South African Indian Women as Custodians of Subversive Knowledge: A Decolonial Reading of Francine Simon's Poetry

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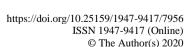arushani.govender@gmail.com

Abstract

This article uses feminist perspectives on decoloniality as a lens for analysing selected poems from Francine Simon's début collection, *Thungachi* (2017). Simon is a South African Indian woman poet from Durban, raised by Catholic parents of Tamil linguistic heritage. Her poetry collection, while feminist and experimental, deeply captures the experiences of dispossession and loss that define the large majority of South African Indians, with particular focus on the women whose voices remain marginalised in the South African literary canon. Framed by decolonial theory, this study serves the interests of decolonising research praxis, and thereby the nature of the knowledge produced. I conducted in-depth interviews with Simon and use them as a supplementary device in executing a literary analysis of two poems: "Betel Nut", and "Tamil Familiars". These poems emphasise the use of South African Indian English and the role that South African Indian women occupy as custodians of the cultural archive in maintaining fragments of precolonial ontologies. This article finds that it is necessary to critique Simon's poetry within a decolonial, feminist framework in order to uncover its cultural complexities and contributions to counter-discourse against the Western, objectivist knowledge paradigm.

Keywords: decoloniality; South African Indian; feminist poetry; Francine Simon; Indigenous Knowledge

Introduction[1]

> I speak here 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—in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight. (Lorde 2007, 37)

Lorde's definition of poetry differs from the poetry of educational institutions and mainstream, profitable literature. She argues that liberation for victims of colonialism—particularly women—cannot occur through the use of pure logic or new ideas but must take place through "old and forgotten [ideas]" (Lorde 2007, 38). Lorde's standpoint signals what Dei, Hall and Rosenberg call the "crisis of knowledge": the commodification of knowledge induced by colonial and globalising forces (2000, 3). The flux of knowledge across geopolitical borders problematically configures the displacement and suppression of indigenous philosophies and traditions, confounding all world knowledges with that of the ruling episteme (Dei, Hall, and Rosenberg 2000, 4). Lorde's view that suppressed, pre-existing ideas are the solution to reshaping black women's futures resembles theories of decoloniality. Decolonial theory is a form of anti-colonial discourse with a distinct approach to deconstructing the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. Within this field of scholarship, decolonisation is not restricted to national, geographical independence but is "a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power" (Smith 1999, 98). Theories of decolonisation frequently entail a rigorous analysis of colonialism, modernity and Western epistemology. For Lorde (2007), poetry is a vital site of colonial resistance, distinguished by its propensity to exhume silenced and marginalised ways of being.

Sharing this perspective, this article argues that Francine Simon's poetry demonstrates decolonial feminist values through its subversive representation of South African Indian women and the indigenous knowledge specific to South African Indian (SAI) culture. Simon was born and raised in Durban by Catholic-convert parents of Tamil linguistic heritage. She sees her identity as a rhizomatic structure, with each root a confluence of cultural identifiers and "femaleness" (Simon 2018, 38). In her debut collection, *Thungachi* (2017), Simon uses "femaleness" as "multiple inflections rather than struggling with the inability to fit into a coherent, single position" (Simon 2018, 22). As a South African, Indian, woman, Catholic, Tamil, Simon acknowledges her self as provisional and frames her poetry within themes of "non-place": by doing this, she can "provisionally situate and yet repeatedly also re-locate" (Simon 2018, 32) her identity. Her poetry, while feminist and experimental, deeply captures the experiences of dispossession and loss that define the large majority of South African Indians.

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[1]   The findings presented in this article are based on my Master's dissertation (Govender 2019), which provides a critical reading of *Thungachi* (Simon 2017) in relation to indigenous knowledge and within the political background and socio-cultural context of the poet's lived experiences.

Most of Simon's poetry is based on memories of her upbringing in Durban. As part of my research for this article, I conducted in-depth interviews with the poet in order to determine the knowledge and experiences that informed her poetry. My research incorporates elements of autoethnography, given that I too am a South African Indian woman of Tamil heritage and was raised in Durban. This article provides a brief explanation of decoloniality with particular focus on feminist, decolonial perspectives, which will be used as scaffolding to construct a reading of two poems selected from the collection, namely "Tamil Familiars" and "Betel-Nut" (Simon 2017).

Theoretical Framework

In this section, I review scholarship on decolonisation and focus on feminist perspectives on decolonial theory, which will later be used to situate Simon's poetry. Decolonial theory emphasises the need for locally specific research that traces the historical and cultural trajectories of a given community (Dei 2002, 6). Decolonisation involves acts of resistance and posits solutions that require collective mobilisation.

