A protest and a mourning ritual

Quishile Charan and Bad Fiji Gyals at the 13th Gwangju Biennale

by Michelangelo Corsaro

Published on 11.05.2021



The 13th Gwangju Biennale (1 April–9 May, 2021) challenges the structural divisions imposed upon corporeal, technological, and spiritual intelligence, and argues for the primacy of plurality, positing that points of origin and influence ought to be accessed not only through the dominant technological systems and machinic vocabularies traceable to the West but also relate to heterodox ancestries.

Directed by Defne Ayas and Natasha Ginwala, Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning *includes work by New Zealand artists Shannon Te Ao, Vivian Lynn, and Quishile Charan & Esha Pillay (aka Bad Fiji Gyals). Bad Fiji Gyals call attention to the legacy of Girmitiya women, indentured labourers from the Indian subcontinent recruited by British colonial authorities to work on Fiji's sugarcane plantations. Their collaborative work originates in archival testimonies and oral accounts sourced within their own community to initiate processes of resistance and remembrance.*

Associate Curator of the 13th Gwangju Biennale, Michelangelo Corsaro, writes on the work of Bad Fiji Gyals in Korea.

> "I once asked my Fua about the ghosts of indenture, did they still exist? She looked to the setting sun and replied:

> ‘We must only talk of these things at the house and not at nightfall. But beta, they are everywhere.’”[01]

History sometimes hides in the folds of maternal ancestries, in mitochondrial DNA strands transmitted along matrilineal genealogies, and in the communal wisdom of crafting hands. “As a fifth-generation Indo-Fijian woman, I don’t carry one set of trauma;” writes Quishile Charan, “rather, my body is a converging point, a collapsing of time.”[2] It is starting from the histories inscribed in her own body that Charan begins to unearth the roots of the epistemic injustice casted upon the community of women to which she belongs.

The body is the site where historical trauma becomes manifest, but it is also a repository of communal intelligence, where traditional crafts are recorded in the memory of the muscles, and a place for healing a sense of loss that goes beyond living memory. Archived in the collective knowledge of textile making, in the passing down of botanical expertise, in the rituals of healing and protection, are histories of oppression and protest of generations of Indo-Fijian women who lived and struggled through indenture. Although indenture officially began in 1879 and ended in 1920, with a community of 13,696 women out of 68,480 Indians brought to Fiji to work in sugar plantations, its 140-year legacy is felt to these days among those who belong to these communities.[03]

While these histories have been omitted from public memory, they surface again in the continued remembrance and in the labor of healing carried on by their descendants. The visual and theoretical research that Charan and Esha Pillay produce under the name of Bad Fiji Gyals instigates an inquiry into stories and cultural knowledge systems of their own communities, honoring the memory of Girmitiya women and materialising their historical and spiritual agency through intergenerational practices of subversion and resilience. As part of *Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning*, artworks by Charan and historical research by Bad Fiji Gyals were for the first time presented in Korea, highlighting forms of collective and ancestral intelligence that question official histories and expose how forms of colonial, casteist, and patriarchal oppression work to obliterate communal and political agency from public memory.

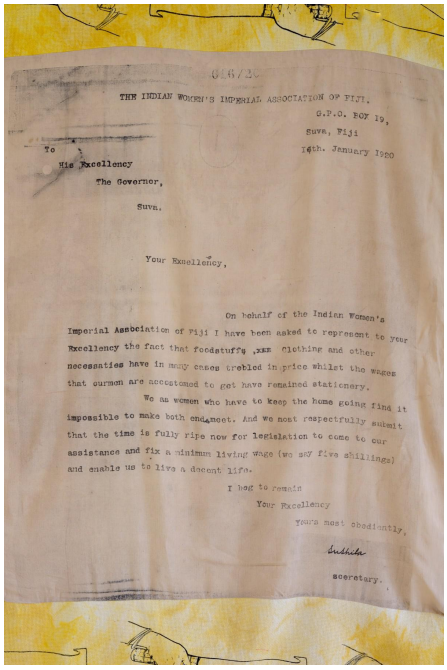
In Gwangju, a series of existing textile banners by Charan materialise the physical and corporeal memory of Charan's family's legacy of craft, and the wider ancestral craft practices found across the Indo-Fijian community. The works are accompanied by a special episode of Bad Fiji Gyals' podcast series *Fiji Baat: Oral Histories & Interviews* (2020–ongoing), which presents research and oral histories collected by the duo that are enriched by encounters with activists and theorists like Rohini Balram, Romitesh Kant, Roshika Deo, Zakiyyah Ali and Salvin Kumar. Adding to the archive and network created and nurtured by Bad Fiji Gyals, an essay by the duo is published in *Stronger Than Bone*, a reader on forms of feminist thinking based on cross-generational collective wisdoms published as part of the 13th Gwangju Biennale.



