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Culture Talks: Attenborough Arts Centre and the Institute for Advanced Studies join in dialogue with artist Sabrina Tirvengadum at the University of Leicester, 11 March 2025

Sabrina Tirvengadum

Sabrina Tirvengadum (b. 1984) is a deaf British Mauritian visual artist and graphic designer based in London. Working across photography, digital painting, generative AI, collage, and film, her practice explores themes of identity, memory and colonial legacies, often drawing on her Mauritian heritage and diasporic experiences. She holds a BA (Hons) in Photographic Arts from the University of Westminster and has over 15 years of experience in graphic design.

Recent exhibitions include Who Were They? Who Am I? at Attenborough Arts Centre, Leicester (2025); Afternoon Chai at SPACE

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Studios, Ilford (2023–2024); and Lafami (Mauritius) at NAE OPEN, New Art Exchange, Nottingham (2023). Her collaborative short film A Souvenir to Keep, edited with Mark Allred, features rediscovered family footage from her family's first trip to Mauritius in 1993, capturing the emotional experience of connecting with ancestral land.

Tirvengadum is the founder of WAH (We're All Human), an art and design collective advocating for digital accessibility and inclusive creativity. She is part of Autograph's Visualising Disability artist development programme and was selected for the 2025 Autograph x Light Work artist residency in New York. Her work will be featured in the upcoming group exhibition I Still Dream of Lost Vocabularies at Autograph Gallery, from 9 October 2025 to 21 March 2026.

For more information, visit her website: sabrina.wereallhuman.uno.

Clare Anderson

Clare Anderson is Professor of History at the University of Leicester, where she also directs the Leicester Institute for Advanced Studies. Her research focuses on histories and legacies of punishment across the British and other empires, with a particular focus on convict transportation. She has worked extensively in Mauritius, where the British established a penal settlement for Indian convicts in 1815, and in Guyana, exploring the aftermaths of colonial prisons in the country now, including in relation to mental health. Her most recent book, *Convicts: A Global History* (Cambridge University Press, 2022) won the Social History Society Prize 2024 and Australian Historical Association Kay Daniels Award 2024. With partners in Mauritius, Guyana and the wider Caribbean, Clare is currently leading a Wellcome Trust Discovery Award, entitled 'Prisons, Drugs and Mental Health: An Interdisciplinary Global Study'.

Esme Cleall

Esme Cleall is a historian of the British Empire at the University of Sheffield. Her 2022 book, *Colonising Disability,* explored disability and identity in nineteenth-century Britain and its empire. She is interested in the histories of the body and mind in the modern period. She is

currently working on several projects, including those on disability and enslavement, as well as the social and cultural history of breathing.

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ANDREW FLETCHER (DIRECTOR, ATTENBOROUGH ARTS CENTRE)

Sabrina opened a fantastic show here in Gallery Two last month, entitled 'Who Were They, Who Am I?', and without saying too much about it, it's a journey through AI and technology, family, history, identity, imagination. I hope you have had a chance to see it. If you haven't, the galleries will be open late this evening. It's a really fascinating and powerful show with great depth. I've spent a lot of time with it; I hope you will all too. And one of the benefits of being here on a university campus, for the Attenborough Arts Centre, is that we're able to convene dialogue with leading academics, both from the University of Leicester and from further afield. So, we're really delighted to be joined this evening by Prof Clare Anderson from the University of Leicester and Dr Esme Cleall from the University of Sheffield who have come together with Sabrina to talk about their kind of respective interests in relation to this exhibition, which hopefully will be enlightening for us all (Figure 1). This is the

Figure 1 *If We Were Marrier d' Unienville* **by Sabrina Tirvengadum.**

first talk that we have run in collaboration with the Leicester Institute for Advanced Studies (LIAS). For those of you who don't know, LIAS champions interdisciplinary research and teaching across the university. There seems no better interdisciplinary event than this – bringing together different expertise and bringing

artists together with academics. So, I hope you have a great evening. Please do go and see the show afterwards. And without further ado, please give our panellists a really warm welcome.

Sabrina Tirvengadum: I want to talk a bit about myself, about who I am and why this exhibition came to be. My name is Sabrina Tirvengadum. Andrew did really well with my surname because it's a bit of a mouthful for a lot of people. But only recently, I actually learned how to say it properly in the Tamil way, which is interesting in itself.

I'm a visual artist, but I'm also a graphic designer. I've been a graphic designer for over 15 years. I studied Photographic Arts and Photography at the University of Westminster. My artwork is usually based on photography, but this time I am exploring my identity and my family history. Both of my parents are from Mauritius; they came over to the UK before I was born. My father was a baker. My mum had multiple jobs; she worked in a factory as well as working as a care assistant. Mauritius, as some of you might know, is a little island in the Indian Ocean on the east coast of Africa.

