Embodiments of bitter narratives

Constructing possible Indo-Caribbean identities through the karela

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ABSTRACT

This critical conversation between multidisciplinary artist Sarojini Lewis and curator Priya Swamy explores the possibilities of exhibiting and telling histories of Indian indentured labour otherwise. Focusing on the installation *Why Do You Have a Face Like a Sopropo?* (Worldmuseum Rotterdam, 2020), Lewis details why and how she sees a bitter, resilient and uniquely shaped vegetable like bitter gourd ('karela' in Hindi, 'sopropo' in Sranang Tongo) as an extension of memory and ancestry. The authors begin by discussing the karela as an 'alternative text' (Mahabir 2009), before contextualising Lewis' wider artistic practice. They then discuss in depth the installation *Why Do You Have a Face Like a Sopropo?*, its implications, and its methods. Finally, as a form of conclusion, both authors reflect upon what it means to have worked on this installation together, from within their distinct positionalities, and what this may imply for Indian indentured labour histories and experiences in the context of global Indian diaspora narratives.

KEYWORDS

Indo-Caribbean archive, Indo-Caribbean feminism, oral history Indo-Caribbean, intergenerational silence, domestic violence Indo-Caribbean

Sarojini Lewis (2020) *Why Do You Have a Face Like a Sopropro?* Video installation of video-performances in Suriname. Photograph made by Priya Swamy

*I threw the kereili in the water and watched their movement making circles ripples... small sounds. Immersing bodily in the rain water mixed with water from the streets, I thought of liquid. Body movements urged a connection with the kereili holding it, throwing it, swirling though the water... A reflection of the sky, a reflection on the white shiny surface of the motor cap of the car... Embodiment of movements resembled searching for an intimate connection through kereili's, being small vegetables of bitter taste and emerging my body fully in the flooded basement of the house of my aunt. Swirling and rolling on the floor losing the kereili and retrieving it somewhere in the water. (Excerpt from *Why Do You Have a Face Like a Sopropro?* Sarojini Lewis, 2020)*

Sarojini Lewis's multimedia installation presented on 3 September 2020 at the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam explores the ways in which a bitter and physically peculiar vegetable known in India as *karela* (bitter gourd or bitter melon in English) can come to embody and re-enact

the experience of indentured labour migration. What is more, to her, the karela has the possibility to symbolise layers of the affective conditions of being a descendant of indentured labour migrants in the Indian diaspora. The karela's bitter taste, jagged shape and bright colour has not lent itself easily to colonising cuisines: it could not be and has not been adapted to the palate of the global North. Yet, in parts of the Caribbean and the Guyanas, the karela has become part of national cuisines. In Suriname, the vegetable has its own name in the lingua franca Sranang Tongo: *soprobo*. There are recipes that recall Indian ways of preparing the dish, submerged in onion and masala mixtures, but also ways that are very typically Afro-Surinamese, stuffed with salted meat or fish. The fact that this bitter vegetable is common across cuisines in Suriname, we argue, is a sensorial experience through which Caribbean histories are shared: bitterness is something that is a familiar part of everyday existence for many. We argue that the *karela* therefore operates as an 'alternative text' (Mahabir 2009) that, when 'read' against the grain as merely a foodstuff, and seen as an alternative archive of experiential histories, can reveal stories of resilience, creativity, cultural exchange and innovation in the face of colonial oppression. Particularly through the physical methodologies of re-enactment (Weinrob 1989; Arns and Horn 2007; Jones 2011; Modrak and Anthes 2011; Nakamura 2018), Sarojini Lewis's work with the karela activates artistically the possibilities of this alternative text by making it a deeply personal archive of the taste, feelings and experiences of her ancestors. Taking the vegetable out of the kitchen and placing it in various ritual contexts and colonial spaces such as the plantation, Lewis's work intervenes into ethnographic museum narratives around indentured labourers as working bodies whose legacy in the Caribbean is often reduced to the physical labour in which they engage.

Marina Carter and Khal Torabully's ambitious research in *Coolitude* served to redress memory that had been 'slashed by the violence of History' (2002: 160). Included in this redress is the rescue of the Indian indentured labourer as an object, and to reinstate rightful claims to various cultural practices (2002: 160). The bodies

of Indian indentured labourers were as expendable as the tools with which they worked: being worth nothing more than an instrument of labour, their bodies became objects themselves. Therefore, if these bodies were considered objects to engage in labour, they could not meaningfully produce or reinvent cultural forms. Yet, as Torabully points out, no matter how the colonial system aimed to reduce these bodies to empty vessels of labour, they were in fact agents of cultural and social innovation, where their often tumultuous journeys across oceans facilitated reinventions and new cultural forms (Carter and Torabully 2002: 160–1).

