

THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

HUB CITY: ASPIRATION AND DISPOSSESSION IN 21ST CENTURY COLOMBO

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A thesis submitted to the Department of International Development of the London School of Economics for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, London, October 2017.

DECLARATION

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it). The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. Quotation from it is permitted, provided that full acknowledgement is made. This thesis may not be reproduced without my prior written consent. I warrant that this authorisation does not, to the best of my belief, infringe the rights of any third party. I declare that my thesis consists of **72,321** words.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an ethnographic study of urban development in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Drawing on 12 months of fieldwork, this manuscript explores the way that the city of Colombo is increasingly being re-imagined by policymakers, developers, government officials and elite residents as a “global city” similar to Singapore or Dubai. As my multi-sited project demonstrates, however, these visions of the new Colombo are far from being the current reality. Through chapters exploring diverse corners of Colombo including: a suspended Chinese-funded waterfront development project; a coastal fishing enclave; a new marketplace opened under the former government; and the city’s luxury apartment buildings, this thesis offers insight both into the varied forms of dispossession faced by the urban poor and working class as well as the aspirational projects designed to appeal to the Colombo elite.

I argue that the primary principle governing Colombo’s urban development is the idea of “hubness,” an aspirational trope which emphasizes connection and mobility, especially across the Indian Ocean region. Rather than taking its island geography as a sign of insularity, many Sri Lankans hope to leverage what is now framed as the country’s “strategic location” to boost its appeal and transform Sri Lanka – and by extension, Colombo – into a major global hub connecting Asia, Africa and the Middle East. I argue that hubness as an ideal is both a spatial and temporal claim. Rather than being a self-evident statement of geography, hubness discourse is also a specific understanding of futurity. These complex entanglements of spatiality and temporality are present in each site.

The ethnographic findings presented in this thesis point to the need to reconsider global city making as a process suffused with uncertainty, rather than as a straightforward, linear evolution. Global cities, I suggest, are not fixed or static entities, but contingent urban forms which are actively created as material and symbolic entities through various forms of dispossession and aspiration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It feels appropriate that, being an ethnography of the dream of global and transnational connection, this thesis owes its existence to so many people and places, spread out across at least three continents. “Hubness,” it turns out, is a large part of my own reality.

First and foremost, thanks are due to the people of Colombo who opened their homes, shops, offices and schedules to me, who shared their wisdom, perspectives and stories and who took time to talk with me about what the development of their city meant to them, their dreams for the future, and their memories of the past. Special thanks are due to the families of Mutuwall, northern Colombo, who regularly greeted me with friendliness and kindness on my visits, especially Rasika, Malith, Alanka, Inoka, Nishantha and others. Father Sarath and Sister Christine changed my entire outlook on fieldwork and my experience of Sri Lanka, and to them I am grateful. Mrs. Rajapakse and Michael Meyler provided Sinhala lessons and much more – structure, kindness and comfort during fieldwork. Rajinda Abeyratne, who has known me since before this PhD, is owed thanks for his constant friendship and good humor.

This thesis would not exist without the gracious support, warmth and patience of my two supervisors, Rajesh Venugopal and Austin Zeiderman. If we accept the anthropological wisdom that debt is a powerful form of social bond, then I consider myself quite happy to remain in their debt forever in light of the intellectual guidance that they provided me over the past four years. I could not have been more lucky than to be supervised by Rajesh, a brilliant social scientist and expert of Sri Lanka who always manages to amaze me with his deep understanding of the country we both study and with his vast wealth of knowledge beyond it. Rajesh took a chance on me when I was a very uncertain twenty-something living in New York with only a vague notion that I wanted to do a PhD about something regarding Sri Lanka. When I came to London I realized how lucky I was that he did; in pushing me always to be more precise, to sharpen my arguments and to consider the different ways my writing could be structured, Rajesh has been that rare combination of mentor who never held back advice or critique but who also let me grow independently – all while reading my work carefully. Rajesh has seen this project through so many stages and evolutions it is dizzying to think of them all.

Austin joined as my co-supervisor after I returned from fieldwork, and I have been grateful every day since for his intellectual contributions and keen insights. I still recall my first time reading one of Austin’s articles and being “wowed” – that sense of deep admiration has never left me. It has been an honor to work with a scholar of cities so distinguished who also somehow found the time and patience to read multiple drafts of my work. Austin always made my ideas better, made thought-provoking points and also provided needed encouragement and support when it felt like I didn’t have the energy to keep going. Both Austin and Rajesh have treated me like a peer and colleague. Mirroring the processes described in this thesis, they have been there throughout this uncertain, fraught and sometimes shaky endeavor. Words cannot express my gratitude.

At the LSE I have also been most grateful for the support of Sohini Kar, who has kindly provided much professional advice and offered many helpful comments on my work since she joined the department. Harry Pettit has been an incredibly valued friend, colleague and sounding board – I have enjoyed our venting and smoking sessions immensely. Portia Roelofs has fielded all manner of random

messages and queries and I am grateful for her advice and friendship. Susan Hoult has been an invaluable resource and has answered all my anxious emails about matters large and small; I cannot thank her enough.

I extend my warmest thanks to Ashan Munasinghe, my friend, interpreter and research assistant in Colombo. Without him, the fieldwork that provided the basis for this thesis would have been next to impossible. Contrary to the popular wisdom, there *is* such a thing as a stupid question, and I asked them all (and then some) while Ashan patiently translated for me. For his patience, kindness and generosity in accompanying me on frenetic *tuk-tuk* journeys, afternoons at the Floating Market, Friday mornings in Mutuwall, and rice and curry lunches in between, I am deeply appreciative.

I consider myself lucky to have been surrounded and supported by many wonderful Sri Lanka scholars throughout my time in Colombo and in the US and UK. Jim Sykes and Vivian Choi have been the best combination of friends and mentors, and their presence in Colombo during the summer of 2015 was the undisputed highlight of my time there. Thiruni Kelegama, Nadia Augustinyak, Nethra Samarawickrema, Dominic Esler, Alexios Tsigkas, Katyayani Dalmia form a loose Sri Lanka “crew” of peers, collaborators and friends whose companionship I hope will continue for years to come. John Rogers, Malathi de Alwis, Harini Amarasuriya and Sharika Thiranagama have been kind and supportive listeners and I am so grateful for their insights and ideas as my project unfolded. The thesis also owes a great deal to audiences at numerous workshops and conferences over the past two years where I have been lucky to present different chapters and receive insightful feedback. It is all the better for the commentary of colleagues at Duke, UC Davis, Princeton, Edinburgh, Madison, and the AAA. All flaws in the work are my own.

The Sri Lanka studies community has sadly suffered many losses over the past few years, and I acknowledge here two people who shaped this work in different ways: Mrs. Unamboowe, former director of the AISLS Colombo center, passed away shortly after I concluded my fieldwork. Her friendly demeanor, interest in my research and helpful recommendations during my time in Colombo are all remembered with great fondness. Vijay Nagaraj was tragically killed in a car accident in August 2017. I remember vividly social evenings at Vijay’s house in Colombo where I frequently left feeling I had a thousand new books I wanted to read, a million ideas to be worked out. Vijay’s ethical and intellectual commitments were admirable, and our discussions indirectly shaped some portions of this text. His passing has left an irreparable wound in the community of scholars, activists and intellectuals of Colombo.

I wrote significant chunks of this thesis while living in another hub city, Istanbul, and there I was lucky to find a community of scholars, readers, interlocutors and friends whose influence on my life and work I have a feeling will be present in my work for some time. Special thanks to Liz DeLuca, Suzie Ferguson, Matt Ghazarian, Jared Conrad-Bradshaw and Josef Wieland for their careful reading of my chapters and many excellent suggestions about both the content and process of writing the doctoral thesis. The bulk of this project has been written during one of the most challenging and turbulent times in my personal life. The friendship, kindness and support that I gained from each of you – and many other dear friends, scattered across the globe –during this past year have been tremendous.

I am proud to be the product of public institutions of higher learning at a moment in our capitalist conjuncture when many are sadly under threat. I am deeply grateful

for my time at UC San Diego, where I gained the courage to pursue my intellectual interests, no matter how broad they appeared to be, and for being first exposed to ethnography and critical theory at McGill University as a master's student. My PhD journey began with a year at the CUNY Graduate Center in the Department of Anthropology and I can say without hesitation or exaggeration that I was transformed by my experience there: intellectually and personally. At CUNY, I was fortunate to be part of one of the most impressive and welcoming cohorts of scholars, activists and friends I have ever encountered, and I doubt such an experience will be repeated again in my life: Alexandra Schindler, Matt Chrisler, Lindsay Parme, Zeynep Oguz, Cihan Tekay, Danya al-Saleh, Talisa Feliciano and Nabil Hussein taught me to think boldly and critically, to live my life honoring the intellectual and ethical commitments which are made in the classroom and outside of it. And to have fun while doing it.

Finally, I turn to my family. My parents, Filippo Radicati and Siranush Papazian, who explained to me when I was a child what a PhD was, supported me every step along the way as I struggled to get it. If I ever manage to achieve even half of what they have accomplished in their lives, I will consider myself quite fortunate. My father instilled in me the intellectual curiosity and love of learning that have shaped my entire life. My mother gave me the drive, ambition and courage to go after what I want, no matter how many doubts I may have. Lutz Haentzschel has always warmly provided his support and understanding.

I cannot adequately express how lucky I am to have two brilliant, hilarious, occasionally crazy, siblings - Elena and Francesco Radicati. Though we have often been separated by oceans and continents, our unique bond endures and I treasure it now more than ever. My brother was in many ways my first intellectual interlocutor, and I have always valued his insights and ideas, his profound curiosity. Elena has been my *nangi*, occasional flatmate, and constant WhatsApp correspondent throughout this process, and has been witness to the challenges and successes of the past few years to a degree paralleled only by my supervisors themselves. For putting up with me, calming me down, and watching terrible television with me always, I owe her everything.

My maternal grandmother, Bernardina Pugliese, was my biggest fan and most unwavering supporter from the time I was born. The memory of her pride in my education and her affection for me have sustained me through some of the darkest times in my life. She passed away shortly before I moved to London to begin this PhD and it is of profound sadness to me that I was not able to share the excitement this process with her. This work is dedicated to her. Her memory is a blessing.

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This map of Colombo depicting a satellite view of the city has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation

Image 1. Satellite View of Colombo, Source: Google Maps

This map of Sri Lanka depicting tourist sites has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation

Image 2. Map of Sri Lanka (Source: Sri Lanka Tourism Board)

INTRODUCTION: THE FUTURE IS NOW

“Through the renovation of cities, new political maps are drawn.” (Ong 2011:10).

The Galle Face Green would seem a logical place to begin any story about Colombo. An open, public space in the heart of the city that is bordered by the Indian Ocean, the Galle Face Green is one of Colombo’s iconic places. In the summer of 2009, long before I conducted the fieldwork that forms the basis of this dissertation, and only a few weeks after the end of the Sri Lankan civil war, I worked as an intern not far from Galle Face, at the US Embassy. Along with my Sri Lankan and American colleagues, a common practice was to close out the day by leaving the office and going for a walk at Galle Face to watch the sunset. It was often crowded with families, young couples and schoolchildren still in their uniforms. The wind always picks up this close to the water, and it would rumple your hair and sweep aside loose clothing, bringing with it the unmistakable saltiness of coastal air. Looking out at the vastness of the Indian Ocean from Galle Face, you might be rewarded with a beautiful sunset, if you were lucky and the weather cooperated. Another day over.

In those months immediately following the end of the civil war, the Galle Face Green was not yet free of the military infrastructures that had been set up to protect the area from attack. The uncertainty of hanging out on the Green rested not only on the chance of catching the sunset. It was also informed by the knowledge that there was still a Sri Lankan Army watchtower and base set up on the northern part of Galle Face. It was known that if a civilian walked too far in this direction, she would be alerted by sounds and gestures from the military service people keeping watch: my recollection of those summer evening walks was that we would

always start at the southern part of the Green and keep walking north, along the water, ever prepared for the sign that we had come too far. Perhaps it was just my imagination, but somehow I was convinced that the boundary between civilian and military space was never the same two days in a row: one could still be caught off guard at the sound of soldiers indicating that it was time to turn back.

Seven years later, in June 2016, I was concluding my ethnographic fieldwork in Colombo. On one of my last few days in the city, I had an appointment at the One Galle Face, the planned site of a luxurious new apartment building situated just on the other side of the main road from the Galle Face Green, which lends the new complex its name. By this time, the city's military checkpoints were largely a thing of the past and the watchtower once staffed by soldiers warning off pedestrians was empty. Taking an Uber from my accommodation in the southern part of Colombo, I arrived at the plush offices unsure of what to expect - I had asked to see the show apartment they advertised on their website, but was concerned my status as a student and researcher rather than a prospective buyer might make the staff less than enthusiastic about my presence. Inside the One Galle Face offices, I was greeted with a mix of warmth and puzzlement at my interest in the property, but attended to nonetheless. I was the only visitor on the premises. As I was shepherded through the complex and shown both miniature models of the planned luxury apartments as well as the life-sized show unit, I was struck by the juxtaposition of the highly detailed interiors of these luxury units, designed for an imaginary wealthy family, and the sight of workers, just on the other side of the glass windows, toiling in the sweltering midday sun.

At the conclusion of my visit to One Galle Face, I met with one of the marketing directors for the project. With a businesslike tone, she rapidly answered

my questions with the air of someone very practiced in these kinds of conversations. She told me the complex was scheduled to be completed in 2018, and explained the developers hoped buyers of the properties would be a mix of foreigners and locals - though she declined to give me further details. Gesturing in the direction of the ocean, towards the construction sites visible in the distance, I asked whether the developers were worried some of the other major projects springing up so close by would be a problem, either by competing with the One Galle Face for buyers, or by obstructing the ocean view their promotional materials so clearly emphasized as a perk of living in these apartments. “No, it won’t disrupt anything,” she told me brusquely. “Really?” I pushed her, finding it hard to believe. Exasperatedly, she closed the interview by responding that “this area has heritage value. It won’t ever change.”