It all started for me looking into my disabled identity. I have hearing loss, and I was struggling in everyday life trying to identify what it meant to be someone who has moderate to severe hearing loss, rather than profound hearing loss. It was when I was looking into that and then that kind of led into my family history.

As I was trying to figure out my disabled identity, I had that feeling of not feeling like I was *enough* – like not deaf enough – and this feeling followed me with different identities where I didn't feel like I was British enough, Tamil enough, Asian enough, African enough, Mauritian enough. It continued with the whole feeling of not being disabled enough. So because of that feeling I started to look into my family's photographs and started from the beginning. And this inspired the exhibition 'Who Were They, Who Am I?' I explore my identity and my family history and also how it connects with the wider history of indentured labour in Mauritius.

I was inspired by my father's life as well as stories that haven't been told. That was one of the key things in my family history: The

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stories that haven't been told. This made me think about who they (my family) are and who I am. And how much of them makes me who I am now and has shaped me as a person. So, in the work that I create it's about my memory; it's about what's true, what's false. It's all kind of combined a bit like history in itself. So, I look into the past in order to understand myself.

Clare Anderson: It's interesting that you were inspired by history, Sabrina, and I think it's fair to say that the history of Mauritius is not well known here in Britain. You've asked me to say a little bit about the history of the island, which is understandable because we are a lot more familiar with the British Caribbean, including histories of enslavement and labour migration to the British Caribbean and to Guyana in South America. But the sugar islands in the Indian Ocean – Mauritius and also Seychelles – bear a lot of resemblance to Guyana and countries like Jamaica and Barbados. Part of the reason that we don't know so much about Mauritius, I think, was that it was initially a French colony, and when the British took over, they left the French settlers intact. At the time of Windrush, and later, some Mauritians (like Sabrina's parents) came to the UK as British citizens, but given its location, some went to Australia, and as French speakers, others went to France.

It's important to know that like Guyana and countries in the Caribbean, Mauritius was a colony of enslavement. Enslaved Africans were trafficked mainly from the east coast of Africa and from the neighbouring island of Madagascar, and the island became this really incredible cosmopolitan place of multiple languages, cultural beliefs, religious practices, spiritual practices; in a nutshell, a really complex, interesting society. One of the features that makes Mauritius quite different from Caribbean islands is that there were quite large numbers of enslaved Indians. There's a slave trade from Pondicherry in the French settlements of South India to the island – and that becomes complicated now when people start to think about their identity and do genetic genealogy DNA testing. That is because after the abolition of slavery in 1834, sugar plantation owners began to bring indentured labourers from India (and China) to

the island. They want unfree workers – they don't want to employ formerly enslaved, emancipated people because they're free. Why would you want to employ free labour when you can have labourers that you can coerce and control using penal contracts and other forms of social discipline? Ultimately, more indentured labourers went to Mauritius than to any other place in the British Empire, with migration continuing right up to the 1920s when it was abolished. Interestingly, Gandhi (who you might know worked in South Africa for some time) campaigned against indenture as being a cruel and oppressive practice. So indenture gets bound up in the politics of nationalism and freedom fighting against British occupation in South Asia too.

With that historical context covered, we have got lots of questions for Sabrina about her art. Sabrina, it's really interesting that you got involved in genealogy and family history and that strikes me as quite unusual for an artist. Loads of people do family history – genealogy – it's never been more popular. It's on the TV, in magazines and books; it's everywhere, right? Everybody understands 'Who Do You Think You Are?' (from the TV programme and book) which is almost a catchphrase. Could you tell us a little bit more about how you got going with the genealogy and family history side of your work?

Sabrina: As I was mentioning, about my disabled identity, I was looking into that prior to the pandemic, and it wasn't until during the pandemic, when I was learning BSL and I had hired a private tutor who was a white male, that I began to think about skin colours. We started discussing skin tone, and I then signed the brown skin tone – well, colour – and he was like, 'no, you're black', and I was like, 'but I'm brown', and we had this conversation back and forth: 'You're black', 'I'm brown', 'You're black', and it really confused me that someone was telling me what colour I am.

So, I was then thinking, 'Okay?' I kind of left it at that but it made me start to think more about my identity in terms of a brown identity. I thought, 'Where do I start?' Because it was the pandemic,

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it was a moment where everyone seemed to be looking into themselves and then looking at their past and feeling really nostalgic. So that was a good moment (because I was living with my mum) to look through the family archives. I started looking through the materials and then in the archive I found photos of people I don't know. There's also a load of studio photos of my family back home, and it was quite interesting to look through that and then try to understand myself.

