

# Joy in the Dirt

## Discovering Indenture's Wild Places

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### Article abstract

I was born in South Africa, as were my parents and grandparents. We have descended from people who had been brought to South Africa through indenture, a colonial labour system that introduced alien agricultural methods and an alien workforce from India, to optimise monocultures like sugarcane. My very presence here is, therefore, entangled with colonialism's domestication and mastery over land, plant, and people (Indigenous and indentured). I have never felt alien here. Why was that? What about the indenture stories of people, land and plant, beyond empire's mastery and control—my ancestral wild places? And was there room within these wild places to heal colonial wounds across our ethnic and racial barriers? What was lost? Could my PhD2 research transcripts address some of those losses? This paper contains poems that emerged from PhD research interviews, my fieldnotes, my father's memoirs, and letters from my ancestral archives. A poetic lens gave me a decolonial language to inspect the archives and transcripts with some of these questions in mind.

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## JOY IN THE DIRT: DISCOVERING INDENTURE'S WILD PLACES

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**Abstract:** I was born in South Africa, as were my parents and grandparents. We have descended from people who had been brought to South Africa through indenture, a colonial labour system that introduced alien agricultural methods and an alien workforce from India, to optimise monocultures like sugarcane. My very presence here is, therefore, entangled with colonialism's domestication and mastery over land, plant, and people (Indigenous and indentured). *I have never felt alien here. Why was that? What about the indenture stories of people, land and plant, beyond empire's mastery and control—my ancestral wild places? And was there room within these wild places to heal colonial wounds across our ethnic and racial barriers? What was lost?* Could my PhD<sup>2</sup> research transcripts address some of those losses? This paper contains poems that emerged from PhD research interviews, my fieldnotes, my father's memoirs, and letters from my ancestral archives. A poetic lens gave me a decolonial language to inspect the archives and transcripts with some of these questions in mind.

**Keywords:** erasure; indenture; soil; women; joy; poetry

## More Than Just Phoenix<sup>3</sup>

A friend and I walked along Addington beach today, telling stories about growing up, of rituals, of the sacred, of the reverence of animal sacrifice and of alternate cosmologies. We shared stories about the laps of our grandmothers and their ways of living within us. We spoke about sardines and preservation, of making a little go a long way. There was resonance, sometimes surprising, yet mainly not. She and I grew up in different areas of KZN<sup>4</sup>, raised by different traditions and, pertinent to all of this, we belong to different race groups in South Africa. Yet, here we were laughing at the familiarity and eccentricities of our ancestors. Today, we didn't speak about the recent violence in Phoenix. Perhaps, because it is hard, or maybe there is a part of us that would like to look past the ugliness of what Phoenix represents. Sometimes, it is easier to focus on the relationships that have developed despite this country's ongoing inequity. (Naidoo, 2021)

The excerpt above is from one of my Facebook posts after the July 2021 riots<sup>5</sup> in KwaZulu-Natal. One of the many repercussions of the riots was what has become known as the Phoenix massacre<sup>6</sup>. In the former Indian<sup>7</sup> township, certain vigilante groups comprising Indian people led armed attacks indiscriminately on Black people, resulting in the deaths of many innocents. Even though the violence had been mainly isolated to the Phoenix area, very distinct ethnic/racial allegiances developed throughout the country as a result. This brought to the surface South Africa's struggle to navigate its carefully constructed racial and ethnic boundedness, sculpted by colonialism, re-inscribed by apartheid's geographical and ideological separateness, and monumentalised by capitalism and neoliberalism. There is now a tendency towards a self-herding into rigid identity groups, more constrained and suspicious of the other than before.

The disconnect with what feels like the other is really a disconnect with our sovereign stories. It is a disconnect with the earth, with our mother tongues and the mother wisdom that nurtured us and the wild places of our ancientness. Ancientness recognises that there is an ancestry which goes deep in time, place, and realm. This ancientness is not archaic or stuck in the past but is vibrant, ever growing, and in constant motion, relating to and in conversation with its environment. It is not concrete. The concrete is a colonial contrivance and one that has become enforced by an "entrapment" of "whiteness" (Mbembe, 2015, p. 3). Whiteness, a residue of colonial and apartheid attitudes, remains pervasive, setting itself up as objective history. Ethnocentrism, ethnic and "national-chauvinism" (p. 1) has emerged from this trapped place "of unresolved crises" (p. 2) because we cannot remember our expansive and imaginative selves, beyond "whiteness" (p. 3). With increased and ongoing violence

upon our bodies and souls, we are having difficulty finding our way home—politically, environmentally, relationally, and spiritually.