In a similar vein, Roshini Kempadoo's¹ embodied approach to research into photography may offer us ways in which to reclaim the Indian indentured labourer-as-object, through the personal processes of what she names 'embodied research' (Kempadoo 2013: 4). On the one hand, embodied research, especially into archives of photography, means to understand that one's vision is situated and enmeshed in perspectives on power, race and gender. Visions are as multiple as subjectivities, thereby affording a number of vantage points to a researcher (Kempadoo 2013: 4). We argue that also crucial for redress is Kempadoo's idea that an archival image is never viewed innocently, particularly for those who claim ancestry from the Indo-Caribbean diaspora. The vision onto the archive is inextricably enmeshed with the experience of ancestry, especially if we view these images as belonging to a shared history and context (Kempadoo 2013). We argue that such an embodied and engaged field of vision is one that has the potential to humanise and reorient archival photos. In Sarojini Lewis's artistic practice, connecting the archive to the deeply familial has been a strategy to rescue her ancestors' legacy, and indeed her own subject position, from deeply rooted objectifications that she has encountered in her research into photographic archives of Indian indentured labourers.

As we have both conducted research into Indo-Caribbean cultural forms in Suriname and the Netherlands, we have noticed that the objectification of the labouring body is evident in the photographic

archives of the Indo-Caribbean collections at the National Museum of World Cultures, the Netherlands, with which Wereldmuseum Rotterdam is partnered. The Indo-Caribbean collections at the National Museum of World Cultures can be seen as a direct result of the colonial legacy of the Netherlands, as they were collected to document the so-called 'arrival' of Indians into the Dutch colony of Suriname, and to archive the material culture of Indian indentured labourers and their descendants. The collections are divided across everyday household items such as cooking and eating utensils, bodily ornamentation (women's jewellery), a few items of clothing and textiles, and a rich photographic archive that includes missionary photography, studio photography of women, men and some children in specific poses or clothing in order to depict Indians as an 'ethnic type' and landscape photography. Landscapes of plantations are the most prominent, although individual homes on the plantation and marketplaces are also strongly featured. In preparation for an exhibition on the afterlives of colonialism in 2022, more sustained provenance research into the history of the collection as a whole is ongoing. While biographies of prominent individual donors such as the Danish missionary P. M. Legene (see photo in this article) and Julius Edward Muller are quite well known (Legene 2007), an overview and understanding of individual donors who were not involved in missionary or government work in Suriname is a pressing matter. What is also important to note is that a substantial part of the collection enters the museum in the mid- to late twentieth century, as donations from individuals (especially of fashion, jewellery and household items), so that one may question whether it is strictly accurate to see this only as a 'historical' or 'colonial' collection. These issues are currently being grappled with at the museum, and require further research and public discussion. This overview, both authors hope, can suffice to orient our audience to the types of objects and images we have at the moment for the purposes of our conversation, but we also understand that the information is limited, and thus limiting, in the picture it gives of the collections' histories.

P. M. Legene. Portrait of group of Indo-Caribbean boys with a melon, sugar cane and bananas (TM-60048533, Tropenmuseum Permanent Collections, dated 1913–1940)

What we would like to highlight here is that a substantial part of the photographic archive focuses on bodies performing labour, or bodies preparing to perform labour – arriving at depots in Suriname, for example. One photograph that is particularly striking is of a group of small children, smiling in a field, posing playfully with crops like melon, bananas and sugar cane.² Here, we can see that the children will inherit a life of work, as the plantation moves from a space of play and jest into one of serious labour. Brandishing the sugar cane as an object, as

Sarojini Lewis (2020) *Why Do You Have a Face Like a Sopro?* Analogue photography, cyanotype prints on cotton cloth and three digital wall prints

opposed to other toys or material culture, reinforces the idea that the Indian body in Suriname is ultimately an object of and for work.