In South Africa, the current decolonial project has been associated with practices of indigenisation, whereby theorists promote a reading culture from the locus of indigenous knowledge. Understanding that knowledge creation and dissemination are tools for attaining power, Akena (2012) notes that scholars are accountable to the communities they represent and must produce knowledge that has true emancipatory value. He states: "To stress the importance of indigenous knowledge as a tool for decolonization, researchers need to appreciate the complexity of the structures of colonialism and its neocolonial forms" (2012, 603). Akena stresses that the process of knowing and its associated content must disclose the levels of subjugation that are naturalised in Western academia, must reroute towards non-exploitative, non-capitalistic and non-individualist research practice, and must circulate the knowledge with honourable intentions of liberating colonised peoples. Given that I share demographic traits with Simon, and with the community she writes about, my research practice follows Akena's account of decolonised knowledge production. In addition to adhering to decolonised research methods, I offer critique framed by decolonial theory. According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), two main strands of thinking are prevalent in the politics and theories of decolonisation, and are integral when formulating decolonised critique. She describes them as follows:

> One draws upon a notion of authenticity, of a time before colonization in which we were intact as indigenous peoples. We had absolute authority over our lives; we were born into a universe which was entirely of our making … . The second strand of the language of critique demands that we have an analysis of how we were colonized, of what that has meant in terms of our immediate past and what it means for our present and future. (Smith 1999, 24)

For Smith, the two strands are mutually dependent and allow the reformulation of problems and solutions for both time periods: colonised time and pre-colonised time

(1999, 24). Her postulation suggests that movements towards decolonising not only involve a dismantling and re-examination of colonialism and its lasting impact, but also that for previously oppressed societies, indigenous knowledge and ontology play a vital role in reclaiming autonomy and self-worth. Similarly, Ngũgĩ (1981) makes an integral case for the politics of language in decolonisation. Ngũgĩ highlights two roles of language: as communication and as a carrier of culture. The work of the coloniser has succeeded in destroying the function of language on both levels, in order to alienate the colonised from their immediate environment. When one views the world through a Eurocentric lens, feelings of dispossession are re-inscribed; this is attributed to loss of language, which "as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" (Ngũgĩ 1981, 15). Consequently, Ngũgĩ (1981) prescribes that African languages be reclaimed as part of a teaching, learning and writing project to establish Afrocentric attitudes, where African culture is the centre and other cultures are viewed in relation to it. Shahjahan notes that Ngũgĩ "exemplifies the use of indigenous knowledge, here specifically language as a counter discourse to rupture the hegemony of colonial language and colonial forms of knowledge production" (2005, 219).

While my analysis acknowledges the presence of indigenous knowledge as a decolonial characteristic in Simon's poetry, I do not suggest that Simon is "indigenous". In line with contemporary decolonial scholarship—which accounts for forced migration, diaspora and hybridised identities—I use the term "indigenous" only in relation to knowledge, rather than to the geographical residency of the knowledge holder. Dei (2002, 5) supports this understanding of indigeneity when he states that knowledge is deemed to have originated from a particular place, has developed over time, and is cumulative. In this context it is possible for South African Indian citizens to acquire and dispense indigenous knowledge, despite their country of origin. Further, this article employs the following definition of indigenous knowledge:

> [S]eeing the individual as part of nature; respecting and reviving the wisdom of elders; giving consideration to the living, the dead, the future generations; sharing responsibility, wealth, and resources within the community; and embracing spiritual values, traditions, and practices reflecting connections to a higher order, to the culture, and to the earth. (Dei, Hall and Rosenberg 2000, 6)

It is necessary to note that indigenous knowledge is typically understood in contrast to "Western epistemology" or "Western knowledge". Scholars of decolonisation use these terms to describe the authoritative, scientific methodologies that are used to validate, verify and engender all institutionalised knowledge (Purcell 1998, 259). Under traditional, positivist tenets of Western knowledge construction, any knowledge that cannot be tested, measured or rendered "objectively true" is considered inferior, irrational and is consequently marginalised. These characteristics mean that indigenous knowledge can have liberating and decolonising values; therefore, African theorists argue, it should be intellectualised and integrated into educational practice (Ntsoane 2005, 100).

On the other hand, Latin American theorists emphasise the struggle against epistemic coloniality by analysing modernity and coloniality as interdependent phenomena. Mignolo (2008, 14) observes four domains that are controlled by colonial power, namely the economy, authoritative forces, gender and sexuality, and knowledge and subjectivity. Hence "domination is not just economic, but it operates at all levels of interrelation between different domains of the colonial matrix or power". He suggests that the entry point to decolonisation is the last domain, for decolonisation of knowledge and being will affect the control of authority and economy by re-imagining the concept of the state (2008, 18). I refer to conceptions of decolonial theory in so far as they emphasise "the power held by local/social practice to survive the colonial and colonized encounters" (Dei, Hall, and Rosenberg 2000, 7).