Quishile Charan, *The Female Horror: Fiji Times Article 1920*, 2019, *We Do Not Have Enough to Satisfy Our Bellies*, SEVENTH Gallery, Melbourne, 2019. Images courtesy of gallery. Archival document, cotton, textile ink, natural dye: haldi (turmeric) and marigold flower, 93cm x 143cm.



Quishile Charan, *We Do Not Have Enough to Satisfy Our Bellies*, SEVENTH Gallery. Melbourne, Australia, 2019. Image courtesy of gallery. Installation: cotton, textile ink, natural dye: haldi (turmeric).



THE INDIAN WOMEN'S IMPERIAL ASSOCIATION OF FIJI.
G.P.O. BOX 19,
Suva, Fiji
16th. January 1920

To
His Excellency
The Governor,
Suva.

Your Excellency,

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

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

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

Quishile Charan, *Sushila's Letter*, 2019, *We Do Not Have Enough to Satisfy Our Bellies*, SEVENTH Gallery, Melbourne, 2019. Images courtesy of gallery. Archival document, cotton, textile ink, natural dye: haldi (turmeric) and kumkum seeds, 136cm x 130cm.



Quishile Charan, *The Female Horror: Fiji Times Article 1920*, 2019, archival document, cotton, textile ink, natural dye: haldi (turmeric) and marigold flower; *Sushila's Letter*, 2019, archival document, cotton, textile ink, natural dye: haldi (turmeric) and kumkum seeds; Quishile Charan, *Oral History: Glass Bangles Broken in Protest at Police Barrier, Nausori 1920*, 2019, embroidery thread, handmade Mohar coins, cotton. Installation shot, 13th Gwangju Biennal. Photo: Sang tae Kim.

Gwangju is a city where for four decades the legacy of protest and pro-democracy movements has existed through diverse narratives commemorating the uprisings that, in 1980, initiated the democratisation of South Korea; from institutional and state-sanctioned remembrances, to the network of grassroot organizations that are still active in the city, as well as the artistic

legacy of the *Minjung* cultural movement. With the 13th Gwangju Biennale *Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning* opening in the aftermath of the 40th anniversary of the uprisings, that legacy of civil protest offered an opportunity to uphold emergent struggles and challenge existing hierarchies of remembrance throughout the exhibition and its programming.

Today planetary networks of solidarity and resistance must contend with a spectrum of regimes, from algorithmic and militarist violence, to casteist, ethnonationalist, and patriarchal oppression, and neo-colonial and capitalist extractivism. Rising currents of civil unrest and practices of resistance manifest as forms of decentralized intelligence stemming from ancestral knowledge, indigenous cosmologies, and techno-spiritual forms of cooperation with more-than-human worlds. In the context of the exhibition the work of Bad Fiji Gyals resonates with other intergenerational feminist alliances within the Biennale and the poetics of heroism that subvert gender norms: from Cecilia Vicuña's tribute to Viet Cong guerrilla women fighters and her commemoration of the Mỹ Lai massacre on display in the spaces of the Gwangju Biennale Hall,[04] to shamanic goddesses and female spirits that in Korea are the agents of much of the communal healing and mourning labor vis-à-vis the political violence that characterised the country's recent history. Artifacts from historical collections like The Museum of Shamanism and the Gahoe Minhwa Museum emphasise shamanism's role as a tradition of healing and memory practices, which within communities of women cultivated a much needed labour of mourning vis-à-vis State militarism and gender disparity.

"We do not have enough to satisfy our bellies"—these words spoken in protest by Girmitiyas to colonial officers reverberate in the process of uncovering and reclaiming Charan and Pillay's ancestral histories: "we as female descendents standing here today find ourselves unsatisfied; we are not satisfied with the narratives that have prevailed of us."[05] Appearing on a five-metre long textile in the form of a protest banner, *We do not have enough to satisfy our bellies* is stitched in large red appliqué letters, surrounded by block-print images of machete knives, a layered image symbolic of the labor in the sugarcane fields and of the regime of violence that underpinned the indenture system. It is also the title of a research

project that Bad Fiji Gyals presented for the first time at SEVENTH Gallery, Melbourne, in 2019. In Gwangju, the banner is part of a series of textile works appearing in the Gwangju Biennale Hall, one of four venues within the biennale. The work leads to a section of the exhibition dedicated to exploring rural and beyond-human forms of kinship. Some of the trajectories explored here look at the retrieval of Sámi matrilineal practices with Outi Pieski's work, or at Tuguldur Yondonjamts' visual encryptions of ancient Mongolian cosmologies. Works include sonic archives of songs sung by women in Maharashtra's rural communities and preserved by the People's Archive of Rural India, Yin-Ju Chen's journey through shamanic ontologies, and techno-spiritual kinetic works inspired by mesoamerican traditions realised by Fernando Palma Rodriguez.



