

# Unfamiliar Shores

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# DECLARATION

Submitted in fulfilment / ~~partial fulfilment~~ (*delete whichever is applicable*) of  
the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS , in the Graduate  
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South Africa.

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. I confirm that an external editor ~~was~~ was not used (*delete whichever is applicable*) and that my Supervisor was informed of the identity and details of my editor. It is being submitted for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

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Thank you to Sally-Ann Murray, for her inestimable guidance, punditry, and patience.

*“the sea remains / and it remains the sea”*

For my father, who passed away the year he was due to complete his own Master's degree

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# Child

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“above all now I know  
how often beyond the shores of a word  
lies a sea I do not understand”

Shabbir Banoobhai



## Prayer list

One pint milk, three kinds fruit,  
camphor, two box matches, one packet samagri.

Lamp oil, brasso, camphor.

*I said camphor already? Okay nev'mind.*

One packet kumgum, *with the red label.*

Betel-nut.

Betel leaves.

*Pick from Aunty Sushila's garden,  
get curry leaves and one bahnahnah leaf when you there.*

Small container ghee, two coak'nuts.

Five boxes agarbatti, *must be the five for ten rand ones.*

One roll red string

*and one packet chips*

*and one popsicle*

*to have when you coming home.*

## Youth

He looks to his side.

Puts down the box of matches

and waves away

the smoke curling

on a morning agarbatti.

Reads last night's movie ticket, carefully.

Washes his hands, rinses his mouth

and wakes his brother into the morning cold.

Turns back

to the photographs

framing the passage walls.

Pulls at the string on his wrist

and unlocks the door.

He can find a foothold

only when the clouds gather breath.

## **After school**

She waits at the crèche  
counting to twenty near the fence,  
watching ants on the red sand.  
Her brother walks the road from his school to hers,  
white shirt humid on his back.  
He loops the small bag over his shoulders  
and takes her hand.

Their Thatha's portrait.  
They stop, take off their shoes. Feel the cold cement.  
Fold hands in reverence and remembrance.

He slices an apple;  
she grapples with her quarter.

"Amma's not going to come home again.  
Let me bath you now, then we can light lamp."

Night falls.  
Banana leaves bow their heads  
in a streaming sky.  
Swallows swing over the yard,  
flowers drift on wet tar.

## **Tinley Manor**

i

Once a year, every summer,  
he went with his grandparents to Tinley Manor,  
a small hut under milkwoods near the beach,  
banana palms rustling.

This his family called their own.

On his first afternoon there  
carrying a plastic spade  
and two paper cups for buckets,  
he walked past the broom vendors  
down the dunes  
to the edge of the ocean.

ii

“Come inside bacha, getting dark now  
dain’jris by the wahteh,” his Nani said  
before she walked back  
to the beach cottage  
where kebab and roti simmered next  
to saucers of samoosas.

Evening settled above the coastal bush,  
trains rattled in the distance.  
The sea light faded  
leaving his silhouette on the sand  
dark and unafraid of the climbing water.

## Two Birds

Late one afternoon,  
a sparrow flew  
through the kitchen  
window and into the lounge.

We moved couches, chairs, tables,  
papers, cricket bats, books, vases, the sideboard, the deep freeze.

Then Dad sat down,  
lifted a newspaper  
into his lap, and said,  
‘We must have scared it out,  
you can’t always kill two birds with one stone.’

Long after bedtime, we woke  
to wild circles around the ceiling fan.  
Dad, quietly male, eased a black bucket  
over the panic and walked outside,  
releasing the stricken sparrow  
into a star-still sky.

Later, after everyone had fallen asleep  
i stayed up, watching the half-light,  
working out a way  
to feed two birds with one seed.

## **School Journal**

Class iii B

Mrs. Govender

20 September 1993

On Friday mam let us wear colour clothes because we never make naughty. Breaktime it was raining so nobody was playing catching games on the grounds. All the classes were getting full with isels, and they was flying into peoples hair. After school my bhaya ate one isel, and spewed on the road. When he went home he had running stomach, so Ma took him to the doctors. The doctor said he caught a bug. Bhai was surprised how the doctor knew so he told Ma about the isel. Ma slapped him, and scolded him, and never make him supper because she said he must carry on eat isels instead of her food. When ma went next door to Aunty Cookies, I gave Bhai one roti and dished him some pumpkin. But I never told Ma.

## **Runaways**

Beneath the freeway underpass  
running to Isipingo Beach  
three young boys balance  
on the shoulder of the N2

in thin t-shirts  
their fathers maybe  
once bought them.  
Two hold backpacks,  
one swings a Checkers packet.

At night they walk along  
the train tracks  
listening to the wind  
carry cars home.

They pass the canal,  
factories lit by steel smoke.  
Hustle maacher in Prospecton,  
run from security.

At Rivermouth they fish  
ashy meat from the brick-braais,  
collect empty beer bottles  
and head into the mangroves.

## **The fox and the grapes**

‘And it jumped, and it jumped  
but it couldn’t reach.’

Your right arm, fox-brown, arcs up,  
following your words through the air.

The rest of your body lies inert  
(the doctors said inept)  
on the double bed flanked by lamps.

– And then? –

my back curls against the old bench,  
sandwiched by other visitors eating silent samoosas.

Then the conversation in the kitchen,  
subdued footsteps down the passage,  
your long drawing in of breath, and louder sigh,  
closing your eyes. The first signs of a sun setting.

‘You should have heard Nana when he could  
*really* talk, he was a school principal you know.’

– But he can talk, really. He really can talk –  
My bare soles are black from the veranda polish;  
my hands hold an empty juice box,  
eyes afraid of the grass snaking outside.

‘Put your slippers on and, quickly,  
throw that juice away  
there’s none left.’



## Diwali

Beige burfee on the table,  
studded with coloured almonds,  
cut into crumbling squares.

Aunty Mano's voice  
in the kitchen, defending  
her sugary delights.

The back-end of a box  
behind the couch. Fireworks.  
Small fingerprints pressed onto dust.

Sushi's shrill, annoying laugh in the lounge,  
but Dadoo never seems to tire of her giggling.

A burnt matchstick on the tiles  
hit from out my hand  
for blacking the lamp-wax too soon.

Beyond the window,  
skies exploding through the night  
into the colour of fire.

The tarnished ladle, standing in the dhall.

Nani seated at the table. She offers

the last piece of ladhoo.

We know it is her favourite.

Uncle Bennie knocks at our open door

carrying little Himaan and a box of sweetmeats.

The door creaks closed.

The lamp I stole is lit outside,

to bring you home out of the darkness.

## Nightfall

### i

On the dark veranda  
outside your house  
we'd sit after lunch.  
Lego on the floor,  
walking stick against the couch,  
sun in the trees.

### ii

Listening to Hindi music  
or the news, quiet.  
Till car lights climbed  
the driveway and birds flew  
like stars into the sky.

# Father

---

“The son who bears upon his back  
the father that he loves, and bears him from  
the ruins of the past, out of nothing left.”

Wallace Stevens

## Still

Today we left it at the dealer,  
Mum, Kavish and I.  
The purple car,  
broken door handles,  
paint peeling off the spoiler.

You drove that car  
to Parklands hospital  
just once.  
We visited, and you  
walked us down  
to buy newspapers  
for your evening read.

We drove home  
from the hospital  
silent. Staring at trees  
skirting the sunlight.  
Birds, still, on quiet branches.

## **Mangoes**

Sonny never refused a dare.

Hesitated, maybe, but never refused.

He'd done it all.

Dived into croc'dile cove,  
swallowed a tablespoon of garam masala,  
walked through Gan's temple at midnight.  
He even gave a thali to Jaron's Mosi,  
"Marr' me Aunty?"

When we went to town on the bus,  
christmastime, early, to see the lights,  
Sonny hesitated, but never refused.  
"Go pick mangoes from Mr Peter's 'ouse,  
easy luck, they ready to fall, 'ees car not there."

Two mangoes were enough,  
trailing orange down all  
our mouths and arms.  
But Sonny never refused a dare.  
"Pick 'nuth'one."

Whizzing through air, leaves, branches,  
a pellet bit into Sonny's bum.  
"Saathie ma!"  
Deena grabbed him, screaming,  
all of us running  
onto the street laughing

as the clouds seeped  
into a messy mango sunset.

## **Father and Son**

i

Your alumni letter came today,  
years after you had last  
carried a book to campus.

The photograph of you.  
Brown zip-up jacket, hip cream trousers.  
Your friends smiling at you smiling.

A familiar face, hidden in yesterday's night:  
throwing pamphlets off Durban buildings  
cursing the Nats under your breath,  
singing Cat Stevens out loud,  
strumming that old guitar in the varsity gardens.

ii

The university i walk through  
in torn jeans and baggy tee  
reading the alumni correspondence.

i walk in the heat  
plugged in to Atmosphere,  
creasing a path to the campus theatre,  
cursing the gnats out loud,  
greeting friends under my breath.



Holding a stack of books  
i squint at the blinding sky,  
looking for libraries on a fading map.

## **A Dream**

My Dad and i are on a beach. Late sunset.

The waves keep breaking.

i leave to get our camera from the car.

When i return, my Dad and the sunset are gone,  
but the waves keep breaking.

## **Grammar Lesson**

It's not reaching into your clothes cupboard  
to look for my grey hoodie.

Not using your purple car  
to buy bread and eggs from the Superette.

Not even looking at the photos on the fridge,  
you and Mum dancing at a birthday party.

Where I falter now, what I find most difficult,  
is speaking of you in the past tense.

## **Killarney Valley, Cato Ridge**

i

Dirt track through the quiet valley.  
Zulu women singing the road home.  
Two horses on a hillside.

ii

Cross-legged in the farmhouse  
listening to funereal bhajans.  
Cycads on the dry river.

iii

Fields of yellow flowers  
besieged by a summer sky.  
The cicadas won't stop singing to the silence.

## **As part of your contribution to the struggle**

You are entitled to:

i

Category One:

a trip to Robben Island, all expenses paid  
and complimentary censored communications from your spouse,  
inclusive of the drawing by your son (with his love)

Also: free restriction of movement (freedom comes at a price).

After your stay, you are entitled to return home

where the following extras apply (including but not limited to)

- house arrest,
- state surveillance,
- years of exile,
- trips to the ninth floor.

(Soap on a rope is for your own account.)

ii

Retirement benefits comprise the following (without guarantee):

- Tea with Madiba and Naomi Campbell
- Rolling Ministerial portfolios
- Keeping good company in terms of the BEE JSE ASAP VIP
- A side street named after you in the city of your choice (currently, only Durban is one of our registered partners)  
little boys at the robot, tapping car windows  
for a small contribution to their struggle.

## **Rivermouth**

A rusted Valiant pulls into a parking,  
the engine rattling above waves.  
Doors open onto potholed tar  
and fishing bait, dented beer cans.

Holding her brother's hand  
a woman in a turquoise sari  
steps barefoot onto stones.

Without her wedding thali,  
her straight hair tied back,  
listening for the day's first birds.

Walking alongside the stirring river  
she doesn't look toward the sky,  
this being the place of goodbyes.  
The fading mendhi on her feet  
disappears under the ochre sand.

The sun rises over dark mangroves  
leaving wet shadows, gleaming.

She drops the urn and falls  
into the fiery water,  
ashes clouding like a storm.

## Leaving

We form circles around the coffin,  
throwing samidha sticks  
past the havan flame.  
In a white robe, holding yellowed paper  
the Pandit recites Vedic mantras.

Curious children push at the door  
to look inside.  
Some run away.  
Some play.

Forgetfully, the undertaker picks his teeth  
while holding the furnace handle.  
When it is lifted, the men drop  
the last of their samagri around you.  
Some step back.  
Some stare.

You leave, in the suit you wore  
to Tanush's wedding.  
Flames blanket your body,  
black smoke in a blue sky.

# Farther Still

---

“And I anchored in Durban...

in the dust of waves.

To be scattered in the gales of continents.

In the currents of colonies.”

Khal Torabully



## **Monsoon**

Morning pushed the sky awake  
grey cloud stretching  
a stick of smoke from early fires.

We went to work,  
wrapped in night-long rain  
smelling soft soil  
and burning wood  
on the narrow path.

Near a fig tree  
Babu stopped,  
pushed his back against the bark  
and tore off his rakhi.

When the sirdar followed Rani  
into the shivering cane  
overseer watched closely, leering.

At midday old Ganesan looked up,  
pondered the sky:  
‘Just like monsoon’.

The sirdar whipped his back  
and the rain began to fall.

Banana leaves cowered  
under the eyes of new gods.

Not even Indra  
swims these skies  
on the wings of his elephant.

## **Sampaati**

### I

In a Ramnagar morning sky two wings of cloud drew  
a shadow onto the sand, upon their talons and over  
their wings, glowing with the gift of Aruna, their father.

### II

Drawing back, their brown claws added one last  
ribbon to the limestone path tracing the only  
mountain in Madhya Pradesh that smelled of the distant sea.

### III

With beating wings and jousting hearts, beaks tilted,  
Jatayu and Sampaati followed their father into  
the sky's sea, wind strong against burning eyes.

### IV

Behind clouds, climbing, sun lighting his plumes,  
Sampaati swirled in the heat, beak opening slowly,  
shadow cloaking his brother's mantle.

### V

Aruna and Jatayu scorched higher, beneath them  
his burnt wings fell to the forest floor  
before Sampaati had the chance to cry for help.

## Karuppayi

*“21<sup>st</sup>. No. 40 Karuppayi was instrumentally delivered of a stillborn child at 3:00pm. Mr. Le Febour was instructed to throw the baby overboard at night when the emigrants were asleep” – Diary of H. Hitchcock, Surgeon-Superintendent aboard the Umvoti, 1882.*

The moonlit village of Orissa calls its children  
home for the evening scything along brown paths  
of flowering snakeroot and rain-dotted vallaraai.  
On a far away ship, carrying Orissa's other children,  
the doleful call of the forest muntjac can't be heard.

The men, speaking the day's last Tamil  
slowly walk to sleep in the cabins they'd washed all day  
while the women sifted rice, throwing the grits overboard.  
On their backs, eyes closing, no one forgets to think about home.  
Month-old infants left behind, harboured in caring hands.

Soon, cabins are quiet with this ocean's foreign breath  
sounding lullabies to those more fearful of the land  
they were heading for than this strange sea.

