

Escaping the Enumerators: An Intimate History of Indentureship Beyond Fact and Fiction

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All these lives, which were destined to pass beneath any discourse and disappear without ever having been told were able to leave behind traces – brief, incisive, and often enigmatic – only at the point of their instantaneous contact with power. So that it is doubtless impossible ever to grasp them ... "in a free state"; they can no longer be separated out from the declamations, the tactical biases, the obligatory lies that power games and the relations with power presuppose.

–Michel Foucault, 'The Lives of Infamous Men' (161)

Introduction

Between 1838 and 1917, nearly half a million people left India to work on Caribbean plantations under the indentureship system. Initially intended as a replacement for enslaved workforces after emancipation, labourers signed contracts which bound them to the plantation for five years, restrained by laws which severely curtailed their mobility. *Girmityas*¹ emigrated under an array of circumstances. Some were kidnapped, misled, or otherwise deceived by recruiters, but others were attracted to the system for a variety of personal and socio-economic reasons. The journey across the *kala pani* (black waters) to the Caribbean was a vast undertaking. Crowded below deck, individuals crossed social, religious, and geographical boundaries, reforging communal ties and identities around newfound collectivities (Mohapatra 173-4). Despite this, the experience of indentureship was uneven: some were enriched, rising to the rank of *sirdar* (overseer), while others were left destitute, broken by a system in which wage calculations were fixed against the worker.

In light of this multiplicity, what can we know about those who boarded ships for the Caribbean? Maybe they dreamed of another life. Their minds must have whirred with the new sensations on board as they plunged into the unknown. For some, the unfamiliarity was augmented by fragments of knowledge. Words to wrap dreams around, like *Chinidad* (Trinidad), *Damra* (Demerara), and *Tapu* (island) (IOR/P/2058 52-6). Or wild stories to hang fears on, such

¹ The word *girmitya* was a late-nineteenth-century self-appellation employed by Indian labourers sent to work on overseas plantations under indenture contracts. It is now used to refer to Indian indentured labourers across the sugar colonies during the indentureship era.

as the rumours of ‘mimiai ka tel’, a supposed oily substance extracted from the heads of emigrants when they reached the plantation (Kumar 58-9). For the many escaping dire circumstances, perhaps the ordeal of the journey was endured by holding dear to the brighter future promised by the recruiter (Figure 1). For others, the burden of that future was too heavy; depot records are dense with notices of desertions, of individuals ‘unwilling to emigrate’, or ‘claimed by relatives’ (IOR/L/PJ/6 no.250). Nonetheless, crouched in the ‘tween decks, as Muslim and Hindu, Brahmin and Dalit rubbed shoulders, shared meals, and faced the same wretched conditions, the sense of rupture must have been unavoidable. Despite the promise of return passage in the contract, 71 percent of indentured emigrants chose to remain in their new homes (Look Lai, ‘Asian Contract Labour’ 252). How did *girmityas* come to terms with this? What made the individual men and women who trickled into the depot in separate groups begin to see themselves as *jahajji-bhais/bahins* (ship brothers/sisters)? When, to paraphrase Saidiya Hartman, was it clear that the old life was over, a new one had begun, and there was no looking back? (*Lose Your Mother* [-])

The answer, from the archives, is that we don’t know. For the colonial administrators who collected the reports, statistical accounts, and legal records that constitute the archival sources for indentureship, the intimate lives of the indentured were unthinkable. As Ann Laura Stoler recognises, colonial records were sites of power, classifying knowledge and reconstructing events so as to render them ‘legible, insignificant, or unintelligible as information’ (29). The voices that emanate from the Colonial Office papers, India Office Records, and Parliamentary Select Committee reports are those of the various men who held power over the indentured. When individual emigrants do appear in these accounts, it is largely as endangered subjects in moments of crisis. The intimate details are those of the wretched: broken bodies that fill surgeons’ reports, frantic petitions to the authorities, and the disorientation of the utterly lost. Their names change in the hands of each translator, serially mistranscribed as though personal identities do not matter. When they speak, it is to answer questions from invisible officials, questions that blame, order, and classify. They do not satisfy the questioner; instead they lie, telling stories that conceal what cannot be revealed, before melting back into the silent spaces beyond the visible record, into a sea of statistical personhood in which the indentured appear as no more than abstract units of labour power.

The early historiography of indentureship did little to challenge these absences. Sustained scholarship on the system emerged in the 1970s with the work of Hugh Tinker, who used colonial records alongside contemporary debates to argue that indentureship constituted a ‘new system of slavery’ (xiv-xv). Tinker’s thesis provoked a number of counterarguments in

The Bearer of this

(.....
..... **Badge No.**
.....)

is employed by the undersigned to recruit Agricultural Emigrants for the Government of Trinidad in the West Indies, in which Colony they will be treated with kindness and always enjoy Government protection.

Emigrants will be provided with a free passage from Calcutta to Trinidad for themselves and their families, with proper food, clothing, and Medical attendance during the voyage.

On their arrival in Trinidad they will be located on such Estates only, the proprietors of which have produced medical Certificates that proper and healthy lodgings are ready for their reception.

The Island is exceedingly fertile, and the rates of wages for work, which is principally . . . by piece work, vary from ten Annas to one Rupee, and an industrious laborer can easily earn double the latter sum in a day.

In no case is the daily pay less than ten annas; during the crop (the season for manufacturing the Cane juice into Sugar) the ordinary wages for all employed are thirteen and a half annas, those laborers employed in keeping up the fire for boiling the juice of the Cane, superintendents of work, and trenchers, are paid at a higher rate, as those varieties of work require greater attention.

Whilst ill the Emigrants are provided with Medical attendance, medicine, and nourishment gratis.

They are provided at all times with houses rent free, and in most instances with as much garden ground as they can cultivate at their leisure hours for their own benefit. The climate and soil are favorable to the production of every description of grain and vegetables grown in this country.

Emigrants can always communicate with their relatives and friends in India through the medium of the Protector of Emigrants in Trinidad and the Agent here. Great care is taken by the Protector of Emigrants in Trinidad in locating the Emigrants on their arrival, not only not to separate blood relations, but to respect as well the more distant ties of kindred and of even local acquaintances.

Whole families, men, women, and children, can go together.

Any further details will be communicated to the Emigrants on their arrival here. The undersigned will be thankful for any assistance rendered by the Authorities in the Mofussil, or their subordinates to the bearer, who is particularly cautioned against misrepresenting his position or deceiving intending Emigrants in any way.

Trinidad Emigration Agency Office,
Trinidad Emigration Agent.
Calcutta, 186-

Figure 1: Notice issued by the Trinidad Emigration Agent (Carter 41)

the following decade, catalysed by Pietr Emmer's assertion that the system was less a continuation of slavery than a 'great escape' from 'an illiberal, inhibiting and very hierarchical social system in India' (248). In the succeeding years, the historiographical field fractured into a series of quasi-legal, moral, and economic debates, setting out to categorise the system as fundamentally exploitative or essentially emancipatory (see Hoefte; Northrup; Galenson). These accounts interpreted the lives of the indentured through binary classifications that reflected archival sources in which the indentured appear either as 'simple agriculturalist[s]' deceived into leaving their village, or subjects of 'misery, poverty and prostitution' for whom 'emigration [was] a blessing' (Bengal Emigration Proceedings 15/76; CO 571/3, no.54685). Working with the logic of these archives, the unrecorded intimate lives and relationships of the

indentured were either subject to easy generalizations or treated as irrelevant to the terms of the enquiry.

These assumptions began to be challenged from the late 1980s by a number of academics at universities in former indentureship destinations. Where earlier historians had used colonial archives to ask similar questions as their contemporary authors – about the legal status of the indentured, the material opportunities the system provided, and its regulation – scholars including Marina Carter, Verene Shepherd, and Patricia Mohammed turned towards ‘the experience of indenture outside the official mind’ (Carter 233). Reading across statistical records, legal inquiries, and subaltern testimonies lodged in official reports, they uncovered the networks which informed potential emigrants about the system, the long histories of labour migration in recruitment areas, and the complex factors behind each decision to emigrate. In the process, they transformed the field, bringing it to focus on the contours of indentured life, complicating the binaries of earlier studies and illuminating the capacity of the indentured to shape their own lives (Bates and Carter; Bates; Kumar).

At the same time, this work remains limited in its capacity to trace intimate lives. Since the 1990s, the recovery of the ‘voice’ and ‘agency’ of the indentured has dominated histories of indenture. But voice and agency are fraught subjects within this history. The voices we hear in the archives are circumstantial, arising from moments of crisis and shaped to particular scripts. They can help reconstruct the negotiations between indentured individuals and the colonial structures which framed their choices, but they cannot tell us of the lives lived outside of those structures, of the efforts to carve out quotidian spaces sheltered from indenture, or of the meanings produced by *girmityas* about their new homes.