I highlight my encounter with the One Galle Face complex and its staff because contrary to the words of the marketing director, it seems important to begin this study by remarking on just how much *has* changed in Colombo. As my own experiences of Galle Face Green make clear, the end of the Sri Lankan civil war has had very noticeable effects on the uses of urban space in Colombo. Though this dissertation focuses on ethnographic material collected and compiled after 2009, the implicit starting point for most of what is presented here is the end of the Sri Lankan civil conflict, which lasted for three decades and claimed many thousands of lives.¹ Many Sri Lankans, right up until the conflict came to its violent conclusion in May

¹ Exact figures of how many people were killed in the Sri Lankan civil war are highly controversial and hard to come by. Much of this stems from the intense controversy over the government’s responsibility for killing civilians in the No Fire Zone at the close of the conflict.

2009, could not imagine that the war would actually ever end. And yet, here we are: Sri Lanka now proudly declares itself a middle-income country, free of terrorism and conflict, and boasts a considerable tourism industry, new infrastructure projects and big plans for Colombo to become a global hub city. What was unimaginable for many people only ten or twenty years ago is now reality.

This study explores the processes and projects taking place in Colombo today which aim to build, secure and propagate specific visions of the future related to life in the Sri Lankan capital. The future is now: the civil war ended, and peace has held.² But the arrival of one future quickly gave rise to even more talk about different futures. The anxieties of wartime seem to have been replaced with different anxieties. The World Bank, for example, speaks of the “peace dividend” - economic growth and foreign investment brought on by the end of the conflict - but warns that “going forward, economic growth will likely require continued structural changes towards greater diversification and productivity increases” (World Bank, 2017). The changes that the World Bank highlights in its writing on Sri Lanka are the need to transition away from an agriculturally based economy to a service economy; the Bank celebrates the current government’s commitment to “promoting a globally competitive, export-led economy with an emphasis on inclusion...generating one million job opportunities, enhancing income levels, development of rural economies and creating a wide and strong middle class as key policy priorities” (World Bank 2017). The economic benefits brought on by the end of the war are often very quickly juxtaposed with mention of how Sri Lanka actually lags behind other Asian countries such as Vietnam, Thailand or Malaysia in critical

² It is important to note that this peace has come at a cost, and has also not meant that ethnic and religious tensions have been absent.

ways (Mills 2017, World Bank 2010). The end of the Sri Lankan civil war has in many ways improved life for people from all ethnic and religious communities; it has also given rise to a new focus on comparison and competition as politicians seek to make up for lost time and accelerate the country's development vis-a-vis neighboring countries.

Colombo is currently at the center of many of these discussions about Sri Lanka's future economic progress. As the main site of industry and commerce, and home to most of the country's corporate headquarters as well as the major maritime port, only functioning international airport, and a major railway station, "Colombo" often comes to stand metonymically for "Sri Lanka" in accounts of economic development (but not in terms of cultural "authenticity" - I will get to this later). Located on the western coast of the island, Colombo is Sri Lanka's largest city and capital. Home to roughly five million inhabitants when counting the entire metropolitan area, Colombo draws people from all over the country who migrate there for job opportunities. The service-based economy celebrated by the World Bank and many Sri Lankan politicians will undoubtedly be centered in Colombo as the city expands and seeks to attract ever more diverse forms of capital. Discussions about infrastructure in Sri Lanka often center on connecting Colombo to the rest of the island precisely because the unavoidable reality is that proximity to Colombo translates into greater economic opportunity (Asian Development Bank 2009, World Bank 2010). Importantly, the central neighborhoods of Colombo are also extremely diverse in ethnic, religious and class terms. Though surrounded by Sinhala-Buddhist suburbs and towns, Colombo's multi-ethnic, multi-confessional identity makes it an exceptional place.

Contemporary dynamics of urban development in Colombo both reinforce and depart from the island's postcolonial spatial politics. Power, money and influence being concentrated in Colombo is certainly nothing new, and dates back to the colonial era (Roberts 1989, Dharmasena 1989, Perera 2002). However, the post-independence period of Sri Lankan history was also characterized by a deep concern for rural development, as politicians vied increasingly for the support of (particularly Sinhala-Buddhist) populations outside Colombo. Mick Moore (1984) has categorized Sri Lanka along the lines of core, inner periphery, outer periphery, extreme periphery, and Jaffna. Colombo, unsurprisingly, is located in the "core" of Moore's schema, along with the rest of the western province. However, Moore also points to the fact that unlike other developing country economies, Sri Lanka had very low levels of rural-urban migration in the 1960s and 1970s (Moore 1984, 103); Sri Lanka's strong record of state-provided services such as education and healthcare for all played a significant role in making rural and village life relatively appealing (Moore 1984, 103). The current level of state involvement in marketing, beautifying and developing Colombo along the lines of other global cities thus represents a turn away from rural-focused, nationalized efforts at development and towards techniques of neoliberal governance which privilege cities as sites of commerce, wealth and knowledge (Brenner 2004, Ong 2006).

The spatial dynamics of three decades of civil war play a further role in forming the contemporary regional divisions and disparities in Sri Lanka. Though Colombo was affected by terrorist attacks and other forms of political violence beginning in the late 1970s until 2009, the city did not experience human suffering or destruction on the same level as the northern and eastern provinces, where most of the intense fighting between LTTE militants and the Sri Lankan Army took place.

During the 1990s, with the war still raging, most of the country's growth and economic prosperity was concentrated in the Western Province (where Colombo is located), which saw its share of national GDP increase from 40.2 percent to 49.4 percent in the period 1990-2000 (CBSL, various years). Postwar analyses estimate about 40 percent of GDP concentrated in the Western Province (CBSL, 2016). The North still lags far behind in virtually all human development indicators, which is unsurprising given that the population sustained nearly 30 years of civil war. However, while the distinction between quality of life and development in Colombo and the Northern Province could not be starker, spatial inequalities require more nuanced understanding. Colombo was exceptional not only in its high concentrations of wealth and share of GDP vis-a-vis the war-stricken Northern Province, but it was also exceptional compared with rural, predominately Sinhalese areas not very far away from the capital (Venugopal 2011), and when juxtaposed with the central Estate areas. In keeping with the general pattern of uneven development, the Western Province, while as a whole more prosperous than the rest of the island, also has higher levels of *internal* inequality than other provinces (Asian Development Bank 2009). Wealth and development are never far - spatially or temporally - from their opposites.

This ethnography attends to the way that dispossession and aspiration are deeply intertwined in contemporary Colombo. It argues that global city-building proceeds through the dispossession of the urban poor, and builds a case for examining aspirational sites of luxury and global connection alongside spaces of poverty and exclusion. Through chapters exploring the different sites and spaces of Colombo's rapid urban development, I offer an ethnographic examination of how urban elites and the urban poor experience this moment in wildly divergent ways.

The juxtaposition of coastal fishermen and Chinese developers, marketplace vendors and marketing professionals working to sell luxury apartments, offers us an important entry point for understanding Colombo today.

Uncertainty and *incompleteness* are thematic threads running through the whole of this manuscript, connecting the chapters on the urban poor and urban elites in ways that contrast with a purely class-based approach. While the juxtapositions of urban experience are significant, I also emphasize throughout this ethnography that the project of making Colombo into a global hub city is one that is fraught with political debate, delays, interruptions, and uneven results. Two of the four ethnographic chapters in this study emphasize the processes of dispossession which undergird the physical and symbolic transformation of Colombo. But, in the words of Abdou Maliq Simone, “the stories of the elite do not follow straight lines either” (2011, 112). Dispossession is a daily and ongoing occurrence in Colombo, yet the aspirations of even the wealthiest are shown to be shaky, often left unrealized, as I highlight in the remaining chapters. This manuscript highlights the contingent nature of the global city form.

As urban scholars increasingly turn attention to the study of “global cities” as well as the processes of global city-making, we see an increasing convergence of aesthetic standards, policy techniques and urban experiences. The story of cities around the world attempting to become global cities/world-class cities or “hub” cities seems familiar. And yet, while this ethnography explicitly and clearly uses the existing literature on global cities across the developing world to make sense of what is taking place in Colombo, it simultaneously makes an intervention into the study of global cities themselves. Rather than view the global city model as an inevitable, monolithic outcome of definite processes (gentrification, speculation, dispossession,

financialization, liberalization) the chapters in this thesis present the global city as a highly contingent urban form - one that has to be actively imagined and brought into being. The future represented by the global city is far from guaranteed.

Additionally, while the dream of achieving global city status includes numerous - sometimes eerie - similarities across diverse sites, I suggest that in each place the global city model is inflected with the specific dreams and histories of the people who labor to make it a reality. As my readers join me in this ethnographic exploration, I invite them to consider the future of Colombo not as foreclosed by a single urban vision, but rather as open with myriad possibilities.

Let me return to the Galle Face Green. The Galle Face Green is a place that “sits in the midst of intense temporal meanings” (Choy 2011: 38). That is to say, the Green conjures associations with Colombo’s past, present and future, often simultaneously. Relatedly, the Galle Face Green also offers an evocation of other places even as it is the quintessential public space of Colombo: as an informant of mine who recalled his childhood days playing at the Green in the 1970s put it, “I often compare it to Central Park in New York City.” As will be made clear in what follows, these temporal and geographic comparisons and cross-references play an important role in shaping how Colombo’s future is imagined.

This thesis is not “about” the Galle Face Green in any explicit or structured way, but Galle Face figures, in big and small ways, throughout this ethnography. The ethnographic vignettes I offered at the beginning of this introduction manage to be the perfect representation of the dynamics I explore in this dissertation: rapid urban development, often involving competing and overlapping construction projects; the emergence of increasingly extravagant and exclusive residence and

leisure spaces alongside the declining value of public spaces; and the uses and values of coastal land. All of these phenomena owe their existence to the end of the civil war and the de-militarization of space in Colombo; the removal of the military watchtowers on a prime piece of land like the Galle Face Green metaphorically and literally paves the way for the construction of a luxury complex like the One Galle Face.

Galle Face Green is the site of construction of the Colombo Port City project, which I describe in Chapter 2. The Green is a feature of the stories of the fishermen whom I introduce in Chapter 3. It both differs from and shares some important features with the new suite of public spaces inaugurated after the end of the civil war, one of which – the Pettah Floating Market – I study in depth in Chapter 4. And, naturally, its recent association with luxury real estate makes it relevant to my analysis of this topic in Chapter 5. Incidentally, Galle Face Green is also one of the few spaces in Colombo today that conjures not only different temporal meanings, but class meanings as well: though today it is often derided as a grimy hang-out spot for the city's working class and poorer residents, its photograph is frequently splashed across tour guides and magazines, and it remains a required stop on tourist itineraries of the city. Historically, the Galle Face Green was a site of elite Colombo culture and sporting events (Roberts 1989) and something of its elite tinge remains even today as most of the descendants of the old colonial era families, along with the nouveaux riches, prefer to spend their time indoors in the air-conditioned malls and hotel lobbies of central Colombo. As I have stated, the Galle Face Green is a logical place to begin any story about Colombo, precisely because it manages to be so central, both physically and metaphorically, to many Colombo residents' understandings of their city.

The stark juxtaposition of the cool interior of the One Galle Face with the laborers working just on the other side of the glass in the hot sun indexes some of the larger trends in Colombo's urban development. People of different classes are separated but close; luxury and labor appear as opposites but are, in fact, intimately intertwined. In the next section, I turn to a discussion of the dynamics of development and dispossession, examining how and why dispossession is so central to the process of global city-making.

Development and Dispossession

“Indeed, many ... are being actively dispossessed as part of the effort to build up a world city based on a speculative imaginary for world-city investors who may just stay away, and for world-city professionals who have yet to come.” (Goldman 2011, 577)

Recent studies of Global South cities have cast critical attention on the making of “world-class” urban centers (Ghertner 2015, Goldman 2013, Ong and Roy 2011, Harms 2012). Urban theory has historically been Eurocentric (Roy and Ong 2011), drawing on the experiences and histories of European and Northern cities to explain urban experiences throughout the world. But with the rise of cities like Dubai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangalore and Shanghai (to name a few) to increasingly important status in the global economy, it becomes clear that Global South cities must be not peripheral but *central* to our understandings of urban theory and urban politics. Despite some approaches which might characterize ours as an age (or a planet) of slums (Davis 2007), urban chaos and immiseration, the experiences of many developing country cities - particularly in Asia - have in fact been very different, characterized instead by strong state control and often by spectacular wealth and growing middle class populations. The rise of these Global South urban centers has been accompanied by trends such as increasing real estate speculation (Goldman

2011); the partitioning and securitization of urban spaces and the rise in middle class enclaves of separation from the rest of the urban landscape (Caldeira 2001); the degradation and devaluation of public spaces (Kaviraj 1997); increasingly classed and gendered modes of transport through urban space (de Koning 2009); and, often, the reliance of the urban poor on informal or improvisational techniques for survival (Simone 2004).

This thesis builds and expands on these scholarly conversations in the context of Colombo. One way in which the importance of the major Global South cities listed above becomes clear is through the relentless use of comparison and analogy to define what Colombo should be like. My research indicated that London, Sydney and New York were not the main focus of Colombo residents' urban aspirations - even if many of my middle class participants had family members living in these cities, or wished to migrate there themselves. Instead, my ethnographic observations reveal the enduring and powerful hold of cities like Singapore and Dubai in the Colombo imagination, a finding echoed in other Asian and African metropolitan settings (Ong and Roy 2011; Melly 2013). This manuscript delves into the specific ways that Colombo is being re-imagined, and re-shaped, in ways that aim to make it resemble cities like Dubai and Singapore. The stark divide between the way most people experience daily life in Colombo and how they imagine things to be in other aspirational city spaces is the driving force behind most current efforts to bring about change in the urban landscape. But how exactly does Colombo become like Dubai? What processes are required to make such a transformation possible?

My ethnography points to the ways that dispossession and urban development are intertwined in Colombo today. Following contemporary Marxist analyses which point to primitive accumulation not as an isolated, historical incident preceding

capitalist development but rather an *ongoing* process that constitutes part of everyday life under capitalism (Harvey 2004, Sanyal 2007, Li 2009, Glassman 2006), I understand dispossession as a pressing topic of continued relevance for making sense of the way that poor urban residents are marginalized and excluded from the prosperity that seems to abound in Colombo. What exactly is meant by dispossession? Because this term is so central to the rest of the dissertation, it behooves me to discuss it in some detail here.

