



Mere Porvaj [I Am Remembering]
Shivanjani Lal

Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts respectfully acknowledges the Wulgurukaba of Gurambilbarra and Yunbenun and our region's surrounding groups - Bindal, Gugu Badhan, Nywaigi, Warrgamay, Bandjin and Gudjal - as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we gather, share and celebrate local creative practice. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the first people of Australia. They have never ceded sovereignty and remain strong in their enduring connection to land and Culture.



Foreword

The print works of *Mere Porvaj [I am Remembering]* carry a direct connection to North Queensland, having been developed during Shivanjani Lal's 2023 Creative Research Residency with Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts and James Cook University Library's Special Collections. In The Studio at Umbrella, she created the eucalyptus oil transfers which layer portraits from her family archives with landscapes marked by sugar cultivation. It is an honour to see those prints back in Umbrella's gallery within the broader installation, particularly alongside Sabrina-Rose Toby's curated exhibition *Woven Together: Undivided We Rise*, which also explores women's traditions and Cultural knowledge.

Mere Porvaj [I am Remembering] was first presented at Linden New Art in Naarm / Melbourne, where Lal staged a powerful meditation on memory, cyclical time and ancestral ghosts. Exhibited now at Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts in Gurambilbarra / Townsville, it takes on new layers of resonance, acknowledging that each landscape carries its own ghosts.

The work is re-contextualised within an environment deeply marked by colonialism, indenture and displacement. The histories Lal evokes of Indian indentured sugar cane labourers in Fiji, echo the forced trafficking of South Sea Islanders blackbirded to labour in North Queensland. We have exhibited powerful artistic reminders of these histories recently in Gail Mabo's work *Indentured* (PUNQ 2024), and parallel histories of indentured Japanese pearl divers in Elysha Rei's 2025 exhibition *Shirozato to Shinju* (*White Sugar and Pearls*). Bringing these histories to the fore enables audiences to reflect on the interconnected legacies of indenture both locally and across oceans.

On behalf of Umbrella, I commend Shivanjani Lal on her commitment to this deeply personal and important work, and thank North Australian Festival of Arts (NAFA) for partnering to present it. Special thanks must also go to Margaret Robertson for supporting Shivanjani's print work in The Studio.

~ Daniel Qualischefski

Deputy Director, Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts



This spread and previous spread: Shivanjani Lal, *Mere Porvaj [I Am Remembering]* (installation details, in situ at Linden New Art), 2024. Photographs: Simon Strong, courtesy of Shivanjani Lal and Linden New Art.

The Archival Kal

~ Manisha Anjali

1. Kal

Kal is both yesterday and tomorrow in Hindi and Urdu. It is a cyclical concept of time in which we stand in the past and future simultaneously. We wander through the rivers of yesterday and the mountains of tomorrow in the present day. The yesterday of girmityas¹ and lascars² on board labour vessels on the Pacific Ocean, and the tomorrow of the rustic pineapple sun crowning the green Sigatoka valley.

Fatimah Asghar's poem *Kal* grounds the concept of time that Fiji-born artist Shivanjani Lal works with in *Mere Porvaj* [*I am Remembering*]. Asghar's *Kal* is a framework for living in which language expands the experience of memory and imagination – "Allah, you gave us a language/ where yesterday & tomorrow / are the same word... Kal means / she's holding my unborn baby / in her arms, helping me pick a name."³ Asghar's *Kal* is the invisible doorway, the space for devotion and attention, the ephemeral and inevitable. In Lal's mother tongue, the koiné language Fiji-Hindi, kal demarcates the illusory lines between yesterday, today and tomorrow, as the years blur between the timelines of nanis, ajis, auntys, mothers, sisters and the artist herself. Circadian rhythms, tidal patterns and lunar phases are cyclical emblems of time that render kal as more than a metaphor.



Shivanjani Lal, *Mere Porvaj* (*Land in their bodies*) 4 (detail), 2024, Eucalyptus oil transfer print on rice paper made on Gurambillbarra with the assistance of Margaret Robertson.

Kal is the birthplace of memory. The invisible threads of kal bind together those who are remembered, those in the ritual of remembering, and the future that is a consequence of this constellation. From girmityas who were indentured on sugar cane plantations in colonial Fiji, to their descendants, like Lal who have migrated from the archipelago to Australia; the living and the dead are entwined across oceans by the eternal kal. Kal is a universal affliction of the exile, who is in a purgatory between lands and stories. Memory is accessed as fragments, dreams and orbits.