Quishile Charan, *We Do Not Have Enough to Satisfy Our Bellies*, 2019, cotton, textile ink, natural dye (aal bark and kumkum seeds), 493 x 117 cm. Installation shot, 13th Gwangju Biennale, Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning. Photo: Sang tae Kim.



Quishile Charan, *We Do Not Have Enough to Satisfy Our Bellies Protest Banner* (detail), 2019. SEVENTH Gallery, Melbourne 2019, Image courtesy of gallery. Cotton, textile ink, natural dye: Aal bark and kumkum seeds, 493cm x 117cm.



Archival image courtesy of the Fiji Museum. Photographer and date unknown.



Archival image courtesy of the Fiji Museum. Photographer and date unknown. Gathered group of Girmitiyas children.

The suite of works presented in this space are a series of textile banners commemorating the labour strike of 1920, an episode that saw thousands of Indo-Fijian workers protesting for living wages and affordable living costs. Two archival documents are

incorporated in the textiles, realised using various traditional techniques. One is the letter of Sushila, one of the protesting women writing in representation of the Indian Women's Imperial Association of Fiji, to lament a sharp increase in living costs and the desperate need for a raise in the workers' salaries. The value of this testimony, reclaimed in the research of Bad Fiji Gyals, is to establish the agency of female Girmitiyas in the protest, rarely acknowledged in academic research.[06]

A second document reproduces an article published in the Fiji Times in response to a riot that ensued from the attempted arrest of a woman who challenged the order of a constable.[07] The article, titled *The Indian Question: The Female Horror*, condenses the misogynist stereotypes of immorality and corruption that stigmatised the existence of Girmitiya women. It called for severe measures to stop the "Indian women suborners […] ghouls, who ought to be gaoled [jailed] at once" and described them as "too awful to be at large."[08] The article attests to the regime of verbal and physical violence used on Girmitiya women while it also substantiates—albeit unintentionally—Bad Fiji Gyals' revindication of women's roles in the strike: "If it were not for these fiends who have lost all sense of sex", the article reads, "there would be hundreds of men at work."[09]



Quishile Charan, *Oral History: Glass Bangles Broken in Protest at Police Barrier, Nausori 1920*, 2019, embroidery thread, handmade Mohar coins, cotton, 110 x 100 cm.



Quishile Charan, *Oral History: Glass Bangles Broken in Protest at Police Barrier, Nausori 1920* (detail), 2019, embroidery thread, handmade Mohar coins, cotton, 110 x 100 cm.



Quishile Charan, *Oral History: Glass Bangles Broken in Protest at Police Barrier, Nausori 1920* (detail), 2019, embroidery thread, handmade Mohar coins, cotton, 110 x 100 cm.

The fourth banner in this series of works highlights the women's active roles in leading the protest. It is inspired by the actions of a group of women who, faced by a police cordon blocking their march, raised their hands above their heads and smashed their glass bangles in protest. Traditionally bangles are worn by married women as a symbol of conjugal responsibilities and often breaking them in public is an emancipatory gesture, expressing rage and transgressing patriarchal norms of passive and docile femininity. This episode is not documented through archival records but through the oral testimony of an Indo-Fijian man who heard first hand from his mother. That this report is acquired through oral sources has a particular relevance here, which is worth mentioning, since it is in oral histories that women's narratives of indenture have survived, while archives are the very institutions that ignored and ultimately erased these histories. Acquiring the report of this protest from oral sources and mobilising it through a visual regime of remembrance is also a means to reclaim existing counternarratives and disrupt the colonial histories that relegated women's agency outside of archives and regarded them as irrelevant. Embroidered on a commemorative textile work, the six pairs of hands crossing in a gesture of dissent return to the

communities of Girmitiya women a memory denied by official history for a century.