In later chapters of *Capital* Volume 1, Marx introduces the concept of primitive accumulation as the “original sin” of capitalism, the process which allows capitalists to acquire labor and capital and sets in motion a process of shifting people from agricultural, rural, peasant economies to proletarian labor under capitalist conditions. David Harvey has famously rephrased “primitive accumulation” as “accumulation by dispossession” (2004) and demonstrates that the logic of accumulation by dispossession can be seen in multiple contemporary processes, from increasingly rapacious forms of speculative finance to intellectual property rights regimes to cultural commodification, and to “the corporatization and privatization of hitherto public assets (like universities) to say nothing of the wave of privatization of water and other public utilities that has swept the world, constitute a new wave of ‘enclosing the commons.’” (Harvey 2004: 75).

Following a long tradition of Marxist urban scholarship (eg. Harvey 2004, Elyachar 2005, Harms 2012, Smith 1984), this thesis focuses on dispossession in contexts both similar to and different from those envisioned by Marx himself, namely those happening within urban spaces - as opposed to those in which rural populations are forced to move to the city in order to become part of the proletarian workforce. The broadly similar dynamics present in urban spaces across the world

today, as listed above, include in many locations the eviction and relocation of the urban poor to create neighborhoods that aesthetically and infrastructurally match the idea of what a “global city” should look like. Colombo is no exception to this pattern. A small city with rapidly increasing land prices in the central districts, Colombo has been the stage for many mass evictions carried out since the end of the civil war in which poor urban residents - often part of multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities - have been moved from valuable land in the city center to housing projects constructed on the outskirts. Through the language of “beautification” and “slum clearance,” such acts are justified by pointing to the presence of low-income communities in central Colombo as an aberration, a result of poor planning, and thus something to be “corrected” by moving them to less valuable land. As Marx himself observed in *Capital*, the language of law and order is very effective in justifying dispossession.

Where I differ from some accounts of dispossession is in my focus on the fuzzy temporalities and unclear ends of dispossession as a tactic of capitalist urban development (Harms 2013). Following the insights of Tania Li (2009), I emphasize that dispossession and accumulation are often decoupled in Colombo. As will become clear in my chapters on the Pettah Floating Market and the Mutuwall fishing community, not all acts of dispossession in Colombo necessarily have an obvious aim, or can be properly said to accomplish the transformation of non-capitalist forms of sociality and economy into capitalist ones. In the case of the Floating Market vendors, for example, dispossession takes place by transferring small merchants from more lucrative spaces to a less successful one. With regards to the fishermen in Mutuwall, the actual moment of dispossession/eviction has not yet happened, rather it looms on the horizon as an imminent but not-fully-realized future. Both of these

cases point to the fact that building a “world class” city, transforming Colombo into a global hub, is an ongoing, messy process. It is *happening*, it is not complete - and may never be. It is this uncertainty, this unclear endpoint, which lends a further level of both injustice and possibility to the dynamics I describe. On the one hand, as in the case of the Floating Market, the relocation of vendors to accommodate projects that never happen and to place them in a space that is clearly not successfully attracting customers is a further reminder of the fact that forcing them from their original shops was a decision without much merit, as it hasn’t translated into any typical form of “successful” urban development. On the other hand, perhaps, the fact that the building of a global hub city is still ongoing may actually mean that certain possibilities are still open for challenging, resisting or more subtly negotiating the relationships between the state and urban citizens. Throughout this dissertation, I urge my readers to keep in mind that the results of Colombo’s post-war push for urban development are still far from final.

The ethnographic findings of this dissertation reveal a strong split between the aspirational images and future-oriented imaginaries of Colombo and present-day reality in the city. In videos, print, digital media, and in conversations, Colombo’s future is quite clearly envisioned as being that of a “global” city. What is remarkable in some ways is the *uniformity* of such images. Very little debate seems to take place about the end goals of these processes of urban development, even if the methods for achieving it may be subject to contestation. Despite the fact that the two major political parties, the SLFP and UNP, were engaged in two hotly contested elections during the period of my research, their agendas for Colombo’s future barely differed from one another. Equally striking is the fact that Colombo residents themselves rarely, if ever, question the idea that their city will one day be like Singapore or

Dubai. What appeared quite obvious to me as ethnographer - the enormous amount of labor, money, and political transformation that would be required to make this happen - was not a concern for most of my informants, whether they were poor, middle class, or wealthy.³

My ethnographic engagement with Colombo residents made me acutely aware of the power beautiful images of an urban future often have over urban dwellers from all walks of life. Echoing the observations of urban scholars like Erik Harms (2012), Asher Ghertner (2015), and Filip de Boeck (2011), I was often surprised by the extent to which the seemingly exclusionary talk of Colombo's future as a "global hub" actually appealed to many of the same people whom it seemed would be most negatively affected by these exact projects. For example, even though I met the fishermen in Mutuwall (introduced in Chapter 3) through social activists organizing them against the construction of the Colombo Port City project, I was surprised when, after several months of fieldwork in the community, an older fisher told me that despite his objections to the project it was important that fishers not be selfish, and "think only of their stomachs"; "if it is for the good of the country, then we must support it" he told me. In general, my field notes from this research are peppered with references to the surprising ways in which urban residents often accepted, or reacted ambivalently to, development plans that would lead to their eviction, loss of livelihood, or otherwise have deleterious impact on their daily lives. Dispossession of urban poor people becomes difficult to combat when the urban poor themselves see the appeal in the idea of a world-class city. In the next section of this

³ The only real critiques of Colombo's "global city" aspirations that I encountered on my fieldwork came from activists and clergy members who had been immersed in the Leftist struggles of the 1970s and 1980s and who used Marxism and Liberation Theology to criticize the current forms of urbanization.

introduction, I consider how the dynamics between the Sri Lankan state and citizenry have shaped the way Colombo's development is unfolding.

State, Citizens and Urban Development

The Sri Lankan state plays a critical role in conceptualizing, implementing and managing urban development in Colombo. Despite some analyses which might suggest the lessening importance of the state under contemporary neoliberal conditions, my ethnography reiterates the findings of many scholars, particularly those working in Asia, who emphasize the enduring importance of the state and statehood as opposed to its decline (Ghertner 2015, Ong 2006, Brenner 2004). The Sri Lankan state is a major actor in both nation-wide development and in the attempts to make Colombo a global hub.

Sri Lanka has a long history of social democratic welfare policies and state interventions which have benefitted the population at large. However, the population often imagined in such efforts was the majority Sinhala-Buddhist rural population, to the exclusion of other minority ethnic and religious groups. Spatially, this has had real implications for how a map of Sri Lanka might be drawn, and how the island territory is understood. The need to appeal to a rural, peasant, Sinhala-Buddhist majority population means that areas outside Colombo were often targeted for development projects (Lynch 1999, Brow 1990). However, questions of territory and people are rarely straightforward; Sri Lanka is not only home to Sinhala-Buddhists, and the northeastern edges of the primarily Sinhalese 'core' (Moore 1984) border areas of the country long inhabited by Tamils and Muslims, ethnic and religious "others" to the nationalist imaginaries which took hold following Sri Lankan independence. Projects like the ambitious Mahaweli Development Scheme

initiated in the 1980s were ways for the state to push Sinhalese farmers into peripheral areas, causing many to view it as a form of internal colonization (Tennekoon 1988). The civil war itself primarily raged in areas far from the capital; both in terms of development and security, the view of the Sri Lankan state was, for many decades, trained on the hinterlands.

The focus on developing Colombo into a world-class or global hub city represents a fundamentally new way for the Sri Lankan state to “see” (Scott 1998) the territory under its control, and there are still tensions between different visions. The focus on building up a capital city as a site of wealth accumulation, foreign investment and luxury mirrors the worldwide trend away from the “spatial Keynesianism” of the mid-20th century (Brenner 2004) to the contemporary realities of neoliberal conditions in which cities are privileged as nodes of wealth in broader transnational networks (Sassen 2001, Ong 2006). In Sri Lanka, specific historical representations and understandings of identity make the focus on Colombo notable. Colombo has long been associated with moral, ethnic and religious impurity (Lynch 1999, Spencer 2015) and it still behooves Sri Lankan politicians to invoke ideas of rural or peasants roots in appealing to the population (Wickremasinghe 2009). And yet, despite the cultural importance of peasant-ness as a legible and sympathetic identity, the renewed focus on Colombo’s development as an *economic* engine for the Sri Lanka is undeniable.

Given the context of a state which historically provided ample healthcare, education and other social services to citizens, the “declarations of dependence” (Ferguson 2013) articulated by many of the urban poor in Colombo are hardly surprising. As discussed above, urban residents frequently comply with and accept government projects that often seem to negatively impact their lives and livelihoods.

In conversations with my informants in Colombo, it became abundantly clear that the state was an ever-present, even intimate presence in people's lives. "He ended the war and I thank him every day for that," a middle class housewife in Colombo 5 told me one day, speaking of former President Mahinda Rajapakse as we sat on her verandah drinking tea. "They're changing everything, we don't know what they'll do next!" exclaimed another woman I interviewed, when I asked her about the various road construction and improvement projects dotting her neighborhood in the southern part of the city. "He", "they" and other intimate pronouns were often used in place of proper names of politicians or government agencies. For the less well-off among my informants - notably the fishermen I encountered in northern Colombo and the marketplace vendors at the Pettah Floating Market - the state was invoked in similar terms of familiarity and closeness as even as these groups complained that "they" should be doing more to help them, to help them out of poverty.

Readers will note that one of the more striking absences in this ethnography is any kind of municipal level governing body. My account of urban development unfolding in Colombo today reveals the extent to which urban residents framed and understood the changes happening in the urban environment around them as the direct result of national level *state* policies. The Urban Development Authority (UDA), was usually the agency responsible for implementing these changes. But as a sub-agency of the national-level Ministry of Defense and Urban Development, initially headed by former President Rajapakse's brother, the UDA is not equivalent to a locally-elected urban governing body. Though there is a Mayor of Colombo and municipal councils do exist, the fact that none of my informants regularly mentioned these institutions in repeated interviews and conversations speaks volumes about how scales of power and authority are understood in Colombo today.

The very name of the Ministry of Defense and Urban Development indicates the link between the post-conflict moment and the project of urban development. As I describe in subsequent chapters, the end of the civil war was seen as a major opportunity for Sri Lanka to attain the development which had eluded it throughout its postcolonial history. “We’d be like Malaysia now, if it weren’t for the war,” a Sri Lankan acquaintance who worked for the US Embassy told me once. The idea that the postwar moment represented a valuable chance to get “back on track” was echoed by the Sri Lankan government itself, which in 2009, the end of the war, was headed by President Mahinda Rajapakse. Eschewing any kind of political settlement with the LTTE, Rajapakse brought the civil war to a decisive but bloody end, obliterating the Tigers once and for all. In 2010, his brother Gotthabaya presided over the creation of the new Ministry, which was widely criticized for its heavy-handed, militarized approach to development. Mass evictions of urban residents were the norm in the years following the end of the war, and both in and outside of Colombo, the government was roundly critiqued for using Sri Lankan Army soldiers to carry out the work of development.

In January 2015, to the surprise of most Sri Lankans and the rest of the world, Mahinda Rajapakse was unexpectedly ousted in a peaceful democratic transition which saw Ranil Wickremasinghe, former prime minister and leader of the opposition, come to power together with Maithripala Sirisena, a defector from Rajapakse’s own camp. Later chapters detail more carefully how this political transition was experienced by informants, and how it impacted various projects of urban development. However, here I wish to highlight the fact that the transition in *government* did not necessarily represent a shift in *state* involvement in the process of transforming Colombo into a global hub city. While the new government appeared

to change directions on a few specific projects (most notably the Colombo Port City, which I address in Chapter 2), it too employed the language of the global hub in laying out visions for Colombo's future. The Sirisena-Wickremasinghe government eventually created a new ministry, the Ministry of Megapolis and Western Development, which ultimately incorporated many of the same projects into its plan for Colombo. At no point was the state's role in urban development questioned, rather it took on different forms and names.

Moving Around and Staying Still: Methodological Reflections

This thesis is based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Colombo between October 2014 and June 2016, with the majority of the research taking place over the course of the year 2015. By immersing myself in Colombo life over a considerable period of time, I was able to gain an appreciation for how urban residents experienced and made sense of development projects and political change as they unfolded. For example, through my long-term ethnographic engagement with Colombo, I witnessed not only the hopeful aftermath of the January 2015 election but also the many months of uncertainty following it, as Sri Lankans waited to hear when subsequent parliamentary elections would take place, and who would emerge victorious. This kind of immersion in the rhythms of city life over a long period of time allowed me to grasp processes that would otherwise have been unavailable to me had I merely conducted targeted interviews, focus groups, or surveys.

My research did not focus on a single community, population, or urban neighborhood. Rather, my interest lay in tracing processes of urban development and the kinds of discussions and debates these processes engendered. As such, this

is a multi-sited ethnography that unfolds through engagement with numerous different places in the city of Colombo where I found such conversations to be particularly pressing and relevant. Four sites/topics in particular form the core of this study: 1) the Colombo Port City project; 2) the fishing community in Mutuwall (northern Colombo); 3) the Pettah Floating Market and 4) luxury real estate development. The chapters of this dissertation are arranged according to these sites/topics. However, as my chapters also make clear, I find it most instructive not to look at these as discrete, bounded, isolated “examples,” which individually represent a larger trend in Colombo’s urban development. Rather, my ethnography points to the overlapping, blurry, sometimes confusing ways in which these various sites are connected. For instance, the fishermen at Mutuwall are directly impacted by the Colombo Port City project, and initially many of my conversations with them focused on this issue. However, it was only through repeated visits to the neighborhood and deepening relationships with specific informants that I came to see how many other things were actually happening in the area. Most memorably, as I explain in Chapter 3, I initially approached the Mutuwall fishing community as one being negatively impacted by the Port City project. It was only after conducting fieldwork there for some time that I discovered the fishers were in fact living under the threat of eviction by state agencies, a process which had begun before - and would likely continue independently of - the Port City construction.

It is worth remarking that the portions of the dissertation dealing with the urban poor are also those that are most clearly anchored in specific *places*, while the portions focused on elite visions of Colombo are more about tracing *conversations*, *ideas* and *concerns*. When I wanted to speak with one of the fishermen or market vendors, I knew exactly what to do: I would get in a three-wheeler, bus, or taxi and

travel to their neighborhood, hoping to find them in their usual spot. It usually worked. By contrast, when my research called for a meeting with a business executive, an urban planner or government official, I often had to go through the time-intensive process of getting their phone number or email address (usually by asking around to see if a contact I already had could give me this information), and typically had to make repeated attempts to reach the person in question. Once they agreed to meet me, I might meet them in any number of places (their office, a restaurant or one of the major hotels), and almost always had to do so at their convenience - that is, I knew that these informants were busy, often meeting me between other obligations, and I was lucky to catch them at all.

