97; Pillay 2021:390). To address issues of marginalisation and exclusion, I therefore employ the descriptor *under erasure* and as a conceptual proxy within this thesis, until a time when citizenship transcends race and ethnicity.

Cultural gatekeeping continues to shape the visibility and representation of 'Indian' artists and academics within the visual arts. Minority voices struggle to gain traction within the dominant *White settler* and *Black African* rhetoric (Pissarra 2011a:189), perpetuated by both local and global art institutions (Partridge, cited in Jamal 2017:16-17). Research indicates that, compared with White and Black artists, very few 'Indian' artists receive solo exhibitions, appear in revisionist art literature, or hold curatorial positions (Moodley 2012a:10; Vajifdar 1991:1-7; Pillay 2014:2). Many scholars contend that the rainbow nation ideal is a state-authored platitude (Goniwe et al. 2011:27; Erwin 2012:100–101; Nkosinkulu 2023:399; Becker 2017:9; Lategan 2015:97) and that genuine transformation is required to foster equality, diversity, and inclusion. This ideal is undermined by "invisible ideologies" (Becker 2017:8, 42), rendering diversity a superficial public relations exercise incapable of real structural change (Radhakrishnan 2003:313; Araeen 2000; Hall 2002:77). If multiculturalism remains merely philosophical rather than practical, the visual arts will continue to resist integration and restrict representation.

The five critical systemic factors identified are insider positionality, systemic bias, the identity-race paradox, self-othering, and cultural gatekeeping. My study identifies these factors as obstructions to the equal representation and cultural belonging of 'Indian' South Africans in the visual arts. They not only perpetuate marginalisation but also inhibit the future-making and creative agency of 'Indian' artists and academics.

1.3.2 Research questions

- i. How do artists and academics negotiate their contemporary identities under the racial descriptor 'Indian' within the postcolonial paradigm of South Africa?
- ii. What factors have contributed to the low representation of 'Indian' artists and academics within South Africa's visual art sector?
- iii. To what extent do 'Indian' South African artists critique marginalisation and separatism within contemporary society? Furthermore, how does their art bear witness to imagined future identities within this context?

- iv. To what extent does my praxis subvert notions of racial labelling and cultural exclusion, and how might it inspire future-making?
- v. In what ways can my praxis as a critical activism employ biographical data to overwrite the colonial archive of my ancestry and generate imagined identities that are contemporary and fluid?

1.4 Research methodology

The following mixed methodologies will be discussed as they are applied within three phases, namely, extraverted, introverted and conceptual.

- i. Reflexivity via autoethnography
- ii. Dialogical approach to texts (literature, media and visual art)
- iii. Onto-epistemological research positionality
- iv. Indexicality ('Indian' indenture ship list data set 1860-1911)
- v. Data analysis and visualisation (computer software)
- vi. Non-linear ideation (art praxis)
- vii. Performative aspects (public exhibition)

1.4.1 Extraverted phase

I have consulted an extensive literature review, which included art history, sociology ('Indian' ethnology), and art critique. Using the linguistic method of dialogism, I approached the literary review as contextual 'points of view' rather than a universal truth (Nesari 2015:643). From this stance I dialogically analysed the phenomenon of 'Indian' South African identity within the context of race and representation. According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1981:280),¹⁸ dialogism considers the individual within every cultural group as opposed to Western linguistic models that impose a unanimous agreement. He is referring specifically to Hegel's monological dialectic of universality as contradictory to the reality of "social heteroglossia"¹⁹ (Shaghool & Hosseini 2022:363-364). This multifocal framework of thought proved an effective tool toward decolonial thinking, as it allowed room for argument, alternate points of view, critical reflection and the creation of new meanings.

¹⁸ Bakhtin was a Russian philosopher and literary theorist best known for his work on the philosophy of language, dialogue, and literary analysis, particularly of Dostoevsky and Rabelais.

¹⁹ Heteroglossia (a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin) refers to the presence of multiple voices, languages, and perspectives within a single text, culture, or discourse.

As a researcher of 'Indian' descent, I approached the material from an onto-epistemological position. This methodology allowed me, as a subject of racial and economic marginalisation, to challenge the broad colonial notions of race and identity by leveraging my lived reality within arguments (Johnson *et al* 2023:584). Being culturally akin to 'Indian' identity, I was positioned as an 'insider' to the various texts (articles, artworks and performances) authored by 'Indian' South African scholars and artists. However, to avert the research pitfalls of homogenising identity through a lens of 'sameness', I considered varying class, education and world views, as proposed by Mitisunge Isabel Kamlongera (2023:652-654). I achieved this by assuming an 'insider-outsider' research method, a liminal position, which allowed me to shift my perspective in order to relate to the truths of others. This method required reflexivity and fluidity whilst critically engaging with views contrary to my own.

The 'Indian' indenture ship lists symbolically reference the broader human conditions of slavery, oppression and dislocation. By applying the method of indexicality, I re-purposed its historical and biographical data within a local, contemporary identity narrative. I also employed methods of data-analysis to extract rich ethnographic detail of my ancestry from this artefact. I spent many hours parsing through this data source, in an attempt to understand the human stories that have laid hidden for many decades. I developed an empathy for the endless list of names, which, over time became real people, with families, homes and religious beliefs. This methodology made me an active participant in excavating, overwriting and re-presenting the history of my ancestry.

1.4.2 Introspective phase

Theorists have proposed methods of critical self-reflection (reflexivity) within human science studies (Erwin 2012:98; Bogumil 2012:3-5; Bentley 2025:4). I have applied autoethnography, which entailed creating a timeline of my 'spoken' family history together with photographs and documents. I compiled a visual process journal over a period of three years, in which I recorded my thoughts, memories, feelings and experiences. To engage with my early formations of identity during a time of segregation (apartheid), I revisited the township of my birth (Chatsworth).²⁰ My pencil sketches and ink drawings within these spaces, reflect weathered structures, neglected yards and familiar pathways, layered with hazy melancholic childhood memories. I reflected on

²⁰ A township erected by the Afrikaner government in the 1960's, located in the southern region of Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal. During apartheid it was reserved for only the 'Indian' population of Durban, which consisted of many heterogenous groups of varying religious, social and linguistic affiliations (Desai & Vahed 2013:1-2).

how my lived experiences, and my family narratives have influenced my analysis of identity, as well as how these biases affect and direct my research.

1.4.3 Conceptual phase

A method of nonlinear ideation (fig 3) allowed me to synthesise complex ideas and map various iterations relating to personal and collective identity formation. Non-linearity has been described as “emergent, generative, and responsive” (Bartleet cited in Bentley 2025:17). The artist Gwenneth Miller²¹ (2015:30) states “I ‘read’ the play of media in such a manner that media ‘speaks back’ to me and influences the concept and images through the possibilities and limitations of its applications. Media and techniques have intertextual meanings and thereby the choice of medium influences concepts”. Her statement underpins the importance of an inter-play with mediums as this directly impacts the creative output. Therefore, I engage with the processes of hand drawing, digital drafting, filming, writing and the construction of scaled 3D prototypes for artwork as a form of thinking about my ideas through mediums. I used a visual journal to sketch and record notes on ideas and the mental associations gleaned from theory and visual texts during three years of research. These visualisations helped me form cognitive links to recurring themes that have surfaced during both the introspective and the extraverted phases. Ideations within the visual journal dictated my choice in the mediums, construction and form of artworks.

²¹ Gwenneth Miller is a South African visual artist and academic whose practice explores intermediality, materiality, and the intersections between digital and analogue processes. Her research-driven work interrogates how meaning is generated across media, often situating visual art within broader cultural, technological, and theoretical frameworks specific to the South African context.

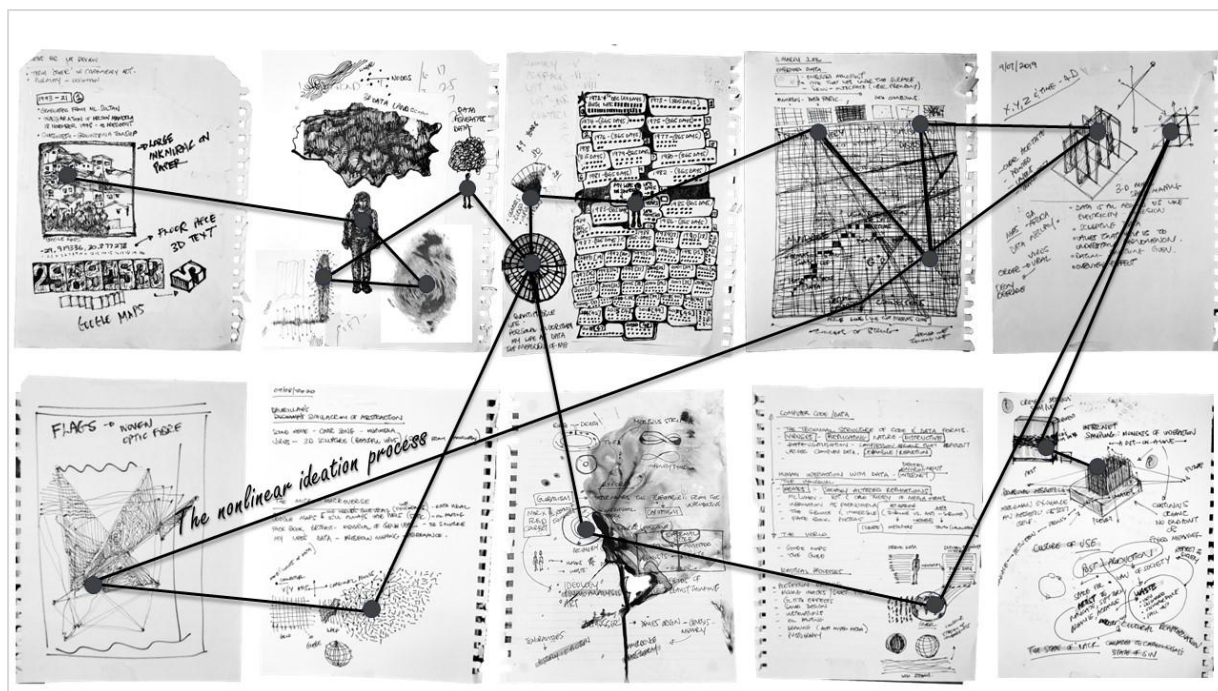


Figure 3. Lucelle Pillay, *Visual Journal indicating a nonlinear ideation method* (2020-2022).

The art exhibition, *Afterisms*, applied the methodology of a public performance within my practice-led research. The artworks indexically referenced my 'Indian' identity, as well as my collective ancestry, for a contemporary audience. Within the public performance, I became a curator of past and present identities and also the silent orator that initiated a dialogue about the future. The method of performance allowed for the visibilisation of 'Indian' identity, through the use of light, projection, movement, and sound. The exhibition space thereby became a fluid site, open to dialogue, interpretation and our collective imagination.

I applied data-visualisation techniques to translate the narratives of the indenture ship lists into physical and digital artworks. I used traditional art mediums as well as digital software to make visible a lost and forgotten history. The artworks became texts of overwritten archives, recordings of my subjective experiences, and a re-presentation of a newly constructed history, embedded with my autoethnography.

1.5. Ethics

This study conforms to the institutional code of ethics required by the University of South Africa. It may be categorised as conceptual research, a methodology that constitutes analysing material on a specific topic that is present in the public domain. This method does not involve conducting any biological experiments, interviews or surveys, as it relates to the use of existing literature, theories and ideas. The study falls within a low category of risk; all

aspects of research have been approved and a certificate of ethical clearance has been granted by the Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee.²²

The nature of the study was interdisciplinary and drew from the fields of visual art, sociology ('Indian' ethnology) and data analysis. An integration of theories from these three distinctive fields provided a holistic understanding of the research subject, namely 'Indian' South African identity. A key artefact that became the conceptual synthesis of all the disciplinary fields, was the 'Indian' indenture ship lists of 1860-1911 (91 volumes).²³ It contained the names and biographical details of labourers and their families who were translocated to South Africa from India. This document was considered the most sensitive historic item with regard to its ethical use. It exists in two formats, as the original handwritten paper ledgers and as digital Excel spreadsheets online. This study had accessed only the digital version which was declared a public record in 2003 (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:65). As an open data source, the information it contains may be used with discretion and without permission.

The handling, interpretation and re-presenting of the ship list data takes into consideration ethical guidelines of accountability, context, truthfulness and community (González 2003:77-86). As the primary ethnographer, I took responsibility to provide a truthful account of the research, acknowledging my positionality and its potential to affect 'Indian' history and perceptions of collective identity. I was also aware of the political, social, physical and emotional contexts that could influence the research process and outcomes. Upon undertaking this study, I made a commitment to honesty and transparency in representing the experiences and voices of the indentured labourers, as accurately as the literature and data allowed. I understand that there exists an interconnectedness between myself and the descendants of indentured labourers, and that I have a responsibility to contribute positively to this community.

Important to this research of the colonial archive, is that it was forgotten; its anthropological findings have been sanitised by time and ancestral memory. The art installation forces a confrontation and a reassessment of the brutality of the original colonial encounter (Simões de Araújo 2020:362). Through practice-led research I directed this encounter with audiences in a manner that was, sympathetic, creative, yet subversive. The WITS exhibition, *Ethnographically intimate: images from the colonial field*, was used as an ethical case study for my interpretation and re-presentation of the colonial data. This included being aware of the ethical treatment and reuse of colonial images, the political economy of how the data archive was collated, colonial power relations, and the need for reflexivity over scholarship

²² NHREC Registration #:Rec-240816-052CREC Reference #:33375135_CRECHS_2024.

²³ Available at the Gandhi-Luthuli Documentation Centre (<https://gldc.ukzn.ac.za/ships-list-1860-1911/>).

and institutional positionality (Simões de Araújo 2020:362). These aspects were applied in my choice of gallery, as well as within my approach and staging of the physical space and virtual exhibition.

The artefact was presented as a memorial tribute to ancestry and lost history in the exhibition *Afterisms: excentric data-fluid narratives* (2023). The data was conceptualised as artworks within the framework of 'Indian' South African identity. I have used the artefact respectfully and have maintained the University's codes of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice (University of South Africa 2016:iii). The data artefact was presented within a visual discourse that was morally sound and enlightening to audiences. I have also acknowledged the hard work and perseverance of the researchers who worked with the original paper ship lists. Specifically, the narratives of Joy Brain and Surendra Bhana were presented in the '*Meta-corridor*' (fig 4a), situated to the right of the gallery entrance.



Figure 4. (a) Lucelle Pillay, *Meta-corridor: information about the data used in artworks* (2023).

(b) Visitor viewing data projection map (2023).

It is important to note that many generations of 'Indians' have never viewed these lists before; therefore, encountering familial names was unprecedented and quite emotional (fig 4b). I approached the biographical data of the deceased as historically vulnerable, in terms of framing of their narratives sympathetically within a contemporary context. I was aware that the original lists were devalued and discarded by previous government administrations. I therefore ensured that the artworks elevated their symbolic meaning and paid reverence to the memory of the men, women and children brought as labourers to African soil.

1.6 Literature review

This review discusses readings from three primary and distinctive disciplines, namely visual art, sociology ('Indian' ethnography) and data art²⁴. This forms a blended discursive that contextualises 'Indian' South African identity historically and geographically. Important local theorists are Goolam Vahed,²⁵ Ashwin Desai²⁶ and Kathryn Pillay,²⁷ whose work in the field of sociology provided the mercurial yet distinctive socio-historic framework of collective 'Indian' identity formation. Although much research has been conducted for the purposes of ethnography, very little has been documented on 'Indian' visual artists and their contribution to the national cultural narrative (Moodley 2012:10; Vajifdar 1991:1-7; Pillay 2014:2). This study begins to fill this gap in knowledge, by re-presenting the colonial archive within the Western modality of the art exhibition.

Within the visual arts space, local writers, Jamal, Gavin Jantjes, Danielle Becker, Sandra Klopper and Kira Erwin spoke directly to the racial exclusions and identity politics endemic in South Africa. Expatriate Maharaj (fig 5a), Okwui Enwezor, Geeta Kapur,²⁸ Arjun Appadurai²⁹ and Spivak contributed deeply insightful arguments on local and global diasporic 'Indian' identity, drawing on their personal encounters within the South African creative sphere. Whilst Lev Manovich is the primary voice on the use of data as an art medium, writers Mohammed, Png and Isaacs (2020) spoke to the decolonial sociotechnical implications of data and AI. As the practical artmaking component of this study falls within a technological realm, the latter becomes pertinent when visualising culturally sensitive biographical data.

Maharaj's key objective within the visual arts is to resist the homogenous flattening of assimilation and shift the discourse to the complexities of identity. Based on his own experiences during apartheid, Maharaj (1994), speaks to the innate complexities of 'Indianness' as "untranslatable" within most Western frameworks. The concept of "minority culture's untranslatability" is echoed by Homi Bhabha³⁰ (1994:321;325), as a state of

²⁴ Due to the focus of my study (SA visual arts) this literature review does not provide general overviews of identity politics, the visual arts or data art. Instead, it covers the intricate and specific entanglement of voices that relate to identity and representation in the visual arts space. The review therefore highlights connections and overlaps between these key areas of research.

²⁵ Goolam Vahed is Professor of Social Sciences at UKZN, who acquired a Ph.D. at Indiana University, USA in 1995; his research focuses on the colonial encounter between Indians, Africans and Whites in KwaZulu Natal.

²⁶ Professor Ashwin Desai is the Director of the Centre of Social Change at the University of Johannesburg. He previously lectured at UKZN and his research focuses on Indian identity and race within the South African context.

²⁷ Dr Kathryn Pillay is a senior lecturer in sociology at UKZN; her areas of teaching and research include 'race', migration, identity and belonging.

²⁸ Geeta Kapur is a noted Indian art critic, art historian and curator based in New Delhi. She was one of the pioneers of critical art writing in India, who has dominated the field of Indian contemporary art theory for three decades.

²⁹ Arjun Appadurai is an Indian American anthropologist recognised as a major theorist in globalisation studies. In his anthropological work, he discusses the importance of the modernity of nation states and globalisation.

³⁰ Homi Kharshedji Bhabha is an Indian scholar and critical theorist. He is the Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University.

unresolved ambivalence. Maharaj (1999:4) describes this ambivalence as “processes of scattering and homecoming [that] remained shackled together, tugging at each other like a prisoner with a ball and chain”. He reflects on the internalised diametrical forces acting upon his being as he seeks inertia, which Mishra (2005:1) described as an entity that is constantly on the move, always arriving yet never belonging. It is from this psychological standpoint that my study extracts the nucleus of the South African ‘Indian’ diaspora as unresolved and perpetually ‘unhomed’.

Within the European artworld, Maharaj (fig 5a & 5c) redirects mainstream discourse away from self-serving Western notions of “...managing diversity for its own ends” (Jantjes cited in Goniwe *et al* 2011:43). He achieves this by disrupting the presiding status quo and decloaking systemic racism endemic within art critique. His theories on “the algebra of difference” (Maharaj 1999:1-24) and “new knowledge systems through art” (Maharaj 2009:1-11) expound on modernism’s authoritarian monopoly on culture and knowledge. His theories together with Enwezor’s became an enactment of decoloniality within the Western art curatorship model of the Documenta 11 (fig 5b). This recognition of indigenous (‘Indian’ and African) knowledge systems (Nkosinkulu 2023:397), aligns to a key tenet of ADERN’s³¹ decolonial theory (Ndlovu-Gatsheni cited in Pillay 2021:400) applied within the South African framework. As a Natalian, Maharaj’s critique fills in the chasmic gaps that currently exist in our understanding of the ‘Indian’ identity within the visual arts.



Figure 5. (a) Sarat Maharaj, *Biennale Arte: Creative Time Summit* (2015).

(b) *Documenta 11* curators (from left): Carlos Basualdo, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Okwui Enwezor, Uta Meta Bauer, Octavio Zaya, Mark Nash (2002).

(c) Sarat Maharaj at *New Contemporaries* (1997).

Generations of ‘Indians’ (referred to as Asiatics) were naturalised on South African soil for over a century before the Afrikaner government reluctantly granted them citizenship in 1961 (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:53). After many failed forced repatriation attempts by the

³¹ The African Decolonial Research Network (ADERN) was established by Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni at UNISA in 2011.

government (Pillay 2019:79), 'Indian' peoples became citizens. Having had legal status for only the last 64 years, 'Indians' are historically one of the youngest South African identities. Sociologists have traced their narrative through hostile and exploitive environments regulated by various colonial political agents, that had governed every aspect of being, including geography, identity, mobility, livelihood and sustainability. My study argues that these factors have ostracised the collective 'Indian' identity, resulting in their eschewing from visual culture.

Deemed the foreign 'other' through race labelling and physical separation (Pillay 2019:80), 'Indians' were excluded socially, which had bearing on their representation culturally as well as their internalised identity formation. The deep psychological wounds, physical violence and political insecurities that have impacted generations are rarely addressed in literature. For many 'Indians', the paper indenture ships lists were the only fragile link to history and heritage, therefore Vahed and Waetjen's (2014:45-73) meticulous documentation of the discovery, handling and eventual digital publishing of the paper ship lists is immensely significant. As the theoretical and conceptual catalyst of this study, the ship list artefact becomes a metaphoric narrative for human lives, passing through tumultuous political eras to the present day. It is therefore imbued with historic value, which bears witness to the origin of 'Indian' South African as a new identity within the fold of multicultural citizenship.

A critical comparison of the revisionist styles of the *Visual century* (Goniwe *et al* 2011; Pissarra 2011) and Jamal's *In the world: essays on contemporary South African art* (2017) finds two distinct approaches. The first, aims to provide a historical context for all artists, thereby giving credence to their work as a reflection of the "nation's cultural identity" (Goniwe *et al* 2011:vi). This revisionist history seeks to align South African artists to that of their international counterparts. The latter is positioned in stark contrast to the first, it refutes the political platform of nation-building and South Africanness (Jamal 2017:11) in favour of the "difficult work" (Jamal 2017:49) of mucking about with the "sticky opaqueness" (Maharaj 1994: par1) of identities on the ground. It wades knee-deep amongst the pathological detritus of "uncertainties and discontinuities" (Goniwe *et al* 2011:x) in the wake of colonial and apartheid brutality (Jamal 2017:38). Rather than perambulate on the outskirts of "political correctness", Jamal (2017:24) asserts that "the toxicity of identity politics" has stifled "personal liberty and artistic freedom" (2017:37) in the sphere of visual art.

Both publications provide crucial insights on South African visual art but serve two very different purposes. Whilst the *Visual century* conforms to a measured state narrative for global export, *In the world* unpacks the gritty grassroots reality of the racial prioritising and exclusionary politics, plaguing the cultural sectors locally. Contrasting forms of historic and

contemporary literature from within and external to state institutions is essential to initiating critical art discourse. The essays within these publications have succeeded in contextualising the phenomenon of local visual arts and have also contributed to my arguments, specifically those of exclusion and framing Blackness. This literary analysis reflects the stark omissions of our emerging democracy, yet provides the discursive substance essential towards vibrant critique and the assertion of intercultural identities, as is the objective of this study.

Internationally known academics, Spivak and Appadurai (fig 6a & 6b) have contributed substantially towards postcolonial discourse relating to the subaltern identity (Spivak 2010) and migratory minorities (Appadurai 2006b). Their engagements with the South African cultural sector bookend two different yet critical historical periods. Spivak was invited to Johannesburg in 1991 to speak at the *New Nation Writers Conference* as an honorary scholar at the brink of democracy (De Kock 1992:32). Appadurai recently presented a lecture, *The planet, the universe and the museum: territories of the imperial imagination*, at the launch of the Joburg Contemporary Art Foundation in 2020, precisely 27 years into democratic freedom. His key focus was rethinking colonial legacies, the relationships among museums, and planetary imaginaries. Aspects of both theorists dovetail into specific decolonial³² arguments relating to minority 'Indian' identity and representation, during and after colonialism and apartheid. Both theorists have firsthand knowledge of South Africa and their voices contribute nuanced insight into diasporic 'Indian' identity from the perspective of the global South.

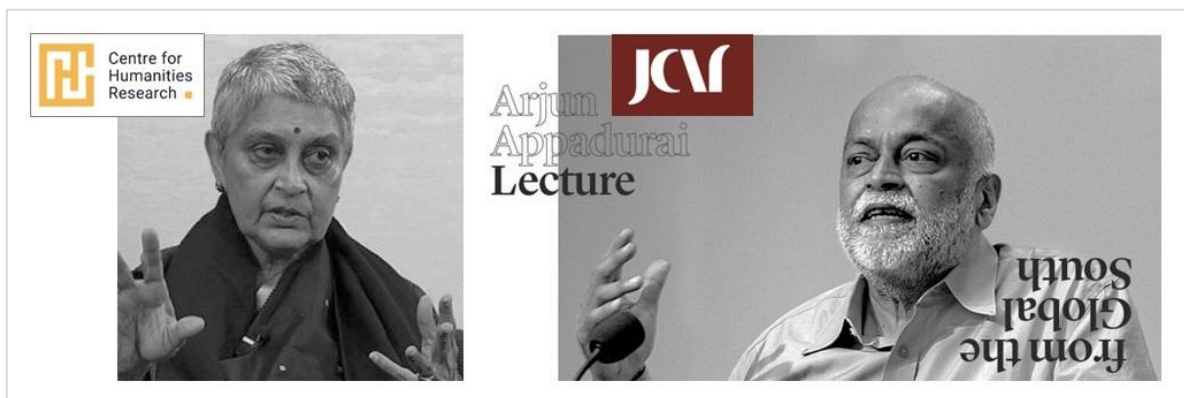


Figure 6. (a) Gaytri Spivak.

(b) Arjun Appadurai, *Lecture from the Global South* (2020).

³² This study acknowledges that there are distinctions between postcolonial and decolonial discourse (Pillay 2021:399); it is not assumed that they are interchangeable. The research, however, will not focus on the divergences but on the parallels and overlaps of both theories.

Spivak is often associated with feminist discourse (Spivak 1978; Vinayaraj 2014), however, this study focuses on her views on representation of the 'other' in art and her critique of Western knowledge systems (Spivak 2010:271-300), similar to that of Maharaj. Appadurai's (1986; 2006b; 2013) theories on postcoloniality, globalisation and diasporic minorities are applied within my arguments about the socio-political paradox faced by 'Indians' in South Africa. I have also applied Appadurai's concept of social value scales (Appadurai 1986:11) and cultural artefacts (Appadurai 1986:34) as a metaphor for the artists, artwork and the paper ship list artefact. Aspects of Spivak and Appadurai's theories dovetail into specific decolonial arguments relating to minorities 'Indian' identity and representation discussed in this study.

The visual output of this study uses a biographical dataset³³ (the indenture ship lists) as a medium within the art narrative. As researcher I am mindful that the "mapping" (Manovich 2002:2) of this ethnographical material is subjective, meaning that I have selected specific dimensions to visualise. By deciding on what parts of the narrative to include and exclude, I become complicit in the quality and authenticity of the visual narrative the software produces. Julie Freeman *et al* (2018:75) states that data its raw format can be manipulated, reconfigured and transformed, as a highly flexible and malleable substance. With this understanding, I have preserved the factual integrity of the data with the intention to inform and provide statistical insight on this specific group. Their identities contained in a dataset consisting of 152 184 people that were translocated to South Africa (Natal) over a period of 51 years. This population group, indigenous to India, were slowly migrated by the British in shiploads between 1860 and 1911.

This archival material, being of colonial origin, once served as a record of human transaction and the acquisition of labour to ensure commercial profit. My intervention repurposes and overwrites these colonial records towards restoring collective memory, ancestry, identity and human dignity. It becomes a process of decolonising the data (Simões de Araújo 2020:362) and exhibiting "sociotechnical foresight" (Mohamed *et al* 2020:622). This means that, as researcher, I must critically examine issues of value, culture and power at play in the application of AI and technological artefacts. The elevation of the ship list data within the realm of art subverts its original colonial origins and becomes an overwritten cultural palimpsest of a new heterotemporal history. The anonymity of identities, previously categorised and fixed (Pillay 2019:86), are allowed to become ethnographically fluid and take their respective place in the layered history narratives of South Africa.

³³ This dataset is considered 'small data', applicable for qualitative and mixed method research approaches.

1.7 Theoretical overview

The dominant theoretical structure on which my arguments are based is postcolonialism, and includes aspects of critical race theory, decolonial theory, identity theory posthumanism and data theory. As these theories form a framework that spans both the literary analysis as well as the art practice, the latter component will be delineated as the sub-section *Art praxis*. In amalgamation, they contribute specific tenets and methodologies that inform the analysis of 'Indian' South African identity and its visibility within the cultural sphere.

Maharaj's theories of the "the algebra of difference" (1999:1-24), "the untranslatability of the other" (1994) and "new knowledge systems through art" (2009:1-11) are applied within the postcolonial and decolonial framework. As South Africa was heralding in a new democracy, Maharaj (1994) was delivering his speech entitled, *Perfidious infidelity: the untranslatability of the other*, at the Tate Modern, attempting to translate the language of "apartheid culture" (Goniwe *et al* 2011:35) to a European audience with limited access points to this discourse. He is pertinent to my study because despite his influential repertoire of literary and curatorial work abroad, Maharaj remains unknown to most 'Indian' South African artists or the art community in general.

His invisibility is testament to the issues of representation being addressed by this study. He rarely appears in South African journals or books, yet his writing and keynote speeches in Western centres are prolific, as Birnbaum (2002: par2) states, " Maharaj's theoretical competence, combined with his willingness to bring the concepts of cultural diversity and difference to a more public forum, makes him a key intellectual voice on the continent today". Maharaj articulates his ethnic identity during apartheid from a position of lived experience, making his theories relatable and relevant to 'Indian' South Africans as well as global audiences. My study locates and presents the persona of Maharaj to initiate the closure of the chasm in the art histories of minorities which is "grievously incomplete" (Chakrabarty 1992:4-5). On the premise of history being in a state of perpetual incompleteness (Serote 2019:2-3; Chakrabarty 1992:16), I aim to enhance the future visibility of Maharaj and other such persons to contribute to a communal curation of future histories and culture-making.

Enwezor is a pivotal figure in my study who like Maharaj can be placed at the threshold of South Africa's global inception. His curatorial work at the second Johannesburg Biennale (*Trade Routes* 1997) (Gardner & Green 2020:1-18), although highly critiqued (Araeen 2000) successfully ushered a selection of local artists into the global gaze. Enwezor (2009:602) would later propose the decentralisation of hegemonic centres to democratise the geopolitics of art production. Maharaj's (2002; 2005) co-curation with Enwezor during Documenta 11, makes visible the diasporic 'Indian' identity within decolonial art activism. My study places

importance in Enwezor's (2009:602) decentralised approach within the theoretical discussion of local 'Indian' artists seeking visibility within the visual art space. As a proponent of the "excentric" (Hassan & Oguibe 2001) paradigm in art, Enwezor augmented decolonial discourse from mere geography toward an 'ideological shift'.

Deeply influenced by Dipesh Chakrabarty's³⁴ (2007:2-23) theories in *Provincializing Europe*, Enwezor proposed his notions on the "centre and periphery" (2009:602). He stated that his concept of multiple modernities of third world (2009:38) was seeded by Chakrabarty. Jintu Alias & Soni Wadhwa (2023:169) apply the theory of European provincialisation to reframe metro-cosmopolitanism within the context of the *Kochi-Muziris Biennale*. This theory is crucial for understanding how urban spatiality and geography perpetuate the power structures of coloniality. These theoretical correlations demonstrate the catalytic nature of the diasporic 'Indian' imagination in decolonising the visual art space. This study therefore asserts that the most credible, relevant and influential interventions to emerge within postcolonial discourse are often from the vantage point of the previously colonised. These perspectives are formed in response to the systemic and epistemic subjugation installed by modernism.

Byron Adams, Gideon de Bruin and Fons van der Vijver (2012:377-388) conducted a study of self-expressed identity across ethnic groups in South Africa. Their purpose was to determine whether culture-specific features and similarities were present in individualistic (Western, independent, and idiocentric) and collectivistic (non-Western, interdependent and allocentric) groups. In the context of their study, the phenomenon of identity is described as:

Both predetermined stable aspects of personhood, such as gender, ethnicity, or age, and fluid aspects in the context of the person such as choices regarding life partners, work, or interests. Identity involves the complex interplay between various private, social, and contextual components that contribute to defining the person as a composite being (Adams *et al* 2012:378).

Identity is defined as consisting of both stable and fluid aspects, with 'gender and ethnicity' listed as stable and 'choice' listed as fluid. These predetermined stable aspects are contested in current discourse, with artists reconfiguring their race, cultural and sexual identities through their art (Klopper 2013:129). The social structures previously considered fixed are rapidly moving into the realms of fluidity. The validity of 'choice' is weighed against generations relegated to psychological and economic silos based on their ethnicity. Racial segregation removed free will as a human right and determined the quality of education, job

³⁴ Chakrabarty is currently the Lawrence A. Kimpton Distinguished Service Professor in History, South Asian Languages and Civilizations. He is a founding member of the editorial collective of *Subaltern Studies*, a consulting editor of *Critical Inquiry*, and a founding editor of *Postcolonial Studies*. He has also served on the editorial boards of the *American Historical Review* and *Public Culture*.

options and living conditions. According to Adams *et al*'s definition, identity becomes the amalgamation of these private, social and contextual aspects. It may be deduced that due to the exposure to a cruel and unjust system of social engineering, identity formation has been severely destabilized within the distinct South African context.

My study therefore argues that the apartheid system limited the free will of individuals for an extended period that was sufficient to cause an irreparable fracture in their formation of identity. To analyse this distinct identity formation I have developed the analytical framework of the cusp³⁵ generation which references 'Indian' people who have lived through apartheid and democracy. In addition to this, is the theoretical matrix which separates singular identity into three formations: Segregated, Contingent and Super-identity. These facets support my discursive unpacking of the complexities of identity as it passes through the various socio-political eras in South Africa.

The Adam *et al*'s (2012:377-388) study on self-expressed identity across racial groups identified close similarities between Indian (non-Western) and White (Western) groups. This reflects intercultural assimilation as a survival mechanism and a further relinquishing of historic cultural identity. This finding calls into question the accuracy of the label of 'non-Western' as it pertains to the 'Indian' diaspora. Under a decolonial lens, social science studies are embedded with the colonial mechanisms (Mohamed *et al* 2020) that categorise and differentiate on the basis of race and origin. To counteract these mechanisms, my study proposes a critical scrutiny of the permutations of racial categorising in scientific (social science) and state structures. Questions must be raised as to its purpose in a multicultural, free society, as well as questioning which entities these categorisations serve.

Appadurai (1986:11) states that the system of values that regulates both commodities (things) and 'the other' (minorities) is indeed a 'social affair'. 'Value' is determined by "rulers and states" (Appadurai 1986:33) and is subject to enormous change over time. He further expounds that cultural relics exist on a sliding scale of mercurial cultural biography and social history. I have applied this theory to the paper ship lists, by tracing their colonial origin as remnants of human purchase. By interweaving its narrative into the context of visual art, the documents have gained significance as an historic artefact of value. This underpins Appadurai's statement that cultural objects like these "...may have a larger historical ebb and flow, in the course of which its meaning may shift significantly" (Appadurai 1986:34). I have metaphorically tethered 'Indian' identity to the ship lists, comparing their 'shifts' in social meaning and value as both move through the changing powers of colonialism, Afrikaner

³⁵ Refers to the liminal space between cultural and political boundaries. The post-colonial perspective focuses on the complex tensions and oppositions that occur on the cusp (Bhabha 1994:248).

nationalism and African democracy. Their interchangeable social value of the individuals listed and their descendants morphs from commodity to foreigner to citizen.

Spivak (2010:70) states that two forms of “representation” exist, the first being political and the second, referred to as “re-presentation”, occurring in art and philosophy. The subtle transposition of the latter term implies the act of re-framing and re-positioning in art and art discourse. More recently, Eliza Garnsey³⁶ (2020:5) has unpacked “re-presentation” within the context of South Africa and the Venice Biennale which is pertinent to my arguments of non-representation of the ‘Indian’ artist. The agents and agencies responsible for re-enacting the conditions for the re-presented entities (artists and artworks) would be the public institutions (state-owned galleries, museums, universities) and the private sector (the art market) (Becker 2017:2-3, 41). The latter sector, being driven by capitalist motives and European predilections will attempt to brand and package artists and artworks for international consumption (Jamal 2017:19).

Jamal (2017:16) states that the agencies enacting this form of “re-presentation” in the contemporary South African art scene are predominantly “white”. He describes the problematic condition of “whiteness as an optic prism which has reframed Blackness” (Jamal 2017: 20). The reframing of identity by those external to Blackness directly impacts the authenticity of re-presentation. Spivak (2010:70) attributes this inauthenticity as “speaking for the other”, a condition that removes our³⁷ agency to react to the horror of our lived experience; it thickens our reality and renders it “generic” (Jamal 2017:22). These conditions had led to the reductive nature and the “invisibilisation” (Khan 2014:19) prevalent in visual art, which serves to ‘close’ the narrative, thereby binding identity to a congealed moment in its past. To subvert this condition, I have appropriated the apparatus of re-presentation to reframe ‘Indian’ identity as fluid and with its own agency to construct meaning in the present. This was based on [Pissarra’s critique](#) of Khan (Chapter three), when he suggested that colonial tools can be used to dismantle structural racism from within.

1.7.1 Art praxis

In the pre-production phase of artmaking, I have applied aspects of Posthuman theory to frame my preparation and parsing of the data set. Located in opposition to humanist³⁸

³⁶ A British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in International Relations at the University of Cambridge. Her research focuses on art and visual culture in international relations and world politics, particularly in relation to human rights, transitional justice, and conflict.

³⁷ I use the possessive adjective ‘our’ here as an artist of colour.

³⁸ This iteration of humanism is derived from European philosophy and culture of the sixteenth century. It proposes that humans are clearly distinguished from other animals and from the natural world. This ideology is theoretically related to the period of modernism which legitimized regimes of power and control over non-European cultures (Von Stuckrad 2023:710).

anthropocentricity, are the philosophies of object orientated ontology³⁹ (OOO) which has theoretically reinvigorated the social lives of objects. The school of posthuman thought, disassociates itself from the ideological standing that human beings have exclusive access to the correlation between thinking and being (Holy-Luczaj 2018:171). They attempt to decentre human agency on the natural world (including man-made technologies) and flatten the hierarchical structures that are imposed on other humans, non-humans and the non-living (objects) (Herbrechter 2021:1-4; Von Stuckrad 2023:710; Wamberg & Thomsen 2016:151). This enables the inclusion of various 'subject-objects', which could be natural, cultural, material or abstract, as integral elements of agential networks (Von Stuckrad 2023:715). This is the theoretical network of ideas; I wish to locate myself as well as the ship lists artefact under study.

The artworks produced are contextualised within the postcolonial framework of the excentric shift. Within this paradigm, Enwezor attempted to destabilise the status quo of Western art discourse. He radically proposed the deconstruction of monolithic modernity into various multiplicities (Enwezor 2009:38). In response to the European question, of whether Africa was ever modern, Enwezor reserves the term, "After modern" (Enwezor 2009:38; Perrill 2012:585). The term implies that in the aftermath of modernism's violence, Africa must move beyond the colonial legacy of exploitation. Within this conceptual paradigm, the marginal or 'excentric' artist is always in the flux of recovering and rediscovering their identity and voice through art. Based on this premise my exhibition '*Afterisms*', therefore becomes a metaphor for Enwezor's liminal space between a dark past and the production of future culture.

Data as a medium within an art narrative is implicated in both decolonial (Mohamed *et al* 2020) and colonial (Couldry & Mejias 2019) theory. Theorists critically engage with the implications of data and its role in shaping contemporary life. They aim to uncover hidden assumptions, challenge inequities, and propose frameworks for more ethical, inclusive and just data practices. When theory is applied to the indenture ship lists, it raises ethical concerns surrounding privacy, consent and bias. For me, as the artist it is imperative that the data, as a colonial object, is reframed within decolonial practice. These sensitivities extend to the public format of the exhibition space, which inherently evokes Western hierarchies of high culture. The representation of labourers' names (many of which were of low cast) within the gallery space, challenges and subverts notions of race and exclusion propagated during the colonial era.

³⁹ Graham Harman coined the term "object-oriented philosophy" in 1999 in his doctoral dissertation, which re-examined Heidegger's concept of the tool (Holy-Luczaj 2018:171).

The concept of cusp discussed earlier in this section refers to a theoretical lens through which I describe the life experiences of 'Indian' artists of my generation. A second iteration is the term 'cusping' which describes my approach to tactile and digital art making processes. The latter has been influenced by Miller's (2015:25-31) interpretation and application of "intermediality" within the exhibition *TRANSCODE: dialogues around intermediality* (2011). Her negotiation of both analogue and digital modalities provided insight into how I could integrate the ether-real medium of data with tactile materials such as acrylic, PVC and wood. *TRANSCODE* subverts any hierarchical articulation of its intermedial positionality and instead adopts a conceptual fluidity (Miller 2015:28; 29) which segues into the aims of the exhibition *Afterisms*.

Inspired by William Kentridge's⁴⁰ exploration of the philosophical notion of thick time (Greslé 2017:261) I have applied the theory of thick data. This is an emergent discourse within data theory and visualisation science. Thick data accommodates deeper qualitative insights drawn from ethnographic or interpretive research methods. It places emphasis on storytelling and rich (thick) contextual interpretations (Latzco-Toth et al cites Geertz 2017:3-4; Bornakke & Due 2018:2; Wildfeuer 2018:272). This approach allowed me to view the medium of data as a cultural artefact with many layers and hidden dimensions. Probing and cross referencing the metadata with the ship lists brought new insights and richer meaning to the artworks, *Journeys*, *Excentricities* and *Artefact of origin*.

A summary of the theoretical frameworks applied would be those of Maharaj, Enwezor and Chakrabarty. Adams *et al*'s identity theory and its implication for 'Indianness' under the label of non-Western. In addition, Appadurai's concept of social value scales, Spivak's theory of re-presentation in art and philosophy as well as Jamal's views of re-presentation within the South African visual art context. Theories relevant to my art praxis are posthumanism, Enwezor's excentric shift and 'after modern', Mohammed et al's decolonial theory of data, Miller's 'intermediality' and thick data in relation to Kentridge's *Thick time*.

1.8 Summary of creative practice

My praxis considers all phases of the creative process as pertinent and meaningful within a conceptual framework. These include ideation, art production, installation, exhibition, virtual afterlife and metadiscourse. My process included keeping a visual journal throughout all research phases, extraverted, introspective and conceptual (fig 1), which contained sketches, notes, images and experiments with mediums and found materials (fig 7). Art

⁴⁰ William Kentridge was born in Johannesburg in 1955, he is best known for his charcoal animations, where hand-drawn images are repeatedly erased and redrawn. He works across drawing, film, theatre, opera, sculpture, and printmaking exploring themes of power, guilt, displacement, and human contradiction. Kentridge's practice is deeply shaped by South Africa's apartheid and post-apartheid realities.

production entailed various stages of design and making, including the application of traditional mediums,⁴¹ digital mediums,⁴² CAD, laser cutting, woodwork, electrical circuitry, engraving, projection mapping, 3D printing and mould casting. Due to the complexity of some of my pieces, I collaborated with other designers, makers and technicians who brought their specialised skills to the project.

⁴¹ Traditional art mediums and techniques include painting, drawing, sculpture and printmaking.

⁴² Digital mediums applied within an artwork includes photography, film, animation, projection, data visualisation.

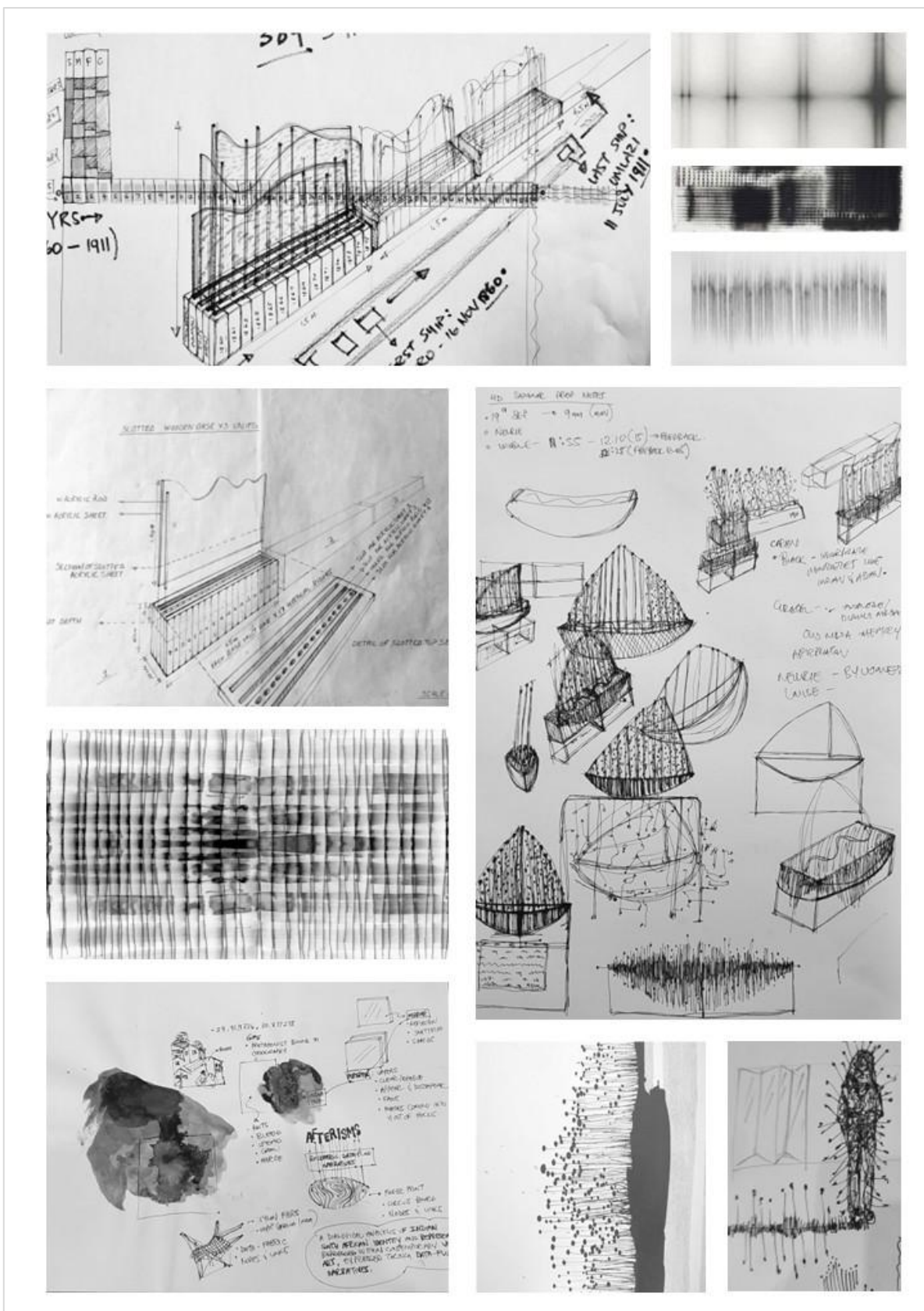




Figure 7. (b) Lucelle Pillay, *My visual journal: a selection drawings & experiments II* (2021-2023).

Social media platforms and a dedicated website (<https://www.lucellepillayart.co.za/latest-exhibition>) provided visitors in situ and online with an interactive exhibition catalogue. Audiences could also access additional information about the original ship lists and, metadata, as well as share images and post comments. The website is an important space that facilitates the virtual afterlife of the exhibition and extends audience engagement and discourse. It becomes a searchable repository and a contemporary archive for reclaimed 'Indian' South African history and identity. Through the art narrative and the overwriting of colonial data, the virtual exhibition becomes a perpetual activism through the performance of identity.

Once the designs of the artworks were finalised, the process moved into the production phase. Using Adobe software such as Dimension, Illustrator and Photoshop, I drafted templates for acrylic laser-cutting and scaled drawings for the construction of wooden lightboxes. When outsourcing to manufacturers, contingencies in terms of time, adaptations and revisions were factored into the production of complex physical pieces. I have overseen all phases of production for each artwork to ensure it conforms aesthetically to my initial concepts.

As the artist, I have undertaken most of the physical making (fig 8) but have also enlisted the services of family and friends (fig 9) during the installation. Critical to the key artwork, *Journeys*, was the accurate representation of data extracted from the original indenture ship lists. Part of my ethical obligation was to stay true to this source, and reflect every identity without exclusion. I entrusted this task to my daughter, Jodie Azalea (fig 9c), a trained tattoo artist, who meticulously engraved miniscule divots into light transmitting acrylic, each representing one of 152 184 labourers. Her investment of labour in this piece imbued meaning and value, as she engaged with an artefact of her ancestry and history.



Figure 8. Lucelle Pillay, Practical art making in studio: India ink experiments on PVC (2023).

To humanise the biographical data,⁴³ a three plane⁴⁴ projection map (*Artefact of origin*) reflected a slow animated scroll, allowing the viewers to read the actual names of people . Coupled with sounds⁴⁵ of the ancient drone of a tanpura and crashing waves, the slow memorial of floating identities was a poignant experience. The visuals and sound design was co-produced with sound engineer, Kevin Leicher (fig 9a). We screen-recorded the scroll of names which spanned two days and used editing techniques such as fades and double exposure; this footage was compressed into an 11 minute and 16 second video clip (<https://www.lucellepillayart.co.za/afterisms-atrefact-of-origin>). 3D designer, Tyla Brassey (fig 9b) assisted with digitally printing custom elements such as acrylic separators, bolt domes and lettering moulds for cement casts. He also constructed a dark room using corex panels for improved projection, as well as a secreted housing for projectors and electronic equipment on the floor.

⁴³ The scrolling lists contained names, age, villages of origin in India, religion, physical markings, allocated plantation and date returned to India.

⁴⁴ The projection was mapped onto three walls within the exhibition space.

⁴⁵ This refers to the audio designed to accompany the artwork, which will be discussed further in chapter 5.



Figure 9. (a) Kevin Leicher⁴⁶ (sound engineer) installing surround speakers (2023).

(b) Tyla Brassey⁴⁷ (3D designer) printing lettering moulds (2023).

(c) Jodie Azalea⁴⁸ (tattoo artist) engraving data forms on acrylic sheets (2023).

In its entirety, the exhibition and artwork fulfil a key aim of this study, to make visible an iteration of contemporary 'Indian' identity from behind a veil of historic obscurity. As an academic, who is not widely published, I realise that this serves as only a modest shift within the visual art space. However, activism, even on a small scale can empower the individual to engage with their own "epistemic reconstitution" (Mignolo cited in Patel 2024:79). The ubiquitous phrase, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step" (Lao Tzu circa 400 BCE) describes perfectly the intention for my art practice. Each exhibition becomes a step closer from the periphery to the centre, and each artwork is a step closer to claiming identity and belonging.

1.9 Summary of chapters

Chapter One introduces the research subject of 'Indian' identity within the visual art space. A brief rationale describes three specific processes (extraverted, introspective and conceptual) applied in analysing this complex subject. This mixed methodology combines reflexivity, autoethnography and theory (literature review) concurrently with conceptual ideation and art making. A primary aim of this study is to initiate a discourse on marginalisation in the visual arts, as well as to interrogate the conditions resulting in the low representation of 'Indian' artists, curators and academics. Supported by theory within postcolonial and decolonial frameworks, the writings of Maharaj, Spivak, Appadurai and Enwezor construct meaning, circumstance and iterations of local and global 'Indian' diasporic identity. Key literature from

⁴⁶ Kevin Vincent Leicher is my partner whose a musician, producer and sound engineer. He has performed with and produced leading acts in Johannesburg and abroad since the 90s. His portfolio in sound design includes various media formats, such as film, TV and live performance. He is currently the lead engineer of AI voice dubbing for Multichoice.

⁴⁷ Tyla Brassey is a George Campbell School of Technology graduate, who designs and builds 3D print machines. Brassey is the founder and owner of the start-up, 3D Ignition, which services the automotive industry with custom accessories and replaceable parts.

⁴⁸ Jodie Azalea Pillay is my daughter, an NSA graduate and a trained tattoo artist is based in Hillcrest, Durban. She fine-tuned her craft by guesting at established studios in Johannesburg and Durban. She has since opened her own tattoo studio (Azalea Ink Tattoos) in Hillcrest, Durban.

the field of South African visual art is comparatively analysed to unpack the arguments of exclusion and censorship that plague this sector. The creative practice that falls within the paradigm of contemporary technology-based work considers the implications of decolonial theory as it relates to data and AI.