In the bridge-wing the captain thinks, fingers  
his bristled lip, breathing in the fresh sea wind,  
the shuffling of restless coolies beneath his feet.

In her bed, Karuppayi Nainar, who had touched and kissed  
her mother's feet before leaving Orissa, wakes  
to an irregular splash against the ship's wooden sides.

### **Truro**

No.	12	Kaghery	Deceased	Age: 40
No.	28	Ameethah	Unfit to Work. Insane since arrival	Age: 17
No.	68	Kolen Vencaten	Chakaskraal Sugar Estate	Age: 25
No.	140	Moonesammy	House Servant	Age: 21
No.	164	Camiah Geddapah	Via Mauritius	Age: 30
No.	255	John Vallet	Cook	Age: 36
No.	260	Dellhi Aumunden	Ayah	Age: 21
No.	301	Chinapen Migale	Then deported	Age: 7

### **Belvedere**

No. 480	Sewoogolam Pursum	Licenced to leave	Age: 38
No. 542	Bholoo Emrith	Leper	Age: 19
No. 592	Lall Vayrub	With 2 children	Age: 19
No. 647	Sobah Bootoo	Orphan	Age: 6
No. 661	Goohee Goluck	Orphan Child	Age: 3
No. 2415	Coopoo Naicker	Unfit to work	Age: 30
No. 5997	Kunnee Chellum	Other	Age: 20

## **Old Ganesan speaks**

### i

Can tear my Lakshmi string, the red cotton in their clenched palms.  
The god-lamp, brass burning by the window, they can put out.  
And laughing at the ash-dot on my neck, pulling their ties,  
they won't remember how orange and lilac coloured their language.

### ii

Can play Ravanna, snatch Sitas from fields.  
Pretend not to recognise the blue eyes of her children.  
Pull us out our homes, before bulldozing  
the lit lamps we tried to leave behind.

### iii

Can sit, close-lipped, when we sing Muruga's bhajans,  
will not return for blessings at the feet of Mata, Pita,  
learn the swearwords saved for sirdars and overseers.

### iv

Can shit in my vegetable garden, piss on my marigolds.  
They can't stop far-away waves reaching our shores  
or the sun from setting and rising up.

## **Muharram**

Pulsing into the street  
Mohammedans, Hindoos, Christians  
silhouette the sunrise.  
Tigers, painted orange, follow  
swirling through the crowd  
pulling at saris, bangles, dhotis.  
In the front - singing mantras,  
surging drums, screaming -  
we haul thaziyahs  
of bamboo and tinsel  
like ships across the tar.  
Trays of fruit for the hungry,  
milk and halwa, camphor burning.  
A bottle breaks. Men sway  
as ganja smokes the air.  
Children search the street,  
carrying prasad in tiny palms.  
Stick fighters start to circle,  
bent backs bloody.  
Voices coil in song.  
Imams, Pandits, Pastors.  
Day falls.  
We stand against a sunset  
watching thaziyahs sink in the Umgeni River.  
Far off is the Indian Ocean.



## **bee sting**

The sun melted  
our dhotis in the fields.

A loaf of bread  
broken among ten.

— Get back to work you bladdy coolies,  
that cane won't cut itself —

Only old Ganesan smiled, picking  
up the long black blade by its  
wooden handle, saying softly  
'dying bees still sting.'

## **Mummy-Aunty recalling childhood**

We should play till late in the canefields.

Sometimes by the mutton-gulla trees or the gumtree trees.

Safe that time, no locking doors or rogues on the roads,

only worry for the big big rats and snakes.

Coming time from school we should watch to cross

the railway tracks, for the trains.

The drivers only liked to throw boiling water

and swear when we was by the crossings.

Whites never used to like us before.

Now I see one-way they eating rotis and kachoris.

We should even play with the blacks' childrens because you know

not any kind peoples should stay in Stanger then, very friendly they was.

Should eat in each other peoples' house for prayers and feen' rals.

Only big-ma nuvva eat for two days when her hupsand ran before one train.

Outside we lit fire to make food

in the handi-pot for when lot people came to visit.

Can't get so fresh vegetabills now.

Dabla, gadhra, bhindi, methi, all from the gardens.

We should chop sugar cane bhaji and pumpkin herbs,

same bush knife Sushila's big-father should use to cut fowl.

Lot space on the farms for the fowls to run,

no such thing as cages or coops.

Then after we moved by the Council homes

where the roads were too quite

and even daytime our doors stayed closed.

1906

*For Ponappa and Arumugan Naicken*

He wakes up,  
folds his blanket.  
Wife and four children  
asleep at his feet.

Picks up his last-born  
with cold hands,  
sky still dark.  
Wraps a blanket around the boy,  
steps across his wife's legs  
and onto the path outside.  
Walks on bristling grass  
listening to crickets,  
a rooster. Watching the stars.

Stops at the railway tracks,  
and lies down.  
Prays to Muruga,  
child asleep on his chest.

## Seashells

### i

Stars, still in the sky  
wash on the sea,  
a ship swaying slowly.

### ii

One hundred and thirty-two people in the hold,  
counted in the morning  
and the afternoon and the evening.

### iii

They show each other strings and scarves,  
smile when someone close  
finds meaning in a word's  
shared voice.

### iv

Waves touch the ship  
then move on to Kerala.

### v

Clouds block the moon  
and in the far far distance  
shells tumble  
to their new home on the sand.

# Returning Tides

---

“I have crossed an ocean  
I have lost my tongue  
from the root of the old one  
a new one has sprung.”

Grace Nichols

## **Today**

Today, waves from  
the Indian Ocean  
fall murkily onto the  
soft iSipingo sand,  
as they did yesterday,  
and the century before.

## Possibilities

If, driving, you leave the N2 as it branches into Umhlali  
you will see swaying waves of sugar cane, wire fences rusting,  
women at the roadside selling netted avocado pears.

If, passing, you turn into the dusty road with a wooden sign  
bronze letters reading 'Beneva Estate 1930' you will see  
split leaves and brown stalks bending to the wind.

If, stopping, you step out near the concrete wall,  
sea wind from Salt Rock at your back, you will see  
a road of stone and mud, curving upward, beyond the field.

If, walking, watching for snakes and stones on the damp ground,  
you will see an old mango tree, thin branches  
without leaves, a rock at the roots, an anthill crumbling.

If, touching, your fingers tracing the brown bark,  
the carved initials, you might see the burns left by the ropes  
hung over its branches, and a small cross nailed to the tree.

Then, tired, if you decide to sit, back against the grainy base,  
hands on cool grass, you won't see the cuts her axe seared  
and the hollows her knees made, falling to the ground.



## **Jooma Road Temple**

Saffron janda flags above

fallen mango leaves.

Grey vervets clatter

over the tin-roof temple.

Murtis in human cloth

glare beyond painted pathways.

Near the pond's concrete edge, a sign:

Please wash hands, feet, fruit, all ofrings

Inside - the smell of smoke and sweetmeat,

devotees slowly circling,

spilling milk and coins on cool tiles.

A black man kneels. Behind him

stands a Tamil woman, hands to the sky.

Silently, both pray to foreign gods.

## **Mitchell Park morning**

*For M*

Lawn quiet and leaf lush.  
You in your salwaar kameez.  
Caged birds sing, small skies to fill.

Word-weary  
you greet devotees  
by smiling.  
They watch your arms  
stretch sunward, holding asanas  
carried from India.

When the last breath is held  
you close your eyes. Listen.  
The silence never speaks.

## Ways

‘Rubbish,’ she said, staring at me.  
Cigarette-fingers raised to  
the corner of her lips.  
‘You can’t be a feminist,’  
unconsciously,  
or unselfconsciously,  
drawing the bottom of her top over  
the belt on her fading jeans.  
‘You don’t know the ways of women,’  
swinging the cigarette away from her knees  
toeing the tar of an invisible atlas.  
A flailing dot of ash  
landed defiantly at my feet.  
Tilting my head upward,  
eyeing the glowing gwayi:  
‘But then, I don’t know the ways of  
the people we call men.’

## **Fast Food**

Just think: these four guys  
tonguing the air  
whistling like wolves  
at women outside  
the Island Hotel  
may one day be  
fathers to daughters.

## **Avatar**

The day the earth began falling  
we started to think the gods were  
human, like us.

Or we started to believe  
we were godly  
like them.

## **Days**

On days like this,  
shade and light swinging  
through the mango tree,  
starlings in the sky above.

On days like these,  
sea surface catching clouds,  
the sky rushes to the ruins  
of its past life.

## **Sunset at Tiger Rocks**

A few fishermen carrying  
the day's catch.

Two women fit a breyani pot  
in the back of a bakkie  
between children and a cricket set.

Birds scatter into the air  
at the speed of flight.

A lifeguard drops his perry buoy,  
asks a young girl to pick it up.  
She does, passes it proudly.

Behind us a carguard jika majikas  
for tips in the emptying car park.

We watch the sun set with stoic eyes.

## **Port Edward**

Rocks stare in different directions  
to stop the insistent waves.  
Nothing else, here, is as devoted.

Worn sea-black, washed stones  
empty along sandlines.  
Wood drifts in the windy water.

Even the sand  
banked among the tussocks  
will one day be swept away.

The sea seems infinite.

But on the other side  
the ring you lost in the rock pool  
beaches on an unfamiliar shore.



## **Mantra**

Breach the time-frame,  
breathe out life's pain  
to keep the mind sane.  
Inhale incense  
exhale incensed.  
Burn with the incredible,  
and the knowledge that  
even eternity's ephemeral.  
At each beach  
waves stretch to blue.  
There our paths are fated.  
Life is never new,  
we are the past reincarnated.

Self-reflexive essay component

## **How to speak?**

*“To speak...means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation”.* Frantz Fanon (1967:17-18)

A contemporary writer may choose from such a multitude of genres that the choice of mode proves an intriguing question. Stylistically, too, there are innumerable options for the writer in a globalised, postmodern world. As I see it, however – certainly in my own case – these formal or aesthetic choices may be tempered by the imagined ethics which inform a writer’s literary production, and this confluence of issues may also be influenced by a writer’s particular choice of subject matter. All these elements, closely aligned, are necessary in the present essay, where I explore the process of my own writing, and offer aspects of literary analysis. This segment of the essay will delineate the mode/s of imaginative writing which I have selected for the collection *Unfamiliar Shores*, as well as detail some of the possible thematic foci in the work. In particular, my textual and formal analyses of certain poems will focus on an examination and evaluation of poetic language in the conveying of culture and the construction of identity.

The arrangement of the various segments in *Unfamiliar Shores* illustrates an awareness of history and historiographical modes. Viewed chronologically, the collection would seem to mimic an excavational foray into personal and cultural memory, moving from the early days of the (‘Child’), to the remembered life of a parent (‘Father’), and on more deeply and distantly still towards cultural ancestry in ‘Farther Still’. However, the last segment (‘Returning Tides’), offers a view of the contemporary experience of South African Indian Hindu life, somewhat surprisingly perhaps unsettling both experiential and historical lines of thought and experience.

Therefore, although history is a recurrent theme and a provocative conceptual node in *Unfamiliar Shores*, there is no simple reliance on the past to determine present identity. Through a challenging examination of conventional historicity and historiographical modes in relation to the lyric form, this part of the self-reflexive essay will detail some of the links between imaginative writing, memory, and the constitution

of social history, with reference to the heterogeneous South African Indian Hindu experience.

Language is an inextricable aspect of human culture. As a form of expression language provides an outlet for the human desire to derive meaning from (and to ascribe definition to) one's environment. As a conduit for communication, it allows for the transfer of ideas, thoughts, and feelings. In attempting to shape expression or transmit ideas, language may assume a multitude of guises in the shape of register, tone and vocabulary, and in this constructive and creative sense language may be seen not merely as a functional channel of expression, but as an imaginative facility whereby innovative spaces of experience and meaning may be fashioned.

Poetry, as a mode of imaginative writing, is a broad genre encompassing manifold varieties and styles. However, poetry, as distinct from other imaginative modes of writing such as fiction or drama, concerns itself chiefly with "the expression of feeling and emotion, and that feeling and emotion are particular" (Eliot 2000:233). In other words, poetry provides a deeply subjective standpoint from which one may attempt to speak. Poetry, then, is an apt form for the exploration and articulation of the intimate voice of the speaker. A poem is a space in which expression is charted, and identity constructed, and as I hope to demonstrate in my discussion of *Unfamiliar Shores*, this map takes the form of personalised intimacy as well as more collective voices in which individual utterance segues into association with the plural. I would like to make some observations, here, concerning poetry and narrative. Whereas prose aligns itself closely to story through the mode of narrativisation, poetry relies less on the establishment of chief characters or protagonists, but this is not to say that poetry excludes characterisation altogether. In my experience, however, in choosing not to foreground the traditional, individualistic conceptualisation of a protagonist or hero/ine, or the teleological mode of linear narrative, there exists in poetic language an ideal space for the exploration of polyvocal expression and, stemming from this polysemy, a sense of pluralistic identity. This is relevant to my poetry project, as one possible purpose of the collection *Unfamiliar Shores* is an attempt to represent multiple aspects of South African Indian Hindu culture and identity and, indeed, to highlight the heterogeneous profile of this culture and identity.

Nationality and religion are, here, key signposts of this identity, although even these seemingly unitary discourses are problematised within the South African Indian context. It must be said here that nationalist discourse is conventionally viewed as having a comparatively fixed and stable identity, yet South African Indians do not form a major part of any nationalist discourse. As C.A. Woods explained in 1954, in “the multi-racial country of South Africa there is no more clearly separated part of the population than the Indians ... they are an importation from the East. Their place of settlement in this country has been limited both by the original reason for their importation and since then by legislation” (ix).

If this quotation is dated – Wood’s register is, after all, indicative of the time in which he was writing – it remains interesting. The remark delineates the precarious position of South African Indians within a South African nationalist discourse, which in itself is polemical and problematic, rather than uncontested. Woods’s choice of sequestering terms, “the Indians”, “an importation” effaces the naturalised status of many South African ‘Indians’ and further relies on the misleading adjective ‘multi-racial’ to describe the highly divisive system of apartheid. If apartheid divided people according to race, such categorisations also entailed the redrafting of racial collectives. Homogenising notions of South African Indianness, for instance, were premised on language, ethnicity, and economic status. This is provocative, considering that difference and divisiveness, rather than assumed collectivity, were influential in shaping South African Indian tradition, originating in the caste system endemic to India. Economic and occupational status formed the defining feature of distinction in the Indian caste system, and in South Africa caste difference has been appropriated into linguistic, rather than occupational, differences. There are two principal reasons for this transmutation of the divisive caste system. Firstly, as Hofmeyr discusses, the transoceanic voyage undertaken by indentured migrants from India to South Africa – the crossing of the Kala Pani or ‘black water’ – necessitated the entanglement of varying castes, including the sharing of personal space, and provisions (2007). This, in itself, ruptured rules regarding the immutable separation of caste. Secondly, on arrival in South Africa occupational and economic differences were negated by the restriction of indentured labourers to plantocratic forms of work, and uniform earnings. Between Hindu indentured labourers, language was the only other clear-cut form of difference.