I needed to dive into my personal archives in order to access what I believe is the original wound in my story with this land—to recognise and acknowledge what had tried to eradicate and eliminate ancient and ancestral ways of knowing and being. I believe that, for my lineage, the wound of coloniality is indenture—“an unresolved crisis” (p. 2) a shadowy ghost supposedly from a very long time ago. My South African ancestry is a result of colonialism’s oppressive and invasive indenture system, which introduced a foreign, mainly male<sup>8</sup>, labour force to service its extractive agricultural methods. The indentured were, like most colonised subjects, “bestialized laboring bodies for the sake of capitalist (re)production” (Mendez, 2015, p. 55). Empire’s exploitation of resources—human and the more than human woven together.

At the same time, at the source of the wound are myriad stories of people, plant, and land beyond empire’s mastery and control, beyond the boundedness and fracture of colonialism and apartheid. Early on in my research, I remember discovering that labourers on the plantations had been supplementing their rations with amaranth<sup>9</sup> (considered a weed and referred to as sugarcane herbs) that grew amidst the sugarcane. I was inspired by the simple way that subjugated beings, plant and servant, had, together, found a wild place that had resisted domestication.

I needed to understand my relationship to land/ the dirt, not for the purposes of proprietorship, and not as an environmentalist, but to understand what it would look like to be in an emancipated and honourable relationship, not only with the land, but to its (still) colonised people.

In order to do this, I had to recognise my own ontology as a once colonised subject (Biko, 2015, p. 56); I had to break ties with the myth that “the native (or the colonial subject) was ontologically incapable of change and therefore of creation” (Mbembe, 2015); I had to find ways to unveil and thus “transform silences into language and action” (Lorde, 1993, p. 42); and lastly, find a way to “mourn, recover and re-tradition lost knowledges” (Sheik, 2021, p. 70) in a way that made sense to me.

## **The Data, the Poetry, the Revelation**

When I began my research, I had been searching for farmers and growers in the Indian community who would have intimate knowledge of food seed which had traversed with indentured people from India. I had interviewed four women (Pumi, Nila,

Vitai, and Malai<sup>10</sup>) who were either small-scale farmers or married to farmers. The interviews had been designed to interrogate a different set of questions—my research questions. As a poet, I had intended to use poetic inquiry as tool to analyse the data. I do not believe that this is what happened.

When she, the mnemonic body speaks—what is voiced is *poetry*. Enfleshed poetry speaks to deep relation, where the mnemonic body evokes that which has been stolen, the flesh off our bone which identified us as belonging to the earth and to each other. (Sheik, 2021, p. 38)

As I began to reread my transcripts, new and different questions had begun to surface. I had lost my last surviving parent, my father, in 2020. I had recently moved from a house where I had tended, and been supported by, a wild garden for over twenty years. The province where I live had been traumatised, not only by the unrest and racial eruption of 2021, but by floods, and electrical and water outages. Issues around race, indigeneity, belonging, relationships, and precarity sat heavily on my soul. The poems that caught the light from the words on the page were, I believe, in conversation with the questions buried within my depths.

Perhaps this is what Lorde was referring to when she spoke of “poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean” (1993, p. 37). Were these poems a distillation, not only of my hidden questions, but of the many lived experiences embedded in my ancestral repository and in the interview transcripts? When the interviews sat side by side with my notes and dream journal, with parts of my father’s memoirs, and with letters from my family archives, the poems which emerged had come from the “deep relation” to other “enfleshed” memories – “mnemonic” (Sheik, 2021, p. 50) bodies speaking to, and through, the parts of my own discomforts and longings for a sense of home.