Chapter Two provides context for the use of the 'Indian' indenture ship lists as a pivotal data source within this study. The movement, ownership and purpose of this colonial document during the shifting sociopolitical tides becomes a metaphor for the lives of the human identities they contain. Vahed, Waetjen, Desai and Pillay are important local voices from the field of sociology ('Indian' ethnology). They provide insightful views on the history of the ship lists, as well as the origin and social conditions that have been contributing factors towards 'Indian' collective identity. Maharaj, having experienced these social conditions in South Africa during apartheid, deconstructs and conceptualises the insidious nature of racism as a scientific formula that calculates difference. Concepts of authenticity, imagination and fluidity are discussed within my family history (autoethnography) and cross referenced with an Indo-Trinidadian diasporic narrative. The *Kochi-Muziris Biennale* and the first *Johannesburg Biennale* are used as case studies of emerging postcolonial identities within the visual arts.

Chapter Three describes the complex and contradictory social milieu of South Africa as paradoxical and obsessed with race. It is argued that this race-paradox has resulted in the splintering of identity formations into the *Segregated*, *Super* and *Contingent-identity*. This argument is extended into the contemporary visual art space, supported by art literature such as *Visual century* and *In the world*, with key voices being Jamal, Jantjes, Klopper and Pissarra. Ethnographic focus is placed on the cusp-generation group that has transitioned from apartheid into democracy. My study asserts that their (and my own) identity formation has been traumatically destabilised by segregation and further marginalised by the continued racial categorising occurring during the subsequent period of democratic freedom. The artwork of Khan and Makan are read as enactments of their ethnic identities. Within this critique aspects of reflexivity and performance are considered as common to both their art narratives.

Chapter Four positions my art practice within the context of data art, notions of conceptualising digital data as a malleable art medium, oscillate between traditional tactility and digital ethereality. In the discussion of re-presenting human data, a parallel is drawn between Kentridge's work, *Thick time* and thick data, the latter being the theoretical underpinning for my pivotal artwork, *Journeys*. Minority 'Indian' identity is argued to be a performance and an activism that implements the Western exhibition modality yet simultaneously subverts it. Under the decolonial banner, my exhibition, *Afterisms: excentric*

data-fluid narratives is critically analysed as a reconstruction of 'Indian' collective identity using archival material. Based on Enwezor's theories of 'excentricism' and 'after modernism', I enact my own singular identity through ancestral memory from the cultural periphery. Projections and light are used to symbolise illumination and bringing to light lost knowledge. 'Indian' identity is liberated from colonial vice and allowed to fluidly move into iterations of contemporariness.

Chapter Five returns to the core aim of my study, an analysis of the phenomenon of 'Indian' South African identity within the context of the visual arts. The study affirms that there could be no conclusive resolutions or absolute revelations regarding a complex sign of this nature. It also concurs that isolating a single race or ethnicity for analysis is ineffective and regressive within the multicultural social milieu of South Africa. Key findings are summarised within chapters one to four, followed by the theoretical and conceptual contributions of the study.

The study also serves as an example of how colonial data can be employed by marginalised minorities as a contemporary story telling device, one that can inform and forge human connection with audiences by dispelling racial stereotypes. The public art exhibition is described as a platform for reconstituting obscure and forgotten histories, considered irrelevant to the national heritage archive. Limitations of the study are listed as niche audiences, limited funding and institutional gatekeeping. By its example, my study encourages further expressions of minority identity through art, in order to enable meaningful intercultural engagement and healing from the trauma of the apartheid legacy.

CHAPTER TWO: THE 'INDIAN' IDENTITY

Introduction

The method employed within this analysis of 'Indian' identity is multifaceted, due to the complex nature of this sign. It includes the metaphorical application of the indenture ship lists and a discursive analysis of the theories of Sarat Maharaj as a prominent case study. In addition, a diasporic 'imagining' of India, juxtaposed to my autoethnography, demystifies notions of ethnic authenticity. An evaluation of the inaugural biennales of both India and South Africa, the Kochi-Muziris⁴⁹ and *Africus*⁵⁰ respectively, yield findings of post-colonial identities emerging in the global gaze. A proximal reading aims to identify how the modality of the Western biennale permutates within these locales.

Considering that local 'Indian' artists were not included in *Africus*, I have re-presented the artwork of the UDW fine art graduates in the form of an imaginary retrospective. This allows for a more inclusive and unprecedented analysis of 'Indian' identity within the period of Johannesburg's first biennale. This chapter responds to [research questions \(i & iii\)](#) which interrogates how 'Indian' artists and academics negotiate their contemporary identities and to what extent do they critique marginalisation and separatism within contemporary society.

2.1 The Indian Indenture ship lists as a metaphor for collective identity

The archival evidence of the [ship lists \(fig 2\)](#) is applied as a metaphor for 'Indian' identity and representation in South Africa. I have used the [methodology of indexicality \(iv\)](#) and re-purposed this artefact as a signifier of collective identity within the local context. Essential to this discussion is the mercurial concept of value, as discussed in Appadurai's theoretical framework in *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective* (1986). He postulates that both objects and people are moving along a scale of cultural and economic value (Appadurai 2006:15). I have applied this premise of value to the ship list artefact (object) and 'Indian' identity (people), in order to demonstrate how their social trajectories are analogous. Appadurai's postcolonial theory of the construct of social value is critical within a discussion on the possibility of decolonising art history, which is essentially the story of objects and people. Underpinning this argument from a local perspective is Becker's (2017:10) assertion of "use value" as it relates to heritage and identity construction in art history. The convergence of these perspectives is discussed within the context of representation and visibility in the visual arts.

⁴⁹ The inaugural edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale ran from 12th December 2012 to 13th March 2013 and was curated by Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu (Gujral Foundation 2025).

⁵⁰ The first Johannesburg Biennale, titled *Africus*, ran from 28 February to 30 April 1995 and was co-curated by Christopher Till and Lorna Ferguson.

The term 'value' has various definitions depending on the context. For the purpose of this discussion, the meaning to rate or scale something in usefulness, importance or general worth is applicable. One could argue that the very nature of value as it pertains to currency, art, history and cultural artefacts is a colonial construct brought to South Africa by the Dutch and British. Eurocentric social scales of value are possibly the most inculcated and accepted mechanisms of marginalisation existing in the cultural sector today (Bhabha 1994:247). The challenge for those who seek to question these value scales for the purpose of decoloniality is that they hide in plain sight. To contest Eurocentric value is to root out historiography (Becker 2017:2), which is deeply entrenched in Western knowledge systems. Western culture is, and always has been, an authority unto itself, categorising and naming objects and people along its scale of value, yet never having to authenticate itself (Becker 2017:5). Becker (2017:6) refers to Western culture as "...all-consuming, invisible and unnamed", its axiomatic nature open to change and fluidity, yet driven to bind and fix other cultures in time and place.

With the understanding that the European model of art and its history is inextricably entwined in colonial bias (Becker 2017:13), it may be deduced that the resulting scale of values are based on those biases. The social currency or value of both people (artist) and things (art) is constantly shifting yet is always determined by those in power (Appadurai 1986:11, 33). The indenture ship list artefact has moved through the power exchanges of British colonialism and Afrikaner apartheid and now resides in African democracy. Starting its journey as a colonial ledger of human resource, it held a value as a transactional record. It served as a mechanism to regulate, control and assert ownership over the lives tethered to it (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:47-50; Bhana 1987:1). Having a high value and function during colonialism, the artefact was downgraded substantially during Afrikaner nationalism, to an obsolete record documenting foreign occupation.

During the apartheid era, historian Joy Brain⁵¹ (fig 10) encountered the paper lists as discarded piles of dusty volumes in no particular order (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:47-56)⁵². Brain, together with Surendra Bhana⁵³ and a myriad of 'Indian' students and staff at the University of Durban Westville (UDW) undertook the colossal task of analysing, ordering and

⁵¹ Joy Brain was an information specialist at the (White) Teachers' Training College of Edgewood and joined the history department at UDW in 1983. She was instrumental in undertaking the arduous and labour-intensive task of organising and recording the ship lists over a period of twenty-five years. Her book, *Indian Christians in Natal 1860-1911* (1983) was as a result of her research of the indenture ship list artefact.

⁵² The 'Indian' indenture ship lists were stored at the Department of Indian Affairs in Durban, Natal, and accessed by Joy Brain in 1978 (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:55-56).

⁵³ Bhana was Professor of History at UDW and at the University of Kansas. As a colleague of Brain, he assisted her for a period of time in replicating and digitising the ship lists. His numerous publications include *Setting down roots: Indian migrants in South Africa, 1860-1911* (coauthored with Joy Brain) and *Indentured Indian emigrants to Natal 1860-1902*.

transcribing the paper⁵⁴ ship lists (fig 11). As a rich data source, it became the subject of 25 years of research and digitisation, thereby elevating it on the value scale to the status of cultural artefact. The complete digital archive was stored in the Gandhi-Luthuli Documentation Centre at the University of KwaZulu Natal.⁵⁵ Brain ceremoniously handed the full digital data set, extricated from the paper ship lists to the Minister of Arts and Culture in 2003 at a diversity celebration (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:47-66). This period was ceremonial as the tenth year into democratic freedom under the ANC government.



Figure 10. (a) Joy Brain with her book *Christian Indians in Natal*.
 (b) Boxes containing the ship registers at the Durban Archives.
 (c) Items from Joy Brain's archive of microfilms of the ship lists.

It is important to note that technological advances between the 1990s and 2000s, affording researchers computers and internet, transformed the materiality of the paper ship list artefact (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:47-62). Its tactile paper substance was converted into digital code, thereby increasing its portability, accessibility and usability. Its new ether-reality was detached from the inertness of paper to a fluid state. In its new form, its narratives could be stored, shared and navigated in multidimensional ways using computer processing. By changing its state of materiality, the digital artefact had increased in value both physically and metaphorically, its data being of ethnographic worth to researchers and academics of various disciplines. Ironically, the original paper artefact continued to decrease in socio-political value. In 1991 the lists were found by a records clerk⁵⁶ in a state of further deterioration on the floor of a room in the Department of Home Affairs (previously the Department of 'Indian' Affairs) (fig 12b) in Durban.

⁵⁴ It is important to note that the original ship lists were volumes of handwritten information on fragile ledger paper, which made them susceptible to deterioration and erasure.

⁵⁵ Previously the University of Durban Westville (UDW).

⁵⁶ This was Andrea Luxton who was hired in 1991 to train government staff on records management (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:63).

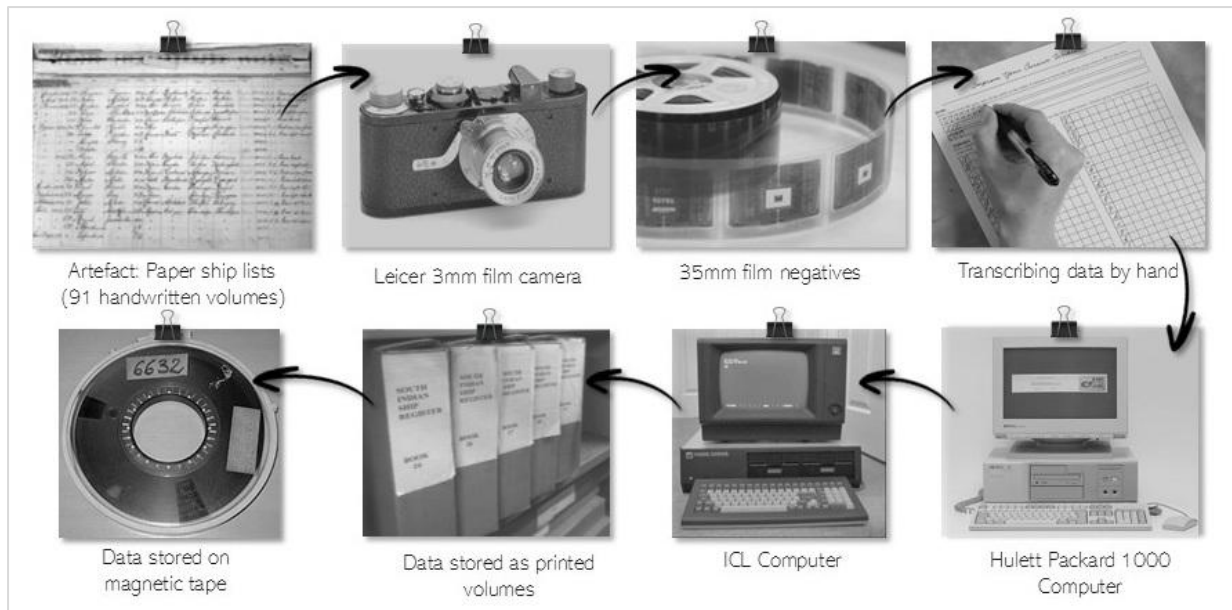


Figure 11. Lucelle Pillay, *Processes of digitising the paper indenture ship lists* (2023).

Realising the archival value of the paper documents, the clerk arranged for them to be moved to the Durban Archives Repository (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:63-64) (fig 12c) where they are preserved today. In essence, the physical paper ship lists were devalued during apartheid and continued to devalue during democracy. Becker's (2017:10) proposal of low "use value" possibly explains the archive's social degeneration. She asserts that the arts and cultural production are always tethered to the dominant nation state, and value is imbued in specific artefacts that support this narrative. State heritage is about underpinning socio-political dominance by using curated fragments of the past, which is tied to identity construction and value systems in the present. Within this framework of thought, I contend that, similar to the discarded paper artefact, the 'Indian' minority identity holds no "use value" in the cultural narrative of democratic Black South Africa.

Given that the 'Indian' identity holds no value within state heritage, it can be deduced that this has contributed to their low representation in the cultural sphere. However, within the broader paradigm of minorities versus majorities, low value and lack of representation may be but one social stigma. According to Appadurai (2004:121) and Mishra (2005:4), the very presence of minorities in proximity to a nation-state's identity causes political unease. They warn that behind every nation-state's veil of tolerance, multiculturalism and inclusion lurks the notion of a single sovereign ethnic identity (Appadurai 2006:3).

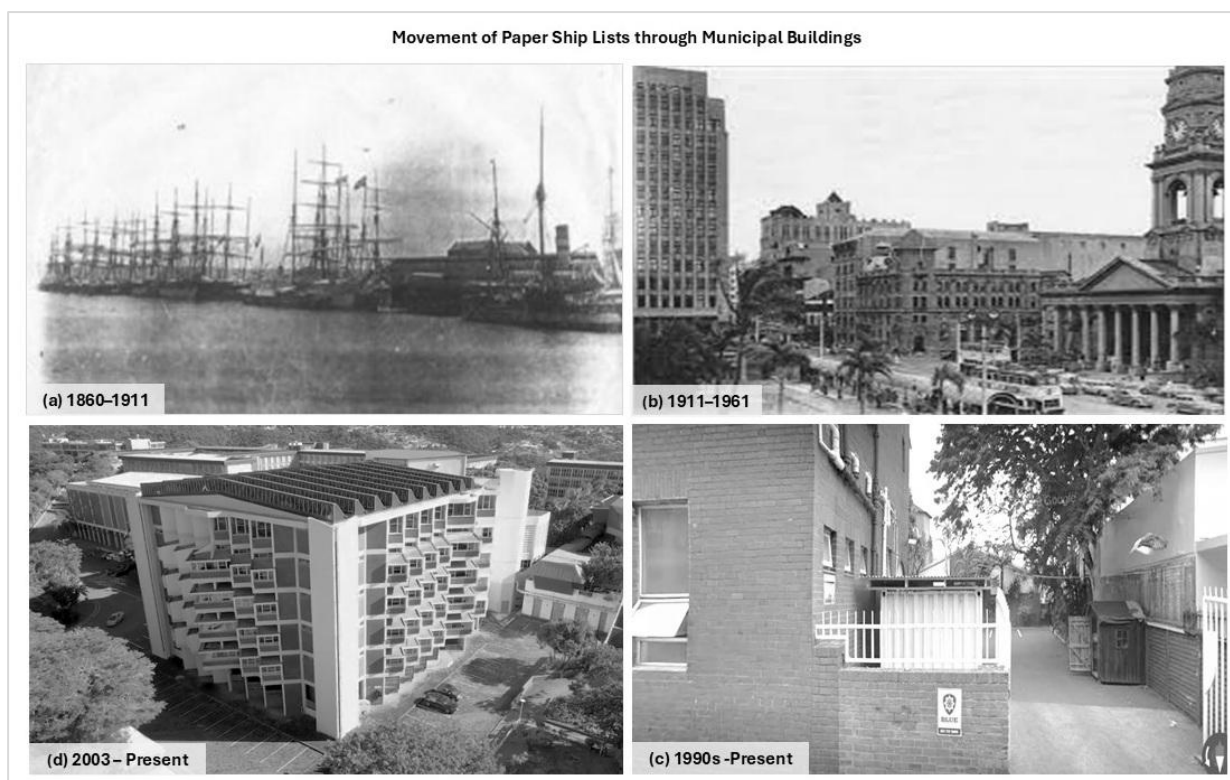


Figure 12. (a) British Protector of Immigrants in Durban Harbour, circa 1890.

(b) Indian Affairs building, Victoria Embankment, Durban, circa 1950.

(c) Street view of Durban Archives Repository.

(d) Gandhi-Luthuli Documentation Centre, UKZN.

This veneration of nationhood is imaginary and constructed from romanticised fantasies of a homogenous utopia (Mishra 2005:4). It therefore stands to reason that the state's 'homogenous imaginarium',⁵⁷ will play out on cultural and heritage platforms such as the arts (Garnsey 2020:2), to reflect a 'race-specific' construction of identity. My study contends that racial categorisation during the time of democracy, serves to politically promote black homogeneity in order to maintain power.

Homogenous constructions of identity perpetuated by the state breed xenophobic violence, which has sporadically surfaced in the social life of 'Indian' identity before and since democratic freedom (Landy et al 2004:212; SAHO 2024a; Menon 2021; *Los Angeles Times* 1985; Fogel 2021). Historically, the political "unease" caused by the mere proximity of minority identity, described as the "Indian problem", (Moodley & Adam 2000:57-58) would

⁵⁷ A place devoted to stimulating and cultivating the imagination (Power thesaurus 2025). In the context of this study, situated within postcolonial discourse, the term is weighted with the more dystopic undertone of Western dominance and systemic control over the third world and the previously colonised. For example, the imaginings of imperialism become an oppressive reality in the lives of subaltern communities.

result in anti-Indian legislature, threats of forced repatriation and land restrictions (Pillay 2019:78-79). These pressures occurred a century after the first ship, the *Truro*,⁵⁸ brought labourers to Natal in 1860, South African born descendants were kept in a social limbo of uncertainty. In the midst of impermanence, identity remained fixed to the ship lists as a sign of foreignness and difference.

The original ship numbers would appear on ID documents, marriage, birth and death certificates for a century after the arrival of the first labourers in 1860 (fig 13a, 13b & 13c). Therefore, the symbolism of the ship lists within the construction of an essentialised 'Indian' identity cannot be underestimated. Also important to the analysis of the ship list data, is that groups of people travelled on ships over a span of 51 years. During the long and treacherous journeys, social bonds and friendships were forged, referred to as "Jehaji-bhai" (shipmates) (Landy *et al* 2004:207). These micro communities formed onboard the ships remained connected long after disembarking and orientating to life on the sugar plantations of Natal. The solidarities formed at sea are an aspect of 'Indian' identity formation that has not been fully explored. Shipmate communities overcame the stigma of caste⁵⁹ and the original class systems of India (Landy *et al* 2004:206, 209), in favour of survival, reciprocity and "fashioning of new personal identities" (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:52). The ship became the liminal space in which identity could become fluid.

The narrative of Jehaji-bhai speaks directly to a fragmentation or relinquishing of past identity upon boarding the ship. For those of low caste in India, the soil of Africa seemed to present an opportunity for reinvention and social agency. However, the oppressive system of colonial engineered indenture, fixed identity firmly to a state of unhomed limbo. Decades after the labourers were brought to Natal, their documents and those of their children bore the ship-number-identifier (fig 13a). To this present day, 'Indian' indenture descendants can only trace their ancestry via this tentative link to the first labourers. Due to time, erasure and inaccessibility to the lists, many lost their history and cultural centredness. This demonstrates the symbolism of the ship lists and how they are implicated in the dislocation and impermanence of 'Indian' identity.

⁵⁸ The first in the ship lists, the *Truro*, carried 342 labourers (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:52).

⁵⁹ To maintain focus, this study does not delve into an in-depth analysis of the contemporary permutations of the India caste system on South African identity formations. From my experience in Chatsworth the concept of caste was long dissipated, with groups identifying with religious beliefs and being socially stratified by profession, earnings and education.

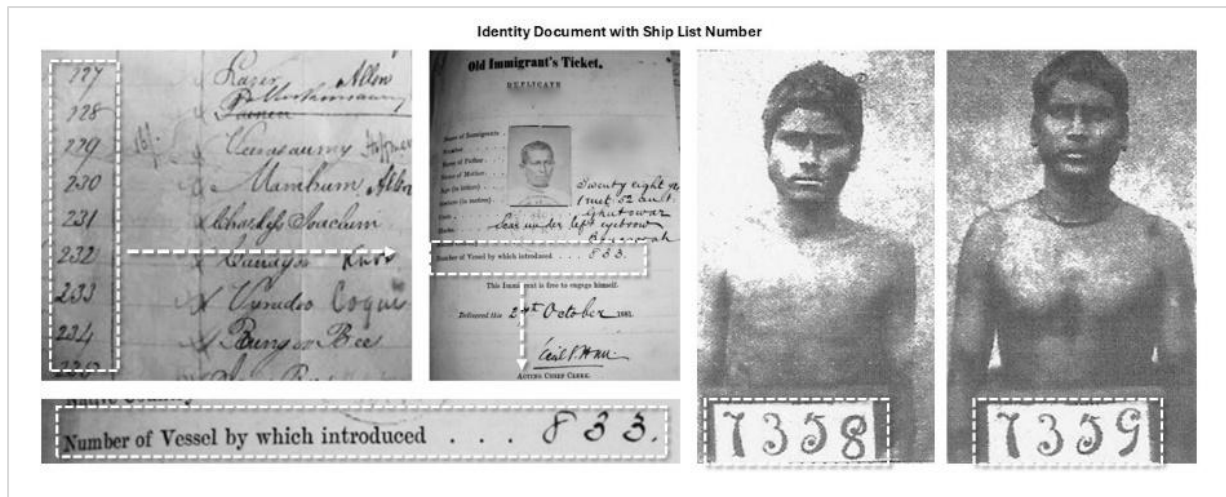


Figure 13. (a) Mole's genealogy, detail from page of Indian Immigration Register with 'dotted line' overlay.
 (b) Example of old immigrant ticket with 'dotted line' overlay indicating ship number.
 (c) Early Indian immigrants to Natal with tin tickets 'dotted line' overlay indicating ship number.

The signs of separatism and marginalisation in contemporary South African society are far more discreet than in the previous political era's, occurring mostly within the socio-economic environments of the public and private workplace. It is within these spaces that 'race' sits high on the social value scale, with the dominant key players being Blacks and Whites. As Kogila Moodley and Heribert Adams (2000:56) state, "Ironically, today, conservative whites insist on colour-blind individualism while progressive blacks reintroduce racial monitoring to achieve representativity". This means that whilst previously advantaged Whites relinquish race to assert a liberal stance, previously disadvantaged Blacks cling to race in order to claim new economic priorities. The value of race today is less an attachment to ethno-racial pride than a social currency used to compete for positions and limited resources (Landy et al 2004:213).

This racial paradox is written into legislation and has led to systemic exclusions that play out within the daily existence of minorities (Moodley & Adams 2000:54; Raggunun *et al* 2022:252-258). They become the unfortunate, silenced middle child, scrambling for economic survival, where playing the race card serves as a liability rather than an asset. During the Mandela⁶⁰ years, 'Indians' were included as part of the liberation struggle (fig 14c), recognising the contributions of political activists such as Ahmed Kathrada (fig 14b), Ismail and Fatima Meer (fig 14a), Billy Nair, Monty Naicker, Frene Ginwala, Yusuf Dadoo and

⁶⁰ Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was a South African anti-apartheid activist and politician who served as the first president of South Africa from 1994 to 1999. He was the country's first black head of state and the first elected in a fully representative democratic election.

Maulvi Cachalia (Mahabir 2022). However, during the ignominious Zuma⁶¹ presidency, the collective 'Indian' identity slid down the value scale, impacting their ability to compete for economic stability (Vahed & Desai 2017:155).



Figure 14. (a) Nelson Mandela⁶² visits Fatima Meer, after his release in February 1990.

(b) Ahmed Kathrada released from prison (1989).

(c) A policeman arrests two Indian protestors in South Africa (1983).

The argument that people and things are not that different in the context of their “social lives” (Appadurai 2006:15) has been applied to the ship list artefact and ‘Indian’ identity. It has been theoretically discussed that just as objects can oscillate between states of commodity and singularity, so too can people. “Slaves, once sold as chattel, can become gradually humanised, personified, and reenchanting by the investiture of humanity” (Appadurai 2006:15). This quote illustrates the constantly shifting socio-political value scale that people of colour have been subject to in South Africa.

The ‘Indian’ identity has fluidly moved through dehumanising and rehumanising political structures and has become a new hybridity of Indo-African origin. How would the authority of government attempt to tease out the essence of its ‘Indianness’, disentangle and discard its ‘Africanness’? It imposes unconstitutional racial tagging that limits not only the ability to compete economically but also denies belonging. This point is critical to my argument as it underpins the [primary research question \(i\)](#) and is further problematised in [Chapter Three](#) where the historic origins of Brownness are discussed as causal to BEE.

Becker identifies that value scales are enmeshed in Western knowledge systems and permeate visual culture and art history. The state construction of homogenous identity using the platform of heritage is argued to contribute to the low representation of the ‘Indian’

⁶¹ Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma was the President of the Republic of South Africa from 9 May 2009 until 14 February 2018.

⁶² Mandela, affectionately referred to locally as ‘Madiba’, was released on 11 February 1990, after spending 27 years in prison (Riba 2023). He became the first Black president of South Africa in 1994 and an iconic figure of human rights activism worldwide.

identity within the cultural narrative. Becker (2017:10) explains this as a pecking order, in which minorities holding low “use-value” and are excluded or erased from the national narrative. The parallel social trajectory of the ship lists and the identities they contain supports the assertion that collective ‘Indian’ identity resides on the periphery of South African culture and history. Furthermore, its foreignness and difference are maintained by the rigorous imposition of racial labelling and marginalisation by the state and by proxy the cultural sector.

2.2 Sarat Maharaj: decoding the “untranslatable other”

Maharaj is a South-African born art historian, orator, curator and lecturer, and is introduced as a key figure within the local and global art world. His theories on the ‘Indian’ identity as “untranslatable” and the social condition of its diaspora within visual art and art history, is highly significant in the analysis of ‘Indian’ identity. Maharaj’s early attempts to academically contest the system of apartheid derailed his studies in Natal and forced him to seek scholarly exile in the UK in 1979 (Van Robbroeck 2011:117). According to alumnus Betty Govinden⁶³ (2011:61), the *College for Blacks⁶⁴ of Indian Origin* on the far-flung Salisbury Island⁶⁵ (fig 15b & fig15c) was designed to be an ‘intellectual desert’, aiming to ‘ghettoize and quarantine’ the ‘Indian’ identity. As a student at the college, Maharaj felt the brunt of the white Afrikaner faculty when his thesis was flagged for reflecting anti-apartheid sentiments. He fondly remembers being mentored and assisted through this precarious situation by the late Walter Battiss (fig 15d), whom he considered a liberal and free-thinker (Maharaj cited in Pillay 2022). Maharaj’s career trajectory in the UK and parts of Europe are discussed within the context of identity and representation and addresses [research questions \(i & iii\)](#).

⁶³ Dr. Devarakshanam (Betty) Govinden is a distinguished Indian-South African scholar, poet, and writer whose work bridges literature, activism, theology and identity. She holds a doctorate in literature from the University of Natal (now University of KwaZulu-Natal), and she has served as Senior Research Associate in the Faculty of Education there.

⁶⁴ It is important to note that under Afrikaner Nationalist legislature, ‘Indians’ were categorised as Black; this was one of the many race labels attached to their identity.

⁶⁵ Under apartheid, the different population groups in South Africa had separate facilities. Salisbury Island’s *University College for Blacks of Indian Origin* was established in 1961. The college was the first tertiary educational institution for Indians. Students used to commute to the college by ferry or board in hostels on the island. It closed in 1971 when it was replaced by the University of Durban-Westville.



Figure 15. (a) Indian students commuting to Salisbury Island (1971).

(b) Exterior view of the FAD building at Salisbury Island (2012).

(c) Library at Salisbury Island (1971).

(d) Walter Battiss in his office at Unisa (1964).

After leaving South Africa, Maharaj began his doctorate⁶⁶ at Goldsmiths University of London in 1980. Upon completion, he was granted a professorship of history and the theory of art. He became the first Rudolf Arnheim Professor at Humboldt University and a Research Fellow at the Jan Van Eyck Akademie (Lund University 2021). During this time his literary contribution and curatorial output indicate that his primary influences were Ananda Coomaraswamy,⁶⁷ James Joyce,⁶⁸ Marcel Duchamp,⁶⁹ and Ulrich Beck⁷⁰ (fig 16). Dating as far back as 1918 with the *Dance of Śiva*, the writing of the Indian art historian, Coomaraswamy is pertinent within this discussion, specifically his critique of Western knowledge systems and his dissemination of the cosmology of Indian art. Maharaj's thinking was informed by these ideologies and he therefore advocated for both 'Indian' and African indigenous knowledge systems to become validated epistemologies within postcolonial discourse. He has implemented this inclusive worldview as pedagogy in his current position as Professor of Visual Art and Knowledge Systems at the Malmö Art Academy in Sweden (Lund University 2021).

⁶⁶ Maharaj's PhD dissertation was entitled "The dialectic of modernism and mass culture: studies in post war British art" (Lund University 2021).

⁶⁷ Ananda Kentish Muthu Coomaraswamy was a Ceylonese metaphysician, historian and a philosopher of Indian art who was an early interpreter of Indian culture to the West. During World War I, he moved to America as curator of Asiatic Art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, where he curated the first large collection of Indian art.

⁶⁸ James Augustine Aloysius Joyce was an Irish novelist, short story writer and poet, widely regarded as one of the most influential modernist authors of the 20th century. Joyce was educated at Clongowes Wood College, Belvedere College, where he studied modern languages and developed his interest in literature and aesthetics.

⁶⁹ Duchamp was regarded as the father of conceptualism and the founder of the radical art movement, Dadaism. He studied at the Académie Julian in 1904-5; his early figure paintings were influenced by Matisse and Fauvism. In 1911 he created a personal brand of Cubism combining earthy colours, mechanical and visceral forms, and a depiction of movement which owes as much to Futurism as to Cubism. His friendship with Man Ray led to their publication of New York Dada in 1921 (Tate 2025).

⁷⁰ Ulrich Beck (1944-2015) was a German sociologist, and one of the most cited social scientists in the world during his lifetime. He was the Professor for Sociology at the Ludwig-Maximilian University Munich (LMU) and the British Journal of Sociology Visiting Centennial Professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Maharaj considered Beck a colleague and friend.

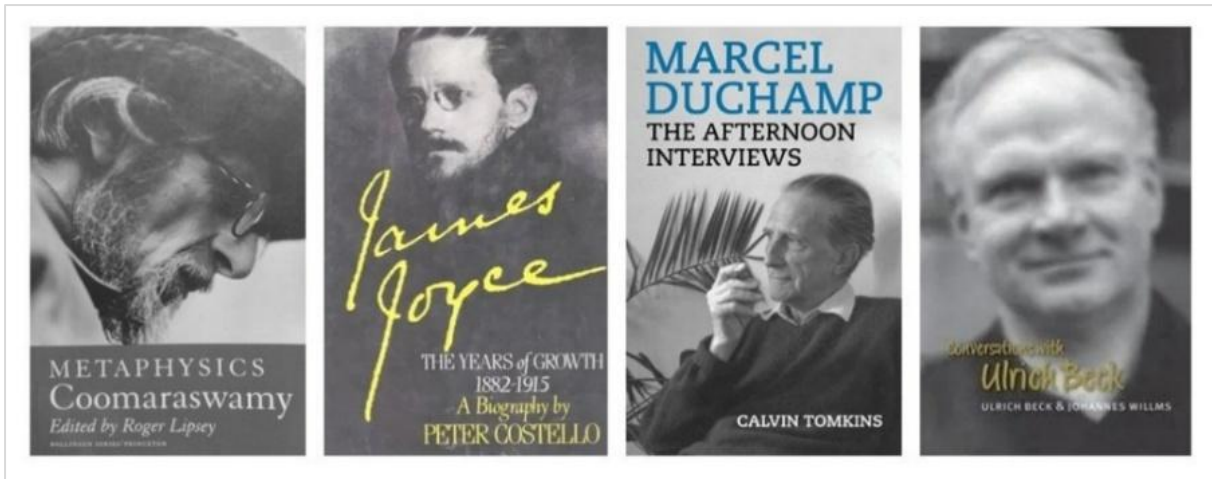


Figure 16. (a) *Metaphysics* Coomaraswamy by Roger Lipsey.
 (b) *James Joyce: the years of growth, 1882-1915: a biography* by Peter Costello.
 (c) *Marcel Duchamp: the afternoon interviews* by Calvin Tomkins.
 (d) *Conversations with Ulrich Beck* Ulrich Beck by Johannes Willms and Ulrich Beck.

Coomaraswamy, is known for his astute translation of Indian art and cosmology (Coomaraswamy 2004). He was a proponent of perennial philosophy within traditional Indian sacred art, which he brought to Western discourse. He presented a revolutionary and controversial critique of modern civilisation as severely inferior to India's ancient knowledge systems (Coomaraswamy 1918:2). The scope and complexity of Coomaraswamy's philosophic canon is far too extensive to cover in this thesis; my aim is to briefly introduce only those theories that influenced Maharaj's notion of "untranslatability". To contextualise this discussion within the scope of 'Indian' identity formation, it must be understood that ancient Indian philosophy and art has been [absent from the education](#) of 'Indians' in Natal. In Chapter Three, my study argues that this severance has destabilised their perceptions of inter-generational identity and cultural lineage to India. I view the deficient education system under apartheid as a key reason for the lack of representation ([research question ii](#)) and visibility of identity in the cultural sphere. Stemming from a purely Westernised curriculum authored from the perspective of the coloniser which had already invisibilised 'Indian' identity, making the collective uncertain as to their place and worth in South African society.

Maharaj's exile allowed him the freedom to re-discover the wisdoms of Coomaraswamy's interpretations, which he internalised as part of his self-described identity formation. His decolonial deconstruction of Western knowledge systems and his advocacy for indigenous and new knowledge systems through art, demonstrates Coomaraswamy's influence over his

curatorial practice (Maharaj 2002).⁷¹ Coomaraswamy's linguistic feat of 'translating' the ancient visual culture of Hinduism and Buddhism into English, was possibly fraught with idiomatic and semantic slippages. How does one interpret Sanskrit, one of the world's oldest languages into English, a dialect developed 2000 years later (*Britannica* 2025) and maintain authentic meaning? Roman Jakobson's (1980:129-130) dialogic of the conscious and unconscious offers a critical answer to my rhetorical question in his proposal that differing cultural groups may hold dissimilar and incompatible world views. He explains that language should not be perceived as a set of interchangeable labels that can be fixed to other groups, as true meaning resides in both their conscious and unconscious experience of the world. This depth of reasoning supports Maharaj's (1994:par3-4) stance that Westernisation attempts to translate 'Indian' identity by flattening it into sameness, a similar result Jakobson (180:130) warns about and refers to as "an over-simplified schematism" or reductive translation of culture. Important to this argument is the philosophical perspective that human consciousness is more complex than the mechanism of the language, furthermore, dissimilarities (untranslatabilities) must be embraced as new territories of undiscovered meaning of the other.

In the context of Indian art, Coomaraswamy (1918:35-36) speaks of the "Absolute", a monistic belief that ascribes a philosophical and metaphysical perception to the phenomenon of reality as composed of a single substrate. Based on this fundamental notion of 'oneness', spiritualism,⁷² art (*rasa*),⁷³ art appreciation⁷⁴ and identity⁷⁵ are a unified experience, inextricably bound in the substance of the universal life force. Coomaraswamy's interpretation of Indian cosmology contributes valuable insights on the origins of fluidity, a key concept of my study ([research question v](#)), specifically the coalescence of various facets of identity, art and spirituality. Steeped in spiritualism and ritual, Indian art appears to be incongruent and divergent in nature from Western art. It serves as a functional conduit towards the devotee achieving *rasa*, unlike Eurocentric notions of monetary valued imposed on the art object, and reverence for the artistic genius, as in the tenets of the Renaissance period. Maharaj (1994:par2) therefore argues that due to the inherent incompatibilities

⁷¹ He was a co-curator of Documenta11 and curated Retinal .Optical. Visual. Conceptual ... at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, in 2002, with Richard Hamilton and Ecke Bonk. He was also co-curator of Farewell to postcolonialism, Guangzhou, in 2008, and Art, knowledge and politics at the 29th Bienal de São Paulo in 2010. He was Chief Curator of the 2011 Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, Pandemonium: art in a time of creativity fever, and a peer advisor to the Sharjah Biennial 11 in 2013.

⁷² The belief in a greater divine presence or God translated as "*Brahman*" in the Hindu dialect (*Hindu American Foundation* 2025).

⁷³ The word art may be translated as "*rasa*" in the Hindu dialect, meaning beauty and aesthetic emotion (Coomaraswamy 1918:31).

⁷⁴ The concept of 'art appreciation', as it is understood in Western culture, does not exist within Indian art, neither is there a direct translation of term 'aesthetics'. The Hindu term "*rāśasvādāna*" as a form of aesthetic contemplation is the closest equivalent (Coomaraswamy 1918:35).

⁷⁵ The viewer or person who appreciates art is translated as "*rasika*" (Coomaraswamy 1918:31).

between Indian and European knowledge systems, the English language renders the essential nature of Indian identity as “untranslatable”. It is on this point of departure that Maharaj (1994:par4) bases his theoretical stance, that the translation of Indian culture is an act of reductiveness due to its disjuncture from Western thought and languages. Furthermore, the act is always monodirectional, with the burden of translation incumbent on the ‘other’ culture towards Western standards of universality. However, untranslatability should never be regarded as a negative; its enigmatic nature should be respected for its vibrancy and potential to yield alternate human wisdoms.

Another influential figure for Maharaj was the sociologist Beck, who focused on the theories of globalisation and cosmopolitanism. Beck’s dialectic of “cosmopolitanisation” (Beck 2002:18) places emphasis on the ‘national’, a state’s internal dynamics and how it treats its people. He asserted that real transformation occurs with identities on the ground, and proposed a methodological framework for negotiating both the national and international as scenes of “inclusive oppositions” (Beck 2002:19). This framework seeks to tackle the real disparities within multiculturalism and the new social conflicts erupting, in what he refers to as “the second modernity” (Beck 2002:18). Beck’s concept of cosmopolitanisation as a framework for real social transformation, supports Maharaj’s critique of international spaces merely ‘managing’ diversity to their own advantage (Maharaj 2002:par4; Araeen 2000). The discourse of cosmopolitanism is an important prelude to the geography of decolonial activism through art, which I will discuss in the section, [*The biennale effect: imaginings of the third kind*](#). I will theoretically expand on the role of geographical centres in postcolonial societies such as India and South Africa, as regulators of culture in the form of the European biennale format.

Maharaj (1994:par1) critiques the international art space as a “scene of translations”, meaning that it is where ‘otherness’ is managed (Maharaj 2002:par4), measured and categorised. Beck’s views (2002:18) underpin those of Maharaj, specifically that the ‘international’ is limited to a “monologic imagination”, which excludes otherness. In a similar way to Beck’s proposal of a grassroots cosmopolitanisation, Bhabha (1994:xvi-xvii) describes the Trinidadian⁷⁶ variant as “vernacular cosmopolitanism”. He asserts that it is far removed from the wealthy cities and profit margins of “global cosmopolitanism” (Bhabha 1994:xiv). He explains that this variant is measured in terms of the human rights granted to national minorities and global migrants. Bhabha (1994:xvii) contends that the most critical is the “right to difference”, not the sacrifice of difference to assimilation or hybridisation, but

⁷⁶ Trinidadians live in the country of Trinidad and Tobago. The population is made up of people from many different ethnicities, religions and nationalities. They include Afro-Indo & Euro-Trinidadians, Cocoa Panyols & Santa Rosa Carib.

“difference within equality”. This echoes Beck’s (2002:19) “inclusive oppositions” occupying international spaces as equal but different entities. Note the theoretical triangulation occurring between Beck and Bhabha as they both maintain that true transformation starts with the fundamental human rights and agency we grant the most vulnerable in society. These spaces of agency and the politics of geography will be discussed further within the context of visual art and the biennales held in India and South Africa in section [*The biennale effect: imaginations of the third kind*](#).

Beck and Maharaj attempt to redirect the discourse of cosmopolitanism away from the control of Western elitists (Beck 2002:17; Rao 2013:166-167), who are impervious to the long term and far-reaching effects of residual coloniality. These residual structures, according to Maharaj (1994:par3-4), continue to manage diversity within the international art scene, by rebranding differentiation with the label of ‘hybridity’. His decoding of such terms reveals their long-term shortfalls of cultural reductionism, which he refers to as “flattening sameness”, meaning a type of assimilation that re-labels ‘Indian’ identity as a subcategory within a greater, all-encompassing epistemological narrative. Maharaj’s attachment to Coomaraswamy’s rejection of assimilation as a promise of Western progress becomes evident here.

Becker (2017:5-6) refers to this form of assimilation occurring within South African art history, in her argument of “integration as opposed to inclusion”. Like Maharaj, she raises the tensions that exist between maintaining epistemological plurality over the passive acceptance of hegemony (Okeke-Angulu cited in Becker 2017:5). She further argues that ‘inclusion’ panders superficially to the rhetoric of decoloniality without truly affecting transformation in the visual arts in South Africa. ‘Integration’, however, holds the potential for curating a more authentic spectrum of diversity without hybridisation. Perhaps this is what Bhabha (1994:xvii) meant by “the right to difference within equality”, and those differences should be reflected in our art and histories. My study asserts that, when difference is represented and respected via visual culture, it stimulates a greater social acceptance and appreciation. This could positively reinvigorate the artistic output of minorities and stimulate career paths towards the arts. The question is whether the visual arts space can rise to meet the challenge of true integration, and reflect the spectrum of difference occurring in this country.

During his co-curatorship of Documenta 11, Maharaj brings his excentric ‘Natalian’⁷⁷ identity to the centre of European art discourse with a re-enactment of *The apartheid-era art history room* (fig 17). He reconceptualised the physical space of his classroom on Salisbury Island

⁷⁷ A person born and raised in the region of Natal (colonial origin) in South Africa, now known as KwaZulu Natal.

into an ideological time capsule, with cultural art forms existing in separate compartments, each organised according to an “evolutionary ladder” of artefacts (Maharaj 2021:par5). The installation displays the dominant Eurocentric modality of art history (Chakrabarty 1992:1-2), fuelled by the modernist drive to categorise both people and things along a scale of value (Appadurai 1986:1; 2006:15). This re-enactment of memory becomes a performance in which Maharaj’s subaltern identity as a student remains invisible and silent amongst the valued apparatus of cultural progress (Enwezor 2009:602).

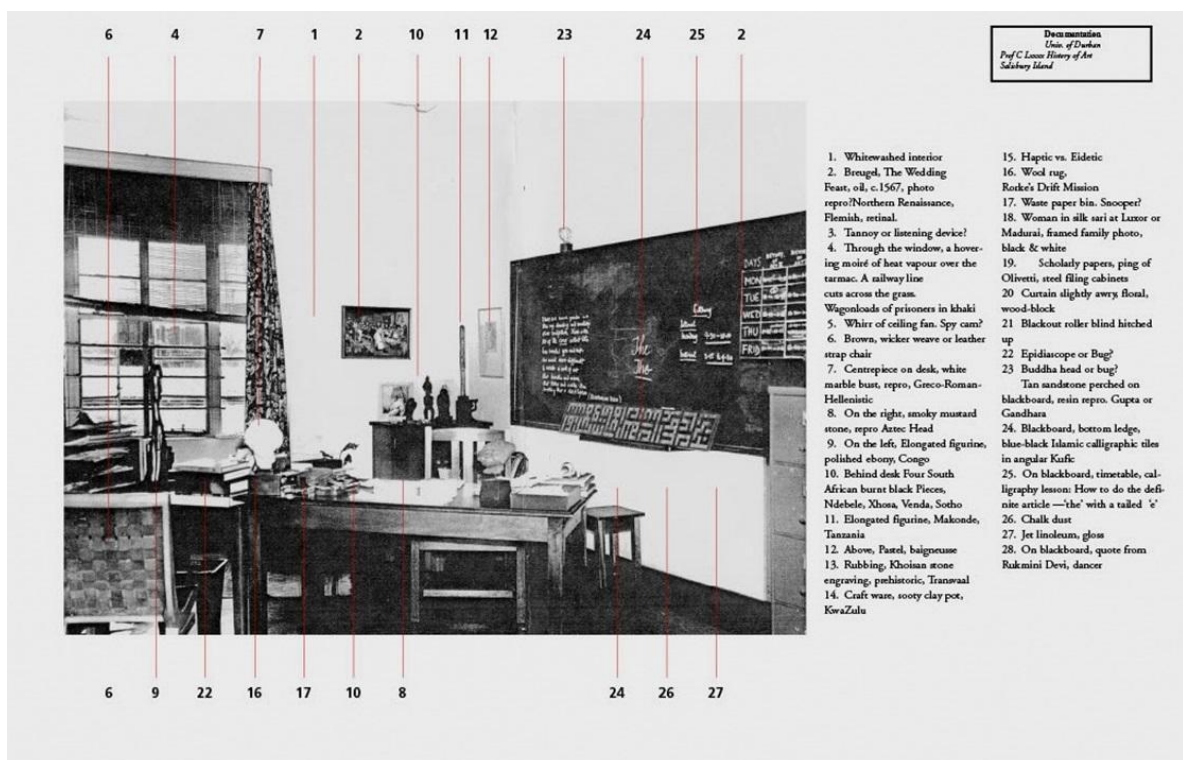


Figure 17. Sarat Maharaj, *Annotated version of The apartheid-era art history room* (AAH Room) (c.1971).

The subaltern may become visible, but only as a refracted image through the Eurocentric lens; identity is formed through, and in relation to, a preordained historical narrative. The epistemic superiority of West over East is solidified in art education; while Greco-European philosophy is hailed as the universal scientific measure of all theoretical reason, Indian philosophy is relegated to the realms of “mystical-religious” cultural practice (Chakrabarty 1992:3). Maharaj illustrates how the performance of a singular identity (through art practice), and the re-framing of a historic artefact, can construct deeper ethnological meaning for the collective identity within decolonial discourse. Influenced by this method, I have applied it to my own artwork in the re-presentation of archival material within the public forum of the exhibition *Afterisms*.

2.3 Imagining India: aspects of fluidity and authenticity in diasporic identity

The concept of fluidity will be used within the theoretical postcolonial context of authentic 'Indian' identity and the diasporic imagination. An argument is made for a fluid identity, one that is not predetermined and is not constituted on the basis of homogeneity. Identity or "identification" continue to form and reform when it gets access to other cultures and is therefore fluid in nature, never a finite product (Bhabha 1994:73; Choudhary 2018:3; Moodley 2012b:47). On the basis of this argument, the aspect of cultural authenticity is discussed in relation to Indians in India and India's colonial diaspora.⁷⁸ My study questions notions of the loss or dissolution of 'ethnic and cultural purity' within diasporic communities living outside India. The problematised concept of 'ethnic purity' itself within diasporic groups described as 'Indian' is debated. I have applied an autoethnographic methodology, in the form of sourced narratives and case studies, including my family history as a cultural text. I consider how notions of India as an imaginary cultural benchmark of 'purity' and 'authenticity' negatively influence formations of local identity.

Stuart Hall⁷⁹ (1990:225) describes cultural identity as a 'process' rather than a finite entity. Similarly, Bhabha (1994:73) refers to identity as an iterative process of "identification"; he points out that a true and static image cannot be gleaned in space and time. Based on both Hall's and Bhabha's descriptions, this study conceptualises cultural identity as a process of 'becoming' as well as 'being', moving fluidly between past and present, in a perpetual interplay of history, culture and power. With fluidity comes instability, and identity becomes relational to non-fixed discursive social narratives (Laclau & Mouffe cited in Islam 2022:3) that are open-ended. This instability and inarticulate nature of this fluid cultural identity is underpinned by Maharaj's 'untranslatability'. Unable to bind within a stable articulation of difference, identity is allowed to engage with its contemporariness and participate in its future making. It is within this theoretical framework of fluidity that my study positions the 'Indian' artist.

Having established the meaning of fluid cultural identity within a postcolonial context, I will discuss the social construct of authentic 'Indian' identity from the perspective of a diasporic 'Indian' descendant born in South Africa. Being many generations removed from my Indian ancestors, I consider the term 'authentic' and its association with self-perception and the

⁷⁸ The descendants of Indian indentured labourers can be found in: the Caribbean; the Indian Ocean and Africa; Asia and the Pacific Ocean and South America. Specific places in the Caribbean include: Trinidad, Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, Jamaica, Saint Vincent, the Grenadines and Grenada. Specific places in the Indian Ocean and Africa include Mauritius, Réunion, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Specific places in Asia and the Pacific Ocean include Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Fiji. Specific places in South America include Suriname and French Guiana (Allen 2017).

⁷⁹ Stuart Henry McPhail Hall (1932-2014) was a Jamaican-born British Marxist sociologist, cultural theorist, and political activist. Hall, along with Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams was one of the founding figures of the school of thought known as British Cultural Studies or the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies.

gaze of others. Mohua Chakraborty⁸⁰ analyses the concept of cultural authenticity in the short story, *Out on Main Street*, by Indo-Trinidadian, Shani Mootoo.⁸¹ One of Mootoo's female protagonists states that Trinidadians are seen as "cultural bastards: not really Indian, but merely products of colonialism" (Chakraborty 2014:30). She continues to explain in the first-person narrative that having brown skin is the only thing she has in common with Indians from India. She blames herself for this disconnectedness, feeling responsible for her local accent and the abandonment of traditional rituals. She refers to Indo-Trinidadians as "kitchen Indians" (Chakraborty 2014:30-31), as their food tends to be the only link to authentic Indian identity. She is embarrassed that both the English⁸² and Indians⁸³ view her as inauthentic and ignorant of her cultural ancestry (Chakraborty 2014:31-32).

Similar attitudes are apparent in South African 'Indians', with Ela Ghandi⁸⁴ (Dupelia-Mesthrie cited in Landy *et al* 2004:209) stating that her Indianness is merely her cultural predispositions pertaining to food, language, music, theatre etc. She places her South African citizenship at the forefront of her identity. She doesn't however reflect the angst of "cultural bastardism" (Chakraborty 2014:31) that Mootoo's character experiences as Indo-Trinidadian. Research indicates that the 'Indian' diaspora in Trinidad and South Africa cannot possibly identify with a unitary form of Indianness from India, as this doesn't exist (Jayaram cited in Landy *et al* 2004:209). India is a chaotic and complex mix of religions, languages and cultural hybridisations that are based on regional geographies (Thomas 2002:9); in short, there are many iterations of Indianness (Landy *et al* 2004:209). For people of the diaspora, such as Ela Ghandi and Mootoo's protagonist, who are both temporally and spatially removed from India as a country, their identities become a 'pick and mix'⁸⁵ of 'Indian' cultural features that are up for grabs. The internal tensions of sustaining some form of connection to India and engaging in a practice that reflects Indianness, be it food or ritual, appears to be prevalent in both women.

Using an autoethnographic narrative, I will explore my own internal tensions relating to India, not just as a country of ethnic origin but as an imaginary constituent of my formation of

⁸⁰ Mohua Chakraborty is a health policy researcher, involved in research initiatives at the DST Center for Policy Research, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru India. Her work in rare diseases has been acknowledged by national and international agencies through awards such as International Network for Government Science Advise- Asia Award Grant and European Parliament Visitors Program award and a National post-doctoral fellowship.

⁸¹ Shani Mootoo is a Trinidadian-Canadian writer, visual artist and video maker. She was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1957 to Trinidadian parents. She grew up in Trinidad and relocated at the age of 19 to Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

⁸² 'English' refers to British descendants who are white.