Hence, religious rituals and cultural customs were re-appropriated along linguistic lines. This anomaly is still apparent in the confusion surrounding the religious affiliation of many South African Hindus, where most individuals mistake language, that is to say culture, with religion. To illuminate this anecdotally, I have been present on many occasions where the question, “Are you a Hindu” was followed by the vehement and fallacious response, “No, I’m Hindi/Tamil/Telegu...”.

In envisioning a contested sense of South African Indian Hindu culture in my English language poetry, replete with its idiosyncratic myths, folk-tales, songs and religious practices, it is impossible to ignore the question of an orature which is not always well accommodated in a text-based literature. Even lyric poetry, with its inferences toward musicality, cannot always aptly convey a resonance of oral practices when the lyric is confined to the page. That said, the importance of the oral to my poetry is perhaps accommodated in the words of Peter Horn, who observes that poetic “language, contrary to the univocality of our discourse of interdiction, attempts reconciliation with what we have excluded” (1994:129), meaning that even poetry for the page might have potential to approximate the oral, thereby playing a part in vocalising marginalised subjects whose utterances lie outside conventional cultural codes. Such marginalised subjects may extend, from the voices of individuals, to discursive fields dismissed from predominating, rationalistic thinking. This is discernible in the types of texts used to identify, rather than recognise the identity of, the Indian indentured labourers who arrived on South African shores. Under the ordered, regulatory structures of the British colonial system, indentured labourers were classified and categorised in terms of impersonal, colonial markers of identity: numbers; colloquial stereotypes; labour designations. Shipping lists are pertinent here, used primarily for the collection and collation of such statistical data as might facilitate the colony’s management of its prospective work force, and contribute to the forwarding of economic control. As my study of historical and archival materials on South African Indian experience has made tellingly clear, for instance, the serial and colonial numbers of indentured labourers were recorded prior to their names, highlighting the economic endeavour of the colonial system, and comprising a vividly telescoped image of its dehumanising effects. I address something of this in *Unfamiliar Shores* in the poems “Truro” and “Belvedere”, referring to the first ships to bring Indian

indentured labourers to Natal. Both poems are attempts to think through, more even than merely to ‘display’, the impersonal effects of colonial discourse, and “to reveal the degree to which [it] homogenizes and misnames its others” (Chrisman 1994:499). They are concept poems which required me to move beyond lyric utterance, exploring the power of the found poem to challenge a reader’s understanding of poetry, and the link between poetic form, witness and historiography.

Let me spend a little more time on the language and form of these poems which, as in the poetry of Khal Torabully, engage with the concept of the “Book of the Voyage” (Carter and Torabully 2002:15). Like Torabully’s, my own poetry hopes to go some way towards “making legible the erased experiences of indenture” (Hofmeyr 2007:10). In this process, a prominent strategy used is the re-situating into a literary context of data from the historical record. In the poems “Belvedere”, and “Truro”, both of which comprise extracts from the ships’ registers, the movement or passage between past and present is foregrounded: as poet, I have deliberately turned to the archives in order to locate and release into a new cultural-conceptual space data which was instrumental to the colonial project of indenture. In a sense, this is a project of historical reclamation. Yet in re-situating the instrumentalist document within a literary-cultural discourse, the documentation is ripped from functionalist intention and released into more uncanny space. The extracts invite reading *as poems*, freighting the apparently utilitarian language with symbolic import and emotional resonance. Consider, here, that the slivers from the shipping lists are so evidently incomplete that they are cause for ethical pause: who, how many, what happened afterwards? When selections from the documents are re-presented as poetry, the conceptual-interpretative paradigm alters, and a reader is given space to enter the passengers’ fragmented life stories.

And yet even when named, re-claimed from historical absence, the passengers remain elusive. Who was Kolen Vencaten? Is ‘John Vallet’ in some sense the equivalent of ‘John Doe’? Are these names accurate, or is the paradoxical process of transoceanic invention and dissolution already underway, altering spelling and birth names? In effect, what I have had to accept, as a poet, is that the strategy of naming does not secure determinate, comprehensive knowledge about these labourers, people who were coming into being *as labourers*; even with my best labours, at once poetic and ethical, the indentured remain as unknown to me and to a reader as to the shipping

official who named them only in the service of the efficient numbering and tracking characteristic of the colonial project – ‘Via Mauritius’, ‘Cook’, ‘Then deported Age: 7’. Nevertheless, despite this limitation, when the lists of numbers, names, descriptors and ages are presented in a collection of poems by a poet, this action has significant potential to prompt questioning. And, further, the very prosaic, even anti-poetic quality of the language challenges a reader to think about the scope and limits of ‘the poetic’.

In what ways may these reconfigured shipping lists comprise poetry, bringing history up against lyric voice? What are the ethics of such an engagement – does the reconfiguration *reduce* history to ‘mere’ literary device and effect? It is true that these lives cannot escape the strictures of time – Sewgolum Pursum is dead. Moonesammy is dead. Even Goohee Goluck, then “Aged 3”, is dead. Yet when unburied from the list and re-animated in the unsettling environment of a poem, there is a powerfully affective sense in which these lives may haunt a reader in the present, allowing forgotten forms of linkage between past and present to surface, the very action of the present being understood through the past rendering lost time momentarily and painfully immediate.

There are further questions which my subject matter has prompted: for instance, who has the right to voice on behalf of the indentured? Am I more entitled, or preferred, or better placed, because of my position as a person of ‘Indian’ or ‘South African Indian’ or ‘Hindu’ extraction? Is the right to recuperate or imagine the experiences and lives of the indentured open to any writer with an empathetic imagination, one willing to explore the claims of affect in relation to recorded history? As my discussion thus far will imply, I have no answers to such questions; they remain philosophical gadflies which buzz and niggle. And what of another challenge: how does a poet write about the *vast numbers* of indentured lives? Inevitably, he (or she, as the case may be) must select, choosing those ‘cases’ or instances most apt for his literary purpose, leaving the rest to the papered lines of the archive, the oceans of miniscule microfiches. Fair enough, you may say. And yet I remain unsettled, sometimes, thinking of the burden of representation that I have placed on the chosen few: have I sought out, from all the material with which I have engaged, instances of indentured experience which have struck me as particularly – even inherently - *literary*, amenable to recasting in terms of such writerly elements as symbol, metaphor, rhythm and voice; and have I thereby skewed historical discourse? In my poems on indentured lives, am I



stereotyping, narrowing cultural and experiential difference into a few examples which then, through my very focus, acquire the weight and overly directed pertinence of ‘exemplars’? Is it better for a poet to make a space for at least some voices, however troubling their representivity, than to continue the blank silence which currently marks indentured experience in South African poetry? And then, too: is it necessary for me, even after attempting this complex literary-historical voicing, to admit the perplexing power of silence as a means to acknowledge the impossibility of ever capturing – and perhaps thereby *re*-containing – the ineluctable experiential histories of those who came from India to this country in the bonds of servitude?

Some may go so far as to argue that the language in which I write further tightens the bond of servitude. Most indentured labourers, although well versed in languages of their own, did not possess an understanding of the language – English – that was used to compile their colonial information profiles. Gayatri Spivak’s delineation of the subaltern, as a subject unable to attain adequate representation, is germane here. By being placed outside, and having minimal means to overturn, hegemonic, colonial codes of order, the indentured were muted and, as subaltern, “cannot be heard or read” (Spivak 1995:35). This elision of self-articulation and self-actualisation occurred when the indentured were situated exterior to the centred power of prescriptive and authoritative codes. The prevalent trait of the dominant, colonial code was a system of logocentric language overtly reliant on notions of immutable truth and knowledge. Poetic language, in that it is opaque and non-reducible, has the ability to disrupt and distend these orthodox modes of language, and I would like to think that even my small study has some power, if not quite in the manner of influential scholarly work by Marina Carter, historian of Mauritian indenture, to “wrestle[...] with the epistemological problems of subaltern invisibility” (Anderson 2004:34).

The manner in which many of the indentured labourers communicated on the sugarcane plantations is indicative of an active attempt toward self-articulation. Within the plantocratic system the language used between figures of authority and indentured subjects was directive and regulatory in the form of orders and edicts. However, the language used between the indentured labourers was often figurative and idiomatic, borrowing from the form of myths, mantras, and religious songs, such as the *Ramayana* and Sanskrit narrative lyrics. This active, potentiating form of language seems to offer a

stark contrast to the reductive, passive, and subservient speech adopted in many of the written petitions addressed by labourers to figures of authority. One such example begins, “We, the undersigned Coolies in the services of the Corporation, beg most respectfully to submit the undermentioned pitiful petition for the consideration of the Town Council” (Bhana 1984:3). Here, the conspicuous master/slave binary is evident in the regulatory rhetorical codes and linguistic protocols integral to the communicative contexts of contractual labour. The interpellation of an inferiorised, abasing identity, from the dominant colonial discourse, is highlighted in the repetition of submissive terms, “beg most respectfully”, “submit”, “pitiful”, which continues throughout the document. The diction used by the plural persona aligns itself with the binary power dichotomy of colonial discourse, where agency is always unequally centralised in one segment of the polarity. Within this binary perception of language and power, the indentured are rendered vocally ineffectual, with delimited space for actuating self-expression. The very space allowed to the tongue is circumscribed by bondage. Nevertheless, there remains a sense in which the language retains opacity, refusing to be heard, or read, merely as given. The hyperbolic, dramatically extensive, accumulation of abasing terms becomes a deliberate characterising strategy, suggesting that the subordinate collective is *conscious* of representing itself in the manner desired by the master, this in effect comprising a subtle linguistic tactic which works to trump the master in a situation where the labourers ostensibly have no power.

The use of figurative language amongst the indentured provided a further, possibly more sustaining, space for self-affirmation. Speaking on the poetry of Khal Torabully, Veronique Bragard suggests that experimentation with language has the potential for “capsizing the master narratives of western imperialism as well as essentialist visions of an ‘Indian’ identity” (2005:231). Torabully, for instance, animates his poetry through a range of idiolects and sociolects, ranging from personal linguistic quirks to more collective colloquial expression as well as literary forms of language. In the case of my own poetry, a re-imagining of the poetic possibilities of idiomatic speech is intended to affirm the validity of indentured identity as pluralistic phenomenon.

Consider how this is illustrated in the poems “bee sting”, and “Monsoon”, from *Unfamiliar Shores*. In “bee sting” the shift in persona, emphasised by the use of

parenthesis, in the second stanza, is an attempt to reflect the power dichotomy present in the historical setting. Both the voices and the tones of the speakers differ. The polyvocal persona of the indentured labourers, present in the first stanza, is highlighted in the use of the plural pronoun “our”. However, the univocal persona of the plantation overseer is underscored in the second stanza, read as monologic instruction. The debasing bluntness of the colonial master/slave dichotomy is expressed in the clichéd pejorative “bladdy coolies”, and the reduction of the indentured to mere economic expedients within colonial discourse is similarly carried in the unimaginative, predictable command, “get back to work”. Attention is also directed to the importance of the primary product in this exchange through the clause, “that cane won’t cut itself”. Although the indentured follow the overseer’s order, the metaphor of the last line acerbically implies their latent resistance in that “dying bees still sting”. This phrasing works quietly, almost at the level of unexpressed thought, and in being inflected with homilectic folk wisdom offers a subtly challenging encoding of colonial power vectors. The subdued alliterative sibilance at the end of the penultimate line, “saying softly”, is sharply offset by the repetition of the digraphic ‘st’ in the poem’s last accent, “still sting”. The use of metaphor is illustrative, here, of a possible tool for resistance to, and subversion of, monologic discourse.

The poem “Monsoon” illustrates an analogous effect, invoking mythology and idiomatic phrasing as forms of figurative mediation to be wielded by the indentured. In “bee sting”, two stanzas attempting to depict the experiences of the indentured from within their consciousnesses frame a crude, externalised injunction articulated by the overseer; in “Monsoon”, once again, the first person plural point of view seeks to affiliate the poet, as writer, to the unfolding realities of the indentured, and again the assimilated agents of the colonial master are described from outside, even as this description is uneasily situated within the body of the poem. The power relations, here, are deliberately unsettled, raising questions about the extent to which the sirdar has been incorporated into a class authority over the indentured, despite having cultural connections with the labourers on the basis of race, perhaps religion, and perhaps language. The structure of the poem simultaneously illustrates and destabilises the binary conceptualisation of colonial discourse, and I would suggest that overall it resists the finality of monologic interaction, through shifts in focalisation. Despite Foucauldian

networks of authority that not only managed daily life but permeated consciousness, some of the indentured, I have to believe, managed to find small spaces of self and community, resistance and rejoicing which enabled them to survive.

Bragard argues that the “crossing of the Kala Pani constitutes the first movement of a series of abusive and culturally stifling situations” (Cited in Carter and Torabully 2002:15). There is some validity here, yet Bragard is also mistaken, I believe, in not reclaiming the nodes of perseverance and even resistance which arose out of the “abusive and culturally stifling”. If the crossing comprised a “first movement”, it must be allowed that many others followed, and that these were shifts of various kinds. The notion of movement, then, might have been better foregrounded in Bragard’s understanding of Coolitude (the aesthetic interpretation of indentured migration, propounded by the Mauritian poet Khal Torabully) instead of the critic settling on the implied stasis or even debasing servitude of the “abusive and culturally stifling”. As Hofmeyr makes clear, Coolitude accommodates not only rupture – the traumatic passage from India to Africa, but also new relation – the capacity of the indentured to imagine an altered connectivity with the now distant putatively original place and finding links with the once hostile but, over time and indeed generations, the erstwhile colonial space as birthplace of new forms of experience and cultural relevance. This is a movement from roots, to routes – an element of the “submarine” unity of which Kamau Brathwaite speaks (1974).