This enfleshed poetry reminds us that neither the archive nor the data is hermetically sealed in the past, in definitions, nor in its naming. These poems, necessarily weighted in the personal and the empirical, are not meant to be, and can never be, representational, essentialist, or homogenous. Through poetry, the personal archive and the data were able to transform what was a repository—containing everything that had been left out, silenced, erased, or shamed into hiding—into something rich and alive, and thus offer us places of possibility.

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. (Lorde, 1993, p. 36)

## Lost

I grew up rarely hearing the word *indenture*, except for a smattering here and there. Until recently<sup>11</sup>, the word was mainly sprinkled in the conversations of historians and educated people. Indenture had not been present in everyday language. Many of the women whom I interviewed did not understand indentureship nor its political implications.

As Malai vaguely put it, “You know how we came from India as labourers.”

Poets Maya Surya Pillay and Maia Marie express the pain of what they regard as the ancestors having forgotten their pasts, leaving descendants with a sense of loss and rootlessness.

*in this red land, I have no history.  
crossing black water, my ancestors  
rinsed their heads out and put them back on*  
(Pillay, 2017, p. 1)

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*I borrow books on indenture  
to remember who they were.  
          occupation trade sugar demand famine poverty  
          avarice rootless labourers  
Words try to bridge time but are so brittle.  
Did they ask the waters to swallow their past?*  
(Marie, 2020, p. 2)

Most people in the community were struggling, living, loving, and planting, unaware that they had been a part of this colonial interruption. Perhaps there were no words to articulate the subjugation and violence of a system. Or perhaps it was something the labourers needed to forget because it was too difficult to remember.

*My great granny  
she came on the ship  
She had a child  
A son  
The recruiters asked them to come...  
she left everything*

*she came way on that ship*  
*She came with some other people from there*  
*The child,*  
*she left that child*  
*and came* (Transcript 2: Pumi)

Some were trying to forget children whom they had left behind for whatever reason. Others had left behind husbands and childhoods. My own great-great grandmother, Subbee, was nine-years old when she arrived in South Africa in 1879. She travelled with her mother and her mother's two brothers, one of whom became her husband when she turned fourteen. There are no records of a father on that ship's list<sup>12</sup>. Subbee's mother was either a widow or someone who had left her husband behind in India. The meticulous colonial records, now known as the ships lists, were "crafted as an institutional method to delimit the terms of indentured settlement, influx regulation and social control by the colonial government in collaboration with employers" (Waetjen & Vahed, 2014, p. 49). To the record keepers, Subbee was a number (21253), a child, and possibly a burden to the planter. For many, however, with no access to the documents of their ancestors, those ships that had brought people from one country to another as colonial servants had literally sailed.

My research around indenture, through the many books and articles that I had read, had given me a skeletal framework for how history had allocated (and relocated) the people from whom I descend. They filled in some of the gaps yet widened others. Skeletal—brittle bones!

The found poem below captures the boney descriptors that commonly recur in association with the indentured. Researched and uncovered by several indenture historians, among them, Desai & Vahed (2007) and Du Bois (2012), these words are found primarily within the extensive colonial records on the indentured subject.

masters and coolies<sup>13</sup>  
 ships and ship lists  
 plantations  
 'illiterate' peasants  
 subjugation  
  
 a nuisance  
 a threat  
 a curse

After their five-year indentureship had ended, many labourers chose to stay on. Some had been promised small plots of land on the margins of the main plantations. Some leased land and began market gardening, mainly to supply fruit and vegetables to the white plantation owners. But soon they began to surpass the colonial planters. Taxes and restrictions on land acquisition soon followed (Du Bois, 2012, p. 46; Freund, 1991, p. 266). Those bestialised labouring bodies had slowly begun to gain visibility as agential bodies – a clue pointing to a wild place that saw the indentured find solace in the soil.

But where were the grandmothers in these texts? Where were the people who had nourished me and my love for the soil, the dirt, and the generative humus? Within the books, I could not find Subbee—the nine-year-old with a mole on her neck<sup>14</sup>—who grew up to show her granddaughter, my ava,<sup>15</sup> how to save seed and plant food, and pray to the earth. Here in the books, I would not find my grandmother (Ava), nor her joy, innovation, or love for community. My lived experience and my mnemonic enfleshed body remembered grandmothers who were seed keepers and storytellers, who fed people and the earth. My relationship with the earth and my environmental education had taken place in my ava's backyard—a few square metres of unspectacular land in an area allocated for those of Indian origin. From the perspective of my younger self, Ava's backyard was a thriving hub of growth and life, brimming with litchi, mango, moringa, su su, methi, bird eye chillies, double beans, and so many other vegetables. I spent many holidays following her around. Ava had not been a farmer, but she had tended that little patch with what I equate to a spiritual connection, a reverence.