In navigating the ‘imposed nonhistory’ of the Caribbean past, the Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant asserts the centrality of literary modes of remembering in re-orienting the ‘thrust of historical thought’ (*Caribbean Discourse* 65). Where earlier Indo-Caribbean literature had approached the indentured past with a sense of disconnect, a new generation of writers emerged from the late-1970s, including Mahadai Das, David Dabydeen, and Ramabai Espinet, who strived for a closer intimacy with that past:

I stand between posterity’s horizon
And her history.
I, alone today, am alive,
Seeing beyond, looking ahead.
(Mahadai Das, ‘They Came in Ships’ 25-7)

Unlike in the early novels of V.S. Naipaul, Sam Selvon, and Ismith Khan, in which modernity is achieved by the death of the indentured past, these writers employed poetry and fiction to undo the amnesia imposed on it. While their work varies in genre and subject, each combines literary imagination with an awareness that the ‘voice’ of the past is fraught, and that stories may be all we have left. As Dabydeen writes in ‘Coolie Odyssey’ (1988), recording the speaker’s thoughts on visiting an Indo-Guyanese graveyard: ‘There are no headstones, epitaphs, dates/The ancestors curl and dry to scrolls of parchment/They lie like texts/Waiting to be written by the children’ (12). Remembering, in these works, is an effort of imagination in the face of absence, rather than a recovery of what once was.

This turn to storytelling has the capacity to alter our relationship to the intimate lives of the indentured and the archival silence that surrounds them. Histories of plantation slavery have long embraced conjecture, uncertainty, and fictionalisation to glimpse lives silenced within colonial records. In the face of an archive that ‘dictates what can be said about the past and the kinds of stories that can be told about the persons catalogued, embalmed, and sealed away in box files and folios’, Saidiya Hartman in particular has opened a field through her method of ‘critical fabulation’, which ‘elaborates, augments, transposes, and breaks open archival documents’ to narrate the lives obscured within (*Lose Your Mother* [-]; *Wayward Lives* xiv). Rejecting the association of ‘the imagined with the imaginary, the fictional with the false’ (Geertz 140), these histories have turned away from a ‘sole reliance on ... empirical matter’ towards an acceptance of storytelling as part of the encounter with historical sources that obscure as much as they reveal (Fuentes 5).

In framing the possibility of an intimate history of indenture, I counterpose literary fiction to archival reconstruction, as different modes of producing knowledge about the past. Turning first to statistical records, I argue that the archives of indentureship are shaped by forms of knowledge in which the intimate lives of the indentured are necessarily absent. However, there remain fleeting glimpses of interiority within prose accounts in the archives. Approaching these texts through the lens of life-writing, I explore how far we can stretch archival accounts through speculative interdisciplinary readings. Finally, I look at Ramabai Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge* (2003), as an attempt to imagine a possible history of indentureship through the intimate, affective reverberations of the past in the present. In the novel, empirical details provide a frame with which to imagine spaces beyond their reach, as memory itself drives the narrative backwards towards the ‘unwritten interior life’ of the indentured (Morrison 92). Reading across disciplinary modes of remembrance and recovery, this thesis poses the

possibility of an intimate history beyond the terms of the archive in order to glimpse the lives that both exceed and are submerged beneath it.

Enumerating the ‘Coolie’

The administrative records that make up the colonial archives were attempts by planters and officials to employ knowledge in order to achieve their political and economic priorities. In this, they systematically silenced and elided subaltern experiences of indentureship, initially as part of metropolitan debates in the late-1830s surrounding its moral and financial acceptability, and later through the classificatory efforts of the system’s growing intra-imperial bureaucracy.

Nearly every aspect of the system was subject to enumeration, from food rations, clothing provisions, and physical space on board, to gender ratios, sanitary conditions, and birth and death rates. This explosion of statistics was rooted in the expanding network of the colonial administration. The Colonial Land and Emigration Commission (CLEC), established in 1840 to provide ‘statistical knowledge’ concerning ‘all the material circumstances by which the choice of emigrants ... should be determined’, delivered annual reports to the Colonial Office, and oversaw the production of records (‘Copy of Instructions from the Secretary of State’ 6). The commissioners, in turn, created a bureaucracy for indentureship: a Protector of Emigrants enforcing regulations at the depots in Calcutta and Madras, an Emigration Agency at both ports, and an Immigration Agency in each destination (CLEC, ‘Proposed Emigration of Labourers from the East to the West Indies’).

A number of historians have interpreted the mid-century intensification of statistical colonial governance as part of an epistemic shift towards modern governmentality (Kalpagam; Dirks 107-123; Prakash 123-143). However, beneath the commitment to rational reform through comprehensive scientific knowledge lay anxieties about the representation and regulation of subaltern mobility. As Mark Condos writes, while knowledge was ‘one of the foundations of colonial domination’, it could ‘just as easily become a source of confusion, fear and panic’ where ‘knowledge and control over local social practices and customs seemed at its weakest’ (12). Racialised doubts about the testimony of indentured informants repeatedly undermined attempts at inquiry. In one report from 1883, a surgeon’s testimony is dismissed because he ‘reported on the condition of the Ellora coolies wholly on their own statements’ (IOR/L/PJ/6, no.250). In another, an administrator writes:

I believe it to be one of the most difficult things to get from the general mass of Indian immigrants a plain unadorned statement of any complaints they may have to make, however well founded, and the more simple the tale, the more highly they are apt to overlay it with fiction.
(in Carter 5)

Lodged between the tables and statistical reports of the folios of the Colonial Office and India Office Records, these asides, footnotes, and digressions divulge disputes over the causation of events, the evidence provided to officials, and the capacity to produce knowledge about the human lives they inscribe.

In light of these anxieties, enumeration enabled officials and planters to convert complex lives into immediately comprehensible data. Unlike legal records – produced in cases of deviation, and dependent on the purportedly doubtful testimony of the indentured – statistics constructed an image of regulation and order. For administrators, anti-indenture campaigners, and planters alike, numbers provided a ‘normalizing frame’ for ‘translating colonial experience into terms graspable in the metropolis’, evening out the tensions of language to create ‘homogenous bodies’ moulded to particular ideologies (Appadurai 326, 333). In this, rather than a ‘fundamental epistemological conquest’ (Kalpagam 38), the enumerative procedures of the colonial administration were intertwined with an acute sense of anxiety and vulnerability, of Orientalist fantasies in which ‘nothing ... is identifiable, and the mere asking of a question causes it to disappear or merge into something else’ (Forster 78). Forming, in Stoler’s words, ‘grids of intelligibility ... fashioned from uncertain knowledge’ (37), statistical representation allowed administrators to classify and order the indentured, while dismissing their subjectivities as fundamentally unknowable.

Such elisions were shaped by the definition of the indentured in relation to labour and race. In the 1830s, as planters navigated the loss of profit and labour-power following emancipation, South and East Asian indentured labourers came to be classified as ‘coolies’.² As Kaushik Ghosh writes, the ‘coolie’ became a ‘virtual drug to the planters’ consciousness across the various island colonies’ (18). John Gladstone, the planter and politician who oversaw the first shipment of indentured labourers to the West Indies in 1838, positioned the ‘coolie’ through the fantasy of a ‘docile, quiet, orderly, and able-bodied People’, whose ‘Habits and Dispositions

² The word ‘coolie’ comes from *kuli*, the Tamil term for wages, and had been used by Europeans in the subcontinent since the sixteenth century to refer native workers employed for menial labour (Bahadur, *Coolie Woman* xx).

... qualify them for the Object we have in view' (PP 1838, lii 22-26). The racialised notion of 'Habits' and 'Dispositions' was marked by the capacity of the 'coolie' to be shaped by the terms of the contract and to adapt to whatever conditions were offered. As one planter stated in 1837:

['Coolies'] entertain no prejudices of caste or religion, and they are willing to turn their hands to any labour whatever. ... In their own country they have but little rice and eat snakes, lizards, rats, mice, etc. Their clothing is simple and scanty, and they eat only once, rarely twice, in 24 hours.
(PP 1838, xxii 174)

The 'coolie' was defined in explicit opposition to newly-emancipated Black workers. Where Black workers were depicted as 'lazy, unreliable, untruthful and unable or unwilling to understand or honour contract', indentured labourers were constructed in the colonial imagination as a 'free race' defined by both docility and industry, capable of exercising a liberal freedom metonymized by the labour contract (Kale 77). The identity of the 'coolie' was stamped on a dizzying multiplicity of labouring communities as the indentureship system was formalised through the 1840s, effacing linguistic, social, and historical specificities with a monolithic and ahistorical identity. Defined by the terms of the contract, the 'coolie' was a spectral figure at the limits of humanity, legally constructed as a liberal subject capable of entering into consensual social relations, yet positioned as a near-animal figure to whom the bare minimum of provisions needed to be tendered.