This simple description of how I contacted different informants makes uncomfortably vivid a seeming distinction between the urban poor as anchored in place and the urban middle classes and elites as freed from the constraints of locality - mobile, flexible and always traveling. I say *seeming* because of course such a distinction is misleading: poverty does not stop mobility, in fact it often encourages it. As I allude to in my chapters on these low-income communities, many of the urban poor in Colombo have their own forms of connection to other places, their own histories and patterns of migration, their own cosmopolitanisms. By the same token, elites too belong to places and neighborhoods, congregate in specific locations, and are rooted in local histories. I do not wish to overstate the divide between elite mobility and working-class stasis. However, the difference in the ways that my wealthier and poorer informants emerge in this text - and the way in which I engaged with them in the course of my research - speaks, I believe, to some interesting facts about how Colombo is developing.

The idea of Colombo as a “global hub” (which I discuss in detail in Chapter 1) implicitly conjures images of movement, circulation and mobility. But the kind of hubness that official discourse about Colombo celebrates is not the kind in evidence on crowded flights to the Gulf states, for instance, where hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankans are employed as laborers, nannies, housemaids, drivers or other working class professions. Desired hubness is implicitly that of the elites. As I make clear in the subsequent chapters of this ethnography, the conflation of mobility and “hubness” with elite or middle class identities has profound implications for the kind of development taking place in Colombo today.

By looking at Colombo more broadly, neither from the perspective of an individual neighborhood or specific project, I sometimes worried that I was missing out on the experience of conducting more “traditional” ethnography. I was concerned that I moved around too much, and stayed still too little. Very few ethnographies I have encountered offer candid descriptions that match my experiences of zooming around the city frantically trying to meet an informant before the onset of traffic, of being in multiple neighborhoods all on the same day, traversing Colombo from north to south, and crossing over between distinct ethnic, religious and class spaces all in the space of a few hours.⁴

However, any ethnography is also a product of the circumstances in which it is produced; the multi-sited nature of my own study, its broad focus on processes and conversations about development, reflects the fact that while I was doing my fieldwork, it was truly impossible to focus on only one place, or one project happening in Colombo. My sometimes jarring experiences of moving fast and

⁴ Of course, my ability to do this was contingent upon many factors including my income, flexible schedule and whiteness. It was made more difficult by my gender and age.

getting stuck, of chasing, rushing, changing course, allowed me to grasp the jagged contrasts between different realities that I attempt to highlight in this thesis. Rather than conforming to common journalistic tropes in writing about Global South cities in which the lifestyles of rich and poor are superficially juxtaposed for western readers, my aim in drawing out these contrasts is to inquire more deeply into ways that aspirational projects and dispossession are intertwined in the project of building a global hub city.

My wider perspective on Colombo's development allowed me to see that the change in government had, in some ways, had very little impact on the actual substantive work of urban development. As I show at various points throughout this manuscript, the goals and plans of the new 2015 government and those of the Rajapakse government were remarkably similar. The drive to create a world-class city (Ghertner 2015), a global hub attracting wealthy tourists and foreign investors, was larger than any single political party or leader.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, my approach to research reflects the fact that over the course of 2015 in Sri Lanka, no one - not even the experts in government agencies, NGOs, or international institutions - really knew what was going on. And, even more importantly, very little work was actually occurring; as I discuss in my chapter on the Colombo Port City project, for example, the change in government led to long period of stasis in which even high up people at the UDA, within the CHEC, etc. did not know what was actually happening. The ethnographic method, by definition, involves the researcher's immersion into the world of her informants and sites. I was just as confused as everyone else in Colombo about what was going to happen with regards to national politics, urban development and foreign policy. Like my informants of all classes and ethnicities, I was frequently

caught up in the confusion of the moment, in which talk of the future was ample but understanding of the present seemed out of reach. In each of my chapters, these tensions between future vs. present and official knowledge vs. on-the-ground realities are explored more deeply.

Chapter Summaries

This thesis contains five chapters. Four of the chapters are associated with one of the sites or topics which formed the basis of my multi-sited ethnography. The remaining chapter is a conceptual exploration of the implications of Sri Lanka's aspirations to hub city status. Because the chapters do not proceed temporally but rather are organized by site, readers will note that timelines and events described in each often overlap. In some cases the events described at one site are interpreted and recounted differently at another.

In **Chapter 1**, "The Politics of Hubness," I provide a discursive analysis of the way that Colombo is symbolically imagined as an emerging hub city in the Asia-Pacific region. Drawing on media reports, politicians' speeches and blog posts, I show the persistence of hub imagery in representing Sri Lanka's postwar future *and* its cosmopolitan past. Based on these and scholarly debates about Sri Lankan history, I offer a lens for reading Sri Lankan history as one of (dis)connection. I explore the way that Colombo and Sri Lanka's location form the basis for hubness discourse, and show that what often appear to be straightforward accounts of geographical "facts" are often political moves which in fact serve to frame Sri Lanka's future as linked with an "Indian Ocean" identity rather than a more narrow conception of Sri Lanka as belonging to "South Asia." Such geographical reframings are in fact laden with significance, as they suggest different *futures* linked to distinct

spatial locations. Whereas a South Asian identity becomes understood as provincial and lacking, an Indian Ocean or broadly “Asian” identity instead is construed as a sign of progress, wealth and development. Hubness, therefore, is both a spatial and temporal claim.

The Colombo Port City project is the basis of **Chapter 2**. Informed by my ethnographic engagement with anti-Port City activists, middle class Colombo residents, government officials and corporate representatives of the Chinese corporation funding the project, I discuss the Port City controversy surrounding the project and the debates it engendered about Sri Lankan sovereignty. The Port City controversy revealed different forms of nationalism at play among my informants. Ultimately, both the uncertainty surrounding the specifics of the Colombo Port City project *and* the new forms of nationalism it seems to have elicited highlight the fact that the transformation of Colombo into a hub city in the Indian Ocean region is a fraught and uncertain process. Hubness does not proceed smoothly, but rather can be interrupted at various points.

The Colombo Port City has major implications for the fishing community I introduce in **Chapter 3**. The slow, messy process of dispossession of the fisher community in Mutuwall offers new ways of thinking dispossession in general, not as a clear linear process with defined outcomes, but rather as a complex and occasionally contradictory set of intersecting moments, plans and projects. My ethnographic engagement with the fishermen of Mutuwall suggests new ways of thinking the temporalities and spatialities of emerging global cities. The presence of the fishermen, I argue, troubles both Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist *and* liberal cosmopolitan perspectives which would assume the strict division of village and city life. Rather than relegating the fishermen to the role of provincial pre-capitalist

subjects, this chapter considers the possibility of a politics of “coequality” (Choy 2011) which acknowledges the simultaneous (coeval) existence of different forms of labor and life in the heart of a global city.

Chapter 4 shifts its focus away from the Colombo coastline to another neighborhood of the city, Pettah, where I explore a new but unsuccessful public space opened by the previous government and occupied by primarily working class vendors who were relocated (against their will) into the new marketplace. In this chapter, I ask what it might mean when global city plans and projects go awry. My ethnographic engagement with the marketplace vendors highlights that confinement - feeling trapped in the unsuccessful and economically unviable space of the Pettah Floating Market - is central to the experiences of the urban poor who have been relocated by the former government. This provides a sharp contrast with the ideals of “hubness” which emphasize mobility and smooth movement of people and commodities.

Chapter 5 turns attention to the phenomenon of luxury real estate development in Colombo. With skyrocketing land prices and ongoing construction visible everywhere in central Colombo, real estate is a topic of everyday conversation and interest. My analysis focuses on the incomplete, partial nature of luxury buildings and what they represent, and on the behind-the-scenes labor of those who work in this field. I suggest that the luxury real estate boom in Colombo is best understood as an ongoing and deeply uncertain project, an example of what Arjun Appadurai refers to as “dreamwork” (2015). By highlighting problems such as potential oversupply of luxury units and widespread fears of an impending economic crash, this chapter underscores that the aspirations and optimistic projections of developers are far from becoming reality.

CHAPTER 1: THE POLITICS OF HUBNESS

When I was conducting my fieldwork in Colombo, Sri Lanka, the atmosphere was alive with talk of location. Government officials, business people, media sources all seemed to be repeating the same refrain: “Sri Lanka is positioned to become a global hub,” or “a regional hub” or “a gateway to South Asia.” The notion of Sri Lanka as a site of exchange, flow and transit – as a node in a larger network, a connecting point between some places and other places – was emerging as both an understanding of the current state of affairs and a wish for the future. Colombo becoming a global hub, I soon realized, was an idea that had to do not only with leveraging its location in the middle of the Indian Ocean, but it was also about conjuring an aspirational vision of the future. In this chapter I develop an idea which I refer to as “the politics of hubness.” By using this term I highlight the contested, uncertain and ongoing nature of these diverse claims and imaginaries of Sri Lanka and Colombo as global “hubs.” My interest lies not in assessing whether or not Colombo is or can actually become an international hub, but rather in interrogating how and why this vision is so powerful to many residents of the city, and to politicians, businesspeople and planners.

Hubness is both a spatial and temporal claim. In acknowledging both elements of aspirations towards hubness, the temporal introduces contingency into our understanding of the spatial. After all, the center of the world is a relative concept: today’s center may be tomorrow’s periphery and vice versa. The intense desire to make Colombo a hub city rests on referencing and recalling the success of cities like Singapore and Dubai that have achieved the indicators and benchmarks of development which many people in Colombo see as beautiful dreams. Hubness speaks to a certain vision of the future, a vision which borrows heavily from the

already-existing present of other places. This is tied up with the relentless optimism which characterizes much journalistic and policy discourse on the emergence of Asian cities and economies, the repeated assertion that we are entering a so-called “Asian century.” As urban theorist Ananya Roy has pointed out with regards to this notion of an “Asian century,” temporality comes to matter in new ways: “instead of positioning the Asian century as the future, or even as one vector in the multiplicity of capitalism’s futures...futuraity itself becomes a mode of governing (Roy 2016: 318). In other words, to say that hubness is both a spatial and temporal claim is to acknowledge that aspirational imaginings of Colombo and Sri Lanka draw not only on the seemingly self-evident and immutable fact of its location, but also on a specific vision of the future.

Hubness as a concept connects different sites and topics across the city of Colombo, including the ones that form the bases of subsequent chapters in this dissertation. The Colombo Port City project, the relocation of coastal communities, the failure of new public spaces to draw visitors and the troubles faced by the luxury real estate industry, all represent, in different ways, the possibilities and limits of hubness. The Port City and the luxury real estate phenomenon both rely on aspirational ideas about Sri Lanka’s importance in the Asia-Pacific/Indian Ocean region, and on the supposed “inevitability” of foreign visitors and commercial connections as sources of wealth and progress. By contrast, the ramshackle fishing shanties of northern Colombo or the empty and dilapidated spaces of Pettah represent forms of connection that are less valued. The people who live and work in these spaces are deemed “quintessential locals” (Subramanian 2009) and assumed to be insufficiently cosmopolitan vis-a-vis the grander ambitions of politicians, the middle class and elites. However, connections of other kinds exist. As I show in the

chapters corresponding to these sites, the urban poor have their own forms of connection which escape the gaze of zealous planners. And there are other forms of local, trans-island connection that matter. A neighborhood like Pettah carries with it negative associations of poverty and crime, but it also functions as an important locus of commerce and trade for the whole island - people and commodities from the rest of Sri Lanka travel to and from Pettah, connecting it with the world beyond Colombo.

Connection itself is both highly politicized and an object of intense longing and desire. For many of my middle and upper class informants, Colombo's former greatness was expressed through the number of residents who claimed European heritage (either Europeans born abroad who had come to Sri Lanka, or burghers), and through its shipping links with other cities in Asia. People often shook their heads in wonderment at the idea that they used to go to Jaffna or other parts of formerly LTTE-controlled territory for weekend getaways. Connection and mobility were things many people I came to know actively aspired towards, or they were powerful memories of better times in the pre-war past. The end of the war represented not only the beginning of a better future, but specifically a better future that might reinstate some of the more pleasant memories of the past. The influx of foreign tourists to Sri Lanka was seen as a hopeful sign that some measure of peace and normalcy had returned; on the other hand, this flow was unidirectional, and many of my informants would very much have liked to make the reverse journey, from Sri Lanka to somewhere far away like Australia, Europe or North America, in search of a better life. Connection exists not only through material links, but also through imaginative labor that values and celebrates certain kinds of connections over others.

There are some key questions that I invite readers to keep in mind as they read through this chapter, and also through the dissertation as a whole. Rather than present concrete answers, I introduce these questions here as a source of tension that help frame and add complexity to our understanding of the idea of hubness. The first question concerns the difference between global/international and domestic/local hubs. How can we think about the relationship between Colombo's externally-oriented hubness (I.e., as a peer of Dubai or Singapore) and its internally oriented hubness as Sri Lanka's major city and capital of commerce, finance, education and political institutions (I.e. a peer of Kandy, Galle and Jaffna)? The second question has to do with inequality. Who or what gets left out of narratives about Colombo becoming a global hub? What subjects and relationships are privileged by such a narrative, and what might be erased? Finally, a third question relates to academic knowledge production and challenges a hard distinction between theoretical work and policy: how might we think about the occasions in which the work of scholars actually dovetails with and supports the efforts of policy-makers? Specifically, how might a newfound interest in Sri Lanka's connected-ness on the part of geographers, historians and anthropologists be taken up in ways that reinforce or lend credence to specific regimes of development, geopolitics and trade? In other words, what is at stake in our understandings of Sri Lanka's (dis)connectedness?

This chapter proceeds by offering a way of reading Sri Lankan history as that of (dis)connection. I discuss recent historiographical debates on how Ceylon/Sri Lanka came to be understood as a distinct, self-contained entity separate from India, and suggest that connection and separation be viewed as lenses through which to understand *all* phases of recent Sri Lankan history. I then seek to ask two important questions about Colombo: *where* is it? And *when* is it (Roy 2016)? In answering

these questions, I address the spatial and temporal facets of hubness. I problematize geography, showing that the issue of Sri Lanka's location, far from a simple assessment of its physical arrangement in space, is in fact an intensely political one. Different actors might thus answer the question "where is Colombo?" in very different ways. I interrogate both middle class nostalgia and planners' optimistic projections for the future as a way of addressing the question of *when* Colombo is, showing that the city's temporality is uniquely tied up with questions of what might have been had history proceeded differently. Finally, I consider the different scales and scopes of Colombo ambitions to be both a global and national level hub.