A generation before, when my father was growing up, during wars and rations<sup>16</sup>, it seemed that Ava's planting, seed saving, and growing had been centred on survival. Sugar plantations had surrounded the little plot. Plantations have seldom fed more than the economy, except for the weeds growing in the underbelly.

*I remember when the sugarcane was young  
There used to be these herbs that used to grow in between  
quite a few  
But I can't really remember their names  
but I just know they were this keerai and that keerai<sup>17</sup>*

*They just grew. (Transcript 2. Pumi)*

My grandparents had to grow their own food to feed the family. It was not an idyllic putter in the garden. The space where they lived did not belong to them and they were quite a distance away from the town.



*Amma would  
 Help in the planting of the crops  
 Take care of chickens  
 Collect the eggs  
 Harvest the fresh vegetables  
 I loved her industry  
 I loved her ingenuity*

This poem, written from my father's memoirs, acknowledges my grandmother's (Ava's) multifaceted work ethic, her "industry." There is nothing exceptional about this observation and it reiterates the difficulties of the time; however, the line which stands out for me is "I loved her ingenuity." The simple mechanical tasks of rural living are brought to life by this word ingenuity. Ava was not merely going through the motions. She was infusing the day-to-day with creative life force.

Ingenuity extended to my grandfather, too.

## Waste

*Daddy used a waste piece of ground  
 through which a rivulet ran  
 He converted this to a paddy field  
 We always had a rich harvest of rice*

*The post war years were lean years  
 No rice imports  
 We always had a rich harvest of rice*

*Relatives from Durban  
 made their annual adventure to see us  
 return[ed] with a boot full of rice  
 We always had a rich harvest of rice*

On a piece of ground considered waste<sup>18</sup> or unused, my grandfather had recognised an opportunity to grow food, not unlike many plantation workers who had preceded him. These farmers had mainly leased "land of lesser fertility or on a steep grade" (Freund, 1991, p. 267), and considered by plantation owners as inferior and nonarable—a waste. My grandfather was not a plantation worker, however. Neither was

he a farmer. He was the headmaster of a rural school that had a strip of waste land near a rivulet.

Rice was my grandfather's link to his mother. At the time she had been living across the sea on the paddy fields of a village in the south of India. His is an interesting story connecting the two continents. His parents had come under indenture to South Africa, where my grandfather and his siblings were born. At the age of 12, his parents returned to India via the repatriation<sup>19</sup> scheme, and my grandfather was plunged into a foreign environment. India had not been kind to my grandfather's health, and when he turned sixteen, he made the decision to return home, to South Africa. He somehow managed to do this—alone—at sixteen! He only managed to reunite with his mother forty years later. I imagine that, while she was growing and harvesting rice in a little village in India, he was doing the same on a plot of borrowed waste land in South Africa. I often reflect on my grandfather's birth story in South Africa. He, too, was nourished by waste. Born prematurely in rural KwaZulu-Natal, he had to be incubated in cow dung. This waste had become a second womb for him, courtesy of the cattle grazing on South African soil.

Waste lands—like the spaces between rows of sugarcane before the introduction of pesticides—were wild places, where human and plant discovered opportunity for growth and thriving beyond mainstream agriculture's regimentation and control. The following poem from Pumi's transcript is about the amaranth which grows in the "vegetable dirt" or compost.

*Kuppai keera*

*kuppai means dirt, she says*

*where they threw all the vegetable dirt*

*There, the herbs used to grow lush*

*The green herbs*

*That's why they call it kuppai keera*

*I always take my vegetable dirt and throw it (Transcript 2: Pumi)*

She uttered the last line with pride, knowing that this ancient act of composting had given the amaranth/ kuppai keera a chance to grow wildly again beyond commodification. In turn, she was never short of nourishment from the waste.