⁸³ Refers to Indian nationals or recent migrants, who maintain strong cultural roots to India.

⁸⁴ The South African granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi and a prominent ANC member of parliament.

⁸⁵ Refers to a system, often used in sweet shops, where customers can select a variety of different items from a large assortment and pay based on the total weight. In this context the phrase is used metaphorically to denote a selection of cultural features.

identity. I was born in the 'Indian' township of Chatsworth in the early seventies. My mother, Theresa Anthoniamah Pillay,⁸⁶ was Catholic and my father, Paul Ganass Pillay, was Hindu. My paternal and maternal ancestry is a culmination of two very different worlds, which is testament to the heterogenous nature of 'Indians' in Natal (Desai & Vahed 2013:5). My mother's parents, Vincent Joshua and Sylvia Grace Pillay (fig 18) were well educated and long-standing parish members of St. Anthony's Church⁸⁷ in Durban. They owned a house in Bentley Street,⁸⁸ inside the city limits, and made spiritual pilgrimages to Lourdes,⁸⁹ Rome and the Vatican. My maternal grandfather told me that we were not converts,⁹⁰ and that we came from generations of Roman Catholics reaching as far back as India. My grandmother was adamant that our ancestors did not come to South Africa as indentured workers but as free passengers who were teachers and missionaries (Brain 1983:4;8).

⁸⁶ Her maiden name is an 'Indian' surname (also spelled Pillai) that has its origins in South India, particularly in the Tamil Nadu and Kerala regions. It is historically associated with the Tamil and Malayali communities and is prevalent among upper-caste groups within those areas.

⁸⁷ Named after St Anthony of Padua, the church was consecrated in 1886. St. Anthony's Catholic Church catered to a predominantly 'Indian' parish. It started as a wood and iron structure and was later upgraded in 1901 by parishioner funding (Pillay 2010).

⁸⁸ Bentley Street was located close to the city centre and was part of a 'grey' area that accommodated a mix of different races. During the implementation of the group areas act of 1950, residents were ordered to relocate to the designated townships.

⁸⁹ Lourdes is a small town located in the Occitanie region of southwestern France, near the foothills of the Pyrenees Mountains. It is internationally famous as a major Catholic pilgrimage site. The site is now home to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, which attracts millions of pilgrims each year seeking spiritual healing or blessings.

⁹⁰ The term 'converts' referred to 'Indians' who relinquished 'Hinduism' in the recent past, to become Christians (Pentecostal, Full Gospel and Baptists).



Figure 18. Maternal grandparents: Vincent Joshua & Sylvia Grace Pillay (1960-1965).

As I grew older, I considered whether this narrative was fabricated to distance our lineage from a demeaning legacy of servitude and indentured labour. However, Brain (1983:197) has gleaned from Father Sobon's⁹¹ letters to the Vatican that some immigrants were from South Indian Catholic mission districts, with a long tradition of both secular and religious education. These 'free' groups came from India and Mauritius and paid for their passage, with many settling in Natal under the migrant laws of the colony at the time. They were educated and worked as teachers, catechists, interpreters and traders (Brain 1983:4;7-8). I have not been able to corroborate my maternal grandparents lineage to the passenger 'Indians' using the ship list data, due to the lack of original [ship numbers](#)⁹² and very little documentation. Mine is a fragile history of generational memories passed down by word of mouth and, like the paper ship lists, one that has blurred and faded over time.

My mother (fig 19) grew up in a small enclave of racially mixed society, that centred around the Roman Catholic church. She was educated at St. Anthony's School and was taught by a

⁹¹ Father Jean-Baptiste Sobon was a French speaking oblate of Mary Immaculate. He arrived in Natal in 1852 to minister to a small population of Irish and French. He became invested in the Catholic 'Indian' immigrants disembarking the Imperial ships at Port Natal in 1860. He became an instrumental figure in initiating churches, education and the social structure of the Catholic population in Natal (Brain 1983:194; Pillay 2010).

⁹² These are the numbers that appear next to a labourers name on the original paper ship lists. These numbers are allocated according to the ship they travelled on (Brain 1983:197).

faculty of White immigrant nuns. The school, an extension of St. Anthony's Church, has a history that dates back to mission work in Natal during 1888 (Brain 1983:8,199; Pillay 2010:par3). The Catholic missionaries⁹³ were instrumental in facilitating education and a sense of community for both indentured labourers and passenger 'Indians'. As vulnerable identities in a foreign and hostile country (Landy *et al* 2004:208), their predicament was humanised by the church that protected them from persecution (Brain 1983:187).



Figure 19. Mother: Theresa Anthoniamah Pillay (1950-1960).

My mother, like her parents, became an assimilated being, she was proud of her perfect English without a hint of an 'Indian' accent. She was taught Latin at school and learnt a form of pidgin Zulu called Fanakalo to communicate with the family's Black houseboy, whom she considered her childhood friend. She always wore trousers, never a sari, was a talented

⁹³ Father JB Sobon (founder), Father Gourlay, Father Boudry and Father Rauol Maingot presided at St Anthony's church from the late 19th to early 20th century (Pillay 2010).

ballroom dancer and often went out to the Himalaya Hotel.⁹⁴ Chaperoned, she could stay out till late, as 'Indians' were not subject to the curfew that applied to Blacks in the city. She disliked her second Christian name, *Anthoniamah*, as it reflected 'Indianness' and bore the stigma of an uncomfortable history. The name was the feminine Tamil derivative of 'Anthony', after St Anthony of Padua, commonly used by the Portuguese missionaries in India when baptising people into the Catholic faith. Mary and Anne were also common for women (Brain 1983:178; Thomas 2002:194) and appear repeatedly in the ship lists.

Tamil was the vernacular of many South Indian labourers, but it was a language my mother would never speak (Landy et al 2004:207-208) nor did she show any affinity to learn it. Reconciling 'Indianness' with Catholicism was not negotiated at the level of church culture; it was something to relinquish. Whereas the imaginary referent for Hindus may have been the sacred land of India, for my mother it was Europe and the Vatican. Religion became an identity within itself, and it permeated every stage of life from baptism to the last rites, demanding a rigorous purge of pagan beliefs and total acculturation (Thomas 2002:5).

This identity exchange between Catholicism and 'Indianness' was not, however, predatory or insidious; it provided a stability that was otherwise not forthcoming from civil life in South Africa. It was a conceptual cocoon in which the narrative of India's poverty and pagan polytheism could be supplanted with a more 'authentic'⁹⁵ Eurocentric narrative. Pilgrimages to France and Italy offered a tangible connection with and validation of a sense of universality, the belief in single omnipotent God, and by proxy the Pope. The diasporic memory could not sustain its genetic tether to India; for my mother it became the semi-transparent imaginings of someone else's history. Upon meeting my father, however, she would encounter this 'other' history first hand. Paul Ganass Pillay (fig 20) came from a family who were direct descendants of the indentured labourers. Upon completing the period of indenture of five years their ancestors settled in the coastal regions of the sugar cane plantations.

My father was born in 1941 in Inanda township situated North-west of Durban. Inanda has historical significance as one of the original townships in the region. It is one of the oldest settlements and was established in the 1800s as a 'reserve' for Black African people. A sizable local 'Indian' population also resided in the area until 1936, when it was designated a 'released area' for the exclusive occupation of Blacks (Department: Provincial and Local Government 2025:4).

⁹⁴ Located in Grey Street in Durban, the Himalaya Hotel was a feature of 'Indian' night life during the 1960s. The hotel, consisting of a bar, restaurant and dance hall became a popular place for socialising and ball room dancing (Chemaly 2023).

⁹⁵ The term 'authentic' within this context refers to the Western validation of Catholicism.



Figure 20. Father: Paul Ganass Pillay (1955-1965).

This would be one of the many contested rural areas that housed both ‘Indian’ indentured labourers and indigenous people. As an eight-year old boy my father would experience the aftermath of the horrific riots of 1949 (SAHO 2017; Moodley 2012a:24).⁹⁶ The xenophobic attacks on ‘Indian’ business owners in the city sparked widespread tension and violence in the surrounding areas. His existence would be grounded in the unstable diametric forces that govern Black and Brown identities as they compete for land and livelihoods (Vahed & Desai 2017:156).

My parents’ marriage (fig 21c) as an ethnographic case study illustrates the diversity and stratification (Landy et al 2004:207) that exists within ‘Indianness’. The cultural mediation of religion determines aspects of material identity formation, its specificity being dependent on locality (Thomas 2002:2-3; Radhakrishnan 2003:316). My mother, being Roman Catholic, had access to Western education,⁹⁷ a secure living environment, recreation and a racially

⁹⁶ Enraged groups of Africans, armed with weapons, attacked Indian communities in Durban city and surrounds. Many businesses and homes were looted and set alight, leaving 142 dead and over a thousand people injured. The unforeseen xenophobic onslaught was reported to be the result of building resentment toward Indians. Blacks considered ‘Indians’ to be privileged, elitist and exploitive towards them (SAHO 2017).

⁹⁷ Western education was considered superior to the vernacular classes taught in Indian villages.

integrated social circle. My father, being Hindu, had attended a village school,⁹⁸ lived in a semi-rural farmhouse, worked several low end jobs and lived within a homogenous social circle consisting only of extended relatives (fig 21d). He was from a large family and, after completing secondary education,⁹⁹ would procure several jobs, together with his brothers, to sustain the family's livelihood. This entailed long travelling hours to reach the 'Indian' business sector in the city; figure 21f is photograph of my father working behind the counter of a popular local take-away called Delhi. Wealthy passenger Indians, mostly Gujarati Muslims¹⁰⁰ (Landy *et al* 2004:207), would provide employment for the poorer descendants of indentured labourers as well as Blacks. These relationships were transactional and often exploitative in nature.

Upon meeting and marrying my mother, my father would convert to Catholicism and sever his residual attachments to Hindu forms of ritualistic worship. His family would for a time disown him, and refused to attend the baptism of his firstborn son at St Anthony's Church. To reconcile these two juxtaposing cultural entities, my mother reluctantly agreed to a Hindu wedding, during which she would wear a sari for the first time and participate in certain traditional marriage rites. The need to maintain a religious connection with India was however dwindling; it became more of a transcendental (Landy *et al* 2004:213) symbolic gesture to an abstract memory of identity. The notion of the 'authentic' Indian had become blurred, not upon arrival in South Africa but stems from the nature of India itself. As a "multi-religious" (Thomas 2002:8) country, India, it may be argued, is omni-cultural and therefore cannot represent a singular authenticity. With its profusion of nonsynchronous histories and diverse cultural habitations, the benchmark of authenticity within India itself is an anomaly (Radhakrishnan 2003:316-317).

India has always held a "pluralistic ethos" (Thomas 2002:9) regarding its plethora of belief systems¹⁰¹, with Hinduism being as old as civilisation itself. Habitations of both indigenous and alien religions not only coexist but interpenetrate (Radhakrishnan cited in Thomas 2002:9) each other, transmorphing into regional variants. Imaginings of India do not evoke characteristics of a bastion of Catholicism; however, its presence has been documented

⁹⁸ Schools for 'Indian' students were funded by local businessmen and taught by 'Indian' teachers. Some classes were taught in vernacular languages like Tamil.

⁹⁹ Secondary school constituted 6 years of study (standard 5 – Matric). Many 'Indian' parents did not send their children to school as they needed them to work or assist with farming duties. Students that did attend often did not complete all levels required at high school. Survival and sustaining livelihoods superseded education.

¹⁰⁰ This group distinguished themselves as the commercial elite and did not consider themselves part of the indentured group or peasantry (Landy *et al* 2004:207).

¹⁰¹ Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are amongst the oldest indigenous religions, with Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Zoroastrianism being alien to India (Thomas 2002:8).

since the first century on the south-west coast, a region now known as Kerala¹⁰² (Fuller cited by Thomas 2002:10). Considering the fact that Roman Catholicism preceded the European conquests and colonisation (Visvanathan cited in Thomas 2002:10), it may be assumed that the authentic 'Hindu' identity was already undergoing a dissipation and modification long before indentured translocation.

What becomes apparent is that India's prolific historiography of spontaneous religious absorbency has contributed to its cultural fluidity and diversity. Although memory and foreign romanticism may imagine India as a monolithic cultural singularity, it is in fact an ever-morphing multiplicity. In my autoethnographic narrative, India is a diverse macrocosm of pluralities and organic hybridities, which have played out within the microcosm of my parent's family history. This study therefore argues that authentic 'Indian' identity is a hypothetical or mythical concept, specifically to those South African diasporic people who have not maintained a connection or ever visited India (Landy et al:2004:213). As an artist who has only known South Africa to be my home, I refute the idea that I have to maintain an 'in-between' state in order for my art to be considered 'authentic'. Araeen states that to be 'in-between' is an alternate, anachronistic identity reserved for diasporic people, that ensures their marginality (Araeen 2001b:98-99). The romanticised notion of 'returning to ones roots', proposed by some postcolonial theorists, invalidates my life's experiences as African.

2.3.1 The biennale effect: imaginations of the third kind



Figure 21. World map indicating key biennales (2025).

¹⁰² Kerala is a state located in the southwestern part of India, along the Malabar Coast. It lies between the Arabian Sea to the west and the western Ghats mountain range to the east. Its capital is Thiruvananthapuram, and the state is known for its scenic landscapes, backwaters, rich cultural heritage, and high literacy rate.

This discussion focuses on the theatre or stage where art, audience and discourse converge, namely the European biennale (fig 21). Although the biennale format has migrated to various third world locales, such as India and South Africa, its distinctive purpose remains a “grand narrative” (Lyotard 1984:xxiii-xxiv) of European origin. Within the context of globalisation, which some have argued to be a form of hyper-cosmopolitanism (Beck 2007:286; Bhabha 1994:xiv; Garnsey 2020:2), I consider the case studies of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2012) and the first Johannesburg Biennale - Africus (1995). Although both events mark the inaugural emergences of South Africa and India into the global art arena, this analysis is not a comparison, the most obvious reason being that these countries are two diametrically diverse socio-political and cultural entities. However, within their common paradigm of postcoloniality, much can be gleaned on how the format of the European biennale has been received and assimilated within these locales, as well as the robust discourse it generated.

The ancient colonial seaport of Fort Kochi¹⁰³ in Kerala (South India) (fig 22) became the scene of India’s emergence into biennale art history. The physical place, being an ancient melting pot of Indian, African, Portuguese, Dutch and British cultures was chosen as the terra firma for the inaugural Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB) in 2012. Following on the heels of the 54th Venice Biennale (2011),¹⁰⁴ Kochi fell under the expectant gaze of the international art world. It convened a notable group of key speakers¹⁰⁵ including Maharaj and Kapur whose critique ‘wrote’ the biennale into contemporary art history (Kapur 2012:32-39). The phenomenon of KMB, referred to as *The Indian biennale effect* (D’Souza 2013:296-312), is a socio-cultural yardstick, and relevant to the formation of the postcolonial Indian identity within the global art space (D’Souza 2013:298).



Figure 22. Fort Kochi: Aspinwall House, boats, murals.

¹⁰³ Pronounced *Kow-chee*.

¹⁰⁴ India participated in the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011, which paved the way for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (D’Souza 2013:299).

¹⁰⁵ Ranjit Hoskote, Gayatri Sinha, Pooja Sood, and Nancy Adajania were key speakers at the KMB.

My discussion contextualises India's political framework but does not delve into the causation and fractures of nationalism; instead, it focuses on metropolitanism, cosmopolitanism and the prospect of European provincialisation (Alias & Wadhwa 2024:169). As an artist, I am interested in mapping the spaces within postcolonial discourse that solicit the "imagination" (Appadurai cited by Salazar 2020:770-771), in which an activism via artistic endeavour could reestablish the identities of the 'previously colonised'. Therefore, with global visual art as its nexus, my study will correlate Chakrabarty's (2007:2-23) proposal of *Provincializing Europe* as an influential precursor to Enwezor's (2009:596-597; 600-602) decentralised zones of art production (609-616) enacted in his curatorship of Documenta 11 (Ogbechi 2005:82). Maharaj's co-curatorship of Documenta 11 with Enwezor further triangulates the [geopolitics of cosmopolitanism](#) previously discussed, and their decolonial objective to provincialise and decentralise the format of the European biennale. I hope my argument illuminates the fecundity of the diasporic 'Indian' imagination (Mishra 2005:8) and its propensity to influence visual art discourse and exhibition.

India gained independence from British rule in 1947 and has undergone many phases of political reform under the nationalist banner. It seems that enactments of identity bear a price, as the curators Krishnamachari & Komu¹⁰⁶ state in their curator's note (2012:28-31) entitled, *Salt Heals*. They disclose some of the political, financial and logistical pressures experienced prior to and during KMB (Krishnamachari 2018:par8; Krishnamachari & Komu 2012:29-30). The KMB inherited the historical and political baggage of the failed Indian Triennale,¹⁰⁷ hosted in the late 1960s (Krishnamachari & Komu 2012:29; D'Souza 2013:301), which suffered an onslaught of negative criticism from both internal and external stakeholders. The KMB is a case study for the systemic struggles of Indian identities "reappropriating the capacity to represent themselves" (Chakrabarty 1992:1) in art history. Representation in the third world is often a paradoxical condition (Chakrabarty 1992:3), in which identities are compelled to define themselves according to epistemologies that know very little about them. This aspect of representing the 'other' within the European biennale format will be explored further in [Koloane's critique of Africus](#).

When Indians' identity is refracted through the Eurocentric lens, it has historically yielded an identity of "lack" (Chakrabarty 1992:5;8), with British colonialism authoring a narrative from

¹⁰⁶ Krishnamachari was born in Kerala in 1963 and completed his Masters in Visual Art Theory and Practice from Goldsmiths College, University of London (1999-2000). He was the Artistic Director and Co-Curator of India's first Biennale. Komu was born in Kerala in 1971 and completed a Bachelor's and Master's in Fine Arts at the Sir J. J. School of Art, Mumbai (BFA 1997, MFA 1999). His work often engages with themes of migration, displacement, identity and sociopolitical conflicts.

¹⁰⁷ Triennale-India was launched in 1968 by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister after independence. It was an initiative sponsored by the Indian Ministry of Culture, with a progressive and international outlook. It was critiqued as having been in the service state and a tool of the nationalist agenda (D'Souza 2013:300).

medieval to modernity on their behalf. While the curators used art as a microcosmic vehicle to visually interrogate these socio-political transitions (Krishnamachari & Komu 2012:28), the issues surrounding the biennale inevitably commented on the macrocosmic failures of nationalism in India. However, the decision of curators, to redirect the global gaze toward Kochi, situated in the communist state of Kerala, was a geographically strategic move. Being the antithesis of a 'modern metropolis', Kochi presented an alternate brand of vernacular cosmopolitanism (Alias & Wadhwa 2023:169; Bhabha 1994:xiii); it disrupted centrality with its people and art rooted firmly on the periphery. The first Indian biennale was therefore a site of geopolitical activism that resisted cosmopolitan centrality, a manoeuvre inspired by Enwezor's *Documenta 11*.

According to Alias & Wadhwa (2023:169), metro-cosmopolitanism is a term that implicates city centres with the management of multicultural movements and livelihoods. Although not exclusively, non-Western academics generally, view the urban metropolis as a colonial site of control and containment (Radhakrishnan 2003:312-313; Chakrabarty 1992:8), which facilitates only elitist formations cosmopolitanism (Alias & Wadhwa 2023:168; Rao 2013:168; Weltman 2024:25-30; Beck 2002:20; Beck 2007:286-287). They argue that metropolitan thinking as a colonial construct is not restricted to geography alone, but infiltrates philosophy, literature and the arts (Alias & Wadhwa 2023:168;167). This logic is evident in the Venice Biennale, positioned both geographically and symbolically as the great bastion of high art, its exclusive pavilions mostly out of reach for poor countries (Breitz 1995b:91).

The "spatial turn" (Alias & Wadhwa 2023:168) constitutes a geographical and more importantly, a psychological move away from metropolitan locales to highlight deeper, more historical and local ways of being cosmopolitan. Chakrabarty's (2007:2-23) highly influential proposal (Alias & Wadhwa 2023:171) of *Provincializing Europe*, has infiltrated the art world, with Enwezor (2009:596-597) adopting it within his theories of decentralised zones of art production, and localised iterations of modernism. The proposal of provincialisation is a form of intellectual activism in response to postcolonialism's growing need to explore subaltern or vernacular cosmopolitanism. In essence, the KMB model became an enactment of decoloniality by virtue of its locality and peoples (Alias & Wadhwa 2023:169).

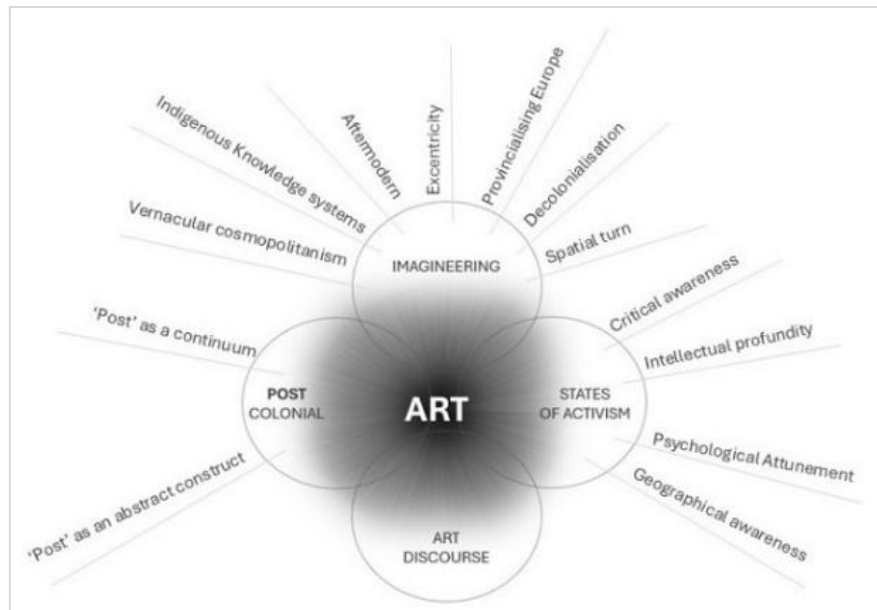


Figure 23. Map indicating the co-dependencies of diasporic art, activism & imagineering (2025).

To synthesise my gleanings thus far, postcolonial literature (relating to non-Western and Indian diasporic academics) is to a lesser degree solution-orientated and, to a greater degree, “imagineering” (Erwin 2012:96) (fig 23). This means that while theorists seek to bring awareness to the inherent biases of Western epistemologies (Radhakrishnan 2003:313; Chakrabarty 2007:5; Alias & Wadhwa 2023:168; cites Gunaratnam cited by Erwin 2012: 97), they are more invested in clearing a space for ‘imagining’ what egalitarian interculturalism could be. The deficit of hard and fast solutions could be a deliberate avoidance to replicate modernist-type prescriptions that should not be the focus of postcoloniality. As colonialism has infiltrated and regulated every aspect of social life, the postcolonial project has yet to fully navigate those ramifications on a local and worldly scale. The complexity of the project is further exacerbated by the residual pervasiveness of Western knowledge systems, which the colonised subject encounters in the realms of the social, political, geographical, intellectual and psychological.

2.3.2 Ranbir Kaleka, Ernesto Neto and Subodh Gupta at Kochi

The first edition of the Kochi Muziris Biennale centred around the “anachronistic” aspects of cosmopolitanism (Kapur 2012:32), thereby acknowledging India’s co-produced histories during its colonial past. The city of Kochi located in the state of Kerala has been a site of trans-oceanic trade with Africa, Arabia, the Mediterranean and Europe since the early 15th century. By leveraging this “infrastructural legacy” (Kapur 2012:32), the curators, Krishnamachari and Komu, hypothesise a new cosmopolitanism of world citizenship. Their approach directly addresses the concepts of vernacular cosmopolitanism, provincialisation

and decentralisation discussed in the [previous section](#) of this chapter. Within the context of my study, KMB is positioned as a geopolitical activism that materialises the theoretical objectives of postcolonial thinkers such as Maharaj, Chakrabarty and Enwezor. Part of the cohort of participating artists were, Ranbir Kaleka¹⁰⁸, Ernesto Neto¹⁰⁹ and Subodh Gupta¹¹⁰, engaged with the rich multicultural history of the old port, while negotiating their own place amongst the colonial structures of the past.

The work of Kaleka bears many points of conceptual intersection with the exhibition *Afterisms*, specifically my work *Artefact of origin* which will be discussed in [Chapter Four](#). His use of projection mapping as a narrative device provides an intimate and immersive experience (fig 24). Kaleka tells fragmented stories that carry an undertone of violence and cruelty towards both humans and animals. These narratives underpin the political vulnerability of marginalised rural communities in India. The cyclical weather patterns of nature are mimicked as looped videos, the repetition acts as a metaphor for the periodic emergence of oppression inflicted on these faceless identities (Kaleka 2018-2018). The artist brings their lives and tragedies into the scope of the public exhibition space, thereby visibilising their struggles. His barren landscapes devoid of human life speak about its subaltern inhabitants in their absence, a visual metaphor that alludes to their lack of agency and vulnerability.

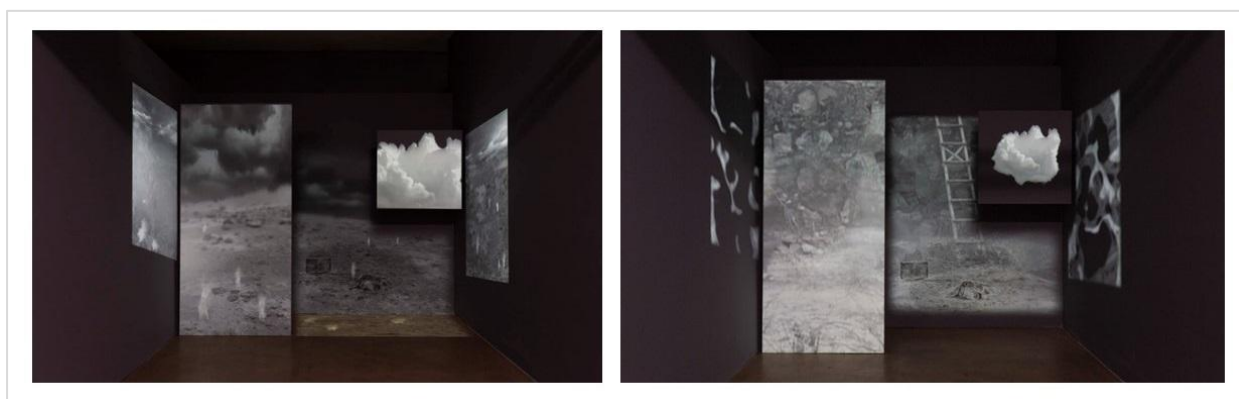


Figure 24. Ranbir Kaleka, *Not anonymous: waking to the obscure fear of a new dawn* (2017-18).

¹⁰⁸ Born in 1953, Kaleka is multi-media artist. He studied at the College of Art, Chandigarh, and the Royal College of Art, London. Trained as a painter, Kaleka's work has increasingly included animation and experimental film narrative sequences. He explores immersive, large-scale video installations and has participated in exhibitions across a range of major galleries and museums around the world.

¹⁰⁹ Ernesto Neto (born 1964, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) is an internationally acclaimed contemporary artist known for his large-scale, immersive installations that explore the sensorial, spatial, and relational dimensions of human experience. Working primarily with soft, organic materials such as Lycra, fabric, spices, sand, and natural fibres, Neto creates environments that invite viewers to touch, walk through, or inhabit the work. His practice is deeply rooted in ideas of the body, ecology, ritual, and interconnectedness.

¹¹⁰ Subodh Gupta (born 1964, Khagaul, Bihar, India) is one of India's most influential contemporary artists, internationally recognized for transforming everyday domestic objects into monumental sculptural statements. Best known for his use of stainless-steel utensils, tiffin boxes, pots, milk pails, and thalis. Gupta elevates the ordinary materials of Indian daily life into symbols of migration, aspiration, labour, and cultural memory.

Kaleka's three-channel video, *House of opaque water* (fig 25), explores the narrative of climate change and the extinction of a sub-rural community from the Bay of Bengal. People of the Sundarbans¹¹¹ have lost arable land due to the effects of the Amphan cyclone and rising sea levels (Bhullar 2020). Water is used as a symbolic device of destructive power contrasted with calm fluidity. The artist locates human life as subject to these two extremes in the daily struggle for survival. The sea evokes notions of death and spirituality, its repetitive tidal patterns reminiscent of the temporality attached to everything around us.



Figure 25. Ranbir Kaleka, *House of opaque water* (2012).

The artwork, *Life Is a River* (fig 26a), is an installation of sewn and suspended local fabrics filled with spices of clove, cumin, and turmeric by the Brazilian artist Neto. Suspended from the ceiling of the vacant warehouse in Moidu's Heritage¹¹² (D'Souza 2013:306), the pungent protuberances are described as sensorily seductive yet visually menacing (Jumabhoy 2013). The looming patchwork sail, weighted by its udder-like formations is evocative of the commercial sustenance of India during the heyday of Kochi's spice trade.

Since Kochi, Neto has expanded on his use of materials and continued to showcase his work globally. I have experienced the immersive and sensory quality of his work in, *One day we were all fish* (fig 27) at the Johannesburg Foundation of Contemporary Art. The installation of woven fish nets infused with the heady aroma of cloves, became an otherworldly space of contemplation and play. The nets together with his use of aqua blues and greens evoke the presence of water, viewers crouched and wove their way through the vine-like vertical ropes, with the light forming cobweb patterns on the floor. Like Kaleka, Neto

¹¹¹ Sundarbans is a mangrove area in the delta formed by the confluence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna Rivers in the Bay of Bengal.

¹¹² A colonial-period storage facility owned by a coconut-fibre company, it overlooks the shipping lanes of the boats that are still transporting these local spices internationally (D'Souza 2013:306).

applies symbols of water and nature to entangle the viewer in the perpetual narrative of life and death.

Gupta's work, *Untitled* (fig 26b), depicts a traditional Keralan fishing boat that has been filled with cooking pots, chairs, bicycles, and quilts, lashed together with chains, and suspended from a girder. Presented within the space of a former shipbuilding yard, the work becomes a symbol of migration, movement and cultural exchange (D'Souza 2013:307). The cargo of utilitarian artefacts represents the remnants of human endeavour. Their materiality bearing signs of wear, age and fragmentation. The vessel, neither fully grounded nor suspended, represents an 'unhomed' state of being constantly adrift. This metaphor could be applied to the Indian diasporas, including the indentured labourers, translocated to various parts of the world.

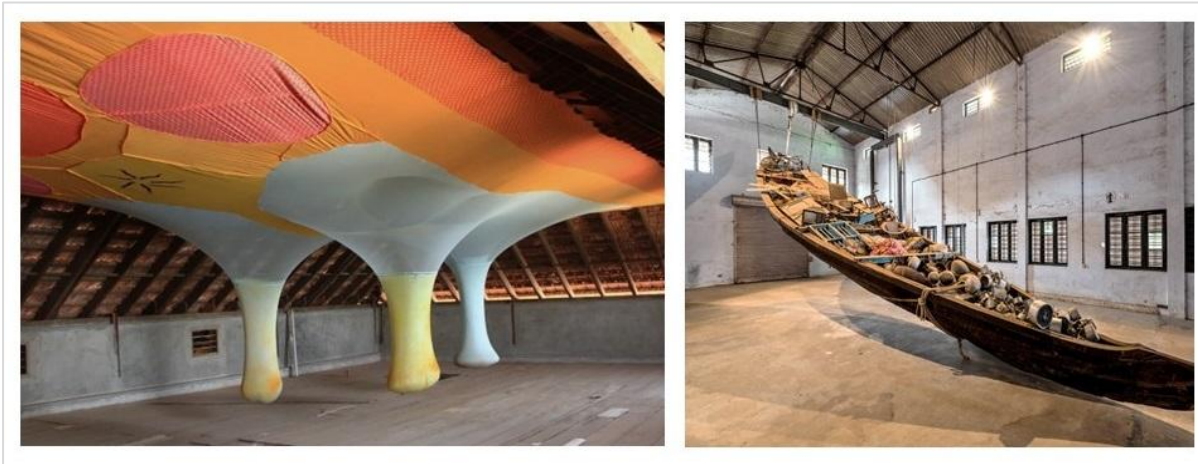


Figure 26. (a) Ernesto Neto, *Life is a river* (2012).

(b) Subodh Gupta, *Untitled* (2012).



Figure 27. Ernesto Neto, *Um dia todos fomos peixes* (*One day we were all fish*) (2017).

The KMB was an experiment in the reappropriation of space and thereby the deterritorialising of colonial history through art. Kaleka, Neto and Gupta provide existential glimpses of the human engagement with nature and world politics. Kapur (2012:32-33) states that both curators and artists placed emphasis on hands-on production rather than conforming to a semiotic grid. This enabled artworks to operate as “indexical signs” (Kapur 2012:32-33) referencing the instability of both man-made and natural elements. This curatorial methodology is described as the organic unfurling of concepts, moulded in materiality. Within this new form of cosmopolitanism, identity is sporadic, untempered and complex.

2.4 Africus: The first Johannesburg Biennale

Africus (1995), Johannesburg’s first biennale marked South Africa’s cultural ‘coming out’ event, after the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 (Koloane 2003:121). The first South African biennale as a confluence of political and artistic representation will be unpacked within the framework of the state’s ‘imaginarium’¹¹³ (Fernandes 2000:611-613). As I previously mentioned, the volatility of political ‘imagineering’ lies equally in grand coloniality and its potential for true and meaningful cultural integration. At its core the biennale operates from “multiple modes” (Garnsey 2020:6) of representation, that are both political (the state) and artistic (the artist/ artwork). Important to the discursive reconnaissance mission of *Africus*, is contextualising its Herculean task of inclusion balanced precariously against its volatile socio-political predicament at the time. It could not, and did not succeed in representing South Africa’s multicultural diversity, nor did it redress the years of socio-economic imbalances (Breitz 1995b:90;94; Koloane 2003:126; Araeen 2000; Becker 1992:89). Based on this historic understanding, I focus on the complexities of representation, that are still playing out in South Africa’s visual art space, thirty years later.

It seems apt to begin this discussion with Araeen’s (2000) question, “Why should there be a biennale of an international nature, in South Africa?”. One of the reasons mentioned by Lorna Ferguson¹¹⁴ (*Africus: Johannesburg Biennale* 1995:9) was to establish the country as a site of art production and “alternate” forms of visual culture. Contrary to this key aim, *Africus* mimicked the formula of the Venice Biennale¹¹⁵ exactly, rather than providing any

¹¹³ A place devoted to stimulating and cultivating the imagination (*Power thesaurus* 2025). Within the context of this study, the term is situated within postcolonial discourse. It is weighted with the more dystopic undertone of Western dominance and systemic control over the third world and the previously colonised. For example, the imaginings of imperialism become an oppressive reality in the lives of subaltern communities.

¹¹⁴ Founder and co-curator of the first Johannesburg Biennale, Ferguson was the former director of the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg, Natal.

¹¹⁵ Curators, Ferguson and Till attended the Venice Biennale the year South Africa was readmitted after 30 years of political boycott over apartheid policies (Koloane 1996:50).

alternate frameworks. For curator Christopher Till¹¹⁶ (*Africus: Johannesburg Biennale* 1995:8), the *timing* was a “critical” reason for the biennale, to absorb the energy of change, which David Koloane¹¹⁷ (1996:56) suggested was more “opportunistic” than critical. In agreement with Koloane, Araeen (2000) suggested that neither biennale (*Africus* and the later *Trade Routes*) truly engaged with the glaring realities of its locality and peoples. In asking the question ‘Why?’, Araeen probes the motives of those in power (Koloane 2003:120;122;124), who stood to gain from the international recognition, curatorships and future gallery deals (Becker 1992:87). The answer would be that it was those of the previous order, who benefited from an existing system of exclusionary practice in the visual arts.

Koloane (citing Burnett 2003:122) spoke to the tensions brought on by the biennale effect in the third world which was glaringly evident in *Africus*, where the collective Black identity was described as “shy, withdrawn and apologetic”. The works of Bonnie Ntshalintshali¹¹⁸ at the Venice Biennale (1993) and Noria Mabasa¹¹⁹ at *Africus* appeared dislocated and decontextualised amongst Western art (Breitz 1995b:91). He questioned whether the inclusion of Black artists was ever intended to visually ‘alter’ the biennale or acted as a mere “appendage” to the existing international status quo (Koloane 1996:56). As an artist and activist, Koloane rejected representing a form of “reconciled political imaginary of the state” (Garnsey 2020:14); instead, he focused on the ongoing struggles of ordinary people within its borders. This is evident in his presentation of, *The journey*, at the Venice Biennale in 2013, almost eighteen years after *Africus*. Koloane repositioned the murder of Steve Biko as a symbol of violence that could easily occur within a Black state (Garnsey 2020:13).

Maharaj’s (1994:par1) conceptualisation of the international art space as a “scene of translations” seems apt within the maelstrom of the biennale as a place where cultural languages are translated through art forms and art critique. As per his argument of [“untranslatability”](#) previously discussed Maharaj (2011:x) problematises critique stating that it tends to embroil the art form and the artist within its political and epistemological entanglements. He describes the ‘visual’ as a “drift of images”, lost in translation due to the “rub up” against its ‘verbal’ attachments. These rub-ups within the socio-political powder keg

¹¹⁶ Till was co-curator of *Africus*. He acquired a master’s degree in 1976 at Rhodes University with a thesis on African Art. He was appointed curator at National Gallery of Rhodesia (1977). He also served as Director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) from 1984 to 1992.

¹¹⁷ David Nthubu Koloane (5 June 1938 – 30 June 2019) was a South African artist. In his drawings, paintings and collages he explored questions about political injustice and human rights. Koloane is considered to have been an influential artist and writer of the apartheid years in South Africa.

¹¹⁸ Bonnie Ntshalintshali is a South African ceramicist who was born on Ardmere Farm in the Winterton district of KwaZulu-Natal in 1967. She suffered from polio as a girl, and because she was not strong enough for farm labouring, she was apprenticed to the ceramicist Fée Halsted.

¹¹⁹ Noria Mabasa is a South African sculptor; she is also a custodian of indigenous knowledge and a respected teacher. Known for her pottery and wood sculptures, she is a recipient of the 2002 Silver category of the Order of the Baobab.

of South Africa can often turn antagonistic as art becomes articulated through text and political positions (Pauwels 2022:119).

I apply this meta-discourse surrounding *Africus* to consider the rawness of the South African socio-political animal at this time, emerging from its violent separatist slumber, a stranger unto itself and those around it. Its 'visual' and 'verbal' utterances were at odds with the art world and incoherent. The remoteness of the 'verbal' in the case study of *Africus* is apparent in the catalogue, which has been critiqued as intellectually inaccessible and devoid of clear objectives and context (Claasen 1997:87). The curator's avoidance of applying a flattening integration rhetoric (Breitz 1995a:288) over diversity could be construed as respectful open-endedness or cultural aloofness. Either interpretation implicates the reader (local and global) to make informed assumptions of the complex drift of human expressions that was *Africus*.

Kapur, an invited curator to Johannesburg, having traversed similar debates during India's Triennale (1968) (D'Souza 2013:300-301) placated the infighting by stating that the voices of inequality do not "evaporate" in the light of democracy (Breitz 1995b:90). Her curatorship of the failed Triennale possibly informed her stance, as she had experienced the birth pains of a newly independent India, attempting to represent itself to the international art world (Fernandes 2000:615;619). The ubiquitous centrifugal forces of European modernist styles such as conceptualism tended to propel indigenous expressions of culture to the margins of such events.

Africus remains a social artefact of our early democracy, unfolding in the local and global visual art space. Although sterile, the catalogue essays have much to offer as they describe converging identities, some vying for legitimacy whilst others refuse to relinquish theirs. The complex entanglements of politics and power over ethnicity was palpable, regardless of the curator's efforts to circumvent the ghosts of our past traumas. The theme of *Dispossession* appears to be the only commonality expressed, with White, Brown and Black identities, exhibiting fears of loss and change. *Africus* may therefore be considered a cultural repository for our combined angst and apprehension in proximity to the other.

2.4.1 *Dispossessed* in *Africus*

A critical discussion of the invited Indian artists that exhibited work at *Africus*, under the title, *Dispossessed*, becomes an interesting cross-cultural analysis of identity that has not been previously explored. This study therefore contributes to the historic gap in understanding different postcolonial iterations of Indianness, occurring proximal to each other within the South African creative arena. As South African artists of 'Indian' descent were not present at *Africus*, I will theoretically apply Garnsey's conceptualisation of "re-presentation" as a paradox of presence and absence in this discussion. She states, "...the presence that

comes from being *re-presented*, and the absence that comes from needing to be *re-presented*' (2020:6). She explains that the act, or event, of representing requires the presence of the person, group, object, or concept being represented, however, it simultaneously necessitates their absence. Her notion that re-presentation is paradoxical adds a nuanced layer of meaning to my framework of the identity-race paradox to be discussed in [Chapter Three](#), which identifies South African identity as defined by its physical and cultural distance from the others. It is from this theoretical vantage point that I will critique the work of selected UDW fine art graduates¹²⁰ between 1984 to 2010, alongside their Indian contemporaries who exhibited at *Africus* in 1995. This is not a comparative, due to the differing social contexts of each group, but rather an analysis of how Indian¹²¹ artists negotiate their identities within their varying socio-political circumstances.

The exhibition *Dispossessed* was curated by Kapur and Shireen Gandhi,¹²² it featured the works of Gowda, Malani, Pushpamala, and Nilima Sheikh.¹²³ As a point of context, India became an independent country in 1947 after 200 years of British colonial control (Britannica 2025). Governance of a multi-religious country with tribal factionalism proved difficult, resulting in communal and caste violence plaguing India since the 1960s (Engineer 1991). However, the early to mid-90s saw expansive political reform, shifts from state-led development to market-oriented growth resulted in huge political and social consequences. The Indian government was pressured to promote economic growth through liberalisation. This entailed embracing globalisation and opening the national economy to open-free trade markets (Fernandes 2000:612). Many Indian artists, benefitted from improved exposure and inclusion to international events such as the Venice Biennale (Da Souza 2012:298). The invitation to *Africus* would form part of this emergence into visibility, yet ironically, 'Indian' South African identity would enter a period of obscurity (Moodley 2012:7).

Stylistically, *Dispossession* displayed a transition from classical modernism toward deconstructive conceptualism. The cohort of Indian artists worked within symbolic and abstract spaces; in which the body is redefined in "non-metaphysical terms" (Kapur & Gandhi 1995:156). They explored the materiality and the everyday tactility of utilitarian life. This is evident in the work of Gowda, who used unconventional materials such as human hair, incense, kumkum (vermillion pigment), ash and tar. During the 1990s, Gowda explored

¹²⁰ UDW as an entity ceased to exist from 2004, and became UKZN.

¹²¹ Refers to both Indian nationals and 'Indian' South Africans.

¹²² Shireen Gandhi is a prominent art gallerist Gallery Chemould, founded by her parents in 1963. She has also worked with museums helping in production of work, acquisitions, working with organisational arenas of well-known biennales and exhibitions around the world.

¹²³ Nilima Sheikh is rooted in Eastern painting traditions such as miniature painting and oral traditions found in vernacular folk songs. Through her own life experiences, Sheikh continues to create bodies of work that evoke mystical imaginary landscapes that address feminine experiences.

sculpture, installation and mixed media. Materials are often deeply symbolic and connected to ritual, everyday life, labour, gender, social and political marginalisation (Metalocus 2019). Gowda brought these visceral experiences from the village of Yelwala into the clinical gallery space (fig 28a), as she paints with cow dung on cloth to invoke notions of subsistence and poverty. Her work is sensorially confronting, the stuff of carnality, blood, birth and excrement, the cyclical perpetuation of life. The latter theme was also explored by the [artist Kaleka](#) in his work *House of opaque water* (2012, fig 25), in which cyclical natural disasters impact human suffering and dislocation.

Pushpamala works within the conceptual framework of feminist critique, gender and identity. Similar to Khan, whose work I discussed in [Chapter Three](#), Pushpamala's work interrogates how women are represented in myth, religion, popular culture and colonial photography. She destabilises stereotypes with performance, staged narratives, masquerade and costume. Her paper shells (fig 28b) echoes the woven receptacles for gathering detritus in the aftermath of Bombay's 1993 riots. Whilst South Africa was recovering from the violence prior to democracy, India had been enduring spates of civil resistance to Nationalism for decades. The artist addresses the violence and destruction in the wake of rioting using hollow receptacles that hold dirt and debris. Resembling gifts, the work speaks to the urban subaltern, whose stories remain bound and closed off from the mainstream, a theme that will be discussed further within the context of [Mariammah from Chatsworth](#) in Chapter Three. Their unspoken stories lie dormant beneath dust of socioeconomic depravity and decay. Pushpamala's myth of civilisation is underpinned by Heiner Müller's¹²⁴ (in Kapur & Gandhi 1995:156) deconstruction of Western progress. Müller dissects the hypocrisy of Western ideals, showing how history repeats itself in cycles of power and destruction.

¹²⁴ Heiner Müller, the German playwright, had a deeply ironic and often bleak perspective on civilization, particularly regarding its contradictions, violence, and self-destructive tendencies. His works critique modern society, power structures, and historical cycles of oppression and decay.



Figure 28. (a) Sheela Gowda, *Untitled*, (1992).

(b) N. Pushpamala, *Hidden narratives*, (1994).

Malani's work is influenced by her experiences as a refugee, she subverts inherited iconographies and venerated cultural stereotypes. She is described as an urban internationalist, who applies the art narrative to condemn nationalism that exploits the beliefs of the masses (Malani 2025). Malani's installation of painting, shaped robes, neon lights and video (fig 29) is an expression of the "white world's greed" (Kapur & Gandhi 1995:157). The allegory depicts a symbolic female figure's doomed journey into civilisation; her symbolic story punctuated with a curse and poison. Malani initiates a dialogue through new media, and expanding her pictorial surface into the surrounding space as ephemeral wall drawing, installation, shadow play, multi projection works and theatre (Malani 2025).

Her work speaks to the struggles of postcoloniality, having been infected by British imperialism and its installation of a profit-based economic model to India. Here, I have observed a correlation between Malani's artistic rejection of modern civilisation and Coomaraswamy's (1918:2) controversial critique of it as a corruption to India's ancient knowledge systems. On the nature of pre-colonised India, he states,

The essential gift of India, then, is simply her Indianness; her great humiliation would then be to substitute or have to have substituted for this own character (svabhāva) a cosmopolitan veneer, for then indeed she must come before the world empty handed (Coomaraswamy 1918:1).

Coomaraswamy's lament finds a visual echo in Malani's work, where the loss of svabhāva (the intrinsic spirit of India) through Western cosmopolitanism, is both mourned and resisted.

Through her layered imagery and hybrid media, Malani attempts to reclaim the essential qualities of the “Indianness” that Coomaraswamy venerates. A collective identity that was perfect in its imperfection and whose preference would be unadorned (empty handed) rather than veiled in the superficiality of modernity (cosmopolitan veneer). Malani’s art becomes a reconciliation of the fragments containing her ancient Indianness and her civilised self. In doing so, she turns Coomaraswamy’s warning into a site of critique, exposing how cultural erasure and capitalist desire continue to shadow postcolonial identity.

Whilst Malani’s installation focuses on a sequential narrative, Gowda and Pushpamala use materials as a metaphor of loss and displacement. *Dispossession* is a body of work that spoke to human fragility under the weight of nationalism in liberated India. Each artist navigates identity within the socio-political volatility of postcolonial India. Unlike the diasporic Indian South African artists, their struggle is not for visibility and representation, but for peaceful co-existence within their own country. Kapur’s (cited in Breitz 1995b:90) [previous statement](#) regarding the persisting inequalities that stubbornly resist democratic freedom, is clarified within this collective. *Dispossession* brought the realities of 48 years of political precarity after their colonial post-partum to *Africus*. This was an opportune cross-cultural learning for South African audiences that was never considered in the catalogue.



Figure 29. Nalini Malani, *Media materials installation*, view at Max Müller Bahvan, (1993).

2.4.2 UDW fine art graduates: performances of ‘Indian’ identity through activism

The following discussion focuses on the work of ‘Indian’ South African artists from the Fine Art Department of the University of Durban Westville (UDW), established in 1972. These works have been meticulously documented by Moodley (2012a), in her PhD thesis, *Culture, politics and identity in the visual art of Indian South African graduates from the University of Durban-Westville in KwaZulu-Natal, 1962-1999*. UDW was the second ‘Indian’ institute of

higher education in Durban after the closure of the “bush” college on Salisbury Island (1961-1971) (Govinden 2025). The university’s lifespan (1972-2004)¹²⁵ bookends a politically volatile period that bridged the toppling of Afrikaner nationalism and the installation of Black democracy. As this group was not invited to participate in Johannesburg’s first biennale, they fall within Garney’s (2020:6) presence-absence paradox, and I have re-presented them within my study to mitigate their erasure from art history.

Moodley (2012a:8) describes the nature of UDW, as highly politicised, “...catering specifically for the Indian community. It was within this institution that the variables of race, class, religion and gender defined the social fabric and political consciousness within which the Indian Fine Art student was shaped”. UDW is described as the grounding for the formation of ‘Indian identity’ within the context of visual arts, Moodley’s documentation becomes a critical source for analysis in this study. She states that students prioritised the struggle for freedom above art production and its exhibition under white curation. They were involved in sustained cultural boycotts, and sacrificed their careers for the more pressing political agenda of resistance and activism (Moodley 2012a:8). However, this period generated some highly significant work, which was “shaped by questions of history, identity, culture and politics, all of which cluster around apartheid as a trope” (Moodley 2012a:19). Therefore, the critical analysis of selected work from the UDW fine art alumni directly addresses three [research questions \(i, ii & iii\)](#) on the negotiation, lack of representation and art production of ‘Indian’ identity in South Africa.

Moodley herself specialised in printmaking, with explorations in etching, screen printing and lithography. Her untitled photo etching (1990, fig 30a) depicts a looming Durban city hall as an iconic colonial building, a symbolic repository of history and power. The low vantage point of the viewer alludes to its inaccessibility, especially to the oppressed people of the city, on whose work it was built. The man-made structure appears merged into the rock face, which speaks to the colonial appropriation of land and natural resources. Moodley’s city hall is a bastion of colonial grandeur that overshadows many silenced histories. It can be compared with the histories and art of the UDW graduates, whose nuances of ethnicity have been homogenised, blurring the cultural distinctions between Hindus and Muslims under the racial label of ‘Indian’ (Moodley 2012a:205).

¹²⁵ In 1972 a new, modern campus is opened in Westville. In 1984 the university becomes an autonomous institution and begins admitting students of all races. In 2004 the former University of Durban-Westville merges with the University of Natal to become the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2025).



Figure 30. (a) Nalini Moodley, *Untitled* (1990).

(b) Faiza Galdhari, *Conversations in my mind, then and now* (2004).

(c) Sandhia Bansi, *Mendhi* (1997).

Faiza Galdhari¹²⁶ is a Muslim printmaker whose work interrogates the representation and empowerment of Muslim women. Of mixed race, she was forced by law to reside in a Coloured group area, which severely limited her ability to engage with the Muslim community and its religious practice. Her work *Conversations in my mind, then and now* (2004, fig30b) is part of a series that maps the intersections of religion, culture and race. Galdhari uses circular motifs, Islamic patterns and text to trace a path of migration from the South Asian subcontinent. During a time of democratic freedom, Galdhari who was previously categorised as Coloured was allowed to move back to an 'Indian' area, which further problematised her formation of identity as based purely on her physical appearance. She maps her identity through art by exploring belonging through imagined spaces with the understanding that, in South Africa, place is always affiliated to race (Moodley 2012a:205-206). Galdhari's work becomes an activism against the geopolitics discussed in the [previous section](#); through her art she resists coloniality occurring in the realms of the social, political, geographical, intellectual and psychological.

The painting *Mendhi* (1997, fig 30c) by Sandhia Bansi¹²⁷ references the Hindu and Muslim tradition of henna-painting on the feet, arms and hands of a bride. The ancient ritual of Mendhi design has become a symbol of Indianness throughout the world (Moodley 2012a:171-172). Bansi's artwork depicts an intricate and time-consuming patterning for the purpose of adornment and celebration. The presentation of the bare feet appears beautifully decorated yet vulnerable, open to the stigma of foreignness and otherness. Placed adjacent to Galdhari's identity map (fig 30b) of Muslim Colouredness, Bansi's feet also become a sort

¹²⁶ Faiza Galdhari graduated in 1991.