The enumeration of this figure was determined by the economic and ideological conditions of the post-emancipation sugar colonies. Just as the process of 'compensated emancipation' oversaw the quantification of labour power in order to determine the financial value of Black lives, the statistical enumeration of the indentured set out to quantify and evaluate their useful labour (Manjapra 41). Tabulation was a key part of this process, classifying *girmityas* through a set of enumerated properties that underpinned a racialised conception of labour power. In one table, requested in 1838 by the Colonial Secretary Lord Glenelg, a complete list of the 'number, names, sexes, and ages' of all emigrant labourers in British Guiana is tabulated across 69 painstaking pages of correspondence (Figure 2). Identifying individuals by origin, 'complexion', health, wage-cost, and 'general behaviour', the table encouraged respondents to value labourers against each other. Revealingly, the statements enclosed correspond closely to the fantasies of the 'docile, industrious coolie' and the 'indolent' ex-enclave, marked by a reticence concerning the former: the comments under the 'general behaviour' column are generally sparse, marking the Indian population as 'good', 'quiet', or 'docile', where Black labourers were

Figure 3 is a table furnished in response to a request by the anti-indenture Bengal Landholders' Society, showing a list of indentured labourers in Mauritius in 1838. In its cells, cultivators, domestic servants, potters, weavers, spinners, gardeners, shopkeepers, shavers, and soldiers are converted into an 'indistinguishable, degraded mass of plantation labourers without caste or family' (Bahadur, *Coolie Woman* 43). Context, networks, and relations are removed from these individuals by tabular representation that consigns each individual to a row, demarcated from others with a clear black line. Each labourer is attributed a particular motivation for emigrating, under the heading 'Under what inducement taken away', while the reasons transcribed from the testimony of the unnamed individuals orient solely around hunger and the need to support their families. The role of communal networks, histories of seasonal migration, or wider structural oppression in the decision to emigrate are inaccessible through the inhuman grammar of the table. Instead, the table's form and content underpin anti-indenture lobbyists' characterisations of labour migrants as 'little more than the hapless and helpless victims of unscrupulous labour recruiters' (Allen).

In turn, planters and officials used statistics to abstract representative units of 'free' labour power from the lives of the indentured. Passenger numbers were regulated by controlling the abstract space which they could occupy: the CLEC set a minimum of fifteen 'superficial' feet per emigrant, while the 'tween decks on indenture ships were limited at a minimum of six feet four inches in height ('Duties of the Emigration Agents' 72-3). Statistical representation of this kind functioned to disappear the actual bodies of those on board. In 'Guano in their Destiny', Tao Leigh Goffe compares a diagram of the *Sheila* as it conveyed indentured labourers to Suriname in 1882 with the diagram of the slave ship *Brookes* drawn up by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1788. While noting their visual similarities, Goffe highlights the absence of bodies in the later diagram. In the sketch of the *Sheila*, physical confinement is abstracted in the name of free labour, with the diagram colour coded to distinguish between its inhuman cargo and the human labour contained within, ensuring the distinction between personhood and objecthood is visually clear (Goffe 43). Here, where abolitionist literature privileged the spectacle of the suffering captive body (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 19), quantification reduced the physical confinement and dislocation of the indentured into a series of numbers legitimated by contractual agreements. Statistical representation in this sense formed a conscious inversion of the aesthetics of abolitionism, ensuring the acceptability of the system to a metropolitan government and public, while eliding the material experience of the voyages and the visibility of the indentured themselves.

Name of the Zillah.	Name of the Pergunnah.	Place of Residence.	Name of the Person gone to Mauritius.	Name of his Legal Representative.	In what Manner taken away.	In what Manner Wages paid.	How their Families support themselves.
K. Maun- bloon.	P. Joyposse	Tanapey	Hutrick Sto Sar	-- his father's name, Bhungen Sing.	-- said, "You come to the Mauritius will get you employ- ment," having said this took away.	-- did not agree for any wages, but only stated the words as in last column, and carried away.	by labour
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Joorun Napet	-- his uncle's name, Hatyram Napet	ditto	ditto	ditto.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Dunun Mahata	-- his son's name, Jeto Mahat	ditto	ditto	by service.
Ditto	ditto	M. Batory	Lall Mahasy	-- his father's name, Duloo Mahasy	ditto	ditto	ditto.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Huteyram Koomar	-- his eldest bro- ther's name, Batey Koomar	ditto	ditto	ditto.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Ghasy Koomar	ditto	ditto	ditto	ditto.
Ditto	ditto	M. Kacha Hao	Kooladonoo Jolah	-- his father's name, Jomon Jolah	ditto	ditto	by weaving.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Sona Mahat	-- his son's name, Coora Mahat.	ditto	ditto	by driving plough.
Ditto	ditto	M. Jora Hao	Bworun Mahat	-- his son's name, Pueha Mahat.	ditto	ditto	-- by begging in vil- lages.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Tebalwa Mahat	-- his son's name, Batadon Mahat.	ditto	ditto	by cultivation
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Damon Bhoosa	-- his wife's name, Soodhigony Bhoosa.	ditto	ditto	by begging
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Beejoy Moora	-- his father's name, Koreen Moora.	ditto	ditto	ditto.
Ditto	P. Cho- ulpore.	M. Harsoon-	Bodai Bogal	-- his brother, Doo- man Bogal.	ditto	ditto	ditto
Ditto	ditto	M. Thar-	Bedoy Paul Tauty	-- his father, Luki- ram Paul Tauty	ditto	ditto	by cultivation.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Singroy Sawotan	-- his father's name, Boochram Sawotan.	ditto	ditto	ditto
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Sunadeb Sa'otan	ditto	ditto	ditto	ditto.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Choona Sawotan	-- his son's name, Muhoo Sawotan.	ditto	ditto	by begging.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Bhiha'ur Dome	-- his son's name, Roopa Dome.	ditto	ditto	ditto.
Ditto	P. Khaspool	M. Assun- sione	Nufer Dhoba	-- his son's name, Thakoor Doss Dhoba.	-- said, "Come with me to the Mauritius, will get you employ- ment."	-- no wages paid here, but said, "Will get you five or six rupees wages."	by washing cloth.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Mohun Dhoba	-- his wife, Doorga Dhobray.	ditto	ditto	ditto.
Ditto	ditto	Mung...	Asman Bhooyea	-- his son, Gourey Bhooyea.	ditto	ditto	by cultivation.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Hunsing Ghatowal	-- his father, Gehan Ghatowal.	ditto	ditto	ditto.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Haros Dhoba	-- his father, Motey- ram Dhoba.	ditto	ditto	ditto.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Gonesh Dhoba	-- his son, Sibdeen Dhoba.	ditto	ditto	by washing cloth.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Mogon Bhooyea	-- his son, Nufer Bhooyea.	-- said, "Come with me to the Mauritius, you will get 10 rupees pay per month."	ditto	by begging.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Mungle Rowanee	-- his son, Jadoosee Rowanee.	ditto	ditto	ditto.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Chundensing Bhooyea.	Nufersing Bhooyea	ditto	ditto	ditto.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Bhurutsing Bhooyea	-- his wife, Motey Bewa.	ditto	ditto	by spinning thread.
Ditto	ditto	M. Tetoleya	Ram Komar	-- his son, Suroop Komar.	ditto	ditto	by pottery.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Suroop Komar	-- his sister, Unoo Komarrey.	-- said, "O Baboo, can you go with me to Mauritius? when my brother replied, "Yes, I will go; but what wages can you give me?" when he said, "I will give you wages at five rupees per month."	ditto	-- by working thread in spindle.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Teloh Komar	-- his son's name, Jugon Komar.	ditto	ditto	by pottery.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Goneeram Napit	-- his brother, Pu- resh Napit.	ditto	ditto	by shaving.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Gevedhun Rajwar	-- his father, Runoo Rajwar.	ditto	ditto	by cultivation.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Saupai Rajwar	-- his nephew, Lo- boon Rajwar	ditto	ditto	ditto.
Ditto	ditto	Chundan- keyary.	Haradhon Rajwar	-- his mother, Saboo Bewa.	ditto	ditto	by begging.
Ditto	ditto	ditto	Khoodoo Rajwar	-- his wife, Gowry Bewa.	-- do not recollect what inducement held out	ditto	ditto.

(continued.)