## Lost and Found

(1)

*You know su su<sup>20</sup>  
couldn't get it anywhere  
mum used to  
make a pickle with it  
cook it with tin fish  
put it in the dhal  
couldn't get it anywhere*

*I went to Food Lovers  
I bought a couple  
I propagated it  
I'm growing it abundantly (Transcript 1: Vitai)*

(2)

*On the farm there were a few dried laari<sup>21</sup> trees (FOUND)  
we grew it  
we took it to my mum  
the Indian community went gaga for it*

*They hadn't seen it (LOST)  
People had chopped it all down (LOST)  
they [had] LOST track of it  
We FOUND it on the farm when we were clearing up  
I kept the seeds. I just kept the seeds.*

*it's those little things that make me so proud of what I do  
you LOST it  
and I FOUND it!! (Transcript 1: Vitai)*

Vitae had found and bought su su, a childhood favourite, at a local food franchise. In propagating the seeds of the su su, she not only recovered a lost treasure, but also emancipated later generations of su su from poisons and pesticides. Vitai and her husband had invested in a farm about thirty minutes away from her upmarket city dwelling. The farm had been a way for Vitai to return to the soil and remember her rural roots. To her delight, she discovered the now elusive laari growing on the farm. For Vitae, the seeds of childhood food plants had resurfaced in unpredictable ways, giving her an opportunity to intentionally rekindle relationships that had frayed over time.

## (3)

**Lost***No space**I grew up in Chatsworth –**in Chatsworth**you couldn't grow there because there were flats –**No space**They used to plant. little bit of banana. little bit of those creeping trees like double beans...that space that they had at the back, they put an outbuilding**No space**Only people that live in Silverglen, Shallcross<sup>22</sup> and things they got big backyard – they plant.***Found***Does your mother save seeds? I ask**She does, she does!**she comes to the market**these things that are overgrown, turning yellow.**She takes the seeds and she dries them up**she comes**she pokes**She's the one that planted the calabash**The peppers,**the African lady sun,**the ones that are rotten**they [the traders] throw it (waste)**she takes it and she dries it**she plants it**she's got green fingers, and whatever she plants**she'll just poke there...**"I planted there, by the tree, is it growing?"**She says "must put water"**But not in Chatsworth ...**There is no place.** (Transcript 3: Malai)*

Malai, unlike Vitae, has grown up in Chatsworth, another Indian township, where low-cost houses are a whisper away from each other. Unlike many other townships, which were hovels with poor access to water and arable soil, what eventually became Chatsworth had once been "a hilly agricultural area" (Desai & Vahed, 2013:1). Displacement and forced removals had herded a large population of those classified as

Indian into the area making (low cost) accommodation a priority. As Malai reiterates, there was no space for growing food. All available space became dwelling space. LOST.

Malai's parents had never really had a relationship with the soil before Malai's marriage to a farmer. There is something jubilant and poignant in the image of Malai's city dwelling mother with no farming experience, making seed from vegetables about to be thrown away and planting by "poking" (into the ground) here and there. Found. A sense of agency, belonging, possibility?

**(4)**

**Lost**

*Farmer parents  
have educated their children  
son is a lawyer in some fancy country  
daughter is a doctor  
they don't want to come back  
back to the farm  
to live the history of their parents  
they don't even know  
what a farm is all about* (Transcript 1: Vitai)

In poem 4, Vitai articulates her theory on why the younger generation have moved away from the rural lifestyle. She is partly right. Education and higher paying jobs had indeed led to a more affluent generation who had been encouraged to free themselves from the status of coolie. But, for many, the movement away from the wild places had led to a disconnect and spiritual severance with the soil.