There is some slippage between "Colombo" and "Sri Lanka" in this chapter. The difficulty of separating out these terms and what they represent is a testament to the way the politics of hubness plays out in day-to-day life. Within Sri Lanka, Colombo is understood as a unique space, often seen as exceptional - that is, no one would consider Colombo representative of the cultural, political or economic life of the rest of the country. And yet, the enthusiastic projections of real estate developers and government officials often elide the differences between "Colombo" and "Sri Lanka." Promotional materials celebrating new infrastructure projects or plans for urban development frequently alternate between claims that the project in question will be good for *Colombo* and the idea that these things will make *Sri Lanka* a hub. In other words, the politics of hubness includes many acts of erasure: erasure of Sri Lankan realities outside of the major city, and also erasure of that within Colombo that does not fit with a more internationally-minded vision of hubness. As understandings of Sri Lanka's place in the world zoom out from South Asia to emphasize its connections with a more expansive notion of the Indian Ocean/Asia Pacific region, what lies outside Colombo on this small island disappears from view.

My aim in this chapter is to offer another way of seeing that might hold in sight both Colombo's relationship to a world outside of Sri Lanka, and to the rest of the island on which it stands.

Histories of (Dis)Connection

Sri Lanka's history can be read as a history of connection and disconnection. One of the central contentions of this section and this chapter as a whole is that in fact *all* of the phases and periods of recent Sri Lankan history carry with them certain associations about the level of connected-ness and cosmopolitanism of the island, or associations with the opposite: times of disconnection, provincialism and inward-lookingness. By reading the history of Sri Lanka as a history of (dis)connection, I offer a way of understanding the history of the entity known as "Sri Lanka" that rubs up against both academic narratives and nationalist rhetoric. To read Sri Lankan history as a history of (dis)connection is not to privilege either connection or disconnection as more important; it is not to label certain moments, places or people as uniformly "provincial" or "cosmopolitan." Rather, it is to look at the tensions between these forms of disconnection and connection as they play out in different moments.

Roughly speaking, the history of Sri Lanka is typically thought of as the pre-colonial, the colonial, the post-independence, civil war and post-war eras. It is obvious in the use of terms like "pre-colonial" and "colonial" that some form of connection beyond Sri Lanka's contemporary borders becomes important for delineating historical phases. But European contact and colonization is of course not the only story of connection that matters. Migration of people and commodities between Sri Lanka and India, for example, is one of the defining features of the island's pre-colonial history (Roberts 1980), and one that remains important in later

moments as well. Religious linkages have brought Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians in Sri Lanka into dialogue with co-religionists across the world for centuries. Linguistic similarities between South Indian Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils have facilitated political imaginaries of a unified Tamil-speaking world. Connection includes but is not limited to the colonial encounter, even as colonial understandings of Ceylon/Sri Lanka materially and symbolically played a role in which connections were encouraged, and which were discouraged (Sivasundaram 2013, Jazeel 2009).

The colonial period offers both a history of connection and active disconnection. After the British consolidated rule of the island by conquering the Kingdom of Kandy in 1815 - something their Dutch and Portuguese predecessors had been unable to do - the inclusion of Ceylon in a colonial network of trade, administration and knowledge production was secured. The shifts in Ceylon's economy from coffee to tea cultivation, for example, are not understandable without grasping its wider place in the Empire. Circuits of power and knowledge firmly placed Ceylon in contact with London, but also with the West Indies and other colonized locations in Asia and Africa (Roberts 1989, Wenzlhuemer 2007); Colombo, increasingly gaining importance over Galle and Kandy, became a significant imperial port city sharing lines of communication, commerce and capital with cities like Singapore, Rangoon and Madras (Frost 2002).

However, to focus exclusively on colonial *connections* may obscure the importance of colonial *disconnections*. British rule over the entirety of the island of Ceylon did not only involve connecting it to wider networks; it also involved active, concerted efforts to sever ties between Ceylon and its neighbors, reifying a long-held European vision of the island as a unified but also exceptional entity naturally

distinct from the rest of the region. Scholars of Sri Lanka have, recently, begun questioning this set of assumptions about Sri Lanka (Jazeel 2009, Sivasundaram 2013, Spencer 2014). As Jonathan Spencer asks, “how did Sri Lanka get to drift away from the land mass to which it seems so almost-attached? Indeed why is Sri Lanka a separate place, a different country, a different anthropology?” (2014: 2). The land mass to which Spencer refers is India, which in the opening of his essay he points out is “missing” from maps of Sri Lanka. Spencer’s question asks not only about land mass and political institutions, but also about knowledge production (“a different anthropology”) of Sri Lanka.

In his historical study of British colonial rule in Sri Lanka, Sujit Sivasundaram offers some answers to Spencer’s question. As suggested by the title, *Islanded*, Sivasundaram’s monograph posits “islanding” as an active *process* rather than assuming Sri Lanka’s inherent separation from the South Asian mainland. Governed by the British Crown rather than the East India company, there were political and economic motivations for keeping India and Sri Lanka separate in the 19th century, along with actual material efforts to separate the two landmasses by dredging the channel between Sri Lanka and its northern neighbor (Sivasundaram 2013: 14). As Sivasundaram puts it: “To understand ‘islanding’ it is important not to take the physical geography of islands at face value, or to assume that the localness and boundedness of the island is natural” (2013: 25). To represent Sri Lanka as an “island” then is not simply to recite simple facts, but to implicitly emphasize certain aspects of what both the terms “Sri Lanka” and “island” can possibly represent. The colonial emphasis on Sri Lanka’s island-ness brings to the fore attributes such as

isolation and uniqueness, cementing its status as a “laboratory” (Sivasundaram 2013) for various experiments of colonial rule.⁵

While Sivasundaram’s argument is particularly memorable for its demonstration that separation was a key technique of British rule, he - along with other historians - does not neglect the importance of specific forms of colonial *connection*. Much of this connection hinged on the importance of Indian labor fanning out through the British Empire in the 19th and 20th centuries. For example, Ceylon was one of the few locations for which Indian labor migration remained “free,” meaning that workers could migrate there without regulation or interference from the British authorities (who put in place such regulations for other destinations of Indian labor) (Wenzlhuemer 2007). At one point, there was even a ferry system established by the Government of Ceylon to facilitate the passage of laborers from India to the island (Wenzlhuemer 2007); this stands in stark contrast with the efforts to dredge the channel to create greater physical separation between the two. Institutionally and politically, Ceylon was distinct from India in that it was already governed as a crown colony while India still lay under control of the East India Company. In this way, Ceylon was different from India, but shared important commonalities with other crown colonies like Mauritius and the Cape Colony. As Sivasundaram observes, Indian labor and “imperial careering and traveling also linked Mauritius, the Cape, and Ceylon” (2013: 25).

This discussion of Sri Lanka’s colonial history helps illuminate the importance of a history of (dis)connection. As the preceding discussion

⁵ In an earlier article on the subject of Sri Lanka’s island-ness, geographer Tariq Jazeel makes many points similar to those advanced by Sivasundaram, however he also warns against viewing the colonial vision of Sri Lanka as a unified, separate entity as overly dependent on British rule and the overthrow of the Kandy Kingdom in 1815. Drawing on sources from American and British travelers to the island before 1815, he skillfully shows that even pre-1815 western visions of the island heavily implied an understanding of Ceylon that assumed it to be a unified entity.

demonstrates, connections and separations of various kinds interrupt, overlap and compete with one another. The island land mass of Ceylon became imagined and visible as distinct - but its inclusion in the British Empire facilitated important connections of labor and commerce. The connections formed, however, did not only tie Ceylon to India, its geographic neighbor, but to other much farther away colonies and crown possessions. All of this is facilitated and shaped by the increase in informational and communications links which emerged as highly important across the British Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Frost 2002).

Thinking carefully about (dis)connection allows for different interpretations of more recent and contemporary Sri Lankan issues. For example, if one takes the civil war period (1983 to 2009), a common-sense interpretation is to see the hostilities between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government as exemplifying a moment of profound disconnection. Political violence and human suffering led many Tamils as well as remaining Sri Lankan citizens of European descent (including Burghers) to leave the country *en masse*, never to return (Daniel 1996, Thiranagama 2011 and 2014). Tourism to Sri Lanka plummeted as foreigners began to doubt their safety. To many, the civil war represents a time of total isolation in which Sri Lanka lost many of its most cosmopolitan, well-educated citizens, and failed to attract much positive interest from the outside world. This view of the civil war as a disconnecting moment is reinforced by contemporary discourse on Sri Lanka, for instance in tourist industry marketing materials that describe Sri Lanka as “emerging” or “opening up” after decades of violence. However, it is also possible to look at the civil war as a moment of profound *connection*, albeit of a different and less hopeful kind. The political struggle of the LTTE for all its violence did propose a vision of connection with a world of Tamil speakers beyond the island of Sri Lanka

(Jazeel 2009). The civil conflict also led Sri Lanka to be inserted into circuits of humanitarian aid, peace building efforts and disaster management that carry a different kind of importance; the Rajapakse government's crackdown on foreign NGOs and demand that UN agencies evacuate the north at the closing stages of the war can then be seen as a violent displacement of one form of connection in favor of the more "global" aspirational connections brought on by the end of the war.

(Dis)connection as a lens through which to understand questions of politics and development in Ceylon/Sri Lanka makes an understanding of Colombo more urgent and necessary, highlighting the coastal capital's role as both a symbol or metonym for Sri Lanka as an entirety, but also its actual, material importance as a place that is dense with connections of various kinds. Thinking about the history of (dis)connection makes it possible to fully explore, and take seriously, the implications of contemporary efforts to re-imagine Colombo as a "hub city" in the Indian Ocean region. What I call the "politics of hub-ness" is a concept understandable only through a reading of Sri Lankan history that centers connection as a contingent, conflicted, and constantly negotiated process, rather than a "natural" outcome of colonization, island geography, religion or culture. Colombo's status as a "global" or "hub" city is far from assured; this study centers the ongoing imaginative and material labor that is involved in trying to make it so.

Where is Colombo?

As mentioned at the opening of this chapter, location plays an important role in the way that Sri Lanka's future is discussed. The optimism and hopeful rhetoric about Colombo becoming a major urban center is very often accompanied by comments on the spatial position of Colombo/Sri Lanka in relation to the rest of the region. Talking about location is more than just an observation of geographical

“facts”; it is a way of recasting Sri Lanka as central rather than peripheral, modern as opposed to underdeveloped. In short, location talk is political. It underpins much hopeful rhetoric about development and the future of the country by framing strategic location as an asset that can be channeled in the project of making Colombo/Sri Lanka developed, desirable and relevant.

So where exactly is Colombo? Where is Sri Lanka? It depends on who you ask. Framed one way, the answer to this question might be that Colombo is the *de facto* capital city of Sri Lanka, located in the western province along the coastline. Following this, one might answer that Sri Lanka is a small island located near Southern India. It might seem that these answers are obvious, objective and incontrovertible facts. They are “only” about simple geography, after all. In some ways, however, this misses the point. Understanding of geography and location is actually far from simple; there is never “only” geography. Geography and location are intimately entangled with political questions about what forms development and progress should take in Sri Lanka. While the geographic facts listed above might initially appear as “obvious” they also obscure other ways of answering the question, “where is Colombo?”. For example, an alternative way of answering this question might be to say that Colombo is a city in the Indian Ocean, right in the middle of routes connecting Africa, Asia and the Arab Gulf. The difference between these answers, and the political implications of how one responds to “where is Colombo?” are made clear in this section as I explore how corporate figures, mainstream global media, policy-makers and bloggers interpret this seemingly obvious but actually highly charged question.

The Economist, one of the more authoritative mainstream media platforms on current affairs and global politics (and, of course, a reliable champion of free market

and neoliberal policies) has reported on Sri Lanka on a number of occasions, but a piece from February 2014 on the “Post-Tiger Economy” is particularly revealing with regards to Sri Lanka’s aspirations of hub-ness. Speaking with Kapila Chandrasena, chief executive of Sri Lankan Airlines, the national carrier, the author of the article explains that efforts are being made to orient Sri Lanka towards a “new” kind of economy, one based increasingly on tourism - which obviously necessitates greater air connections with other parts of the world. In the eyes of *The Economist*, this turn to tourism is “emblematic of the country’s desire to re-integrate with a world that has often regarded it as a pariah” (2014). The article concedes that “indeed, the speed at which tourists seem have flocked back may even seem tasteless” in light of the human rights situation, but this is weighed against the obvious progress in the tourism sector. The author draws our attention to the startling fact that “in July 2009, just two months after the war came to its grisly denouement, the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (TDA) recorded a 28% increase in tourists stays compared with the same month a year earlier” (*The Economist* 2014).

If tourism, an example of global connection and a turn away from status as “pariah” is to form the foundation of Sri Lanka’s new economy, then the actual means of connection themselves, in this case air travel links, are worth some consideration. The *Economist* article goes on to discuss these in detail with Chandrasena, and I reproduce a key excerpt here:

More ambitiously, Mr Chandrasena wants the capital to become a bridging point between China and Africa. “We see major high-volume traffic flows between Asia and Africa, and especially China and Africa,” he says. “From a geographical point of view, the shortest route is above Sri Lanka.” The jury is still out on this latter goal. Sri Lankan Airlines may serve four points in China, but it serves none in Africa (notwithstanding a new route to the Seychelles, which is offered by Mihin Lanka, its low-cost affiliate). Mr

Chandrasena is keen to add one or two big African hubs to his network, but he admits that a local partner will be required to “fan out across the continent”. Wooing this partner may prove tricky. Ethiopian Airlines already flies to four Chinese destinations and is adding a fifth in March; Kenya Airways has its own partnerships with two Chinese carriers; and South African Airways is likely to favour Etihad, with which it has signed a codeshare agreement, to improve its connections with China. [*The Economist*, 2014]

The “high-volume flows” referenced here of course are due to the much talked about spike in Chinese development in sub-Saharan Africa, which has probably gotten more press than similar Chinese initiatives in other parts of Asia. Here, Sri Lanka is positioned as an actor that should somehow find a way to channel these flows, directing them to favor the country’s development and become a “bridging point between China and Africa.” The flows already exist - but Sri Lanka needs to figure out a way to take advantage of them.