Figure 3: 'List of the Men who went to the Mauritius from various Villages, 1838' (PP 1841, xvi p.189)

This distinction was crucial in differentiating indentureship from slavery and aligning it with emerging ideas of liberal subjecthood. Early metropolitan debate concerning indenture drew heavily on its aesthetic resemblance to slavery: in Thomas Clarkson's words, indentureship was 'a new slave-trade in *likeness* of the old', while Anglo-Indian petitioners warned that, 'If the present system be continued, the Coast Ports of India will soon *resemble* the slave marts of Africa' (Connolly 91, italics mine). The disappearance of bodies in representations of indenture through regulation and statistics upheld the gradual definition of indentureship through the liberal economic ideology of 'free labour', which positioned the system as a 'means of civilizing primitive workers, and of correcting the supposed failures of emancipation' (Connolly 89). Regulation, alongside financial calculations, helped draw attention away from the shipment of bodies across oceans into the New World, towards the wage-earning potential for peasants 'starving on 1½d. a day in India' (Lord Stanley, *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser., lx, col.1336). Forging a distinct grammar and ideology allowed indentureship to be justified as a lesser evil to slavery, one that empowered British sugar colonies to compete with foreign slave colonies while preserving 'the sublime experiment of negro emancipation' (Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser., clii, col.1232). Refiguring the system as an idealised form of free labour, quantitative regulation generated a distance from the Middle Passage, while drawing attention away from intimate experiences of indentureship. The steady development of a universal humanity in the preceding century depended on the classification of enslaved and colonised people as something less than human (Wynter); indentureship, in portraying the indentured as liberal subjects, served as legal affirmation of their *potential* humanity through the contract, while employing regulation and statistical representation that rendered them invisible.

As the system expanded from the late-1840s and regulations placed growing responsibilities on the colonial administration, the function of enumeration subtly shifted. Rather than invisibility, officials turned to selective visibility, simultaneously quantifying stable 'norms' and 'types' from the inherent flux of the system, and flattening and enclosing the social lives of the indentured within legible bodies. Both racialisation and medicalisation distinguished this phase of enumeration from the last, the former asserting 'habits' and 'dispositions' where they had been rendered blank by planters, the latter reasserting the centrality of the body to representations of indentureship. By moving statistical representation beyond the terms of the contract, administrators mobilised enumeration to grapple with the global scale of the system.

Enumeration and race science came together to produce knowledge about the indentured through the creation of ordered ‘types’ explaining both biological attributes and behaviours. Caste, in particular, was repeatedly invoked by emigration officials in India. Figure 4, a table produced in 1881 for the Immigration Agent General of British Guiana, attempts to order the multiplicity of indentured labourers at the depot through a dizzying list of 87 castes. Bearing striking resemblance to the valuation of enslaved people for apprenticeship in the 1830s, it sets out a hierarchy of labour power, descending from ‘Best Labourers’ to ‘Good Labourers’, ‘Fairly Good’, ‘Indifferent’, and ‘Worthless’. For administrators, such calculations helped order highly mobile populations. From the 1860s, officials pathologized the high numbers of suicides and wife murders among the indentured, using statistics to demonstrate that they were ‘due rather to the race than the place’ (CO 384/185, no.4142). Comparing data on the prevalence of wife murder among indentured populations with other groups, officials used statistics to ‘prove’ that such murders were rooted in ‘the constitutional jealousy of Orientals’ (PP 1871, xx p.187).

questions jud...
themselves to have been...
as silent witnesses.

CASTES.

26. I append a list of castes which embody the results of several years experience in selecting emigrants at Calcutta, prepared at my request by the Superintendent of the Trinidad Depôt, Baboo Grish Chunder Ghose.*

BEST LABOURERS.			
Koyree, Koornee, Chamar, Dossaud, Talleo, Bhoomiz, Bhur, Keot, Kachee.	Moorao, Mehtter, Mooneah, Moosaher, Fagdee, Sutgope, Koybutto, Aheer, Gowar.	Sowtal, Lodh, Kenrah, Pode, Tewor, Chundul, Dome, Koal, Dungar.	Durkar, Kor e, Koonah, Rajbhur, Diamook, Kissan, Gooria, Thappa, Baree, Chatowar.
GOOD LABOURERS.	FAIRLY GOOD.	INDIFFERENT.	WORTHLESS.
Kabar, Koomar, Chuttree, Tamoolee, Jat, Goojur, Lohur, Kalowar, Rajowar, Khugee.	Bhoochur, Mussulman, Khurtick, Garraree, Malla, Barrae, Passee, Agoore, Bhurbhooja, Aurack, Tantee, Agree, Boyhena.	Hazam, Dhooniah, Pauhiree, Nekuree, Choorchur, Lahayra, Tantowa, Halowayee, Kolloo, Dhobee, Koochundee, Mewattee.	Baneah, Prabmia, Kaet, Sonar, Jogee, Bhat, Jolla, Poyedda, Gossoya, Antit, Ekteer, Khetree.

Figure 4: Mitchell’s register of labourers according to caste (IOR/L/PJ/6/237, no.237: ‘Emigration to British Guiana: Agent General’s Report for 1881’)

Reifying race as a category of analysis, these late-nineteenth-century statistical operations sought to understand and represent the indentured by a logic of representative ‘types’ that accounted for racialised wholes. In this, they shifted from the logic of earlier tabulations, in which the indentured were evaluated for their *lack* of ‘characteristics’, to one through which administrators could quantify behaviours in relation to a universalised concept of race. In the hands of colonial officials, statistics produced a static temporality of essentialised types and habits, which were subsequently used to manage fluid populations.

If regulation erased the bodies of *girmityas*, medical enumeration made their bodies legible while obscuring the wider systemic conditions that shaped their bodily health. After a season of exceptionally high mortality in 1856-7, an investigation by Dr Frederic J. Mouat led to the creation of a system of extensive medical recordkeeping. Under the new provisions, every ship’s arrival was to be documented in detail by the surgeon superintendent on board, charting the full stock of medical provisions, the surgeon’s journal, hospital admissions, a sick list, a case book, a register of births and deaths, and the surgeon’s abstract report of the voyage (CO 384/185, no.15689). In the case of outbreaks of illness, this enabled administrators to track diseases as they travelled through the emigrants’ bodies, and to correlate symptoms with quantitative data on shipboard conditions. In this sense, statistics were medical instruments in the containment of epidemics, allowing officials to trace the effects of individual factors on mortality by producing legible bodies from those on board (CO 384/185, no.9942).

But behind this statistical management lay crude financial calculations. Surgeons were paid gratuities on the basis of the number of ‘healthy souls’ they landed. Initially, this stood at eight shillings per head, although it later rose to twelve shillings for veteran surgeons (Shepherd 20). This was significantly less than surgeons on emigrant ships bound for Australia, who could earn up to twenty shillings (£1) per head, and which subsequently attracted better surgeons (Shepherd 20). Indentured labourers were dependent on the care and capability of the surgeon superintendent, both as a medical officer and as a barrier against the assaults of crew members (CO 384/185, no.15689), and administrators frequently ascribed high mortality rates and abuses at sea to their failings. In one case, the arrival of ‘extremely emaciated and very weak’ emigrants in British Guiana in 1881 drew investigations that blamed the surgeon superintendent, Dr Edward Hardwicke, for his ‘negligence, carelessness, perfunctory duty, and gross ignorance’ (IOR/L/PJ/6, no.250). Yet the pay offered by the service meant that it could attract little better, and Hardwicke went on to become a veteran surgeon superintendent of over fifteen years (CO 384/185, no.15689). In that time, he came under investigation at least twice, once when a woman under his care died after being sexually assaulted, and again after

being accused of taking ‘indecent liberties’ with a female emigrant (Shepherd 33-44; CO 386/160, no.303). Hardwicke’s case is not an outlier: ill-treatment punctuates the statistical precision of the reports with grim regularity, as emigrants suffered neglect and abuse at the hands of surgeons (Bahadur, *Coolie Woman* 57-60).

In this, financial speculation superseded medical scientific knowledge in the statistical management of indentureship. Though a system existed for tracking the spread of disease through the bodies of emigrants, that system did not account for the financial valuation that rendered their lives disposable, or the racialisation that deemed them ‘coolies’, capable of weathering conditions no ‘free’ labourer would survive. It was not biopolitics – as the effort ‘to administer, optimize, and multiply [life], subjecting it to precise and comprehensive regulations’ (Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge* 237) – but necropolitics, premised upon the disposability of racialised life, that defined the system and its quantification.³ Enumerative procedures obscured these connections, abstracting experiences of indentureship through regulations and statistical representation that accommodated both administrative management and metropolitan debate.

The development of statistical knowledge about indentureship occurred within two overlapping contexts, one respondent to post-emancipation conditions in the sugar colonies and the metropole, the other to the development of colonial knowledge by government officials as an intra-imperial comparative framework. For both administrators and planters, statistics drew attention away from the intimate experiences of the indentured, towards representative figures who could serve as bundles of labour power or manageable ‘types’. Abstraction – making bodies legible and lives fungible – allowed planters to smooth out difference to pave the way for an ‘imperial reallocation labour strategy’ that sought to ‘profit from the portability of capital and labour’ (Lowe 25). Crucially, it also ordered the system’s inherent mobility by producing fixed images that both exposed and obscured the lives of labourers, while ensuring the disposability of their bodies.

³ This characterisation of indentureship employs Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics, grounded in the idea that ‘to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality’ (12).