## **Community, Love and Desire**

The more something is shared, the greater its value becomes. This is hard to grasp for societies steeped in notions of private property, where others are, by definition, excluded from sharing. (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 26)

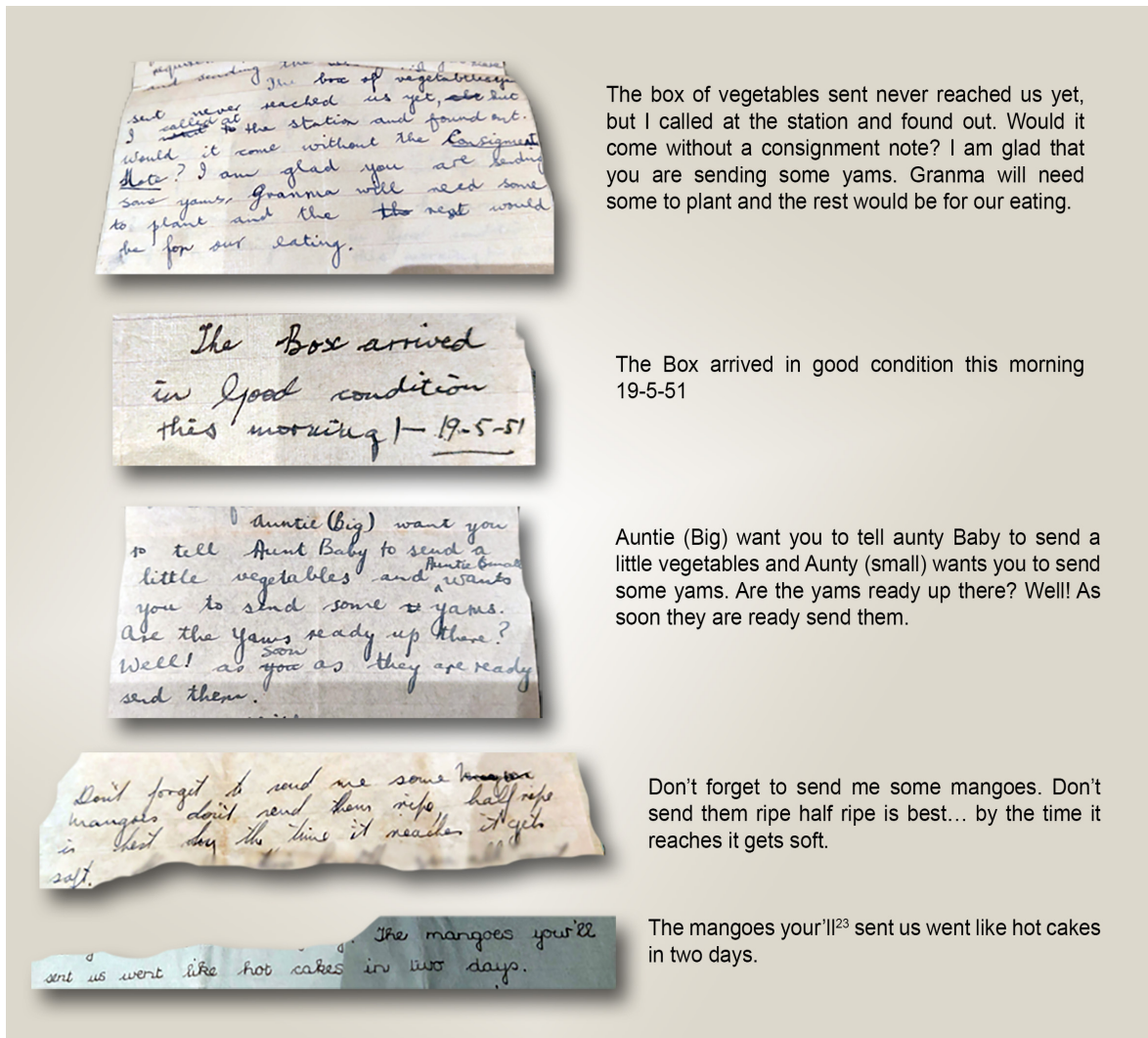
Vitai often has an abundance of vegetables and realises that food is her greatest gift. She also acknowledges the power of sharing among people who grow things. This is her experience of what she refers to as a farming community. I resonated with the memory of food sharing among the growers I know.