¹²⁷ Sandhia Bansi graduated in 1995.

of map that traces her Hinduism. I have juxtaposed these works to set up a conversation about the divergent ways in which both artists negotiate their identity-race paradoxes, a condition that will be explored in the context of 'Indian' identity in greater depth in [Chapter three](#). While Galdhari searches for meaning in the signs that define her race and culture, Bansi wears her podal ornamentation to solidify hers. Their art bears witness to the complex and heterogenous nature of cultural identity and simultaneously challenges and contradicts the homogenous racial category of 'Indian'.

They came from the East (1987, fig 31a) by Vedant Nanackchand¹²⁸ is the first in a series of commissioned paintings for the Documentation Centre (UKZN). It depicts the disembarkation of indentured Indian labourers under the supervision of a British agent. Those arriving appear exhausted and unsettled from the journey, while the agent is focused on tabulating his human cargo. I am reminded of Maharaj's (1999) notion of the "calculus of difference" used to theorise coloniality's mechanical forms of racism.



Figure 31. (a) Vedant Nanackchand, *They came from the East* (1987).

(b) Vedant Nanackchand, *The sugar fields* (1987).

(c) Vedant Nanackchand, *The merchant* (1987).

Nanackchand tells a layered story from the perspective of the colonised. Using expressive brush strokes and a varied palette, he has composed a complex arrangement of people and places (Moodley 2012a:188). The *sugar fields* (1987, fig 31b) documents life on the plantations, where both men and women toiled in the sun while their names lay silent in the pages of the ship lists. The last in the series is *The merchant* (1987, fig 31c), which illustrates a life of commerce in the city, depicting the narrative of the free traders who came to Africa with more agency and means than the indentured labourers. Important in this last-mentioned painting is the artists inclusion of significant historical landmarks, such as the iconic Grey Street¹²⁹ (1987, fig 31c), which formed part of the 'Indian' sector of Durban city.

¹²⁸ Vedant Nanackchand graduated in 1977.

¹²⁹ Renamed Doctor Yusuf Dadoo Street.

Nanackchand's narrative portrays the shifting identity constructions of 'Indians' and their assimilation into South African society.

Clive Pillay's¹³⁰ *A South African stamp* (1984, fig 32a) documents the plight of poor Black and Indian communities living in Cato Manor. Situated on the outskirts of Durban City, the township was home to vegetable growers, former indentured labourers and their descendants. The geographical location of Cato Manor symbolises the complex and hierarchical strata of human survival, spawned by the system of apartheid, similar to [Inanda](#), the place my father was born, which was a contested area where Black and Brown people clamoured and scuffled for the right to live and belong. The spaces Pillay represents speak to more than mere geography; they are sites engrained with the true history of human strife, playing out amongst the poorest and least valued in South African society.



Figure 32. (a) Clive Pillay, *A South African Stamp* (1984).

(b) Sherene Timol, *Untitled* (2010).

(c) Avitha Sooful, *Dislocation* (2010).

¹³⁰ Clive Pillay graduated in 1983.

White landowners leased and sold plots to 'Indians' who in turn leased plots to African families who were prohibited from owning land at the time. The regulations and restrictions pertaining to land and the disenfranchisement of the abject Black subaltern by both Whites and 'Indians' is evident here (Soske 2009:ii). I will discuss the problematic condition of 'Indian' racism towards Black people further in the section [Reflections of Brownness](#).

After the implementation of the Group Areas Act in 1958, Cato Manor was proclaimed a White group area and the entire non-white population was forcibly relocated to the townships of KwaMashu, Umlazi and Chatsworth (SAHO 2025). Cato Manor was no longer a place where you lived, but a place you left, a transition between the fragility of the known to the unknown. This impermanent state is what Pillay's image (fig 32a) on an 11 cent stamp depicts. He exposes the vulnerability of children as but a momentary glimpse of the uncertainty and dislocation suffered by both 'Indian' and Black people. As a 'romanticised'¹³¹ picture on a stamp, the children's lives are worth a mere 11c, yet in reality they are often entirely worthless, abandoned and left to fend for themselves. Children represent the future, and Pillay utilises this scene to foreshadow the weight of their reality, growing up in a country that refuses you the basic right of place and home.

Sherene Timol¹³² is an art activist of mixed race who confronts her inner conflicts of identity as defined under apartheid through her artwork. Scarred by the decision to change her race from Coloured to 'Indian' in order to register at university, she struggled to find a sense of belonging. Her diptych (2010, fig 32b) consists of finely stitched anthropomorphic forms that plot the journey of her family from Indonesia to South Africa. As Galdhari did in her map (fig 30b), Timol plots her ethnic journey through time and space, wrapping the figures with undyed cloth in an attempt to anonymise her race and limit essentialisation (Moodley 2012a:186-187). The ritual of wrapping as an act of concealing and privatising one's inner pain and conflict is also present in [Pushpamala's Hidden narratives](#) (fig 28b). Ironically, a wrapped form is protected from the external world, yet simultaneously cannot access it, an aspect that echoes Garnsey's presence-absence paradox. Both Timol and Pushpamala attempt to navigate their identities in the wake of catastrophic events, and their art reveals the emotional after effects that remain hidden within their psyches.

In her paintings, Avitha Sooful¹³³ works predominantly with landscapes that often function as metaphors for current political issues (Moodley 2012a:199). Her work *Dislocation* (2010, fig 32c) explores aspects of the natural environment, here the Free State veld, imposed upon

¹³¹ The word 'romanticised' is used to describe how the gaze, often the white gaze, softens, beautifies or sentimentalises the harsh realities of the poor in art.

¹³² Shireen Timol graduated in 1972.

¹³³ Avitha Sooful graduated in 1986.

by colonial land appropriation. Like Pillay's *A South African stamp* (1984, fig 32a), Sooful's work speaks to displacement and exclusion but in a different more detached manner. This aloofness is further emphasised by the lack of human presence; the landscape becomes the restricted and alien domain of those who have erected a fence to keep the viewer at bay. One can 'imagine' rolling hills beyond the horizon, but the artist uses a shallow one-point perspective to limit depth. She makes the barbed wire fence a symbol of the geographical restrictions and spatial divisions of the architecture of apartheid. Sooful reflects on a time when 'Indians' were not allowed to live or even sleep over in the Free State by law (Moodley 2012a:199). She transfers this abstract ideation into delicate text that merges into the fence, becoming a psychological barrier in her imagined landscape.

Sooful paints from memory, another technique that distances or separates her from the reality of place. The act of remembering mediates her artistic expression in a way that is unusual within the genre of landscape painting. Landscape artists usually paint in situ or from photographs in order to capture fleeting light effects and mood. However, *Dislocation* (fig 32c) is not about capturing beauty. Instead of depicting the reality of a specific landscape, the artist portrays a veiled recollection of spaces that she is not allowed to inhabit. The concept of [reflexivity](#) (memory), which is pertinent to my study, is applied in Sooful's praxis as a method of passively and quietly inserting her identity or presence into the landscape. Moodley (2012a:200) aptly describes her work as "silent", less about atmosphere and more about the lack of agency and the invisibilisation of the 'Indian' South African artist.

Garnsey (2020:3) states that "...in the context of the Biennale, artistic representation can be understood as a form of political representation...art is a radical form of political participation in times of political transition". Although her statement applies to third world countries participating in the Venice Biennale, the concepts of representation and radicalism can be applied here. Both groups (the Indian Biennale participants in *Dispossessed* and the UDW graduates) were emerging during a time of tumultuous political transition occurring in India and South Africa. The need for representation and visibility was crucial. This cross-cultural reflection reveals separate yet similar political motivations to define entangled postcolonial identities. Indian artists expressed their struggle to regain an essence of their indigeneity; ironically, 'Indian' South Africans relinquished their ethnicity in the hope of belonging. Considered in the context of the presence-absence paradox (Garnsey 2020:6), their historic absence has unwittingly necessitated a re-presentation within my study.

In presenting my imagined retrospective of the UDW fine art graduates against the Indian artists who exhibited at *Africus*, the banner of *Dispossessed* seems apt for both collections,

with regard to the artists' common exploration of physical and psychological displacement resulting from the colonial occupation of India and South Africa. The analysis of artwork in my discussion has addressed the [research question \(iii\)](#) that asked to what extent 'Indian' artists critique marginalisation and separatism within contemporary society, and questioned how art bears witness to their imagined future identities within this context.

CHAPTER THREE: IDENTITY FORMATIONS IN VISUAL ART

3.1 The identity-race paradox in contemporary South African art

The identity-race paradox has fostered a society of compartmentalized identities, each defined by its physical and cultural distance from the others. To illustrate this unusual social condition prevalent in South African society, I have developed a theoretical matrix which separates singular identity into three formations: Segregated, Contingent and Super-identity. These formations are located on a timeline that spans the political eras of apartheid and democracy (fig 33). I will apply this framework as well as my own life experiences to discuss how artists have negotiated identity amidst their mercurial socio-political states of being. Note in the diagram below that the Segregated-identity was formed during apartheid, yet it coexists with the Contingent and Super-identity during the present democracy. This residual psychological baggage of separateness is what the cusp generation carried with them into a time of freedom.

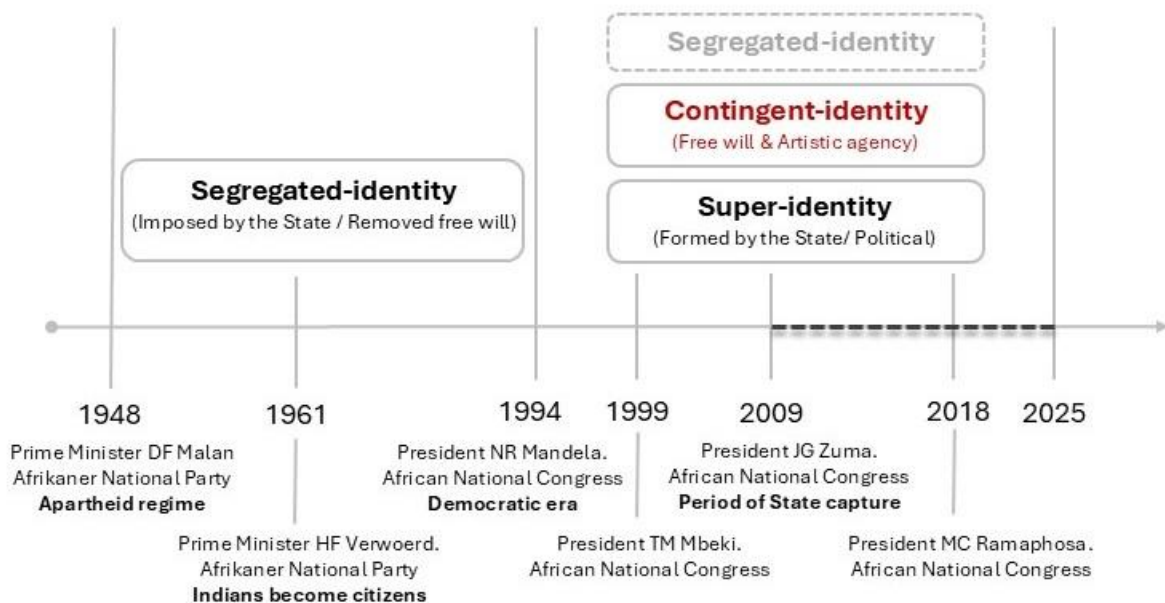


Figure 33. Timeline indicating segregated, contingent and super-identity formations (2025).

The division of identity into three variants of itself problematises race as a stable singularity and supports the notion of paradox. I propose that the nation-state propagates of a type of Super-identity, which is a 'one size fits all' model, similar to the 'rainbow nation' rhetoric. However, at a grassroots level, there exists an existential melee of Contingent-identities held hostage to the political social trajectory of the Super-identity. It is within the chaotic complexity of the Contingent formation that I locate artistic agency and free will. Artists are

able to explore the interdependencies of the various facets that constitute their own identities. Freedom of expression through art becomes significant here as an ethnographic text that provides deeper meaning into how we perceive ourselves and each other. I assert that art is the only space where psychological reconstitution and social transformation can occur, therefore, it must be relentlessly defended.

The controversial artist Ed Young¹³⁴ certainly defends and guards his right to freedom of expression by pushing the boundaries of political correctness. I will discuss how he achieves this by analysing three word-artworks, *ALL SO FUCKING AFRICAN*, *BLACK PUSSY*¹³⁵ and *BLACK IN FIVE MINUTES*. Young's risqué art prods at the racial politics of the local visual arts sector as well as the international art market. Through controversy, he highlights the scourge of censorship and political correctness facing artists almost thirty years into democracy. Klopper (213:137-140) asserts that artists still struggle with expressing their identities and exerting their 'freedoms', while Jamal (2017:21) affirms that freedom of expression, is a "ruse". It is apparent that the identity-race paradox has bled into our visual culture, entrenching racial differences, rather than celebrating inclusion and cross-cultural assimilation. My study therefore proposes forms of art activism that promotes cultural fluidity, specifically [provincialisation and decentralised zones](#) of excentric emergence discussed in Chapter Two.

The literature review reveals that racial dialogues are inextricably interlaced within South Africa's unusual socio-political past and present. Therefore, this study concedes that an attempt to analyse any individual 'racial'¹³⁶ group (i.e. 'Indian' in this case) and its identity formation would be futile and indeterminate. This problematises the racial singularity of the hypothetical statement that underpins this study. However, it ironically validates the social reductiveness of racial categorisation enforced by the state. To extrapolate instances of meaning and understanding of identities, their verbal dialogues and their visual expressions must be observed within the multiracial entanglements (Van de Watt cited in Klopper 2013:130; Erwin 2012:97) of the visual art space. Therefore, an important argument is made, that all racial identities are interdependent (Jamal 2017:24) and contingent (Adam 1995:464; Malinen 2022:7) on each other.

¹³⁴ Young holds a BFA (cum laude, 2001) and an MFA (cum laude, 2005) from the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town. Young's work is characterised by a sharp mix of wit, subversion and cultural critique. He forgoes strictly "traditional" media, employing silicone sculptures, neon text, found-objects, performance, video and installation, often layering humour with discomfort. His practice questions representation, identity, power and the everyday, frequently in a distinctly South African post-apartheid context.

¹³⁵ This work was never made but was proposed by the artist to illicit dialogue regarding the censorship of art by local and global markets (Jamal 2017:27).

¹³⁶ Refers to the state allocated racial descriptors of Black, White, Indian and Coloured.

To argue the point of these interdependencies, a theoretical deconstruction of the national narrative and the grassroots reality is incumbent. This is demonstrated by juxtaposing the Super-identity, which is a politically correct, two-dimensional construct, to the realities of the Contingent-identity. Jamal (2017:37) states that beneath the veneer of the Super-identity, there exists a “fakery of nationhood” that is unpalatable to artists seeking authentic platforms of expression, such as the controversial, Ed Young, described by a curator from Harlem Studio Museums¹³⁷ as, “Not the kind of African they were looking for” (Jamal 2017:28). Young’s word-work, *ALL SO FUCKING AFRICAN* (fig 34b) was rejected this particular American gallery, due to its shock value rubbing up uncomfortably against global sentimentality and local ‘rainbow’ idealism. This resistance and rejection are the social fuel of his work, even those imagined but never made, like *BLACK PUSSY* (Jamal 2017:27). This work was purely theoretical, and conceptualised by Young to shine a blinding light on the scourge of art censorship. *BLACK IN FIVE MINUTES* (fig 34a), on the other hand, implicates the art market as dealing in black fetishism like a fast-food outlet.



Figure 34. (a) Ed Young, *BLACK IN FIVE MINUTES* (2010).

(b) Ed Young, *ALL SO FUCKING AFRICAN* (2016).

Young’s performance of identity as a provocateur, speaks to the collective frustration of artists caught in nationhood’s iron grip of political correctness, the cancer of repressing free speech and artistic expression. As Young pushes the boundaries of his male whiteness, questions arise whether this is resistance art or art activism. Stewart Martin (2007:372-373) describes this resistance as a “primal scene of politics in capitalist culture” in which anti-art is

¹³⁷ The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, is devoted to the work of artists of African descent.

but another face of the same currency. This means that, although Young attempts to subvert and reject the conformities of the art market, he still achieves a notoriety in the art scene that bolsters his popularity. These tangled discourses of perceived ownerships, cultural expropriations and racist aspersions (Klopper 2013:130) breed “undefined bitterness and cynicism” (Khan 2014:18) in the trenches of Contingent-identities. They are the awkward and flawed lovechild of the race-identity paradox, biting at its restraints of censorship and political correctness.

Artists, like Young, who are willing to call the system's bluff, receive an onslaught of racial reprise, confirming the repercussions of exerting one's self-identity (Hall cited in Khan cites 2014:25). We are held to an ethic that states, South African artists collectively can only see ourselves in proximity to the *Other*, we can only position our art in relation to where *They* aren't (Adam 1995:463; Vally cited in Moodley 2012:22). This imposed view leaves little room for our dysfunctional mash-up of being (Adam 1995:460), our proximity of differences bleeding into each other and becoming something new (Moodley 2012:39; Klopper cites Hall 2013:130). This newness is only possible if the Contingent-identity acknowledges its cross-cultural assimilation, in order to move beyond its racial silo. This state of contemporary fluidity, is proposed within my study as a countermeasure to the identity-race paradox.

The fluidity of cross-assimilation between and amongst racial groups over time forms cultural hybridities. However, hybridities problematise the clear divisions and special entitlements (Adam 1997:464) awarded to the state's seat of power. Maintaining racial delineation is a device used to justify and retain that power. As a result, racial categorisation is a condition that is politically enforced and perpetuated at the cost of those who fall outside such privileges. Art in the service of the state has offered a brand of “didactic and tokenistic multiculturalism” (Perrill 2012:586), one that lacks the motivation to provide meaningful social transformation.

It has been argued that the visual arts are plagued by censorship and delimited by global expectations that serve political-mongering and profit-grabbing. The question arises as to whether art can untether itself from these entanglements to provide a more progressive and inclusive social space for human expression. Art currently resides within the sectors of state-funded sport, culture, education and private commerce; none of which have made huge strides in promoting authentic multicultural inclusivity. The resolution of untethering of visual art is most likely unrealistic, considering the systemic self-serving, hierarchical model that sustains it. A complete “rethinking of race, identity and art” (Jamal cites Mangcu 2027:24) or, at the very least, a safe space to contemplate this rethinking is but one resolve. Rather than perceive the visual arts as an autonomous and finite entity, it must be reconceptualised as a

fluid multiplicity, a cultural composite and visual repository that can occur in various forms and “habitations” (Chakrabarty cited in Enwezor 2009: 30). Enwezor’s adoption of Chakrabarty’s theory of decentralised provincialities can be applied within South Africa’s visual art space/s.

Provincialisation is proposed to encourage the sporadic emergence of various excentric iterations of visual art expression. These iterations of cultural hybridisations are an ethnographical fact of colonialism and racial segregation, as argued in this case study of South African ‘Indians’. The notion of provincialisation subverts modernism’s stubborn aspiration to create centres, a condition that seemingly cannot be eradicated. Within this condition, every action of the excentric artist, tends to produce an equal centrifugal reaction, flinging their narratives to the outskirts of cultural relevance. As such, ‘Indian’ art identities do not desire re-presentation, merely a platform for expressing or enacting their heterotemporal histories and multifaceted identities.

It is proposed that artists at a grassroots level can disrupt the current status quo of art production and turn the political machine on its head. If Contingent-identities are in the service of heralding a “joint culture” (Jamal 2017:24), then the visual arts could become a platform where all our cultural cohesions and contradictions could reside in a “fluid moment” (Van de Watt 2012:413) of being. This form of art activism could over time create conducive spaces for excentric emergence and will provide multiple vantage points of South African identity and thereby rebirth lost histories. The gradual emergence and visibility of the many iterations of culture could shift the focus from the lines that divide us to the liminal spaces we overlap.

3.2 The cusp generation: the dichotomy of identity

The previous argument of the identity-race paradox has concluded that an analysis of ‘Indian’ identity as a singularity could not yield understanding outside the framework of multiculturalism (Adam 1995:463-464). Therefore, this discussion is based on the premise that the intertextuality between races must be read within a structure of proximal and interdependent singularities. I provide my life experience, as an ‘Indian’ artist framed within the cusp generation group, to unpack the dichotomies that exist within iterations of my identity. The cusp generation’s social *conditioning* during apartheid and expected *de-conditioning* after emancipation, substantiates the premise of the race-identity paradox discussed in the previous section. Their formations of the Segregated and Contingent-identities which span the political periods of apartheid and democracy are particularly pertinent to the paradox. A critical discussion of this dichotomous split or fracture of identity

will reveal reasons for the low participation and representation of 'Indians' within the visual arts ([research question ii](#)).

To contextualise the cusp generation, it is important to consider that they have endured a bizarre system of legalised oppression and marginalisation for a prolonged period before democratic freedom. My autoethnographic narrative bears testament to the psychological impact of this system on the formation of my identity. My formative experiences were solidified in the culture of apartheid, as was that of my parents. This discussion focuses on the primary, secondary and tertiary education systems available to 'Indians' in Natal during the political transition from apartheid to democracy. School curricula and educational structures were apartheid-apparatus that controlled and delimited the social trajectory of people of colour (Ndhlovu 2023:1-3; Reddy 2004:9; Msila:149). It is also argued that "apartheid education was used as a tool to divide society as it constructed certain forms of identity among learners" (Msila 2007:146) which makes it critical to my study. Based on these views, the socio-political implications of education and institutions are weighed against the collective identity formation and invisibility of 'Indians' in contemporary culture.

Schools in 'Indian' townships were regulated by the *Indian Education Act, 1965* (Law Library South Africa 2025). It defined a notably inferior basic curriculum, with limited resources (Ndhlovu 2023:1), devised to suppress scholarly acumen and propagate the warped social condition of white supremacy (Wheeler 1961:247; Moodley 2012:4). During my formative years (1977-1984) I attended Rose Heights Primary School in the township of Chatsworth. Its scope excluded diasporic history, vernacular languages,¹³⁸ or art studies relating to Indo-Asiatic visual cultures and music. This further destabilised the formation of identity by severing it from any form of cultural origin or history. As a young child, my community consisted of a heterogenous society of Brown people, yet I couldn't locate their semblance or histories in the textbooks I studied. Although I didn't fully understand how we 'Indian' people had come to be in this place, I knew we were different, unwanted and separate from the others. I internalised an unspoken stigma of foreignness and inferiority (Pillay 2019:83) that has permeated my being to this current day. I have discussed the conditions for this self-described identity formation within the context of my autoethnography and family history in [Chapter Two](#).

Secondary School further inculcated notions of separateness and the geographical distance between races, and fostered fears and resentments (fig 35a). Many students questioned the

¹³⁸ Vernacular lessons of South Indian languages, such as Tamil, were offered only as extra-curricular classes after school hours. These were poorly attended as most parents and students didn't see the social value of Indian vernaculars in South Africa.

enforcement of Afrikaans¹³⁹ as an examination subject over vernacular 'Indian' languages. History lessons consisted of European wars, with particular emphasis on the Anglo-Boer¹⁴⁰ war and the historic narratives of 'Die Groot Trek' and episodes such as 'Rachel de Beer'.¹⁴¹ Within these narratives, Zulu¹⁴² warriors were depicted as cruel savages who massacred many innocent Dutch women and children. Whites were presented as heroic conquerors, whilst minorities such as Coloureds and 'Indians' were dislocated from these historic accounts. From this position of invisibility, the Segregated-identity had no repository of societal experience, allegiance and ideas to draw from. It has been proposed that, "not only do we make history, but we are also made by our history (Araeen *et al* 2002:11). Therefore, due to an incomplete and obscured heritage, 'Indian' identity exists in a state of tenuous ambivalence regarding its place in South Africa (Moodley 2012:26).



Figure 35. (a) Arena Park Secondary School: matric art class with Lucelle Pillay (1989).

(b) Lucelle Pillay, *My pencil sketch: Chatsworth* (1989).

(c) *Chatsworth Tabloid News*, Chatsworth (2024).

The visual and performative arts at the senior phase of high school were mostly inaccessible to students (Pillay 2010:i). Art and drama (electives) were often removed from the matric¹⁴³ curriculum, due to a low uptake in most schools. Art as an examination subject was only offered in exceptional scenarios, when student numbers were deemed feasible. School governing bodies placed emphasis on maths, science and sport as vehicles toward professional careers. Funding for materials and equipment were allocated to these subjects,

¹³⁹ Afrikaans was derived from the Dutch brought to the Cape by Protestant settlers in the 17th century, and is an official language of South Africa. It is argued to have various cultural influences such as variants of Malay, Portuguese and Indonesian as well as the indigenous Khoikhoi and San languages (SAHO 2025).

¹⁴⁰ Anglo-Boer war of 1899 refers to fighting between the British and the Afrikaners during which the latter group was defeated. Being opposed to British system of education because they saw it as a way of alienating them from their own cultural practices, Afrikaners decided to establish their own schools based on Christian National Education (CNE) (Msila 2007:148). The term Boer (farmer) describes members of the early population of Dutch and Huguenots that settled in southern Africa. Contemporary Afrikaners consist of a heterogenous mix European migrants that have settled in South Africa since.

¹⁴¹ 'The Great Trek' and 'Rachel de Beer' are narratives of 'Boer' history, told from the perspective of Afrikaners.

¹⁴² The Zulu people are the largest ethnic group and nation in South Africa, living mainly in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

¹⁴³ The term 'Matric' in South Africa refers to the last grade in High School, now known as Grade 12.

with art, drama and music – if they were offered at all - often lacking in resources. Due to these conditions, only a small cohort of graduates filtered into the tertiary visual art space. I was fortunate to attend the Arena Park Secondary School (fig 36), located in a more affluent area with private housing, amenities and recreation facilities. The politician and leader of the minority front, Amichand Rajbansi,¹⁴⁴ lived in the area and channelled funding towards a school hall, sport facilities and an art centre. I was therefore able to choose the electives of art and drama, and I graduated with a matric exemption in 1990, a period punctuated with anti-apartheid student protests (Moodley 2012:8; Reddy 2004:5).

The late 1980s to mid-1990s was a climactic and politically charged period in South Africa. The release of Mandela catalysed the country's transition into a tenuous democracy headed by the ANC. During this transition, promises of free and equal access to education for all races was on the horizon; however, for the cusp generation, the higher education landscape remained racially divided (Badat 1995:141; Reddy 2004:8) for many years. The roadmap to tangible educational transformation was uncharted and the existing colonial structures proved stubbornly resistant to change (Badat 1995:141, Moodley 2012:39-40). As a young adult, I soon faced the reality that tertiary education options had remained severely limited for people of colour (Wheeler 1961:247; Moodley 2012:4-6). 'Indians' in Natal had only two offerings, the University of Durban-Westville and the ML Sultan Technikon,¹⁴⁵ both being 'Indian'-only institutes under the recently toppled Nationalist regime. They were under severe pressure to accommodate a burgeoning Black student cohort as well as 'Indians' (Moodley 2012:6), whilst their white counterparts, such as Natal University and Natal Technikon remained monolithically resolute (Reddy 2004:5).

After graduating from high school, I registered in the fashion design programme at the ML Sultan Technikon in 1990. My parents convinced me that this was a more viable career option than a university fine art degree, which was my first choice. The student cohort consisted only of 'Indians', Blacks and Coloureds, as the neighbouring Natal Technikon was reserved for Whites only. Campus life was a vibrant social space, with young people converging from all parts of the country. Freed from our existential silos, we could engage with others on equal ground and express our political allegiances. From my own experiences, these were diverse and varied: for example I observed 'Indian' Muslims holding rallies in support of Palestine while Hindus sympathised with civil mobilisation for

¹⁴⁴ He was a former chairman of the Ministers' Council of the House of Delegates Tricameral parliamentary chamber for Indian people.

¹⁴⁵ The origins of ML Sultan Technikon can be traced to Hajee Malukmahomed Lappa Sultan who donated funds for the first technical college in Durban in 1941. This early iteration was intended to educate the descendants of the indentured labourers who were threatened with repatriation and refused education facilities. Funded through several 'Indian' foundations and business conglomerates over the years, the ML Sultan Technical College was officially opened in 1956.

decentralised power in India. During this time I felt intimidated by Black students as they forced me and my fellow students out of lecture halls, I noticed that sit-ins and protests grew progressively more volatile prior to the release of Mandela in 1990. These were frightening but politically invigorating times, pregnant with the hope for imminent change and liberation.

Political rifts between 'Indian' and Black students grew, as instances of rioting, destruction of property and intimidation became more frequent. This culminated in campus closures, frustrating 'Indians' who wanted to finalise their qualifications. For the cusp generation, it was ironic and somewhat tragic that Black aggression would be demonstrated in an institute built on the contribution of the 'Indian' community (ML Sultan 2025 & DUT 2025:4-5). It wouldn't be the first time Black and Brown political allegiances would come under dispute; I have provided more contextual background on racism between 'Indians' and Blacks in the section [Reflections on maintaining brownness](#). As a tertiary student I experienced a fracture in my allegiance towards liberation, feeling sandwiched between the causes of others and held hostage to their opposing value systems. The short sightedness of the old regime had fuelled the brutality of Black resistance, and I was an inconsequential casualty. 'Indian' minorities perceived themselves 'stuck in the middle' (Vahed & Desai 2017:148-150), or a subtext to a greater narrative in which they were without agency.

3.2.1 The cusp generation and existential siloing

Nalini Moodley-Diar¹⁴⁶ and Sharlene Khan¹⁴⁷ were amongst many fine art graduates at UDW (fig 36) during the tumultuous period of political transition. Moodley-Diar has diligently documented and contextualised the work of 'Indian' students,¹⁴⁸ having identified their 'invisibility' in the era of democratic freedom (Moodley 2012a:1-4; Moodley 2012b:38-39). A selection of student work has been previously discussed in [Chapter Two](#). Her writing serves to document the 'Indian' art identity, as well as define the complex and paradoxical nature of its formation in South Africa. Moodley's article states,

Indian identity is constantly made and remade, represented and erased, asserted and disputed. Identity politics as conceived by people of colour has never meant bemoaning one's circumstances, ranking or oppressions but rather by a politics of activism, which seeks to recognise, name and destroy the system of domination which subjugates people of colour (Rajan cited in Moodley 2012a:27).

¹⁴⁶ Nalini Moodley-Diar is currently the Executive Dean and Professor in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa. She has a B.A (Fine Arts), M.A. (Art History) cum laude, a UPGCE and completed her PhD in Art History at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, focusing on the visual art produced by Indian South Africans.

¹⁴⁷ Associate Professor at WITS. Sharlene Khan BAFA, MAFA, PhD is a South African visual artist who works in multimedia installations and performances that focus on the socio-political realities of a post-apartheid society and the intersectionality of race–gender–class.

¹⁴⁸ UDW Fine Arts students that graduated between 1980-1998 are Kiren Thathiah (1983); Avitha Sooful (1986); Ravi Govender (1987); Nalini Moodley (1991); Faiza Galdhari (1991); Reshma Maharaj (1992); Yusu Vahed (1994); Selvan Naidoo (1995) and Sharlene Khan (1998).

The above quote supports my study's position of the instability, lack of representation and the perpetual erasure of 'Indian' cultural continuity within the historic narrative of struggle. It mentions the important aspect of activism as a prominent trait within the art identity during the 1990s (Moodley 2012a:35, 162). I have therefore expanded on activism as a performance of my own identity in the context of the art exhibition in [Chapter Four](#).¹⁴⁹ This was intended as a continuity of activism to subvert invisibility and erasure still occurring in contemporary art practice.



Figure 36. (a) *Student protest meeting at UDW*. L to R (standing): Jerry Coovadia, Zac Yacoob, Rector SP Olivier, and Ramlal Ramesar (undated).
 (b) The "heart" of the UDW campus, showing the pond, quad, cafeteria, MH Joosub Hall (far left) & library (undated).
 (c) *Art Gallery at UDW* (2012).

Khan, who describes herself as a Black¹⁵⁰ feminist, has been vociferous in the decolonial discourse of race and gender in the visual arts. Frustrated by the glacial pace of transformation in this sector and higher education, Khan (2016:3-7) debunked the façade of racial equality in the post-apartheid era. In the 10-year retrospective of her controversial article, *Doing it for Daddy* (2006), she reflected on the rebuke and pariah status she was allotted for speaking against the system (Khan 2016). Her article broached the issue of how White women have usurped power in academia and the visual arts, over marginalised Black women, under the guise that they too were victims of white patriarchy. In response to this, Khan (2016:4) states, "...you [white women] were struggling within a system which privileged you against all others, that still privileges you, was I, as a historical and currently marginalised person, supposed to understand your struggle as similar to mine?"

Whilst Khan acknowledges the challenges of all women (including Whites) in the context of male patriarchal oppression, speaking in the first person, she delineates the Black women's struggle as more justified. Her rhetorical questioning invalidates the positions of authority given to White woman and simultaneously undermines their stance as previously

¹⁴⁹ This can be found in Chapter Four, subsection 4.3 *The art exhibition as an activism*.

¹⁵⁰ Khan uses the racial descriptor of 'Black' within the context of all women of colour, regardless of ethnicity.

'oppressed'. Khan's argument is similar to Chammah Kaunda's (2017:2), when he described the notion of White subalternity (Roos 2016:119) as "antithetical". Like Khan, he raises questions of whether the previous oppressors should be allowed to infiltrate decolonial agendas, and thereby absolve themselves from the atrocities of the past.

An analysis of this argument reveals the complex taxonomy of the identity-race paradox. Within this framework, there exist layers of privilege and oppression aligned to apartheid history. Informed by a skewed narrative, this framework is always hierarchical with each stratum remaining attached to race. The Segregated-identity has borne the brunt of immense and prolonged oppression, which remains unresolved in its Contingent-self. It struggles against the condition of existential siloing, installed within its psyche. It is a condition that has reduced the individuals capacity to relate to or empathise with other races, on the premise that he/she has not been afforded empathy or understanding. Therefore, a characteristic of the cusp generation is that existential siloing allows them to justify behaviour and ways of being in the world, from a unifocal heterotemporality. This poses challenges within decolonial discourse, in which all layers (habitations) of privilege and oppression should be renegotiated to ensure equal representation.

From Khan's perspective, negotiating White privilege over Black oppression, on the same sliding scale of political variables was absurd, as she strongly believed they were irreconcilable. Whilst this view is unquestionably moralistic, in hindsight it did not serve her cause within the socio-political framework at the time. Suffice it to say that the scales of power tipped heavily in favour of White women, who held high-ranking positions in the visual arts and academia. Khan (2016:4) states that she was silenced and alienated professionally, which resulted in her decision to undertake her PhD studies at Goldsmiths University in the UK. According to Pissarra (2011b), Khan's critical flaw was to homogenise white women within a bloc of privilege. She thereby alienated possible allies who would be in positions to affect change from within this sector.

Khan's Contingent-identity failed to recognise the shifting strata of privilege and oppression, that were in play within the 'paradox' framework. In the new dispensation, the monolithic apartheid narrative had become a multifocal memory, open to a 'renegotiation' (Moodley 2012a:185) for all races, genders and identities. While Pissarra (2012b) agreed with Khan's argument of the "stagnation of transformation" occurring in the visual arts, he proposed that a more forensic analysis of the sector was needed on her part. As opposed to a broad-strokes lambasting of the situation, qualitative findings would have substantiated her claims on an academic basis and would then have warranted further intervention. Beneath the surface of Pissarra's advice, it can be gleaned that the previously oppressed should

utilise the colonial tools afforded them, in order to dismantle these structures from within. I was intrigued by this concept and have applied the idea of reverse engineering the ship list data as a tool that speaks in favour of those that were once oppressed. I have explained my application fully in [Chapter Four](#).

Whether Khan's assertion of free speech inadvertently limited her potential as a 'change-agent' within the visual arts at the time is difficult to ascertain. In retrospect, the socio-political negotiations of minority identity during the transition period must be clearly distinguished from Black identity. Although Khan (2014:20) identifies as a 'Black' feminist, the history and daily realities of her Segregated-identity were dissimilar to those of Black women. Questions arise as to who can assume Blackness (Araeen 2004:139), since this signifier has in itself undergone various renegotiations in meaning. Whilst 'Indians', under the umbrella of Blackness, joined the struggle against the White nationalist government, their motives have since come under scrutiny (Vahed & Desai 2017:155-156). Outed for political corruption and voting in opposition to the ANC, 'Indian' identity currently occupies a place of ambivalence in South Africa. This Indo-African tension has contributed to the dichotomy of the cusp generation's identity formation, as well as their visibility in culture and politics.

3.3 Invisibility and the contingent-identity

This discussion focuses on the internal and external factors that contribute to the perpetuated invisibility of 'Indians' in post-apartheid South Africa. Inherent cultural traits and economic vulnerabilities of this diasporic group, are weighed against their negotiation of contemporary life. A discursive unpacking of the socio-political trajectories of the Super and Contingent-identities will indicate a possible rationale for their low representation in cultural spheres and history. Appadurai's social theories in, *"Fear of small numbers"* (2006) are applied to the case study of 'Indians' as a minority race group, in the face of the maintenance of power and difference by the state's majority (Appadurai 2006:11). Lastly, aspects of hybridisation and cross assimilation, identified in Adam *et al's* study (2012:377-388), argues the accuracy of the descriptor 'non-Western' as it applies to contemporary 'Indian' South Africans.

The cultural traits typical to non-Western groups are patriarchal traditionalism, gender inequality and religious conservatism (Pillay 2014:ii). These traits are considered as possible inherent causes for the absence of identity in visual culture. Women in particular have inhabited depoliticised, domestic spaces, where they were vulnerable to violence, physical abuse and the economic challenges of raising and educating children (Waetjen 2013:99-100). Like Black women, many 'Indian' women suffered directly in the struggle for freedom, yet their narratives are shrouded in silence (Waetjen 2013:100). The case study of

Mariamamah Chetty, appears in the book, *Chatsworth, the making of a South African township*, her strained smile telling a story of strife and hardship (Waetjen 2013:99-111). Mariammah's husband, a political activist during apartheid, was arrested and sentenced to fourteen years on Robben Island.¹⁵¹ She was uneducated and carved a meagre existence from growing and selling vegetables. This livelihood would come under threat after the forced removals of the Group Areas Act, which brought the prospect of deplorable, cramped living conditions and abject poverty in the township. Waetjen (2013:111) refers to this as "privatised zones of struggle", that are removed from the heroism of political activism, meaning that Mariammah's subaltern identity remains invisible and silent within the grand narrative of Black liberation history.

The cusp generation and those younger, who have witnessed the struggles of their parents, have fostered a survivalist attitude, with higher education seen as a vehicle towards financial security. For this reason, professions in medicine, law and business were seen as favourable conduits to wealth and a higher social status (Pillay 2014:21). This tendency has resulted in an obvious deficit of both male and female 'Indian' artists within the cultural sphere. Therefore, there exists a lack of prominent 'Indian' identities emerging from the visual art sector, such as the likes of Kentridge and Marlene Dumas¹⁵². As a result, the opportunity of mentorship and seasoned role models guiding a path toward art as a profession, is void. Thavamani Pillay¹⁵³ acknowledged this void during her Master's research, which focused predominantly on the invisibility of 'Indian' women in the arts. She states that the cusp generation faced the hurdles of gender inequality, whilst walking a tightrope between old conservatism and new Westernism (Pillay 2014:21). This describes the conflicted position of non-Western minorities, attempting to form new hybrid identities, whilst maintaining remnants of ethnic values passed down generationally.

The current political relationship between the Super-identities of Blacks and Indians is tentative. At the level of national government, the 'Indian' identity has shifted from ally to antagonist. Local 'Indian' businessmen and politicians have been ousted for fraudulent deals, ill-gained tenders and government corruption. The infamous case of President Zuma's inglorious partnership with the Guptas¹⁵⁴ (Vahed & Desai 2017:152-155) has broad-stroked

¹⁵¹ Robben Island, in Table Bay, Western Cape served as South Africa's maximum-security prison from the mid-1960s to 1991. Most inmates, including Mandela, were black men incarcerated for political offences.

¹⁵² Marlene Dumas was born in Cape Town, and attended Cape Town University, where she studied for a BA in Visual Arts. Themes central to Dumas' work include race and sexuality, guilt and innocence, violence and tenderness.

¹⁵³ Thavamani Pillay is an art historian and writer. She obtained her Master's degree at Unisa in 2014 and curates an online gallery of Indian South African visual artists.

¹⁵⁴ The Guptas are a family of businessmen who immigrated to South Africa from India in the early 1990s. They are accused of using their ties to the former South African President Jacob Zuma, to grow their businesses in various industries. They have faced accusations of "state capture," involving using their connections to influence government policies and secure lucrative contracts.

the 'Indian' identity as politically predatory and unscrupulous. This narrative has unfortunately permeated down to the working classes and the poor, who have gradually been removed from BEE employment initiatives. Black politicians have publicised their views on 'Indians' being racist and having no real claim or belonging in Africa (Vahed & Desai 2017:156;158, Moodley 2012a:27). These periodic xenophobic sentiments against 'Indian' identity have become normalised within their South Africanness. Historically, the first group of 'Indians' to disembark the Truro in 1860 catalysed an ongoing adversarial stand-off between themselves and indigenous Zulu people. The Black and 'Indian' Contingent-identities are not strangers to their incessant competition for land, resources and employment (Vahed & Desai 2017:150), which has continued to play out in contemporary life.

3.3.1 Reflections on maintaining Brownness

'Indian' South Africans, have been fixed with an indelible mark of foreignness, that is non-negotiable in a global world fixated on majority nationalist idealism (Appadurai 2006:3). Important to this stigma is the historic struggle by 'Indians' to maintain Brownness, a position popularised by Mahatma Gandhi¹⁵⁵ (fig 37). They distinguished themselves from the Black subaltern to avoid the harsh social conditions they were subjected to during colonialism. It is not surprising that, once in power, the Black government would hold 'Indians' to this distinction and deny them Blackness. Many African politicians reject Gandhi as an "anti-colonialist" (Vahed & Desai 2017:158) hero in the context of South African history, based on his racist attitudes toward Black people.

During the 1940's and 1950's Black intellectuals formed antagonistic attitudes toward the Indian population and their place in South Africa. Many upper caste Gujrati, Hindu and Muslims owned bus fleets, shops and property whilst Blacks were denied these rights by the Nationalist government (Soske 2009:ii-iii). Colonial governance contributed to and perpetuated notions of difference between Zulu and Indian populations. Apartheid structures and policies instigated a social volatility between them, these racial tensions would continue to shape their intellectual, and cultural landscapes for much of the 20th Century (Soske 2009:3).

This racial hierarchy of Indian over African developed into the socio-political divide that is still evident today. These are proposed as possible reasons that the collective 'Indian' identity occupies an uncomfortable position in present day history and culture, one that is constantly coming up for scrutiny and renegotiation. It may even be deduced that the sins of the Super-

¹⁵⁵ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) was a key leader in India's struggle for independence from British colonial rule. He is widely regarded as a symbol of nonviolent resistance, truth, and civil disobedience. He lived in South Africa from 1893 to 1914 (21 years).

identity will continue to erode the acrimonious allegiance between Blacks and 'Indians', threatening the survival of their Contingent-identities at grassroots.



Figure 37. (a) A young Gandhi arrives in South Africa.
 (b) Indian lawyer leads mineworkers in march to Transvaal 1913.
 (c) Statue of Mahatma Gandhi, Pietermaritzburg.
 (d) Statue of Mahatma Gandhi, Johannesburg.

This argument raises questions for the collective 'Indian' psyche, such as the following. Has the caste system and 'Indian's' prolonged proximity to white hate, enabled our own racist notions toward Black people? Is it on the basis of an inherent fear of the Black subaltern, or fear of *becoming* subaltern ourselves, that we distinguish 'Indian' identity, as different? Was it an innate instinct for survival, greed or the allure of social mobility that allowed us to indulge in the exploitation (Vahed & Desai 2017:157) of the Black subaltern? What were our true motives in the struggle for freedom, and what value do we place on our Indian heritage and South African citizenship at a time of globalisation? This reflexivity, explored through artistic practice, scratches beneath the surface of 'Indian' identity, and will be discussed in the work of Sharlene Khan and Amita Makan. There has been a gradual exodus of South African professionals to other countries since the 90s, catalysed by political and economic instability. High unemployment rates and the rigorous application of the defunct BEE apparatus (News24 2024; Wits Business School 2024 & BizNews 2023) has rendered the workplace an unequal and hostile space for all minorities. Due to this, the 'Indian' presence has become gradually inconspicuous, as they seek economic stability abroad, using their PIO status, by immigrating or by working and studying outside South Africa (Vahed & Desai 2017:159-160).

Appadurai argues that the maintenance of difference becomes critical for majority states to promote their visibility and power (Appadurai 2006:11). They achieve this by categorising races as separate monolithic blocs. According to Vahed and Desai (2017:159) there is a risk to analysing a multicultural social system in this way, as it ignores the burgeoning African

bourgeoisie and the growing poor minorities. In South Africa, the need to hold on to race labels is always for political gain and serves only the group in power, allowing them feed off the fat of the land. Minorities, by their very presence, muddy the waters of the ethnoracial boundaries enforced by the state. Occurring consistently and sporadically are “mixed marriages, shared languages and other deep connectivities” (Appadurai 2006:11), aspects of multiculturalism that cannot be restricted or predicted. Over time these forms of organic interculturalism will blur the boundaries between distinctive race groups.

The blurring of boundaries (Van de Watt 2012:413; Appadurai 2006:11) has already begun eroding the systems of difference through cross-assimilation. The identity study using *Personality trait theory* across all races in South Africa (Adams *et al* 2012:377-388) revealed an unexpected similarity between ‘Indian’ and White groups. Within the variable of *Relational orientation*, both groups displayed equal and similar “Independence” traits in their self-descriptions of identity (Adams *et al* 2012:384). The hypothesis statement that non-Western cultures exhibit dominant traits of “Collectivism” was therefore disproved. The descriptor of non-Western and its validity within the analysis of ‘Indian’ identity is questioned. Within the microcosm of the Adams *et al*’s analysis, it may be assumed that similar instances of cross-assimilation have been occurring generationally within the social milieu of South Africa.

This discussion has proposed a few inherent characteristics as well as external socio-political and economic factors that have influenced the visibility of the contemporary ‘Indian’ Identity. These formations have been observed from ‘Indian’ identity’s proximal relations to those of Blacks and Whites. It must be mentioned that the complexities of race theory applied to the varying social trajectories of identities within the South African context is problematic and uncharted. Erwin (2012:95) warns that the epistemological apparatus and artefacts of the past may serve to “nurture privilege, entrench poverty and reproduce ideas around racial difference”. This means that post-colonial societies, organised around Western modalities of being, must deconstruct these social and psychological silos to avoid repeating the mistakes of colonialism. She proposes a shift to more reflexive alternative methodologies for researching race, which could contribute to open spaces that promote inclusivity and dialogue. Therefore, the aim of this study is to apply reflexivity and fluidity within the medium of visual art, as an alternate modality for the construction and representation of identity beyond racial divides.

3.4 Reflexivity and performance as a qualitative research methodology within the art narrative

This discussion focuses on the effectiveness of reflexivity and performance in arts-based research, specifically in the area of identity and race theory. It advocates for the inclusion of

art methodologies in the development of hybrid modalities in human science research. It is argued that when applied within an interdisciplinary framework, art can expand our notions on the realities of diversity (Kamlongera 2023:656; Bogumi *et al* 2015:1-2) and mitigate the social condition of racial siloing. [Previous research](#) has established that colonial legacies and Western epistemologies remain colossal obstructions to the unbiased study of race and identity theory (Erwin 2012:94). Arts-based practices are an effective tool in challenging these dominant forms of representing knowledge, by providing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of identity.

Aspects of reflexivity and performance are analysed in the work of Sharlene Khan and Amita Makan. Aspects of autoethnography, masquerade and presentation allow a reading of their art narratives as 'enactments' (Jones 2017:sp; Crowley 2022:163) of their ethnic identities. In this research framework, the artworks are critiqued not purely on the basis of aesthetics but as 'primary documents of history'. The artist and their performance of identity is viewed as in itself an ethnographic text through which meaning is created, presented and implied (Bogumi *et al* 2015:1-2). Reflecting this, the visual artist Suzanne Crowley¹⁵⁶ (2022:164) states that her art is never neutral; it always stems from culture, and acts as a mnemonic for deeper, more resonant life experiences that are often concealed. Below I explore this tension between the visible and invisible within the art of Khan and Makan. According to Yasmin Gunaratnam¹⁵⁷ (2007:271), it is this interplay of the inner and external worlds that can "surprise and demand invention and representation". She refers to the depth of representation that occurs within an art performance, citing elements of interplay, improvisation and creativity that are spontaneous and non-linear. It can be deduced that arts-based methodology provides an intuitive, dynamic and revealing format for representation, that is relatable on the basis of our common humanity.

Erwin (2012:94) has identified that the traditional research methods of the past may serve to solidify the racial codification of the apartheid era. Art can be a powerful tool that conveys complex meanings and emotions, and impacts ways of thinking that surpass the skewed rationale and formulas of some traditional methods (Bogumi *et al* 2015:2). Researchers working with marginalised groups, mitigate gaps in literacy and education by applying arts-based methods such as drawing and photovoice¹⁵⁸ (Kamlongera 2023:656). These methods

¹⁵⁶ Suzanne Crowley has a PhD in Art Education from the University of Tasmania. Her study is an exploration of geometry and geometric form through the visual arts for what this can contribute to interdisciplinary knowledge.

¹⁵⁷ Gunaratnam is a senior at the sociology department at Goldsmiths College, University of London. She researches race and gender equality in health and social care. She applies art methodologies such as poetry and imagery within palliative care research.

¹⁵⁸ Photovoice is a participatory research method that uses photography and storytelling to empower individuals. Particularly within marginalized or underrepresented communities, to document and communicate their experiences, issues, and perspectives.

are effective for empowerment, facilitating the co-creation of complex, non-verbal and tacit meanings (Johnson *et al* 2015:2). As opposed to more traditional methods, the aspect of mindfulness required in art practice allows access to deeper understandings and engagement, as well as reduced judgment or rigid evaluations (Bentley 2025:9-10).

Autoethnography as a methodology of reflexivity has been applied as meaningful for knowledge creation, specifically within identity studies (Phillips *et al* 2022:763, 766, Kamlongera 2023:658; Gunaratnam 2007:274, 278, Bentley 2025:6, Elizabeth *et al* 2015:3). It has been substantiated that traditional research methods within the human sciences are problematic, due to the inherent biases of Western epistemology (Erwin 2012:96-98). Art methods can dispel stereotypical assumptions of race and othering by repositioning 'Indian' South African identity within the larger discourse of colonial dislocation. From this new position, new analogies can be formed on the mutualism between Blackness and Brownness. Art has the capacity to stimulate interculturalism and racial reciprocity by reflecting back our common humanness. In the new dispensation, Brown, Coloured and White minorities struggle to find belonging and identity under the weight of their colonial yokes of the past. Through fluid art narratives, all races can initiate a dialogue about their past, in an attempt to interrogate its trauma within the present moment.

3.4.1 Unmasked: the excentric Sharlene Khan

The performances of the artist Khan, are critically analysed within the evaluative framework of masquerade theory (Egonwa 2019:880), which has become a discursive platform for decolonising African art within the museum and gallery space (Savage 2008:79).

Masquerade theory as an interpretative tool is argued to be effective in representing the seen, hidden, endogenous and non-literary knowledge systems that inform African art (Egonwa 2019:882). Khan's work is positioned squarely within decoloniality, post-coloniality and the intersectionality of race and gender (Third Text 2025). In this section I analyse as enactments of her 'Indian' South African identity, the work, *What I look like, what I feel like* (2008, fig 38). As an influential yardstick, Tracy Rose's¹⁵⁹ *Ciao Bella* (2002, fig 40) is critiqued alongside Khan's performance. In addition, the effectiveness of performance as a medium of art activism is considered within the context of institutionalised racism and monopolised representation.

In *What I look like, what I feel like*, Khan engages in the performative aspects of identity as a multiplicity (Khan 2014:25), portraying each persona as a mask. Through documenting her

¹⁵⁹ Tracey Rose is a South African artist who lives and works in Johannesburg. She is best-known for her revolutionary performative practice which often translates to and is accompanied by photography, video, installation, and digital prints. Often described as absurd, anarchic, slapdash and carnivalesque, Rose's work explores themes around post-coloniality, gender and sexuality, race and repatriation.