Voices in the Archive

Statistical reports sought to stabilise indentureship by ordering the encounter between their administrative authors and the *girmityas* they represent. In 1882, Robert W.S. Mitchell filed his first annual report as Immigration Agent General for British Guiana (IOR/L/PJ/6, no.237). Mitchell was deeply embedded in the colonial administration, with a footing in both the East and West Indies: he had been an overseer in the Caribbean, while his then-seven-year-old son was born and raised in Calcutta, where Mitchell later returned as an Emigration Agent (Bahadur, *Coolie Woman* 27; 'Robert Gordon Melville Mitchell'; CO 384/185, no.41412). Mitchell had arrived in the colony the previous year, and spent some time visiting estates to gather information. However, the incessant turn to statistical representation in his report stills this period of travel, depicting a birds-eye view of a fixed moment in time. The report's tables present a single population from an array of angles, from mortality and hospital cases, to gender ratios, suicides, and even a tabulated account of the temperature of their dwellings. At the same time, tabular representation erases the various interlocutors and informants responsible for gathering the report, reducing the multiple perspectives of these hidden authors, and the multiplicity of the population they represent, into a singular subject and object: a self-authoring 'I' who 'expresses himself in the text', and a knowable world represented through empirical data (Cixous 385). Frozen in time, repeatable year on year in the tables, statistical representation constructs a sense of fixity from a system characterised by transoceanic mobility. These statistics tell the official story of indentureship, both as the sanctioned narrative, and as a kind of administrative life-writing, 'assembling and claiming [official] identities, securing and releasing [their] social relations and negotiating affective attachments' (Rippl et al. 5).

That fixity is sporadically broken by prose digressions that evade the rigid temporality of the table:

Travelling along the West Coast, on a Saturday not long after my arrival, I was surprised to find the villages fringing the highroad which traverses a number of estates, thronged with Indian Immigrants, and a goodly sprinkling of Chinese and Creoles, in holiday garb, the Indian Immigrants vying with the rainbow in their get up, the women especially, cuirassed with massive silver ornaments set off here and there by a necklace of sovereigns or American Gold Eagle pieces, and nose and earrings of the same metal.

From a careful and exhaustive series of calculations it appears that about 2,301 Indian immigrants were omitted from the returns in 1871 and some 8,059 escaped the scrutiny of the Enumerators in 1881. This is not to be wondered at, considering the extent of the Colony, and its vast system of rivers with their

ramifications of creeks where considerable communities might exist completely isolated, beyond the ken of all but the aboriginal Indians and wandering hunters.

(IOR/L/PJ/6, no.237)

These passages register impressions that lay outside the scope of enumeration: in the first, a crowded highroad resists efforts to disentangle the labouring population into discrete, bounded racial groups; in the second, the location of the indentured beyond the plantation and the 'regime of visibility' that surveilled its bounded population pushes the author into speculation and fantasy (Lowe and Manjapra 30). In both vignettes, the indentured are unfixed from their labour power and racialised 'habits', situated at the interstices of creolised indigeneity and intra-imperial mobility. Marked by imaginative lexis ('cuirassed', 'a goodly sprinkling'), metaphorical conceit ('vying with the rainbow'), and dense, breathless syntax, these passages are at odds with the sparse reportage of the rest of the text, registering what lies hidden beneath statistics: an administrative author grappling with lives that refuse the administration's enumerated categories. Mitchell's report is caught between the detached register of the official and the fascination of the colonial travel writer, exposing the affective encounters of 'worlds and visions brought into contact' (Wagner and Roque 4-5). As colonial life-writing, statistics represent the administrative lives lived in the fluid transoceanic spaces produced by indentureship, and their attempts to tame that flux through self-authoring and self-authorising texts.

Occasionally, the testimony of the indentured breaks through the official story and transforms these texts. One woman's story comes to us through number alone. Looking through the surgeon's report for the *Rohilla*, arrived from Calcutta in 1883, the Acting Medical Officer for British Guiana noticed a discrepancy between the ship's log and the account of the surgeon superintendent, Dr Edward Noot (CO 384/144, no.6112). In the log, the birth and death of a child were recorded in the space of a few days in December and January, where Noot's journal recorded no such occurrence. Having been passed the file, the Governor of British Guiana, Henry Irving, wrote to the Colonial Office calling for a full investigation (CO 384/144, no.6112). The resulting inquiry hinged on the surgeon's recordkeeping and his 'want of care and accuracy', though it was ultimately decided that the omission was insufficient reason to withhold Noot's payment, and the case was closed (IOR/L/PJ/6, no.1148). Registered in the official log but crossed out in Noot's account, according to the enumerative logic of the colonial administration the brief life of the child and the experience of his mother did not matter; what mattered was that the numbers in the two accounts did not add up.

However, the testimony of the mother, Chairya, alongside that of the nurse, Rubootri, transforms what can be known about the life and death of the child. Chairya's deposition in the enquiry, given to a translator, reads as follows:

I was confined of a boy on board the ship "Rohilla". The child live (sic) three days. Both the doctor and the Baboo (Compounder) were present when I was confined. The child was a full time strong one. On the third day it got fever at noon, and died at 8 o'clock at night. The female nurse went to call the doctor and he came and looked at the child before it died.

I was confined in the tween' decks, not in the Hospital in the morning early about 3 o'clock. The nurse who went to call the doctor was called Rubootri.

(CO 384/144, no.6112)

Her words change the story. What we glimpse is the journey of Chairya, a thirty-year-old woman, travelling to Calcutta and embarking on a ship bound for British Guiana heavily pregnant. It was a famine year in the key recruiting areas, meaning the depot was likely full (Look Lai, *Indentured Labor* 25-6). Eight days into the voyage, in the crowded 'tween decks she shared with 426 other souls, she gave birth to a healthy boy. Three days later, he developed a fever, and the nurse called for the surgeon, who arrived, pronounced that 'this child will not live', and promptly left ('Statement of Rubootri', CO 384/144, no.6112). Hours later, the boy died. If the child was born healthy – and not stillborn, as Noott later claimed – then he was killed by conditions on board. Reading across the testimonies in the enquiry, we know that Chairya switched from breastfeeding to the bottle after one day ('Statement of C.B. King', CO 384/144, no.6112). Surgeons rarely connected the deaths of babies with insufficient or bad milk. But milk on board was often of poor quality; in one case in 1898, tins of lumpy milk retained from old stock had to be wasted after the deaths of three new-borns (CO 111/507, no.27797). This skeletal account is little more than a glimpse into the disposability of life during indentured voyages. It offers no details of Chairya's own intimate life or her response to the boy's death. Yet it is all we are afforded through the words of his mother, nudging his story past the ledger of life and death supplied in the surgeon's statistical reports.

In the early twenty-first century, testimony such as Chairya's was brought to the centre of a number of historical accounts. Verene Shepherd's *Maharani's Misery* devotes nearly half of its pages to reprinting testimonies from the enquiry into the rape, and subsequent death, of Maharani, a young woman on board the *Ellora* bound for British Guiana in 1885 (81-153). Other examples include Carter's *Voices of Indenture*, which catalogues the various 'modes of

expression of labour migrants' contained in the colonial archives – oral depositions in court, petitions, and letters – in order to 'visualize immigrants not as objects of analysis by colonial officials but as individuals articulating fears, disappointments and expectations in their own manner.' (229)

This emphasis on 'revealing the voices of the bonded labourers' followed a wider trend in colonial and Atlantic histories (Shepherd xxviii), as scholars turned to what Martha Hodes terms 'radical inclusion', as 'finding a way to incorporate virtually every direct and indirect voice I found' (73-4). The project of recovering voice in both Shepherd and Carter's work is premised upon the reversal of loss and a belief in the capacity of archival reconstruction to salvage fragments of testimony and stitch them together into a form that provides access to interiority.

However, the notion that recovering voice can counteract archival silence belies the nature of the voices preserved in the archives. The idea of 'voice' is representational: it speaks the subject out of non-being and into being. But the very voices we hear in the colonial archives of indenture are not representational of whole lives; they come from specific encounters and, as texts, are inextricable from this context. Petitions, court depositions, and testimony to Royal Commissions were some of the few chances the indentured had to air their grievances, and *gimtyas* were prolific at identifying opportunities for complaints to be raised (see PP 1871, xx, appendix II 3-149). Their testimony is moulded to the demands of these occasions, following strategies developed in dealing with colonial adjudicators. Often they would draw attention to their wounds – 'the only evidence they had' – while withdrawing other aspects of their lives from their accounts (Carter 8). In other cases, they lodged complaints at the Immigration Agent's office, only to slip away before they could be located and adjudicated upon (PP 1871, xx, appendix I 37-8). Frequently labourers lied, fictionalising stories that would help their case before authorities that placed little value on the words of Indian immigrants (Bahadur, *Coolie Woman* 86).

Such testimony was not simply engaged with 'truth', but with what Glissant terms the 'right to opacity', obscuring realities and using fictionalisation within an uneven negotiation with power (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* 189). To extract testimonies from these texts and treat them as representative of an idealised voice-consciousness reduces the experiences of the indentured to a catalogue of the moments made visible to the colonial eye. The archival testimony is largely premised on violation – of bodies and contracts – or the risk of future punishment, in the case of prosecutions against the indentured. To recover 'voice' from such texts as a representative

of subjectivity overwrites the strategic silences and obfuscations that the indentured employed for their own protection.