Although the historical provenance of the photograph has been insightfully contextualised by scholar and former museum curator Susan Legene (2007), Priya Swamy's curatorial practice asks that we pay particular attention to the impact that these images have when they are displayed and exhibited. She calls these the 'representational provenances' of objects and images, and seeks to highlight how they are often mobilised in order to perpetuate racist, romanticised stereotypes of indentured labourers as tied inextricably to the labour that they do. Unlike conventional, art-historical provenances of objects and collections, representational provenances are both historical and future-oriented: First, they draw attention to the persistence of narratives such as 'labourer-as-object' across the museum's history in order to contextualise and problematise the museum's practice. This is crucial if institutions themselves wish to understand their implicatedness in colonial afterlives. Second, representational provenances take stock of what has been done in the past with objects and images, and ask

how they may be mobilised otherwise in the future, in ways that centre personal, multisensorial and emotional narratives. As part of this second aspect of representational provenance work, Sarojini Lewis's installation in the World Museum Rotterdam, *Why Do You Have a Face Like a Sopropo?* (2020) is an embodied intervention into objectifying images of Indian indentured labourers at the museum. It marks a moment to address the ways in which our collection of Indo-Caribbean material culture reinforces the Indian labourer as object, and to think of remedies for this. It also asks what kinds of material culture could be mobilised as 'alternative texts' in an attempt to redress the objectification of Indian indentured labourers.

IN CONVERSATION

The remainder of this piece is structured as a space wherein both authors express their own views, but also come into conversation with each other. Both authors come together to think through difficult histories and the legacies of Indian indentured labour from a place of adjacency (Campt 2019), where we take seriously the subject positions and lived realities that allow people to 'stand beside' each other as we grapple with the lives, stories and experiences we jointly value (Swamy 2021). Priya Swamy is a relatively recent immigrant to the Netherlands who grew up in a south Indian family, within a diverse Canadian Indian diaspora community. She has researched Indo-Caribbean histories, colonial legacies and everyday religious practices since 2010. Her research aims to disrupt the idea that Indo-Caribbean histories and experiences must be siphoned off from larger Indian diaspora narratives in the spirit of adjacency outlined above. Sarojini Lewis grew up in the Netherlands and is of Indo-Caribbean and Indonesian heritage, but has also been working, creating and studying in New Delhi, India. Her artistic practice and research also aim to bring Indian and Caribbean source materials and experiences closer together. What is more, she has also worked in Mauritius, as she is committed to exploring the

legacies of Indian migration, and labour migration legacy, in a broad sense. While both authors come to the conversation from different positionalities, they find common ground in their commitment to perspectives on and from Indian diasporas that are critical, emotional and personal. This conversation is also a larger exercise in demonstrating the adjacency that is possible within the incredibly diverse notion of 'Indian diaspora', and that our stake in contextualising colonialism, postcolonialism and personal histories can be shared, empathised with and amplified across cultural, linguistic and national borders.

Rather than a conventional description of Sarojini Lewis's work as retold by a second spectator/author, Sarojini Lewis herself elucidates the larger context of her artistic practice in the following section. She focuses on the particular embodied research methods of 're-enactment', which she argues is at the basis of her work with ethnographic collections and physical encounters with peoples, places, things and archival documents that create 'thought experiments' through her Indo-Caribbean ancestry. We then present an exchange between the two authors, where they reflect on the work that contemporary art can do in telling stories around Indian labour migration into the Caribbean and the specific work that is being done around Indentured labour legacies in *Why Do You Have a Face Like a Sopropo?* We conclude by briefly reflecting separately on two issues. First, we offer insight into the curatorial and creative potential of alternative texts like the karela in the museum and for indentured labour legacies. As part of an ongoing dialogue between the authors, we discuss the assertions of the artwork Lewis has produced and its place in an ethnographic museum. This final word is also a reflection on her positionality as a woman from an indentured labour diaspora, whose personal histories are intertwined with the archival subjectivities she encounters and retrieves from the gaps and blind spots of historical and museological narratives. These reflections are not meant to be encompassing concluding remarks, but provocations that may spark future debate and reflection.

SKETCHING A PRACTICE: SAROJINI LEWIS

A significant moment of starting a conceptual framework around the karela was the self-portrait 'Karela Prayer' taken in 2015 with a karela in the Saksische Sweiss, a landscape often portrayed by the German painter Caspar David Friedrich. A lonely figure overwhelmed by nature is often depicted in his paintings. I connected to the very same landscape but with a different emotion.

In this photograph, I am holding the vegetable in my hand, questioning how we are connected. The prayer position recalls Hindu ways of praying, even though we never pray with a vegetable between our hands. I kept asking myself:

Why does the karela relate to my own Indian migration roots?

What does it have to do with me personally?