Mr. Chandrasena’s observation that “from a geographical point of view, the shortest route is above Sri Lanka,” is undoubtedly true; what this sentence reveals, however, are the discrepancies between the “geographical point of view” and another point of view. What might this second point of view be called? The tone of the passage is clearly one of pragmatism and caution juxtaposed with the quixotic aspirations of Mr. Chandrasena: “the jury is still out” on the idea of Sri Lanka becoming a connection point between regions. Alongside the “geographical point of view” sits a point of view that emphasizes not geography but economic power and significance; not position and potential but what is already there. In this other, more sober, point of view, Sri Lanka is not exactly a hub but rather a latecomer to the connection game. The juxtaposition of Sri Lankan Airlines with Ethiopian Airlines, Kenya Airways and South African Airways has the effect of reminding readers that Sri Lanka is in fact very much behind in the race to connect Africa with China. So in juxtaposition to the “geographical point of view” another picture emerges - one in

which, Sri Lanka's advantageous position and location are not enough to render it a global player on the scale that many Sri Lankans would wish.

The interview with Chandrasena emphasizes an aerial view of Sri Lanka's (and by extension, Colombo's) location. Connection and hubness are things floating in the air "above Sri Lanka." However another dimension of Sri Lanka's location is significant, that is its position in the ocean and proximity to important maritime routes. As many scholars of maritime worlds and materiality have observed, the ocean often figures as a stand-in for concepts of fluidity, flow, exchange. But this conception of the ocean is not limited to academics. Different parties with a material interest in Sri Lanka's geopolitical position are engaged in discussions that make reference to the *actual* Indian Ocean on which it sits, but in doing so conjure all the same themes of the ocean as a space of constant movement, traffic and "flow" of important commodities for the global economy.

Consider this portion of a speech by US Secretary of State John Kerry delivered in Colombo in May 2015:

Sri Lankans should take enormous pride – I'm sure you do – in what has been happening within your borders. But every nation also has to look beyond its borders as well. For Sri Lankans, that's nothing new. Your country sits at the crossroads of Africa, South Asia, and East Asia. And for centuries, it's served as a gateway for merchant ships. The Indian Ocean is the world's most important commercial highway. Today, 40 percent of all seaborne oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz and half of the world's merchant fleet capacity sails through the Straits of Malacca. And with its strategic location near deep-water ports in India and Myanmar, Sri Lanka could serve as the fulcrum of a modern and dynamic Indo-Pacific region. (US State Department, 2015)

Secretary Kerry's remarks gesture towards Sri Lanka's historical hub-ness, with talk of looking beyond borders as being "nothing new" for Sri Lankans, who have "for centuries" inhabited an island that facilitated the passage of merchant vessels. Two metaphors stick out here: first, the Indian Ocean becomes an "important commercial

highway,” and next Sri Lanka itself “could” become a “fulcrum of a modern and dynamic Indo-Pacific region.” In the highway metaphor, the ocean becomes another version of a well-known land-based technology for conveying goods and people. And, it bears mentioning that in pointing to highways, Secretary Kerry manages to touch on an actual technology/piece of infrastructure that is itself the source of discussion, desire and disappointment in Sri Lanka - one of the major post-war developments under Mahinda Rajapakse was the completion of two new lengths of highway, linking Colombo to other key locations in the Southern and Western provinces.

The image of the fulcrum calls to mind a lever, or a see-saw; in this view, Sri Lanka is a central hinge between two disparate realms. Interestingly, this word choice stands quite apart from the oceanic imagery of fluidity, porous borders and connection; in evoking the fulcrum, John Kerry (unwittingly?) manages to conjure a vision of a world divided between two oscillating or see-sawing camps. In light of the growing rivalry between China on the one hand and India on the other, supported by the United States, for influence in the Indian Ocean realm, this is a striking metaphor for the Secretary of State to employ. One might ask: what exactly is the role of the fulcrum, what can become of it, and the people who live on it, under these geopolitical conditions?

Some time into my fieldwork, an article began making the rounds on social media. A couple of Sri Lankan friends told me about it, knowing of my interest in Chinese investment in the Port City project. Entitled “Cartopolitics and Sri Lanka: Rereading and Repainting Twenty-First Century Asia,” and published in on the website of an Indian magazine, the essay begins by pointing out that geographic regions are imagined and constructed - so far, so good. The author goes on to

suggest that Sri Lanka could be considered either a “South Asian” or “Indian Ocean” state and explains the difference between the two identities:

Although Sri Lanka can be thought of as either a South Asian state or an Indian Ocean one, the associations and images that our mind conjures in each case, seemingly sub-consciously, are quite different. One is perhaps the diversity, rich history, creaking bureaucracy and poverty of the Indian sub-continent, the other, sun-kissed beaches, global trade routes and geo-political jostling. The South Asian construct creates a imagined community comprising Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, while downplaying Sri Lanka’s historic community with the Arab trading states to the west, the Theravada Buddhist countries to the east and the south east Asian port cities of Penang, Malacca and Singapore. (Alphonsus 2015)

In this reading, India represents “history” “bureaucracy” and “poverty,” the Indian Ocean stands for alluring beaches, “global trade” and “geopolitical jostling.” Which image sounds more appealing? Does one even have to ask? The author builds his case for considering the Indian Ocean identity as preferable, packing the signifier full of images that speak to the aspirations and desires of the post-war moment. Interestingly, nowhere in the article is Sri Lanka’s rocky political relationship with India mentioned. The choice between identifying as South Asian or as an Indian Ocean state is presented as a simple matter of marketing and preference, not as a political move that may serve to sever connections between Sri Lanka and its large and highly influential neighbor.

At this point in reading the article, I still could not quite tell whether the author was merely reciting the desires and aspirations he believed others to hold, or if this was a statement of his own views. The unqualified optimism associated with the Indian Ocean, as opposed to the “South Asian” label, gradually made it clearer, though, that the essay was in fact championing the supposedly new and exciting opportunities associated with the oceanic vs. Subcontinental identity:

In recent times, Sri Lanka has started to undergo a refashioning of its identity. The re-emergent Indian Ocean identity reflects Sri Lanka's cosmopolitan, ocean-going and mercantile heritage, making its participation in global affairs—particularly commerce—natural and ordinary. But to the world's investors, it also underscores that Sri Lanka's distinctiveness from most of the Indian sub-continent and its location at the cross-roads of emerging markets for trade and travel. At least within the field of strategic studies, the country's heritage as an Indian Ocean state is being revived and many decision-makers, such as the United States secretary of state, John Kerry, are becoming aware of the implications and opportunities this presents. Suddenly, Sri Lanka is not India's heel or even its gateway—it is at the cross-roads of the emerging energy, trade and air routes, linking Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, South East Asia and Australia. (Alphonsus 2015)

As an anthropologist, I have to pause at the words “natural and ordinary.” The phrase itself is only used to signify the extent to which Sri Lanka's "cosmopolitan, ocean-going and mercantile heritage" have been *unseen* and *undervalued* - until now, apparently. Evoking the image of the "crossroads" twice in one paragraph, this excerpt illustrates perfectly the way that hub discourse works: there is very little in terms of concrete references to *how* Sri Lanka can make use of being at the "crossroads" or what the precise terms of its engagement in "global affairs" and "commerce." Though couched in the language of pragmatism and 21st century business speak (the references to "strategic studies," "decision makers" and "emerging energy, trade and air routes" are helpful buzzwords), this section - much like the entire article - is remarkably light on the details of how advantageous geographic position might translate into meaningful economic change. To paraphrase Asher Ghertner, what matters now is the future - not the conditions of its making (Ghertner 2015: 25).

The notion of flexibility is key for the strength of the "Cartopolitics" argument. In reference to new strategic initiatives on the part of India and China such as the revived “Maritime Silk Road” and Project Mausam, the author explains that “interestingly, the shaping of these initiatives is not only in the hands of China, India

or the USA; this fluidity creates opportunities for small states as well. The arbiters of the success or failure of these initiatives are as much the states along the silk and monsoon trade routes ... as are the countries that launched them” (Alphonsus 2015). “Fluidity” signifies “opportunity” and smaller states are supposedly just as in control of the Maritime Silk Road and Project Mausam initiatives as are major powers like China, India and the United States. But this proposition invites some interrogation. How can this be true in view of the huge disparities between a country like Sri Lanka and any of the three major powers listed above in terms of wealth and military prowess? If a project is initiated and designed by one country, how much can other countries really be said to influence or shape it? The more realistic assessment would seem to be that smaller countries like Sri Lanka have the choice to opt in or out of regional initiatives according to their foreign policy objectives. But, as was made clear during the Cold War in much of Asia, opting in and opting out can be very limited, precarious sets of choices indeed.

Some additional research on the author of this piece, Daniel Alphonsus revealed that at the time the article was being circulated, he was working for the Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, under the new government that took power in January 2015. Together with US Secretary of State John Kerry’s remarks, it is not, I think, out of the question to consider these opinions and interpretations of the future of the Indian Ocean as somewhat representative of how those in power, or with access to power, are thinking about Sri Lanka’s potential hubness. Fluidity, flexibility and porousness are concepts easily associated with the ocean and water both through metaphor and straightforward description of the ocean's materiality; some of the same exact concepts are employed as metaphors for the movement of capital and serve as aspirational qualities under neoliberal regimes. What kind of

political-economic futures, then, are made possible through the re/discovery of Sri Lanka's Indian Ocean identity?

Locating Colombo - that is, answering the question “where is Colombo?” is a much more complicated proposition than it initially seems. As evidenced by the words and writings of bloggers, political figures and corporate executives, the act of naming Colombo and Sri Lanka as parts of certain regions and not of others, the process of figuring out exactly *where* they are, is fraught with tension. While Sri Lanka is easily considered part of the South Asia region as a result of its proximity to India, the speakers and writers I present here are invested to different degrees in re-imagining this spatial relationship, foregrounding instead Sri Lanka’s connections to a wider Indian Ocean or Asian region. These verbal and written acts of reimagining Sri Lanka’s place in the world have become intimately intertwined with the hopeful, aspirational post-war development discourse of which dreams of Colombo attaining “global city” status are part. Asking where Colombo is is a question with affective, temporal and political implications.

When is Colombo?

Hubness is a temporal claim. Talk of Colombo as a “hub” city invites not only reflection on Sri Lanka’s geographic/spatial positioning in the Indian Ocean, but also on visions of its future. As discussed earlier, the past plays a role as well - different visions of Colombo/Ceylon/Sri Lankan history as connected or disconnected are the source of much debate. In this section I would like to consider the temporal implications of hub city discourse not by elaborating on historiographical debates about whether or not the island should be viewed as separate or connected, but rather by interrogating both the nostalgic renderings of a cosmopolitan, connected Colombo *and* the aspirational future-oriented discourse deployed to justify current

modes of urban development. Cosmopolitan nostalgia and ambitious plans for the future together contribute to the temporal element of the politics of hubness.

The creation of global cities across the Global South and Asia in particular requires the enlistment of temporal tropes: ideas like “progress” and “development” imply teleological visions in which some cities try to “catch up” to what other cities have already achieved in terms of cleanliness, safety, infrastructure, commerce, etc. Ananya Roy captures the importance of this in her analysis of common tropes of the 21st century as the “Asian Century”:

This is perhaps most evident in the ideology of the Asian century, which evokes a future of economic emergence in Asia but also relates different pathways of development to one another through models, benchmarks, and milestones. It is in this sense that Asia is a project, requiring of us the question “When is Asia?” instead of the more commonly asked question, “Where is Asia?” (2016: 317).

In her co-edited volume with Aihwa Ong, Roy similarly draws attention to the processes whereby Asian urban experiences increasingly reference and conjure comparison with other Asian cities. Asia is a “place” in some sense but as the description of benchmarks and milestones makes clear, it is also an aspirational claim, a vision of something in the future. This has real implications for how urban centers in Asia are being managed and governed. Roy continues by stating that: “Instead of positioning the Asian century as the future, or even as one vector in the multiplicity of capitalism’s futures, I seek to understand how *futurity itself becomes a mode of governing*” [Italics added] (2016: 318). Following Roy, I find it useful to pose the question “when is Colombo?” Such a question allows me to both take seriously the futurity which Roy points out does a significant amount of work in forming the political imaginaries of today, but it also permits me to look critically at the forms of nostalgia and memory I encountered among many Colombo residents.

“When is Colombo?” becomes, then, a question that casts a glance backwards as well as forwards. By drawing nostalgia for the past and aspirations for the future into the same analytical frame, I am able to deepen the understanding of temporality’s important role in forming urban imaginaries.

A common trope among middle class and elite Colombo residents holds that had it not been for the civil war, Sri Lanka today might be like Singapore, or Malaysia. Many of my English-speaking, educated informants and friends liked to tell me wistfully that at one time Lee Kuan Yew (the early leader of Singapore) had once expressed a wish that one day Singapore might become like Colombo - how times had changed! Others liked to mention that when Sri Lanka gained its independence, it had generally been assumed - including by the British colonizers themselves - that it would be Sri Lanka, not Malaysia, which would become a prosperous, peaceful multi-ethnic country free of violence. It is noteworthy that these kinds of narratives - recounted to me more times than I can list, on all of my visits to Sri Lanka both before and during fieldwork - reveal the extent to which “regular” people actively engage the idea that their country’s history may have been otherwise and deploy this understanding on a fairly regular basis. Why would people talk like this? While the answer to that question is probably more complicated than can be elucidated in this chapter, I would like to draw attention to two inter-related points arising from this observation: first, that this kind of talk had important implications for how the civil conflict is understood, and second, that it also reveals a belief in the possibility that Sri Lanka could reclaim its “rightful” place in a community of peaceful, developed nations. “If not for the civil war” is a statement that brackets the conflict as an unfortunate but somehow isolated set of events; three decades of conflict become a kind of detour from the regular march of progress that

Sri Lanka *should* have experienced. The LTTE are doubly “outsiders” then - political enemies and ethnic others who are also simultaneously responsible for bringing the unitary Sri Lankan state outside of its appropriate pathway towards development. “If not for the civil war” is also a remarkably effective way of de-linking politics, development and ethnic relations from one another. When one positions the civil war as a very unfortunate tragedy befalling Sri Lanka which *should have been* like Singapore, the nationalism and hateful rhetoric propagated by Sinhalese politicians from all across the political spectrum become less significant.