Restoring narratives of heroism into the collective memory of those historical events is a pivotal strategy to undo what Charan and Pillay effectively describe as "history's spell on bad women."[10] In the episode of their podcast series *Fiji Baat*[11] commissioned by the 13th Gwangju Biennale the duo elaborates further on the use of the Fiji Hindi word *kharaab*: meaning bad, ruined, or spoiled, used to denote the "bad woman". That Girmitiyas women are a source of immorality and abjection is an idea that for over a century stigmatised the Indo-Fijian community's ancestral roots, and that in pervasive ways persists until today—as do many of the consequences of indenture. It is a notion that, starting from their name, Bad Fiji Gyals decided to contest on all fronts, reclaiming the label of the *bad* woman as a symbol of heroism and resistance to honour and celebrate.



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



Archival image courtesy of the Fiji Museum. Photographer and date unknown. Girmitiya women.

The subversion that transforms stigma into heroism begins with a protest and a mourning ritual performed in monumental terms. *to grieve among the sugarcane fields* (2018) is a banner of more than

eleven metres, where Charan's inherited textile-making skills find an application in the labor of healing and in ritual *pyaar*.[12] It is a work that incorporates materials with symbolic and historical value: kawakawa leaves, associated with mourning in Māori culture, and haldi, also known as turmeric, which is considered to have antibiotic properties. On the vibrating yellow tint infused through the banner's repeated dye baths, Charan printed unique photographic records of Girmitiya women that she sourced through the archives of the Fiji Museum. Running all around the perimeter of the fabric, a line of machete knives and sailing ships stands to signify the regime of exploitation and displacement endured by indentured laborers.

Although the women portrayed in the photos remain unnamed, in Charan's work their images undergo a profound transformation, restoring them to communal memory. Firstly they are released from colonial archives, which preserved these images as documents of an otherness to be controlled and exploited, and which allowed their names to be forgotten. Secondly, they are introduced to a new aesthetic regime in which these women are celebrated as founders and mothers of a community that honours them with love and gratitude. The work of mourning condensed in the process of naming ancestral ties and retelling their histories is a tribute paid to these women. As their spirits make their appearance in Gwangju—even for the short time afforded by the exhibition— a network of solidarity is made visible in a ritual of exchange between the living and the dead.



Quishile Charan, *to grieve among the sugarcane fields*, 2018, The Lock-Up, New Castle, 2018. Image courtesy of The Lock-Up. Archival images, textile ink, cotton, natural dye with haldi (turmeric) and kawakawa leaves, 1140 x 130cm.



Exhibition view 13th Gwangju Biennale, *Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning*. Works by Gerard Fortuné, Quishile Charan, Pacita Abad, Sonia Gomes, Seyni Camara. Photo: Sang tae Kim.

Anthropologist Seongnae Kim, who dedicated her life to studying the relations between shamanism and Korea's recent history, brilliantly observed how histories of political violence that are erased from public memory survive in spirit memorials, where the messages of ghosts and departed souls come to be true repositories of historical counternarratives. "When the language that expresses pain is monopolized by state power and patriarchal men, the solidarity of pain may be sought in laments and dream-images, the forms of expression prior to language, and in spirits possession, the supernatural and religious forms of expression in the imaginary realm."[13] Like voices without a language, the disturbances that spirits create in the world of the living signal powerful currents of resistance that swell below regimes of silence. Whereas these forces exist within the body and travel through its fibers, or lurk at the margins of archives, they always dwell in places where history is incomplete.

Throughout Bad Fiji Gyals' collective production of textile work, written essays, and podcast series, the collective labor of remembrance takes shape as a form of resistance as much as a practice for healing. "Exhuming my female ancestors from State archives started from an urgency to find and retrieve life: to build from the remnants that my female ancestors left on history and allow the spiritual entity of resilience to breathe beyond the page."[14] Within the metaphorical gesture evoked in these works, of exhuming an image and returning it to the honors of an imagined burial ground, lies a sentiment that connects histories of oppression and civil dissent on a planetary scale. It realises an act of remembrance and mourning, key to a dialectics of resistance that mediates between the restlessness of the ghosts and the unrest of the living. It is, in other words, the way to break a cycle of trauma, forging an aesthetic of resistance and healing that resonates with the living organs of a communal mind.

Footnotes

01. Quishile Charan, "She Cut Me from Ganna" (Auckland University of Technology, 2019), p. 27.

02. Charan, p. 29.

03. Charan, p. 17.

04. Cecilia Vicuña, *Homage to Vietnam: Partial Recreation of the Exhibition of Cecilia Vicuña at the Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño in Bogotá in 1977* (2020). The work is composed of a series of eight banners reproducing a series of paintings and one video celebrating the memory of women resistance fighters of Vietnam.