Keeping the notion of critical subjectivity in mind, I aim to describe my role and position in co-constructing in my artistic practice a visual

Sarojini Lewis (2015) *Karela Prayer*. Analogue photography of karela in Saksische Sweiss

Sarojini Lewis (2016) *Why Do You Have a Face Like a Sopropo?* Analogue photography of karela in New Delhi

narrative of how the karela through indentured labour and migration from India to the Caribbean became a powerful symbol of resistance. The title of the installation *Why Do You Have a Face Like a Sopropo?* links with facial expressions and body language from photographs of colonial subjects, my art practice as well as my research discusses the symbolism and representations of selected case studies of individuals and groups of Indian origin in the Dutch colonial territory of Suriname. Indentured migration is a critical aspect of colonial history and has left several traces during the formation of a so-called 'multi-cultural' society in Suriname. It is a process that has transformed cultural traditions of those who migrated and led to new creations.

While both authors are not aware of contemporary artistic work³ around the karela as an alternative text, its importance resonates in imaginations of indentured labour migration. For example, in Safdar Zaidi's *Chini jo meethi na thi* (The sugar that was not sweet), he imagines that Radj, a man of Indo-Caribbean origin who lives in the Netherlands, wakes up in his village of origin in Uttar Pradesh in 1873 in India. Here, a specific reference is made to karela seeds and the journeys they take. Before departing by boat to Calcutta, the villagers, including a character named

Lakshmi, wrapped some of their belongings such as silver jewellery in cotton fabrics. A scene is described of a female village girl running behind Lakshmi with a small package. She tells her that the package consists of seeds of *karaila*, *kohora* and *bhindi* so that Lakshmi will always think of her (Zaidi 2016: 142).

This passage imagines how seeds were transported on boats to survive in an unknown, potentially hostile destination. Besides this need for familiar food, an emotional connection is alluded to, as the seeds become memories of friendships and people that were left behind. After moving into Suriname, these seeds grew in red clay earth, which changed the karela in shape and size. Karelas became larger, more vertical and cucumber-like with a shinier surface. The green was lighter; there are even white ones. In India karelas are darker green and have a different, spikier surface.

The archives of the Tropenmuseum have photographs of women who sell karela in the market or along passageways such as the rail track, as can be seen in the next photograph. I view these as images of female emancipation of labour after their period of indenture ends. The photographs show women in several market stalls selling their own produce from small plots of land they were able to purchase,

Augusta Curiel. Market in Lelydorp along the railway track (TM-10019149), Tropenmuseum Permanent Collections, dated 1910–1930)

releasing them from restrictions of their previous labour on the plantation. Therefore, I see the karela as implicated in the process of resistance and resilience for women market sellers.

The earliest stages of my work with the karela mark my commitment to an artistic practice wherein questions and interpretations of archives are explored physically. In various works, I explore how certain archival documents and photographs become central pieces in my work and allow for new visual interpretations, in a way that may aid Priya's work on representational provenances, where the archive is reimagined and re-engaged with.

In particular, the physicality of my work is related to the practice of 're-enactment'. Rebekah Modrak's writing on re-enactment within the context of photography paraphrases Mircea Eliade, who noted that the act of travelling back in time is at the core of modern psychotherapy: 'The cure (of trauma) consists precisely in a "return to the past"; a retracing of one's steps in order to re-enact the crisis, to relive the psychic shock and bring back into consciousness' (Modrak 2011). Modrak concludes that rephotography is a way to cope with traumatic or ruptured experiences. She refers to projects in which artists restage old photographs, and she refers to the gap between the real and the unspeakable that is enforced by re-enactment that depicts the true nature of the trauma. Thus artists thrust themselves, or others, into the past through conversation and re-enactments. I wondered whether journeys to archives could lead to a certain re-enactment of history itself as well, by immersing oneself in the archive. The experiment of immersing myself in an archive autobiographically and ethnographically began in the city of Dresden, Germany. There is an almost forgotten ethnology museum in a village called Herrnhut, with a collection that was collected by missionaries in 1735. Two of the main geographical and cultural focus areas of the missionaries were Suriname and the Himalayan Mission in Leh. I took on the complicated task of tracking down this forgotten museum in order to focus on the collection of Surinamese objects they had. I imagined how the path of these missionaries could have crossed the path of my ancestors in the past.

I found that archival photographs and objects from the archives of Herrnhut missionaries in Germany documented the migration in the early twentieth century in Suriname. Besides these photographs, there was a group of objects that represented Indian migrants living in Suriname. The missionaries took this material back to Herrnhut, along with different diaries describing the lives of Indian migrants. My personal encounter with this, especially the act of physically holding the objects while documenting them, inspired me to create a series of self-portraits. In this series, identity is linked to various histories and geographies of migration, in a playful meeting between body and object. What does it mean to me to have the same migration roots as these objects?