Amidst talk of what could have been or might have been, the physical manifestations of connectedness - transportation infrastructures - come to be objects of longing and nostalgia. The civil war severely restricted civilians’ mobility and effectively severed the part of the island under LTTE control from the rest of Sri Lanka. Freedom of movement was something remembered from the pre-war past. Although this most negatively and drastically impacted Tamils, the effects were felt and shared by every ethno-religious community. In Colombo and beyond, checkpoints became a regular feature of everyday life, particularly salient reminders of the ongoing militarization of Sri Lankan life (see Jeganathan 2002, Choi 2015 and Lehman 2013 for further discussions on this topic). Sharika Thiranagama’s analysis of the attempts to re-open the Colombo-Jaffna railway line after the end of the civil war highlights the importance of infrastructure for national identity. She calls the railway line a symbol of a “social compact in which the life of the individual, the community, and the state became integrally intertwined” (2012: 223). Thiranagama emphasizes that the attempt to revive the Colombo-Jaffna line “has come to symbolize the quest for the desired normalcy of the past, an aspiration towards an

everyday experience that the younger generations have never had and which has, as a consequence, become a potent force in their lives" (2012: 223).

Tariq Jazeel also points to the effects that interrupted, ruptured and destroyed infrastructure as well as militarized space have had on (particularly young) Sri Lankans' sense of belonging and freedom as they move through space:

Even then, the unhindered freedom of movement across island-space has never been a privilege enjoyed by all in Sri Lanka. The militarization of roads and the regulation of movement through island space via the draconian and racialized discrimination of the security checkpoint, severely curtail access to the whole island for most (especially Tamil) Sri Lankans (see Hyndman and de Alwis 2004). An entire generation of Sri Lankans born post-1983 (Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims) have grown up knowing a fragmented, patchwork, militarized territorial 'integrity', where insular, exceptional and inviolable island-ness persists precisely as discourse, as textual assertion, far more than geopolitical object. (2009: 411)

In both Jazeel and Thiranagama's accounts, the disconnect between generations, especially the generation too young to remember a time *before* the civil war is emphasized as one of the main results of this long-running division and securitization of space. The reference to generations is of course implicitly tied up with temporality, as in both writers' analyses the past was a time of greater mobility. In other words, spatial imaginaries become associated with specific temporalities. *When* is a unified, cohesive Sri Lanka? It exists only before and after the civil war.

Talk about the future justifies all manner of projects of urban development and beautification in contemporary, post-war Colombo. Much future-oriented rhetoric is vague about *when* various things will be accomplished, and yet change is presented as imminent, constantly "just about" to happen. Two specific projects highlight the way that futurity is used to affectively and imaginatively conjure a vision of what a better, future-Colombo should look like. In 2015 and 2016, two of the most high profile projects in Colombo - the Colombo Port City project and the Western Region

Megapolis Planning Project - produced numerous forms of digital media, images and other promotional materials which speak to aspirations for Colombo's future and exemplify rhetoric of hubness. The Port City and Megapolis are linked, though with slightly different scopes and goals. The Port City project, which I address in-depth in subsequent chapters of this dissertation, was a Chinese-funded concept for an artificially created island that would be attached to present-day Colombo and be home to luxury apartments, offices, and malls. Though the Port City project emerged independently of Megapolis and was the subject of significant controversy, it was eventually subsumed under the larger Megapolis plan, which was a more holistic vision for the city of Colombo and the future zoning and uses of space. With its very own Ministry (Ministry of Megapolis and Urban Development), the Megapolis plan was the new Wickremasinghe-Sirisena government's signature plan for developing the city of Colombo. While Megapolis in theory represented a departure from the old Rajapakse government's approach to urban development, it in fact continued some of the former administration's plans, for example by modifying to include the Port City (rather than canceling it due to the controversy). Both the Colombo Port City project and Megapolis use the idiom of potential and possibility to communicate their hopeful visions for Colombo's future.

The Port City's promotional video, viewable on its website and on YouTube, offers viewers a "fly through" and aerial view of digitally conjured maps displaying the various offerings of the Port City. The video opens with this hopeful message: "Colombo is about to grow. In size, success and prosperity" and closes with: "the rewards are great. Come, be a part of it." The construction "about to grow" lends some urgency to the video's entreaty to viewers to come "be a part of" the Port City. However, the political debates and conflicts surrounding the project led to significant

delays in construction; in reality the timeline of the project's completion was far from certain when the video was disseminated. The fact that only digital renderings of the Port City - rather than actual photos or video footage - are available further underscores the disconnect between the urgency of something "about to grow" and the considerable work still needed for this to happen. Colombo residents would have seen physical evidence of the project as nothing more than chain link fence and a desolate project site on which tractors and bulldozers often lay still on heaps of sand. The Port City video nudges viewers to consider the hopeful digital images as more "real" than the material foundations of the project currently on display.

By contrast, the Megapolis project promotional video is more wordy and more detailed, drawing a distinction between where Colombo is currently and what planners hope it will be like in the future. Nonetheless, aspirational and future-oriented language here too plays a central role in anchoring the video and structuring its narrative. The Megapolis video, narrated in the voice of an educated, friendly English-speaking male, christens Colombo "South Asia's open city," comparing and then implicitly elevating it when juxtaposed with neighboring cities like Mumbai or Chennai. Colombo is described as currently having "a friendly cosmopolitan culture, a clean and green environment, and excellent services." Once again, visually the video relies not on actual images of Colombo today, but on a cartoon rendering of the city and its people in bright colors. The optimistic assessment of Colombo's present condition is modified by a reminder that *the future* is more significant, and promises to be greater still: "So this is Colombo today. But more important is what comes tomorrow. Not just a dynamic city but an expansive, multi-dimensional metropolis conceived for the world to come."

The work of re-imagining Colombo as a global hub city requires particular understandings of the city's spatial and temporal location. While calling Colombo a "hub" might initially appear to be a simple spatial/geographic statement, it in fact requires a certain understanding of temporality as well. Hubness calls upon the nostalgia experienced by many city residents for whom the idea of a well-connected city is associated primarily with a time before 1983 (the beginning of the civil conflict). It also requires faith in the optimistic projects of developers and city planners who regularly traffic in images of a future that they assure residents will *soon* be reality, but which remains elusive. The reliance on digital renderings and drawings highlights the distance yet to be traversed between the Colombo of today and the longed-for Colombo of tomorrow. By examining both nostalgia for Colombo's cosmopolitan past and these images of its future, it becomes possible to assess the real import of everyday rhetoric positing that "if not for the civil war," Colombo would, by now, be the equal of other Asian cities. Hubness becomes the channel through which this imagined counterfactual can be experienced and felt as real.

Scales of Hubness

Hubness discourse as I have laid it out here tends to emphasize Colombo being a hub with connections to other places outside Sri Lanka like Dubai or Singapore or Hong Kong; what gets lost in these kinds of discussions is the fact that Colombo still plays a critical role in Sri Lanka itself. Colombo's more local connections are often devalued because they appear less glamorous than connections to other major Asian cities. In one vision of appropriate/proper development priorities, Colombo is part of a network of people, things and places on the island called Sri Lanka. In the

other, it is an entity struggling for recognition in a network of a very different sort, that of "world cities" or "Asian cities." But Colombo is still Sri Lanka's largest city. It functions as a kind of double hub: it is a hub within Sri Lanka while simultaneously being linked to the outside world in important ways. Understanding this forces us to rethink issues of scale and what we mean by the term "hub" city.

Colombo was not always the most important urban center in Sri Lanka. Other cities on the island such as Galle, Kandy and Jaffna were important in their own right and it actually was a lengthy process for Colombo to "win out" over Galle in competition during the colonial period over which port city the British should favor (Dharmasena 1989). Understanding this helps us recast Colombo as one of many possible Sri Lankan hubs, rather than the obvious choice.

Contemporary post-war talk of developing other cities in Sri Lanka abounds, but it is clear that Colombo has won the majority of the attention and effort aimed at urban development. Rajapakse's efforts to bring major infrastructure projects to his home city of Hambantota in the South amounted to nothing and are widely considered examples of failure - the airport, port and cricket stadium lie unused years after their completion. Colombo is now home to the only functioning international airport in Sri Lanka, the most important shipping port, the largest railway station and bus depots.

Disparities between Colombo and the rest of Sri Lanka are a major source of anxiety for citizens, planners and policy-makers. My interview with Mr. Senaratne, a business leader, the former head of the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce and a supporter of the new government, revealed some of the tensions surrounding Colombo's situation vis-a-vis not only other regional cities but also the rest of Sri Lanka. When the subject of our discussion turned to the Chinese-funded Colombo

Port City (which I discuss at length in Chapter 2), Senaratne surprised me by being openly very critical of the project. As a senior member of the business community, Senaratne repeated to me several times that he and the Chamber were of course "very much for FDI (Foreign Direct Investment)" - it was as if he was anxious that I might take his criticisms of the Port City as indications of not being sufficiently pro-investment or pro-free market.

More than the criticism itself, the reasons for Senaratne's opposition were what stuck with me. According to Senaratne, in addition to the financial issues with the project (he, like many others, worried that Sri Lanka was acquiring too much debt as a result of ambitious infrastructure spending), the Port City was an example of Colombo-centric development that ignored regional disparities. In his view, many of these disparities were embodied by the poor links between Colombo and other regions: "connectivity is not up to the mark," Senaratne said, pointing to the poor quality of the roads and railway lines. He told me that he himself was originally from the hill country, a town that was about 200km from Colombo but which required an 8 hour train ride to reach. This exemplified, for Senaratne, how far Sri Lankan infrastructure had to go in connecting Colombo with the rest of the country. Turning to the northern and eastern provinces, the majority Tamil regions most affected by the civil war, Senaratne framed their problems not in terms of ethnic tension or militarization but in terms of connectivity: they were not particularly badly off, according to him, the problem was that they were not well-connected to the rest of the country through highways and rail lines. "We need to improve regional disparities, [we] have to do so in a systematic manner," he explained. Senaratne mixed pro-business ideals with a measure of social consciousness - "there are slums and underprivileged people [here], [we] need to uplift that infrastructure"

he said, arguing that "the sequence does not seem to be right" in prioritizing projects like the Port City over things like basic sanitation, housing and road construction.

Senaratne's comments represent a striking shift in scale from the rhetoric which compares Colombo with cities such as Singapore, Hong Kong or Dubai. In his framing, Colombo's proper role is as a hub city not for Asia or the Indian Ocean region as a whole but for the rest of Sri Lanka; the lack of links between Colombo and the rest of the country became, in his analysis, an indication of what was wrong with the kind of development being pursued. His contention that projects like the Port City were "out of sequence" posits *national* and *regional* development as the foundation upon which more globally-oriented projects are built. Without sufficient local and national level infrastructure, a project like the Port City would never be successful. This kind of thinking stands in stark contrast with the relentlessly hopeful projections of real estate developers and government officials who, as evidenced in the previous section, often use glittering images of possible infrastructures as a way of shifting conversations about Colombo's development into a permanent future tense, drawing attention away from current lacunae in the urban landscape.

Rethinking Colombo as the capital of Sri Lanka rather than as a competitor of Dubai has the effect of pulling attention back to the inequalities plaguing Sri Lanka as a whole. The articulation of inequality through spatial realities is a feature of contemporary capitalism as Neil Brenner observes:

Thus, within a capitalist political-economic system, inequalities are not only expressed socially, in the form of class and income stratification, but also spatially, through the polarization of development among different territories, regions, places, and scales. (Brenner 2004: 13)

And later:

The goal of national, regional, and local state spatial policies is no longer to alleviate uneven geographical development, but actively to intensify it through the deployment of urban locational policies designed to strengthen the place-specific socioeconomic assets of strategic, globally linked city-regions. (Brenner 2004: 16)

As Colombo is actively transformed into a “globally linked city-region,” infrastructures, jobs and business opportunities are increasingly concentrated there. Colombo acts as a representative of Sri Lanka to the outside world - to the foreign investors and big corporations that politicians and planners hope to draw to the island. The rest of Sri Lanka lags behind Colombo. The rest of the country is disconnected from Colombo due to poor infrastructure links, and as a result disconnected from the rest of the world. Re-imagining Colombo as a hub city not only involves efforts to transform the urban landscape, but it requires a re-molding and re-thinking of Sri Lanka in which the city becomes the privileged, exclusive gateway to the global.

Colombo’s hubness is best conceived of as fractal. By fractal, I mean that it recurs at different scales. It is simultaneously a national capital and important center of commerce, knowledge and transportation within Sri Lanka as well as a city whose residents, planners and politicians increasingly cast it as global, an analog of other important Asian metropolises outside of Sri Lanka. In response to claims that Colombo is becoming a “hub” perhaps the most important question is: what kind of hub? A hub for what, for whom? In paying close attention to these questions and their many possible answers, it becomes possible to de-naturalize, and critically engage with, the hubness talk put forth by private and state interests.

Conclusion

The discourse surrounding Sri Lanka and Colombo’s “strategic location” in the Indian Ocean is inherently political and suffused with meaning beyond simple

geography. As I have shown, what I term “hubness” is both a spatial and temporal claim. Spatial in that it suggests a specific way of reading Sri Lanka’s place in the world, not as a South Asian state but more broadly as part of “Asia-Pacific” or the Indian Ocean. This kind of claim implicitly devalues connections to South Asia, specifically India, by suggesting that belonging to the broader category Indian Ocean/Asian is connected with progress, prosperity and modernity. Hubness is also a temporal claim. It draws on nostalgia for colonial and pre-civil war era cosmopolitanism, as well as aspirational images of what the future holds. Connected-ness becomes associated with specific time periods, and in particular with speculation of what Sri Lanka *might have been like* had the civil war never taken place.

Talking about Colombo becoming a “global hub” leads to some confusion, some slippage between terms. As evidenced throughout this chapter, hubness discourse blurs the line between “Colombo” and “Sri Lanka.” The perspectives I present in the “When is Colombo” section speak of *Sri Lanka*, not Colombo, when they re-think and re-cast the island’s role in the global economy and geopolitics. But Colombo is understood to be the urban center that facilitates the achievement of hubness. Without Colombo achieving the kind of urban development envisioned by planners, politicians and real estate developers, the project of leveraging Sri Lanka’s unique location falls apart - after all, Colombo is home to the only international airport, the major railway station, and is home to most of the Sri Lankan political and cultural elite. Colombo is valued because it represents the cosmopolitan, metropolitan future after three decades of civil war. But discussions about Colombo becoming a “global hub” are strikingly circumspect about what, if any, the relation

of this international hub to the rest of the island should be, and what happens to places outside of Colombo that lack the distinction of hubness.