The grid consists of 48 small image panels arranged in 6 rows and 8 columns. The panels contain various photographs and illustrations of a woman in different contexts:

- Row 1:
 - Panel 1: Two photos of a woman in a dark top, one lying down and one sitting.
 - Panel 2: Two photos of a woman in a white headscarf, one looking down and one smiling.
 - Panel 3: Two photos of a woman in a dark top, one lying down and one sitting.
 - Panel 4: Two photos of a woman in a white headscarf, one looking down and one smiling.
 - Panel 5: A collage of photos showing a woman in academic regalia (graduation cap and gown) in various poses.
 - Panel 6: Two photos of a woman in a dark top, one sitting at a desk and one standing.
- Row 2:
 - Panel 1: Two photos of a woman in a yellow dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 2: Two photos of a woman in a graduation cap and gown, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 3: A white silhouette of a person standing, with the text "WESTERNISED EDUCATED DUTCH" below it.
 - Panel 4: A white silhouette of a person standing, with the text "INDIAN MUSLIM CHRISTIAN JEW TITANIUM EDUCATED MARRIAGE CLASS MIXED CLASS NON-WHITE BLACK WOMEN" below it.
 - Panel 5: Two photos of a woman in a red wig and a yellow top, one holding a book and one standing.
- Row 3:
 - Panel 1: Two photos of a woman in a dark top, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 2: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 3: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 4: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 5: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 6: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
- Row 4:
 - Panel 1: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 2: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 3: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 4: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 5: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 6: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
- Row 5:
 - Panel 1: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 2: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 3: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 4: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 5: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 6: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
- Row 6:
 - Panel 1: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 2: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 3: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 4: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 5: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.
 - Panel 6: Two photos of a woman in a white dress, one holding a book and one standing.

¹⁶⁰ A selfie is an image that includes oneself (often with another person or as part of a group), taken by oneself using a digital camera especially for posting on social networks.

Although some images exude a darker psychological dysfunction, they are juxtaposed with those depicting a normal “matter-of-factness” (Asfour 2010:8). The performance becomes an exchange of internal and external dialogues, those spoken and unspoken: it mimics the broader social masquerade playing out in society.

Khan’s use of role play and masquerade speaks not only to the psychological tensions between her private and social selves, but also to the conflicting traumas that lie hidden beneath the veneers of womanhood (Asfour 2010:8). She attempts to bridge the jarring disparities between identities using the medium of embroidery (fig 39); however, the coloured thread and almost child-like symbols offer little reconciliation. The act of stitching, is read as another layer of temporal performance, one that reflects the labour of introspection (Asfour 2010:9), leaving the artist open and vulnerable to the external gaze. One such vulnerability is her self-identification as a ‘Black’ woman, which my study has already [problematised](#). Khan’s assumption of Blackness may be construed as an appropriation, based on the current racial divides that appear more socially entrenched than ever.



Figure 39. Sharlene Khan, Selected images from *What I look like, what I feel like* series with embroidered detail (2008).

Blackness within the context of the South African Super-identity falls purely within the jurisdiction of race and indigeneity to African soil. However, Khan’s Contingent-identity is akin to Araeen’s (2004:139) iteration, which is based on Blackness as a collective experience of coloniality and white oppression, shared by all people of colour. This concept was popularised during the Black art movement in Britain during the early 1980s and was inclusive of both Asian and Black artists. Blackness as a joint identity shared between Asians and Africans, dissipated by the 1990s, due to changes in popular culture, education and the social status of these groups (Araeen 2004:135-149). Araeen states that academics who distinguish themselves as Black African in Britain have fallen into the post-colonial trap of self-essentialism (Araeen 2004:139).

Araeen's 'essentialist-trap' is what this study has previously defined as the identity-race paradox. Within its vortex, Blackness as a formation of identity remains political, unresolved and contested. This paradox includes the notion of Whiteness as intellectually privileged over Blackness (Spivak 1988:70), which is where Khan's 'activism' (Asfour 2010:9) is located. Important to the complexities of the paradox-argument is the presupposition of multifocal activism, which are contingent, mercurial and temporal: the social lives of humans are in constant flux, their trajectories governed by the greater systems of race, politics, class and economics (Appadurai 2006:15).

Spivak (1988:71) describes these systems as artificial, economic and impersonal, which solidifies the philosophical position that, '*art cannot change the world*'.¹⁶¹ If we consider that art itself is acting from the periphery, indulging our humanness, yet unable to affect change to our social circumstances, then what is the purpose of such activism? Araeen (2004:136-151) contradicts this stance by asserting that through militance and radicality, [Black] art activism can disrupt the historical exclusions and Eurocentric dominance in the arts. My study now asks whether Khans' masks of feminine Blackness are merely screaming into the void. Or does her very presence, in proximity to a nation-state's essentialised Blackness, cause a socio-political unease (Appadurai 2004:121; Mishra 2005:4) that can affect change and true transformation?

These are questions that have no clear or simple answers. As artists, we¹⁶² all want change, so we choose our battles [activisms] and curate our positionalities from multiple excentricities. Through the flux and temporality of our social lives, these positionalities are prone to shifts and erosion, which Araeen (2004:148-149) makes no accommodation for. He strongly believes that those [Blacks and Asians] who relinquish their excentricism and participate in a 'white-managed' multiculturalism are acting out of self-interest. However, he offers little in terms of what radical change actually looks like, how it can be achieved or the sustainability of excentricism over collaboration. Local artists like Khan are walking a tight rope between essentialism and the assertion of Brownness, as a 'different' yet 'equal' (Bhabha 1994:xvii) shade of Blackness. Reflexivity and performance in visual art theory, art history and practice, is pivotal in moving this debate off the tight rope and toward alternative ways of re-thinking race, gender and interculturalism.

¹⁶¹ This phrase is often associated with Ad Reinhardt, an influential American abstract painter, who argued that art is autonomous and should not be instrumentalised as a tool for political or social change. He believed in the purity of art for art's sake and cautioned against reducing art to propaganda or activism. He stated, "Art is art. Everything else is everything else" (MoMa 2025).

¹⁶² The pronoun 'we' is used to show my solidarity with other local artists.

Tracy Rose's, *Ciao bella series* (2001, fig 39) featured in the 49th Venice Biennale,¹⁶³ is an audio-visual performance of the artist, 'inserting' her physical persona into the artwork. It is an autobiographical piece that approaches issues of religion, class, apartheid and the gendered roles of women (Malatjie 2011:58). Her role-play is a form of counter-penetration, as she asserts her subjectivity in response to the objectifying external gaze (Salah Hassan cited in O' Toole 2002). Rose's Black feminist aesthetic and its influence on Khan's (2014:105-106) work is apparent, as both artists use the mediums of performance and masquerade. *Ciao bella* reads like a parade of hyperbolic signifiers, whose meanings oscillate between the absurd and tragic. Rose's enactments disrupt and deface the austerity of history, as she penetrates it with her own image, thereby fictionalising and subverting the grand European narrative of truth (O' Toole 2002).

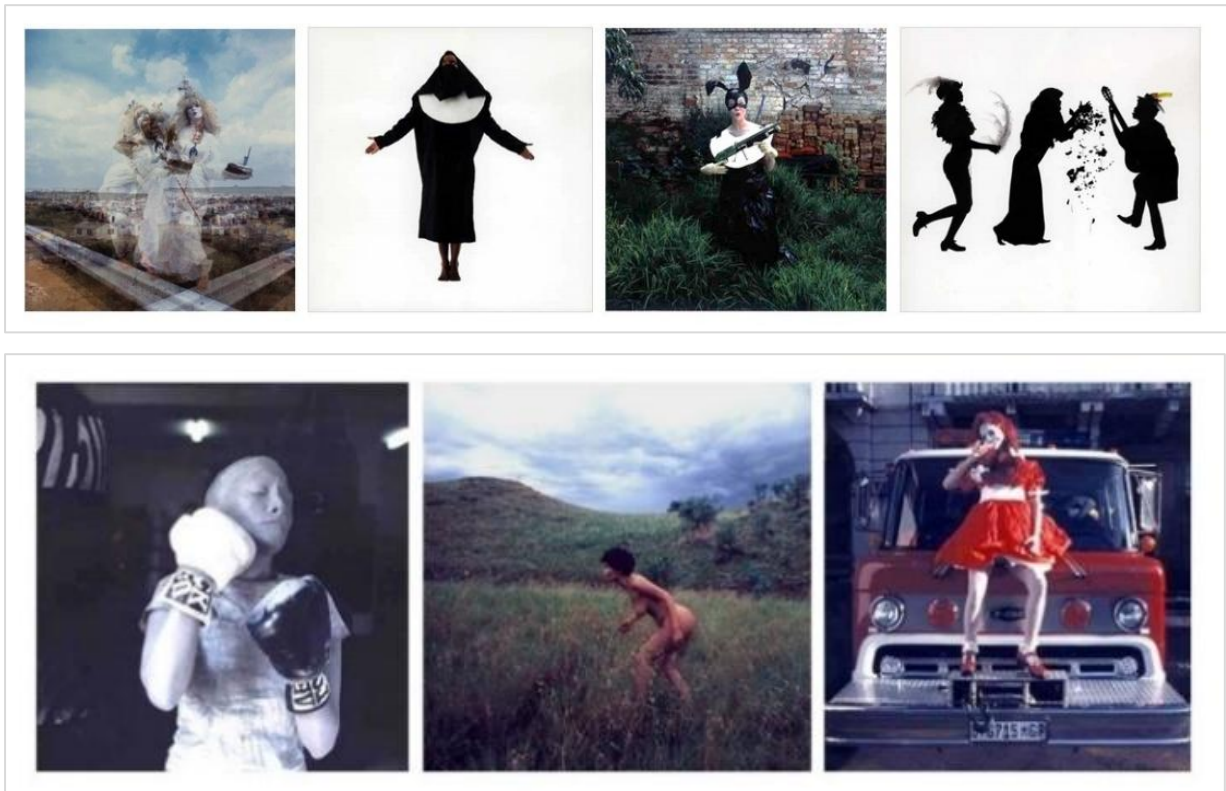


Figure 40. Tracey Rose, *Ciao bella series* (2001).

Khan's and Rose's works are essentially narratives about the female body, moving through a pastiche of roles and social constructs. The elements of theatre, costume and masks imply a temporal façade, as if these personas are merely two-dimensional props. The artists' true identity plays a sort of 'peek-a-boo' with the audience, being revealed and concealed at various points in the performances. They hide in plain sight, while slipping

¹⁶³ The 49th Venice Biennale (2001), entitled '*The Plateau of Humankind*', was curated by Harald Szeemann.

between the garish and the demure, the everyday and the extravagant; they are all these characters, yet at the same time none of them (Araeen cited in Weedon 2004:104). What appears to be a masquerade, in which the artist plays a juvenile game of 'dress-up', is actually a layered and complex enactment of trauma. The characters personify the experiences of the physical body, and the feminine psyche that inhabits it. Through art, both Khan and Rose are able to explore and reveal these intimate versions of their Blackness, against the paradoxical backdrop of South African life.

3.4.2 Amita Makan: freedom to be 'in-between'

The life and work of Amita Makan, a South African painter and textile artist, is analysed within the framework of reflexivity and performance. Makan's autoethnographical narrative, of ancestry, maternal bonds and ethnic identity, informs and underpins this critique. Important to my discussion is the diasporic positionality of 'in-betweenness' within postcolonial discourse, sometimes referred to as a "middle space" (Moodley cites Rastogi 2012a:31). Using the discursive method of triangulation, I will argue that 'Indian' identity as lying 'in-between' monolithic Blackness and Whiteness has been construed as a compromised state (Araeen 2001:98-99 & Vahed & Desai 2017:149-150). I consider Makan's artwork as an ethnographic text, to dispute this notion and to further argue that 'in-betweenness' as a social positionality, can be beneficial for interculturalism.

I will underpin this argument by demonstrating how the artist navigates her Indo-African identity by inhabiting the interstice of both cultural iterations. A reading of her delicate, time consuming textile pieces will show the intricate connections between her internal and external influences. This textual analysis further demonstrates the immateriality of the notion of [Indian authenticity](#) and the creative profundity of a state of 'in-betweenness'.

From Gujarati¹⁶⁴ ancestry, Makan is a fourth-generation 'Indian' South African. Her great grandfather, Makan Bhana, was an influential figure within the diasporic narrative. He came to Port Elizabeth in 1901, which was a city in a British colony at the time, as a maker and repairer of shoes. Through hard work and entrepreneurial endeavour, he established various retail and wholesale businesses in South End, a mixed-race residential area (Ka Mathe 2010). Bhana had built a life and a home for his family but, like so many others, his legacy was torn down by the Group Areas Act, when he and his family were forced to relocate to designated 'Indian' areas. This rupture affected Makan deeply, as she recounts the severance from family, community and the erasure of generations of history (Ka Mathe 2010).

¹⁶⁴ Gujarat is a state along the western coast of India and is the fifth-largest Indian state with a population of 60.4 million.

Makan's textile art practice draws medium and method from her ancestry and the ancient craft of Gujarati shoemaking. She uses a variety of haberdashery such as fibre, cloth, silk ribbon, recycled remnants, found materials and beads to stitch and weave her fragile and intimate stories. A process she refers to as, 'something from something', is the interlacing of mass-produced plastic and polystyrene with vintage sequins and precious silk saris (Makan 2014). Like a magpie, she collects and arranges these miniscule remnants of daily life, incorporating the value-less with the valuable, the imperishable juxtaposed with the atrophy of the human body. The artist also uses old family photographs, memory and scripture from the Bhagavat Gita¹⁶⁵ as creative sources. Brenton Maart¹⁶⁶ (in Shezi [Sa]) describes Makan's process as the meticulous construction of links between internal domesticity and the external forces of culture and politics. He states that her art is an unassuming, yet a powerful self-representation of her liberated identity.

The embroidered portrait of the artist's mother (fig 41a) as a young and vibrant 'Indian' woman, was a labour-intensive process, taking eight hours a day, over eight months to complete (Makan [Sa]). Makan describes her artmaking as ritualistic, rhythmic and meditative; it slowly gestates till it is ready to burst forth with meaning. The work, *Loose ends: A story about my mother* (2009, fig 41a), is embedded with the ineffable sorrow associated with the loss of a parent. Makan watched her mother battle with Alzheimer's disease and slowly deteriorate into a shadow of her former self. The painting, *The last portrait* (fig 41b) captures her mother's fragility and disassociation with the world during her last days. Almost like an attempt to repair and keep her mother whole, the artist preserves the memories of her life and death through art (Makan [Sa]). In recognition of this work, Makan was awarded 'runner-up' at the Sasol New Signatures National Art Competition in South Africa.

Self-portrait: African Renaissance (2013, fig 41c) is an interpretation of a photo of the artist taken shortly after her mother's passing. As a form of healing and rebirth, the artist adorns her semblance with fragments salvaged from her mother's saris, fabric that once wrapped around her body. The absence of the maternal energy is heightened by Makan's child-like self-portrait which reflects an innocence and vulnerability. Within its naive delicacy, the work is laden with symbolism, white represents *sattva*, at death the soul is believed to shed the body returning to a pure, unburdened state. The circle of organza represents the self and

¹⁶⁵ The Bhagavad Gita is a Hindu scripture, dated to the second or first century BCE, which forms part of the epic poem Mahabharata. The Gita is a synthesis of various strands of Indian religious thought.

¹⁶⁶ Maart holds an M.A. in Fine Arts from the University of the Witwatersrand and an M.Sc. in Biotechnology achieved with distinction from Rhodes University. His research interests are ruin porn in relation to climate change politics.

samsara, the endless cycles of death and rebirth (Makan 2014:14), a theme also explored by the Indian artist, [Kaleka](#).

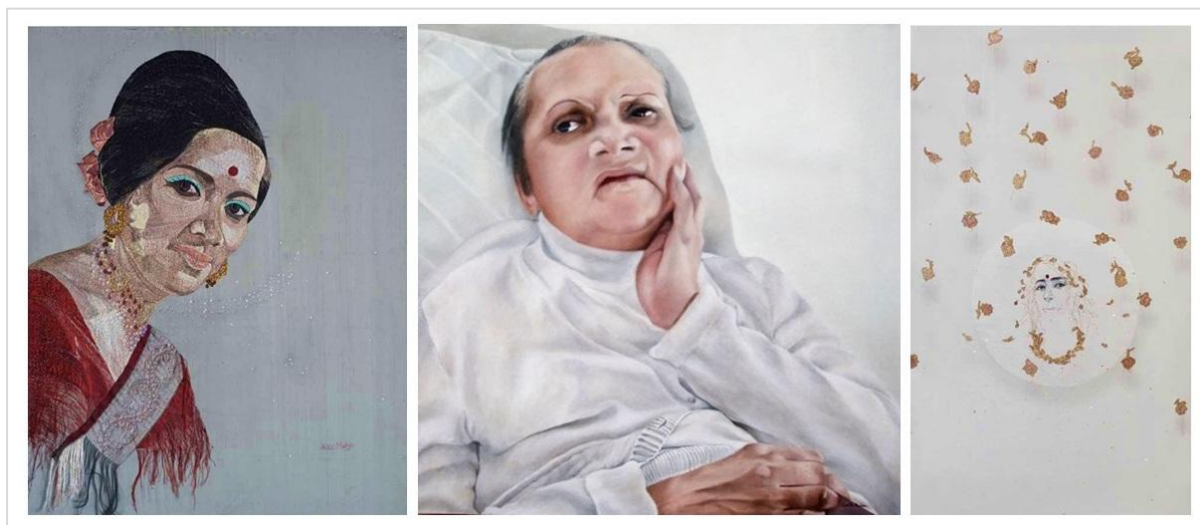


Figure 41. (a) Amita Makan, *Loose ends: a story about my mother* (2009).

(b) Amita Makan, *The last portrait* (2009).

(c) Amita Makan, *Self-portrait: African Renaissance* (2013).

Makan appears to inhabit her 'Indianness' and her 'Africanness' seamlessly, since she finds grounding in her maternal Gujrati lineage, as well as in strong Black women such as Miriam Makeba,¹⁶⁷ Dorothy Masuku¹⁶⁸ and Brenda Fassie¹⁶⁹ (2014, fig 43a) (Shezi [Sa]). Her portrait entitled *Miriam Makeba, 1965* (2011, fig 42a) was commissioned for the *Dr Miriam Makeba Concert Hall* at UNISA and reflects Makan's African influences. She states, "I am a product of social, political and cultural processes. My artwork is an inventory of my history" (Makan 2011). A history that intertwines the traumatic loss of her mother with her reverence for popular figures such as Makeba. I have observed that Makan's velvety application of oil paint in *The last portrait* (2009, fig 41b) is similar to her treatment of Makeba in figure 42a. Her female subjects seem enveloped in a delicate veil of softness, almost as if the artist seeks to cocoon and protect their semblance and memory through paint. Inspired by the singer's life story, Makan created a series of six works entitled *Recollections of Miriam Makeba*, two of which can be viewed in figures 42b and 42c (Makan 2011).

¹⁶⁷ Zenzile Miriam Makeba, nicknamed Mama Africa, was a South African singer, songwriter, actress and civil rights activist.

¹⁶⁸ Dorothy Masuka was a vocalist and songwriter who blazed a trail for female pop stars in South Africa. She was an advocate of human rights and the struggle against apartheid.

¹⁶⁹ The singer Brenda Fassie was known as South Africa's queen of pop music. Fassie sang in English, Xhosa, Sotho, and Zulu languages.



Figure 42. (a) Amita Makan, *Miriam Makeba*, 1965 (2011).
 (b) Amita Makan, *Nomalungelo (After Jurgen Schadeberg and Gustav Klimt)* (2013).
 (c) Amita Makan, *Phatha Phatha: For Miriam Makeba and Dorothy Masuku* (2014).

Her solo exhibition, *Nomalungelo: threads to freedom* (2013) was curated by Brenton Maart and pays homage to the courage and tenacity of Black women, upon whose struggle her civil liberties rest. She uses the analogy of embroidery thread as a double helix; like DNA, it connects our humanness beyond imposed cultural and political divides (Shezi [Sa]). The mixed media artworks, *Nomalungelo* (2013, fig42b) and *Phatha Phatha* (2014, fig 42c) feel celebratory, the intricate silk stitching and meticulous placement of sequins and crystals add a precious quality of adornment. Maart (2014:6) describes Makan's portraits as "objects of worship", which could reference the audience's experience or the artists investment of labour.

Makan credits the photographers Shorkend, Schadeberg and Gopal Naransamy on whose photographs her portraits are based. Interestingly, Maart (2014:6) describes these original sources as graphs (data), that are able to capture the fervour and ideologies of its time. I found this interpretation to be a conceptual link to my use of the ship list data in *Afterisms*. He further states that Makan combines the elements of archive (photos) and the relic (her mother's saris), thereby attaching memory to the art object (Maart 2014:6). As curator, Maart positions the artist as a bridge between history and the contemporary, with the facility to potentialise meaning stored within latent records (Maart 2014:6). Similar interventions and re-interpretations of the archive can be seen in the work of [Kentridge](#), to be discussed in Chapter four. Through her unique agency and intermediality, Makan's work becomes a

personal visual language that presents new meaning and insight into hybridity and intercultural identity.



Figure 43. (a) Amita Makan, *My Black President (after Sally Shorkend)* (detail) (2014).

(b) Amita Makan, *Vasant / spring II* (detail) (2016).

The work, *My black president* (fig 41a), uses the delicacy of silk thread on translucent organza to capture Fassi's courage, as well as her vulnerability. Makan's portrait, named after Fassi's once banned song, harkens to the moment of liberty, when Mandela was released from prison in 1990, a time when Black and Brown identities were united in the common struggle against oppression. Reminiscent of this camaraderie, she weaves her own narrative and heritage into these women's stories, in a way similar to Khan and Rose's 'insertions' (Salah Hassan cited in O' Toole 2002). Makan's method is more subtle and endearing, as she embellishes the semblances of heroic Black women using fragments of her mother's saris and traditional stitch formations originating in India.

Makan's areas of interest extend into South Africa's natural heritage in the form of plants and ecosystems that have come under the threat of extinction. The *Vasant/ spring* series (fig 41b) brings awareness of climate change and drought, that threatens the rare indigenous fynbos¹⁷⁰ ecosystems of the Cape (Makan 2016). The artist uses recycled nylon packaging threads on polyester tulle to interpret butterflies and plant forms that have already become extinct. The non-degradable mediums encourage the viewer to be mindful of our carbon footprint, as we consume and discard plastic waste with impunity. Makan's artworks are meticulous constructions of meaning, which connect the internal and external worlds of thought by being both and visually mesmerizing and provocative.

¹⁷⁰ Fynbos is the Afrikaans word for 'fine bush', a belt of natural shrubland or heathland vegetation located in the Western and Eastern Cape provinces of South Africa.

Reflexivity and an inner dialogue conceptually guides the artist's hand, as she moves through her human conditions of grief, mourning and hope. She navigates her 'Indian' and 'African' identities as merely two sides of the same coin. Vahed and Desai (2017:147;149-150) have described this dichotomous identity as uncomfortably 'sandwiched', within the socio-political milieu of South Africa, while Araeen (2001:98-99) refers to 'in-betweenness' as a relegated anachronistic state that keeps identity on the periphery, invisibilised to history. I disagree with these arguments based on the grassroots existence of Makan's Contingent-identity formation. She expresses her cultural plurality within her art, thereby reconciling the political traumas of the past within the exuberance of the present moment. By invoking both her 'Indian' ancestry and her African locality, she views her 'in-betweenness' as a unique position, from which she has agency to act and create (Maart 2014:6). The many hours of physical labour she devotes to her large-scale embroideries, becomes a personal activism, performed through ritual, repetition and remembering.

CHAPTER FOUR: CREATIVE PRACTICE

4.1 Introduction

My creative practice related to this thesis consists of six large artworks, *Journeys* (2023, fig 56), *Kūli* (2023, fig 59), *Excentricities* (2023, fig 61), *Kala pani* (2023, fig 64), *Chatsworth 29.92.70°S,30.88.43°E* (2023, fig 66) and *Artefact of origin* (2023, fig 68). I will critically discuss each work in detail, beginning with *Journeys* as a reference point for all the other artworks in the exhibition *Afterisms: excentric data-fluid narratives*. Through this critique I will explain how my creative output addresses the [research questions](#) (iv & v), expounding specifically on how it subverts racial labelling and cultural exclusion while inspiring future-making. In addition, I will unpack how the application of biographical data has enabled me to overwrite the colonial archive in a form of activism.

It is important to note that my creative practice is a culmination of all three research phases introduced in Chapter One ([extraverted, introspective and conceptual](#)), and the synthesis of theory and artmaking. The analysis of my work will include a description of its physical qualities, such as mediums, materials, forms and dimensions. I will also discuss the interrelation between physicality, symbolism and metaphoric meanings, and make critical connections to the work of selected artists from both India and 'Indian' South African discussed in previous chapters.

Prior to the critical reflection of artworks themselves, I will provide a short preamble outlining the pre-production phase of artmaking, specifically my preparation and analysis of the biographical data set. This is critical to an understanding of how I have theorised data as a medium and given it agency to produce knowledge within my art narrative. As discussed in my [theoretical overview \(1.7.1 Art praxis\)](#) I have applied aspects of posthumanism, specifically object orientated ontology and thick data theory, to my analysis. Through the [method of reflexivity](#) combined with artmaking I have become cognisant that biographical data is a [self-indexical sign](#) which is able to collapse the gap between subject and representation by becoming both evidence and expression. By locating its historic origins (time frame) as well as its physical taxonomy (type), I will demonstrate that these embedded characteristics have served my creative [objective of decolonising the archive](#) of my 'Indian' ancestry.

Operating within the framework of decoloniality and the [politics of geography](#), I will provide some historical background on the exhibition venue as well as my reasons for selecting it. It was important to me that the gallery was a neutral and sympathetic zone for the re-presentation of the 'Indian' indenture story. I will also discuss how I configured the physical

gallery space as a type of memorial in which visitors followed a circumambulatory path of mourning. This was intended to instil an attitude of respect for people who have been considered to be worth less than their records. By reflecting on all these aspects, I will demonstrate that I have fulfilled my [ethical duties](#) in the handling and presentation of the ship lists data.

4.1.1 Pre-production phase: re-presenting human data

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, [the indenture ship lists](#) data is a pivotal artefact or signifier of collective 'Indian' identity within this study. It forms the factual basis for the theoretical arguments; it also provides the archival substance to produce artwork. This discussion focuses on the latter, with specific emphasis on data as a medium within an art narrative. My art praxis, the conceptual phase of my research, consists of four stages: pre-production, production, site installation and reflexive reconnaissance. By unpacking the intertextual nature of these stages, I will demonstrate that the 'unseen' processes prior to the exhibition are as contingent to meaning and knowledge creation as the art object itself.

As referenced earlier, decolonial activism through the art narrative is embodied as an encounter with the colonial archive. The substance of its materialities is autonomised under the lens of object-orientated ontology. Within these theoretical frameworks, I propose that cold data¹⁷¹ can be re-humanised into a warm substrate,¹⁷² through which an art narrative can be extruded. In the pre-production phase, I have decentred my positionality to that of an 'actor'¹⁷³ who is able to digitally engage with entities and their *present* and *absent* attributes (fig 43). As the 'human in the loop' [HITL]¹⁷⁴ my interactions with entities become membranous journeys between shifting states of materiality (tactility & digitality). By digitally traversing the unknown terrain of my history, I am afforded the ability to untether identities from a fixed past and re-animate their data-residues within the matrix of a computer program.

¹⁷¹ Cold data refers to the qualitative information that interrelates elements of a complex system. It offers a relatable human perspective on what is learned from quantitative data (Bateson 2017:36; IBI 2025).

¹⁷² Warm data provides leverage and human insight in the analysis of other streams of information (Bateson 2017; IBI 2025).

¹⁷³ In the 'Actor Model' of concurrent computation, an actor is a fundamental unit of computation that, receives messages, makes decisions, sends messages and creates more actors (Hewitt 2010:3).

¹⁷⁴ Human-in-the-loop (HITL) refers to systems where a human actively participates in the decision-making process. It is a concept used primarily in artificial intelligence and machine learning, but it is also expanding into philosophy, art and ethics, especially in posthuman and techno-critical discourse.

PRIMARY KEY			ENTITY	NULL_VOID		ATTRIBUTES								META_DATA	
Indenture No	Names	Father	Yr	Mo	Sex	Caste	Zillah	Thanna	Village	Remarks	Arrival	Employer	Returned_Deceased		
1	DAVARUM	PAGE MISSING	30	0	M	Christian	MADRAS			DIAMOND FIELDS 1861	1860 Truro Madras				
2	NAGIUM	PAGE MISSING	18	0	F	Christian	MADRAS			DIAMOND FIELDS 1861	1860 Truro Madras				
3	ELIZABETH	DAVARUM	1	0	G	Christian	MADRAS			(LICENCED TO LEAVE	1860 Truro Madras				
4	KIRBAY	DAVARUM	4	0	G	Christian	MADRAS				1860 Truro Madras				
5	ABRAHAM	PAGE MISSING	38	0	M	Christian	MADRAS				1860 Truro Madras				
6	SARAH	PAGE MISSING	30	0	F	Christian	MADRAS				1860 Truro Madras				
7	ESACK	ABRAHAM	10	0	M	Christian	MADRAS				1860 Truro Madras		22.06.1861]DIED (743/1928)?		
8	YACOOB	ABRAHAM	8	0	B	Christian	MADRAS			TO LEAVE COLONY FOR	1860 Truro Madras				

Figure 44. Lucelle Pillay, Cold data sample indicating allocation types & absent data (2025).

The handwritten paper ship lists constitute an analogue data format produced by the British between 1860 and 1911 (fig 44b). According to Michael Friendly in A brief history of data visualization (2006:3-4), this period denotes the pinnacle of modernism and a time of innovation, industry and commerce (fig 44a). Modernism was spurred by highly developed systems of knowledge (epistemologies), as well as methods to record, store, disseminate and reference these systems. Modernist ideologies were prompted by scientific, mathematical and geographical enquiry, each producing separate or interrelated artefacts of evidence, formulas and measurement (Friendly 2006:9-20). The production of sophisticated cartography and seafaring technology during this period facilitated the spread of colonialism and the globalised dislocation of Brown and Black people. As per the definition of data, the existence of the ship lists is the factual and ‘objective’ evidence that such dislocations of identity occurred.

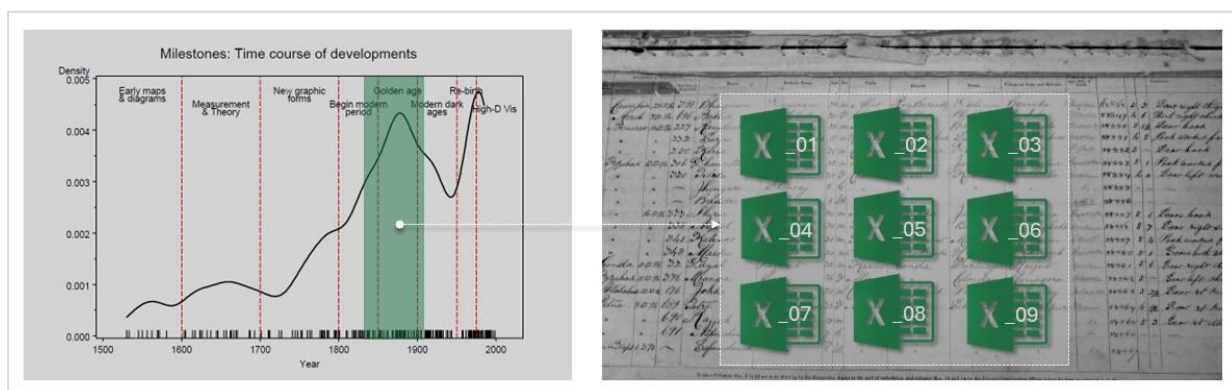


Figure 45. (a) Michael Friendly, *History of data visualisation-graph* (with overlay indicating the era of ship list origin) (2006).

(b) Ship list: Durban Archives Repository, *North Indian ship register, Book M* (with my overlay indicating nine volumes as Excel spreadsheet icons) (2025).

The construction of my art narrative oscillates between the technical language of data theory (science) and the philosophical nuances of a posthuman rationale. Operating within this framework, the materiality of the paper ship lists becomes imbricated with the materialities of history, culture and technology in a non-passive way (Griniuk 2021:103). The heuristic construct below (fig 45) illustrates my decentred position as artist and researcher as a subversion of anthropocentric agency. The paper ship lists (Source-data-object1) are positioned as an autonomous and discrete object, with its own agency to construct meaning. Within this matrix, each iteration of materiality, such as Excel spreadsheets (Data-object 2), data visualisations (Data-object 3) and projection maps (art narrative) (Data-object 4) exists as an object, and so too do the human actors¹⁷⁵ of the artist (HITL-Human in the loop) and the 'Indian' labourers (Entities). This matrix describes the positionalities and context of the work undertaken during the pre-production stage of artmaking.

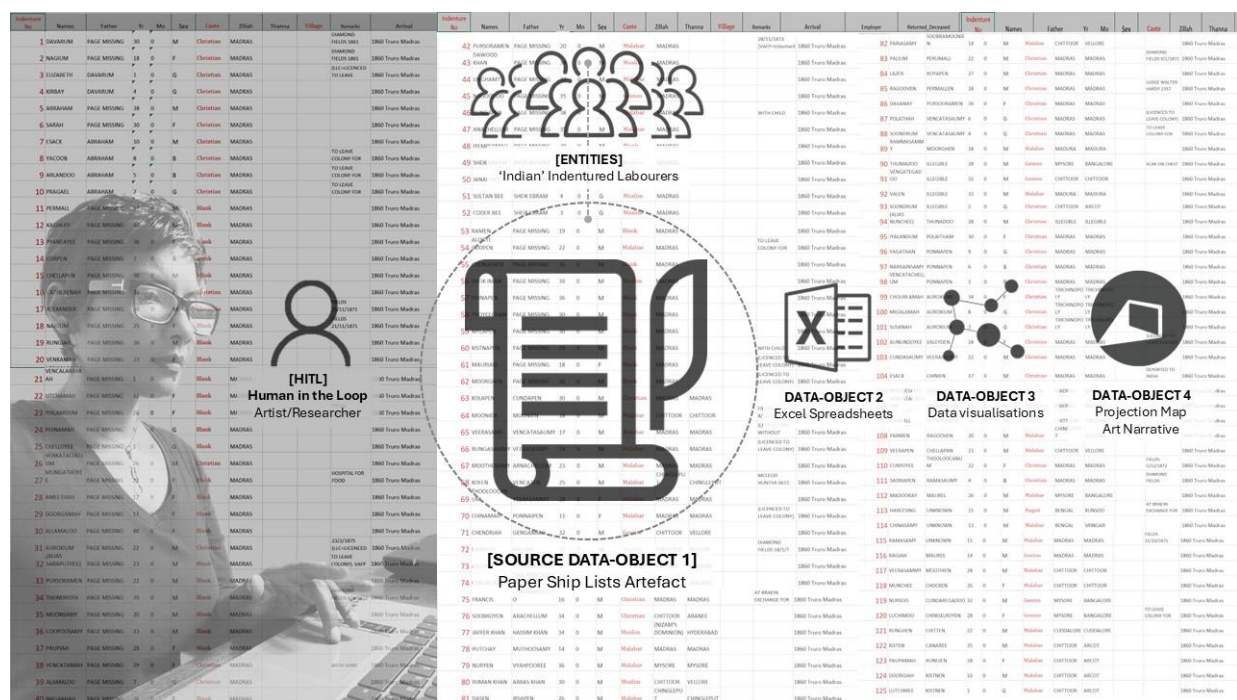


Figure 46. Positionalities of the artist (HITL), Paper ship list artefact (Data-objects) & 'Indian' indentured labourers (Entities) in the construction of an art narrative (2023).

4.1.1.1 A 'thick data' reading of the ship lists

As mentioned in the [theoretical overview](#), my art praxis was influenced by Kentridge's six large-scale installations that constitutes the performance, *Thick time* (Greslé 2017:261), specifically his subversion of linear, chronological time (Datta 2022:109). My

¹⁷⁵ In the 'Actor Model' of concurrent computation, an actor is a fundamental unit of computation that receives messages, makes decisions, sends messages and creates more actors (Hewitt 2010:3).

work, as Kentridge's work, becomes an affectively charged re-interpretation of South Africa's saturated history and colonial past. Equally relevant to this comparison is the motif of the archive, as a destabilised entity from which the artist excavates an equally distorted formation of identity (Greslé 2017:261). The concept of 'thick time' appears increasingly in postcolonial discourse and art critique (Bogusławski 2022:61-62) and proposes that historic memory is an entanglement of multiple temporalities (Greslé 2017:261).

In the sensually charged and immersive installation, *The refusal of time* (fig 46), Kentridge applies this philosophical concept of time as a thickly compacted (layered), non-linear experience of temporality. He challenges the linear, chronological view of time, and instead embraces time as dense, folded, recursive and affectively charged (Datta 2022:109). Through sound, projection and movement, he arouses sensations and emotions that mimic the processes of remembering and forgetting (Greslé 2017:264). He explores these themes through the medium of stop-frame animation and his ongoing layered processes of drawing and erasure. Inspired by Kentridge's exploration of the philosophical notion of thick time, I have applied the theory of [thick data \(as mentioned in 1.7.1 Art praxis\)](#) within my study. This emergent discourse allows me to extricate deeper qualitative and ethnographic insights from the biographical data set of the ship lists.

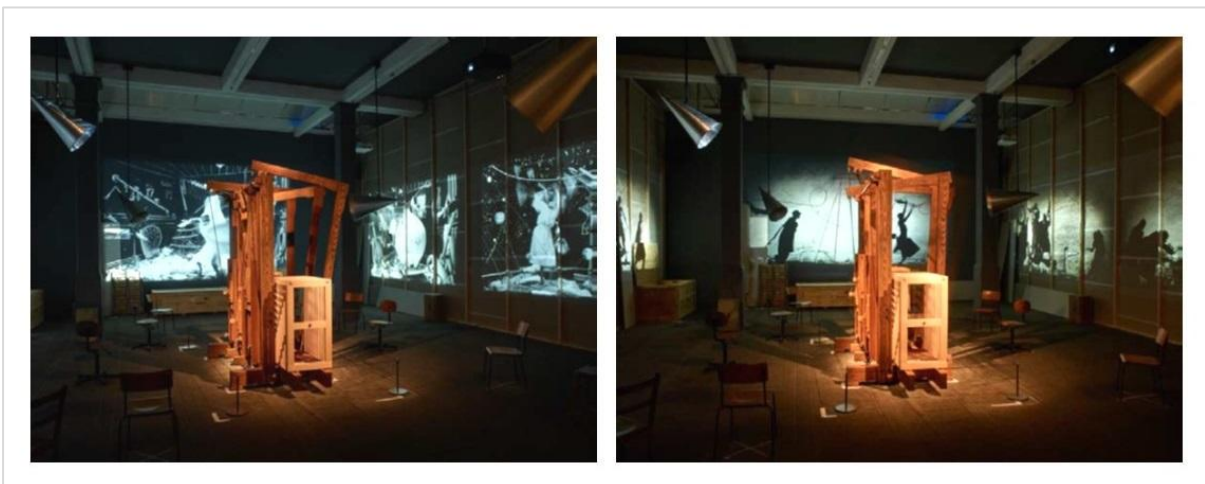


Figure 47. William Kentridge, *The refusal of time* (2012).

I engaged with the data on the technical level of preparing and parsing, but I also contemplated the human suffering that lay beneath its surface. This contextual or 'thick' reading revealed that it was mostly poor people of low caste that were enlisted. Many were coerced onto ships and endured long and traumatic journeys, with many dying in transit or from abject cruelty (Bhana 1987:10-12; Vahed & Waetjen 2014:49). The

suffering of the indentured workers was masked by the quantitative neutrality of the British paper archive. Its affective qualities were further diminished when converted into an Excel spreadsheet, repetitive rows and columns fixing 'Indian' identity within a silent colonial chronology and classification of difference. This reflexivity when encountering the archive was a critical aspect of my process, as it has directed and influenced my approach to materials and form.

My installation *Journeys* (2023, fig 56) is based on 'biographical-ticketing', which greatly resembles the deeds of sale, synonymous with the previous orders of slavery. A 'thick' reading reveals that the supposedly 'free' system of indenture, installed by the British, was in most instances exploitive, opaque, self-serving and deceptive (Bhana 1987:20; Vahed & Waetjen 2014:49). As the human resource intermediary and moral overseer, India's 'neutrality' has also been debated and historically contested (Bhana 1987:20), which I acknowledge in my research. Indian recruitment agents (usually of a higher caste) often used methods of coercion, deception and kidnapping to enlist impoverished labourers (low caste), who were the most vulnerable people in Indian society (Bhana 1987:13). Caught between the drives of an unscrupulous homeland and imperial greed, the indentured identities had little agency to affect the course of their lives in South Africa.

4.1.1.2 Segmentation of core data narrative

At the height of modernism, 'Indian coolies'¹⁷⁶ were shipped to the sugar-growing British colonies of Mauritius, the Caribbean, South America, Fiji and the south-eastern coast of Africa. Under the charge of the Protector of Immigrants¹⁷⁷ each labourer was allocated a ticket that included: the name of immigrant; his/her father's/mother's name; sex; age; stature; marks; caste; native country and village; name of vessel (ship) and ship's captain (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:49-50). The artwork, *Journeys* (fig 47), is based on a linear graph,¹⁷⁸ which is essentially a timeline that depicts every ship and labourer that was received at the Port of Natal from 1860 to 1911. The visualised data narrative depicts that in total 152 184 people were brought to Natal over a period of 51 years.

¹⁷⁶ In the 19th century, the term 'Indian coolies' referred to indentured labourers from India who were recruited to work in European colonies after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833 (the law came into effect in 1834).

¹⁷⁷ The Protector of Immigrants was a colonial administrative official appointed by European colonial powers, particularly the British Empire, during the indentured labour system in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

¹⁷⁸ A linear graph in data visualisation is a type of graph that displays data as a straight line or a series of straight-line segments. It is typically used to show the relationship between two continuous variables and is especially useful when that relationship is proportional or linear, meaning one variable increases or decreases at a constant rate in relation to the other.

More specifically, during this period, 384 British ships carried 93 130 men, 37 282 women and 21 772 children to South Africa.

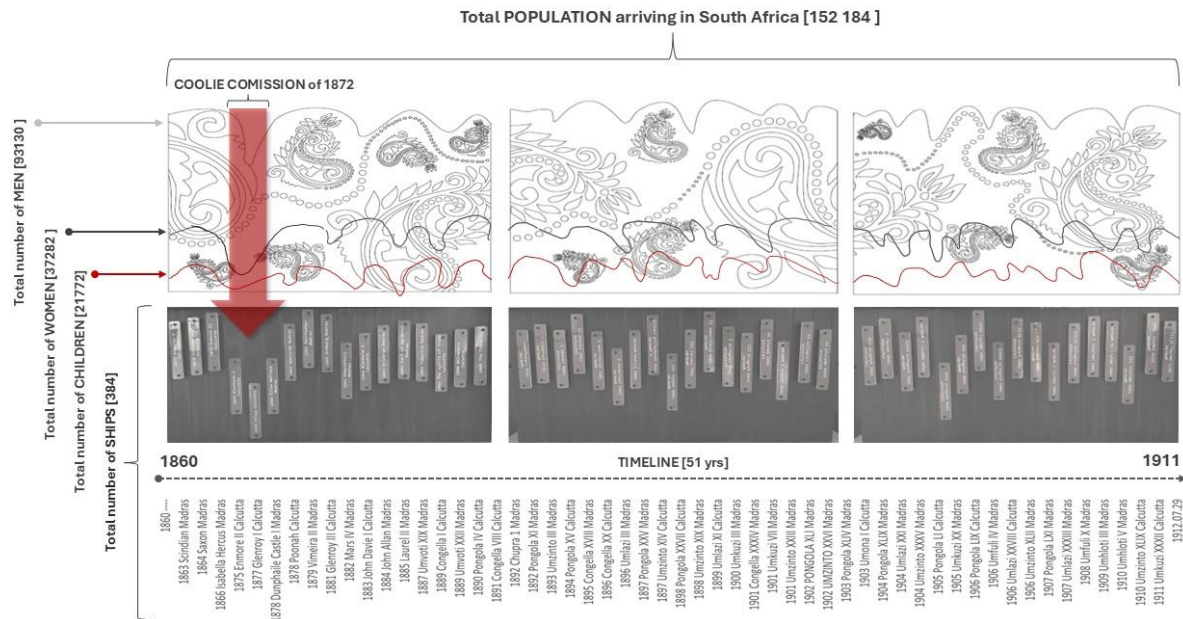


Figure 48. *Journeys*: segmented data narrative (2025).

Labourers and their families faced harsh and inhumane work and living conditions in Natal, so severe that India was forced to cease this form of human trafficking in 1866. This drop in the movement of ships and people has been located on the timeline and marked with a red arrow (fig 47). An obvious conflict of interest was revealed in the implementation of the Coolie Commission in 1872 by British colonial authorities to investigate the poor conditions endured by labourers (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:51). The commission's mandate was to address the abuses, working conditions and mortality rates, but their objectives were largely driven by the economic interests of the empire, rather than humanitarian concerns. Some superficial reforms were implemented and the flow of labour from India resumed in 1874 (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:51). This example indicates how data as a medium can reveal the human narratives that are entangled within factual colonial records.

This section has focused on the pre-production stage of artmaking, specifically the preparation and parsing of the ship list data as a form of reflexive practice. Reflexivity as a methodology constitutes a form of decolonial activism when encountering the colonial archive. Initially, I intended to use the paper archive as a mere metaphor for 'Indian' identity, but I came to realise that it contains its own genealogy of affectual potentialities (fig 48). I

4.2 Afterisms: excentric data fluid narratives

Artist's statement

I previously introduced the term [cusp-generation](#) theoretically, to describe individuals (like myself) who straddled the apartheid and democratic political eras in South Africa. The concept of the 'cusp' is thus applied metaphorically within my study to describe a point of transition between two different states or situations. In the context of my art practice the term conjoins the methodologies of analogue and digital technologies. I find the analogy of 'cusping' critical for an understanding of the South African identity, considering that the introduction and quickening of technological advancements, coincided with the social uprising for democratic freedom.¹⁷⁹ The exhibition *Afterisms* epitomises the uneasy act of negotiating the "entangled materialities" (Herbrechter 2012:4,30; Bennett 2010:115) of the natural, cultural and technological.

As a cusp-generation artist, I approach art production with an intrinsic understanding of analogue systems and traditional mediums as more tactile ways of life. My ideation and production of artwork therefore fluctuates between real (tactile) and virtual (digital) methodologies and mediums. Transitioning from an analogue reality to an ethereal digitalism has provided me new perspectives and hybrid methods of artmaking. Influential for my concept of 'cusping' is Miller's (2015:25-31) reinterpretation of the concept of ["intermediality"](#), previously discussed in the theoretical overview, as the intertextuality between media and its application within the art narrative. This concept is evident in Miller's exhibition *TRANSCODE: dialogues around intermediality* (2011), where she uses various types of intermediality that she presents as four distinct rooms,¹⁸⁰ thereby conjoining theory to practice.

Another important aspect of Miller's (2015:28) application of intermediality is its conceptual link to [fluidity](#) which is also important within the context of my study. The flow of spaces in my exhibition *Afterisms* can be seen in figure 51 where the grouping of digitised data (immersive spaces on the left) and analogue images (entrance exhibition on the right) form an intertextual dialogue. My curatorial arrangement of both discursive textual and visual images forms grid-like structures, enabling the visitor to interpret my unfolding narrative.

¹⁷⁹ The release of Mandela in 1991 and the first free elections of 1994 segued into the emergence of mobile phone networks in 1994, which catalysed the expansion of infrastructure and extended global communications to previously marginalised groups (Pillay 2013:80).

¹⁸⁰ Miller's (2015:31) four rooms explore narrative theory, space, embodiment and order in process as iterations of intermediality.



Figure 51. Exhibition entrance (panoramic view) (2023).

I am aware that I am reflexively positioning my exhibition within the context of hybrid-intermedial analogue and digital processes, yet these complexities also existed in the ongoing development of my identity, ideation, pre-production and making. I am an 'Indian' artist trained within Western paradigms, which problematises the analysis of ethnic identity by creating an [epistemological tension \(research problem ii\)](#). Applying my [onto-epistemological research positionality as a method](#), I seat my art practice within this tension that raises questions of my [authenticity](#). I have argued that my authentic 'Indian' identity is a hypothetical or mythical concept, as I have no connection to nor have ever visited India. Therefore, the term authentic triggers an internal cultural unease, which [Chakraborty](#) (2014:30) associates with self-perception and the gaze of others. I am aware that my Western conditioning is perceived as divergent from my 'Indianness' as I negotiate this hybridity through art. This means that the epistemological tension of artmaking and theorising within this exhibition emanates from within myself but is also exerted by external social forces.

Posthumanism, as articulated before, is a mode of thinking about the intersection of human, nonhuman and technological worlds. A contribution of posthumanist thought has been to decentre the human and to demonstrate how all matter is interlinked, mutually dependent and co-evolved, whether this is the animal forms on earth or the impact humans have on technology and vice versa (Nayar 2023). This school of thought proposes that humans co-evolve with technology, a statement I strongly agree with, as my work (mediums and approach) has been deeply influenced by the proponents of optical kineticism, computer art,

minimalism and the avant-garde. Relevant artists include Yaacof Agam,¹⁸¹ John Whitney,¹⁸² Larry Bell¹⁸³ and Dan Flavin,¹⁸⁴ with specific focus on their scientific and conceptual exploration of movement, form and light within visual phenomena (Centre Pompidou 2025; Guggenheim 2025a; David Zwirner Gallery 2025). Due to the focus of my thesis, I do not discuss the details of these artists' works, I simply acknowledge the wide field of influence on my practice. My interest in data as a medium stemmed from the artist and software developer Casey Reas,¹⁸⁵ who applies logic and procedures creatively, co-producing rough sketches with computer algorithms for final artworks (Creators Project 2012). A critical aspect of his process is the lack of complete autonomy and the acquiescence to digitalism, which I partially adopted in my visual interpretation of the ship list data. To some degree data as object-performed in various formats in my exhibition. Reas's large scale-projection maps¹⁸⁶ (Creators Project 2012; Mutual Art 2012) made me look beyond screens and consider the 3D object and the environment as a canvas, transforming art into the range of spatial experimentations, immersing the viewer as evident in figures 51 and 52 (2023).

4.2.1 Journeys

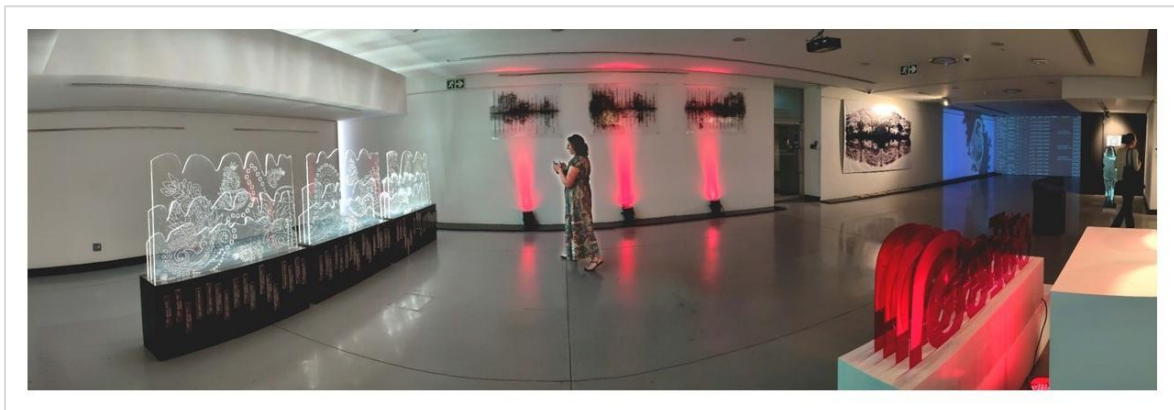


Figure 52. Main gallery with *Journeys* and *Kala pani* (panoramic view) (2023).

¹⁸¹ Agam was born in Israel and is a pioneer and leading exponent of optical and kinetic art, best known for his three-dimensional paintings and sculptures.

¹⁸² Whitney was a pioneer computer animator who founded Motion Graphics Incorporated. He created a library of visual effects, titled Catalog, using an analogue computer. In 1966, IBM awarded John Whitney his first artist-in-residence position.