In providing a reading of Simon's poetry I refrain from deconstructive analysis and adopt decolonised, feminist critique in order to align my reading with Simon's use of "femaleness" as a poetic device. Lugones (2008, 17) stresses the necessity to understand pre-colonial gender relations within indigenous societies and in order to understand how colonialism affected them. She posits that the intersections of "race", gender and sexuality must be read alongside the coloniality of power to explore how men of colour "exhibit to [sic] the systemic violences inflicted upon women of colour" (2008, 1). Lugones investigates gynecratic indigenous societies, deducing that the exchange of pluralistic spiritual beliefs for a singular, divine male being turned egalitarian tribes into hierarchical, male-dominated societies. Indigenous ontologies were destroyed, women's authority was relegated, male dominance became the prerequisite for survival, and clan structures were replaced by the nuclear family (Lugones 2008, 10). Lugones's meditations caution us against presuming the victimisation of women in indigenous societies prior to colonisation: this prejudice is itself an integral component of the coloniality of power. While her assertions significantly address the marginalisation of colonised women—and thus their descendants—her solution poses great difficulty for cases where pre-colonial social relations are not determined or are historically determined as inequitable and oppressive.

From an African feminist perspective, Nfah-Abbenyi (2005, 262) argues that a "singular" post-colonial discourse does not aptly cater for the multiple fragmentations of post-colonial women. She proposes that a pluralistic post-colonial discourse be initiated through discovering manifold theories that inexplicitly exist in language, oral literature and fiction. Furthermore, she suggests that by drawing attention to the multiple, mutable and contradictory subjectivities represented in African women's fiction, women's identity can be reconstituted in a way that undermines gender dichotomies (Nfah-Abbenyi 2005, 275). As a result, she makes the following conjecture:

> The theory is embedded in the polysemous and polymorphous nature of the narratives themselves. These texts reinscribe and foreground teleological, ontological, and

epistemological insights and praxes relevant to the specific histories and politics that preceded the fictional texts. (2005, 262–63)

In effect, Nfah-Abbenyi calls for a reframing of the notion of theory itself. Similarly, Gqola (2011, 7) observes that African feminist scholars "warn against reading creative sites as locations of raw material to be mined for meaning" and stress the need "to recognize that creative sites are places where theory is produced, not simply applied". Clery and Metcalfe (2018) indicate that due to the multiple, intersecting identities taken up by post-colonial women, feminism need not be restricted to issues of gender in the study of post-colonial women's literature. They argue that "these diverse and intersecting identities can lead to complex and multiple layers of oppression and exclusion, but also to possibilities for recognising commonalities of oppressions" (2018, 5). I adhere to these decolonial feminist perspectives in that my literary analysis does not merely "apply" theory but attempts an unravelling of the theory and knowledge already present in Simon's poetry.

Orality and Animism in "Tamil Familiars"

"Tamil Familiars" (Simon 2017, 15) is based on the regulations of Simon's maternal grandmother—a daughter of a staunch Catholic-converted family who married a Tamil man.[2] The poem reflects on ways of knowing and being that permeate Tamil heritage, despite one's religious affiliation or conversion. A census report taken in 1936 indicates that that the majority of Indians shipped to South Africa (83 731 out of 211 071) were Tamil-speaking (Mesthrie 1992, 9). Tamil is one of India's 22 official languages and according to Zvelebil (1974, 2), "Tamil can claim one of the longest unbroken literary traditions of any of the world's living languages".

In South Africa, the use of Indian vernaculars as home languages was virtually non-existent by the 1980s. Ancestral languages were reserved for religious rituals and dialogues among the older generation, "yet the attachment to linguistic identities has persisted long after the vernaculars fell out of daily use … [V]ernaculars became a sign of the past and purely of sentimental value" (Hansen 2012, 75). Tamil in present-day South Africa is a cultural identifier beyond the scope of language. It is a way of life for its speakers, often imparted to their non-Tamil-speaking descendants. Simon regrets never learning Tamil, stating in an interview, "once I got into university and I started writing poems for this collection—that was in 2011, so seven years ago, I quickly realised that I wished to have learnt that language, really like, a desperate wish to have learnt it".[3] Although Tamil is familiar to Simon, she struggles to access the complete ontological worldview that comes from being a speaker—a tension repeatedly reflected in "Tamil Familiars":

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[2]   Based on my interview with Simon (Durban, 27 June 2018).
[3]   Based on my interview with Simon (Durban, 27 June 2018).

Grandmother used
to warn me not to whistle;
I'd call the snakes.

She forbad me
to sleep with my hair open:
I'd wake up looking like a pichachi,
gone to hell and back.

She said not to eat
out of the pot or it would rain
on my wedding day

I did and I do.

My mother tells me not to
pick from the curry-leaf tree
when it's that time of the month.
It will die, she says.