Let me make a few observations, here, about the place of religion in my poems in relation to the re-imagining of the experiences of Indian indentured labourers as they sought a reconfigured sense of spiritual identity in a South African setting. Such poems feature prominently in the ‘Farther Still’ segment of the collection, where I am interested in imagining the *historical* experience of Indian indenture in South Africa. Apart from “Monsoon”, the poems “Old Ganesan speaks” and “Sampaati”, draw on characters in Hindu mythology, implying that it was through such invocation of traditional religio-mythic figures that displaced Indian people sought to negotiate early instances of the diaspora. In addition, though, poems such as “Prayer List”, “Leaving”, and “Jooma Road Temple”, from other parts of the collection, explore the nature of *contemporary* Hindu tradition in attempting to depict a shifting South African Indian Hindu identity.

Let us return to the poem “Monsoon” in order to engage with some of these points. Religious mythology is channelled into the poem through references to the divine figures, Indra, the God of lightning, thunder and rain, and his carrier Airavata, meaning elephant of the clouds. Further reference to religio-cultural symbology is implicit in the inference to the Hindu festival Raksha Bandhan, in the allusion to the thread of protection, “rakhi”. Raksha Bandhan, typically takes place in August, near the end of the Indian monsoon season, and celebrates the kinship between brothers and sisters (Chandra 2007:169). Apart from their shared link to the rainy monsoon season, Raksha Bandhan has strong mythical ties to Indra and his wife, Sachi, who feature in stories of the rakhi’s origination. The rending of the rakhi in an act of exasperation by Babu, one of the indentured characters, may represent the loss of traditional customs through the processes of migrancy and acculturation. Religious texts, in the form of songs, myths, and folk-tales, were instrumental in forging a newfound sense of identity for Indian indentured migrants. As Marina Carter and Khal Torabully write, “sacred texts were part and parcel of their journey ... a struggle against deculturation took place. Coolies clung to their founding texts” (2002:117). Many of the texts considered sacred in the Hindu religion, including the *Vedas*, *Bhagavad-Gita*, and the *Ramayana*, are in verse form. Textually, the verse used is syllabically metered and has a complex uniform prosody and structured rhythm unique to classical Sanskrit poetry (Brough 1968:12). However, as many of the indentured migrants were unable to read or write, stories from these sacred texts were adapted from the verse form. It is clear that in affirming their cultural identity, the indentured turned toward a more demotic form than written literature to sustain and retain the mythology of their religious texts. Yet, in the transliteration from the written to the spoken word, there is an unavoidable loss and rupture which redrafts the original fixed texts into altered and adaptable forms. Similarly, speaking of migrant communities in the Antilles, Derek Walcott says: “deprived of their original language, the captured and indentured tribes create their own, accreting and secreting fragments of an old, an epic vocabulary” (1996:506). Linking the creative potential in forming new modes of speech to the craft of poetry, Walcott goes on to state, “this process of renaming, of finding new metaphors, is the same process that the poet faces” (ibid.).

As many of my comments thus far should attest, in expressing a sense of South African Indian Hindu identity as comprising multiple languages, it is my belief that polyvocality should occur in a deeper sense than poetic form alone. And thus I keep returning to the matter of language. The language question is extremely fraught. Consider for a moment the case of Hindi in the context of the Indian subcontinent. As Michael Scharf explains, there are over 1,600 languages spoken in India, but Hindi became the country's official language after independence from the British Crown in 1947 even though Hindi was native to but 40% of the population. "There was much resistance to the language's elevation" to the "perceived "symbol and arbiter of North Indian cultural hegemony" and "speakers of Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, and Telugu together number hundreds of millions" (2010:n.p). In some sense, then, the Hindi language has connotations of dominance, even while it is also associated with the subservience of Indian indenture in South Africa.

Where does that leave me as a young English-speaking South African Indian Hindu poet? (The clunky descriptors are intentional, as they point to the impossibility of ever arriving at a satisfactory categorisation of one's experience and imaginary.)

There are many factors to consider in choosing a fitting language to evince and enunciate the identities in which I am interested. Fortunately I am able to trace both a Hindi and a Tamil lineage, and have grown up hearing the musicality of these languages at the homes of relatives. Yet, there remains only one language I am able even half-deftly to write in, and that is neither Hindi nor Tamil. Paradoxically, even were I proficient in these influential Indian vernaculars, to choose to write solely in one of them would be deliberately to deny the multilingualism of a *South African* Indian identity.

This is where the pertinence of English arises. I find myself thinking: if, as Hofmeyr suggests via the insights of several other scholars, "Islam provides a 'grammar' of the Indian Ocean" in that Arabic as an international language "facilitated cosmopolitan exchange and mobility over vast areas" (2007:8) by promoting "new categories of travellers, most notably pilgrims, administrators and scholars"... what of other languages? English is the language that comes most immediately to mind. English may carry certain connotations and connections to the colonial discourse of British

imperialism. Yet as Scharf points out, “English: the language of India’s erstwhile colonial rulers, a language that first entered the country by armed force and bureaucratic ‘necessity’, has become, increasingly, ‘neutral’. The importance of English has been amplified by its emergence as the language of international transaction and class mobility, and in the process its older political meanings have been almost wholly eclipsed in India” (2010:n.p). Similar obtains in South Africa, where English has become the language most used by South African Indians, and the language best able to communicate ideas across a variety of cultures and contexts. That said, it is worth noting how English remains a contested language of literary expression in India, where skill in the vernaculars tends still to be considered the best measure of a poet’s ‘Indianness’. The use of English, in comparison, is used “to impugn the poet with lingering colonialist sensibilities” and “to condemn alleged mimicry”. These critiques are “rooted in a politics that does not see English as a proper medium for an Indian poetic” and “deny that Indian poetry in English is Indian at all” (Scharf 2010:n.p). This position has lately been challenged by Jeet Thayil’s edited anthology *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*. This is the first volume “to place a large selection of poets from across the diaspora, including poets born outside India, alongside the standard [Indian] canon”, and Thayil conceptualises this as “a community separated by the sea” where the demographic links are “Indian descent and the use of the English language” (Scharf 2010:n.p).

Like any living language, English is not a static mode of communication or expression for the South African Indian community. With the appropriation of old words, and the addition of new terms, a unique dialect has materialised. This has been influenced by a plethora of ‘African’ languages, including Afrikaans, isiZulu, as well as those from India such as Hindi, Tamil, Urdu, Telegu and Malayalam. In turn, this nuanced patois has impacted upon many other South African dialects. My poems, then, while written in English, represent elements of idiolect and sociolect in order to convey the polyvocal potentiality embedded in English as ‘englishes’. Certain linguistic purists may support the argument that using such a dialect in poetry may render the piece flawed or less than estimable. In particular, there may be anxieties expressed about the linguistic compromising of ‘proper’ English. Yet I consider that there is a rich poetic cadence in under-used demotic speech patterns; they comprise a still latent linguistic

repertoire which needs to be used to realise and embody a neglected aspect of South African experience, that of South African Indians. An example can be found in the poem “Mummy-Aunty recalling childhood”. Whilst there are numerous grammatical transgressions by the persona – including “We should play...” and “gumtree trees” – these are aptly reflective of a certain South African Indian sociolect. In the line, “dabla, gadhra, bhindhi, methi”, there is a rhymed syllabic rhythm idiosyncratic to this manner of speaking. The English equivalents of lima beans, tiny beans, okra, and fenugreek utterly fail to convey the mellifluous, harmonious resonance, ingredients, if you like, which were constitutive to the persona’s youthful identity and which she attempts to gather or re-collect through the words of the poem. These herbs and vegetables, as many are aware, are a significant part of traditional South African Indian cuisine, and they furthermore connote a symbolic connection to land. This entails not merely a symbolic connection with the inherited cultural practices of ‘India’, but the difficult formation of a bond with the new, foreign land, in that many once indentured labourers purchased tracts of arable land after their contracts were completed. The land was used for sustenance and livelihood, home gardening and market gardening. These specific sites of ownership and domestication were crucial to the mapping of a South African Indian identity.

Further, as my choice of poetry as a medium for the exploration and expression of identity implies, ‘the poem’, subsequently, becomes an apt tract or place in which the contemporary descendent of indenture may dig into aspects of his own inherited identity. I have suggested in my discussion that conventionally rigid, nationalist and religious discourses are not fixed for South African Indian Hindus, and that poetry is an apt form for the purposes of representing varieties of ‘South African Indian’ experience. Poetry is a form capable of multivalence. It responds both to compression, and to expansion, and allows space for the imagist moment as well as the textually layered dramatic monologue, the epic voice of culture record and the interiorised voice of the individual who is seeking to situate him/herself, even to the extent of ventriloquising, in relation to cultural shift, inherited tradition and historical witness.



### **A slippery creature**

*“History – a slippery creature. It’s full of plot twists and surprise endings like a mystery feature.”* Talib Kweli (2010)

South African Indian Hindu identity, heterogeneous and pluralistic, encompasses the lives and stories of numerous individuals. In the religio-cultural composition of this identity, tradition forms an indelible influence. Tradition itself, involves rituals and customs, developed in the past, yet continued into the present. In attempting to understand this layering a diachronic view of identity is crucial, one which accommodates alteration and shift in terms of both time and of location.

In South Africa, the very concept of history is vigorously contested, and the dominant understanding of history has tended to occlude more alternative, palimpsest views of history as ordinary or marginal experiences. The ongoing task of revising ossified notions of history and canonised forms of historiography is clearly relevant to my own descriptions, in poetry, of aspects of the South African Indian Hindu experience. Accordingly, this section of my essay will investigate historicity and historiographical modes as they concern *Unfamiliar Shores*. The accuracy and veracity of conventional historiographical modes in the documentation of the South African Indian Hindu experience will be investigated, and through a formal analysis of selected poems, the possibilities of poetry as a form of historiography will be examined.

To begin with, let me briefly visit orature. For centuries orature, including songs, poems, and folk-tales, has been used as a means for continuing or preserving cultural identity for posterity. Conventional oral devices such as repetition and incantation have a rhythmic quality that aids memory, for instance, and many of the songs, poems and folk-tales in orature are allegorical, idiomatic, and figurative, which again helps to ground the otherwise extremely variable oral mode. The use of literary techniques such as metaphor, personification, and anthropomorphism offers a symbolic representation of cultural history which is image based and hence imaginatively vivid; this encourages affective identification and long memory.

In that it is mutable, orature tends to convey an episodic, non-linear account of history, one in contrast to more orthodox views of history as teleological, and chronological, narrative, a Euro-American paradigm in which linear time is determinant and analogous with progress. It is relevant, here, that the binarised aesthetics of Occidental discourse have othered or romanticised not only ‘Oriental’ *cultures*, but the associated notions of time and history as well. Referring to the types of Western writing used to describe Oriental societies, Edward Said observes that the narrative tone is “declarative and self-evident” and “the tense they employ is the timeless eternal” (1995:72). While this exoticised view may endow Eastern cultures with a sense of enduring stability and pre-history, it tends to stereotype; it refuses the existence – even the possibility – of the Orient *in* history, and eastern people as having varied experiential histories. Firstly, the notion of an unchanging society suggests a lack of developmental progress, a marker of change and history under colonial discourse. Secondly, the idea of a perennially static culture implies that the past, present, and future are indistinguishable, hence preventing a conceptualisation of history, that is a recollection of the past as it bears upon present and future actions. In addition, colonial discourse valorises the tradition and history of the coloniser, whilst simultaneously seeking to discredit the customs and rituals of the colonised people. Against this inequity, there is the need to revise the canonised history, which is exclusionary in its omission.

Furthermore, the forms of historiography which have shaped this history also require a degree of reformation, in writing an alternative history to the established discourse. This is especially pertinent when weighed in relation to the manner in which ‘the South African Indian Hindu’ experience has been situated in historical discourse. The dominant historical narrative relating to this experience tends to group South African Indians as a homogeneous whole, with race as the unifying factor. It is also pertinent to note, here, that not all South African Indians were, or are descendants of, indentured labourers. Following the successful docking of ships carrying indentured labourers to Natal, many ‘free’ or passenger Indians travelled to South Africa of their own accord. Moreover, preceding the introduction of indentured labour into Natal by the British Empire, Dutch trading companies had seized Indian slaves to work in the Cape centuries earlier. Many of these Malayalam speaking people, from the Malabar

coast, inter-married, and among their descendants are the Cape Malay community. Embedded in history, then, are layers of experience. Indeed, until recent revisionist histories produced by writers such as Ashwin Desai, Goolam Vahed, and Uma-Dhupelia Mesthrie, socio-cultural distinctions such as class, gender, and religion, were marginalised in the established discourse, an orthodox mode of historiography which favoured supposed objectivity and was predisposed to discovering and illustrating an absolute understanding of truth. Clearly, such views of history have been contested, and history has been shown to comprise lacunae which demand to be populated with alternative forms of truth. One means to achieve this heterogeneous understanding of history may be to accord space and attention to emotional or experiential truths, rather than persisting with the belief in history as an objective record. It is crucial for historiography to recognise the importance of personal accounts. Even here, however, it must be granted that the memory which shapes personal recollection is temperamental, and that it may rely not only on recovery but on repression and forgetting.

As I am arguing, the very idea of an historical narrative is predicated on the structuring of memories, individual and social. Yet, memory, even in the social sphere, is subject to alteration, elision and addition. Speaking on the capriciousness of memory, and objectivity in historical discourse, Andre Brink states, “The individual constitutes and invents her/himself through the constant editing and re-editing of memory; the confluence of innumerable records and recording of memories determines the publicly sanctioned account, which debouches into history” (2005:30).

What does this mean for me, as a writer who works on a neglected area of South African history? Well, the re-telling of a cultural history never entails the direct retrieval of facts or data. Even the historical record is cut across with elements of invention. In re-envisioning a cultural history, then, there is the need *further* to re-imagine experiences which the dominant discourse has omitted or oppressed, as well as to enter – willingly, cautiously, and with a sense of powerful reciprocity – into the unsettled spaces of unrecorded experience. A poet, I am suggesting, may write something of the historical record. The process of imaginative writing may be one way in which cultural and social history may be reconstituted to more appropriately document the South African Indian Hindu experience.