So, after the pandemic when we could go back home, I went back home. When I say home, I mean Mauritius. I then tried to reconnect with my family, trying to learn a bit more, and I started to make my own archive and take pictures of my family, but not the usual family snaps but using the theme of studio photographs. They chose their own outfits and then we got bed sheets to use as backdrops. They were all helping me out, and none of them said no. They were all willing to do it, and what was quite nice about doing this was that it got the conversation going; people were talking, and that's been a bit of a problem, I think, in the Mauritian culture, just exchanging stories. But my artistic work got people to open up. So that's kind of how I started.

Then I came back to London, and I had this body of work. My husband, who is also an artist, Mark Allred, showed me the AI platform Midjourney. So I was just playing around. Basically, it's an AI platform; you can write image descriptions, and it creates an image. I wanted to create someone that looked like me, so I thought, 'Okay, let's put Indian, let me generate images of people that look like me', and when I'm typing in Indian it gave me Indigenous Americans. It wasn't giving me someone that looked like me. As I was already looking at my family archive, I started to incorporate these AI generated images into the work. And so that's kind of how it all started.

Clare: For me as an historian, it's fascinating to see in the exhibition all of the photographs and things like passports and so on. Does your family have a lot of papers in Mauritius or here? Are there a lot of letters or other kinds of documents?

Sabrina: Yes. I had quite a few myself actually. During the pandemic I was reading letters from my grandmother out to my cousin, and she was quite surprised about a lot of what she had written to me. And, a lot of it, she was saying that she missed me and she wanted me to come back, which was quite sweet. So that's the papers that I do know about. Otherwise, the way they document stuff in Mauritius is just like scraps of paper. Even the way they look after their photographs, it's not the best, which is quite problematic as well.

Clare: The video footage of your family in the exhibition (from 1993) is amazing. I was a PhD student on the island at about that time and was surprised at how historic the footage looks. Did you collect it in Mauritius or was it from your mum and dad?

Sabrina: The footage was here; it was my father's footage. During the pandemic, when we were looking through things, it was the footage I found, so that was something we worked on too. I don't think people in Mauritius … no one was actually filming; I think only my dad was doing that, which was quite nice because I think he was the archiver, he was the one that was keeping that body of work. I like to think that this was probably to allow me to do this.

Clare: That's interesting because often sociologists would say that it's women who are the gatekeepers of family histories and stories. They're the ones that keep the papers and file the photographs so it's really interesting that it was your dad.

Sabrina: It was my dad; oh, my mum and pieces of paper, no!

Dr Esme Cleall: As you know, I'm here because I specialize in the history of disability across Britain and its Empire, particularly in the nineteenth century and particularly in relation to deafness. Thinking about what you have been saying about your artistic practice, I'm wondering if technology drives us to a particular way of archiving? But I mainly want to ask you about memory. I want to ask you about your memory of that trip in 1993 and your memories of Mauritius over time, but also about your family's memories and the intergenerational memory that you have picked up on as well.

Sabrina: When I went back to Mauritius, it had been after a 14-year gap. I hadn't really thought about Mauritius much during the

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intervening period. But when I looked through the archive, it brought everything back to me and things I found in my family archive helped me remember certain moments. Especially – as you can see in the film – with moments like cutting potatoes. I remember doing things like that! Or picking longan or tamarind from the trees which is something that's completely different now because back then people grew their own food, but now life is more supermarket based, like in the western world.

In terms of my family memory, when they talk about their – I don't know if this is connected – but when they talk about history, stuff that has happened in the past, they do tell me that they regret not asking questions of their parents and grandparents to keep memories alive. I guess in this body of work, that's what I tried to do, just kind of keep their memory and my memory. And because a photograph in itself is like a moment captured in the moment and a lot of the work in the exhibition is a mix between my own memory but something kind of detached as well. For example, the self-portrait downstairs has a dual meaning; it's myself and my great-grandmother. But at the same time, I didn't realize a part of the memory is in there. What she's wearing is a similar outfit to the one I wore for my 21st birthday and I hadn't realized I'd blended this with the picture until the other day, so I guess it kind of intertwined.

Esme: I was looking not at the archive video but the other video projection and thinking, 'Is there a colonial memory that goes into making something like that?'

Sabrina: I only found out about the history of Indian indentured labour a few years ago, which was a bit weird. I had a strange experience of it, because I would have thought that kind of information would have been passed on, in my family, but I had never been told and did not know about it. So even after reading some of the history of Mauritius, I have these moments of imagination, a bit like when you're reading a novel. And so that's what I tried to create in the projection – they might be memories actually that are coming through, but they're also my imagination of moments that could have happened.