Funny. It hasn't died yet.
And I never give a thought
to my wedding day.
(Simon 2017, 15)

The first three stanzas relay a list of warnings from the speaker's grandmother. The cautions are followed by the childlike rebellion of "I did and I do", indicating two possibilities: the speaker is not an ardent believer of the warnings, or believes them and is enticed by the idea of playing with fate. Stanza five outlines the instructions given to the speaker by her mother and makes up a third of the warnings mentioned in the poem, displaying the limitations of the mother's knowledge in comparison with that of the grandmother. Simon revealed that she is unsure of the origins of her family's worldviews, stating that, "Often nobody could really tell me".[4] She wanted the poem to represent her family's oral culture in its naturally occurring form. She avoided consulting the internet based on an instinctual feeling: "I just had the feeling if I did that, that something would be disrupted".[5] Simon alludes to the importance of "living archives". For Davids (2007, 81), the "living archive" is not "necessarily interested in being a part of the larger story or of being woven into the fabric of a place or event" and "does not pander to the material demands of the material archive, but once included into that archive they can be grafted into its mythologies and made to demonstrate truths". Simon accords her family's oral narratives their own space and uses her written poetry

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[4]   Based on my interview with Simon (Durban, 27 June 2018).
[5]   Based on my interview with Simon (Durban, 27 June 2018).

as a form of material archive that encompasses the "living archive". She blends permanence and transience by recording orality in written form.

The poem shifts from past to present; all past participles are applied to the speaker's grandmother: "Grandmother used / to warn me not to whistle", "She forbad me" and "She said not to eat". However, the mother's assertions are written in present tense: "My mother tells me not to" and "It will die, she says". Simon confirmed that her maternal grandmother had passed away and that the week of our interview marked the 10-year anniversary of her death.[6] The use of past tense in the poem to refer to the grandmother's philosophies and the present tense for the mother's indicates the continuity of oral traditions stretched over a vast period of time. The grandmother is no longer a "living archive". Now, the mother fulfils the responsibility of imparting Tamil wisdom to the family. Furniss (2004, 158) postulates that "orality is performance", intimate and expository, and unlike the written word, it elicits an existing relationship between the speaker and listener. Simon is cognisant of her attempt to translate orality to written text and sidesteps any textual inquiry that could further tamper with the quality of knowledge that is imparted by her grandmother and mother. Once on the page, the oral vignettes become subject to the gaze, static and susceptible to multi-perspectival readings (Furniss 2004, 12). "Tamil Familiars" blurs oral and written history in order to represent the attitudes of an acutely marginalised culture. By capturing the unique subjectivities of the women and their oral traditions in the material archive, Simon contributes to the "production of counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world" (Maldonado-Torres 2016, 10).

Furthermore, Simon questions the incongruence of animistic thinking with her Catholic upbringing. Her doctoral thesis states: "this and other superstitions that we retain co-exist with our Catholic belief systems, sliding between various forms of inherited family spiritual traditions and epistemologies" (Simon 2018, 21). Simon associates animism with superstition when perceiving her family's ontology from the boundaries of scientific thinking. I have also inadvertently used the word "superstition" in our interview, sharing the same dilemma as Simon.[7] I must reiterate that Western ontology renders human beings as possessors of agency to configure reliable knowledge through dualistic separations of mind/body and natural/supernatural (Teffo and Roux 2003, 193–96). The poem reveals the tensions experienced by a speaker who is caught between differing ontologies and who is, at times, prompted to view her family's beliefs with suspicion, through the lens of Western science.

Stanza five illustrates the intimate relationship between the natural order of the female body and the spirits residing in nature. In Tamil culture, such ontology stems from Hindu karmic philosophy, which suggests that all living organisms contain souls.

[6]   Based on my interview with Simon (Durban, 25 June 2018).
[7]   Based on my interview with Simon (Durban, 27 June 2018).

Communication in this case is not a purely human ability, but occurs among all elements of nature and in this context, the curry-leaf tree can respond to signals from the menstruating, female body. The ontology in "not to eat out of the pot or it would rain / on my wedding day" suggests the interconnectedness between living beings and objects. Naidoo (2004, 9) posits that due to regional, ethnic, linguistic and class divisions among South African Indians, there is no singular standard of worship used by Hindus. Tamil formularies depict the most complex rituals due to an abundance of symbols and liturgies, making it easy "to lose track of meaning and reduce them to magic and superstition"; furthermore, "[rituals] were influenced by transplantation to South Africa" (Naidoo 2004, v).

Simon's representation of the various ontological standpoints of the three women characters in the poem illustrates one of the key goals of decoloniality: countering the scientific, objectivist paradigm of Western knowledge. Maldonado-Torres (2016, 18–19) elucidates how Western epistemic violence detaches the knower from the known through Cartesian divisions of mind/body and reason/nature. The outcome is a knowing subject who is confronted by a world of objects and produces objective knowledge. Maldonado-Torres postulates that the illusion of universal knowledge is reflected through Western ontology, re-initiating self-erasure within the colonised. Simon reflexively demonstrates the speaker's (her) scepticism about her mother's and grandmother's beliefs, indicating how hegemonic frameworks have dismantled and repressed worldviews that exist outside them. At the same time, Simon represents the older women as preservers of indigenous knowledge, indicating how the knowledge has hybridised and amalgamated as it was transferred from one generation to the next. The structure of the poem captures the varied levels of knowledge holding and knowledge dissemination among the three women.