*If I want it to enrich the community  
It must come from my heart*

*the community where the farm is  
a poor community  
mixed community  
we donate to  
people who need veg*

*one day this girl came begging  
I opened the van  
I gave her  
spinach, sweet potato, thyme, butternut, pumpkin  
I hope that made a difference in her life*

*if you live in a farming community, you won't starve  
SHE reaps mielies - SHE sends six mielies to the neighbour  
SHE'S cutting okra - she's sending a little bit of okra to the neighbour  
if you live in a farming community you won't starve*

**Figure 1***Plants have desires too: A visual*

Many of the freed labourers, who did not return to India, settled around the plantation hubs in KwaZulu-Natal. Marriage networked various families and, as the visual poem in Figure 1 shows, food plants as well. As people found ways to traverse the different locations, so did fruit and vegetable find ways to travel through human desire (Pollan, 2001). The seemingly quotidian letters illustrate the movement of food from its source of growth to a destination where it was desired. The first three letters are

from my twelve-year-old father, who had been sent to live with his aunties in Newcastle for a year to attend high school, to his father who was headmaster at a primary school in Glen Albyn, 416 kilometres away. This same grandfather, together with my industrious and ingenious grandmother, had developed the borrowed land around the school into an abundant food producing garden—rice included. There was obviously surplus which sometimes, together with a consignment note, found its way to Newcastle by train. In Newcastle, the aunties awaited vegetables and yams, primarily for eating but also for propagation—to poke into the ground, as many a grandmother was wont to do. The yams that my father refers to were actually taro. In South Africa, taro is known as amadumbe or madumbi. These root vegetables<sup>24</sup>, although originally from the south of India, are well integrated into local food desires, as are so many other traditional food plants.<sup>25</sup>

In the last two excerpts are requests by my mother and her mother for mangoes. The mangoes which grew in Stanger had to travel 151km to Pietermaritzburg, to satisfy the desires of my maternal grandmother. This grandmother had been widowed in her thirties and left to support four children through her dressmaking. According to family legend, my grandparents used to sit under that very mango tree in Stanger when my grandfather was alive, enjoying its delicious fruit. I imagine that, in the midst of all her struggle in later years, the mangoes from Stanger had reminded her of happier times during their brief love story.

Love and desire en flesh the labouring bodies, the statistics, the skeletons. These love stories are possible over generations and among different species and realms. As Pumi reminds us below,

*I just love farming. I just love it!*  
*my children say - mommy you should retire now*  
*I say no*

*when I go to the farm*  
*I say I'm coming back now*  
*I go there*  
*I just spend the time like that*

Pumi grows on borrowed land—land which she was meant to have inherited after her husband's death. During the interview, even though Pumi had expressed dismay over her precarious circumstances, her desire to grow, and the reward of working the dirt, seemed to outweigh her desire for proprietorship of the land. I listened to the recording again just to hear that inflection in her voice when she spoke about her farm. This was true love. An operation, an accident, multiple incidents of theft, and a hard



lockdown during COVID have not kept Pumi from finding joy in the dirt of her borrowed piece of land.

Agriculture and farming were not necessarily skills that the indentured had brought with them from India. Back then, they were thrust into the monocultured, colonial agenda. But so, too, were they introduced to South Africa's rich soil—dirt which fed and nourished an uprooted people. Many of the ex-indentured became farmers, and, pressured to make a living from cash crops such as cane, tobacco, bananas, and maize, emulated the techniques and agricultural methods of the planters. The poems reveal, however, that there existed a life beyond colonial entrapment.

Whether in wild backyards or in between the cash crops, there were (and still are) people in relationships of reciprocity, community, love, innovation, ingenuity, and joy. These relationships were embedded in an honouring and reverence for the earth. They reveal that the ancestors had carried with them a heritage of care, love, reverence, and wholeness, before coloniality began its strategic severance of other ways of being and knowing. In the dirt of what once was, are possibilities for discovering lost selves, of remembering that we loved and we were loved here, before dispossession and disconnection.

Had all the grandmothers of different ethnicities been allowed to grow without the matrix of monsters hovering over us, surely, we would discover that joy in the dirt, our birthright—a joy based on justice, respect, relationality, and reciprocation? As Kimmerer notes in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, “our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories. But who will tell them?” (2013, p. 9). There are multiple stories and traumas embedded in our land, stories rippling beneath so many layers of silenced lives. The traumas are ancient, dark, and deep. And each one of us must tell them from the depths of our wounds, oppressions, joys, and wild spaces. The constellation of these stories and poems about our relationship with the land and with each other, hold possibilities for a coming home that has not yet been imagined.