Kal is archival practice. For Lal, to pull from the lacuna of kal is to talanoa⁴ with spirits, oral histories, ritual practices, vessels and journeys. The archival kal is alive in our perceptions of time and love. Lal's kal is rooted in the realm of ancestral ghosts, who are present in every aspect of yesterday, today and tomorrow. Lal engages the archival kal as a tender and devotional method of remembering a community.

2. Ghosts

After the death of the physical body, if the spirit remains rooted to the land, the spirit is a ghost. Lal meditates on spirits that remain etched onto the islands, in houses of the living, in bodies and everyday objects. Indo-Fijian historian Brij Lal writes about witnessing *Pitara Pakh*, a 16-lunar-day period in the Hindu calendar, where spirits of the recently deceased walk the earth. Offerings of dalo leaves, banana and prayer were placed beneath a mango tree. Lal makes note, that such practice has since been forgotten in Fiji.⁵ What has remained, is the consciousness that the living and the dead occupy the same world.

In *Mere Porvaj* [*I am Remembering*], the artist makes contemporary offerings to ancestral spirits. The ghosts are cradled by two sound explorations that speak in the language of the dead. These songs exude the praxis of prayer. Devotional attention is given to the longings of wandering ghosts embedded in the continuum of kal. For the descendent, this is akin to cutting open time with the same sickle once used to cut ganna.⁶

Kiske Bathai Hum, a sound exploration at the heart of the exhibition, created by Lal in collaboration with singer and scholar Mahesh White-Radhakrishnan, cements itself in the body of the cosmological kal, transcending Western concepts of structured and linear time. Lal's singing is layered in folkloric and ghostly harmonies. The voices of Lal and White-Radhakrishnan together is rhythmic like the waves, ancient like the fading of the amber sun and the blanket of the South Pacific moon, and fragrant like frangipani and sandalwood after the hurricane. They sing of crossing restless oceans carrying the only surety in life – the day and the night, guided by the omniscient fire in the heart of the lonely wanderer – asking the question, *who will tell our stories?*

1 Girmityas are Indians who were indentured on sugar cane plantations in colonial Fiji, between 1879-1916

2 Indian seamen

3 Asghar, Fatimah. *If They Come For Us*. London: Corsair, 2019.

4 Talanoa means to communicate and converse, a word used in Fiji and across the Pacific Islands

5 Lal, Brij. "Return to Bairach." Essay. In *Chalo Jahaji*, 25–40. Canberra: ANU, 2012.

6 Ganna is a Hindi word for sugar cane.

Lal recites a haunting poem against the metronome of the clock:

*They had birds and fishes under their skin.
Papery and translucent, as though they would disappear when they slept at night.
Disappearing into their blood only to return in the morning.
I used to trace the lines of initials and flowers,
wondering how they got etched onto my grandmothers' bodies.
It was a comfort to see marks so lived in.
I imagine dark nights and laughter ringing out as their marks were made.
Imperfect and fragile, when I touched them I felt whole histories.*

When Lal speaks, the birds and fishes come to life. Composed in London during her Masters in Artists' Film & Moving Image, Lal's poetry breathes into the symbols on bodies of women as living histories. The cartography of bodies is the site of haunting and memory, the personification of kal, evanescent and iridescent. The artist playfully traces symbols of the past with her fingers, as she extends the invitation of the archival kal to the audience. *How do we remember?*

In *I am Remembering*, Lal recites another poem:

*I am remembering 87 ships sailing black waters.
60,965 bodies moved through the kala pani, the dark tides.
Holding land in their bodies, mere porvaj.
Only 60, 553 arrived in Viti.
I am remembering those who fell,
Those who couldn't make it across to that better life of false promises.*

Her cadence is resonant like the night, immersed in the inherited memory of the three-month dark passage from the subcontinent to Fiji. She pulls forgotten, fallen ghosts from the archival kal. This recitation is followed by the white noise of the Pacific Ocean.