The speaker's rebellious behaviour, indicated by her refusal to abide by the rules, is not equivalent to the rejection of her elders' ontologies, but explicates a dismissal of gender relations stemming from that knowledge. Each instruction given to the speaker links to notions of being a good wife or mother. The curry-leaf tree must not die for it is integral to good cooking. A girl must not wake up looking like a *pichachi*[8] because such appearance would not be attractive to a potential husband. Simon (2018, 24) states, "my femaleness is influenced by familial pressures from traditional patriarchal culture, yet, this is also mediated by the changes that have accumulated in this culture over time". The poem fulfils the two strands of decolonisation outlined by Smith (1999, 24) as mentioned in the previous section. It reflects on a time before colonisation through references to animistic ontologies related to ancient Hinduism and ways of being, while also demonstrating how such ontologies have evolved and combined with a Western worldview, as the lasting effect of colonialism. Additionally, Simon's subversion of the

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[8] *Pichachi* is a Tamil word, meaning "she-demon". It is used in South African Indian dialect as a derogatory term to describe women who appear unappealing or sinister.

patriarchal values imposed upon her indicates an attempt to reconstitute gender roles while drawing attention to the differing and fluctuating subjectivities of South African Indian women.

Language and Beyond in "Betel-Nut"

The poem "Betel-Nut" (Simon 2017, 59–60) is based on Simon's present continuous experiences at her relatives' homes in Chatsworth. Chatsworth is an Indian township about 15km south of Durban. Hansen (2006, 209) explains that Chatsworth was devised in the 1950s as a buffer between white and black residential areas in Durban during the Group Areas Act. Poorer Indians were strategically positioned on the outskirts, bordering Umlazi, while middle-class Indians were located on the boundaries of working-class white neighbourhoods. Desai and Vahed (2013, 1) note, "Chatsworth was born at the height of apartheid's madness when the government sought to ghettoize persons of 'Indian' origin into what it intended to be a frozen racial landscape". Housing approximately 350 000 residents, Chatsworth became the largest Indian suburb in the country (Desai and Vahed 2013, 2). Hansen (2012, 15–16) postulates that the shift from apartheid to democracy instituted multilayered feelings of loss among Chatsworth residents who had grown accustomed to communal intimacy, enforced by cultural enclosure and newfound economic stability. The birth of Chatsworth marked almost a hundred years since Indians were first shipped to South Africa during the system of indenture. The first ships arrived in 1860 and contained nearly seven hundred indentured migrants from various parts of the Indian subcontinent. Desai and Vahed describe this moment: "Hierarchies 'imagined' into being over a long period; divisions based on age-old customs; castes, religions, dialects, centuries in the making, unravelling. Space, time and place compressed" (2010, 1).

Given the post-apartheid imperative of geopolitically locating the country's residents as "South African", today Indians are officially known as "South African Indians" (SAI), yet widely referred to as "Indians"; these classifications are influenced by indenture and apartheid racial classifiers. The term "South African Indian" is reductive and fails to account for the differences among a heterogeneous population of 1.3 million people (Hansen 2006, 202). Hansen aptly describes the incessant flux of SAI identity as a result of numerous systems of oppression and shifts in contemporary politics:

> Indians in South Africa remain, in other words, "in suspension"—in a provisional and indeterminate space: with a history of forced removals, non-recognition, of economic success against many odds; of being at the mercy of powerful forces beyond their own control. (Hansen 2006, 203)

Given the divisions and compression of contrasting Indian cultures in South Africa, "Betel-Nut" will resonate particularly with South African Indians of Tamil linguistic heritage, residents of Chatsworth and Christian converts who hold on tightly to Hindu traditions despite their religious affiliations. Simon has never lived in Chatsworth, having been raised in Durban North for the most part of her childhood, but often visits

her aunts and cousins who live there, especially on festive occasions. Simon and I shared sentiments about the expectation to speak the dialect and reclaim "Indianness" when among our relatives. [9] The tension of being both an insider and outsider in the community is the predominant motif in "Betel-Nut" (Simon 2017, 59–60):

> I am dark but
> they say I'm bluffing.
> I snack on tamarind seeds
>
> sucking while Mom makes brinjal.
> Black tongue, mangrove mud   between my toes.
> *She's not like us but.*
>
> This is why I am not like them.
> I wouldn't say *that*,
> but I would say that
>
> when she tells me all about climbing
> jackfruit trees at aunty's house, she calls me
> girl, losing my name.
>
> Lately, I try out their voice: oiyoh, but it's so hard eh!
> *She, she don't fright for nothing.*
> *She don't know nothing too.*
>
> It's ayyo when I check
> my brand new dictionary,
> a book to mark bed-made words.
>
> The Indians, they put eyes on me except
> when I go to Chatsworth
> then my sentences end but.
>
> What happened to my degree?
> That's what I wonder anyway,
> spitting betel-nuts, white husk.