Clare: It's interesting thinking about how art or poetry, storytelling can sort of fill those memory gaps. And I think your exhibition shows this really well; it's that blend of we're never quite sure what's – I don't want to say real – but what's a projection of the past and what's something that you've imagined. It's not really the point to figure out what's what, but it's how it all comes together in a piece of art.

Sabrina: Yes, that's kind of what the AI work is, it's basically what's real, what's imagined, what's true or false? And it's reimagining the moment, I guess.

Clare: It's also really interesting to hear you say that you didn't know about indentured labour in your family because, as an historian, I had never really thought that it would be possible *not* to know this. I just assumed that Mauritians of South Asian heritage would have an awareness of this history of labour migration. Why do you think there were these silences? Is it that people didn't ask or people were unwilling to tell?

Sabrina: I feel like a behaviour of silencing has been integrated into the culture. Even when I try and talk about it with my mum, she says things like 'I don't know'; she doesn't want to have the conversation and then leaves the room; that's the end of it. I tried to have conversations with other people. My mum's generation doesn't seem to have anything to say, which is kind of sad. But I guess moments like this – like an exhibition – can help generations to talk about their family history. And I feel like that's my intention actually; I think that's probably what I'm supposed to do.

Esme: When you were talking earlier you were talking about your disabled identity as well and how that feeds into your work. How does your identity as a disabled artist feed into your art-making?

Sabrina: In terms of my hearing loss, I only got a hearing aid a couple of years ago. So, before that, I was filling in the gaps, so in terms of how it reflects my disability, I think of the moments of silence and me filling the gaps as we fill in the gaps of history. And I feel that's probably how I'm doing it in terms of my disability. So

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it's not black and white – 'This is my disability' – it's more my experience and way of approaching the world.

Esme: And do you think differently about accessibility?

Sabrina: Yes. Also, I'm a graphic designer, and I am founder of a company called We're All Human (WAH), and we campaign for digital accessibility. So I have an understanding of access. That's another reason why, when you go into the exhibition space, it's quite immersive. I think about the senses, like the smell and how that evokes our memories, and you've got the hearing – the soundscape – and it's not just the visuals that are there.

Clare: You mentioned the piece earlier of you wearing a coral skirt; that's my favourite piece. I think it's a beautiful piece. But I want to ask you about what you like best in the exhibition and why.

Sabrina: I think my favourite work is probably *If We Were Marrier d' Unienville* (Figure 2) because it shows where it all started when I found out my DNA results. Basically, quite a few years ago, I took

Figure 2 Sabrina Tirvengadum in conversation with Professor Clare Anderson and Dr Esme Cleall.
Source: Photo by Mark Allred.

this DNA test, and then I forgot about it until I put the results on another genealogy platform. And then it generated some more connections that I noticed, and then, again, I left it. After coming back from Mauritius, because I had opened up this conversation with people about our family's history, I started doing a bit more research, looking into my surname. I was trying to figure out where could my surname originate? Where could my ancestors have been coming from? I found out that it's a Tamil surname. I just assumed it would be a certain area of South India. So I talked to my cousin about it, and then she said, 'Oh that's not your surname.' I was like, '*What*?! It is my surname.' She said, 'No, no, you should have a different surname,' and I said, 'What do you mean?' She told me, 'Oh, it should be d'Unienville.' I responded, 'I actually recognize that surname,' and she said, 'Our great-grandmother was a maid for this family, and our grandfather was of mixed heritage.' This is something I had no idea of, that nobody had ever mentioned. So that's what I mean about sharing; there's a lack of it, and I guess this body of work is opening up conversations like this. I thought, 'Okay, I recognize this surname; let me go back to my DNA results on the website', and I just saw d'Unienville everywhere on my profile. I thought, 'Right, this confirms the story.'

So, from that story, I created *If We Were Marrier d'Unienville*. When you look at the piece, it shows photographs of my family members and what kind of life they *could* have had. The steps of the staircase are – and I don't know if I did this consciously – but I put this staircase in the middle, and I think, in the back of my mind, I thought of a grand house, a big staircase, but I hadn't realized that they're also actually a representation of the steps that the indentured labourers had taken when they arrived in the immigration depot (Aapravasi Ghat) in Mauritius. I thought this is something that's come through and I hadn't realized, which is interesting in itself.

Clare: Yes, and as you know those steps are so symbolically powerful in Mauritius. And the d'Unienville family are also interesting.