05. Esha Pillay and Quishile Charan, "Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women: Counter-Colonial Narratives of the Female Girmit Role in the 1920 Labour Strike" (Melbourne, 2019), p. 43.

06. "To the best of Esha and my own knowledge, only two academic writers who have acknowledged that women led the strike are Shaista Shameem and Margaret Mishra.' Pillay and Charan, p. 21.

07. As the event is described by Pillay and Charan, "Rahiman—'a woman with a bad reputation'—approached Constable Reay, who was patrolling in the area, and asked what was in his pocket or sleeve. Reay told Rahiman that he had a baton. Rahiman started to swear in English at the Constable. When Rahiman was told to move she replied, 'I'll stay where I like.' Constable Reay tried to manhandle Rahiman to arrest her. The two fought but Reay was losing, and to a coolie woman at that. Other Girmitiyas women joined Rahiman, armed with sticks, and started to beat the Constable and his other officers." Pillay and Charan, p. 35.

08. From "The Indian Question: The Female Horror." *Fiji Times and Herald*, February 11, 1920. Pillay and Charan, p. 36.

09. Pillay and Charan, p. 36.

10. Pillay and Charan, p. 6. See also their reference to the article: Mishra, Margaret (2016). 'Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman': Revisiting Female Deviance in Colonial Fiji. Journal of International Women's Studies, 17(4), 67-78. Available at: www.vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol17/iss4/5

11. The special episode of *Fiji Baat*, commissioned by the 13th Gwangju Biennale can be found on www.13thgwangjubiennale.org/live-organ/the-bad-fiji-gyals/.

12. Love.

13. Seongnae Kim, "Women, Mourning, and the Ritual for the Death of Family," in *Stronger Than Bone*, edited by Defne Ayas, Natasha Ginwala, and Jill Winder (Berlin: Archive Books, 2020), p. 245. It is worth noting in passing how Kim's words appear in an essay published right alongside the writings of the Bad Fiji Gyals in Stronger Than Bone, a reader on forms of feminist thinking based on cross-generational collective wisdoms published as part of the 13th Gwangju Biennale.

14. Charan, "She Cut Me from Ganna," p. 37.



Quishile Charan: She/her — I am an Indo-Fijian textile maker and writer living in Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa. Craft, gifted to me through being my Aaji's namesake, encompasses language, identity, story-telling and acts as a place of healing. I create textiles that nurture craft as a form of generational exchange and love. Stitching and threading together memories and stories, I uphold the values of textile making and craft as a cultural knowledge system and a way to actively challenge colonial violence. I work to affirm the significance and importance of craft through the relationships with the women in my family. Another aspect of my work is the centering of Indo-Fijian women's narratives of resistance and oral stories that are excluded historically, in the archives and in academia. By bringing craft and textile work together with my research on the silencing of Indo-Fijian women's narratives, I seek to challenge hierarchies of silencing women's labour and their histories. I am of Girmit and pākehā descent.

Esha Pillay: She/her — I am a writer whose stories connect with the women who came before me: my grandmothers and great-grandmothers, all the ammas. I'm Fijian-born with roots in Lautoka and Labasa and currently live in the United States. My research focuses on intergenerational traumas among Indo-Fijian communities and the connection between the colonial violence of indentured histories that manifest in present-day traumas. The function of caste violence throughout Girmit, its impact on descendants and the lived experiences of my family is another key area of my research. Being Madraji, I also highlight the experiences of indentured labour communities who came from South India. I hold a Masters in Migration and Diaspora Studies from SOAS, University of London and work in education and web design.



Michelangelo Corsaro is a curator and writer currently based in Berlin and Associate Curator of the 13th Gwangju Biennale. He graduated in Art History from the Roma 3 University, Rome, and in Visual Arts from IUAV University, Venice. He has been curator at Kunsthalle Athena (2013–15) and part of the editorial team of South as a State of Mind until 2015. In 2013 and 2014 he was twice fellow curator at the Schwarz Foundation, collaborating on Slavs and Tatars and Nevin Aladağ's exhibitions at the Art Space Pythagorion, Samos. In 2016 he curated Socratis Socratous solo exhibition at Point Centre for Contemporary Art, Nicosia, and the group show *Handsome, Young, and Unemployed*, at Komplot, Brussels. He assisted in the curatorial team of documenta 14, in Athens and Kassel. In 2018 he organized Leidy Churchman's solo exhibition at Rodeo, Piraeus. His texts have been published in Critical Collective, ArtReview, South as a State of Mind, CAC Interviu.

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