In renegotiating an overtly political past, with untold voices silenced, and numerous stories untold, many South African imaginative writers have attempted to write into, and around, historical modes. The form this has taken tends to be prose, chiefly memoirs and historical novels. These include Ronnie Govender's *Song of the Atman* (2006) as well as Aziz Hassim's *The Lotus People* (2002) and *Revenge of Kali* (2009). Whilst not all of these texts follow the structure of linear or teleological narrative, the writing is premised on the act of narrativisation in that history is conceptualised *as a narrative*, in that events and experiences are seen as linked and sequentially unfolding. Historicity in lyric poetry is very different. The poem as a form proposes and indeed enables a fragmentary, ruptured representation of the past. This is not to say that narrativisation is absent from lyric poetry, but it is to suggest that poetic language does not rely primarily on the mode of narrative in either its production or reception. The lyric works with affect, image, symbol; it aims to effect a link between individual interiority and social space, but this link is acknowledged in the very environment of the lyric poem to be tentative and fleeting, entailing moments of extreme intensity or deep thoughtfulness which nevertheless pass into loosely-linked instants of time. This is relevant to South African Indian Hindu experience and indenture. The process of transnational migration led to the loss of holistic cultural structures, whether these were familial, linguistic, or religious. In order to represent such a fragmentary history, the form of writing utilised should be suggestive of rupture. The lyric is well-suited, as it brings the poet's personal voice within earshot of faint historical echoes, a listening which prompts him to speak in voices other than his/her own. Further, the mode of free verse, without syllabic or metered restriction, comes closest to representing a fragmented past and the lost voices and feelings of individuals who have been forgotten in the historical record.

In the collection *Unfamiliar Shores*, the poems "Seashells" and "Karuppayi" demonstrate the applicability of free verse to the migratory stage of South African Indian Hindu history. In "Seashells" the formal composition of each individual stanza is irregular. The syllabic count, metrics, and number of lines differ for each stanza of the poem. A reader may find this structural variation arbitrary, but if any account were taken of poetic intention, I would want to say that the dissimilitude in line length,

across the stanzas, is an aesthetic decision which significantly bolsters the subject matter of the poem. The juxtaposition of long lines in the second, third, and fifth stanzas against shorter lines in the first and fourth stanzas, conveys an undulating visual impression, and this mirrors the oceanic site of crossing into indenture. The oceanic motif is channelled, further, into the diction, where the only specific references to the ocean are made in the shorter stanzas (i and iv), “sea”, “Waves”, creating a contrast between the aesthetic shape and its semantic referents. The numbered stanzas in ‘Seashells’ offer a semblance of order and continuity, representing the journey, geographically and physically, from India to South Africa as direct, an evident here to there. Yet the poem also works to remind a reader that the symbolic journey of memory is not as straightforward. This is evidenced in the fourth stanza, “Waves touch the ship / then move on to Kerala”. In effect, the poem embodies disparate views of history as teleological timeline and as more elusive emotional-experiential movement; it shifts from the mappable geographical cartography of origin and destination to a less fixed oceanic space. In one sense, the movement of the indentured is linear; the soon-to-be labourers travel from a point of departure to a point of arrival. However, the shift of the waves and tides is circuitous, suggested in the line above, where the water’s progression, toward Indian shores, “Kerala”, is counter to the ship’s navigational route. Here, too, in turning to both linear and more fluid forms, the poem carries complex undulations of voluntary and involuntary, agency and bound constraint. On a metaphoric level, the overlapping of movement might be considered a metaphoric representation of the interstices between India and South Africa for the indentured. As Bragard puts it, the “oceanic site which in the western psyche is mostly associated with exoticism, introspection or void (as opposed to the knowledge of the continent) surfaces here as an in-between space where memory reconstructs historiographical omissions” (2005:224). Although the above quotation is a reference to the poetry of the Francophone Mauritian writer Khal Torabully, there are thematic commonalities between Torabully’s work, and my own. Both highlight the significance of the transoceanic voyage in the history of Indian indentured labourers, and in the histories of culture and family which have been handed on to their descendants.

This leitmotif of the voyage as central to the experience of indenture recurs in the poem “Karuppayi”. The opening stanza begins with an impression of the communal

experience of transoceanic migration for the indentured labourers. As the poem progresses, it delves into a more individualised locus of experience. As opposed to “Seashells” there is some degree of regularity in the syllabic length and the number of lines from stanza to stanza. The first two stanzas consist of five lines each, while the last three stanzas comprise three lines each. This formal tapering is the corollary of the shift in focus from ‘The Indentured’, in the plural, collective sense, to ‘the indentured’, in an individual sense, meaning the woman Karuppayi. The poem begins...the poem begins, where? With the title, which is a somewhat cryptic signifier for the uninformed reader – is ‘Karuppayi’ a place, a person, the name of a cultural practice? Does the poem begin with the epigraph from the Umvoti Surgeon-Superintendent’s diary, dated 1882, detailing a miscarriage? Or, is the beginning in the opening words of the first stanza, “The moonlit village of Orissa”? Clearly, as poet I have wanted in this poem to problematise questions of origin and destination even as I have hoped to engage with issues of traumatic loss and guilt.

The epigraph, by virtue of its weight as intertextual referent, draws a reader’s attention to the historical record of the past, indeed draws written history into the present space of the poem, which is that of history being written. Further, in selecting from the slew of historical detail a poignant, passing, yet latently momentous personal moment, as a poet I am commenting on the nature of historiography: which experiences are deemed memorable? What of the dangerous power of the vast archive to obscure or diminish individual experience, even while placing it ‘on record’? The reader of “Karuppayi” might be prompted towards questions such as these, and the very bringing together of personal and historical is a reminder of the cathection between self and social.

In the epigraph, the clinical, impersonal style of writing, in stark contrast to the poignancy of personal loss, is indicative of the institutionalised historiographical mode favoured in the colonial discourse. Yet, the poetic reimagining of Karuppayi’s miscarriage countermands her experiential absence from the mainstream literature. Marginalised as Karuppayi is by the canonised history, the imaginative and re-imaginative potential of the poetic form humanises her experience. The importance of personalising individuals dehumanised within dominant inscriptions is emphasised by the title, “Karuppayi”. Other poems in the collection which use the poetic mode to

reimagine untold historical experiences of actual individuals include “1906”, and “Possibilities”. These were influenced by disparate sources. “1906” poeticises the suicide of Ponappa Naicken, which was also documented in the historical text *Inside Indian Indenture*. Whilst “Possibilities” attempts to reimagine circumstances surrounding ‘The Hanging Tree’, iconified as a community legend, and so named for the many suicides committed upon this tree. These varied historiographical sources point to the diverse, multi-layered aspects of local history, and the need to examine this history from multiple standpoints.

My poetry collection, I believe, helps to “disclose the Coolie’s story which has been shipwrecked (‘erased’) in the ocean of Western-made historical discourse” (Bragard cited in Carter and Torabully 2002:15).

In the poem “Karuppayi”, I attempt even more dramatically than in “Belvedere” and “Truro” to *presence* the absent lives of the indentured. In “Karuppayi”, the strategy is less to extract and morph extracts from the extant historical archive into poems than it is creatively to personalise and ‘to story’ an individual life which features in the historical record as mere diarised aside. That this poem takes the form of imaginative projection rather than historical reclamation ought not to be considered a fault, or an historical untruth. Rather, it attests to the importance of the literary in bringing to life, presencing, that which has been absent and even subjected to absent-mindedness because it has not been thought important, or even thought of, except in passing. As Anderson says of work by Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, “[h]istorical imaginings of the experiences of indentured labourers are...central to...efforts of redefine and re-appropriate the ways in which indentured immigrants coped with life on the plantation and produced meaningful forms of self and collective identity”; to this end, it is necessary to “explore the distortions of the archives and the early colonial literature”, and to “combine[...] empirical research with artistic immersion” (2004:34).

In writing the history of the South African Indian Hindu experience, the pivotal role of the transoceanic voyage has been demonstrated. Yet this central juncture was far from temporally static, with the passage of Indians to the port of Durban spanning over fifty years. During this period, there was further transnational movement, with some of the indentured labourers, who had completed their contracts, making the return passage

to India. Such movement has consequences for the poetry which might be written about the experiences of South African Indians, and it is worth noting, here, that although my poetry collection aims to remedy absences and lacunae in the dominant historical discourse, the scope is unavoidably limited. For instance, I am aware that my focus in *Unfamiliar Shores* on indenture overlooks other aspects of transoceanic migrancy, among them the voyages undertaken by ‘free’ or passenger Indians. That said, many of the passenger Indians were part of an Indian social elite, and their experiences therefore do not properly coincide with my attempt, in my own poetry collection, to depict aspects of working class South African Indian Hindu life. Even my focus on South African Indian Hindu identity is circumscribed by my preferred foci, and there remains the need for complex and multiple versions of this cultural identity in order for us to begin to appreciate its plural, layered nature. Without this, there is the risk of “the selective forgetting of particular historical memories in order to maintain the fantasy of essential socio-political identities with fixed positions” (Stevens 1996: 204).

This is particularly evident in contemporary public discourse on ‘the South African Indian experience’. As 2010 marks the one hundred and fiftieth year since Indian indentured labourers first landed on South African shores, there is a renewed political interest in this cultural identity, and this is to be welcomed. However, where the political interest is reduced to bandwagoning and sloganeering, this endeavour becomes momentary, limited only to a commemorative date. Rather, the renewed effort toward celebrating or revivifying South African Indian identity should be an ongoing process not necessitated by, or restricted to, specific dates on a calendar.

In recent years, the social inscription of South African Indian identity has also occurred in literary works, predominantly written as memoirs. Certainly, the theme of “People and Passages” is one of two that Hofmeyr identifies as having “literary pertinence” in the theorizing of an Indian Ocean diaspora (2007:9). However, many such texts are premised on a sentimentalised reaction to the past, in some cases, perversely, going so far as to glorify apartheid for its unintended role in galvanising social cohesion amongst South African Indians.

A central motif in recent social historiography is the immortalisation of India as a paradisiacal *mati*, or motherland. Yet embedded in this idealisation are a troubled



sense of nationhood, and forms of nationalised identity which entail avoidance and separation. Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, for instance, suggests that “the surge in Indianness could be counter-productive to the vision of an integrated nation if this Indianness is isolated from the context of what it means to be a South African as well” (2000:27). Still, many South African Indians fervently support the Indian cricket team rather than the South African national outfit, and, in addition, a commemorative issue of the influential community newspaper the *Post* included the Indian national anthem (*Bharat*) alongside South Africa’s national anthem (*Post* 2010:2).

This position, valorising India as the primary marker of South African Indian identity, overlooks the drastic and marked changes which have taken place on the Indian subcontinent in the many decades since the start – and *end* – of the indenture system. Nationalist and religious tension, swayed by colonial influence, divided the seemingly unified nation state of the British Raj, from where many of the indentured departed. Even the India which was once the home of the forebears of South African Indians has changed irrevocably. The political state of India is subject to change as is the imagined India of the descendants of Indian indentured labourers. As Paul Gilroy explains,

“diaspora is a concept that problematizes the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging. It disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location, and consciousness. It destroys the naïve invocation of common memory as the basis of particularity in a similar fashion by drawing attention to the contingent political dynamics of commemoration” (2000:123).

In other words, diaspora displaces rigid discourses of nationalism and the nation-state as markers of identity, replacing these with more fluid, mobile articulations.

It should not be surprising, then, that *Unfamiliar Shores* proposes a formulation of a heterogeneous, historical identity rooted in South Africa, whilst similarly acknowledging a faintly flickering, fragmentary connection to the Indian subcontinent. This is similar in some respects to Paul Gilroy’s analysis of “the Atlantic as a site of transnational black modernity neither African nor American, Caribbean or British, but a complex translation of these various traditions into something new” (Hofmeyr, 2007:3). What that newness is, and what its connections to – and differences from – ‘India’,

remain continuing challenges. In Homi Bhabha's words, given the transnational translation of imagined community into increasingly more hybrid forms, 'nationalism' is undergoing "a profound process of redefinition" and "the truest eye may now belong to the migrant's double vision" (1994:5). What is migrant? What indigenous? In fact, even 'doubleness' no longer seems an adequate envisioning of cultural positioning, and I am more inclined to turn to Arjun Appadurai's idea that various 'scapes', among them 'mediascapes' (1996:35), may comprise influential nodes of influence in the formation of transnational identities; these entail elusive interplays of imaginaries which scholars are still working through, and which turn the ocean motifs so important to Coolitude and diaspora to different forms of 'current'.

In South Africa, where 'coolie' remains an all-too-current racial slur, the links between place and identity, inherited tradition and cultural invention are extremely fraught. If Coolitude made "the crossing central", thereby avoiding an essential "connection with an idealized Mother India" which was "clearly left behind", (Bragard cited in Carter and Torabully 2002:15), it is also important to concede that the 'crossing' of cultures and identities continues today, often enough in ways which escape easy categorisation: what is meaningful 'South African Indianness', and what not? Who has the authority to determine such cultural validity as against supposed cultural inauthenticity? In terms of such mobile questionings, Coolitude moves from being "an impossible meeting ground that splits entities...in mutual opposition to a generative space of creative tension, giving rise to a space of rhizomatic transculturation" (De Souza and Murdoch 2005:264).

I have been suggesting that my writing, since it takes the form of lyric poetry, a genre which searches out links between the personal and the social, the fragmentary and the coherent, may assist in producing an alternative mode to the established historiographies which have romanticised, homogenised, or excluded a convincing account of South African Indian Hindu life. I should also comment a little, however, on the most immediately personal aspect of the voice which predominates in part of the collection. While at times I adopt a persona which enables me to speak through the mask of assumed identities, whether actual historical individuals or world historical types associated with indenture, with the Hindu religion, or with 'Indian South Africanness', many of the poems have their origins in the poet's own, personal

experience. The entire collection, indeed, is dedicated to “my father, who passed away the year he was due to complete his own Master’s degree”.

It should be very clear what I am attempting: to bring currents of family history into contact with the histories – past and present – of a marginalised group. This effort redirects conventionalised understandings of history as a force of change which charts only consequential social and political events, in the process tending to assimilate individual experience into the formation of cultural history, denying the individual’s import in and of itself. Alternatively, where individual narratives *are* written into the mainstream discourse of history, they tend to focus on the person as a hyperbolic representation of the group’s cultural identity, exalting excessive power, or resistance to excessive power. In South Africa, a country where the prevailing theme of social history is so explicitly political, the ordinary person’s history, if considered at all, has most often been shaped into the mode of testimony and confession. This form of historiography necessitates the framework of a dialogue, the articulation of words from a speaker to an audience. While the genre of lyric poetry is not inimical to such dialogue – the absent historical subject, indeed, may be addressed through apostrophe, for example – the lyric voice also has about it the quality of a person speaking to himself, thinking through affective claims upon his heart and his imagination. Lyric poetry, then, is an admirable form for exploring the expression of personal feeling and personal history, affirming an introspective constitution of the self. However, personal history is not restricted solely to the individual self. Even the personal exists in relation to relation. Either through internal hereditary traits, or external familial tradition, family history is indivisible from the history of the individual self, even when a written, or otherwise textualised, family history does not exist. Once again, then we see the need for the recognition of the power of the oral account.