Sarojini Lewis (2015) *Hidden Traces*. Analogue photography object from Herrnhut Museum depot

However, the origin of these objects is somewhat unknown, and I questioned whether some of them indeed belonged to the material culture of Indian migrants in Suriname. For example, the veil held by the curator of the museum (see the next photo) could be an object from Egypt, as I found a photo of a woman who is wearing a similar veil in Egypt. I view this as a displaced object in the museum's archive. I see the fact that it has been mistakenly placed into the Indo-Surinamese collection as a thought experiment: the possible misinterpretation of its origin led me to think that origins of objects could defy or resist memories of migration. For my practice, this

meant that mistakes in categorisation can lead to new works that play with the idea of origin. As the origin of the object is 'unknown', I re-enacted this moment by actually wearing the veil. Thus its identity becomes skewed, as well as the gaze and interpretation of the viewer. Is it this object that then becomes 'Egyptian', or do I 'become Egyptian' by wearing the veil? These questions and their possible answers rest in the gaze of the viewer.

Sarojini Lewis (2017) *Notes on Migration*. Analogue photography of veil from Herrnhut Museum Depot. Collage technique on Indian newspaper used as plates for cup cakes

Amelia Jones describes how re-enactment is also a form of repetition within performance art and how the idea of experiencing and repetition leads to an understanding of the past:

Re-enactment activates precisely the tension between our desire for material (for the other's body, for presence, for the 'true event') and the impossibility of ever fixing this space and time. Re-enactment both testifies to our desire to know the past in order to secure ourselves in the present and the paradox of that knowledge always taking place through repetition. It thus exposes the paradox of that knowledge, providing our own inexorable mortality: the fact that we are always reaching to secure time, and always failing. (Jones 2011: 16–45)

In addition to the work within the museum's collections, I embarked upon a project wherein my series of self-portraits and objects are combined with unexpected encounters with landscapes and people in Dresden. I chose to construct an 'open documentation' in between objects of the Herrnhut collection and the current realities of migrants' daily lives in Dresden.

The series of photographs has one photograph that included the act of exchanging clothing with a Pakistani woman named

Sarojini Lewis (2015) *Hidden Traces*. Analogue photography of South Asian housing complex of the Goethe Institute and the exchange of clothes with Rabiya Ahmad

Sarojini Lewis (2016) *Room 327 in the Aftermath of Holi*. Analogue photography collaged with colonial document in JNU in New Delhi

Rabiya. The meeting between Rabiya and me was a form of re-enactment and by wearing her red Kurta that significantly links to Pakistan where she grew up, I wanted to refer to my transit from Germany to India. The photograph was taken along the high metal gate of the housing and industrial area where we lived.⁴ In some instances, the viewer is mixed up with the stories of refugees and migrants. When I exhibited these photographs in Dresden, some viewers felt that the photographs appeared to be taken in a refugee camp.

My meeting with Rabiya is part of the fragmented experience of searching for visual evidence of ancestral migration in rural Germany, and being in a stage of transit to India.

Another way in which I explore questions of re-enactment through the body are through the photographs taken on the day of the Hindu festival of Holi that are combined with archival documents, such as contracts. There is a contradictory interplay between the photograph and the colonial document: the traces of

celebration and the stark realities of objectification become integral parts of the same self-portrait.

The concept of re-enactment is not only about preserving history, but how we can inhabit certain re-experiences of this history. What is more, re-enactment asks whether or not these acts are a recreation of an image or an actual event.

TELLING STORIES WITH EMBODIED EMOTIONS: FURTHER DISCUSSIONS ON THE KARELA AND ARTISTIC PRACTICES

We turn now to a conversation that took place over the course of a sunny afternoon in Amsterdam, to contextualise both Sarojini Lewis's broader artistic practices, and what is at stake for curatorial practices around representational provenances today.

PS: Can you speak about the overarching concept behind the installation *Why Do You Have a Face Like a Sopropo?*

SL: It came together in the past few years, when I was in India and you were in the Netherlands. It developed out of a photo collage that I made in 2016, but even that was part of a longer conversation from the years in Dresden and the Indian expression 'Why do you have a face like a *sopropo?*', said to someone who looks angry or bitter.