Of Chairya, the only detail that hints at her intimate life is the name given to her son: Rohilla. This is not provided by her own testimony, but is reported in the ship's log, in parenthesis: '31st December 1882. Last night a female Coolie gave birth to a male child (Rohilla)' (CO 384/144, no.6112). It is unclear whether Chairya chose the name herself, or if it was a crew member's invention. Nonetheless, it is tempting to fill in the gaps, to 'imagine what cannot be verified', as Hartman writes, in order to 'displace the received account' (Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts' 11). The name, the same as the ship, offers a hint; across the other surgeons' reports I have seen, I have not found a single other instance of a child born onboard named after the ship. As Carter and Khal Torabully have written, the ship was 'a place of destruction and creation of identity' (15). In cases of births at sea, creative ingenuity was often applied in naming children, with mothers fabricating names according to the situation (Bahadur, *Coolie Woman* 21). Did Chairya name the boy herself? And if so, was he named for the ship, or was it mere coincidence? If the former, what did she intend for this child, named for the vessel carrying them across the *kala pani*? Was this name an attempt to write a new story, to craft a new identity bound to the ship that bore her towards an uncertain future?

There is so much we can glimpse, but so little we can know, through these cracks in the enumerative logic of the archives. Any attempt to answer these questions must contend with both the limits of knowing the indentured from these sources, and the possibility of perceiving their emotional worlds only through 'doubts, wishes, and multiple possible truths' (Bahadur, 'Conjure Women and Coolie Women' 249). Even locating a 'voice', translated and transcribed, does not necessarily grant us access to the inner world of the speaker. Chairya does not call upon the reader as a witness; it is not testimony that speaks through any 'ethics of recognition' (Whitlock 7). Her voice is a circumstantial one, called upon to testify to an administrative error, and her fragmented deposition answers hidden questions that focussed her words on two matters only: whether her son was born healthy, and whether Dr Noott was aware of his birth. The resulting testimony can be closely read to narrate the story of the boy's short life, but there is too much we cannot know about Chairya to redeem the past by recovering her voice and designating on her untold, untellable story, an impossible closure. Though archival excavation may allow us to 'reconstruct the texture of [indentured] lives', as Gaiutra Bahadur writes, it cannot 'reveal the texture of their thoughts and feelings' ('Conjure Women and Coolie Women')

247). All that is left out – the hopes, anxieties, and inner worlds of the indentured – belongs to fiction.

Fictional Lives, Fictional Memories

It is an untold story.

–Ramabai Espinet, *The Swinging Bridge* (3)

If empirical traces cannot illuminate intimacies, Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* (2003) turns towards fiction to conjure a history of indentureship threaded through the intimate lives of the indentured. In recent years, as Indo-Caribbean women's history and literature has garnered long-overdue scholarly attention, *The Swinging Bridge* has been read for its treatment of gender-based trauma, migration, and questions of Indo-Caribbean identity (Morgan; Jeffers; Kanhai, 'Fire in De Cane'). My approach is different: rather than focussing on individual characters, I want to draw attention to the way in which Espinet constructs a fictionalised memory of the past. Starting with the fictional forms which the author uses to access lives hidden in the archives, I look at how she narrates women's experiences in the indentureship and post-indentureship periods not through a mode of recovery, but one of remembering, in which the past cannot be 'regained' in the present,⁴ but only re-membered, that is, populated with characters who allow us to imagine what cannot be known.

In the novel, Mona Singh, a Montreal-based film researcher raised in Trinidad, is asked by her dying brother to revisit the island and recover their family land. Mona's narration is dense with memories, retreating from events in the present towards personal recollections of the past. As she travels to Trinidad, the novel pivots towards the story of her great-grandmother Gainer's journey to the island as an indentured labourer. Gainer, a singer and dancer who escaped into indentureship from an unwanted marriage, is twice silenced: in life her singing forbidden by her husband, and in death her story removed from the family history. Pieced together through memories, hidden artefacts, and stories, the narrative weaves itself around Gainer, from her journey to the plantation to her life after indenture and death in childbirth. Mona's quest to purchase the family land becomes intimately bound up with this history and her awareness of its absence in her memory. As she uncovers Gainer's story, the narrative winds its way beyond the narrator's own lifespan into an extended history that binds Mona and

⁴ Recovery: 'gaining or regaining possession, esp. of something lost or taken away' ('recovery, *n.*', *OED Online*).

her great-grandmother to the lives of Indo-Caribbean women under indentureship and into the post-indentureship era.

In going beyond the recovery of lost voices or reconstructions of the past ‘as it was’, *The Swinging Bridge* illuminates the fraught process of remembering histories silenced in the ‘official’ stories of and about the Indo-Caribbean community. Plagued by the absence of the women she seeks to know, Mona experiences their silence as an interruption of the present that pushes her further back into the past. Rather than ‘speaking’ through archival depositions, the past reverberates through memories, songs, and echoes in the quotidian lives of indentured labourers and their descendants. Reaching past the empirical base of historical work, *The Swinging Bridge* points beyond the walls of the archives towards an intimate understanding of experience in all of its possibilities.

This approach is deeply embedded within Espinet’s own experiences of the afterlives of indentureship. Born in Trinidad to the descendants of indentured labourers, the author established a reputation as a poet, academic, and activist in the two decades before *The Swinging Bridge*, her first novel, was published. Writing in the wake of indenture, her work pivots around what she has labelled the ‘absent voice’ of Indo-Caribbean women, tracking the effects of this silence on a community in which domestic violence, alcoholism, and suicide rates remain entangled with gendered histories of indentureship (Espinet, ‘The Absent Voice’). Arguing that the ‘official story’ of the community ‘hides all of the suppressions and filth and abuse’ in women’s experiences of indenture, Espinet positions her literary work as an attempt to ‘fill out the picture’ by ‘taking the small, the ragged and the insignificant, the discarded, the output of beggars, of those cast out of the community ... and making a whole out of those outlawed consciousnesses’ (Dawes 113).

In *The Swinging Bridge*, this effort to ‘make a whole’ draws on an array of histories, both public and private, collective and individual. Having left Trinidad for Canada as a teenager, Espinet uses memories of growing up in a Presbyterian community in San Fernando to construct Mona and the cast of characters she encounters. These intimate details of family life are interlaced with historical events to reconstruct the fabric of independence-era Trinidad. Eric Williams, Trinidad’s first Prime Minister – thinly disguised as ‘De Doctah’ – admires Mona’s father and offers him a political career (70), while in an earlier scene Mona recollects De Doctah’s visit to her school, accompanied by the celebrated dancer Beryl McBurnie, under her pseudonym ‘La Rosette’ (67). Later, her father’s desire to leave Trinidad is framed around

the real-life executions of Boysie Singh and Boland Ramkissoon, brutal gangsters whose deaths nevertheless make plain for him a latent anti-Indian sentiment in the island (100-1).

However, while acknowledging that the imaginative universe of *The Swinging Bridge* ‘depends upon an understanding ... acquired experientially and intuitively by living in that environment’, Espinet has shied away from discussing the novel as ‘family history’, insisting on the role of ‘fictional interpolation’ in the story’s construction (Savory 86). Instead of empirical traces, Espinet’s narrative reaches backwards by gathering subjective memories into a shared image of the past. The novel’s historical aspects are used within this as a frame with which to imagine the intimate dramas beyond their reach.

This imaginative memory-work functions on a number of different levels, which are interwoven to produce a patchwork of subjectivities threaded by a single plotline. On one level, the narrative constitutes a fairly conventional *bildungsroman*, as Mona overcomes a sense of dislocation through the encounter with history. This brings an awareness of her place within a story larger than herself, easing the torrent of uncontrolled memories through the ‘epiphany of meaning that is “maturity”’ (Moretti 19). At the same time, the novel employs the conventions of the mystery story, as Mona decodes ‘puzzles’ (274) to piece together the hidden story of her great-grandmother (Cawelti 42-4). At a further level, the novel works as historiographic metafiction, tracing the uneven mediation of the indentured past through fictional intertexts including songs, journals, and letters, while pointing towards an invisible presence that stalks the silent spaces of the written records (Hutcheon 114). Each level draws attention to a different subject: the first is focalised around the consciousness of the present-day narrator, the second on Gainder as she slowly develops through Mona’s detective work, and the third the collectivity of women written out of the history of indentureship. Through this mixing of genres, Espinet produces an awareness of a multiplicity of subjects, experiences, and intimate lives, working against the logic of colonial knowledge and its ‘paradigm of “the one”’ (Blaser).