Personal accounts of memory, as erratic as they may be, lay the foundation of history in the domestic sphere. In that this history is at once personal and private, its telling may at times hold, for the poet, a more prioritised urgency than even the recovery of an imagined communal history. I see no reason not to acknowledge this difficulty, as to do so would merely distort the very ways in which I hope to work with, and against, H/history. To deny the personal as it sits awkwardly in relation to indenture, I believe, would constitute a mistaken re-marginalisation of some of the very

small forms of human experience which are so central to the workings of my poetry, which gathers various forms of marginal and minority experience into a loose 'collection'. Interestingly enough, when read against the present upsurge of interest in South African Indian identity that characterises 2010 as the 150 year anniversary of Indian indentured labour in South Africa – in terms of which 'Indenture' becomes something of an approved, new master narrative almost essential to an understanding of South African Indianness, a few poems which engage with the personal history of a single, unremarkable South African Indian Hindu family might seem especially fragile. It is this very fragility, I believe, a form of social forgetting to which indenture itself has, in different times, been subject, which entitles the marginal, personal subject matter to claim its little space in some written archive of history. Where else, I ask, if not in my own poems?

Personal history is particularly delicate as it is closely reliant on the fallible mode of individual memory. This fragility imparts an especially poignant significance to personal history. Salman Rushdie suggests that "the shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities" (1992: 12). This quotation is apt to the genre of lyric poetry, where the form is condensed, but also evocative.

For the poet to speak of the distant historical past entails the overcoming of absence, the imaginative calling up of the unknown into multiple forms of embodiment. Yet as I have experienced it, this process is also, always, informed by a sense of loss: of times past and the experiences of others now ended, both of which are 'lost' to me, paradoxically, by virtue of not ever having been mine to live. And that loss is never completely overcome precisely because it is an incorporeal loss: even with inspired creative projection, the poet cannot easily breathe life into the loss in order to embody it in the present since the loss is historical; it is that which has always already happened, and not to the poet; it is that which he/she never knew even as he/she seeks, now, to know it through the strange bond of violence which is empathy.

In comparison with the incorporeal loss which I consider a fundamental feature of any attempt to engage with history, much of the poetry in the 'Father' segment of

*Unfamiliar Shores* is informed by a sense of *corporeal* loss. This loss is tangible and still painfully felt in that it holds to the loss of a close individual, one intimately known to me, rather than the loss of remote historical experience. It is true, since poetry is polysemic rather than single-voiced by nature, that the sense of loss which some of my poems record need not be restricted to a certain family, mine; that in the responses to death which rest on culture, tradition, religion, even the simple human feeling of a son's love for his father the poems may be representative of mourning in other South African Indian Hindu households. Yet the triggering inspirations in the poems in 'Father' are in the first instance personally elegiac; they are poems of mourning by a son for his lost – his dead – father. In these poems, I, Dashen Naicker, mourn Savinthrarajan Narayansamy Naicker. I write his name and he is not effaced. I recollect his life, and it is not forgotten. In the vigorously summoning, vivid space of the poems, too, I may forgive myself for the passing of time which slowly erases, sometimes threatening to leave me unable to remember as vividly as I (once) could. A poem, here, becomes a metonymic talisman at once potent and poignant.

The mode of lyric poetry is well-suited to conveying the subtlety involved in such mourning. The loss of a loved one – how scarcely such phrasing can touch the nerves and plumb the depths of personal feeling. The lyric poem, in comparison – the very process of writing the poem and not merely attending to the finished piece – allows the writer to undergo a catharsis, and then this may be turned through further facets in the process of reading, and re-turning later, in a different mode of engagement, to the poem as a metonymic site of personal loss or grief.

However, when writing the poems in the section 'Father' I also had to be attentive toward the fact that the loss of my father was not solely personal, but *familial*. My father's loss meant not only the loss of 'my father', but a woundingly ramified severance that fractured an extended family structure. Thus, many of the poems in 'Father', including "Rivermouth", "Leaving", and "Still" attempt to enter into the sense of grief and loss felt by other family members; these poems attempt to inscribe the poet into a moment of family history by emptying self into relational others.

### **An unknown sea**

*“Your home bends downwards to an unknown sea  
do you remember the sound of my lonely singing?”*

Robert Berold (1999:32).

In representing aspects of South African Indian Hindu identity, it is crucial to examine the influential relationship between place and the formation of this identity. The conventional manner of approaching the notion of place affirms a tangible, material connection between individual identity and spatial environment. The phenomenological link between a centralised place and the formation of identity has been charted by positivist cultural geographers. Yet, contemporary postcolonial geographies highlight the ambiguities of place as an influence upon identity, suggesting that the grounded affiliations apparently denoted by ‘roots’ in effect become radically rhizomatic ‘routes’ within the frameworks of contemporary globalised, transnationalised, diasporic experience. Among these, and germane to this section, is Homi Bhabha’s notion of culture as, at once, ‘transnational’ and ‘translational’ (1993) subject to shifting spatial and social bounds. The fluid nature of this identity formation also displays the manner in which supposedly unitary understandings of nationality and the nation state are continually reinvented.

This is cogent to the idea of South African Indianness, where the primary markers of identity – ‘South Africa’ and ‘India’ – are adjectives indicative of geographical connection. However, a critical reading of the political implications of ‘South African’ and ‘Indian’ highlights the complex difficulties in the formation of local, national, and transnational identities. There is an inherent doubleness in the term ‘South African Indian’, even without the visible hyphenations associated with diasporic and postcolonial location, and when one subjects this naturalised term to thought, it splits into an unsettling plurality that threatens to disperse the subject altogether (to disappear it?) across a range of geographical contexts and compass points. Where, in this identity, may one locate a firm sense of belonging? What is the authority of assumed origin? And how may ‘origination’ yet be swept across by forces that are less

*backwashes* than changing rip tides, cross-currents which land one now on this shore, and now, whether in memory or in projection, on another?

Identity is fraught with tension. South African Indians are simultaneously part of a national, and a diasporic, identity. As poetic language is dialogic and representational, it provides a suitable space to explore the complicated relationship between place and the construction of identity. This part of the essay will address the importance and intricacies of place in illustrating a South African Indian Hindu identity. The suitability of poetic language toward highlighting the fragmented, disrupted connections with place which South African Indians have had will be considered with reference to certain poems in *Unfamiliar Shores*.

As several of my comments in earlier sections of this essay will have implied, the connection between place and its role in establishing identity has been problematic for South African Indians for two principal reasons. The first is the dislocation involved through the process of transnational migrancy. The second is the socio-spatial dialectic delineated by the apartheid system. To refer to the latter, in the South African locale, place has had an inextricable link to one's racial identity, although post-apartheid it has begun to signify one's social status. The systems of governance plotting boundaries based on racial or social division were drafted according to ideologies which often marginalised the experience of South African Indians. There was also a disabling, divisive doubleness to this practice in that 'Indians' were clearly people not white, meaning evidently less than white, and yet clearly not black, meaning slightly more than black. Neither nor. Where did that leave them?

As much as apartheid was a political system founded on the notion of racial difference, one such way in which this difference was enforced and entrenched was through spatial control. As any number of historians and historical-geographers have helped us to understand, the Group Areas Act propounded by the apartheid government rendered geography a brutally ideological space, one in which an individual's link to place was defined by race. To be here. And not there. To know one's *place*. To stay put, rather than to be allowed to move. To be obliged to move, when this place – *this* place – was the only one you had ever known. As Pallavi Rastogi states, "racial affiliation incorporates a spatial affiliation" (2008:18). During apartheid, forced

removals relocated South African Indians to environs outside metropolitan areas, and in doing so placed South African Indians in peripheral positions, distanced from the economic and political centre, diminishing the scope of their livelihoods and marginalising their role in the construction of a national identity. Further, the grouping of individuals based on racial similarities had a homogenising effect on identity, minimising ethnic and religious variations, giving perverse substance to the misrepresentative collective label 'Indian'.

The direct impact of forced removals on cultural identity was most severe in that social and religious bonds were severed. Not only did relocation separate communities, it moved people away from places of worship, and sites of religious significance. For Hindus, places of worship and sites of religious significance are not restricted solely to temples, although these are important locations of religious devotion. Additionally, most Hindu homes have personal lamps and shrines, however small, where daily acts of devotion, or home *puja*, are enacted. As several of my poems attempt to illustrate, the removal of South African Indians from these sacred domestic sites had a fracturing effect on their religious identity. This is documented in the poem "Old Ganesan speaks", where the agonised persona exclaims, "Pull us out our homes, before bulldozing / the lit lamps we tried to leave behind". A renegotiation of religious identity was necessary in the new environs of apartheid space, where different shrines and temples had to be constructed and blessed again. There are suggestive parallels, here, with the experiences of indentured Indians who were forced to create new temples and sites of devotion after their migration to South Africa. The construction of temples by the Hindu indentures, as iconic sites for devotees, is closely linked to the construction of the indentured religio-cultural identity. Interestingly, this trend continues in post-apartheid South Africa where many individuals who have moved away from traditionally Indian areas, return to pray at temples in these locations. These regions, thus, acquire a special religious significance, akin to sites of pilgrimage, as evidenced by the Easter festivities at the Mariamman temple in Isipingo Rail, "A great number of temples in KZN are dedicated to Mariamman, with the largest and most important being at Isipingo Rail, south of Durban, to which bus-loads of thousands of devotees come to attend her festival during the Easter weekend" (Diesel 2003:43).



Post-apartheid, the removal of previous spatial barriers has also contributed to the renegotiation of race and religious identity. With many black South Africans moving to formerly Indian areas, and pursuing their education at formerly Indian schools, it is not uncommon to see black South Africans involved with Indian cultural practices. I engage with such new developments in the poem “Jooma Road Temple”. The very notion of a strictly racialised South African Indianness has, of late, been challenged by many black South Africans practising traditionally ‘Indian’ cultural activities such as Carnatic singing and Bharata-Natyam dancing, both regarded as Indian classical artforms.

It is also important to consider ‘Natal’ and ‘KwaZulu-Natal’ as geographic locations central to South African Indian identities.

Historically speaking, the stationing of Indian indentured labourers along, and near, the Natal coastline was a result of the economic necessities of the British colonial system. Port Natal, as Durban was known, was the sole point of entry into South Africa for Indian indentured labourers. While these labourers were drawn from various locations in India, the environs of Durban were to have a pronounced effect on the formation of South African Indian identity. Reciprocally, the multifarious aspects of Indian culture, including architecture, cuisine, and language, were to have a dramatic impact upon the development of the specific regional character of Durban and KwaZulu Natal. Throughout KwaZulu Natal, many of the towns with a prominent Indian demographic are situated near areas of primary economic activity. While the capitalistic proclivities of the colonial system defined arable land as a source of potential income, this land offered a semblance of belonging for Indian indentured labourers in that it provided the space to grow a form of community. In *Unfamiliar Shores*, poems such as “bee sting”, “Monsoon”, “Mummy-Aunty recalling childhood”, and “Possibilities” display the vital role that coastal sugar farms played in the formation of South African Indian Hindu identity. (Sugar estates, it must be noted, were not the only sites of labour for the Indian indentured; there were also the collieries of inland Northern Natal. Experiences in this location have not been depicted in *Unfamiliar Shores*, and remain a space to be imaginatively represented in South African literature, giving further expression to the concept of ‘coolitude’ as encompassing not only the literal ocean crossing but more extended cultural-experiential movement. In the present

collection *Unfamiliar Shores*, however, as the title suggests the focus falls on more expressly littoral locales, and on the ocean itself as a definitive marker of Durban Indian experience.)

On the sugar estates movement was restricted and contractually bound, thus sites of labour extended beyond their primary purpose, and were pivotal in establishing a nascent identity in a new locale. While most of the indentured labourers were denied opportunities to purchase their own tracts of land, many nevertheless used the land on sugar estates for small-scale subsistence farming to supplement the insubstantial rations. This connection to the land continued for many labourers who moved away from rural areas after the completion of their contracts. Market gardening was one possible channel for South African Indians to achieve economic liberation from colonial systems of re-indenture, or repatriation, after the introduction of tax to all 'free' Indians in the early part of the twentieth century. This direct, material link to the land also displays a commitment to developing a rooted identity, figurative and literal, one grounded in a South African setting. As I have earlier suggested, for many descendants of Indian indentured labourers, India holds a symbolic, rather than material, link in the formation of South African Indian identity. This again attests to complex affiliations with place. On the one hand, "South Africans of Indian origin had fought for acceptance too long and too hard to...abandon the label of South African as the primary signifier of cultural identity" (Rastogi 2008:1). And yet on the other hand, however, as with many diasporic communities, the cultural connections with the former home country are too numerous and perseverative to allow South African Indian identity to be solely and rigidly located in South Africa alone.

As the majority of South African Indians have never even visited the Indian subcontinent, there is a process of transnational cultural mediation involved in affirming South African Indian identity. This transnational interchange subverts the homogenisation or concretisation of identity, as there is a cultural dialogue which surpasses, and trespasses, established boundaries of nationality. The Indian Ocean connecting India and South Africa, here, acts as an integral environment to convey the fluidity of South African Indian identity. As the passage of transoceanic migrancy for Indian indentured labourers "the image of the ocean evoke[d] the ambivalence of fragmentation and longed-for unity" (Bragard 2005:228). The sea is able symbolically

to subvert colonial cartography, in that the ocean, despite the nation state's attempt to establish 'national waters', is not easily a site which can be divided by boundaries, or nationalised.