In the five years that I lived in India, I felt more closely connected to the vegetable and my consumption of it in daily life. There are so many different shapes and colours, it became a sort of fascination. So this led me to make a series of photographs where I actually place the smaller *kareili* on my body and the photo collage consists of five photographs with the *kareili* on my body. I think visualising the vegetable means something other than food because we usually

Sarojini Lewis (2016) *Why Do You Have a Face Like a Sopropo?* Analogue photography of karela in New Delhi and digital text collage of a poem

associate it with Surinamese culture, and Indo-Surinamese culture with food parties, or consumption, and that's it.

Putting the karela into a context where you actually connect it to the body is deliberately different. Identifying as Indo-Caribbean, we are expected to cook Indian food, while I have a Dutch upbringing with Dutch food like mashed potatoes. These expectations around food choice irritate me because there is more at stake with Indo-Caribbean identity than cooking. It seems that the Indian diaspora thus has not integrated the karela into other perceptions than food and the literature outlining the historic value of the seeds that were once transported from India. The specificity of its taste is something that has been valuable for other Indo-Caribbean stories that feature in my work. The karela has a bitter taste, and this is something that I wanted to connect to memories of migration and indentured labour

because I think it is appropriate when thinking through this migration history.

PS: When we first began talking about this project a few years ago, you said something about the karela being an ‘alien’, just like migrant bodies can be in new and hostile environments. Could you speak about that?

SL: This really comes from the time I ‘met’ the karela in a Pakistani shop in Dresden, Germany, which is a very ‘white’ city. The Neo-Nazi PEGIDA movement was active at the moment, so encountering this so-called tropical vegetable against that backdrop was like encountering something that was closely related to my own migration roots.

PS: So you feel like you had a bond, or relationship, with the karela?

SL: Yes, I didn’t identify with the people of Dresden, but I did feel a bond with the karela . . . Maybe I was missing the Indo-Caribbean community, I had sort of detached myself from it in the pursuit of my art . . . going to the shop with Rabiya, the South Asian language student, brought me back a feeling of home.

[. . .]

PS: Is the act of putting the karela on your body and the earlier artistic work with this vegetable a response to the absences and gaps in your personal family history?

SL: There are all kinds of loose, open-ended stories that don’t fit into my personal puzzle. I was disappointed when I went to my ancestral village and couldn’t find any family members . . . I think it is not as much making a statement about history as it is about speaking about our current situation having Indo-Caribbean roots. I think placing the karela on the body is also related to the texture of the vegetable itself: it doesn’t have an even skin, it’s textured, bumpy. This produces a distinct sensation when it is on your skin, and this is a larger metaphor for how one *feels* unevenly about the history, and how it is attached to you

as a female. Also I think that women aren't challenged to feel and express emotions in Indo-Surinamese communities. Putting the vegetable on my body was an act of resistance. I have different sensibilities, therefore I want to express myself differently.

PS: You also work directly with your own body – particularly your own nudity. What does this type of physicality afford you in terms of working with legacies of Indian indentured labour migration?

SL: I was always working with my own body and nudity. That's the thing you always have – it's your material in a way. I was doing nude portraits in art school in 2004–2005, whether or not it has to do with indentured labour migration. For me being a female artist of colour, growing up in the Netherlands, I never felt Dutch, and my body was a particular body – one that was exceptional rather than the norm.

PS: What about the stories you tell with your body then, specifically around indentured labour and migration? Why do you mobilise your body to tell or work with those histories?

SL: I think it is because it is something that is a very emotional process. The historical context around indentured labour is very much a bodily act. You're replacing enslaved bodies with contracted bodies. The labourers are physically bound to their contract and perform hard, manual labour. One has to produce. The body must produce, so the body almost became an object. The way that these bodies are conceived changes . . . In my work I want to retrieve the feelings and emotions that are attached to such bodies . . . The body has so much emotional knowledge, we navigate through emotions. This is a basic aspect of my art – it is not just important for indentured labour legacies. I'd like people to go back to their emotions and feelings and understand them. Histories of indentured labourers are presented through photo studios of white, colonising bodies who made photographs of people in studios, or in the field. There is no emotion attached to these photographs, or stories.

They are completely disconnected from people, and in the end people become disconnected from themselves. It becomes a silent history, and people now do not want to talk about it. We need to reconnect to the emotional if we can ever talk about it in the current day. Even though I sometimes feel uncomfortable in my own body, I think it is important to express this discomfort through my work.