If statistical representation relies on generalised norms and types, Espinet employs fiction to illuminate ‘peculiarities and perceptions’ in response to what she terms the ‘phenomenon of invisibility regarding the Indian woman’ (‘The Invisible Woman’ 116). In the colonial era, indentured women exceeded the categories through which they were archived, frequently travelling alone, while manipulating their scarcity on the plantation to attain greater independence (Poynting 232). The response from the men around them was to define these women as prostitutes, and when Indian women were murdered by husbands, partners, or jealous plantation workers, it was frequently ascribed to their ‘quality’ (Bahadur, *Coolie Woman* 117). Definitions mattered, and the blanket characterisation of indentured women as ‘rands’ –

the Bhojpuri word for both prostitutes and young widows – both silenced and killed. Meanwhile, in narratives of indenture in the post-indentureship period, women frequently disappeared beneath the fraternal concept of *jahaji-bhai*, recast within frameworks of domestic and national devotion as silent signifiers of Indianness (DeLoughrey 78-83). Between colonial-era and post-indentureship representations, the intimate lives and agency of these women were cast, in Spivak's terms, 'doubly in the shadow' (288), woven together to resemble a homogenous mass defined by either promiscuity or sanctified domesticity.

Responding to these representations, Espinet's novel renders visible women's presence in history through constructions of literary character that extend beyond 'type'. As Mona unravels Gainder's story, an ensemble of characters are drawn into the narrative. Women in Mona's family are portrayed alongside those they encounter, from Nani, Gainder's *jahaji-bajin*, to Baboonie, an old woman Mona remembers from childhood, and Chandroutie, a chutney singer who helps Mona translate Gainder's songs.⁵ Dispersed across generations and social groups, these women share commonalities, yet bear distinctive experiences and subjectivities. In the process, Espinet rejects the idea of the historical novel's protagonist as a representative type, synthesising 'all the humanly and socially essential determinants' (Lukács 39), in favour of a multiplicity that complexifies and illuminates Mona's encounter with the indentured past.

If the novel's relation to the past is sustained through character, its core lies in memory. In a 'zig-zag trajectory through time' (Singer), the narrative pitches and reels through different characters' recollections, stretching from the narrative present of 1995 to Gainder's journey into indentureship in 1879. As a narrator, Mona is sensitive to the gravitational pull memories exert on her imagination, of fragments 'arising unbidden out of parts of my life no longer in use. Signals, beckoning me into the past' (5). In one thirty-page-long section early in the novel, she sits on board a train to Ontario, as the sight of those around her and her imaginative associations carry the narrative backwards into the recollection of childhood events, from leaving Trinidad (26), to Christmas festivities (31-5), and finally the traumatic recall of 'the day I escaped from rape and probably murder', aged eleven (40). Mona's memories are frequently unbidden, her narrative populated by 'events, memories that still seeped through, uninvited, and stalked my dreams' (166). In one passage, the narrative is drawn backwards into the past as Mona falls asleep in her parents' house:

⁵ Chutney is a music genre developed by descendants of indentured labourers in the mid-twentieth century, fusing Bhojpuri folk traditions with specifically Caribbean influences.

I could touch that night-blanket and feel its texture, falling asleep in the house our parents had built in this foreign land, as impregnable as any other shelter they had provided, even those precarious ones we had pitched about in, the spanking new building in La Plata, the borrowed house in Ramgoolie Trace, and the first one, Pappy's house, the old board frame in Manahambre Road.

Some nights I would go to sleep in that old board house, with carlights from the street only occasionally filtering through the cracks, feeling myself falling into a place of dreaming, falling into a sea of words rhyming and twisting, piped straight into my brain from the calypso tents in Port of Spain. These nights would begin in the weeks before Carnival when Da-Da would stay up late to hear the new crop of calypsos. When my father's drinking friends came to our house, he would entertain them with obscure gems that nobody knew. If he forgot a line or a chorus, he would summon me and I never failed to deliver.
(96-7)

These memories are imagistic, developing through sensory associations. Mona's narrative travels into the past through sensations (the 'feel' of the night-blanket), arriving first at associated general recollections (the sound of calypso music), before travelling through them to particular details (reciting calypsos) and, eventually, events (in this case, three pages later, San Fernando carnival). Individualised and impulsive, these associative memories travel between periods in her own life, structured through a 'psychic disconnect' that creates a sense of solipsism in the opening chapters (Hamilton 146). Carried along through Mona's consciousness, the first half of the novel destabilises time, living with its narrator 'in the eye of a storm' in which her 'whole life arches backwards and forwards according to the speed of the gust around [her]' (5).

This 'automatic, mechanical recall' gives way to conscious memory work and 'intelligent reconstruction' in the third part of the novel, as Mona tugs at the loose strands of her own memories to unravel a past that lies beyond her capacity to remember.⁶ 'Struck' by the absence of her great-grandmother in the family stories carefully narrated over the two previous sections, the narrator questions her mother, Muddie, but receives only a short reply: 'She was a woman they called Gainer. She took on the name Beharry, but it wasn't her real name.' (251). As Nalani Mohabir writes, 'questions are the narrative impulse of indenture histories, as so little remains of the lives lived, either in the archives or in inherited memories' (114). Mona persistently questions Muddie and, eventually, gets her to '[sit] down and [try] hard to recall what she did know. All she remembered were bits and pieces of gossip and hearsay.' (251)

⁶ The distinction between these forms of memory is made by Paul Ricouer in *Memory, History and Forgetting* (29).

From this passage on, memory becomes increasingly dialogic, as Mona fills the gaps in her recollection with the memories of others. Dialogue enables participants to overcome ignorance on one side and unwillingness on the other, in a dynamic that propels the narrative into the imaginative reconstruction of the past. Immediately after the conversation with her mother, Mona's narration spends eleven pages detailing Grandma Lil's life, filling out the 'bits and pieces' Muddie provides into an extensive narrative. If Gainer's absence in Mona's picture of the family story is due to a collective silence, then the narrator recovers her story by building a picture in conversation with others. Where colonial administrators used statistics to collapse their various interlocutors into a single 'official' subjectivity, Mona's attempt to remember her great-grandmother reconceptualises knowledge about the past as intersubjective, leading to further stories through the memories of others.

This collective memory-work is placed in opposition to the structural forgetting of women's agency during the indentureship-era. In the novel's final section, Mona's cousin Bess helps develop an Indian heritage museum, gathering 'artifacts, objects, and precious mementoes from the Indian past' (282). When the museum opens, space is found to display Gainer's recently-discovered songs, but her story itself is left out; as Bess tells Mona, 'the grand picture is still what everybody wants. The righteous Indian family, intact, coming across the kala pani together.' (297). These elisions cut across the public and the private spheres. Within the family, Gainer is excluded from both memory and written records, her page in Aunt Alice's family history torn out and replaced with three cursory sentences: 'Lily's mother was named Gainer. She came from India in the nineteenth century. She died in childbirth.' (271)

In the face of this silence, Espinet's fictionalisation allows Mona to travel past the torn-out page and into impossible memories, conjuring a lost archive of indentureship through diaries, letters, and stories that strengthen her encounter with the past. After discovering the torn-out page, Mona searches Bess's storeroom, where she finds her grandmother's shop books. The end of each book, following a run of receipts, contains 'blank pages with scribbled notes', inscribing 'a journal of sorts', with 'rough sentences, obviously made for her own private consumption' (272). It is here that Mona locates her grandmother's writing about Gainer and, crucially, Gainer's songs.

The Sounds of Silence

In *The Swinging Bridge*, music allows for the integration of memory and imagination. As an artefact, music inscribes multiple moments, from composition to performance to the moment of listening, offering access into the ways in which the past is ‘multiply encoded, recorded and transmitted at different points in time’ (Macdonald and Tyler 54). The music of the indentured moved Indian folk traditions and devotional songs into the plantation context (Myers). Rather than the preservation of ‘Indianness’, these songs speak to the transformation of perceptual frameworks in an emotional universe characterised by longing, homesickness, and nostalgia.⁷ In this, the music of indenture did not simply preserve memories from the past, but inscribed the present onto them, turning folk songs and devotional forms into multi-temporal and polyvocal palimpsests.

Similarly, Gainder’s songs pass through an extended chain of memorialisation via performance and storytelling before they arrive in the present: Mona first hears of them when her mother hums the melodies passed down by Grandma Lil, who received them from Nani, Gainder’s *jahaji-bajin*, after her mother’s death. Later, when Mona discovers her grandmother’s Hindi transcription of the songs, she goes to Chandroutie, the chutney singer, who translates and performs them while Mona transcribes her performance. In order to be inscribed into the narrative of the novel, the songs must be preserved and performed by an array of largely unheard voices. They are not really ‘recovered’ – Mona discovers that one of them has already become a ‘popular love song’ through its wider diffusion (276) – but re-membered, returned to the multiplicity of women responsible for their creation and preservation. In the process, they allow Mona to piece fragments into pictures, both in the sense of traces of Gainder appearing ‘like an image developing slowly on photo-sensitive paper’ (293), and in the broader sense of connecting the various women encountered in the novel into a community forged through memory, performance, and song.