The ghosts are at home in the landscape of voices. Lal evokes her cultural inheritance in the audio works – bhajans, anti-indenture folk songs and poetry. The singing of birds is also present. The poet is entwined with the sound of nature. Songbirds, who witness the sun setting over the plantations, are also collaborators in the expression of girmitiyas and their descendants. What the birds and singers have in common is ancient oral tradition.

These are the songs of exile. Lal's sound explorations pay homage to the bidesia folk tradition. Bidesia is the folk culture that emerged in the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of India – eastern Uttar Pradesh, western Bihar and western Jharkhand – as a direct response to the rupture in spirit caused by departure of those who crossed the kala pani.⁷ These were songs of longing and love addressed to the departee, who would be called *bidesia*, *pardesi* or *batohia*.⁸ In the offshore sugar colonies, songs emerged of longing for the homeland, grief of crossing the kala pani, and the horror of living and dying in the coolie lines.

3. Soul Transfer

The land is full of ghosts. Fiji, or Viti, is inhabited by the spirits of girmitiyas who were coerced, tricked and trafficked onto the plantations by British colonisers. Many of the ghosts are faceless, and nameless, appearing in dream or in yaqona-induced reverie, or as numbers in the National Archives of Fiji. Brij Lal writes, "The girmitiyas are gone now, but their imprint is etched indelibly on the landscape of their adopted homes."⁹ This statement is the crux of *Mere Porvaj* [*I am Remembering*].

The original landscape of the adopted homes was terraformed for sugar cane and rubber plantations. The removal of Fijian dry forests was a plague on the vanua.¹⁰ Once home to ancient cycads, sandalwood and banded iguanas, dry forests succumbed to colonial commercialisation. The massacred land then experienced thousands of Indian labourers toiling in the ganna fields under the violence of cruel Australian overseers, in a place that neither of them belonged. The displaced ghosts planted themselves in the liminality of Fijian lands and waters. Like the land, the girmitiya had their genealogical roots removed. In the grief of kal, mourning is both for the integrity of the land and the spirits.

In Gurambilbarra, known as Townsville, Queensland, native forests were also terraformed to create sugar cane plantations. It was on these plantations that blackbirding, the trafficking South Sea Islanders to Australia for indentured labour took place. It was in Gurambilbarra, during a Creative Research Residency at Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts, that Lal practiced printmaking, amidst the ghosts and hidden histories of Queensland.

Lal created eucalyptus oil transfers of nostalgic family photographs. This is soul transfer. The faces in the images are given another platform in which to live. The elegiac portraits are nourished by the medicinal properties of eucalyptus oil, traditionally used by Aboriginal healers to treat wounds, infections and fevers. Each image is pulled from Lal's family archives and juxtaposed with images of terraformed lands which housed the bodies of the beloved.

In one print, a woman with braided hair and deep-set eyes is sitting cross-legged on the floor playing the veena. Beneath her, a colour transfer of verdant landscape of Rakiraki, taken on the way to a cousin's wedding. The veena player was also a mathematics teacher, who taught Lal's mother. In another print, a family of five dressed in white stare at the camera. Two of the women are Lal's great aunts. One of the women is protected by a small boy standing next to her. He did not like wearing the white man's clothing. Beneath them, a photograph of a sugar cane field taken by Lal on her way to Sigatoka.

The juxtaposition of portraits and the land offer a balm to the spirits and the land, for both being transformed into commodities for the empire. Resilience is rooted in the faces in the portraits, and in the soil upon which they walked.

7 Kala Pani translates to "black waters". It is believed that once one leaves India and crosses the black waters, they will lose their caste and be cursed. Many who travelled to Fiji believed they suffered because they crossed the kala pani.

8 Tiwari, Badri Narayan. "Bidesia: Migration, Change, and Folk Culture," March 2003.

9 Lal, Brij. "Preface: Beginnings and Endings." Essay. In *Chalo Jahaji*, ix–xviii. Canberra: ANU, 2012.

10 Vanua is the iTaukei ideology connecting the people and the land.

4. Collapsing Monuments

Monuments are permanent structures, such as buildings and statues, which memorialise a significant person or historical moment. Colonial monuments are imposed on the ancient indigenous lands of Fiji and Australia. In opposition to this, Lal seeks to monumentalise the labour of women by bringing forth their work with natural fibres, natural dyes, weaving and stitching.