¹⁸³ Larry Bell is an American contemporary artist best known for his pioneering work exploring light, reflection, and transparency, especially through glass and acrylic sculptures. He is often associated with the West Coast "Light and Space" movement.

¹⁸⁴ Dan Flavin was an American minimalist artist famous for creating sculptures and installations using fluorescent light tubes. He is considered a pioneer of both Minimalism and light art.

¹⁸⁵ Casey Reas, is an American artist whose conceptual, procedural and minimal artworks explore ideas through the contemporary lens of software. He is known for having created, with Ben Fry, the processing programming language.

¹⁸⁶ I refer specifically to Reas and Rosner's site specific work *Chronograph* (s.a.) (Projection map installation. Site-specific, time-based software mural) on the Frank Gehry building in Miami. Images can be viewed at <https://www.mutualart.com/Article/The-Future-of-Art--Computed-Creations/46F859F007180D72> (Creators Project 2012; Mutual Art 2012).

The artwork *Journeys* (2023, fig 52) (<https://www.lucellepillayart.co.za/afterisms-journeys>) is a triptych consisting of wooden lightboxes and nine slotted sheets of engraved light-transmitting acrylic. The three individual pieces placed adjacent to each other span nine metres. The acrylic sheets are engraved with the intricate pattern of the sacred mankolam¹⁸⁷ or paisley motif (fig 53). The sheets embed into nine parallel slots and are illuminated by LED lights secreted within the wooden boxes. A total of fifty-one ship names (fig 54) has been inscribed on acrylic tags and attached to the lightboxes and positioned in a formation that echoes a linear data graph. As a tactile data visualisation, the narrative must be read from right to left, when the viewer faces the triptych, as shown in figure 51. The chronology of ships is bookended with the first (*Truro* 1860) and the last (*Umlazi* 1911) of the ships that transported labourers to the Port of Natal (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:61).

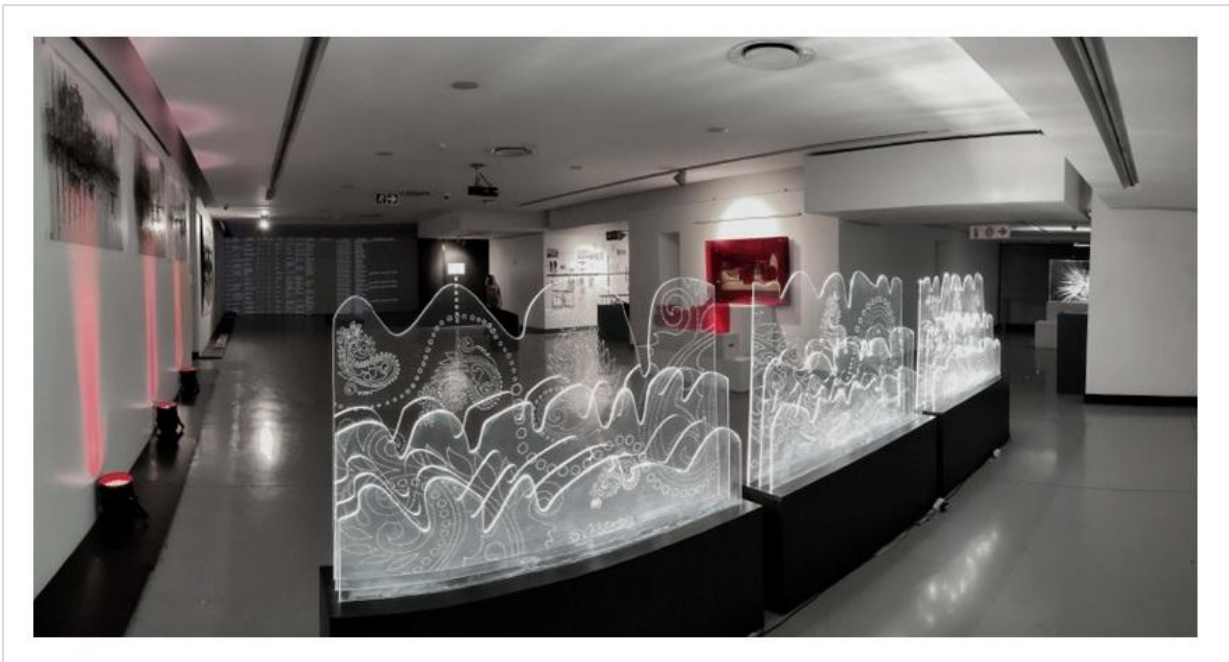


Figure 53. Lucelle Pillay, *Journeys* (2023).

Journeys as a visualised data narrative depicts 152 184 people who were brought to Natal over a period of 51 years. During this period, 384 British ships carried 93 130 men, 37 282 women and 21 772 children to South Africa. The triptych is positioned to be viewed from both sides which encourages the viewer to walk around the artwork and thereby experience the narrative from various vantage points. Figure 52 depicts the rear view, which is read from left to right as opposed to the front view, which is read from right to left. The nine acrylic data

¹⁸⁷ A precious and revered teardrop symbol, known as 'mankolam' in ancient Sanskrit, signified fertility and a time of harvest in Indian cosmology (Prajapati & Tiwari 2021:30). Known in Western culture as 'paisley', it is a contested motif within postcolonial discourse as it was appropriated from Indian culture when Scotland began manufacturing their own version to compete with Indian originals, even naming a village after the stylised motif (Prajapati & Tiwari 2021:29).

waves represent population volume: the highest indicates men, mid-height indicates women and the lowest height indicates children, reflecting the proportion of each group. I have provided a detailed illustration of the segmentation of this data narrative in the section [Segmentation of core data narrative](#).

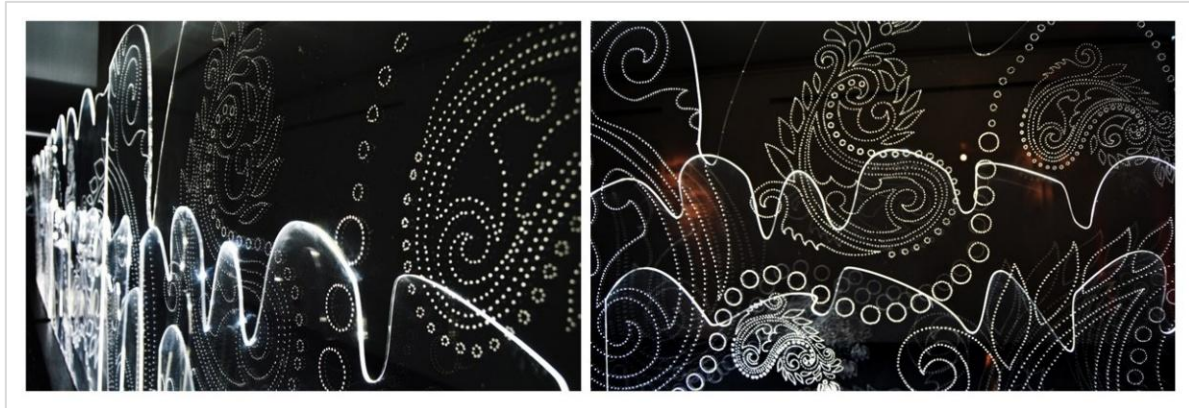


Figure 54. Lucelle Pillay, *Journeys (detail): engraved pixels in the form of a mankalam (paisley)* (2023).

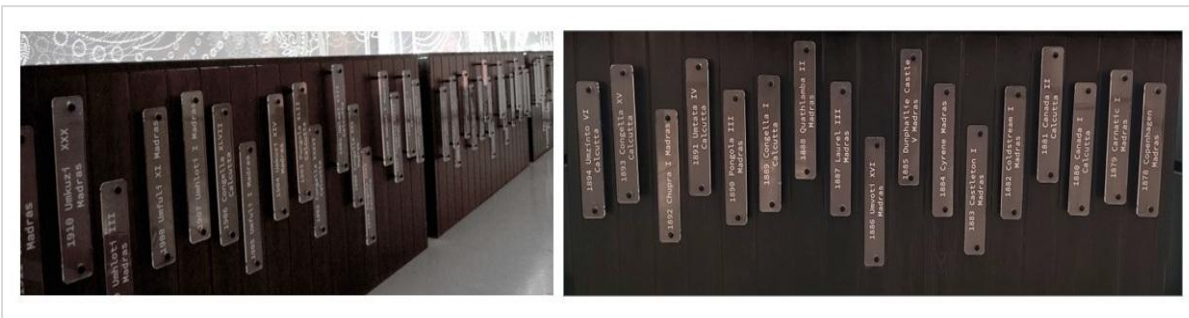


Figure 55. Lucelle Pillay, *Journeys (detail): ship names and arrival dates* (2023).

I juxtaposed the weight and sturdiness of wood with the translucency of acrylic to explore light, movement and fluidity through contrast. Reminiscent of sailing vessels the lightboxes anchor the illuminated wave data that appears to float in the ether. My use of acrylic sheets was strongly influenced by the technical properties of the artwork of Bell (figures 55a-d) who explored layering and the transmission of light. Through experimentation I discovered that acrylic was a timeless medium that acted as a clear canvas on which I could write the ‘Indian’ indenture story. The minute scarification to the surface of the acrylic, glows with light as each pixel represents an individual (man, woman or child) (fig 53). Acrylic as a substrate¹⁸⁸ is a highly sensitive and receptive surface, that records every speck of dust,

¹⁸⁸ Substrate refers to a base or underlying layer upon which something else is built, grown or applied. As an art material, it is the base material upon which coatings, paints or other materials are applied. For example, in printmaking, the paper acts as the substrate for the ink.

fingerprint and scratch on its surface. It's careful handling while engraving adds a tension that underpins the psychological and epistemological iterations [previously discussed](#). The acrylic surface in *Journeys* (2023, fig 52) holds the etched marks as memories of the once living bodies of people.

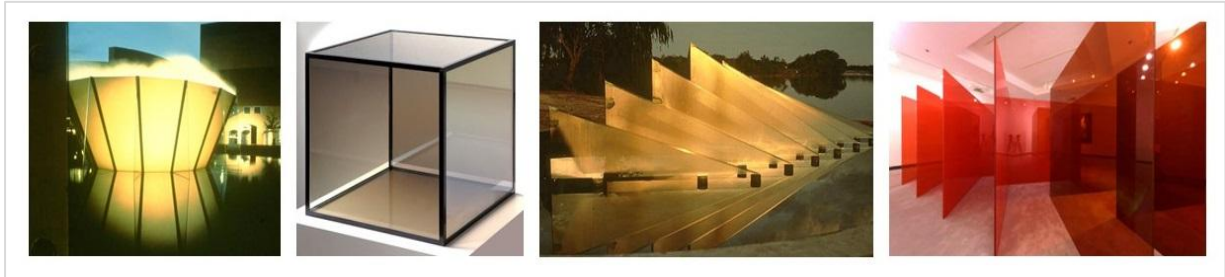


Figure 56. (a) Larry Bell, *Solar fountain* (1983).

(b) Larry Bell, *Untitled* (1966).

(c) Larry Bell, *Wind wedge* (1982).

(d) Larry Bell, *Pacific red II* (2017).

The process of carving out or scratching into the acrylic skin reinvigorates the sensual and visceral within the biological data registry, a technique my daughter, Jodie Azalea (56c), is familiar with, being a professional tattoo artist. As she transferred my technical drawings onto the acrylic in this piece, I was reminded of Maharaj's analogy of the mark of indenture, which is worn as a "tattoo"¹⁸⁹ by slave diaspora (Maharaj 1999:3). It conjured up the branded stigma of the subaltern that has been permanently fixed to 'Indian' identity in contemporary times. Jodie's repetitious and time-consuming act of engraving, coupled with the drone sound of the Dremel machine, reminded me of [Makan's embroidery](#) of her mother, as ritualistic, rhythmic and meditative. I saw parallels in our endeavour to pay homage to those who came before as a form of healing through the labour of art.

¹⁸⁹ A tattoo is a permanent mark or design made on the skin by inserting pigment through pricks into the skin's dermis layer.



Figure 57. (a) Jodie Azalea tracing projected mankalam pattern on paper template (2023).

(b) Laser cut acrylic sheets with protective film (2023).

(c) Jodie Azalea engraving individual pixels using Dremel tool (2023).

(d) Completion of the first engraved sheet (2023).



Figure 58. Attendees viewing *Journeys* on preview evening (2023).

The inclusion of the ship names and dates (fig 54) is important to this work, as colonial authority has made the [ticket system](#) the only connection to ancestry and India for these indentured persons. To this present day, 'Indian' indenture descendants can only trace their ancestry via this tentative link to the first labourers. Due to time, erasure and the inaccessibility of the lists, many lost their history and cultural centredness. The ship names are therefore symbolic of the dislocation and impermanence associated with 'Indian' identity in South Africa. To answer the [research question of overwriting the archive](#), *Journeys* (2023, fig 52) neutralises the stigma of the ship numbers by making fluid the identities that were once attached to them. Through art, entities once buried in piles of dusty ledgers have been re-presented to a contemporary audience (fig 57). This is the most valuable contribution to knowledge of 'Indian' identity, demystifying its previous obscurity.

4.2.2 *Kūli*

Identity and naming (or name-calling) are closely associated. The installation dialogue between *Journeys* and *Kūli* (2023, fig 59 and 60) can be seen in figure 59, considering both the medium and the intensity of the curved line.

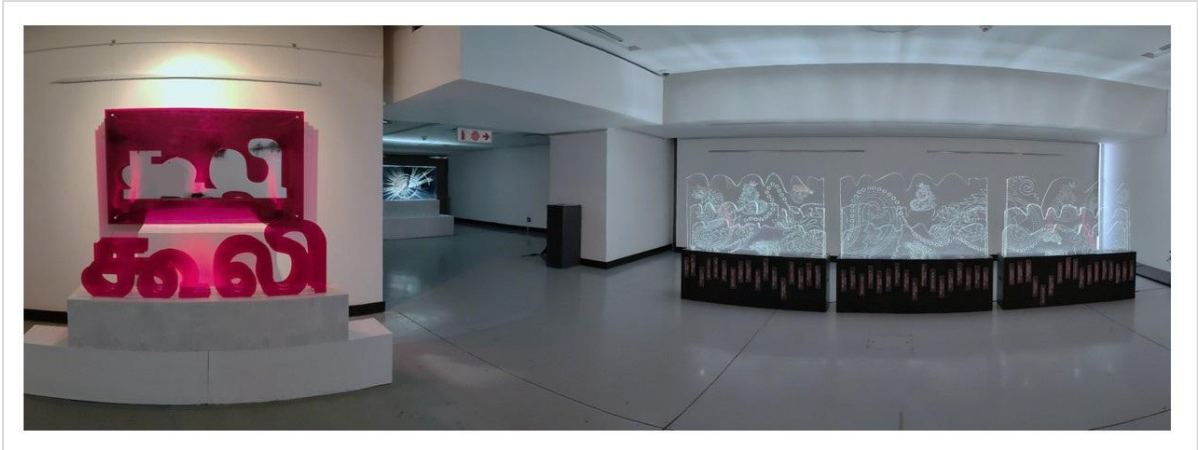


Figure 59. Recessed space off main gallery (panoramic view) (2023).

The artwork *Kūli* (2023, fig 58 and 59) (<https://www.lucellepillayart.co.za/afterisms-kuli>) is a bi-sectional sign that consists of a wooden lightbox, eight acrylic laser cuttings and a sheet of mirror. The choice of the bright colour red was inspired by Bell's *Pacific red II* (fig 55d, 2017), an artwork that explores the relationship between positive and negative space. Similarly, *Kūli* is an experimentation with four 'positive' and four 'negative' shapes. The word forms, which I will refer to as positives, are inserted into four parallel slots in the light box that contains secreted LED lighting. The positive lettering becomes edge-lit when electrical current is supplied. The negative forms are bolted together with separations to form layers that are mounted against a sheet of mirror. The word-form section with its light box is positioned in front of and slightly lower than the negative form, which is wall mounted. This means that the piece can be viewed only from the front, a device I applied to limit accessibility and close perspectival depth.

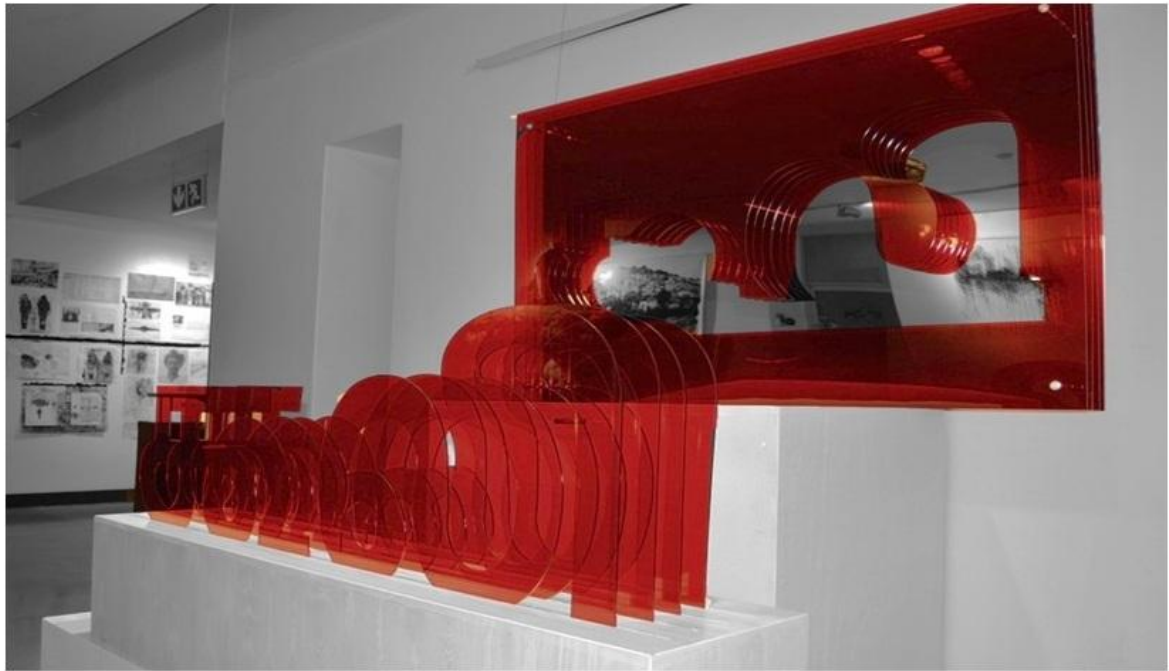


Figure 60. Lucelle Pillay, *Kūli* (2023).

The word form references the Hindu regional dialect of Tamil, spoken predominantly in South India. *Kūli*, also spelt as 'Coolie', is a pejorative term allotted to low-grade workers and menial labourers, typically of Indian descent (Du Bois 2012:31). Ironically, the artwork is presented as elevated and grand, thereby subverting the word's derogatory implication. It becomes a disproportionate aggrandisement of the word 'Coolie', visually celebrated in luminous red acrylic. Red is considered the oldest and most primal colour in Hindu culture, related to blood, fire and love (Kudrya-Marais 2022:3). Red denotes power, inner strength (*shakti*), and purity. These attributes are at odds with the sign's textual meaning, thereby becoming a visual paradox and a metaphor for identity. The negative form of the word that labelled identity reveals a mirror, reflecting viewers, which allows them to ponder on the labels that they have been subjected to. As the only colour work in the exhibition, *Kūli* punctuates the space as a sign should, yet spatially limits access to its layers. This forced two-dimensionality typifies stereo-typing and the flattening effect of racial labels, as well as their desire to debase, dehumanise and categorise human beings.



Figure 61. Lucelle Pillay, *Kūli (details)* (2023).

The artwork strikes at the core of the [research question \(iv\)](#) by subverting racial labelling and cultural exclusion. My appropriation and re-presentation of the racist label Coolie within the public domain of the exhibition space embodies a personal [activism](#). As I contemplated my reflection in the mirror framed by the negative forms, I was aware that *Kūli* has implications beyond a specifically 'Indian' identity (fig 66a). Its boldness opens a dialogue about the lines of division that permeate all races in South Africa. It draws attention to the cruel and derogatory names we have called each other, and the deep psychological scars that remain embedded in our identities. Most viewers were initially curious as to the meaning of the word, then appeared observably uncomfortable after reading its English translation on the caption label. This social unease speaks to the [epistemological tensions \(research problem ii\)](#) discussed previously. *Afterisms* attempts to address these underlying tensions by using the medium of art and the exhibition as a safe contemplative space for the renegotiation of racial identity.



Figure 62. (a) *Viewing my reflection in mirror framed by negative forms* (2023).

(b) *Play of light and reflection on Kūli word form* (2023).

(c) *Viewers taking photos and discussing artwork* (2023).

(d) *Play of light and reflection on Kūli negative form layers* (2023).

As discussed previously, many younger generations have ceased learning to read or write [vernacular Indian languages](#); the word is therefore syntactically obscure to most South Africans of 'Indian' descent. *Kūli* becomes an inaccessible linear rhythm of code that speaks

to lost traditions, language and culture. A causal line can be drawn to the apartheid era's enforcement of an inferior Western-based curriculum in all but White schools (Ndhlovu 2023:1), which removed choice from the formation of 'Indian' cultural identity. I have previously argued, using the Adams *et al* (2012:378) study, that the lack of choice during this period had removed agency and therefore destabilised the formation of identity. These complex underlying themes resonate within my autoethnography and the story of my family in Chapter Two, specifically my reflections on fluidity. As a sign *Kūli* is symbolic of the label that fixed us to a geography and predetermined our future-making based on homogeneity. However, within the conceptual space of *Afterisms*, I was able to subvert the historical implications of the word 'Coolie', transforming it into a sign that is verbally and visually fluid. This was inspired by Maharaj's (1994) theory of "untranslatability" that refutes reductionist and derogatory interpretations of 'Indian' identity and culture. The artwork reminds audiences that racial labelling in different forms still exists in a time of freedom and democracy.

4.2.3 *Excentricities*

Excentricities (2023, fig 62) (<https://www.lucellepillayart.co.za/afterisms-excentricities>) consists of a wooden light box and three acrylic sheets imbed into three parallel slots. This piece is a data iteration of *Journeys*, as it reflects the same population data set of men, women and children that arrived by ship from 1860 to 1911. Whilst *Journeys* is a wave graph, *Excentricities* is a radial map (fig 63), providing a different perspective or vantage point for the same story. The ship data is located at its epicentre and the labourers biographical data radiates and dissipates outwardly. LED lights within the box illuminate the acrylic sheets and the markings engraved on its surface. A timed circuit allows for the various data sets to illuminate in succession on a loop; this adds movement and acts as a temporal device. It allows the three data segments to light up in slow succession as viewers move around the suspended narrative.

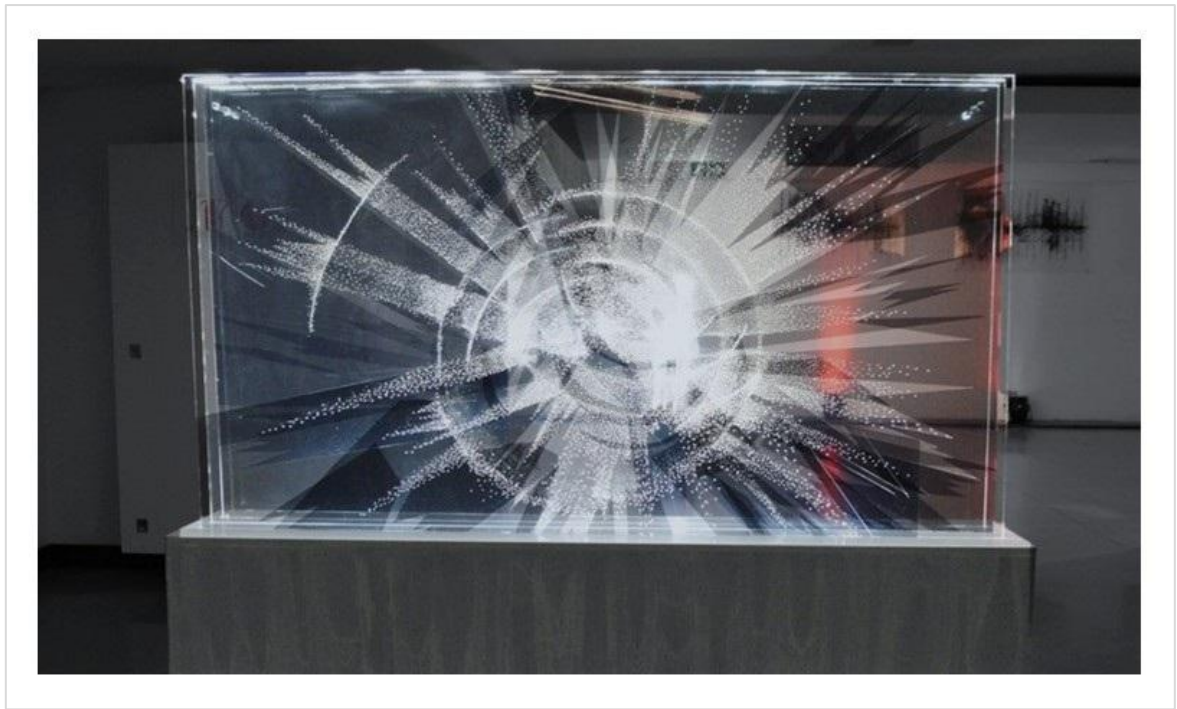


Figure 63. Lucelle Pillay, *Excentricities* (2023).

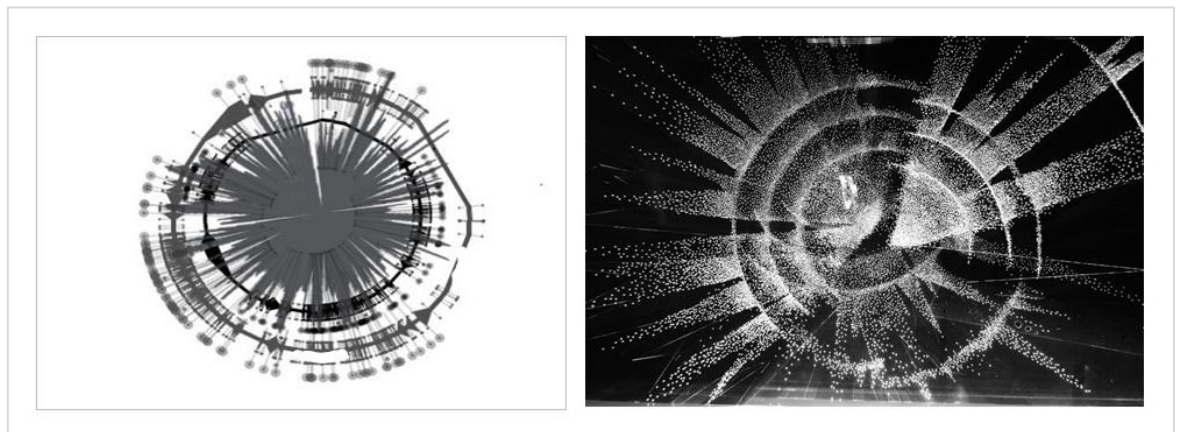


Figure 64. *Excentricities*: Radial data map of the artwork (2025).



Figure 65. Lucelle Pillay, *Excentricities (details)* (2023).

Similar to [Kentridge's disruption of chronological time](#) (Datta 2022:109; Greslé 2017:261), *Excentricities* distorts the linear timeline by bending it into a divergent (starburst or radial) entity, thereby obscuring the points of alpha and omega. The data becomes unreadable as a form of colonial calculation and is transformed into sporadic radiations of entities through time and space. I apply the term the term divergent to describe a movement from a current state of being into something different or something else, to move or extend in different directions from a common point. This analogy is symbolic of the centrifugal force of modernism, which had flung the 'Indian' diaspora to the peripheries of subalternity and buried their history beneath the detritus of imperial profiteering. However, through the process of artmaking, the ship lists become 'atemporal' and its entities (labourers) can be re-presented as perpetually emerging into something new.

An index is a type of sign that has a direct, causal, or physical connection to what it represents. By applying the [method of indexicality](#), the ship list data is used to reference communities of descendants, where pixels of light become indexical traces of lived experiences, real bodies and histories. The point of origin located within the centre of the radial form represents the ports of Calcutta and Madras (Bhana 1987:22) from which 384 ships departed bringing 152 144 indentured labourers to South Africa. By tracing each journey the artwork conceptually integrates the polytheistic, fluid nature of the population, thereby illuminating 'Indian' identity's "[pluralistic ethos](#)" (Thomas 2002:9) discussed previously. This is also reflected in my autoethnography with my mother being Catholic and my father Hindu. *Excentricities* is a complex ethnographic sign that represents a plethora of belief systems that are not static but constantly transmorphing into new variants of identity.¹⁹⁰

The dominant stellate shape of the artwork suggests the Catholic iconography of the Sacred heart, the halo of Christ and Mother Mary. This was an unexpected outcome, yet it referenced my mother and her family's life-long religious affiliation to the church. Important to this reflective critique is Brain's (1983:197) research on the early missionaries such as Father Sobon and the building of St Anthony's church in Durban. [My mother's story](#) underpins the historical relevance of the Catholic church as an ecclesiastic guardian over 'Indian' communities in Natal. Attendees (fig 65) have mentioned that its sunburst luminescence presents as an aspirational motif. *Excentricities'* radial form as a symbol of future hope unexpectedly answered the [research question \(iv\)](#), which problematised the futurity of identity.

¹⁹⁰ Although my artistic approach and treatment of the sign of identity differs from that of Khan, I see similarities in our aim to represent iterations Indianness in alternative ways.

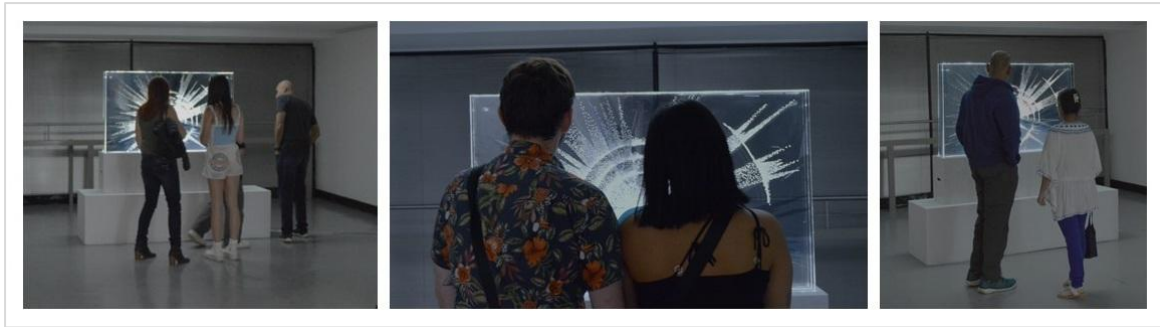


Figure 66. Attendees viewing *Excentricities* on preview evening (2023).

Imagining the future was hindered due to the label of 'Indian' being fixed as foreign and inferior during coloniality and apartheid (Pillay 2019:86). However, the positive responses and audience engagement with my diasporic history, validates the transformative nature of art and its ability to engage interest and promote empathy. On a personal level I find it validating that my success as a doctoral candidate could possibly honour all those parents who sought a better future for their children. As a descendant of people once considered low-caste and uneducated, my study and exhibition is testament to their endurance and hope, which prevails in contemporary 'Indian' identity. These aspirations and cultural pride came through as comments in several discussions with the public at the exhibition *Vice Versa* (2025).

4.2.4 *Kala pani*

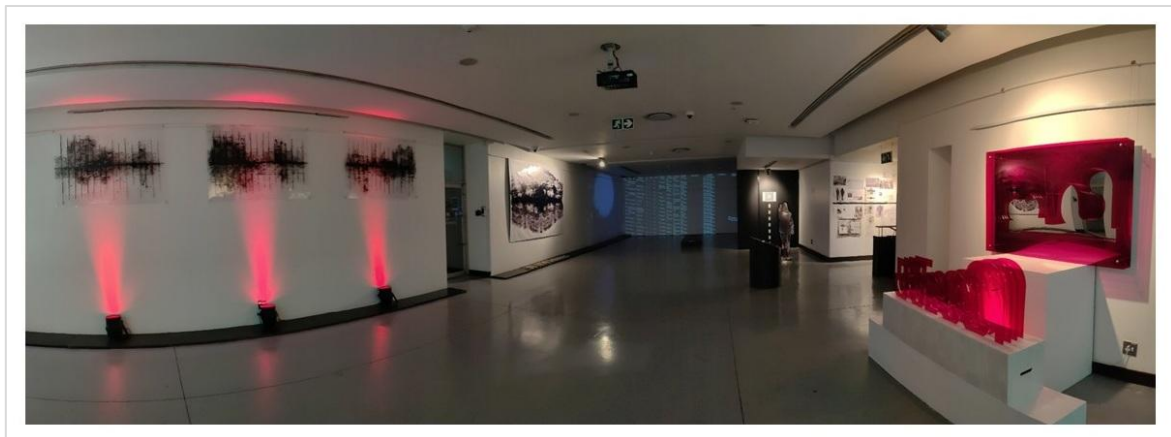


Figure 67. Main gallery with *Kala pani* and *Kūli* (panoramic view) (2023).

Kala pani (black water) (2023, fig 67) (<https://www.lucellepillayart.co.za/afterisms-kala-pani>) is another iteration of the original data set used in *Journeys* and *Excentricities*. The artwork is based on a *bar chart* visualisation consists of ink drawings on PVC sheets in three panels.

I used invasive techniques of scoring and scratching into the surface of the plastic to represent a bar chart, these create funnelled paths that direct and channel ink across its surface. Layers of ink and water dilutions were poured and splattered on the plastic, then sandwiched between sheets and left to dry for a few days. Once dry, more ink washes were applied along the linear etchings of the bar chart data, and this process was repeated over several weeks. These repetitions occurring over time evoke the temporal journey of the labourers and their descendants in South Africa. Artmaking processes of building layers and deepening tonalities over time became a physical re-enactment of the diasporic spread.

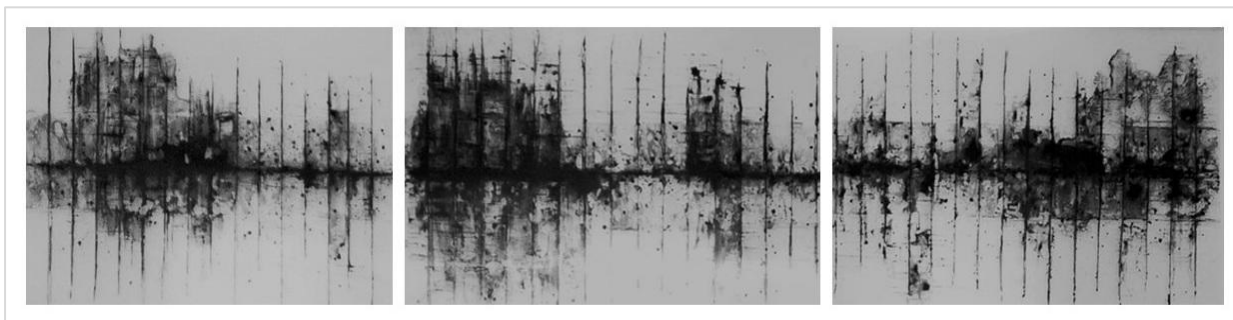


Figure 68. Lucelle Pillay, *Kala pani (black water)* (2023).

Kala pani is the term used by indentured labourers to describe the dark Indian Ocean they feared crossing. Most had never been on a ship nor considered the prospect of a long and treacherous journey to a foreign land. Moreover, conditions on board the ships were atrocious, with many people dying in transit due to the spread of disease and inhumane confinement over long periods (Bhana 1987:18). This is an example of how the [theoretical framework of thick data](#) can decolonise the colonial archive ([research question v](#)) by visualising the human stories that lay beneath the surface.

Kala pani is an experiment using the diametrical forces of [fluidity](#) and static solidity. These are innate characteristics of ink and polyvinyl chloride (PVC): while ink's liquidity wants to flow and be subsumed, the plastic surface resists its penetration. These processes imitate the larger theoretical idea of the [government's resistance](#) to the diasporic spread and geographic naturalisation of foreign people in South Africa. It also reflects the [uncomfortable tensions](#) and ambivalence that problematise this analysis of identity. Similar tensions are found in the art of [Khan and Makan](#) that has been discussed previously.



Figure 69. Casey Reas, *Emergence series* (2012).



Figure 70. Lucelle Pillay, *Kala pani (black water)* (detail) (2023).

In the work *Emergence series* (fig 68, 2012) by digital artist Reas, he blurs the boundaries between the science of digitalism and the creative intelligence of humans. Combining the calculative logic of software with the emotive subjectivity of human thought is the alchemy I find intriguing and laden with infinite potential. Within the context of my ethnographic study, I merged the data analysis (butterfly bar chart) of the indentured 'Indian' labourers (biographical data set 1860-1911) with traditional ink drawing and watercolour techniques (fig 69). This method allowed me to bring colonial archival material into a contemporary discourse about identity and race. The work, *Kala pani (black water)*, was inspired by Reas's use of the X axis as a common point of emergence. I re-interpreted it's linearity as a timeline on which I could demonstrate the translocation and dislocation of identities belonging to my ancestral line.

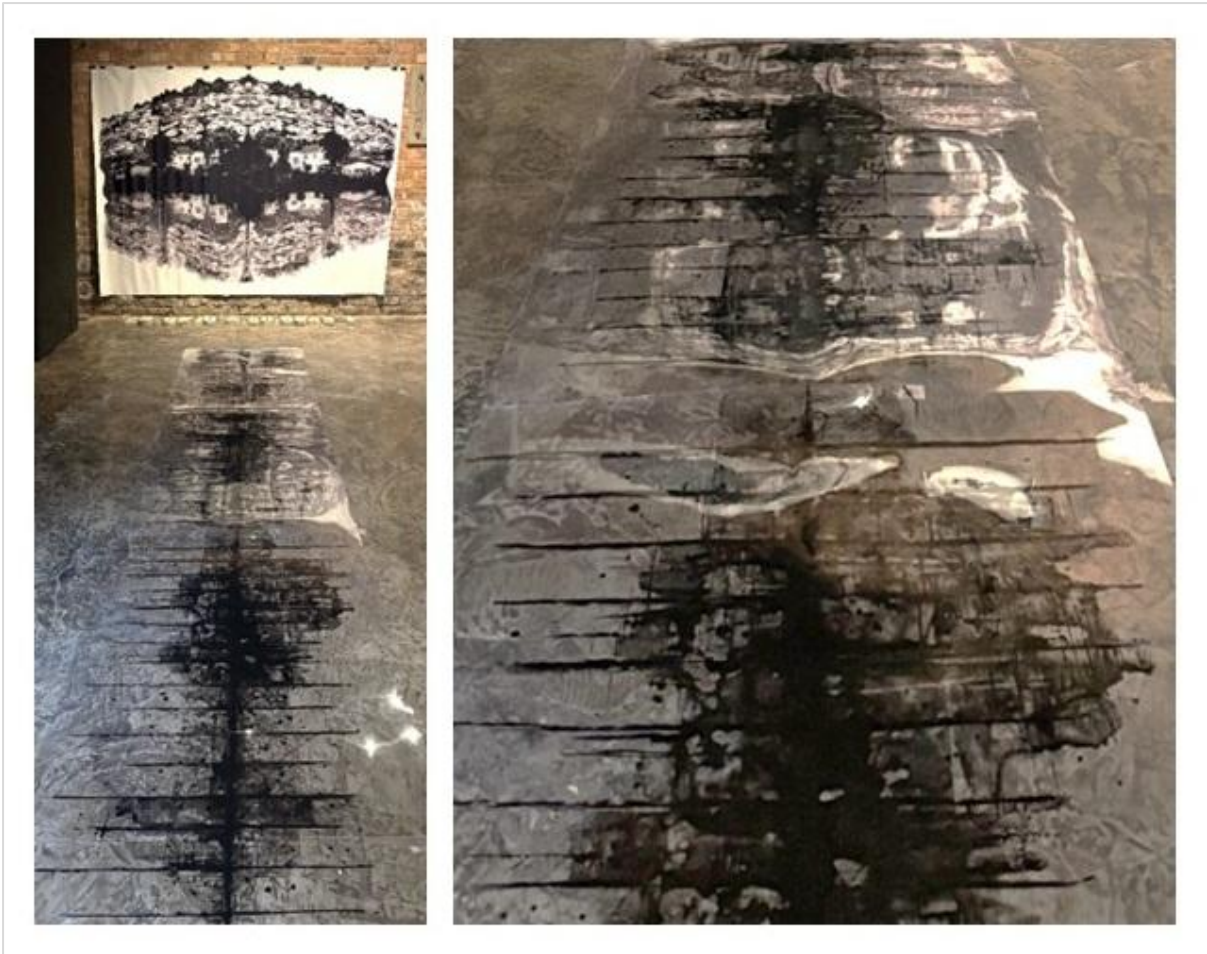


Figure 71. *Kala pani (black water)* (as installed at the group *Vice versa*, at Aardklop 25 Visual Arts Festival) (2025).

More recently, the artwork was shown at a group exhibition *Vice versa*¹⁹¹ (fig 70, 2025), where it took on different characteristics compared to its inclusion in *Afterisms*. It was applied as a floor piece below a projection and aligned with Chatsworth 29.92.70°S, 30.88.43°E (fig 71 and 73), the play of light on the PVC mimicked the reflective surface of water, thereby echoing the sea voyage of the labourers. The symbolism of the dark, undulating ocean referenced the theoretical notions of fluidity in art. I have previously argued that fluidity is a state of being that transcends the containment of homogeneity and racial divides. In *Afterisms* a red light projected from below onto *Kala pani* (fig 72) visually connected the viewer to the red hue of *Kūli* (fig 67) located across the gallery space, evoking a different metaphoric link by the association of colour. Furthermore, I proposed that the modality of art activism can facilitate this fluidity by bringing an obscure and forgotten history

¹⁹¹ The *Vice versa* group exhibition formed part of the Momentum Aardklop25 cultural festival in Potchefstroom and was curated by Dr Gwenneth Miller. More information can be accessed at <https://www.gwennethmiller.com/vice-versa>.

to contemporary spaces. As a visual metaphor, *Kala pani*'s changeability within two gallery environments also becomes a metaphor for its liquidity, which could inspire social reflexivity. I therefore reiterate that art contextualised in various spaces can be effective as an alternative methodology for researching race and producing ethnographical knowledge. Storytelling using data as a medium can inspire empathy, inclusivity and dialogue beyond our racial divides.

4.2.5 Chatsworth 29.92.70°S,30.88.43°E

In *Afterisms*, the work *Kala pani (black water)* was exhibited between *Journeys* (2023) and *Chatsworth 29.92.70°S, 30.88.43°E* as demonstrated in the various figures (67, 72 and 73).

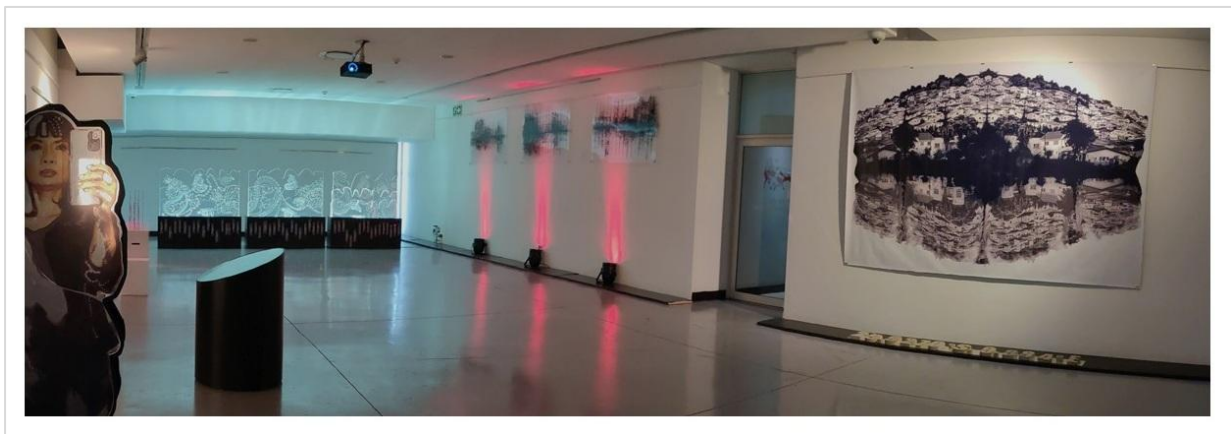


Figure 72. Main gallery with *Chatsworth 29.92.70°S, 30.88.43°E* (panoramic view) (2023).

Chatsworth 29.92.70°S,30.88.43°E (2023, fig 73) is a large format print (3x2m) on unframed vinyl, suspended on a central wall within the exhibition space (<https://www.lucellepillayart.co.za/afterisms-chatsworth>). I digitally combined and morphed existing photographic imagery to create a monolithic representation of the township in which I was born during apartheid. Its amorphous form looms over the viewer, like a memory or a dream; the artwork becomes a shrine to my segregated-identity during a time of racial isolation. I had cast Chatsworth's GPS coordinates in cement from 3D-printed¹⁹² moulds, and I presented them beneath the suspended image (fig 73). Cement represents structure, shelter, land and earth, and its weight and solidity counterpoints the fragility of reminiscence. As a material, cement grounds the memory of place with the grassroots realities behind the daily materialisation of identity.

¹⁹² 3D printing or additive manufacturing is a process of making three-dimensional objects from a digital file.



Figure 73. Lucelle Pillay, *Chatsworth* 29.92.70°S, 30.88.43°E (2023).

Chatsworth comprises an area that was once a farm of the same name, part of Witteklip, owned by Samuel Bennington. It was named after the prestigious estate in the Derbyshire Dales district in England, a famous mansion that was the administrative seat of the English Dukes of Devonshire (SAHO 2025). The cruel irony was that the township was the antithesis of its namesake and held the prospect of deplorable cramped living conditions and abject poverty. It became the geographical repository for the subaltern condition of 'Indian'. This [ethno-racial label](#) blanketed over a heterogenous population of diverse histories, cultures, religions and languages.

In the opening lines of the book *Chatsworth, the making of a South African township* Desai and Vahed (2013:1) write,

Chatsworth was born at the at the height of apartheid's madness when the government sought to ghettoise persons of 'Indian' origin into what it intended to be a frozen racial landscape. Part of the nationwide policy that forcibly relocated millions of black South Africans to segregated urban townships and ethnic 'homelands', the removals that created Chatsworth drew widespread condemnation, both for the violation of dignity and rights they signified and for the callous manner of their execution... The stories in this book are about the Chatsworth that grew up from this project of racial engineering, transformed over the decades through need and creativity by the people living there.

The statement implies that the geography of Chatsworth had been designated by apartheid's imaginarium of containment and fixedness. However, it is the creativity of its people and their stories that 'made' the township a vibrant part of South Africa's living heritage. [My family's story](#), previously discussed, forms part of the cultural fabric of this place, intertwined with hundreds like us, who were forcibly removed and relegated to its nameless streets.¹⁹³ My parents were still reeling from the trauma of selling their [Bentley Street](#) home and leaving behind their church and community. For me, however, having been born in Chatsworth, it was my only home and, while life there was undoubtedly challenging, my memories of the place are tinged with a bittersweet melancholia that is difficult to explain in academic terms.

Perhaps Govinden (2011) describes this emotional ambivalence best by quoting Jacob Dlamini¹⁹⁴ when he asked, "What does it mean for a Black South African to remember life under apartheid with fondness?" Govinden compares her time as a student at the 'Indian' college on [Salisbury Island](#) with Dlamini's account of the "richness" he experienced growing up in Katlehong during apartheid. She questions whether a person of colour *may* reminisce fondly on a time of separation and oppression, as her feelings oscillate between endearment and loathing. As discussed previously, using Maharaj's case study, it is between these [two diametrically opposing states](#) that the 'Indian' identity resides, states that describe my bittersweet memories of Chatsworth perfectly. What the writers Desai, Vahed, Govinden and Dlamini are attempting to articulate is that Black and Brown people found pockets of habitation that offered them reprieve, where the fullness and abundance of life could be enjoyed. Chatsworth was one such pocket, which the harshness and alienation of the grand narrative of apartheid at its most severe, could not obliterate.

The rich diversity of township life is reflected in its many inhabitants and their stories which are too numerous to mention here. Many 'Indians' were directly impacted by the liberation struggle, like [Mariammah Chetty](#), discussed in Chapter Three, her subaltern identity remains invisible and silent during a time of freedom (Waetjen 2013:111). This invisibility and lack of representation underpins the [primary research question \(ii\)](#) of my study. The artist [Clive Pillay](#), whose work is referenced in Chapter Two, has explored aspects of dislocation through his art by documenting the forced removals of the people of Cato Manor. Since it opened in 2003, he has been the artist in residence at the Nelson Mandela Community Youth Centre (2025), which was funded by former president Mandela in his effort to support the

¹⁹³ For many years after it was established, streets in Chatsworth were numbered with no actual names.

¹⁹⁴ Jacob Dlamini in *Native Nostalgia* (2009).

Chatsworth community that was plagued with unemployment, limited access to education and substance abuse. Pillay currently serves as programme coordinator at the centre.

My artwork bears witness to these stories concerning pockets of humanity living on the margins of society, in [constant renegotiation of their identities](#) and belonging in South Africa. *Chatsworth 29.92.70°S, 30.88.43°E* (2023, fig 74) depicts a patchwork of anonymous beings whose lives are fused into a quilt of sameness. I digitally morphed photographic images of the view from my bedroom window when I was a child, applying photo editing techniques such as duplication, mirroring and warp to create a distortion of reality. Chatsworth is an image passing through the fish-eye lens of my mind, causing my memories to vacillate between nostalgia and grief, like those articulated by Govinden (2011). The artwork expresses these dual states as a mirrored reflection of itself, ungrounded and afloat. It becomes a metaphor for my identity, constantly traversing a middle ground between self-perception and the gaze of others.



Figure 74. Attendees viewing *Chatsworth 29.92.70°S, 30.88.43°E* (2023, 2025).

The work resonated with viewers on various levels regardless of race; as South Africans we understand the culture of separation and its implications in contemporary times (fig 74). Attendees of 'Indian' descent who lived in Chatsworth felt acknowledged that a small facet of their narrative was being told. As mentioned above, the work was recently exhibited at the *Vice versa* group exhibition (2025) where it found significant responses from the audience attending the festival. The work *Chatsworth*, almost thirty years into democracy, speaks less to geography and more to the psychological divisions that mediate our social interactions.

4.2.6 Artefact of origin

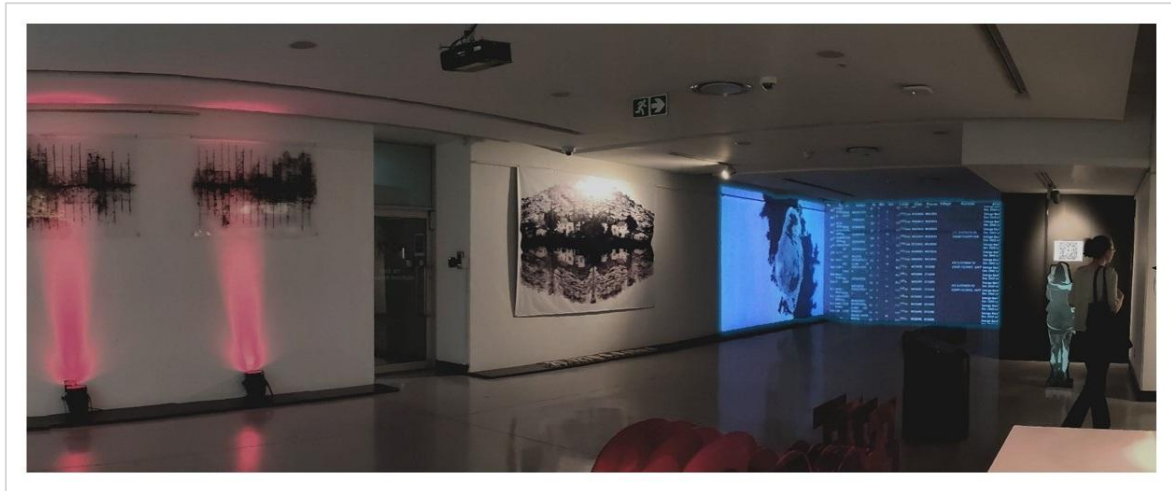


Figure 75. Main gallery with *Artefact of origin* (panoramic view) (2023).