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They were Franco-Mauritians, some of them owned enslaved property, and there was a d'Unienville, who was a famous historian in the early nineteenth century. It's mind-blowing, isn't it, that your DNA is bound up with this history of French settlement, ownership of the enslaved and indentured labour?

I also wanted to ask you … you've been to Mauritius a few times. You talked about going home earlier, using that word – "home" – which I thought was really interesting. Tell us about your trips to Mauritius, how you went, the circumstances, how the island has changed in between trips?

Sabrina: I had that fourteen-year gap – in fact it was the pandemic that encouraged me to go. So I went back and found that it's very different; it's very westernized. I loved how it used to be; simple. I missed the simple life. When we went to Mauritius there was that contrast, and we've got the westernized life here, and then when you go there and it's just like cleaning the rice or feeding the chickens, that kind of simple life. Now when you go there, everyone's on social media doing the posing; it's very different. Before it was more about the community, and now it feels like it's more about individuality – which is great – but at the same time, I feel like I kind of want the balance, and us in the west, I feel like we're wanting what people in other places had; just a slower pace. So it's quite different. They have a metro now – I know you've been on it too (Clare).

Clare: Yes. I went on the metro last month, which was a bit weird!

Sabrina: It was very weird.

Clare: You mentioned your DNA test; has anyone else in your family done a DNA test? What compelled you to do it? Was it a Christmas gift?

Sabrina: I was at work, my colleague was doing it and she asked, 'Why don't you do it?' I said, 'Okay then.' So we just ended up doing it. Her story's a little different; it unravelled a lot.

Clare: Well, this is the danger of these kinds of tests.

Sabrina: It changed her life quite a lot actually. But for me, I didn't think anything of it. I was a certain percentage of Melanesian which changed when I moved it over to another DNA platform.

Clare: Interpreting genetic genealogy data can be really tricky. I've read a lot of social science about all the challenges that people face when they try to find meaning in these tests.

Sabrina: Today I got an email from the platform – writing about Indian indentured labour. So I think they're changing the platforms at the moment.

Clare: Did you get any matches with anybody? Did you put it into one of those matching platforms?

Sabrina: No. I would need to pay again.

Clare: We could have a whole 'culture talks' discussion about DNA testing because it's really problematic in so many ways; the science is problematic, and the kind of unravelling that you're describing as well is really difficult. Did you know that it is banned in France and in the French overseas territories, including Réunion island (close to Mauritius). We can speculate about why this is so (privacy etc.), but certainly it has the potential to work against shared ideas about citizenship. So people in Réunion would get friends to order them a test from elsewhere and then send it off.

Esme: It's really interesting as well the way, Sabrina, the way that your work draws on that kind of science. We might question the science of genetic testing, but we can also challenge memory and other forms of knowledge.

Sabrina: Yes, there are quite a lot of layers to my practice.

Esme: I've got a question for you about gender. I'm interested in how gender might feed into the stories that you represent or into your own identity.

Sabrina: In terms of the archives in general, I think women are excluded as well in that their whole experience of abuse has been silenced. So in this body of work, again, I don't feel this was a conscious decision, but I have produced a kind of balance in the

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number of women in there but some of the children I turned into women, into females too. There were actually originally boys, and I changed their gender to girls, and I didn't realize why I had done that – I have no idea. But, actually, one thing from the archive, you can see some of the boys are dressed up as girls in some of the photos. Some people probably will agree that they have photos like that in their family collections.

Sabrina: In terms of my own gender, I struggle. So, when pronouns were becoming more of a topic of conversation, I didn't really want to talk about who I am – I am female. I struggled with that, and I feel like I struggled with that because of what it means to be a woman in my culture, what it means to be domestic; you have to be domestic, you have to carry a child, you have to get married – it's all that checklist of what it means to be a woman. And even throughout my childhood, I've always been a bit like, 'Oh mum, get out of the kitchen; you don't need to make that many dishes.' It's just the expectation.

What I also love about the Mauritian Kreol language – which is derived from French – is that while French has got the masculine and feminine, in Kreol, it doesn't use gendered pronouns. Everyone is simply referred to as *li* and *zot*, which means they/them.

Because of that, I feel comfortable being referred to as both they/them and she/her in terms of my own identity.

Clare: On that positive note, I think we should bring the discussion to a close. In the spirit of the accessibility that underpins Sabrina's practice, we welcome everybody to stay with us to talk, discuss and view the exhibition. In the meantime, I'd like to thank the team from Attenborough Arts Centre, LIAS, Esme and all of you for attending. Most of all, thank you to Sabrina for introducing and discussing this wonderful exhibition.