Built structures like houses embody the archival kal, holding the memory of the ghosts who have lived in the space. The exhibition space, Linden New Art, is a colonial house built in 1871, eight years before the first labour ship arrived in Fiji. The house of Lal's nani was constructed at Rakiraki and the house of Lal's aji, was at Yalava, Sigatoka. It is these women to whom Lal devotes these woven monuments. In the intersection of colonial structures and the labour of Lal and the women in her family, we experience contrasting sentiments of memorialisation.

A sari is a house for a body. The sari is one piece of woven fabric which is wrapped around the physical vessel housing the living feminine body, occasionally revealing the belly, or fashioned into a veil to frame the face. When women worked the fields, they would be wearing saris.

A sack is a house for granules of sugar, refined or raw. Lal, with her mother, sister and niece, has stitched sugar sacks together on Gadigal land. They line one side of the sari, as a tribute to the labour of women. The sugar sacks also line the floor of the exhibition space. These woven sacks were sourced by the Lal at Sigatoka Heritage Market.

Masi, another fabric made monumental, is made only by women. Masi is made from paper mulberry trees by separating the bark and beating it with a mallet. Lal has bought this masi from the same woman in Sigatoka Heritage Market over the past five years. Lal doused the masi in the iridescent yellow of haldi, or turmeric, a sacred spice from India used daily in cooking, in ayurvedic healing and rituals. This evokes the spiritual kinship between Indo-Fijian and iTaukei women, sharing labour and land. Lal refers to the haldi-coloured masi as a collapsing monument, an object that cannot be held down or distorted by colonial ideology.

Monuments made by saris, sugar sacks and masi – woven and stitched together by the hands of women – is an organic, holistic kind of monument, devoid of empirical paradigms. Lal offers a tender and temporal alternative to colonial monuments, as transient as the nature of kal. These fabric monuments will one day return to the earth from which they were derived.

5. Library

Within the houses of women, we learn that objects can be read like books. On the floor covered in plain fabric, Lal has placed a small library of everyday objects from family homes. The seashells in this space belong to the artist's mother. The shankha,

also known as the conch, is a vessel made in the sea by a living creature. It is blown at the beginning and end of a pooja. Like birds, the conch is a collaborator in oral storytelling. There is a stack of saris, silk and cotton, belonging to the women in Lal's family. The houses of women are neatly folded in a pile, as dormant stories of rites of passage and adornment. Beside the saris is aji's tin bowl. Lal sourced this vessel from outdoor kitchen at aji's Yalava dwelling upon her passing. Vessels like this were given to girimiyas to carry holy water from the Ganges to the green fields, bures and corrugated iron homes of Fiji. In this space, aji's tin bowl is filled with saltwater from St Kilda Beach. Saltwater too, has archival memory.



Shivanjani Lal, *Mere Porvaj (Land in their bodies) 1* (detail), 2024, Eucalyptus oil transfer print on rice paper made on Gurambilbarra with the assistance of Margaret Robertson.

6. Aaj-kal

The Hindi word aaj means today. The phrase aaj-kal means nowadays. Aaj-kal, the memory of labour, past and present, is monumentalised by descendants of girimiyas like Lal. *Mere Porvaj* [I am Remembering] is a celebration of love and memory, an invitation to walk hand-in-hand with ancestral ghosts, and to talanoa with the past and future.

Originally written for the Linden New Art iteration of this exhibition in 2024 - reprinted with thanks to the author and Linden New Art. | *Manisha Anjali* is a writer and researcher. She is the author of *Naag Mountain* (Giramondo, 2024). Manisha is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne. She has lived in Fiji, Aotearoa and Australia.

Mere Porvaj [I Am Remembering] Shivanjani Lal

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Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts

408 Flinders St, Gurambilbarra / Townsville, QLD 4810 | www.umbrella.org.au
07 4772 7109 | Tues-Fri 9am-5pm | Sat-Sun 9am-1pm | Closed Mondays + public holidays

Cover image: Shivanjani Lal, *Mere Porvaj (Land in their bodies)* 3, 2024, Eucalyptus oil transfer print on rice paper made on Gurambilbarra with the assistance of Margaret Robertson.

Back cover: Shivanjani Lal, *Mere Porvaj [I Am Remembering]* (installation detail, in situ at Linden New Art), 2024. Photographs: Simon Strong, courtesy of Shivanjani Lal and Linden New Art.

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