- PS: I notice also that the methods and bodily practices you use to create and activate your artistic work are often very painstaking, and time-consuming. Is this an extension of the need to give Indian indentured labour history its due attention, in all of its intricate forms and narratives?
- SL: Yes, you don't just want to make a print-out and hang it on a wall! I think that my techniques are physically a challenge and that these challenging techniques carry my signature. . . . Try to find some of the chemicals to produce cyanotype prints in Old Delhi! There was a lot of tension due to communal violence in India at that time . . . and then you [find yourself] completely lost in an alleyway. It was already absurd in itself: I was putting my life at risk to find the correct chemicals . . . Being in a situation where I was so vulnerable triggered me, but also inspired me. It is also something quite special – maybe this was how the earliest moments of migration were. People not knowing where they were, they were completely lost.
- PS: Can you explain a bit more about the cyanotype print methods and why they were used for the current installation on karela?
- SL: To make the cyanotype prints you add two chemicals to one mixture that then becomes light sensitive, and this has to be done in complete darkness. In creating the work for *Why Do You Have a Face Like a Sopropo?* I bought tape to blacken all the windows in my hostel room in Koyna in Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. My roommate had gone home and I had just enough space to put out the three-meter-long cloth

pieces that were immersed in chemicals. After this, the negatives were laid out on the dried cloth prints on the roof of the hostel with a glass plate that I found lying on one of the balconies. Depending on the strength of the sun, the tones of blue vary.

My use of cyanotype is a clear technical reference of the period when ‘colonial’ archival prints were reproduced, as this was about the same time frame – beginning of the twentieth century. My prints have traces of my physical actions in them – my stains and drips – because the way that I apply the chemicals is very rough, like I am fighting with time and the sensation of darkness. Besides, the colour of the karela becomes blue in the print, therefore it is not so much its characteristics as a vegetable that get highlighted, but its shape and taste connected to the body. Entangled in the presence of the

Sarojini Lewis (2015) *Hidden Traces*. Analogue photography object from Herrnhut Museum Depot

people portrayed and connected to their cultural background, their hands are attached to the karela. The individuals portrayed experience this so-called 'migratory status' and are continuously missing an idea of 'home'. The emotional spectrum of karela as an alien thus foregrounds the visual presentation in the installation by this blue-ish cyanotype colour.

PS: Could you comment on the ways that embodied research and re-enactment have shaped this art project in particular? Where specifically do you connect the personal with the archival or let's say 'the larger' historical context of Indian indentured labour within this project?

SL: In my images my mother appears; a karela is clinging to her chest. In another, I feature a friend Jafar who I travelled with to some Indian villages. He holds the karela uncomfortably, almost as if he feels a phallus in his hands and is afraid of a queer association. This is something I wanted to treat carefully as he comes from a very orthodox religious community and has gone through personal struggles trying to come to terms with his own roots. Keeping in mind the religious and political struggles in India at the time, the sadness that can be read on his face connects to a state of mind in which identities solely based on religious affinity create violence and deep cultural gaps. This is something which was experienced by many other left-wing activists and students working in New Delhi at the time. In an interview with Jafar, he imagines the karela as a bitter relationship, which, when it becomes too bitter, should end. While he sits down on a stone, he drifts away to memories of his Nani's (maternal grandmother's) garden plot where his family used to grow karela in a place near Uttar Pradesh. Then again he is reminded about the recent attacks on Jamia Islamia University in New Delhi, and how the library gets smashed to pieces while we together activate the memorial potential of the karela in a Bhojpuri- and Awadi-speaking region, the same

regions that many descendants of Indian indentured labourers in Suriname would have migrated from. A deep feeling of alienation, indeed bitterness, can be read in his facial expression and mood.

Sarojini Lewis (2019) *Why Do You Have a Face Like a Sopropo?* Analogue photography. Jafar at a village nearby Hindu religious site Madhya Pradesh in India

RE-ENACTMENT AS A CRITICAL INTERVENTION: PRIYA SWAMY

When *Why Do You Have a Face Like a Sopropo?* was installed at the Wereldmuseum in summer of 2020, I fixated on a line that an older man repeats during the film that makes up part of the larger work. When he is asked if his ancestors recalled India, or the village from which he came, he repeated: ‘I don’t know anything about that.’ Simply addressing what is not known, where the ruptures and the breaks are in personal histories, profoundly

subverts the sense of authority that museological collections claim to have over historical narratives. Rather than an attempt to fill these gaps, Sarojini Lewis's installation reminds us that we must continually search for ways to tell histories, or ways to know, that may be ignored or overlooked. Furthermore, her artistic practice reminds us why embodied approaches including re-enactment can retrieve certain subjectivities from the gaps of history: the dehumanizing spaces wherein they are exiled become spaces of serious intervention, rehabilitation and personal reflection. Though her work with the karela may at first appear playful and novel, it is nevertheless profound: it creates a sensorial world where the creativeness, bitterness and innovation of Indian indentured labour migration can be expressed in ways that written colonial archives and ethnographic museum collections cannot facilitate. Her work draws people in not as spectators, but participants on a journey that is at once familiar and hostile, but never objectifying.