Simon verified that she shifts to SAI dialect when among her Chatsworth relatives, identifying it as a "code switch", resulting in feelings of self-consciousness and inauthenticity. "Sometimes I would feel like I wasn't a real Indian person because I was pretending", she said.[10] There is an implied reference to the power of language as a repository of local knowledge, which, if manifested, allows the acquisition of the status "real Indian". Chatsworth is a melting pot of diverse Indian linguistic and cultural

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[9]   Based on my interview with Simon (Durban, 27 June 2018).
[10]   Based on my interview with Simon (Durban, 27 June 2018).

heritages. Primarily, the poem interweaves Chatsworth dialect with local ways of being, echoing Ngũgĩ's (1981) extrapolation that language is culture's collective memory bank. On a secondary level, the use of Earth imagery—vegetation, soil and plants—illustrates the speaker's attempt to exceed language. By physically immersing her body into the land and consuming its produce, the speaker finds an alternative route to excavating her ancestral ways of knowing. I will examine how both aspects interplay in the poem.

Ngũgĩ posits that culture is both the outcome and reflection of history and mediates understanding of the self, between the self and others, and between the self and nature, by transmitting collective realities into the spoken or written word. In effect, "culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history" (Ngũgĩ 1981, 15). For this reason, language was mobilised as a colonial force in reshaping human subjectivities (Singh 2018, 69) and is centralised by decolonial thinkers as a solution to cultural reclamation (Singh 2018, 74). In the poem, the speaker is conflicted about her performative use of South African Indian dialect when surrounded by her Chatsworth family. "I am dark but / they say I'm bluffing" suggests her family's disposition to her "false" Indian identity despite their shared "racial" and genealogical attributes. The word "bluff" is often chosen in South African Indian English as a synonym for lying, or "to insist that something is true, knowing it to be false" (Mesthrie 2010, 29). The voice in italics, "*She's not like us but*", is a direct quotation representing the voices of the speaker's relatives. In contrast with the speaker's use of standard English, the quotations in italics serve as evidence of why she is "not like them". "But" is commonly located at the end of a sentence in South African Indian English. Mesthrie (2010, 108) postulates that the clause-final use of "but" has a "weakly adversative sense … the primary meaning of *but* is 'though, really, truly', etc.". He propounds that SAI dialect is a form of "language-shift English" as a result of English replacing the culture's vernacular in daily communication (Mesthrie 1992, 3). Simon, having been educated at Model-C schools in the mostly white neighbourhood of Durban North, communicates in standard English, except when around her family or other dialect users. Outside those contexts, she re-adapts to the standard English accepted in white or educational environments.[11] Her doctoral thesis states:

> Because I simply do not hear such usages, when I am out of habitual context, and thus they contract and shrivel in my linguistic repertoire, waiting for the water of community connection so that they may once again well into the presence of the ear. (Simon 2018, 25)

According to Mesthrie (1992, 61), white South African English is used in conjunction with South African Indian English by a small group of bidialectical speakers in the country, who "tend to be young professionals employed in prestigious commercial

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[11]   Based on my interview with Simon (Durban, 27 June 2018).

houses" and who "run the risk of being gently ridiculed". Using incorrect syntax and the idiom *oiyoh*—an exclamation loosely translating to "Good Lord!", suggesting pain, surprise or sympathy (Mesthrie 2010, 10), elicits disorientation from white enunciation. Presumably, that is why Simon wishes to "try out their voice", acknowledging her limitations. Her linguistic shifts are not the task of appropriation, but an effort to speak the same language as her relatives, as a means of seeing the world from their perspectives.

Simon expressed her fascination with Rajend Mesthrie's *A Dictionary of South African Indian English* in our interview, and it may well be the "brand new dictionary" she refers to in stanza six. Published in 2010, Mesthrie's book is the first written compilation of SAI terminology and expressions. The speaker solemnly reflects on this as "a book to mark bed-made words", provoking the absence of orality in the intervention of objective written record. In the poem, dialect is assigned to the relatives at "aunty's house"—the ambiguous "them"—forcefully reverberating the voices of a collective. With the shift to italics, we are able to *see* different voices on the page and are propelled to imagine their elocutions. We see, in the phrases in italics, orality's resistance to being captured on paper, and its capacity to live beyond the page. *Oiyoh* is best described in the activity of speech, having no precise English word equivalent to house its complex resonances and ideological perspectives. Likewise, "they put eyes on me" is an idiom exclusive to South African Indians, used to describe bad energies emitting from an observer. The potential evil from having someone "put eyes" is thwarted by rotating a handful of salt around the targeted individual. The everyday language of Chatsworth exceeds denotation. It engages mythologies and ontologies that lead to ritualistic practice. Translation, then, reaches only the contours of a vocabulary, even when the translation is between standard English and "English in language shift". Through language shifts, the poem fluctuates on a spectrum with institutional homogenisation on one end and decolonial gestures on the other (Ramazani 2009, 8). The speaker, anticipating her family's judgment, tries to attain Indianness through the language of the Earth.