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## ENDNOTES

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1. In this article, I use the word dirt to refer to soil and earth.
2. My research focuses on women (of indenture) and their relationship with (food) seed.
3. Phoenix is a township in Durban, formerly reserved for Indians, where both Indians and Blacks live. Townships are part of the apartheid legacy, and, as a result of the Group Areas Act of 1950, designed to segregate the different race groups in South Africa. Racialised groups who were not white had been forcefully removed from central business areas and the lion's share of land that had been appropriated by, and for, the white ruling class.
4. KZN is the abbreviation for KwaZulu-Natal, a province in South Africa. Durban is a city within KwaZulu-Natal.
5. On 9 July 2021, supporters of former President Zuma took to the streets in protest after his imprisonment. Joined by masses of disgruntled citizens, protests escalated into the large scale vandalism and looting of several businesses in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. Lack of police intervention led to many communities coming together to protect their neighbourhoods. Many Black people were profiled indiscriminately as looters.
6. There are ongoing investigations as to how many people were killed and whether these figures warrant the status of a massacre. Nevertheless, the allegations have deepened the wounds of the subjugated.
7. Indian and Black are two of four racial classifications in South Africa, introduced under the Population Registration Act of 1950. In this article, I refer to Black and Indian in terms of the racial/ethnic categories as defined by apartheid. The apartheid classifications have created unequal material realities for the various race groups.
8. Although I have deliberately interviewed and foregrounded women of indentured heritage in order to shine some light onto this silenced demographic, I have not excluded men from this article.
9. Despite its classification as a weed of the cane fields, *Amaranthus thunbergii* Moq. is indigenous to South Africa.
10. All names have been changed to protect the identities of the women who were interviewed. These pseudonyms are Tamil translations: Pumi means earth; Nila means moon, Vitai means seed, and Malai means flower.
11. Many historians and researchers have been involved in significant archival work around indenture. The Gandhi-Luthuli Documentation Centre at UKZN houses volumes of personal narratives from history students through the Roots Project <https://gldc.ukzn.ac.za/roots-projects-and-family-histories/>. The 1860 Heritage Centre does ongoing research, fleshing out the unwritten histories of ordinary people. <https://1860heritagecentre.wordpress.com/about/>
12. Between 1981 and 1986, the extensive ships lists were digitised by committed scholars and hence became available online and to the public. The number allocated to the indentured by the officials would later appear on the unabridged birth certificates of descendants. These provided clues for those tracing their roots. The following websites contain pdf and excel formats of the lists. <https://scnc.ukzn.ac.za/> or <https://gldc.ukzn.ac.za/ships-list-1860-1911/>
13. *Coolie* was a term used by planters in a derogatory way to refer to the indentured. It is said to come from the Tamil word *kuli*, which means wages. I have chosen not to use the term in this article.
14. The original ships lists included a section for identifying markings. Subbee had a mole.
15. Ava (pronounced ahvah) is the Telegu word for grandmother. Telegu was my grandfather's mother tongue.
16. My father was born in 1938 and the family moved to the schoolyard in 1942.
17. Keerai is the Tamil word for leafy green vegetables or, more generally, they are called herbs. These greens are not limited to amaranth varieties. At the local market in Chatsworth one can find pumpkin leaves, moringa leaves, clover, sorrel, black jack, arum lily, purslane, and potato vine. This list is not exhaustive.

18. Waste refers to biodegradable organic matter and, within the context of my father's memory, the waste land refers to unused earth.
19. Various agendas between the British Raj and colonial planters to address indenture, the treatment of the indentured by planters, their growing numbers, and their perceived threat to the colonial planters led to the repatriation scheme in 1914 which made it possible for ex-indentured to return to India.
20. Chayote.
21. Pigeon Peas, originally from the South of India.
22. Towards the periphery of Chatsworth. There are still traces of a farming community here.
23. A colloquial term amongst the Durban Indian community, *your'll* is used as the plural of you, conjoining the words, you and all.
24. Amadumbe, taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) is a type of root vegetable or corm. <https://www.britannica.com/science/corm>.
25. See also Kuppai Keerai (amaranth) also known as imfino, imbuia and morogo in South Africa.