Music allows for the integration of Mona’s automatic, associative recall within her memory-work. Calypsos, chutney, country songs, and religious music produce a soundscape in the novel, forming a ‘memory mixtape’ carried within Mona’s consciousness, recorded and replayed in her mind, allowing her to remember what might otherwise have been forgotten (Hamilton 144). This intersection of narrative and music allows the narrator to reach further

⁷ Lalbihari Sharma’s *Holi Songs of Demerara* is the only surviving song-text by an indentured labourer, although folk songs also survive. Sharma’s text stretches North Indian forms of poetry and song, including references to Tulsidas’ *Ramcharitmanas* and subversions of the *barahmasa* folk form, to produce occasional music for Holi celebrations in British Guiana in 1916 (Sharma; Tulsidas; Grierson; Vaudeville).

into intimacy than is possible through the empirical traces of indentureship. In one passage, Mona awakens in her home in Montreal ‘to the sound of rainwater pouring down the galvanized spouting at the back of the house into the drain’:

But it couldn't be, there was no spouting, no drain to catch the rainwater, nothing like that. Still the sound persisted, then I heard that familiar dissonant singing at the back of rushing water, exactly like the first time so long ago.
(*The Swinging Bridge*, 108)

The sound of rainwater sparks the recollection of a soundscape from Mona's childhood, when the family lived in a village called Ramgoolie Trace. During this time, Baboonie, an ‘old beggar woman’, appeared at their front door to offer work around the house (109). Later, Mona learned of Baboonie's story, of how every night ‘fellers in the village does use she’, ‘beating down the door’ to her house (111). As the narrator remembers, she would lie awake in fear, listening to Baboonie singing into the night at her assailants. Compare Mona's recollection of Baboonie's singing with the following excerpt from a captain's account of an indentured voyage to Trinidad in 1877:

[T]he coolies were encouraged to keep themselves amused in their own fashion. This mostly resolved itself into tum, tum, tumming on their small drums ... The tunes they get out of those tom-toms to European ears is most dreary, tuneless, and monotonous.
(Angel 152)

As I listened, I realized that the sound was a voice, singing with the rain yet high above rain and river at the same time, the notes discordant but clear, beating out a rhythm I recognized. It was the rise and fall of women singing Ramayana at kathas. [...]

I listened to music and a story, till then unknown to me, coming through the wailing voice of an old beggar woman, crying through the rain, breaking up the classical words of the Ramayan with her own tale of exile and banishment. [...]

The words had scant meaning to me at the time ... but now, lying in the darkness of the sleeping house, pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. How Baboonie must have had no real name, and how much cruelty must have gone into naming her Baboonie, meaning young girl. How she was singing Ramayana alone in Toolsie's hut, singing of such abandonment that words lost their power and only raw sound could capture it, pelting the broken shards of that holy text into the night, singing her grief. And I listened again, as though to a blessing, hearing Baboonie's strong voice, washed in rain.
(*The Swinging Bridge*, 112-4)

The combination of associative recall and conscious recollection in the present ('but now') allows the novel to explore the margins in a way that archival traces cannot. In accounts like Captain Angel's, the singing of the indentured is reduced to background noise, stripped of meaning, authorship, and the agency of performance. Espinet's writing is just as ambivalent in its entanglement of song and suffering. Yet through this and other moments like it, she moves the sound barely registered by men like Angel into the centre of the aural scene. Rendered as neither noise nor silence, it can be read as a form of what Camp terms 'the quiet', a 'modality that surrounds and infuses sound with impact and affect which creates the possibility for it to register as meaningful' (4). In *The Swinging Bridge*, Espinet suggests what we might be able to hear if we could attune ourselves to the quiet spaces in accounts like Angel's, layering quotidian sounds with an emotional intensity that is otherwise absent. In place of textuality ('words lost their power'), it is 'raw sound' that conveys Baboonie's 'tale of exile and punishment', the *Ramayana* transformed into a material substance, 'pelt[ed] into the night' in 'broken shards'. In these quiet spaces, Espinet reimagines sound, with outcast and overlooked women reinhabiting holy texts to tell their stories at a frequency inaudible within archival accounts.

In the novel, the 'absent voice' of the 'invisible woman' that the author gestures towards is heard not through testimony – or statistics – but through performance and music. Rather than celebrating speech as 'breaking silence', Espinet explores invisibility through characters whose literal voices are barely registered (Halbestram 126). As Spivak writes, such voices 'cannot be heard or read', since the process of archivation renders the speech of the 'subaltern as female' a failure (308): though speech may be attributed to the 'grotesquely mistranscribed names' in colonial reports, 'one never encounters the testimony of the women's voice consciousness ... one cannot put together a "voice".' (297) In *The Swinging Bridge*, Baboonie and Gainer do not need to 'speak' to be heard. Fictionalised song and aurality offer a mode of illuminating the past in which speech fails, but intimacy emerges in its absence, revealing the multiplicity of voices that we cannot hear. Outside of an archive in which the testimony of women was used to 'prove' either their willingness or their subjugation, song offers Mona an encounter with 'women like Baboonie, like my great-grandmother Gainer' who, 'in the face of renewed opposition to their freedom ... sang songs, stringing together with bawdy humour, tenderness, pain, and honesty the scattered beads of their new lives.' (298)

Conclusion

Reading fiction next to the archives of indentureship exposes different forms of knowledge about the past and the assumptions they carry. As a mode of accessing the past, archival recovery must contend with traces lodged within texts in which the intimate lives of the indentured are systematically elided. The ‘voice’ such texts inscribe is necessarily one overwritten by power, framed by the classifications of officials and planters, and the attempts by the indentured to navigate this uneven encounter. As such, efforts to recover the subjectivities of those enclosed within the cells of colonial tables and reports are bound by what can be known through their contact with authority.

The novel offers a different mode of approaching this past, layering fictional and empirical intertexts to produce an imagined access to history. Rather than recovery – as the excavation of voices or lives that once existed – *The Swinging Bridge* rests on the imagination of what is *not* there, of what *did not exist*: in interviews, Espinet is adamant that Gainder is wholly fictional, where other aspects of Mona’s life reflect the author’s experiences (Savory 95). Instead, the novel’s memory-work functions as imaginative work, conjuring an intimate story of the past that employs fiction’s capacity to travel past absence and into possible worlds, producing stories unknowable to state archives and the historiographies built from them.

Where Carter and Shepherd seek to ‘recover’ lost voices, *The Swinging Bridge* re-members the past, filling it with multiple subjects to give a composite image that nonetheless resists our efforts to make it speak. Against statistical records that disentangle subjective experiences into inert categories of objective data, the narrative pull of *The Swinging Bridge* exerts a generative force on images of the past, as memories spiral into each other, gathering pace and unfurling across its chapters. Diachronic rather than synchronic, it unfreezes the snapshot into a moving image, bridging subjects across generations, and replacing the discrete, bounded entities of tabulated accounts with subjects that are entangled, relational, and mobile.

Counterposing literary fiction to archival depositions permits glimpses of histories inaccessible to either text in isolation. Where Espinet’s novel proceeds from present-day absence towards presence in a forgotten past, the colonial archives proceed from the literal presence of the indentured towards their absence via selective inclusions and statistical representation. Together, they form a patchwork of presences and absences that registers traces of both the anxious world of the colonial administrators and the emotional universe of the *girmityas*.

In this thick reading, the ‘facts’ and the fictionalisations within literary and archival texts are equally important. Such a reading cuts against the inherent positivism in the idea of history as an ‘institution of knowledge’, and archival documents as artefacts intended ‘to verify, that is, to make true, some hypothesis’ (Ricoeur 167, 177). Where this process of disciplinary verification produces ‘facts’ from contemporary accounts by disengaging them from ‘distortions’ (Heehs 428), in the case of indentureship the distortions tell us as much as the facts. Recognising where archival documents distort the interior lives of the indentured enables us to trace the contours of archival silences. Though we cannot hear or see these silent spaces, we would not be able to account for their existence without being able to read for the distortions. Similarly, the fictionalisations within Espinet’s novel – where the narrative shifts from historical events into the quiet frequencies of Mona’s memories – offers access to worlds we cannot objectively know. The two kinds of ‘distortion’ – literary and archival – form inversions of the other, and by reading them together we can glimpse the mobile lives of the indentured and the officials who followed in their wake. These ‘fictions’ provide a trace of lives otherwise unknowable, exposing the ‘unrealized possibilities, practices and dreams’ that shadow the statistical accounts of indenture (Azoulay 565).

The history of indentureship remains largely unwritten. No narrative captures the multitude who made their way from the Gangetic plain to the Caribbean between 1838 and 1917: their intimate lives, their dreams, and their plans exceed the words that could write it. There is no figure, abstract or concrete, that can hold all of these stories, that can represent the lives trapped beneath the six letters that make up ‘coolie’. It is up to fiction, in conjunction with the traces of these lives, to imagine a world that exceeds the text.

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