Throughout the poem, the speaker consumes a number of ingredients that are popular in Durban Indian cuisine, particularly in Tamil households. It is necessary to remember that the Cartesian view of the world sees the Earth as a sum of separable parts. Each part must be studied in isolation in order to be objectively understood (Kavanagh 2018, 43). As a result, post-colonial cultures are left with the fragmented remains of indigenous knowledge and ontologies. For South African Indians, cultural fragmentation occurs twice: first in their transplantation from India to South Africa, and then by the relocations of the Group Areas Act. The poet employs a decolonial strategy by making efforts to upset the objectivist paradigm through the speaker's appreciation of plant life as reservoirs of cultural history. In other words, through contemplating each item, the speaker gradually develops a broader understanding of the cultural discourse surrounding those items, working from the ground up, so to speak. For instance, when the speaker is accused of "bluffing", she retaliates by snacking on "tamarind seeds": a

sour seed used in South Indian dishes, including brinjal[12] curry. "Mom makes brinjal" is based on the real-life image of Simon's mother cooking brinjal at her aunt's house.[13] The inclusion of this image represents the norm of Tamil women in Chatsworth, who often cook in the homes of their relatives and friends. The tamarind seed in its raw form is an acquired taste that demands an experienced palate. The dark pulp causes the speaker's physical and metaphorical "Black tongue", indicating her efforts to put her cultural modes of communication into her mouth. The "mangrove mud" induces a tropical atmosphere, allowing the speaker to move deeper into the Earth. Gradually nature moves into her body, resulting in mud "between [her] toes". She moves on to "climbing / jackfruit trees at aunty's house", thus behaving like her Chatsworth relatives and affording her mother the ability to call her "girl". "Girl" is used in South African Indian English to denote "daughter". Additionally, when a girl gets her period for the first time, she is called a "big girl", and when a woman gets married, her family and friends are referred to as the "girl's side" (Mesthrie 2010, 85). "Girl", ironically a standard English word, is riddled with traces of Indian linguistic cultures. Calling the speaker "girl" marks her belonging within the collective identity of Chatsworth people. Simon attests:

> The designator *Francine Simon* is mediated by patterns of fixity … *and* by ripples of shift, in the gesture of Indian South African parents who chose to give their eldest child an English sounding name that does not visibly or audibly enunciate "Indianness". (Simon 2018, 25; italics in original)

Losing her name altogether makes space for the assertion of Indianness. Hansen (2006, 212) observes that residents of Chatsworth perceive their neighbourhoods as intimate spaces and as "a site of strongly asserted insider-culture defined by accents, food, jokes, and, racial features". The speaker, cognisant of her white accent and struggle to "wear" a different voice, assimilates insider culture through alternative routes. She establishes her racial features, "I am dark", proceeds to instil the flavours of Chatsworth into her palate, loses her name and then is confident enough to "try out their voice", rather comically conveying both the voice and the difficulty in achieving authenticity: "oiyoh, but it's so hard eh!" Hansen (2012, 93) observes that in Chatsworth's community theatre and radio entertainment, accents are exaggerated for comic relief, furthermore, "exaggerated 'white' accents are deployed to portray the typical overambitious lahnee[14] who tries to expunge every trace of his Indianness". Consequently, the speaker enacts both measures of comedic entertainment, strengthening her "Indianness".

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[12] *Brinjal* is the preferred South African Indian term for aubergine.
[13] Based on my interview with Simon (Durban, 27 June 2018).
[14] According to Mesthrie (2010, 132), *lahnee* is a South African Indian slang used as a noun to describe "one's employer ... a person of means ... a White man" or as an adjective to describe someone "exceedingly rich".

The poet uses betel nut as a metaphor for Chatsworth dialect. Betel nuts are staple items used in Tamil rituals and eaten as refreshment between meals. The speaker requires its coarse structure, its darkness and woody bitterness to reshape her tongue. The betel nut is used as a means of reaching the "cultural composite of communication" (Kavanagh 2018, 43), which the speaker must rebuild for herself before she can understand her relatives' worldviews. The imagery of vegetation outlines the ontological nature of the relationship between Indians and South African landscape, where an exploitative agricultural past is one of the culture's defining factors. The mouth and tongue are given purpose beyond their verbal duties—they constitute a palate that is tightly intertwined with nature. Through the dialect, the speaker is able to access fragments of her cultural roots, and is furthermore removed from such roots in comparison with her relatives, given that she is a bidialectal speaker.