Yet, poems such as "Seashells", and "Karuppayi" suggest how despite its apparent boundlessness, the sea was viewed as a place of spatial constraint, rather than freedom, for indentured labourers. 'The ship' as the vehicle which transported indentured labourers from India to elsewhere (South Africa, Mauritius, Trinidad, Fiji, Guyana, Martinique...) is as influential a site of identity construction as the eventual countries of arrival themselves. As Vijay Mishra suggests, "any account of the production and reproduction of diaspora culture must begin with the ship's passage" (2007:75), for the transoceanic voyage irrevocably altered orthodox and traditional forms of Indian cultural identity. These shifts occurred under difficult experiential constraint, but might yet have entailed imaginative elements: the very word 'passage' implies at once narrow restriction, a clear channel, and expanding horizons. Similarly, the cultural shifts may be considered by some to have entailed the dilution of that which was once authentic, but others may see this as productive distillation.

Passage was especially pertinent for the Hindu indentured who migrated from India to South Africa. To embark on transoceanic travel was taboo for certain Hindus, as it implied a crossing of the vilified *Kala Pani*, black waters or dark seas. "The soul of the Hindu who left the Ganges was doomed to err perpetually, as it was cut from the cycle of reincarnation" (Carter and Torabully 2002:164). There is an undeniable sense of loss which stems from the process of diasporic migrancy. The reimagining of this historical reality in a poetic mode evokes a more emotive understanding of this process, which supposedly impartial forms of documentation may not offer. This allows for a humanising of the indentured labourers, who were impersonalised by colonial codes. Further, the dialogism of poetic language, through its use of various tropes, reflects the multiplicity and transference accorded through transnational, and cross-cultural, movements. Speaking with regard to migrant communities Homi Bhabha posits, "their metaphoric movement requires a kind of 'doubleness' in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without a centred causal logic (1994:141). The connotative characteristic of poetry, where meaning is ceaselessly transferred, reflects the continual mediation between two or

more cultures for individuals of a specific diaspora, or any multicultural society. This distinction is illustrated in the first stanza of the second part of “Tinley Manor”,

“‘Come inside bacha, getting dark now / dain’jris by the wahteh,’ his Nani said / before she walked back / to the beach cottage / where kebab and roti simmered next / to saucers of samoosas”. The persona’s grandmother’s way of speaking is a hybridised form of English, with the inclusion of the Hindi word “bacha”, a general term of endearment, and various mispronunciations of English words ‘dangerous’, “dain’jris” and ‘water’, “wahteh”. This manner of speech is juxtaposed against the typically Indian fare of “kebab and roti” and “saucers of samoosas”, together situated in the setting of “Tinley Manor” on the KwaZulu Natal North Coast. The melange of Indian influences and a South African setting illustrate the cross-cultural composition of South African Indian identity. In the poem’s last lines, “leaving his silhouette on the sand / dark and unafraid of the climbing water”, the persona’s shadow eluding the ocean tide may be symbolic of the manner in which identity is never stable or fixed, despite attempts to compartmentalise selfhood.

The varied spatial, and temporal, explorations in *Unfamiliar Shores* attest to the heterogeneity and plurality of South African Indian identity. Motion and movement are recurring motifs through the project. The arrangement of the collection, moving from “Child” to “Father” to “Farther Still” involves a process of receding into memory, a way of reaching back. Yet, the final section “Returning Tides” is, in effect, an illuminated re-turning toward the present, with space for speaking forward. As South Africa’s political climate continues to change, so too will the role of South African Indians, and the significance of place in the construction of their identity. Furthermore, the Indian diaspora in South Africa, itself, is continually changing and redrafting the meanings attributed to place, home, and belonging. The new wave of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent, post-apartheid, has begun to reshape notions of South African Indian Hindu identity. This may offer me subject matter for future poems regarding the experiences of these immigrants and their relatedness, compassionate or conflicting, to South African Indians.

## **Knotted Strings**

*“The past was never beautiful  
but through its knotted strings my ancestors  
speak to me with apocryphal gestures  
and languages you will never understand  
and dances that would strain your gait.”*

Ari Sitas (2000:108).

In the crafting or production of any form of artistic output, there are innumerable influences contributing to the shape and character the artwork acquires. To complicate matters, texts are rarely, if ever, isolated from context, which then also becomes an influence of a kind. This context may be the social circumstances of the text’s production, and even here the correct situating vocabulary is elusive: does context ‘surround’ a piece of art? Or ‘inform’ it? Or form the ‘backdrop’? Additionally, context may extend to the tradition, stylistic or thematic, with which the text is consciously aligned by the writer during the writing process, or perhaps subsequently attributed to the finished work by critics and scholars. As such, although not always limiting or didactic, a text’s production draws from and channels the aesthetics and/or ethics of a variety of auxiliary texts.

This form of influence may manifest itself as inspiration, or appropriation, yet it is always coloured by the ideas and information gathered, knowingly or not, by the creator of the text. This is chiefly determined by the individual’s subject position. The apparatuses involved in the formation of one’s identity will indelibly impact upon the cultural artefacts one produces. These may be institutions as gargantuan and abstracted as ‘The State’, or more personally meaningful practices and structures such as religion. Further, they may be as small and idiosyncratic as the music or poetry which a writer prefers. In this respect, it becomes possible to understand cultural identities as what Stuart Hall refers to as “points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a ‘positioning’” (2003:395).

The question of influence upon me as the writer of *Unfamiliar Shores* is difficult to address. Influences are not always easily detectable, never mind traceable, and they are continually in flux. They may be immediate and sensory, hearing the plaintive playing of a piano, or contemplatively cerebral, extrapolating the hypothesis of a psychoanalytical critique. They may even include the perceived audience or readership the literary text will reach. Further, there are elusive forms of intertextuality in my poetry, some of them apparent, noted and acknowledged, others deliberately absorbed into the text without reference, less as a form of appropriative ownership, however, than imaginative re-animation. While I do not espouse Picasso's audacious maxim that "Bad artists copy. Good artists steal" (Cited in Dufresne 2004:59), believing even in this postmodern age in the romantic idea of originality, there have been many sources from which I have overtly and covertly taken inspiration. There has been an exhaustive list of influences in producing poems in *Unfamiliar Shores*, from daybreak over the ocean to drinking intoxicating potions, from J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime* to Talib Kweli's *Long Hot Summer*. The laborious sentencing above illustrates the profuse number of experiences and texts which have somehow contributed to the drafting of *Unfamiliar Shores*.

However, in the interests of focus, this part of my essay aims to detail three key, if disparate, aspects of influence on my poetry. Firstly, in relation to my style and voice I discuss a few poems by Kobus Moolman. Secondly, I refer to translations of Sanskrit lyrics. Thirdly, primarily as they bear upon subject matter, I turn to varieties of sociohistorical document which record the experiences of indenture. (Especially in parts two and three of this discussion, elements of overlap with previous sections of the essay are unavoidable, but I maintain that there are new insights to be gained by situating these elements in a specific discussion of writerly influence.)

## I

To whom might the poet of Durban and KZN turn in the search for models – whether negative or positive – of local representation? The obvious answer is Douglas Livingstone. He is among the most famous of South African poets, and despite work by poets such as Mike Kirkwood, Sally-Ann Murray, Ari Sitas and Peter Strauss, he

remains *the* poet to have written the Durban and KwaZulu-Natal region into literary being. In effect, he is a monumental gateway through which an emerging Durban poet is expected to pass. Yet something doesn't quite fit, in this assumption, and scholars need to beware of the glib expectation that poets who are identified by birth or residence with the same region necessarily share a conceptual or imaginative geography. Is Livingstone's Indian Ocean the same as my father's, when by virtue of his race the self-proclaimed 'White African' poet was entitled to beach and swim, live and write, where he would? Is the ocean, here, a curious 'testing ground' of identity, another form of 'littoral zone' that stretches far beyond Livingstone's scientific sampling of tainted waters for the CSIR? What of Livingstone's own forced migration from Malaysia to South Africa as a child? Although I grant the need to contextualise the limitations of Livingstone's responses, as well as his own poetic preoccupations, there is undoubtedly some criticism to be levelled against this poet for his inability to see Durban Indians as anything more than poor, displaced fishermen in "Carnivores at Station 22" or cunning mendicants as in "Isipingo" (1991). I find myself wishing that this poet had have risked more, in terms of the representation of local people, rather than, so insistently, turning his scientist's critical, sceptical eye to 'man's' impact upon habitats and animals, or to the leftovers of environments suited to ironic versions of the artists as faded white hunter. To what extent can I as a young, contemporary, 'South African Indian Hindu' poet find beauty in Livingstone's "Old Harbour" or "Road Back" (1991) when to succumb to the pull of the lyrical language in such poems is also possibly to be drawn away from the sustained absence, in local poetic representation, of othered experiences in Durban harbour, the unrecorded experiences of others.

These are questions I cannot hope to answer, and the admittedly easy solution is for me to take another tack.

Certainly, there is a sense in which I cannot identify with Livingstone's work on account of the divisive spatial ideologies which have shaped our respective experience. At the same time, however, it should be acknowledged that poets of a region (or even not, as the case may be) can find aesthetic affiliation across South Africa's inherited geography of separate development. Consider the following extract from a poem by Ari Sitas:

*"The past was never beautiful  
but through its knotted strings my ancestors  
speak to me with apocryphal gestures  
and languages you will never understand  
and dances that would strain your gait".*  
(2000:108).

Despite his subject position as a white Cyprus born, South African poet, Sitas' metaphoric description of transnational ancestry is cogent to my own, not dissimilar, concerns. The 'knotted strings' may refer to both the troubled link with the past, or perhaps amulets suggestive of the actual cultural artefacts linking the persona with his historical heritage. In that the poet writes of the voyage undertaken by slaves or the indentured, despite his subject position, the mode of poetic language has allowed him to enter the experience of another culture in a powerfully affective sense.

A similar hold upon my imagination is exerted by the poems of Kobus Moolman, although his subject matters are often different from my own. Moolman has been hailed as "one of the leading voices in South African poetry" (Nyezwa 2008:8). Oddly enough, given my feelings about Livingstone's poetry as lacking the human variety of the coastal region which it reputedly represents, Moolman's verse appeals to me on account of a quiet, solid treatment of place and land in which people are not so much absent as diminished, re-shaped into figurations which are insignificant in weight to the inanimate environmental or experiential forces in relation to which human life is lived.

As a poet, Moolman's oeuvre is extremely varied, and he has turned to the aesthetic of prose poetry and cycle poems in his more recent work. However, his use of language is unremittingly sensory in the importance it attributes to imagery. The artistry of his poems lies in their simple and arresting affectivity. Events and experiences are concisely mediated, often through a precise word choice which minimises excess and embellishment in the scenes portrayed. While his poetry is not strictly imagist (many believe, anyway, that an insistence on formal stricture is now irrelevant to writers' conceptions of their work), there is nevertheless in his poetry an awareness of the "imagist tenet of the exact word as the adequate symbol" (Chapman 2009:179). Rather



than relying on bombastic syntax and a diction saturated in rhetorical devices, Moolman's poetic crafting surfaces through understated techniques such as enjambment, phanopoeia, personification, and the cadence of ordinary speech. In some of his poems the production of a discontinuous, shifting sequence of images has a filmic quality, creating an awareness of scene as cinematically constructed rather than natural, the poem is a series of disrupted frames even as it simultaneously unfolds or pans out. The poem "Transkei trekking" exemplifies this (Moolman 2003:19-21). The poem consists of three segments, broken down further into six takes each. The use of the cinematic "take" to divide the stanzas enhances a photographic feel, as the separate stanzas are representative of single, isolated incidents. Certain stanzas comprise terse illustrations of the Eastern Cape landscape, with monosyllabic or disyllabic adjectives as descriptors. These include "take 1" in the first segment, "winter day", "take 2" in the second segment, "long raw donga", and "take 4" in the third segment, "only empty sky above / everyone". These sparse stanzas offer a real/reel visual mediation of the scene as *landscape*, inviting a reader to consider how the eye measures that which is seen, and how the seen refuses scenic construction. While there may be symbolism in these stanzas, there is a conspicuous omission of metaphoric attributes in these lines. Further, evidenced by the title, "Transkei trekking" there is an emphasis upon place and the natural landscape as re-figured through the imagination. While personification is a technique Moolman often uses in depicting the natural, or impersonal, environment, inanimate elements are not anthropomorphised in this particular poem. Devoid of human qualities, the absence of personification mitigates the transference of meaning beyond the natural setting, producing a viscerally visual milieu. In my own collection, the poem "Killarney Valley, Cato Ridge" exhibits a similar aesthetic to "Transkei trekking". "Killarney Valley, Cato Ridge" is separated into three disparate, but not unconnected, stanzas of three lines each. Each of the stanzas opens with two lines describing an action, and closes with an image attempting to encapsulate the atmosphere of the stanza. In the poem, the paucity of adjectives illustrates an attempt to heighten the sensory, visual aspect without recourse to embellishment; I wished to represent the scene as close to itself as it was. This is a hopeless task of course, since representation inevitably screens, and filters. Yet the clear language also carried poetic hopefulness, the promise, albeit unfulfilled, of realising my writerly aim. And what I am left with, after everything, is an impressionistic view of a pastoral scene.

This visual mediation is inverted in the poem's closing line, which is still, paradoxically and playfully, the longest in the poem. It acts as a coda to the previous scenes, and the sibilance of "cicadas won't stop singing to the silence", stresses the aural aspects of the setting, as a juxtaposition to the imagery throughout the poem. This contrast between the aural and visual is heightened by the polarising opposition of "singing" and "silence". Moreover, the use of a disparate stanzaic structure connotes the characteristic of human sensory perception, which is erratic and episodic. The use of stanza headings is, perhaps, indicative of the manner in which the human mind attempts to order or re-order the circumstances our senses perceive. The stanzas work here as "'re-arrangements' of the elements of our observations" (Chapman 2009:190).

Place and landscape, the natural world and the poet's place in it, function as central tropes in Moolman's work. The enduring, perennial capacity of the non-human world is a recurrent thematic concern in many of his poems. The incessant passage of time, represented by non-human elements, is often weighted against the inconsequential position of human life within this monumental scheme. This difficult balance is elucidated in the poem "The Viewer and The Subject" (Moolman 2001:49), where the title intimates the asymmetrical power relations present when an object is subjected to the gaze. While the title may suggest that the persona holds subjective agency in framing the setting under his/her gaze, this is contradicted in the poem. Throughout the poem, impermanent, animate, human aspects, as in much of Moolman's work, are not determined by the grammatical use of definite articles, "Head bent back", "Man waits for the sky". However, the permanent or inanimate elements in Moolman's poetry – "the sky", "the horizon" – are almost without exception prefaced by the use of definite articles, thus emphasising their perdurability. This has the effect of shifting agency from the persona to the natural environment, or informing surroundings. The use of personification, in rendering the inanimate animate, further emphasises the autonomy of the natural world, where the typically immobile sky gains a movement and momentum which causes "the sky to step across the horizon".