The artwork entitled, *Artefact of origin* (2023, fig 75) is a three-channel projection mapped onto the walls of the exhibition space (<https://www.lucellepillayart.co.za/afterisms-atrefact-of-origin>). The projection consists of a central and two peripheral narratives, immersing the viewer in light and sound. The peripherals are morphing images of ink experiments, ocean, ships and photographs of the labourers. The central projection depicts the scrolling names of the ship lists. To achieve a readable scroll rate, the entire data sample was screen-captured over 2 days. The viewers read the unending procession of names, in which details of suicides, children, murders, pregnancies, death in transit and mental illness have been circled as points of interest. Waves of data became people with names, families and places of origin, emerging from the obscurity of a discarded history.

It is proposed that history presented as an autoethnographic text promotes the awareness of vulnerable groups and challenges racial stereo-types (Bogumil *et al* 2015:5, Bentley 2025:13-14), thereby stimulating critical thinking (Au-Yong-Oliveira 2020:1). Considering this, *Artefact* was an experiment in humanising the clinical nature of data presentation. By applying techniques such as movement, sound and imagery, I produced performance texts to tell stories about actual people and their treacherous journeys to Africa. As the artist, I was also a subject of research (fig 76) and my artwork became a palimpsest of my heterotemporal experiences, written over and threaded through the colonial grand narrative.



Figure 76. Lucelle Pillay, *Artefact of Origin* (2023).

To visibilise my ancestral 'Indian' identity I used the [methodology of performance](#), which also becomes a form of activism, one that contests and subverts colonial history and its affinity to categorise and bind Indianness to a fixed moment in its past. Borrowing from notions of the colonial encounter (Savage 2008:78; Bull 2014:253), I perceived a shift in the gallery space to a more inclusive, fluid cultural narrative, one that conjoined an unresolved past with the present. This fluidity, although abstract within theoretical confines, becomes immensely cathartic and empowering on a creative level (Ren 2015:11-12). Engaging with the greater "moral community" (Denzin 2001:24) in this intimate way, allowed me to reconcile my 'otherness' to theirs and reinstalled a sense of human value.



Figure 77. *Artefact of origin*: Artist within 3D projection (2023).

The treacherous journey of the first labourers was represented by a writhing ocean, which swelled and dipped, enhanced by the sounds of crashing waves and buffeted sails (fig 78). The veiled presence of a British sailing ship appeared and disappeared on the undulating tides, like a faded memory. This imagery wrapped around the 3D projection space and engulfed the viewer within a fluid narrative, one that transcended a static colonial history and reenacted the labourers' existential journey into the unknown. I used the symbol of dark water to evoke feelings of human vulnerability, similarly to [Kaleka's](#) use of water to denote death and spirituality. In his three-channel video, *House of opaque water* (2012, fig 25), complex themes of transience and natural life cycles are tentatively weighed against human survival.



Figure 78. Lucelle Pillay, *Artefact of origin* (still) (2023).



Figure 79. *Artefact of origin*: detail with audience (2023).

I perceive critical, thematic and conceptual links between Kaleka's work and *Artefact of origin*. Kaleka's narrative of the Sundarbans, facing extinction due to climate change, serves as one of the contemporary iterations of abject poverty playing out in India since time immemorial. Born into the tragic drama of the subaltern, identities of lower caste, such as the Chamars,¹⁹⁵ Ahirs,¹⁹⁶ Goala,¹⁹⁷ Pariahs¹⁹⁸ and the Vellalans¹⁹⁹ (Bhana 1987:65), would have been the case for the majority of labourers translocated to South Africa. A [thick reading](#) of the data draws a straight causal line from British economic policies to the dissolution of most indigenous agriculture, craft and production industries (Bhana 1987:68-73). Colonial activity in India during the 19th century, specifically the Land Revenue Act, resulted in landlessness, displacement, scarcity and famine (Bhana 1987:73). With the loss of sustainable livelihoods, many people were forced to board indenture ships as an escape from their ever-worsening circumstances under British rule.

The artworks discussed are expressions of my [excentric positionality](#) on the outskirts of representation. They exist within their own heterotemporality, removed from the grand chronology of Western art. Neither modern nor postmodern, *Afterisms: excentric data-fluid narratives* is a *consequence* of colonialism and its suppressed aftermath. Within the conceptual framework of Aftermodern (Enwezor 2009:38; Perrill 2012:585), my work becomes reverberances or ripples, emanating from greater cataclysmic events. My identity has been shaped by the socio-political tremors of previous and current state entities. However, through the visual art narrative, I have renegotiated the representation of my

¹⁹⁵ From North India, the Chamars are mostly leatherworkers and tanners, considered Dalit, formerly referred to as 'Untouchable' caste.

¹⁹⁶ From North India, the Ahirs are mostly cattle herders and milk producers, from the 'Shudra' caste.

¹⁹⁷ From East India, the Goala are cowherders, similar to the Ahirs, belonging to the 'Shudra' caste.

¹⁹⁸ From South India (Tamil Nadu), the Pariahs are historically marginalised and excluded from village rituals and temple entry. They belong to the 'untouchable caste', and perform manual labour, including tasks considered a social 'pollution'.

¹⁹⁹ From South India (Tamil Nadu), the Vellalans are landowners and agriculturalists, considered upper 'Shudra' caste and often functioned as a dominant caste in rural Tamil society.

history and thereby my future. This plasticity or [fluidity occurring within artmaking](#) translates into a reframing of identity beyond the fixedness of race labelling. Excentricism ceases to be marginalisation, but is rather a psychological attunement to art activism.

4.3 The art exhibition as an activism

This study reflects on what it previously identified as the states of activism of diasporic art, which occur geographically, psychologically and intellectually (critically). Within this premise, the modality of the exhibition space becomes a [site of excentricity and activism](#). As a diasporic artist seeking to present my 'Indian' identity through the art narrative, being cognisant of the place (geographical location) and space of the exhibition is crucial to the psychological 'staging'²⁰⁰ of re-presentation. This staging precedes the installation of artwork and imbues the process of the exhibition with a sensitivity and empathy for myself (ethnographic subject) and the audience. I discuss below how this intellectual and psychological attunement to place, space and the performance of my identity through the conduit of the Western art exhibition, is an intimate yet empowering form of activism.

I approach the exhibition space and the presentation of art as a Western or colonial construct. Within this framework, the visual art environment is regarded as a culturally and economically elitist sector, managed by a white minority. It caters to a middle to upper class niche of the population and its institutions are associated with education and privilege (Pauwels 2022:128). With this perception in mind, I sought out depoliticised, inclusive spaces that did not carry the stigma of this history. This was a challenging endeavour within the local geographic landscape, which still bears the remnants of its racial, colonial and economic divides. The state-funded higher education spaces (publics)²⁰¹ are in the process of navigating and negotiating their varying states of decoloniality. The University campus has become a politically charged stage, on which our worst fears and hopes for the future are unfolding (Badat 1995:142-145; Ndhlovu 2023:2; Reddy 2004:34; Spaul 2013:45).

I chose the Origins Centre (<https://www.wits.ac.za/origins/about-us/>), which, while located on the Wits campus, was established in the context of a democratic South African and hence not tied to the apartheid past. Located in the city centre of Braamfontein, Johannesburg, and opened by former President Thabo Mbeki²⁰² (fig 80a) in 2006, the Origins Centre is dedicated to exploring and celebrating the history of modern humankind. Mbeki was a pioneering figure in the Pan-African²⁰³ discourse of the African Renaissance (Sesanti

²⁰⁰ In this context, the term 'staging' refers to setting up a context for the artwork related to marginalised identity.

²⁰¹ The 'Publics' refer to State-funded Universities such as UNISA, WITS, UKZN, UCT, UJ, UP & UJ.

²⁰² Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki is a South African politician who served as the second president of democratic South Africa from 14 June 1999 to 24 September 2008. Prior to this appointment, he was deputy president under Mandela from 1994 to 1999.

²⁰³ A term relating to all African countries or the advocacy of political unity among African countries.

2016:24-37). His focus was on unifying the African continent toward the common goals of “non-racialism, non-sexism and democracy” (Serote 2019:1). I have always admired President Mbeki’s political integrity, vision and his humanity, echoed in his famous speech, *I am an African* (1996). His poetic oration to the National Assembly, whilst he was Mandela’s deputy head, marked the formal adoption of the final Constitution of South Africa.



Figure 80. (a) The Presidency, *Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki*.

(b) Nelson Mandela with Thabo Mbeki.

(c) Origins Centre: a research institution of archaeology, anthropology, and palaeontology.

(d) *Dance of death & life: central ritual of the San*.

I am an African was Mbeki’s self-described identity, one that carried the legacy of indigenous peoples, European settlers, indentured Indian labourers,²⁰⁴ and slaves brought from across the world (Thabo Mbeki Foundation 2016). His ideation of Africanicity resonated with me, as it was not defined by race or origin, but by belonging to Africa and its turbulent history. As the torch bearer of Mandela’s (fig 80b) legacy, Mbeki’s vision focused on promoting an inclusive culture that would reflect all Africa’s people and their diaspora (Serote 2019:8, Sesanti 2016:24-25). The Origins Centre (80c & 80d) embodies this vision, and supports multiculturalism through science, art and discourse.

The floorplan below (fig 81d) indicates the final positioning of artwork, which provided a basis for the installation of the sound and lighting design. I collaborated with sound engineer, Leicher (fig 82), who installed the site audiovisual hardware and the three-channel projection map, *Artefact of origin*. He also co-produced the short introductory video and the ambient acoustical piece for the exhibition (<https://youtu.be/p3CPnRp4iZA>). I briefed him on the conceptual premise, characteristics of artworks, gallery space and atmosphere I wanted to achieve.

²⁰⁴ The specific section of the speech that refers to ‘Indian labourers states, “I come of those who were transported from India and China, whose being resided in the fact, solely, that they were able to provide physical labour, who taught me that we could both be at home and be foreign, who taught me that human existence itself demanded that freedom was a necessary condition for that human existence” (Thabo Mbeki Foundation 2016).

We focused on the key data visualisation, *Journeys*, as the point of departure for the other artworks. The audial elements we chose to include were the shuffling of paper (signifying the ship lists), water/ocean (representing the sea voyage) and a drone musical instrument called a tanpura (evoking the Indian origin). Its deep resonant tones are prevalent in both the Hindustani and the Carnatic systems (Kasliwal 2001) and impart a feeling of sombreness. Leicher combined these sounds into a type of dirge, a solemn, mournful chant that expressed grief. Essentially the exhibition was a memorial for people that were treated inhumanely, many dying in transit or on the plantations, and who were not afforded proper Hindu or Catholic funerals. The atmospheric soundscape, in the form of a slow, reflective lament, was intended to honour their memory and restore their humanity.



Figure 81. (a) Origins Centre temporary gallery - first floor (2023).

(b) Staircase to gallery (2023).

(c) Reception area - ground floor (2023).

(d) Floor Plan indicating the position of artworks (2023).

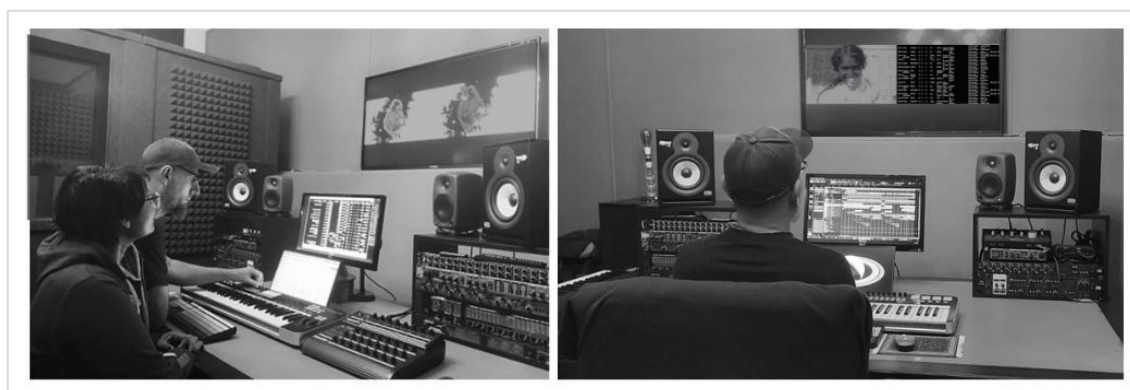


Figure 82. Kevin Leicher working on sound design (2023).

While *Journeys* (2023, fig 53) is a static manifestation of the data narrative, the projection map, *Artefact of origin* (2023, fig 76) serves as an animated iteration that includes imagery and sound. These works were located opposite each other in the gallery space (83a) and it was imperative that the sound design would conceptually link them. Two speakers were installed on the ceiling in the far left and right sections of the Gallery. Speaker 1 emitted the sounds of shuffling paper, which was digitally morphed into a writhing ocean, whilst speaker 2 radiated the deep sustained 'drone' of the tanpura, the Indian classical instrument that evoked the mood of a sombre Eastern dirge.

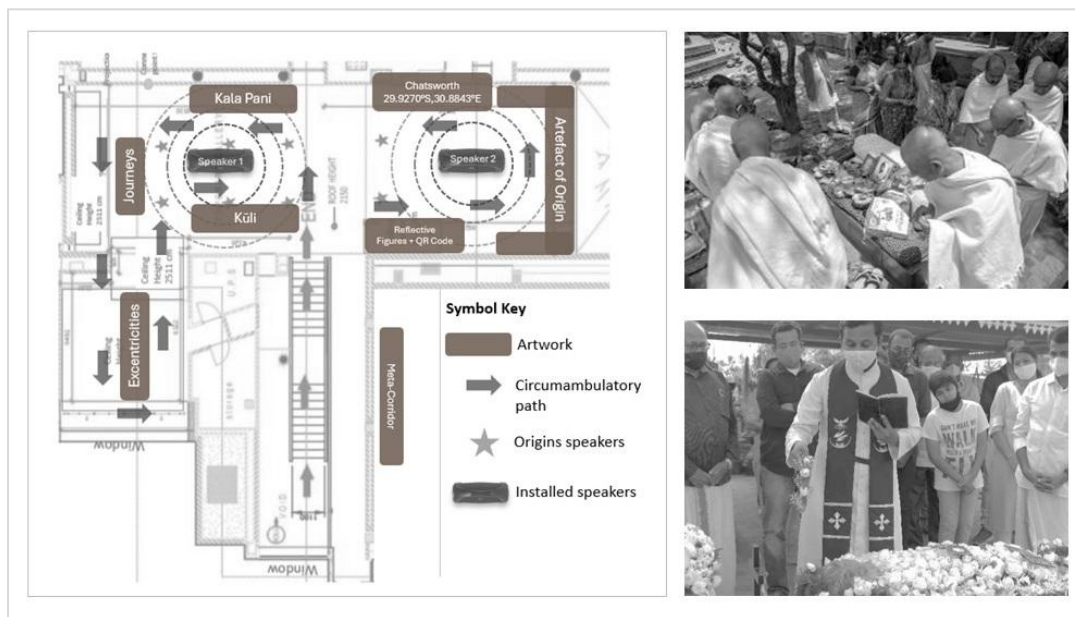


Figure 83. (a) Floorplan: Indicating sound design & circumambulatory path (2023).

(b) Thirteen-day Hindu death ritual (2025).

(c) Catholic funeral in Kerala, India (2023).

As viewers moved between the physical artworks and the projection map, they heard the intermingled sounds of crashing waves and the drone of the tanpura. The monotonous hum resounded in the space like a meditative mantra, as the ship lists scrolled their memorial tribute to the names lost to history. The arrangement of the artworks encouraged an anticlockwise circumambulatory path (83b), echoing a ritual performed by mourners during a Hindu funeral ceremony (Cremation Institute 2025). Similarly, Orthodox Catholic parishioners in Kerala (fig 83c) circle the deceased as a form of veneration, whilst the priest swings the sacred thurible,²⁰⁵ as a rite of purification and the release of the soul to heaven.

²⁰⁵ A metal censer suspended from chains, in which incense is burned during liturgical ceremonies. The priest or altar server swings it gently to disperse the fragrant smoke, symbolising prayers rising to heaven.

Permission was granted by the gallery for the ‘contained’ burning of a specific incense common to both Hindu and Catholic tradition, namely Sambrani.²⁰⁶ Also known as Benzoin incense, Sambrani has been used for centuries in India, and is known for its distinctive fragrance and spiritual associations. The aromatic scent permeated the gallery and sensorily transformed it into a hallowed space for contemplation. Combined with this aroma, the recorded sound, and the light emitted from the artworks, *Journeys* and *Artefact of origin*, which physically illuminated the space, the data metaphorically bore witness to the memory of the ‘Indian’ migrant, the untouchable, the coolie, the lesser man.

The reception area with media screen on the ground floor was booked only for the preview evening held on 16 September 2023 (fig 84). This space was used to receive patrons and guests with a serving of wine and cheese. The media screen played an introductory video, *Afterisms: excentric data-fluid narratives* (2023), providing a short history of the colonial ship lists and the first indentured labourers in South Africa. This contextualised and informed visitors of the core narrative before they entered the exhibition on the first floor. The exhibition poster (fig 85) suspended opposite the gallery stairway punctuated the space by its sheer scale (fig 87b). The image of my digitised fingerprint in the poster served to introduce the viewer to the conceptual framework of identity. By featuring this personal symbol within a narrative of ‘Indian’ indenture, I inserted my persona into the context of ‘Indian’ ancestry.

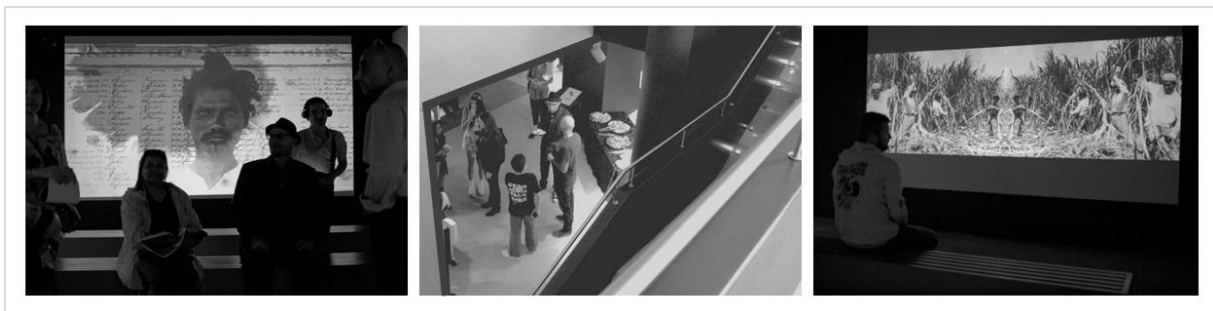


Figure 84. (a) Ground floor: media screen showing an introductory video (2023).

(b) View of guests in the reception area from the first-floor gallery (2023).

(c) Ground floor: guest viewing the introductory video (2023).

My fingerprint as a sign of ‘Indian’ identity applies the [methodology of indexicality](#) to reference my connection to the indenture narrative. The motif also reads as a symbol of

²⁰⁶ The term "Sambrani" is often used in Indian contexts to refer to the resinous material obtained from the *Styrax* trees, with *Styrax benzoin* being a common source (Sambrani Incense 2025).

analysis in forensic science, its concentric pattern or '*type*' is classified as a "whorl"²⁰⁷ (Hoover 2024). Its concentric pattern is an intimate motif of personal identity entangled with the mark of the indentured. As most labourers were illiterate, they signed their contracts with an ink fingerprint. These markings and the paper ship lists symbolise the residues of their collective identity.

The font featured in the poster image was developed from ancient Sanskrit and Tamil script. The horizontal linearity of the Eastern-inspired font, cuts across the fingerprint like a biometric scanner. It authenticates the physical data, measuring the minutiae of friction ridges and bifurcations. The digitisation of my fingerprint from an ink transfer (fig 86) also speaks to the application of data and digitalism within the artwork on exhibit, and the generative and recursive qualities of digitalism that facilitated the visual iterations of identity. While the unique characteristics of a fingerprint remain unrefuted as a sign of identity in science, the exhibition questions whether race is an indelible biological marker, encoded into our being, from which we can find no respite.

²⁰⁷ Whorl, central pocket loop, is a type of fingerprint pattern that has two deltas and at least one friction ridge that makes one complete circuit, which may be spiral, oval, circular, or any variant of a circle (Hoover 2024).

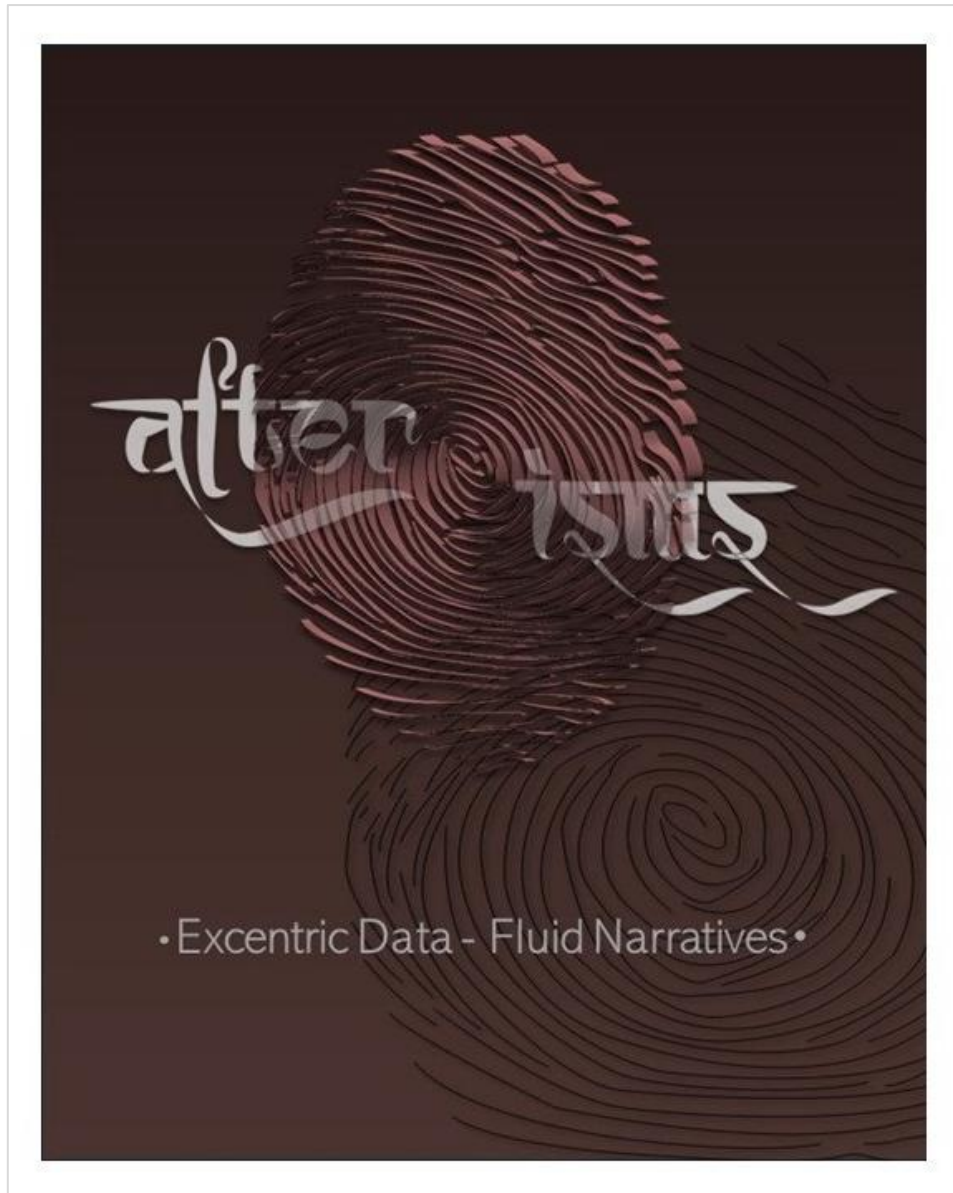


Figure 85. Lucelle Pillay, *Afterisms* exhibition poster (2023).



Figure 86. Sequence of digitising ink fingerprint using Photoshop (2023).



Figure 87. (a) Guests ascending stairs to meta-corridor (2023).

(b) View of exhibition poster from the gallery (first floor) (2023).

(c) Greeting guests entering the gallery (2023).

Beyond the staircase, the viewer encountered two life-size mirror-figures of myself (fig 89a) in a gesture of scanning the exhibition QR²⁰⁸ code (fig 87b). Once scanned with a smartphone, the QR code linked viewers to the artist's website (<https://www.lucellepillayart.co.za/latest-exhibition>) and the online exhibition. It was important that the work sustained a '*virtual afterlife*' beyond the *white cube* of the gallery, allowing online audiences to comment and share media, thereby engaging with the theoretical discourses surrounding the artwork (Dal Falco & Vassos 2017:S3977-78; Hannula *et al* 2005:22). These conversations regarding the nature and expression of South African identities could be sustained long after the physical, site-specific installation had concluded.

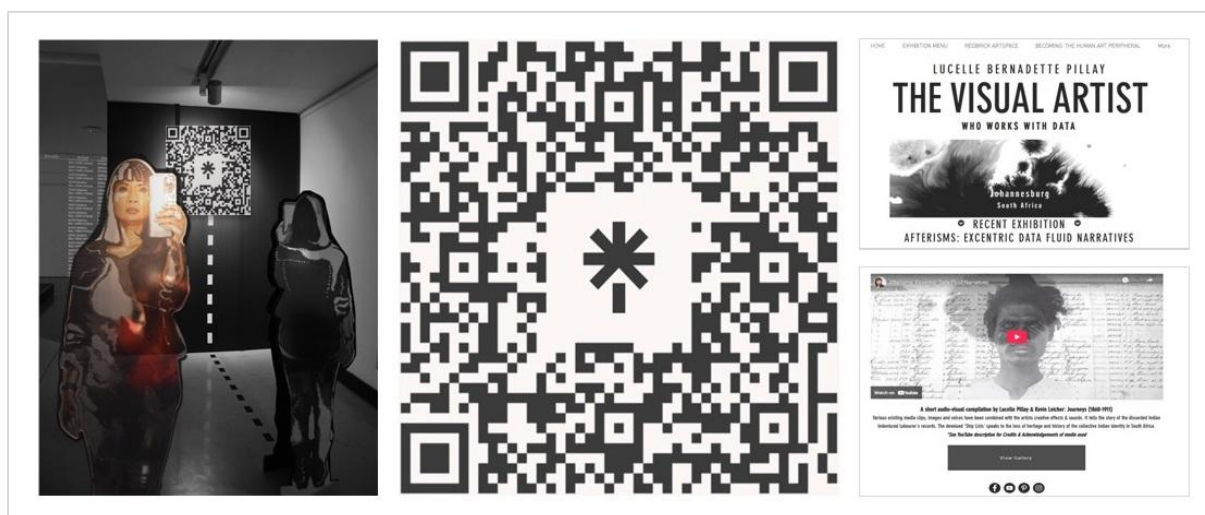


Figure 88. (a) Lucelle Pillay, *X2 mirror figures* (2023).

(b) QR code: online catalogue (2023).

(c) Artist website: online gallery (2023).

²⁰⁸ A computer-readable code consisting of an array of black and white squares, typically used for storing URLs or other information for reading by the camera on a smartphone.

The mirror figures make me visible amongst the surrounding artworks, as they silently bounced the reflected light from the adjoining projection. The figures also mirror the viewer's curious gaze. The figures were for me important metaphors for the concept of 'mirroring', a social tool used to build empathy and understanding with others (Vartanov *et al* 2023). Self-identity is partially formed from our perceptions of family and those in our social circle (Adams *et al* 2012:378), and the concept of 'reflection' speaks to how we see ourselves through the eyes of others. The QR code, which is in essence a data visualisation, roots the exhibition within the technological paradigm of the *black cube* (O'Doherty cited by Nemerov 2007:6-9).

The detailed critical reflection on my works, *Journeys, Kūli, Excentricities, Kala pani, Chatsworth 29.92.70°S,30.88.43°E and Artefact of origin*, serves to show how my praxis subverts racial labelling and cultural exclusion, as framed in my [research question \(iv\)](#). My use of biographical data within the art narrative has reinvigorated dialogues of 'Indian' history as a stable vantage point for imagining a future beyond our physical and psychological divides. Collectively the artworks act as counter-narratives to the colonial archives by reconfiguring its authority and telling human stories. Through a decolonial approach to mediums, art making, the exhibition space and reflection, I have demonstrated how it is possible to achieve activism through biographical data, thus addressing [research question \(v\)](#). I have argued that, from my excentric positionality, the exhibition can become a space of activism and a performance of identity. Fluidity as a theoretical construct relating to my autoethnography and as a conceptual device in *Afterisms*, is critical to my negotiation and futurity of identity in this study.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter revisits the core research focus of this qualitative study, that of the formation and representation of 'Indian' South African identity in the visual arts. This angle of enquiry emerged from an awareness of how colonial legacies continue to frame both visibility and invisibility within contemporary South African culture. As an artist operating within this framework, I found myself being acted upon by these systems of exclusion, based solely on race and my diasporic identity, that inevitably marginalised my narratives. I therefore sought to theoretically analyse various iterations of 'Indian' identity occurring within the local and global visual art arenas. By locating, examining and thereby understanding 'Indianness' and its formations, I was able to contextualise and reposition my own identity within the vibrant milieu of South Africa and its peoples.

To systematically unpack the phenomenon of ethnic identity, I formulated five probes or research enquiries, that were aligned to postcolonial and decolonial discourse. [Research questions i – iii](#) unpacked the racial descriptor of 'Indian', the contributing factors of low representation, and the ways in which 'Indian' artists critique marginalisation either through dialogue or their art. [Research questions iv-v](#) applied to my art praxis, which was the result of my conscious acknowledgement of underrepresented histories. My study evolved into a personal witnessing and narration of an excruciating colonial inheritance of both class prejudice and the political abuse of power hierarchies. I investigated how art could subvert racial labelling and cultural exclusion, as well as promote future-making. In addition, my study questioned whether art could become a critical activism that employs biographical data to overwrite the colonial archive, thereby generating new imagined identities that are contemporary and fluid.

To address my research enquiries, [three primary aims](#) were established. The first focused on analysing the phenomenon of self-described identity formations of selected 'Indian' South African artists, curators and academics. This was limited to individuals who had agency within the framework of the local and international contemporary visual arts sphere, as well as artists with whom I felt an artistic resonance. As my research progressed, the sample group began to broaden to Indian nationals, such as the group of artists invited to exhibit at *Africus*, Johannesburg's first biennale. I found this research-offshoot offered me an unexpected cross-cultural dynamic that informed and enriched my understanding of diasporic identity. An unpacking of the *Kochi-Muziris Biennale* further provided socio-political insights on India that counteracted my imagined constructs of the country and its culture.

The second aim sought to unpack possible reasons for the low representation of 'Indian' artists, curators and academics in the South African visual arts sphere, as well as the cultural narrative. This study targeted selected art exhibitions, as well as revisionist art history and literature. My research confirmed that the socio-political variables that affect representation in South Africa are both complex and mercurial. Supported my research with an expansive interdisciplinary literature review, I have examined both the external (systemic) and internal (socio-cultural) circumstances that have impacted the visibility and agency of 'Indians' in the visual arts space. These findings are presented as informed proposals, rather than absolutes or definitive answers to my research questions.

Lastly, my thesis aimed to apply decolonial activism within my art praxis to explore how mediums such as biographical data could overwrite the authority of the colonial archive. Through the creative and non-linear processes involved in the pre-production, production and exhibition phases of my art praxis, I sought to subvert the colonial stigmas of racial labelling and cultural exclusion. I will discuss how my study has met or in some instances exceeded these aims.

5.2 Summary of key findings

5.2.1 Chapter One

As a researcher, I made an important negation of the current status quo, which positioned the phenomenon of identity as separate to race. By placing the racial descriptor 'Indian' under erasure (Nayak cited by Erwin 2012:97), I subverted the state's mechanism of categorisation and set up a new dialogue that is open to alternate and fluid modes of representation. My onto-epistemological positionality was in itself a methodological tool toward a more authentic reading of identity.

This initial problematising of the racial label 'Indian' was a critical step toward an understanding of the ambivalence that is inherent in the diasporic psyche. This paradoxical tension, identified as a research problem in Chapter One, describes how many 'Indians' negotiate their daily existence by oscillating between citizenry and foreignness. For me as researcher, establishing that this tension and ambivalence constituted the very nature of being 'Indian' in this country served to destabilise stereotypical assumptions. I find it incumbent to mention that my negation of 'Indian' within this thesis and my art praxis does not extend to individuals whose 'self-described' identity imbibes cultural and religious affiliation to India. Within a free society, people have the right (free will) to identify with their ancestral and cultural roots. However, problems arise when the state weaponises racio-cultural categorisation to divide and prioritise specific groups over others. It is within this latter scenario that my study positions its socio-political argument regarding ethnic identity.

A study of self-expressed identity across ethnic groups in South Africa (Adams *et al* 2012:377-388) revealed a possible reason for the cultural invisibility of 'Indians'. It defined identity as consisting of both stable and fluid aspects, with 'ethnicity' listed as stable, and 'choice' listed as fluid. Based on this hypothesis, I argued that the racial segregation of apartheid removed free will (choice) as a human right and determined the quality of education, job options and living conditions of 'Indians'. With 'free will' removed, generations were relegated to psychological and economic silos based on their ethnicity. This destabilising act of enforced alienation severely affected their integration and representation in the greater society. The apartheid era defined people of colour as 'lesser' beings, whose only purpose was to be in the service of White communities. Over generations, these attitudes were internalised and became the underpinning dogma of how 'Indians' perceived themselves. This self-perception of 'lesser' and 'other' has been theoretically linked to their national invisibility and cultural vulnerability prior to and during the current democratic era.

5.2.2 Chapter Two

Chapter Two explored various facets of 'Indian' identity which addressed [research questions \(i-iii\)](#). A key finding was that employing the colonial archive as a metaphor for 'Indian' identity was an effective decolonial tool that exposed the undemocratic racial value scales at play. My study introduced the writing and curatorial work of the historian Maharaj, which yielded insight into the local and global facets of 'Indian' identity in the visual arts. His reenactment of the *Apartheid-era art history room* (2019) had directly influenced my understanding of the 'performance of identity' as a passive activism. The methodology of activism through performance was therefore included within my exhibition, *Afterisms: excentric data-fluid narratives*.

An important personal insight was that I did not have to define my authenticity as an 'Indian' artist by upholding India as an imaginary benchmark. I came to this realisation by applying the dialogical concept of authenticity and cultural fluidity to the sign of 'Indian' identity, using the method of autoethnography. For individuals like myself, who are generationally and geographically removed from India, this stigma had influenced my perceptions of belonging and being Indo-African. This recognition supported my resulting argument that India as a multi-theistic, cultural amalgam does not accommodate a singular authenticity from which to draw culture; instead, it exhibits a remarkable potential for fluidity.

To address the research question of how 'Indian' artists critique marginalisation and separatism through art, the *Kochi-Muziris* and *Africus* biennales were analysed as contextual and geographic markers of the entry of postcolonial identities into the global visual arts arena. As a cross-cultural retrospective of Indian nationals and local diasporic artists during

the mid-nineties, the work of UDW fine art students was included within this retrospective critique. Unpacking the work of 'Indian' South African artists, proximal to Indian national identity within the politicised space of the biennale, had not previously been considered. This aspect of the study therefore yielded the most valuable new insights into how art stood witness to the artists' varying socio-political realities within the postcolonial framework. Another finding was that the mid-nineties was a period in which Indian nationals were becoming globally visible due to India's liberalisation policies (Fernandes 2000:612). Ironically, at the same time the 'Indian' diaspora in South Africa were entering their darkest period of invisibility and marginalisation.

5.2.3 Chapter Three

This chapter delved into the complex identity-race paradox that exists within multicultural, democratic South Africa. It addressed the research questions of how artists negotiate race and how their art comments on racial categorisation. At this point, I took a crucial stance that implicated the phenomenon of 'Indian' identity and how it was analysed. As researcher, I conceded that an attempt to analyse any individual 'racial' group (i.e. 'Indian') and its identity formation would be futile and indeterminate. This problematised the racial singularity of the hypothetical statement that underpins this study. However, it ironically validated the social reductiveness of racial categorisation enforced by the state. Through textual analysis, I found that to extrapolate instances of meaning and understanding of 'Indianness', the verbal dialogues and visual expressions of 'Indian' South Africans must be observed within the multiracial entanglements of the visual art space (Van der Watt cited in Klopper 2013:130; Erwin 2012:97). My most fundamental finding, was that all racial identities in South Africa are interdependent and contingent on each other (Jamal 2017:24; Adam 1995:464; Malinen 2022:7).

The internal, socio-cultural conditions of the Segregated identity (apartheid era) were analysed to determine possible situational factors that have contributed to the low representation and low uptake of careers in the visual arts. 'Indian' South Africans are categorised as a 'non-Western' (Adams et al. 2012:377-388) racial group, as are Blacks. The cultural traits typical of these groups are patriarchal traditionalism, gender inequality and religious conservatism (Pillay 2014:ii). My study proposes that these traits, combined with subalternism and inaccessibility to higher education, were also possible causes for the absence of 'Indians' in visual culture. I have further problematised the categorisation of 'Indian' South Africans as non-Western based on insights from the Adams *et al* (2012:384) study which partially invalidates collectivistic traits in this group.

The section entitled *Reflections on maintaining Brownness* addresses the question of navigating 'Indian' identity within the postcolonial paradigm. It introduces the complex political matrix that determined a distinction between foreign Brownness and the Black struggle for freedom against the White settler. This distinction can be traced back historically to Gandhi, who popularised the maintenance of Brownness. Many African politicians rejected Gandhi as an "anti-colonialist" (Vahed & Desai 2017:158) hero in the context of South African history, based on his 'separatist' attitudes toward Black people. I propose that it is for these reasons that the collective 'Indian' identity occupies an uncomfortable position in present day history and culture, one that is constantly coming up for scrutiny and renegotiation. This key insight was applied in my reflexive practice as a method of raising uncomfortable rhetorical questions that address Brown on Black racism, as well as the fear and self-loathing of Black subalternism by 'Indians'. I propose that these findings, if explored in the future, hold the most potential for meaningful social reparation and cohesion between 'Indian' and Black people.

The works of Khan, Rose and Makan are critiqued on aspects of autoethnography, masquerade and performance. In the work *What I look like, what I feel like*, Khan explores autobiography, memory, mimicry, repetition and ambivalence (Khan 2014:7). A key finding here reveals that Indo-Africanity is a hybridisation of both Western and Non-Western identity formations, as explored through Khan's performances. This underpins my previous findings of assimilation and cross-culturalism occurring within diasporic 'Indian' South Africans. Makan appears to inhabit her 'Indianness' and her 'Africanness' seamlessly, since she finds grounding in her maternal Gujrati lineage, as well as in strong Black women. She demonstrates a diasporic positionality of 'in-betweenness' within postcolonial discourse, sometimes referred to as a "middle space" (Rastogi cited by Moodley 2012a:31). The artist navigates her Indo-African identity by inhabiting the interstice of both cultural iterations. These findings further validate my position on the hybridity of 'Indian' identity as a new divergent formation, unique to Southern Africa.

5.2.4 Chapter Four

The colonial archive as a data source has yielded key insights on decolonial methodology within practice-led studies. The re-presentation of biographical data within the art narrative revealed that colonial records can stand witness to its inherent barbarity. This means that its cold nature as an apparatus of human transaction can be laid bare for contemporary audiences to reflect upon within the exhibition space. The key finding is that, through art practice, the historic tools of colonialism can be conceptually restructured to create new powerful narratives, which can vindicate those it once sought to oppress.

The selective application of posthuman theory during the pre-production phase allowed me to position the ship list artefact as an autonomous and discrete object with its own agency to construct meaning. This was a critical finding that made me aware of the ethical implications of my intervention when engaging with all forms of materiality (specifically human biographical data). This methodology can be applied when re-presenting historically sensitive data, taking into account that the pre-production stage of artmaking is as insightful and reflective as the final artwork.

This study has employed methods of dialogism, indexicality, onto-epistemology, reflexivity through autoethnography, non-linear ideation and performance within the theoretical and conceptual phases. Although each method served a specific purpose, they were applied fluidly and often combined and overlapped at various stages of the research. In retrospect, I realise that the administration of multiple methods was challenging, and often complicated the outcomes of this study. Identity studies are multifaceted and complex in their own right, and the exhaustive application of many methods in my research design could become overwhelming in its intensity, yet it rendered productive results.

5.3 Theoretical & conceptual contributions

I developed a [research map](#) consisting of three phases, namely, extraverted, introspective and conceptual processes. This facilitated a theoretical mapping of the phenomenon of 'Indian' identity and the introduction of new dialogical perspectives and correlations that have not previously been considered in art research on 'Indian' South African identity. The introduction of the expatriate, Maharaj, who straddles his South African and European identities theoretically, ushered in a global vantage point for analysis. Making visible his curatorial contribution to the visual arts and postcolonial discourse within my study served to address the gap in intergenerational knowledge.

By positioning India as an imaginary benchmark for authenticity, I have extended a discourse that encourages the diasporic psyche to free itself from this tether. By theoretically unpacking how aspects of fluidity and hybridity are positive markers, I shifted the discourse toward 'Indian' identity as distinctly South African. Based on this premise, I developed the [theoretical framework](#) of the Segregated, Super and Contingent-identity types to illustrate the socio-political complexities as well as the multi-faceted nature of identity. Similarly, the construct of the [cusp generation](#) provided a theoretical lens through which artists of my generation could be contextualised. In the first instance, it refers to individuals who have transitioned from the apartheid era to democracy. In the second, cusp refers to a psychological transition from tactility to digitalism (ether-reality) and "intermediality" occurring

within artmaking. To my knowledge this dual contextualisation has not previously been explored as relevant to 'Indian' identity formation and art creation.

To analyse the art of Indian nationals who exhibited at the Johannesburg Biennale in 1995 alongside their 'Indian' South African contemporaries, I created an 'imagined' personal retrospective. This compensated for the absence of 'Indian' artists at the biennale and opened new and inclusive dialogues within the present. Re-presenting the work of UDW students provided a historic reference to intergenerational 'Indian' visual culture that is severely lacking. This method of reintroducing neglected artefacts of the past can be used to inform contemporary culture and address exclusion in mainstream art discourse.

Conceptual contributions are the application of thick data to empathically re-present the ship list artefact as a symbol of 'Indian' displacement by colonial agents. I have introduced the modality of 'data-fluid narratives' in which digital and analogue formats merge to produce new forms of embodied knowledge. By situating my artwork within Enwezor's paradigm of the 'excentric shift', my art praxis redefines marginality as an active site of creativity and critical reflection. I therefore conceptualise excentricity as a powerful position for the diasporic artist, one that is no longer defined by exclusion but rather a position from which to exert one's agency and identity.

5.4 Implications of the research

This research positions art not merely as representation, but as a method of inquiry, activism and ethnographic knowledge creation. As a critical intervention in race and identity, this study proposes new frameworks for understanding 'Indian' South African identity beyond essentialist and monolithic racial categories. This discourse and praxis contribute to decolonial scholarship by demonstrating that identity is an emergent and fluid phenomenon that cannot be fixed in time or bound to colonial record.

The study proposes a hybrid methodological approach that could act as a template for future scholars and practitioners seeking to integrate scientific methodologies (such as data visualisation, statistical analysis, migratory patterns, etc.) with visual art techniques. It encourages interdisciplinary collaboration and new modalities for the production of art and knowledge. The omnipresence of digital technologies in our world makes this method of storytelling relevant and shareable. The exhibition *Afterisms: excentric data-fluid narratives* has demonstrated that, through seeing, feeling and remembering, data can be transformed into a multisensory experience for audiences.

The research further contributes to ongoing discussions around decolonising art institutions and archives, arguing for the inclusion of non-Western epistemologies and indigenous

knowledge systems within global contemporary art. Exhibiting the work at the Origins Centre, a site symbolically aligned with the beginnings of humankind, extends the conversation toward a more inclusive human story, one that acknowledges the coexistence of multiple origins and temporalities.

Ultimately, the implications of this work lie in its demonstration that artmaking is not a passive reflection of reality but an active re-construction of it. The fusion of creativity, technology and decolonial critique presented here establishes a model for art as a living archive, an evolving platform through which marginalised histories may continue to speak, be re-imagined, and find resonance across generations.

5.5 Limitations of the study

The historical and socio-political contexts of South Africa are marked by apartheid's unique racial engineering, thus limiting my study's direct transposability to other postcolonial settings. Its cultural specificity, which focuses on the 'Indian' South African diaspora, limits the universality of the findings. But I recognise that universality is in itself problematic within the context of globalisation, and is known for its 'flattening' of ethnic diversity. I intentionally focused on 'Indians' as a case study in order to contribute to that gap in knowledge and promote visibility. However, this study does not claim to represent all diasporic or racialised identities within the nation's multicultural framework. The Segregated, Super and Contingent-identity framework, while applicable to 'Indian' identity in this study, requires further exploration in relation to other ethnic or cultural groups.

As an autoethnographic and practice-based study, my research is embedded in subjectivity. While methods of reflexivity and an onto-epistemological positionality were employed to ensure transparency and critical distance, the interpretation of identity remains situated within the artist-researcher's lived experience and biases. To maintain a balance between the subjective voice and critical objectivity, the study employed triangulation between autoethnographic insight, theoretical frameworks and archival data. However, this mitigation is not measurable and I acknowledge that the research risks becoming self-referential.

The production and installation of artworks within the exhibition was influenced by technical, spatial and financial constraints. The scale of the digital installations and projection mapping was limited to available equipment and venue infrastructure. These restrictions narrowed certain aesthetic ambitions, such as immersive technologies and interactive components, yet simultaneously encouraged creative problem-solving and innovation. The relocation and re-installation of this exhibition as a whole would require a complete re-design of the digital projection map to meet the specifications of a new venue. The physical pieces are large and

consist of various delicate components such as acrylic sheets and light circuitry which would be costly to transport. This limits the potential to reach new audiences nationally.

The 'Indian' indenture ship lists (1860–1911) formed the central data set for this study. Although this archive is extensive, it is also incomplete, with numerous gaps and missing pages. These absences limit the quantitative precision of the dataset but simultaneously serve as conceptual metaphors for historical erasure and loss. The act of visualising the data through art is therefore not restitutorial, but rather reparative and symbolic, bound by the limitations of time and degradation.

5.6 Recommendations & future research

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research and creative exploration across the intersecting fields of art, technology, postcolonial studies and digital humanities. The framework established demonstrates the potential of digital art as a decolonial tool for re-presenting lost histories. However, further exploration is required to formalise these hybrid research models in academic and curatorial practices. Interdisciplinary collaborations between artists, data scientists and social theorists could yield responsive systems for representing identity and heritage in the digital age.

The use of the indenture ship lists as an art material revealed the need for accessible, ethically curated databases of colonial records. Future projects could explore the creation of an interactive digital archive combining art, oral histories and genealogical data. Such platforms would function as living archives that are reflexive, participatory and reparative.

The responsibility of preserving, curating and imagining 'Indian' South African history and diasporic culture lies with 'Indians' themselves. My exhibition *Afterisms* functioned as a microcosm of this visual activism, engaging audiences in the reimagining of our erased identities. Future research could investigate how such exhibitions operate within public policy, education and social transformation, particularly in multicultural societies still grappling with inequality. As a young and divergent 'Indian' South African society we need to pick up the gauntlet and begin the challenging work of constructing our postcolonial identities. By preserving the narratives of our past as the foundation for future-making, we can instil value in ourselves and find belonging.

Given the shared histories of indenture across Africa, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia, my study sees potential in investigating the transnational dialogues of Indian diasporic art. Collaborative research, exhibitions and symposia could enable comparative studies of postcolonial 'Indian' identity, highlighting how different diasporic communities have visually negotiated in-betweenness, hybridity, and belonging globally. I have been invited in the

capacity of art consultant and digital archivist to join a transdisciplinary research collective in 2026, which seeks to address the aforementioned aspects. The collective, '*Building global South-South solidarities to redress inequities*' (BUSSIN)²⁰⁹ is funded by the Open University in the UK and is headed by the principle investigator, Dr Geetha Reddy.²¹⁰

I am hopeful that this collaboration with academics and artists from other countries will broaden understanding of indentured descendants occurring in other global locales. This could lead to a broader interdisciplinary mapping of indenture aesthetics in global art history and possibly develop into a group exhibition across geographical borders. The future application of data-fluid narratives has potential as a creative story-telling device as well as a modality of documentation that will contribute to new archives and as yet unborn histories.

In conclusion, the journey of locating my own identity amidst the intersections of art, technology and colonial history is a perpetual one. Through my analysis of data, I have learnt that the complex sign of 'Indian' identity is also a series of nodes and links connecting people with their geographies and their geographies with events. At the beginning of my thesis, I described the collective psychological condition of the 'Indian' diaspora as unresolved and perpetually 'unhomed', constantly hankering after belonging and birthplace, referred to by Maharaj (1999) as "*Fatal Natalities*". Reflecting on this statement at the close of my study, I understand that these conditions have inspired the qualities that are innately valuable to 'Indianness', qualities such as resilience, adaptability, fortitude and endeavour, all of which were born out of South Africa's unique socio-political circumstances. I conclude that identity remains ontologically and epistemologically immeasurable, yet art can bear witness to its collective essence.

²⁰⁹ BUSSIN Collective is a pilot project organised by Dr Geetha Reddy and Research Administrator, Ope Olusoga. The aim of this collective is for the co-researchers to develop a multi-year and international research project dedicated to imagining free-er futures for marginalised communities and to work together to realise these imaginations (For more information visit: <https://university.open.ac.uk/centres/psychology/research/projects/bussin/collective>).

²¹⁰ Dr Geetha Reddy is a social, cultural and political psychologist, who works across psychological and social sciences to understand how people make sense of colonisation, multiculturalism, migration and power structures, using an intersectional and decolonial critical paradigm.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Professor Sarat Maharaj: biography



Figure 1. *Sarat Maharaj* (2011).

Early Life & Education

1951 – Born in Durban (KwaZulu-Natal), South Africa.

Maharaj's family was part of the large group of Indians who migrated to the province of KwaZulu-Natal in the nineteenth century (INIVA 2025). His grandfather, a descendant of the indentured labourers, worked in sugar plantations as a contract worker. As a young boy, Maharaj witnessed the cruelty of racial segregation under the apartheid regime. During his university studies, Maharaj had to travel by ferry to the College for Blacks of Indian Origin, located on Salisbury Island off the coast of Durban. These experiences made him sensitive to the violence that was inherently present in colonial classification systems (Sharjah Art Foundation 2025).

1980 – Began doctoral studies at Goldsmiths College, University of London (UK). His doctoral thesis was entitled, *The Dialectic of Modernism and Mass Culture: Studies in Post War British Art* (Lund University 2025).

Academic Appointments

1980-2005 – Professor of History & Theory of Art at Goldsmiths College (London).

1999-2001 – Research Fellow at the Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht.

2001-2002 – First Rudolf Arnheim Professor at the Humboldt University of Berlin, Philosophy Faculty (Lund University 2025).

2010s – Professor of Visual Art & Knowledge Systems at the Malmö Art Academy and Lund University (Sweden). He is also “Visiting Research Professor” at Goldsmiths (INIVA 2025).

Curatorial Projects & Key Exhibitions

2002 – Co-curator of documenta 11, Kassel.

2002 – Co-curated “*retinal.optical.visual.conceptual...*” at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (with Richard Hamilton and Ecke Bonk) (Lund University 2025).

2005 – Curator of “Knowledge Lab” at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

2008 – Co-curator of Guangzhou Triennial, *Farewell to Postcolonialism, Towards a Post-Western Modernity* (Sharjah Art Foundation 2025).

2010 – Co-curator of the 29th São Paulo Bienal, *There Is Always a Cup of Sea to Sail*.

2011 – Chief curator of the 6th Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, *Pandemonium: Art in a Time of Creativity Fever* (Biennale Foundation 2010).

Research-Focus, Publications & Themes

Throughout his art research, Maharaj has engaged with themes of modernism, knowledge/knowledge production, post-colonial critique, visual art as epistemic practice, and the intersections of art, culture and migration (Creative Time Summit 2024). He has written and edited key works including, *What the Thunder Said: Art as a Thinking Process*; *Elemental Scatterings: The Sarat Maharaj Reader*; *Small Change of the Universal: Beyond Modernity?* among others (Sharjah Art Foundation 2025).

Additional Notes & Contemporary Standing

Maharaj currently lives and works between Lund (Sweden) and London (UK). His academic and curatorial repertoire which focuses on post-coloniality and the diasporic perspective, is widely recognised in European art and academia. His positioning as an ‘Indian’ South African identity, has relevance to this research, specifically his commentary on the legacy of apartheid and how his experiences have shaped his conceptualisation of new knowledge systems through visual art practice.