The tension emerging from the speaker's efforts to assimilate her relatives' dialect emphasises the political power of language and its decolonial capabilities. The poem corroborates the Fanonian view that "[t]o speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture " (Fanon 1986, 8). Moreover, it shows that dialect encapsulates unique, local worldviews and mindsets. Simon's use of natural elements illustrates Ngũgĩ's (1981, 15) reservations that "culture does not merely reflect that history, or rather it does so by actually forming images or pictures of the world of nature and nurture". If language is the image-forming liaison of culture, and if the speaker cannot adopt the desired language, she resolves the issue by focusing on the images of nature and nurture in their tangible configurations. Understanding "Betel-Nut" requires an insider's understanding of South African Indian English. I have referred to lexical definitions throughout this analysis, conveying how the poem's meanings deepen when it is read in this context. The use of language certifies the poem's local specificity and the role of language in decolonising knowledge.

Conclusion

The poems analysed in this article elucidate a number of decolonial themes and preoccupations. Both poems signify the importance of orality and dialect as a means of transferring generational knowledge, and thus providing counter-narratives to Western epistemology and discourse. Gunner (2000, 1) postulates that orality in Africa does not merely signal the absence of literature but must be appreciated as an alternative model that charts the development of human beings. While Indian cultures contain a long history of literacy, for South African Indians, orality flourished as compensation for broken genealogies, lost traditions and fractured cultural identities. South African Indians have lived in the country for over 150 years, experiencing a long, troublesome history of systematic oppression through indenture and apartheid. Simon's poetry signifies a need and relevance for South African Indian narratives to be perceived as movements towards decolonising outputs.

Simon's reference to oral traditions challenges Western history as a chronological, universal, coherent, totalising, patriarchal account of all human experience (Smith 1999, 30–31). "Tamil Familiars" subverts aspects of Western ontology by representing the voices of marginalised women and the significance of orality in their self-regulation. Women are portrayed as the bearers of knowledge, as the remaining links to India, and thus, to their pre-colonial cultural traditions and ways of being. Simon discloses that the characters in *Thungachi* (2017) are based on influential people in her life, stating in the interview that "the more you read it the more you can see that there are characters. There's a mum character, there's a dad—a little bit less of a dad character. There's a grandma character. There's an aunt".[15] While the poems reveal that women are key custodians of subversive knowledge—through their cooking, their relationship with nature, their animistic ontologies, or their use of dialect—the reclamation of such marginalised knowledge is pitted against implications of women's subservience.

Hansen (2006, 216) identifies that in Chatsworth, the domestic environment is conceived as the core of Indianness, associated with cuisine, ceremonial activity and authority over women's bodies. Evidently the poems depict the speaker's elders in domestic environments, along with their concerns about marriage, cooking, and preservation of the female body. However, by centralising the voices of the women and portraying them as authoritative figures, Simon offers matriarchal narratives that contribute to what Clery and Metcalfe (2018, 10) call "feminist/community archives", as her accounts of South African Indian womanhood "describe the particular contexts in which stories are told—nationally, locally and relationally". Nfah-Abbenyi cautions against uniform generalisations of womanhood in Africa, and this easily applies to the population of South African Indian women. She postulates that "fixed identity must therefore be destabilised and by doing so, fixed relations of gender and power hierarchies can also be disorganized" (Nfah-Abbenyi 2005, 274). Simon negotiates her cultural identity through multiple dimensions of "femaleness" (itself a cultural construct).

Through her poetry and interview responses, Simon demonstrates an acute awareness of the marginalisation of SAI culture and the troublesome ironing out of SAI heterogeneity. She remedies these issues in her experimental poetry, which distils her specific variation of the South African Indian woman's experience. Her analytical and feminist reflections allow her to question the patriarchal imputations of Tamil "superstition", Catholicism and formal education, while distinguishing the power of women as sources of decolonial attributes and potential agents of ontological paradigm shift. "Betel-Nut" reflects on South African Indian English as a unique worldview informed by an attachment to linguistic identities, as a compensatory measure for the loss of Indian indigenous languages (Hansen 2012, 2). Additionally, the poem sees

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[15]   Based on my interview with Simon (Durban, 25 June 2018).

nature as a historical archive that has the power to ignite the speaker's connection to her cultural past, when her spoken word falls short.

Overall, Simon's poetry in *Thungachi* (2017) makes visible the gaps in SAI history and consequent representations of the culture. The poems discussed in this article represent memory as a collective enterprise, where an individual's memory is often accompanied by memories of others and cultural continuity depends on communal collaboration. The decolonising of South African poetry must include the poetry of all marginalised South African groups, including that of SAI women. They have been subjected to oppressive colonial practices, and are largely denied representation in anthologies and curricula. Simon's work holds significant value in the current projects of decolonising knowledge and education in South Africa. It is my intention to provoke further research into the poetry of contemporary SAI writers, whose work provokes political resistance through a reclamation and centralisation of the local and the personal.

Acknowledgements

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