As a powerful symbol of resistance, resilience and the deeply emotional, the karela has been a productive and exciting way to subvert the colonial gaze in a museum context. At the beginning of my work with Sarojini at Worldmuseum, I received a message from a colleague working at the museum. It was a link to a Dutch website selling the unlikely ice cream flavour *sopropro*. 'Our dear *sopropro* has been colonised', the message lamented. Although the message was meant in jest, a conversation ensued over the next few days about the possibility of ever truly colonising this vegetable. Even though today the health benefits of karela juice are being touted in certain middle-class, health-conscious European and American circles, this is not quite the same as domesticating the taste to suit a variety of Dutch tastebuds. Its intense flavour seems to be a novelty, suited to healthy juices or experimental liquors, rather than a viable side dish. Until we see *sopropro*-filled fried snacks for sale, Sarojini and I maintain (with a nod to the poet, musician and author Gil Scott-Heron⁵): the vegetable will not be colonised.

THE KARELA AS ALIEN: SAROJINI LEWIS

Working with Priya Swamy has been important – her voice was like a sounding board that resonated through this process of making a new body of work. Over the years we initiated conversations through the phone while I was in New Delhi, ideas shaped up crossing borders of India back to Suriname and the Netherlands. Being both from an Indian diaspora meant we shared a certain vision about the way we treat subject matter that is sometimes appropriated by a white gaze, a gaze lacking embodied experience of colonial migration. Sometimes, in the art world, I have the feeling of speaking a visual language that does not resonate with an inner experience someone has, and therefore it is often misunderstood. Perhaps I get sensitive about my artworks too often, and do not treat them as objects or art. To me they are

Sarojini Lewis (2020) *Why Do You Have a Face Like a Sopropo?* Analogue photography of karela with Jagyaseni in Koyana Hostel JNU

monuments of experience. They are the outcome of silent gaps, long forgotten and unretrievable memories, like the sound of noise when an old gramophone record ends, just to begin again. This triggers me to see the karela as an alien, as having a migrant body. It reminds me of the idea of my own citizenship and the difference between an 'illegal alien' and a 'legal alien'. Does the alienation change within the context of descending from a migrant family for six generations or being a recent illegal immigrant? Here I am reminded how my ancestors once entered the Caribbean by boat and must have felt a certain alienation in Suriname, clinging to their cultural objects such as valuable jewellery and a few seeds from their villages in India. The karela seeds, as well as their bodies, were considered alien when they newly arrived on the plantation grounds.

In 2021 karela is being appropriated by Dutch companies that are trying to use the potential of karela as a commercially produced vegetable for a wider market. This 'alien' then can only integrate if it is multiplied in a useful seed that can adjust to a cold climate. Slowly the soil it first grew in does not matter and perhaps when replanted in its villages of origin the modified seeds will not be able to continue to grow.

I want to activate our past to resist victimisation, but to also be vulnerable again, such as when I connect my body and overlap it with a colonial document that registers one's class, age, policepost, village, boat, departure and arrival points . . . Through my work, I long for a bitter taste that makes it possible to reimagine.

NOTES

- 1 Kempadoo refers here to her research into archival photos of female Indian indentured labourers in Trinidad between 1860 and 1960. We are particularly compelled by her perspective, as both authors work closely with the archive of colonial photography in the National Museum of World Cultures (The Netherlands), which depicts female indentured labour bodies from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

- 2 The photographer, P. M. Legene (1885–1954) was a missionary active in Herrnhut. This is doubly significant, given Sarojini Lewis's work with the Herrnhut collections (see following section).
- 3 Another significant work of poetry related to the karela is English poet Daljit Nagra's 'Karela!' (2007), which explores the texture and cooking processes of this vegetable in relationship to the familiar feelings of home that it brings, despite its bitterness.
- 4 It was deemed more 'safe' for the residency programme to place me among south Asian language students who were living at a residence at a larger distance from the square where the PEGIDA held their protests. The acronym is for 'Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West', an organisation that started to demonstrate from 2014 in Dresden, eastern Germany. They stand for anti-Islamic policies and anti-migrant attitudes.
- 5 This is our take on his legendary words 'the revolution will not be televised' from the song of the same name (1971).

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