Moolman's almost unpoetic poetic strategies have influenced certain poems in the "Returning Tides" segment of *Unfamiliar Shores*, including "Today", "Days", and "Sunset at Tiger Rocks". All of these poems attempt to evoke a sense of the permanence of the natural world, and its imperviousness to human endeavour.

(Romantic and idealist this may be, but it does represent the poet's fragile hope in the face of repeated threat.) Here, clearly, I am indebted to Moolman's poems, which often attribute agency to abiotic elements which logocentric discourse wishes to control, to acquire knowledge over. "The name of the moon" is one such poem which conveys the immensity of the natural world, and the ineffectuality of human endeavour to master it (Moolman 2007:46). The poem is divided into five stanzas. There is the persistent use of personification at the start of the first four stanzas, and this acts as a form of parallelism. The inanimate elements in the poem are followed by transitive verbs, signifying agency and action, "The wind wears the face", "The sea weaves long fingers", "The sky turns its back", "The moon stops so far". Yet, in the concluding stanza the persona's action is subsequent to a modal verb, "must", and only then the transitive verb, "repeat its old name". This shift in syntax stresses the contrast between the human and non-human elements. Further, the parallelism in the first four stanzas acts as an anaphoric incantation. This heightens the perennial aspect of the insentient elements, and also reflects the persona's preoccupation with the repetition of the moon's name.

I admire the concise manner in which Moolman shapes his work. It is his persistent attention to detail, and deft craftsmanship that have been invaluable lessons in writing poems of my own. While I can only whimsically wish to emulate his precision as a poet, I can realistically hope that his poetry has imbued a sense of itself into my own poetry, and that I will continue to draw inspiration from his work.

## II

There is a frame that hangs in my family's lounge. It is inconspicuous amidst the surrounding vibrantly coloured paintings. In the frame is a page with dull calligraphic script representing our family name. The lines are meticulous, in their varying expansion and elision. I have never been able to decipher the text, but the translation details the meaning of our surname, and traits of our character, according to an ancient Hindu form of nominative determinism. In the familiar English lettering, our surname does not seem as intricate, as ornamental, as it does in the Sanskrit script. Yet this aesthetic appeal belies a language that is purported to be one of the oldest written languages in the world, and the original medium of many of the myths and poems of the Hindu religion. In drafting *Unfamiliar Shores*, I turned to poems from the Sanskrit,

albeit in translation, to inform and help form some poems. These considered the religious and cultural aspects of ancient Hindu tradition, and examined the way this has been altered over time and place.

Sanskrit was the preferred linguistic medium for many of the Hindu Holy Scriptures including the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* (Brough 1968). However, in a contemporary setting it is not often used at religious rituals or ceremonial observances. Certain mantras continue to be recited in Sanskrit, but in many Hindu quarters prayer is recited in the local dialects. Most texts from the Sanskrit, religious, dramatic, or poetic, often a combination of all three, are composed in verse form, known as *kavya*. As such, the texts have an implicit poetic quality. While most of the Hindu holy texts are narratives represented in the verse form, there are many Sanskrit texts which are not liturgical in nature. These poems are composed in the mode of the Sanskrit fragmentary lyric, *khanda-kavya*, and are terse, discontinuous stanzas often centred on heightened emotion and passion. Speaking of their poetic structure, Barbara Stoler Miller says of the separate stanzas, “these verses are short and aesthetically complete – ideally an isolated verse should be appreciated on its own, without any larger context” (1994:55). In this way, the poetic mode is highlighted, rather than the narrative.

While many of the poems in *Unfamiliar Shores* attempt to engage with the narratives of marginalised histories, it was crucial for me to shape a poetic aesthetic framework for narrative, rather than allowing plot logic or teleology to take precedence. One such way in which the Sanskrit fragmentary lyric is able to produce the abovementioned effect is through condensed syntactical structure, as opposed to the expansive mode of conventional narrative. Further, this mode of poetry was developed to express, explore or exhort interiorised emotion, rather than singularly adopting a representational view of a material, external reality. In its musing upon emotion and feeling there is the possibility of the poetry being overly contemplative and philosophical. However, to use an Eliotian term, many of these poems include the use of objective correlatives, from the natural, perennial environment. The permanence and universality of natural elements, as in the poetry of Kobus Moolman, allows for the emotive aspects of the poetry to cohere. This is exemplified in the following lyric, “Although I have a lamp, and fire, / stars, moon, and sun to give me light, / unless I

look into her eyes, / all is black night” (Bhartrhari 1968:65). The contrast between light and dark acts as a conceit, shifting the mood from lines one and two to lines three and four. The list of incandescent elements, “lamp, and fire, / stars, moon, and sun” (ibid.) is juxtaposed against the stark darkness of the “black night” (ibid.). The finality in tone evidenced by “all is black night” emphasises the emotional effect of detachment from the persona’s loved one. While, the aesthetic form of this poetry has had an impact on certain poems in *Unfamiliar Shores*, the chief concerns of the Sanskrit fragmentary lyric have not contributed directly to the collection. The chief concerns of this mode of poetry are patriarchal and androcentric, proffering a world view that minimises the agency of women. The rampant objectification of women in this canonised literary sphere, and in South African Indian Hindu society, coupled with the need to countermand such a discriminatory system accounted for poems such as “Fast Food” and “Ways”. Having said this, disconcertingly, very few poems in *Unfamiliar Shores* utilise the voice of a woman persona, or attempt to openly articulate women’s experience.

Distinct from the Sanskrit fragmentary lyric, and more exalted as a genre, is the Sanskrit narrative lyric or *maha-kavya* (Stoler Miller 1994:55). The Sanskrit narrative lyric is the formal genre of the Hindu holy text, the *Ramayana*, originally composed by the poet Valmiki, and consisting of an exhausting twenty four thousand stanzas (Narayan 1977). There have been numerous linguistic translations and formalistic adaptations of this text, yet in most instances the thematic focus, and narrative, have remained consonant with the original. The text is religiously significant in that Rama, the protagonist, is regarded as an avatar, or human incarnation, of the God Vishnu. Further, it is due to the eventual triumph of Rama and his wife Sita over the demon, Ravanna, that the festival of lights, or Diwali, is celebrated. Poems in *Unfamiliar Shores* which draw inspiration from the *Ramayana* include “Sampaati” and “Old Ganesan speaks”. In the opening line of the second stanza in “Old Ganesan speaks”, “Can play Ravanna, snatch Sitas from fields”, the persona references the capturing of Rama’s wife, Sita, by the Lankan king, Ravanna, in an allegorical depiction of the abduction and abuse of female indentured labourers by plantation overseers and sirdars. Clearly, here, the *Ramayana* does not influence the whole poem, but the sacred text is drawn into a longer list of references cogent to South African

Indian Hindu identity. In “Sampaati”, in comparison, the entire poem is a re-imagining of the vulture Sampaati’s pinioning. The siblings Sampaati and Jatayu are minor characters in the *Ramayana*. However, the flight of the two brothers toward the Sun, which left Sampaati permanently wingless attempting to save his brother, shares many similarities with the Greek myth of Icarus. Interestingly, the poem “Sampaati” was originally drafted as a re-imagining of the Greek myth. In my notebook the poem had the working title “Icarus”, as well as the now omitted concluding line, “our inability to fly / as inescapable as death”. This was then appropriated as a poetic re-imagining of the tale of Sampaati upon reading of his role in the *Ramayana*. It is important to note that the Sanskrit texts I have read, in conjunction with drafting *Unfamiliar Shores*, are only Sanskrit cultural artefacts, in that they are received through the mediating processes of transliteration and translation. However, in their bearing on Hindu tradition, and their distinctive poetic form, the Sanskrit texts detailed above have provided relevant influence in crafting my own poetry in the collection *Unfamiliar Shores*.

### III

In academic discourse the narrative of the Indian indentured experience in South Africa was extensively enriched with the 2007 publication of Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed’s *Inside Indenture: A South African Story 1860 -1914*.<sup>1</sup> In my attempts to chart varieties of South African Indian Hindu identity, and convey an historical re-imagining of indentured experience, this text was an invaluable and inspirational research tool. By referring to certain accounts and vignettes in the text, and through an examination of the text’s subversion of conventional modes and discourses, I will aim to illustrate the value of this text in relation to poems from *Unfamiliar Shores*.

There were many texts I perused in researching the Indian indentured experience in South Africa including Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie’s *From Cane Fields To Freedom: A Chronicle Of Indian South African Life* (2000), Marina Carter & Khal Torabully’s *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (2002), and Surendra Bhana & J. B. Brain’s *Setting Down Roots. Indian Migrants in South Africa 1860 – 1911* (1990). However, the aesthetic form, style of writing, and grounded South

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequently re-published as *Inside Indian Indenture: A South African Story 1860 -1914*.

African context in *Inside Indian Indenture* proved to have an especial influence on the content in *Unfamiliar Shores*. The unconventional historiographical mode in *Inside Indian Indenture* subverts orthodox ways of documenting history. The book is intertextual in its inclusion of poetic extracts, maps, photographs, and bureaucratic certification and documentation. This interdisciplinarity produces a dialogic discourse, conveying a sense of the many stories and many voices, in a sense the variety and plurality, of South African Indian culture and history. Further, many of the poetic epigraphs from *Inside Indian Indenture* provided additional reading and reference toward writing poems of my own.

It was the historical source documents in the Desai & Vahed text that provided the framework for re-imagining indentured experiences through the medium of poetry. An example of such source documentation is the diary entries of ship officials. The poem “Karuppai”, as evidenced by the epigraph before the start of the poem, is based on the impartial diary entries of the Surgeon-Superintendent aboard the *Umvoti*. “21<sup>st</sup>: No. 40 Karuppai was instrumentally delivered of a stillborn child at 3:00pm. Mr. Le Febour was instructed to throw the baby overboard at night when the Emigrants were asleep” (Hitchcock cited in Desai and Vahed 2010:27). There is no other mention of Karuppai in the Surgeon-Superintendent’s journal, apart from the cursory, inconspicuous “24<sup>th</sup>: The woman who was instrumentally delivered is progressing favourably”. As discussed in earlier sections of this essay, I felt the need to offer Karuppai’s story in a mode which does not impersonalise her or her emotion toward the loss of a child. Her child. However, while the poem aims to humanise Karuppai, it may also be representative of the experience of loss by other unidentified indentured labourers. This extrapolation is necessary when counterposed against some of the more heartless diary entries of other officials: “26<sup>th</sup> October 1873: Another coolie whelp skedaddled to Kingdom come... 29 October: Another coolie infant vermosed... 7 November: One of the coolies jumped overboard, [the third] assigning as a reason that he had not enough grub. This amusement is getting rather too common” (Johnson cited in Desai and Vahed 2010:30). (As an aside: if these author editors are citing from disparate sources, this may be understood as part of the recuperative labour of scholars interested in Coolitude, analogous to Carter and Torabully’s project in *Voices from Indenture*. This layered current of citations is one which I too enter, not so much to take

my place in the sites of scholarship as to discover where the intellectual, aesthetic and emotional currents may take me.)

Suicide was common among the indentured labourers, both during their voyage across the Indian Ocean and upon taking up their contracts in South Africa. “Natal had the second highest suicide rate amongst the colonies that received indentured labour” (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000:11). However, it is these stories, lives extinguished without regard, either overtly or clandestinely, that are often omitted from the established historical discourse. Here, suicide becomes a societal and psychological pattern, rather than the individualised act of a single desperate, psychologically unstable individual’s intent on ending his or her life. Poems such as “1906” and “Possibilities” are attempts to depict the poignancy of the losses associated with these individual’s lives. “1906”, as shown in the dedicational epigraph of the poem, is a poetic re-imagining of Ponappa Naicken’s suicide, in which he also killed his youngest son, Arumugan. The build-up to the suicide, and their eventual deaths is relayed in visceral detail in *Inside Indian Indenture*, “Blood marks, pieces of bone, portions of their brains and pieces of blanket were traced for a distance of 250 feet from their bodies” (Desai and Vahed 2010:164). However, in making poetry of their deaths, my aim was to write in a restrained manner, to avoid either hyperbole or forensic accuracy, and instead to establish a measured degree of emotive language which might persuade a reader to enter a space of history that is also an abject personal terminal. The end of history? I object to the bandying about of such theoretical claims when we have barely begun to accommodate in history such lives as were on the line in this double death.

Contrastingly, life was also celebrated and embraced by the indentured. This is exemplified by the traditionally Islamic festival of *Muharram*, pejoratively called “Coolie Christmas” by colonial founding fathers. While this festival is, ordinarily, unique to the Muslim religion it was practised by Indian indentured Muslims, Hindus, and Christians in Durban indicating the manner in which the intermingling of castes and religions on the transoceanic voyage worked to supersede inherited religious and cultural traditions. The three day long festival consisted of dramatic performance, dance, wrestling, and the transporting of elaborately decorated chariots, known as *thaziyahs*, into the Umgeni River. It was an important annual event for the indentured, as it was one of the few occasions where established power relations were challenged in



the spirit of carnival. Further, as indentured society became more ossified, religious divisions emerged, preventing such a form of unified celebration on such a grand scale. The unbridled energy of the festivities is evoked in the aesthetic of “Muharram” where the poem progresses without stanza breaks or conspicuous white space. As Muharram is no longer celebrated in Durban, in this way, the poem then also becomes a curious enactment of a lost practice; the poem is a cultural artefact representing the event, engirdled by the historical narrative in *Inside Indian Indenture*.

The carefully considered mode of narrative coupled with the thoroughly detailed research in *Inside Indian Indenture* was one of the central bibliographical texts in drafting poems focused upon the system of indenture in South Africa. As the suffix of the text’s title reads, the historical experience of South African Indians, is one of many vital “South African Story[s]” (Desai and Vahed 2010). The research, drafting, writing, editing, and re-editing of *Unfamiliar Shores* highlights the continual process of mediating culture and identity. In producing the poems for this collection, in some way, I too hope to have accomplished the telling, even the poetic suggestion, of one element of an important ‘South African Story’.

Let these poems be  
messages in bottles  
reaching for their own  
unfamiliar shores.

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