Appendix 2: My family photographs and personal documents of identity.



Figure 2. (a) *Theresa Pillay* (my mother as a baby) (s.a.).

(b) *Gerald Pillay* (uncle), *Theresa and Sylvia Pillay* (my maternal grandmother) in *Bentley Street, Durban* (s.a.).



Figure 3. (a) *My mother's First Holy Communion* (St. Johns Church) (s.a.).

(b) *My mother at the Catholic Debutante Ball* (St. Johns Church) (s.a.).



Figure 4. (a) *Paul Pillay (my father) as a young man (s.a.).*
 (b) *My father's High School photograph (s.a.).*

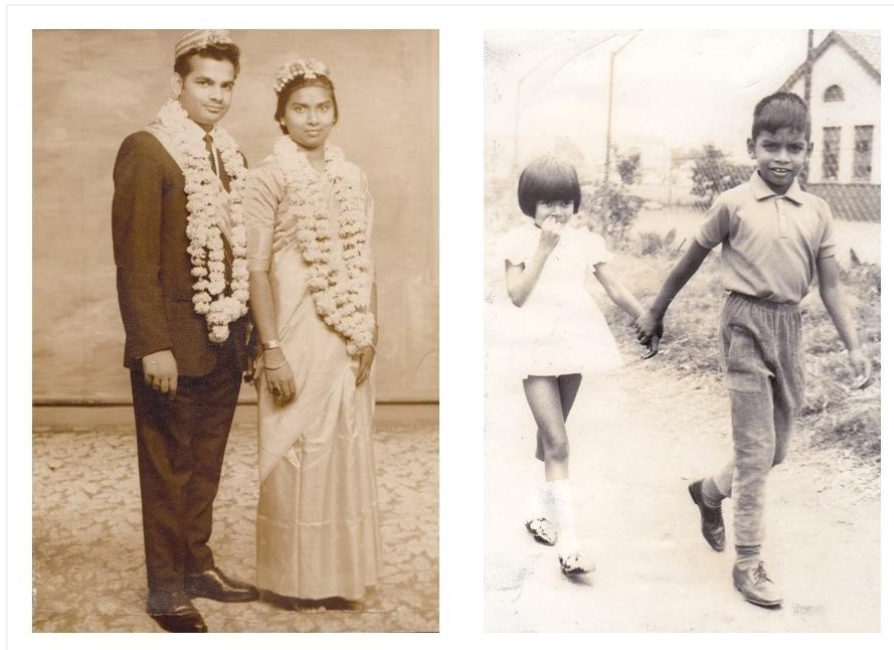


Figure 5. (a) *My mother & father (s.a.).*
 (b) *Emmanuel Pillay (brother) & Pauline Pillay (sister) walking to church (s.a.).*



Figure 6. *My paternal grandparents with extended family members (Verulam, Durban) (s.a.).*



Figure 7. (a). *Vincent & Sylvia Pillay (my maternal grandparents) on pilgrimage in Lourdes, France (1961).*
 (b) *Easter procession of Roman Catholic Church in Durban (s.a.).*



Figure 8. *Holy Procession of 'Indian' Catholics in Durban (s.a.).*



Figure 9. (a) *My first birthday with Vincent Pillay (Grandfather)*
(House 83, Road 609, Unit 6, Chatsworth, Durban) (1973).

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857/77 B 24648

B.M.D. 158.
(Ou Inkomste 209.)
(Old Revenue 209.)

REPUBLIEK VAN SUID-AFRIKA. REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA.

VERKORTE GEBOORTESERTIFIKAAT. ABRIDGED BIRTH CERTIFICATE.

Uitgereik kragtens Wet No. 81 van 1963. Issued in terms of Act No. 81 of 1963.

Gesertifiseer 'n ware uittreksel uit die geboorteregister van:— Certified a true extract from the birth register of:—

Van _____
Surname _____
Voornamen GANASS
First names _____
Geboortedatum TWENTY-SEVENTH APRIL, 1941.
Date of birth _____
Geslag MALE
Sex _____
Distrik van geboorte INANDA
District of birth _____
Ras INDIAN
Race _____
Inskrywingsnommer 98 6297/41.
Entry number _____

DISTRICT REGISTRAR
Place DURBAN
Datum 26-1-1971
Date _____
INDIANS
BIRTHS AND DEATHS
G.P.S.

K. M. M. M.
Registrateur, Assistent-registrateur, Districts-registrateur.
Registrar, Assistant Registrar, District Registrar.

25c
Moet uitgereik word slegs ten opsigte van persone wat voor 1/1/1960 gebore is.
To be issued only in respect of persons born before 1/1/1960.

Figure 10. My father's birth certificate (1941).

132

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT, NATAL

NATAL STANDARD VI CERTIFICATE

This is to Certify that

XXX THERESA ANTOINETTE PILLAY XXX

at the end of 1956 successfully completed the Primary School Course up to and including Standard SIX, and may be admitted to a Secondary School Course in Natal.

P. M. M. M.
Examinations Officer
W. E. M. M. M.
Director of Education
Date 1 JANUARY 1957.

I.D. 890-329252 A.

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT, NATAL

NATAL STANDARD VI CERTIFICATE

This is to Certify that

XXX Ganass Aristensamy Pillay XXX

at the end of 1958 successfully completed the Primary School Course up to and including Standard SIX, and may be admitted to a Secondary School Course in Natal.

P. M. M. M.
Examinations Officer
W. E. M. M. M.
Director of Education
Date 1 January, 1959.

1 2 428-0 20175/N W 31473/00013-0 092184

Figure 11. My mother's and father's standard six school certificates (1957;1959).

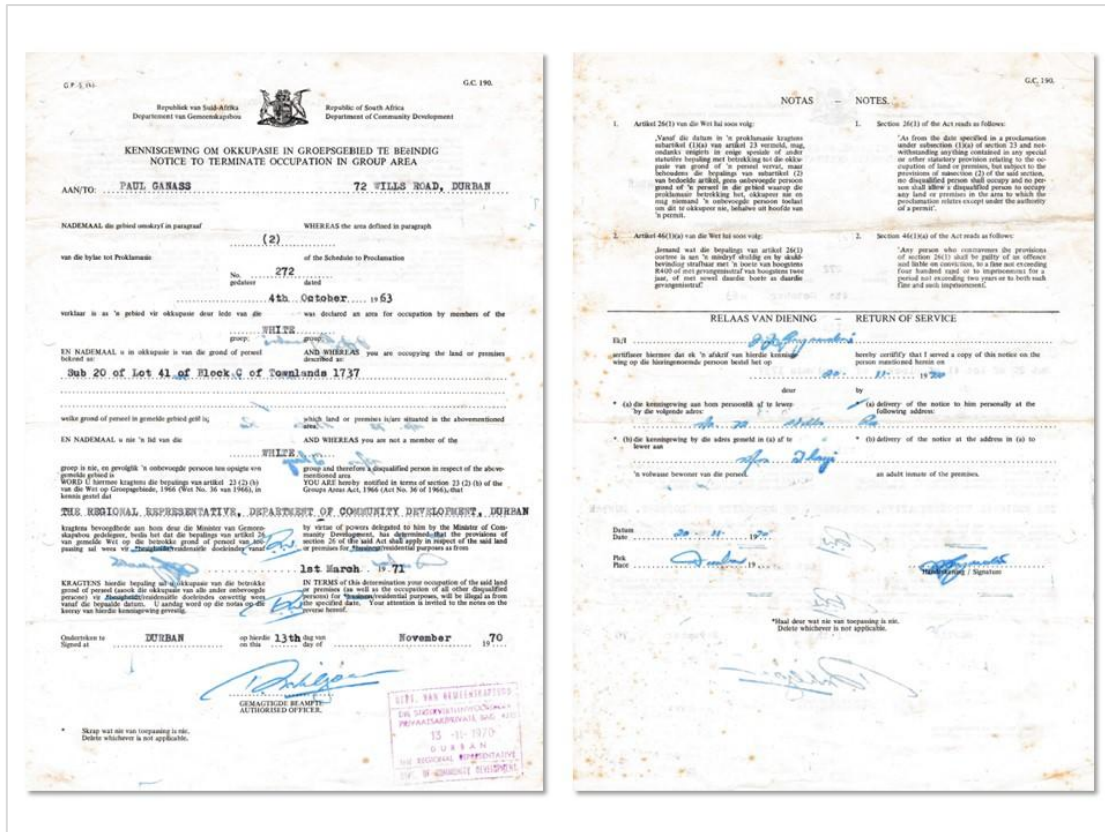


Figure 12. Group Areas Act letter of notification (addressed to my father) (1970).

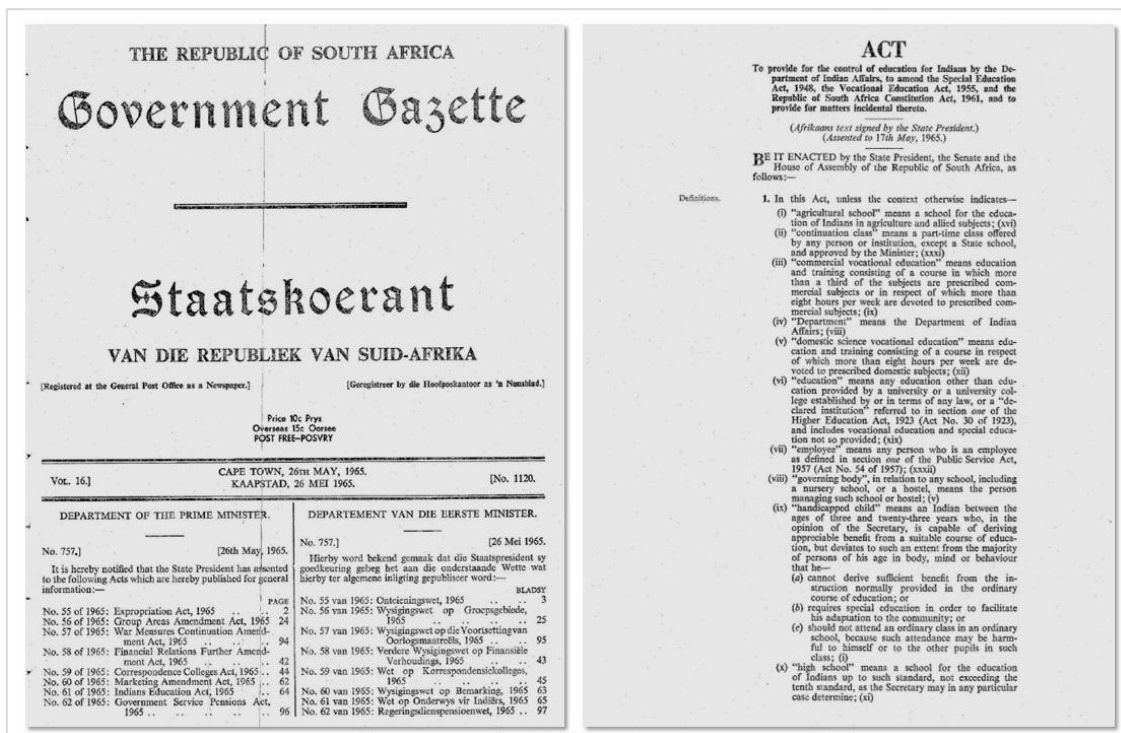


Figure 13. Indian Education Act, 1965 (2025).

LIST OF FIGURES: Appendix 2

- Figure 1. *Sarat Maharaj* (2011). *GIBCA*. <https://www.gibca.se/gibca/arkiv/gibca-2011/curatorer/> (Accessed 20 October 2025).
- Figure 2a. *Theresa Pillay* (my mother as a baby) (s.a.). Photograph. Personal collection.
- Figure 2b. *Gerald Pillay* (uncle), *Theresa and Sylvia Pillay* (my maternal grandmother) *in Bentley Street, Durban* (s.a.). Photograph. Personal collection.
- Figure 3a. *My mother's First Holy Communion* (St. Johns Church) (s.a.). Photograph. Personal collection.
- Figure 3b. *My mother at the Catholic Debutante Ball* (St. Johns Church) (s.a.). Photograph. Personal collection.
- Figure 4a. *Paul Pillay* (my father) *as a young man* (s.a.). Photograph. Personal collection.
- Figure 4b. *My father's High School photograph* (s.a.). Photograph. Personal collection.
- Figure 5a. *My mother & father* (s.a.). Photograph. Personal collection.
- Figure 5b. *Emmanuel Pillay* (brother) & *Pauline Pillay* (sister) *walking to church* (s.a.). Photograph. Personal collection.
- Figure 6. *My paternal grandparents with extended family members* (Verulam, Durban) (s.a.). Photograph. Personal collection.
- Fig 7a. Vincent & Sylvia Pillay (my maternal grandparents) *on pilgrimage in Lourdes, France* (1961).
- Fig 7b. *Easter procession of Roman Catholic Church in Durban* (s.a.).
- Figure 8. *Holy Procession of 'Indian' Catholics in Durban* (s.a.).
- Figure 9. *My first birthday with Vincent Pillay* (Grandfather) *(House 83, Road 609, Unit 6, Chatsworth, Durban)* (1973).
- Figure 10. My father's birth certificate (1941). Scan.
- Figure 11. My mother's and father's standard six school certificates (1957;1959). Scan.
- Figure 12. *Group Areas Act letter of notification* (addressed to my father) (1970).
- Figure 13. Indian Education Act, 1965 (2025). *Law Library South Africa*. <https://lawlibrary.org.za/akn/za/act/1965/61/eng@1965-05-26> (Accessed 26 May 2025).

Appendix 3: Glossary of terms

Acculturation	Refers to the cultural modification of people adapting to traits from another culture. This usually occurs after political conquest and the imposition of the beliefs and practices of the dominant culture (<i>Merriam-Webster Dictionary</i> 2025. Sv “acculturation”).
Actor	[Computer science] In the ‘actor model’ of concurrent computation, an actor is a fundamental unit of computation that receives messages, makes decisions, sends messages and creates more actors (Hewitt 2010:3).
Affordance theory	[Ecological psychology] Within the study of visual perception, affordances describe the ‘action-possibilities’ that an environment offers an organism, relative to that organism’s capabilities. For example, a chair affords sitting for a human, not necessarily a dog. Although the object is classified as a chair, this is arbitrary as it may afford the human various ‘action-possibilities’ other than sitting. These alternate perceptions can be gleaned outside the philosophical definitions and classifications allotted to objects. Gestalt theory has strongly influenced this concept, specifically its proposition of ‘demand character’, meaning the value (action-possibilities) of a thing is perceived just as immediately as its colour (Gibson 2014:126-129). [Digital semiotics] Affordance theory when applied to digitalism refers to the perceived ‘action-possibilities’ in product and interface design. In digital contexts, affordances describe what users think they can do by clicking on icons, such as envelopes, arrows and sliders. The concept of affordance has become central to digital semiotics, specifically, human-computer interaction, user interface and user experience design.
Algorithm	[Computers] An algorithm is a list set of instructions, used to solve problems or perform tasks, based on the understanding of available alternatives (International Institute in Geneva 2025).
Analogue computer	A class of device which uses continuously variable physical quantities, such as electrical potential, fluid pressure, or mechanical motion. This is represented in a way analogous to the corresponding quantities required to solve a problem (Britannica 2025).
Anthropocene	The Anthropocene is a proposed geological epoch that marks the period during which human activity has had a dominant impact on the earth’s climate, ecosystems, and geology. [Coincidence with posthumanism] An acceleration in technological innovation has seen both the scientific and philosophical schools of thought centre around the Anthropocene era. Modern culture’s clear-cut division between an anatomically stable body and its passive and infinitely malleable surroundings has been eroded. Posthumanism introduces the

concept of a more de-centralised distribution of agency, in which the natural environment, saturated with technological interventions in all possible scales, from geological ground to earth surface, to oceans, to plants, to air and vacuum, begins to exert a new kind of pressure on the human body (Wamberg & Thomsen 2016:151).

Anthropocentric

Considering human beings as the most significant entity of the universe, interpreting or regarding the world in terms of human values and experiences (*Merriam Webster Dictionary 2025*. Sv “anthropocentric”).

Anthropological cosmology

Refers to the human construct of cosmology. These are notions on the workings of the world and peoples place in it. It draws on scientific and anthropological theories to construct models for disciplines, such as politics and psychology. In addition, the arts and literature comment on cosmological ideas and use them to develop ideologies and visual culture (Campion 2017:1).

Artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to computer systems that can perform complex tasks normally done by human-reasoning, decision making and creating. NASA (2025) follows the definition of AI found within the National Defence Authorization Act of 2019.

- Any artificial system that performs tasks under varying and unpredictable circumstances without significant human oversight, or that can learn from experience and improve performance when exposed to data sets.
- An artificial system developed in computer software, physical hardware, or other context that solves tasks requiring human-like perception, cognition, planning, learning, communication, or physical action.
- An artificial system designed to think or act like a human, including cognitive architectures and neural networks.
- A set of techniques, including machine learning that is designed to approximate a cognitive task.
- An artificial system designed to act rationally, including an intelligent software agent or embodied robot that achieves goals using perception, planning, reasoning, learning, communicating, decision-making, and acting.

[Three research fronts of AI]

1. Wetware is the attempt to create artificial biological life through such techniques as building components of unicellular organisms in test tubes.
2. Hardware is the construction of robots and other embodied life-forms.

3. Software is the creation of computer programs instantiating emergent or evolutionary processes (Hayles 1999:225).

Atemporal	Existing or considered without relation to time. Not belonging to, or typical of, any period in history (<i>Cambridge Dictionary 2025</i> . Sv “atemporal”).
Big data	Different from conventional data, big data refers to very large or complex data sets that comprise internet, network, mobile applications, social network and other data sources. It has been predicted that art practices using big data will become more common as data increasingly proliferates and influences contemporary societies. Digital practices involving big data offer valuable directions for future research and artistic production (Manyika <i>et al</i> cited in Li. 2018:300).
Blackness	According to Rasheed Araeen (2004:135;139), in the context of the ‘Black Art’ movement started in Britain in the early 1980s, the word ‘Black’ denoted a common experience for people of both African and Asian origins. The white media and black academics caused a split into ‘Black and Asians’, meaning, ‘African and Asians’, thus essentialising the ‘Blackness’ of African people.
Caste system	The caste system in 19th-century India was a deeply entrenched social hierarchy rooted in Hindu tradition, and it significantly shaped people’s identities, rights, occupations, and mobility. During this period, it intersected with colonial policies, economic change, and social reform movements, resulting in both rigidification and early resistance.
Centres	Within postcolonial discourse, the term refers to modernism’s drive toward hierarchical echelons of high culture and art. These centres usually reside in Western countries and promote the superiority of European culture and philosophy. Historically, African and other non-Western societies are not viewed as centres.
Centre & periphery	Enwezor’s (2009:31) decentralisation theory refers to the ‘centre’ as those places of Eurocentric thought and culture, located in first-world countries, that propagate Western or modernist socio-political systems. The ‘periphery’ refers to the third-world countries that appear divergent from the centres and their modernist models of economic and cultural progress.
Code	[Computers] Code is the name used for the set of instructions that tells a computer how to execute certain tasks. Code is written in a specific programming language. There are many, such as C++, Java and Python, which consist of algorithms, formulas, objects, functions and classes that manipulate data to complete each task (Lenovo 2025).
Computer art	Art that is produced by the manipulation of computer-generated images (pictures, designs, scenery, portraits, etc.) as part of a purposeful creative process. Specialised software is used together with interactive devices such as digital cameras, optical scanners, styli, and electronic tablets (Britannica 2025).

Conceptual art	In the 1960s, many artists experimented with art that emphasised ideas over objects and materials traditionally associated with art making. In 1967, Sol LeWitt wrote in his essay “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” that “the idea itself, even if it is not made visual, is as much of a work of art as any finished product” (MoMa 2025). Conceptual artists used their work to question the notion of what art is, and to critique the underlying ideological structures of artistic production, distribution, and display.
Conceptual turn	It has been argued that historical accounts of the conceptual strategies of the 1960s, have plotted the trajectory from Minimalism to Conceptual art; however, the conceptual turn can be traced back the 1950s, with Brecht, Duchamp (Dadaism) and Cage gaining traction in avant-garde circles. The introduction of the ‘readymade’ radically altered the perceptions of the artistic genius and the role of objects in art (Robinson 2009:79-80).
Contingent-identity	A term used theoretically within this study to describe the grassroots reality of identity, versus the broad state-formed identity (Super-identity).
Cosmopolitanisation	Closely related to globalisation, cosmopolitanisation, according to Beck (2002:18), is a non-linear, dialectic process in which the global and the local do not exist as cultural polarities but as combined and mutually implicating principles. He therefore defines the term as ‘internal globalisation’, occurring within nation states.
Cosmopolitanism	[Vernacular] Within postcolonial discourse, Bhabha (1994:xvi-xvii) offers the term ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ as an iteration that emerges from the world of migrants and diasporic minorities. He cites Kristeva, who calls it a wounded cosmopolitanism of daily economic hardship, completely polarised from ‘progressive’ global mobility.
Cross-assimilation	Within this study, the term refers to cultural assimilation that occurs omnidirectionally across all races. Behaviours and attitudes are imbibed through cultural proximity, social conviviality, economic enhancement and political progressiveness. The patterns of this form of assimilation are often mercurial and dependent on socio-political value systems.
Cusp	Refers to the liminal space between cultural and political boundaries. The post-colonial perspective focuses on the complex tensions and oppositions that occur on the cusp, rather than resorting to holistic forms of social explanation (Bhabha 1994:248).
Cusp-generation	[Social] Within this study, the term refers to people of all races who have experienced the socio-political eras of both apartheid and African democracy. They would fall within the age group of 35 and older. Their life experiences in South Africa are unique and unusual, being at the point of transition from rigid racial segregation to democratic freedom. Based on this, I assume that this generation harbours deep psychological wounds due to the divisions, insecurities and violence during political transition.

[Technological] The secondary characteristic of this group is that they have lived through a period of expansive technological development (1970s - 1980s), moving into the digital era of mobile technology and the internet (1990s - present day). The prolific speed of development and the ubiquitous applications of technological devices have had a substantial impact on their sustainability, acquired skills and job options.

Cusping

I have used this phrase to describe my artmaking processes that combine traditional and digital mediums both technically and conceptually. For me, these processes became a metaphor for attempting to reconcile my segregated and contingent identities through artistic expression.

Data

Factual information (such as measurements or statistics) used as a basis for reasoning, discussion, or calculation (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* 2025. Sv “data”).

[Digitalism] Refers to digital (binary) data specifically: machine-readable, representing a set of distinct pieces of information (datum) in a particular structure and format that describe something (Freeman *et al* 2018:75).

[Raw data] Technically raw data is defined as any data object that hasn't undergone thorough data processing. This definition implies that since the data hasn't been analysed, processed, or interpreted in any way, it must be factually accurate and unbiased as there hasn't been any human intervention. This stance has been theoretically contested by scholars of data theory (Purdue University 2025).

[Warm data & cold data] Refers to the information that interrelates elements of a complex system. This is particularly valuable within qualitative studies, as it offers a deeper, contextual understanding of quantitative data (cold). Warm data provides a more nuanced analysis of human-generated information (IBI 2025).

Data-fluid narrative

I use this term to describe a visual art presentation that articulates a narrative extracted from a data source that relates to humans. Fluid is used to describe an intellectual position that is characterised by openness, neutrality and racial inclusivity. This type of narrative serves to make visible ethnographic histories and events in a manner that is objective, informative and engaging.

Decolonial theory

Decolonisation refers to the process through which colonised nations and peoples achieve independence from colonial rule, both politically and culturally. It involves dismantling colonial power structures, reclaiming sovereignty, and addressing the lingering impacts of colonisation on cultural, economic, and social systems. In addition to political independence, decolonisation emphasises the deconstruction of colonial ideologies and knowledge systems imposed by the colonisers, fostering

	the restoration of indigenous identities, traditions, and ways of knowing (Pillay 2021:390).
Digitalism	The word 'digital' is derived from Latin for finger, <i>digitus</i> . It has been adopted to refer to discrete mathematical numbers, the two binary digits in a digital computer. In the arts, the term refers to the increased use of computers in the conceptualisation, production and presentation of digital art and music (Bowen & Giannini 2014:2-3).
Digital art	'Digital art' describes the use of technology in creative thinking and art making. Ranging across a wide variety of mediums, digital art spans from computer, generative, robotic, kinetic, and net art, through to post-internet, virtual reality, and augmented reality art (Victoria & Albert Museum 2025).
Digital turn	The digital turn in artistic disciplines refers to the progressive professional and academic substitution of digital instruments for analogue ones. This shift has transformed the practical, theoretical and philosophical nature of art and art history (Näslund & Wasielewski 2021:249-254). The digital turn constitutes a process of the mass institutionalisation of new social practices. The ubiquitous use of digitalism in the form of applications and products has infiltrated every aspect of the human experience (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona 2025).
Discrete	Constituting a separate entity that is individually distinct. [Data systems] Consist of individual units that are countable. Opposite of continuous (<i>Merriam Webster Dictionary</i> 2025. Sv "discrete").
Divergent	The action of moving or extending in different directions from a common point. [Mathematics] Relating to or being an infinite sequence that does not have a limit or an infinite series whose partial sums do not have a limit. [Physics] Causing rays to draw apart from a common centre (<i>Merriam Webster Dictionary</i> 2025. Sv "divergent"). The act of becoming different or something else (<i>Cambridge Dictionary</i> 2025. Sv "divergent").
Ecological	Relates to living things and their relationship to their environments (<i>Merriam-Webster Dictionary</i> 2024. Sv "ecological").
Ecologies	[Posthumanism] Refers to interconnected networks of human, nonhuman, technological, and material agencies, which move beyond traditional nature/human binaries. It emphasises relationality, co-existence, and entanglement across species, systems and scales (Bennett 2010:94).
Entity	[Computer Science] An entity (in databases) is a real-world object represented in a database, within the context of entity-relationship (ER) modelling. An example

would be a student record in a university database, or an entry in the indenture ship lists within this study.

Epistemology

The study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* 2025).

Ether-real

This study applies this term to describe the intangibility of digital mediums presented within the real or tactile world. It is also a play on the word 'ethereal' which means heavenly, celestial and intangible (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* 2024).

Excentric shift

Decolonial discourse (Táíwò 2019:143; Said 1994:43; Spivak *et al* 2022:138) tackles the complex systemic discordances between previously colonised nation-states and ethnicities in the thick of their new democracies. Multiculturalism and representation in the arts are embroiled in this discourse, with exclusion and marginalisation at the forefront during a time of globalisation. The term 'excentric' (Enwezor 2009:3) refers to marginalised artists living in localities removed from Western art centres. The shift refers to a decentralised ideology that promotes a radical change in the modes of engagement and presentation between Western art centres and peripheral artists.

Existential siloing

A psychological condition proposed by this study as a symptom of apartheid's racial hierarchy and separation. This condition reduces an individual's capacity to relate to or empathise with people of other races in a deep and sincere manner. Individuals accept only their own history and circumstances as valid and thereby justify their behaviour and ways of interacting with others. In extremes this condition can result in feelings of superiority as well as verbal and physical outbursts.

Fluidity

As an overarching concept in this study, the term is adopted to describe an intellectual position that is characterised by openness, neutrality and racial inclusivity. This term is also applied to art practice and refers to the seamless use of both tactile and digital art mediums within a narrative.

Fluidity

[Autoethnography] Fluidity occurs during an autoethnographical account (text) by a 'performer' (artist, poet, actor, musician, orator, writer etc) when the self and others engage, question and challenge each other. The performer facilitates a historical moment during which the performance space and the audience construct meanings. The aim of the performance is to resist conclusions; it is open-ended and is committed to creating and keeping a dialogue ongoing. It is more like a hyphen, than a period (Crepes 2023).

Fluidity

[Fluid identities in postcolonial discourse] Theoretically related to culture, power, and the construction of differences. The condition of difference associated with ethnicity is crucial as it dictates cultural identity and the management of multiplicities within a state (Islam 2022:2). An argument is made for a fluid identity, one that is not predetermined and is not

constituted based on homogeneity. Identity or “identification”, but continues to form and reform when it gets access to other cultures and is therefore fluid in nature, and never a finite product (Bhabha 1994:73). Cultural identity is therefore a process of “becoming” as well as “being”, moving fluidly between past and present, in a perpetual interplay between history, culture and power (Hall 1996:225).

Gestalt principles

Identified laws of human perception that describe how humans’ group similar elements, recognise patterns and simplify complex images when we perceive objects (Interaction Design Foundation 2025).

Group areas act (GAA)

A legal framework implemented by the Afrikaner National Party in 1950 to establish districts as 'group areas', thereby separating people on the basis of race. The act imposed control over interracial property transactions and property occupation throughout South Africa. It resulted ultimately in the forced removals of ‘Indians’ and is argued to be the most damaging tool to racial cohesion and identity formation across all races (Pillay 2019:82-83).

Heterotemporal history

Okwui Enwezor, applies Chakrabarty’s use of the term as the experiences of those who fall outside modernist recorded history (Chakrabarty cited in Enwezor 2009:27-28). Heterotemporal refers to the individual’s personal experience of history within various locales, as micro-iterations of varying modernities. Enwezor validates the diverse modes of social identities and discourse peripheral to Western epistemological constructs.

Houseboy

A term for a male domestic servant, usually of African or Indian origin, used in British society (*Collins Dictionary* 2025. Sv “houseboy”). Within South African society, the term referred to a Black man or boy who works in service of a white household. This term is considered racist and derogatory within post and decolonial discourse.

Humanism

[Eurocentric] The idea that humans are clearly distinguished from other animals and from the natural world in general is a cornerstone of European philosophy and culture from at least the sixteenth century onward. Often, this idea is related to understandings of ‘humanism’ that emerged in that period and legitimised regimes of power and control over non-European cultures (Von Stuckrad 2023:710)

Human in the Loop

[Computer science] A model where human judgment is integrated into automated systems, in the context of AI, robotics, machine learning and decision-making systems. An example would be a doctor reviewing AI-generated diagnoses before final approval.

Hybrid identity

Sociology is interested in how identities are constructed and maintained, especially how gender, race, ethnicity and class impact on self-identity and our social opportunities. Who we are, how we perceive ourselves, and how others perceive us have increasingly led many social scientists to describe contemporary identities, as hybrid (Marotta 2011:189).

Indentured ‘Indians’

During the British colonisation of Natal during the 19th century, quotas of ‘Indian’ labour were brought to South Africa between 1860 and 1911. These immigrants were subject to a five-year agreement of labour on sugar plantations, after which they would return to India. This contract was in accordance with the Natal Act No.14 of 1859; however, many labourers were illiterate, so they merely put their mark on a pre-written statement. This system was stopped at various times by India due to the cruel and inhumane treatment of people (SAHO 2016).

Imaginarium

A place devoted to stimulating and cultivating the imagination (*Power thesaurus* 2025). Within the context of this study, the term is situated within postcolonial discourse. It is weighted with the more dystopic undertone of Western dominance and systemic control over the third world and the previously colonised. For example, the imaginings of imperialism become an oppressive reality in the lives of subaltern communities.

Imagineering

Disney have used this term aggressively as part of their advertising since 1962 (Salazar 2011:49); however its earliest origin has been attributed to a company called Alcoa Aluminium in 1942 (Smith 2022). Within this study, the term is adopted in the context of social science and postcolonial discourse, as a theoretical apparatus of activism in art and discourse.

Salazar (2020:773) & Lategang (2015:81) state that imagination is crucial to the mobility of cultures but also discuss the more ominous and destructive aspects of western imaginaries in Africa and Asia (Salazar 2011:65-66). Using the case studies of Tanzania and Indonesia, Salazar (2011:50-51) describes how the ‘Disney theme park model’ was adapted in the seventies to promote local cultural heritage and encourage tourism. He states that such imagineering resulted in a “flattening and faking” of indigenous culture and history.

[Appadurai] (1996:31) views the imagination as a form of global social practice that gives agency to the previously colonised and allows them to negotiate new cultural possibilities. Similarly, Erwin (2012:96) states that “imagineering” is part utopic thinking and part social engineering. It requires reflexive research on race by those who are mindful of the future consequences of historic categorisation.

[Post humanism & Art] Thinkers such as Haraway, Hayles, Rosi, Braidotti and Wolfe stress the role of art as source of inspiration and practice in ‘imagineering’ posthuman futures (Herbrecht 2012:16).

‘Indian’

The racial descriptor ‘Indian’ appears in single quotations within this thesis. This reserves its use as necessary within the local socio-political framework, yet open to dialectical deconstruction within the argument of identity. When the quotations are omitted it refers to people born and living in India (Indian nationals).

[Passenger ‘Indians’] Travelled on board British ships to Natal, but unlike indentured labourers, they were free migrants, that settled in Natal under the migrant laws of the colony at the time. They were of varied religious followings, including Roman Catholicism. They came from India and Mauritius and paid for their passage to South Africa. They were educated and worked as teachers, catechists, interpreters and traders (Brain 1983:7-8).

['Indian' coolie] In the 19th century, the term referred to indentured labourers from India who were recruited to work in European colonies after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833. These workers were often contracted to serve for five years (renewable) in plantations, railways, mines or domestic labour across various British, French, Dutch and Portuguese colonies (Vahed & Waetjen 2014:). The word 'coolie' is now considered derogatory and pejorative, but during the 19th century, it was a common term used by colonial authorities. It likely derives from the Tamil word *kūli*, meaning 'wages', or from Hindi *kūli*, referring to day labourers.

Indianness	Within this study, the term refers to a broad description of cultural, social and spiritual similarities perceived to exist within a specific race group (<i>Collins Dictionary</i> 2024. Sv "Indianness").
Information	Knowledge obtained from investigation, study, or instruction (<i>Merriam-Webster Dictionary</i> 2025).
Intermediality	A concept used to describe the complex and layered relationship and interaction between media as applied to art making (Miller 2015:25). [Shannon & Wiener] Conceptualized information as an entity distinct from the substrates carrying it. From this formulation information can be conceptualised as a kind of bodiless fluid that could flow between different substrates without loss of meaning or form (Hayles 1999: xi).
Intersectionality	Describes the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination such as racism, sexism, and classism combine, overlap, or intersect, specifically the experiences of marginalised individuals or groups (<i>Merriam-Webster dictionary</i> 2025).
Invisibilisation	Meaning to mark a political process of 'being made invisible' – not simply a condition of 'being invisible', but where one is actively rendered invisible by political processes of exclusion and silencing (Khan 2014:19).
Ism	As a stand-alone term 'ism' refers to a general philosophy or set of beliefs (<i>Cambridge Dictionary</i> 2024). As a suffix (for example, Surrealism) it affords the noun the status of a practised and established ideology or genre. Within art discourse, the term is critiqued as the remnants of modernist cultural categorisations (Jantjes cited in Goniwe <i>et al</i> 2011:21). Within the context of this study, when 'ism' is attached to a noun by a

hyphen (for example, Mondrian-ism), it suggests a deconstructive read within the discourse of dominant Western theory.

Light

[Science] Light is electromagnetic radiation, which is a core topic in physics. Light, or visible light, commonly refers to electromagnetic radiation that can be detected by the human eye. The entire electromagnetic spectrum is extremely broad, ranging from low energy radio waves with wavelengths that are measured in meters (Oxford Instruments 2025).

[Western Philosophy] The concept of light is embodied in the knowledge of man (humanism), which became known as the period of 'enlightenment'. Within the arts of Europe, humanism became the philosophical tenet of the Renaissance, with its emphasis on the study of Classical literature and architecture. Important to the Western ideological framework of light and enlightenment, was its foundation in the rational and empirical methods of discovering truth that were introduced by the scientific revolution (Britannica 2025. Sv "light").

[Eastern Philosophy] - *This study focuses on the interpretation of the 'speaker' Jiddu Krishnamurti, who didn't want to be perceived as a 'philosopher' in the Western designation of the term. Nor did he consider himself a 'guru' in the Eastern traditional of learned teachers.*

He approached light from the psychological perspective of a deep inherent knowledge that is understood within oneself. This knowledge, which is an intrinsic ontology of humanness, cannot be defined or explained by the narrow parameters of science, academia or religion. Krishnamurti refers to this state of 'knowing' as light. He elaborates that when this light is perceived it frees the individual from all authority and subjugation of mind, body and spirit (Krishnamurti 1968:54).

Kierkegaardian-inspired

Refers to the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, who became known as the father of existentialism (Lippitt & Evans 2023: [sp]). He propagated concepts of deep introspection toward finding meaning and fulfilment in a chaotic world. In Jamal's quotation in my preface, he applies Kierkegaard's angst about our identity being defined by "others and worldly distinctions" (Lippitt & Evans 2023: [sp]). Jamal questions his place and purpose within the racial rigours of the South African context (Jamal 2017:12).

Mapping

[Data visualisation] The concept of mapping is closely related to visualisation but separate. A system of representing all data using the same numerical code allows computers to map one representation into another: grayscale image into 3D surface, or a sound wave into an image (visualisers in music players such as iTunes). Visualisation can be regarded as a particular subset of mapping in which a data set is mapped into an image (Manovich 2002:2).

Metadata	Describes the origin story of data, the time and place it was created, its sender and receiver, the phone used, the network used, IP address or type of camera. “Metadata absolutely tells you everything about somebody’s life. If you have enough metadata, you don’t really need content” (Emerson <i>et al</i> 2018:172).
Metropolitan/ism	Related to a large city and its surrounding suburbs or region. Metropolitanism refers to the characteristics of busy city life, often implying sophistication or diversity (<i>Collins Dictionary</i> 2025. Sv “metropolitanism”). The expression ‘metropolis’ refers to the seat of culture and of world power, whilst metropolitan thinking symbolises the centre from which the coloniser would rule a colony; it is also used as the de facto site for urbanity (Alias & Wadhwa 2023:168).
Mother India	Engendering India as a nation state perpetuates a specific symbolism and cultural ideology. The ‘Mother’ nurtured imaginings of selfhood and freedom of Indian people (Nationals from India) who were viewed as subservient during colonialism. Traditionally, women in patriarchal societies are always expected to be the repositories and safe guardians of morality. The concept of ‘Mother India’ therefore, embodies national pride and inner spirituality, which lie at the core of national identity (Gupta 2021:128-130). The film <i>Mother India</i> is used as a device to couple political ideologies of unity and nationhood, with the promise of development and the reduction of poverty (Fernandes 2000:613).
Multifaceted identity	The intricate interplay of various factors, including cultural, social, psychological and personal elements that shape who we are as individuals. Identity is not considered a monolithic entity but rather a tapestry woven from different threads (Golden-Adah 2025).
Nation-building	Maharaj (Goniwe <i>et al</i> 2011: xi) states that one needs to tread carefully when placing visual art in the service of nation-building or any other propagandist motive. He references Duchamp’s proposal of art “in the service of the mind” to support his “open-ended drift of knowledge” theory. My argument concurs that history has shown that the concepts of nation-building and nationalism smack of hegemonic control (De Kock 1992:30) by those who hold the seat of power.
Netnography	Is a specific adaptation of ethnography designed to maintain ethnography’s cultural approach and apply it to the study of online social interactions and experiences. Netnography is most closely aligned with gestalt psychology, cyber-psychology and the anthropology of consciousness (Kozinets <i>et al</i> 2017:6).
New materialism	Is an umbrella term which covers a broad variety of theories in the field of philosophy, cultural studies and the arts, which emerged in the first decades of the 21st century. The most fundamental assumption of new materialism is the rejection of an opposition between life and matter (Holy-Luczaj 2018:176-177).

New media art	In contemporary art, it refers to a range of materials and technologies developed relatively recently and utilised in the creation, presentation and dissemination of art. These new media are drawn from a range of sources both within the arts and the wider field of communications, entertainment and information technologies (IMMA 2025).
Object-oriented ontology	[OOO] Graham Harman coined the term “object-oriented philosophy” in 1999 in his doctoral dissertation, which re-examined Heidegger’s concept of the tool. This school of thought builds its identity on an attempt to overcome correlationism according to which, humans are the only subjects who can access to the correlation between thinking and being. (Holy-Luczaj 2018:171).
Ontology	Refers to the philosophical study of being in general, or of what applies neutrally to everything that is real. It was called “first philosophy” by Aristotle in Book IV of his <i>Metaphysics</i> (Britannica 2025).
Other	This term within decolonial (Khan 2014:27-30) and decentralisation (Enwezor 2009:31) discourse refers to any group or individual that has been marginalised from mainstream society. Historically, the ‘other’ refers to those who bear cultural, behavioural and physical differences as compared to ruling groups who identify strongly with homogeneity or superiority (Biscombe <i>et al</i> 2017:2-4).
Paisley	[Western definition] Typically of soft wool and woven or printed with colourful curved abstract figures (<i>Merriam Webster Dictionary</i> 2025). [Indian origin] Known as a motif resembling a mango leaf, which is popular in Central Asia. A paisley is a droplet-shaped motif, also known as ‘mankolam’ in Sanskrit, ‘ambi’ in Punjabi, ‘kairi’ in Urdu and ‘kalga’ in native language. Their colourful and abstract figures signify the time of harvest in India, and are a symbolism of fertility. During Mughal rule the motif, known for its uniqueness, was embroidered on artefacts. They are exclusively seen on Kashmiri carpets and Pashmina shawls (Prajapati & Tiwari 2021:30). [Post-colonial discourse] The commercial traffic with India in the 19th century brought the paisley shawl into the homes of the English middle class. Textiles adorned with the paisley symbol had come to function as an exotic foreign artifact but also as a marker of proper Englishness (Daly 2002:237). The paisley motif was appropriated from Indian culture when Scotland began manufacturing their own version to compete with Indian originals, even naming a village Paisley after the stylised motif (Prajapati & Tiwari 2021:29).
Parse	[Excel spreadsheet] To analyse structured data to extract meaning, break it into components, or make it usable in another form; systematically examining cells or columns to identify patterns, extracting certain values,

classifying or interpreting data points, and converting the data into a new structure (*Cambridge Dictionary* 2025).

Perennial philosophy

Defined in Ananda Coomaraswamy's (2004) discourse on Indian art, it refers to inherent symbolism in religion, poetry and art. Each form and motif reflects deeper spiritual realities that were not just cultural constructs but manifestations of a universal metaphysical order.

Performance

[Autoethnography] Performative autoethnography allows a researcher to explore meaning through dramatic and performance texts. A *performance text* is 'everything that takes place on a stage' that a spectator experiences, from the movements and speech of the dancers and/or actors to the lighting, sets and other technical or multimedia effects. The *dramatic text* exists on the page; it is the play, script, music score, dance notation, etc. that exists whether the work is performed or not. Therefore, dramatic and performance texts exist in different interpretive contexts. They are imbued with and enhanced by unique and overlapping infinities of interpretation (Schechner cited in Creps 2023).

Physics

Is the science that studies matter and energy, and their interactions. It is a discipline that deals with the structure of matter and the interactions between the fundamental constituents of the observable universe (*Britannica* 2025. Sv "physics").

Pillay

Is an 'Indian' surname (also spelled Pillai) that has its origins in South India, particularly in the Tamil Nadu and Kerala regions. It is historically associated with the Tamil and Malayali communities and is prevalent among upper-caste groups within those areas. Translates as 'noble child', a title of nobility or honour in feudal and administrative roles, particularly among the Nair community in Kerala, and sometimes among the Vellalar community in Tamil Nadu (*Forebears* 2025).

Posthumanism

[General definition] Posthumanism is a mode of thinking about the intersection of human, nonhuman, and technological worlds. It has gained theoretical currency in the late 20th and 21st centuries, especially since the emergence of ecological consciousness and environmental campaigns that question the role of humans in shaping the fate of the earth (Nayar 2023).

[Origins in non-Western cultures] The interconnectedness of humans with other life forms and the planet has been a commonplace in Asian, African, and Aboriginal thought. This awareness has been embodied in Yoruba, the subcontinent's tribal myths, folklore, creation stories of the Native Americans, and literatures from these continents (Nayar 2023).

[Origins in Western cultures] The West draws on a Eurocentric tradition of humanism and its critique, some of which emerges from critical race theory and disciplines as diverse as animal studies and social studies of technology. Euro-American posthumanism calls for a re-evaluation of traditional humanistic myths, such as the human as the centre of the universe, or the dominance attitude

toward other life forms and non-living matter. A contribution of posthumanist thought has been to decentre the human and to demonstrate how all matter is interlinked, mutually dependent and co-evolved, whether this is the animal forms on earth or the impact humans have on technology and vice versa (Nayar 2023).

[Gender & sexuality] The social relations of families and communities have all been reconfigured in terms of binary genders and sexual norms. Posthumanism deconstructs the Nature/Culture binary as it has been enshrined in the Euro-American tradition (Nayar 2023).

[Art & technology] Posthumanist philosophy argues that technologies and humans co-evolve, just as humans and nonhumans do. It also examines the prospects of human enhancement, the expansion of artificial intelligence (AI), and the ethics of these developments as they affect humans. Popular culture, performance arts, and even architectural styles have been known to incorporate posthuman themes (Nayar 2023). Modern artworks expose the medial conditions, through which the artwork comes into being, from the virtual (e.g. informational, sensorial) to material (e.g. remotely or locally immersive), thereby stressing the existential condition of being situated and uttering something inside and in relation to a densely interacting world. In avant-garde art the very means of communication are pointed at through alienation. Avant-garde art performs rather than merely describes the posthuman (Wamberg & Thomsen 2016:158).

Projection map

This is a video projection technique in which video footage is mapped onto a shaped surface, such as the exterior of a building, interior walls and 3D objects. The projection wraps around the surface's shape and textures to create an immersive experience of light, movement and illusion. Mapping software is needed to customise the dimensions of the projection (Cumins 2023).

Radial map

Refers to any data representation that is circular. Typically, polar coordinates are used (centre and the angles of intersection to radius), instead of Cartesian coordinates (x and y coordinates) (Rodden 2023).

Representation

[Re-presentation] Spivak (2010:70) theorises that two forms of representation exist, the political and the act of "re-presentation" which governs art and philosophy. The latter term references the act of "speaking for the other". Spivak reveals the equivocalness inherent in the concept of 'representation'.

Salt

The Hindu ritual of "turning salt" is believed to offer protection from negative energy from others and the environment (Hindu Janajagruti Samiti 2025). Salt was also valued in European cultures and is said to be derived from the word, "salary". Many references are made to salt in the bible, and it was traded between cultures since medieval times. British monarchs enforced salt taxes, and in modern times Mahatma Gandhi defied these laws as a means of mobilising popular support for self-rule in India (Saltworks 2025).

Sanskrit	An ancient Indo-Aryan language that produced written documents called the Vedas. Found in the northern midlands of the Indian subcontinent, they are the earliest human texts, dated to 500 BCE (Brittanica 2025. Sv “Sanskrit).
Self-indexical sign	Whilst indexical signs show evidence of what they signify, for example, smoke as an index of fire, a self-indexical sign is a reflexive, meaning its act of signifying is inseparable from its own being or occurrence. A self-indexical sign does not refer to something outside itself but points to itself as part of its meaning. It is therefore, both the signifier and the evidence of what it signifies.
Shakti	Means ‘power’ in Hindu philosophy and theology. It is understood to be the divine power that underlies the godhead’s ability to create the world and to display itself. It is expressed as quiescence and stillness (Asia Society 2024).
Slippage	In linguistic and literary theory, slippage refers to the inherent instability and fluidity of meaning in language, where words and signs can shift in interpretation depending on context. In poststructuralist thought, Jacques Derrida argued that a signifier (a word or symbol) leads only to another signifier, never to a definitive signified (the concept it represents), resulting in an inherent indeterminacy of meaning (Oxford Dictionary 2025).
Small data	Refers to datasets that are small enough to be comprehended and analysed by humans without requiring complex computational tools or algorithms. Unlike big data, which emphasises vast quantities of data and automated processing, small data focuses on specific, actionable insights derived from more manageable datasets. Small data is often used in qualitative research such as sample groups, case studies and interviews. Within ethnographical analyses of small groups (minorities), this methodology emphasises context, detail, and relevance over sheer volume (Kitchin & Lauriault 2014:3)
Speculative realism	Is a contemporary philosophical movement that insists that reality exists independently of human thought and aims to explore that reality beyond the limits of human access or interpretation (Holy-Luczaj 2018:171; Srnicek et al 2011:8).
Substrate	[Art material] Substrate refers to a base or underlying layer upon which something else is built, grown or applied. As an art material, it is the base material upon which coatings, paints or other materials are applied. For example, in printmaking the paper acts as the substrate for the ink (Merriam Webster Dictionary 2025. Sv “substrate”).
Textual analysis	Is a commonly used qualitative method for analysing and interpreting cultural texts. This approach elicits how representations occur in popular culture (art, writing, film, photography etc) and their underlying

assumptions and how they come to have meaning. Textual interpretation may differ according to cultures, languages and regions (Jürgens *et al* 2024:1).

Thick Time

[Postcolonial discourse] refers to a non-linear, layered experience of temporality, in which multiple temporalities (past, present, future) coexist, overlap or entangle within a single moment or structure. It challenges the linear, chronological view of time, and instead embraces time as dense, folded, recursive, and affectively charged (Datta 2022:109).

[William Kentridge] He conceptualises 'Thick time' as the temporality of postcolonial fragmentation, using the mediums of the archive, machines, propaganda, time, inscription and palimpsestic re-inscription. Kentridge's 'thick time' connects the past, present and future to what he describes as a 'black hole', the space where everything disappears. His artwork presents 'Thick time' as a thickening of space with temporal crises accumulated over generations, reinforced through the technologies of timekeeping, time-management and their resultant time-burdens. He uses creative devices such as unwinding, slowing down and rewinding to mimic capturing and materialising postcolonial and subjective experiences of time. Kentridge refuses to conform to the colonising effects of time; he presents postcoloniality as a wish to unwind time, undo the damage done by colonial time, and present a longing to reverse time itself for marginal and indigenous communities (Datta 2022:108-109, Greslé 2017:262-263).

Thick Data

Thick data refers to qualitative insights drawn from ethnographic or interpretive research methods, such as participant observation, interviews, fieldnotes and storytelling which capture rich contextual meaning, motivations and stories. Unlike big data, which emphasises scale and quantification, thick data prioritises depth, nuance, and understanding of the "why" behind behaviours and social phenomena (Geertz cited in Latzco-Toth *et al* 2017:3-4; Bornakke & Due 2018:2).

Thin

[Academic argument] Using the term 'thin argument' typically conveys that the argument is lacking in depth, complexity, or substance. It is poorly supported by evidence and critical reasoning, and is possibly overly simplistic or superficial.

[Small data – qualitative analysis] This process of data thickening reduces the breadth of data (the number of data points) while enhancing their depth. This method provides a deeper and more complete understanding of interactions that can occur between different layers of the data under observation (Latzco-Toth 2017:3).

Transcorporeality

Means that all creatures, as embodied beings, are enmeshed with the dynamic, material world. It intersects them, transforms them, and is in turn transformed. Transcorporeality as an ontology includes all living creatures

and begins with the human, with the aim of disrupting Western human exceptionalism (Alaimo Sa.).

Triangulation

Within the context of qualitative research, the term refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena. Triangulation has been viewed as a research strategy to test validity through the convergence of information from different sources (Carter *et al* 2014).

Truth-value

Within the context of Lyotard's (1984:25-27) discourse of the postmodern condition, he refers to the 'grand narratives' that underpin Western epistemologies such as scientific truth. This uncontested, self-validating knowledge is perceived to carry a higher value of credibility compared to other non-Eurocentric systems of thought.

Wave map

In the scope of data visualisation, a wave map represents data nodes in a pattern that resembles a wave/s (Li 2020).

White cube

[White cube vs. black cube] – Pioneered by new media art, this discourse surrounds the old order of the traditional museum/gallery space referred to as the "white cube"²¹¹ (Nemerov cites O'Doherty 2007: 6-9). Its emergence problematised the notion of curatorship within a postmodern context. It emphasises the closedness of the gallery space (white cube) due to its residual modernist ideals that have inadvertently separated life from art as well as high culture from low. Nemerov advocated that technology has allowed accessibility to art via social platforms and the connectedness they provide. He states that technology "collapses such boundaries, allowing aspects of the everyday to fluidly enter the museum's enclosure" (Nemerov 2007:18). This concept of art fluidity and accessibility is referred to as the "black cube".

²¹¹ A series of essays written by Brian O' Doherty in 1976 for Artforum became a book called *Inside the white cube: The ideology of the gallery space*.

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