Jonathan Spencer has theorized Sri Lanka's connections to South Asia and its island geography through ethnographic engagement with the multi-ethnic eastern part of the island. Writing about an ambitious, but ultimately unsuccessful, harbor construction project in Oluvil, a small fishing town in the Eastern Province, Spencer concludes his article as follows:

Far from providing shelter, the builders had contrived to channel dangerous currents into the harbor itself. Even the local fishermen couldn't use it. In many ways, the harbor is typical of much post-war development across the island—a high-capital project of little immediate utility to the people who live in its shadow. As such it can serve us as a final, very concrete, metaphor, this time of the ambivalence that marks Sri Lanka's relationship to its neighbors —superficially a gateway to the world around, which turns out to be too hazardous for anyone to use (2014: 11).

Spencer's account of the Oluvil harbor highlights failed infrastructure of "little immediate utility,"; the harbor he describes was an effort at forging connection between a "provincial" location within Sri Lanka and the rest of the world. As Spencer suggests, the harbor was wasteful and ultimately unsuccessful, but it is hardly exceptional: many such unnecessary or incomplete projects litter the Sri Lankan landscape. Two points are striking about this passage: first, the depiction of deficient, badly planned development projects, which are just as present in Colombo as they are in Oluvil. Second, the image of a "high capital project" that is "superficially a gateway to the world around, which turns out to be too hazardous for anyone to use." "Gateway" can of course be understood as another term for hub - a connecting point, facilitating exchange between different places. The failed Oluvil port speaks to the challenges of trying to build connections between "provincial" locations in Sri Lanka and "the world around" without some link through Colombo. On the one hand the failed port can be easily read as another example of overzealous

and ambitious politicians overestimating the importance of whatever provincial location to which they owe allegiance. But this anecdote - when read alongside the different texts and perspectives I have presented in this chapter - says something about Colombo's importance too, even though the city does not figure in Spencer's account. The Oluvil Port debacle reveals the limitations of attempts at achieving "hub" status that try to circumvent Colombo. Understanding the politics of hubness requires not only unpacking the political, historically-contingent understandings of connection/disconnection at work in contemporary Sri Lanka, but also urges greater attention be paid to the inequalities that inhere in post-war spatial arrangements.

CHAPTER 2: PUTTING COLOMBO ON THE MAP: THE COLOMBO PORT CITY PROJECT

Transforming a city into a global hub is not a smooth or frictionless process. Rhetoric about Sri Lanka's advantageous geographic position often moves seamlessly between a romanticized reading of the past in which the island *was* more cosmopolitan and enmeshed in global networks than it is now, and optimistic projections about the future in which the city of Colombo *will be* a global hub for the Indian Ocean region. But how do we get there? What needs to take place in order for Colombo to reach this coveted status? Between nostalgia for the pre-war past and excitement for a better post-war future, the present is frequently overlooked. This chapter uses the example of the Colombo Port City project to argue for a processual understanding of the work of building Colombo into a hub city. I draw attention to the debates, controversies and disagreements about the Port City to foreground the messy, non-linear nature of urban development, using my ethnography to highlight a moment of suspension and pause in the project's progress. I argue that the Port City project also provides an entry point for understanding contemporary forms of what I call "unitary" Sri Lankan nationalism, distinct from either Tamil or Sinhala-Buddhist nationalisms, and focused instead on a broad, multi-ethnic, all-island form of identification and solidarity. While official narratives about Colombo's development tend to actively ignore the civil war, framing it as a thing of the past, I suggest in this analysis that the effects of the conflict still linger in the tone and content of the debates around urban development schemes. Ultimately, I suggest that both nationalist and hubness discourses are underpinned by specific spatial imaginaries of Colombo's relationship to the rest of the island.

In chapter one, I argued that “hubness” is the overarching logic through which development in Colombo is structured. Hubness is an aspirational discourse which prizes connection beyond South Asia, highlighting both historical and future possibilities for Sri Lanka’s imbrication in wider regional and global networks. Dovetailing with the recent emergence of the Indian Ocean region as an object of fascination in academic, policy and media narratives, hubness is a set of both spatial and temporal claims which employs Sri Lanka’s apparent “naturally” advantageous location to suggest that geography can be leveraged to bring about desired contemporary capitalist visions of urban development. My discussion of hubness in chapter one centered on unpacking these spatiotemporal claims. In this chapter, I turn from a consideration of hubness discourse in the abstract to the concrete example of the Colombo Port City, a project which exemplifies the material and symbolic labor involved in building a global hub city.

The Colombo Port City project, a joint initiative of the Sri Lankan government and a Chinese corporation, became the source of a major controversy during the period of my fieldwork. Hubness as a mode of approaching and thinking about urban development is most acutely exemplified in this hotly-debated waterfront development scheme, which would involve dredging sand from the Indian Ocean floor to create a new island opposite the existing Fort business district and connected to the core of the city by bridges and walkways. The Port City would eventually include luxury apartments and high-rise buildings, shopping malls and other sites of leisure and consumption aimed at attracting wealthy Sri Lankans and foreigners. However, designed, funded and implemented by a Chinese company, the China Harbor Engineering Corporation (CHEC), the Port City project became the subject of highly contentious debates over Sri Lankan sovereignty and the appropriate role

of foreign - specifically Chinese - influence in Sri Lankan politics. Proponents of the project, employing the language of hubness, suggested the Port City would “put Sri Lanka on the map,” making it a more appealing destination for elite global businesses and consumers, while detractors cited environmental concerns, fears of excessive entanglement with China, and the supposed wastefulness of the project vis-a-vis other development priorities. At a value of \$1.4 billion USD, the Port City represented the largest foreign direct investment (FDI) in Sri Lanka.⁶ The question became: could Sri Lanka afford *not* to go ahead with it?

The Port City project exemplifies not only the value placed on global and transnational forms of connection, but also reveals the fraught nature of certain connections being forged. The Sri Lankan civil war, which lasted nearly three decades, came to a dramatic and violent conclusion in May 2009 with the Sri Lankan government, under then-President Mahinda Rajapakse, electing to end the conflict through a pure military victory, crushing the LTTE rebels and killing thousands of Tamil civilians in the process.⁷ Following this display of military force, the Sri Lankan government was criticized heavily by western powers - most notably the United States, United Kingdom and Canada - for human rights abuses. In response, the Rajapakse regime grew increasingly anti-western in its rhetoric, seeking out a closer alliance with China, which did not openly criticize Sri Lanka’s human rights record. With expectations running high for a triumphant Sri Lankan economic

⁶ Though the Port City is the most significant Chinese investment in monetary terms, Chinese money poured into Sri Lanka in the post-war period through investment in railway lines, a new and ultimately unsuccessful international airport in Hambantota on the southern coast, and other projects.

⁷ The controversy surrounding civilian deaths at the end of the civil war continues to be a highly charged issue, with exact numbers of civilians killed usually reported as significantly lower by the Sri Lankan government (9,000) versus the estimate of up to 40,000 by the UN and international human rights groups (BBC News, 2012). Some of these issues are explored in a documentary broadcast on the British television network Channel 4 entitled “Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields.” Many Tamil families still have no information about what happened to their relatives in the final days of the war. On the other hand, many Sri Lankans argue that delving too deeply into the end of the conflict only exacerbates ethnic tensions.

miracle following the end of the war, Chinese support came in handy for financial reasons as well. As China seeks to expand its sphere of influence in Asia through its One Belt One Road⁸ initiative, the appeal of investing in Sri Lanka was clear. Many Sri Lankans who supported Mahinda Rajapakse's presidency believed the Port City and tighter alliance with China were positive steps forward for the country and would combine to assert Sri Lanka's independence from the west as well as prove that the country was capable of rapidly modernizing. However, to others more critical of the Rajapakse government, the Port City and attendant rapprochement with China came to represent increasing alienation from the West, excessive debt, and misplaced priorities.⁹ Might some costs be too high to pay in the effort to become a global city? This chapter highlights the fact that hubness discourse often fails to account for the specificity of the connections being created. While many Sri Lankans assumed that the Port City would naturally attract plenty of wealthy foreign visitors and residents, others asked more pointed questions about *who* these visitors would be, and whether they should be welcomed at all.

The Port City project came to a halt only a few months after construction work was initiated. The January 2015 presidential elections saw Mahinda Rajapakse voted out of power in a shocking victory for the opposition. The alliance with the Chinese had been forged under his increasingly personalistic and authoritarian rule. Without Rajapakse at the helm, it was unclear what relationship Sri Lanka and China

⁸ The One Belt One Road (OBOR) strategy refers to a series of Chinese initiatives designed to develop trade and infrastructure partnerships with other Asian countries. The "Road" refers to a "New Silk Road" connecting China to land-locked Central Asian countries, while the "Belt" portion refers to the coastal linkages created by investing in ports and other similar developments in countries such as Sri Lanka and Pakistan. This is also sometimes referred to as the "Maritime Silk Road."

⁹ During my fieldwork, the enormous amount of debt incurred by the Rajapakse government was a source of major concern for many of my interlocutors who worked in policy and the private sector; many criticisms of Rajapakse also centered on allegations of massive corruption and personal benefits to his family and associates as a result of costly infrastructure development projects. Many of these projects, including several major initiatives which took place in Rajapakse's home district of Hambantota, were seen as personal vanity projects with little use to the citizenry.

might have; as a result, the fate of the Port City remained unclear as well. The new coalition government, in response to brewing discontent and public criticisms of the Port City, put the project on hold in March 2015, suspending construction entirely.

Nationalism is a crucial part of the story that this chapter seeks to tell. As my ethnographic material makes clear, both pro and anti-Port City Colombo residents made use of nationalist rhetoric in framing their opinions about the project. However, as I explain in subsequent sections, the nationalism on display from both camps was not a narrowly defined nationalism based on notions of purity or ethnic belonging. Instead, informants displayed what I term “unitary Sri Lankan nationalism,” an island-wide re-imagining of the relevant community as being not Sinhalese, Tamils or Muslims, but potentially *all* Sri Lankans. Framed in opposition to the Chinese businessmen who conceptualized the project or other foreign powers, this unitary, all-island nationalism relied primarily on juxtapositions of local versus foreign/cosmopolitan.

This chapter approaches the uneasiness of the present ethnographically, that is through observations, conversations and repeated interactions that happened over a sustained period of time. This provides a sharp contrast to the dominant, future-oriented focus of the CHEC and many Sri Lankan supporters of the Port City. The Port City controversy was one of the constant threads running through my fieldwork in Colombo; sometimes it surged to the foreground, as evidenced by the animated debates and protests it inspired, several of which I relate in this chapter. But, often, the Port City was present in fragments of everyday life in Colombo over the course of 2015: snippets of conversation, day-to-day gossip and chats with *tuk-tuk* drivers, housewives, various friends and acquaintances; in glimpses of a pro-Port City sticker affixed to the back of a three-wheeler careening down Duplication Road; in the sight

of the construction zone completely at a stand-still next to the crashing waves of the ocean. The long period of the project's suspension gave rise to many rumors and conflicting pieces of information about its true purpose, many of which I relate in later sections. But the pause in the Port City's construction not only highlighted the social divisions and debates which colored Sri Lankan politics, it also served as a powerful reminder of the labor and time required to transform Colombo into the global hub city envisioned by government officials, planners and real estate developers.

The Politics of the Colombo Port City Project

The Colombo Port City project has little to do with Colombo's working, industrial port. If the "real" port of Colombo is a major location of intense capitalist activity, a place for loading and unloading of goods circulating from around the world in one of Asia's major shipping hubs, the Port City is supposed to offer a spectacular capitalist vision of a different, but related, kind. By dredging sand from the ocean floor and transporting rocks from the Sri Lankan interior, the Port City is to be built on a new island of reclaimed land which will sit right next to its main business and commercial district, Fort. Promotional videos and images for the project show a gleaming, hyper-modern city, floating on the Indian Ocean. Plans for the Port City include: luxury condos in high rise apartment buildings, shopping malls housing international brands, a network of canals lined by pedestrian walkways, a race course, and a dedicated transportation hub. The ads for the Port City interpellate viewers with encouragement not to miss out on what promises to be a major new addition to Colombo's urban landscape: "the rewards are great, come, be a part of it."

The Colombo Port City project was officially inaugurated, with much fanfare, in September 2014. President Xi Jinping of China shook hands with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse, as a crowd looked on, with traditional Sinhalese drummers in attendance. A plaque was ceremonially unveiled, commemorating the event. The two heads of state exchanged words: "I have seen prosperous signs in the development of Sri Lanka and feel happy for you," said President Xi (China Daily 2014). For his part, Rajapakse commented that "With the help from Chinese friends, the Sri Lanka people are able to make their dream come true," (China Daily 2014). At the time of the event, the project was expected to be finished by 2022, and in the words of President Xi, would ensure Sri Lanka's place as an "important transportation hub on the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road." As the *China Daily* reported, the occasion was marked by the blaring of nearby ships' sirens, and the coordinated dumping of sand and rocks into the water by a group of bulldozers. Less than six months later, the project was on hold; the bulldozers and ships were still, and it was unclear whether the Port City would ever be completed.

These images of the Colombo Port City have been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation

Image 3: Computer animations depicting the Colombo Port City. Source: Colombo Port City/China Harbor Engineering Corporation

For the majority of my fieldwork, the Colombo Port City project was in a state of suspension. The construction site baked under the hot afternoon sun, looking as if it could spring back to action at any moment. Party politics had intervened, bringing the Colombo Port City construction to a grinding halt. President Mahinda Rajapakse, who joined President Xi in inaugurating the project, was voted out of power in a historic election in January 2015. Head of the Sri Lanka People's

Freedom party (SLFP), Rajapakse had long presided over a hyper-nationalist, populist and authoritarian government characterized by extreme corruption and nepotism. Chinese financial and political support did much to bolster Rajapakse's government in the face of international criticism and alienation. With Chinese funds, new highways and improved railway lines and cars were built; Chinese tourists flooded Sri Lanka, boosting the local hotel, restaurant and shopping industries. Accompanying other far-reaching projects of beautification and re-organization of urban Colombo, the Colombo Port City was praised by many as a decisive new addition to the urban landscape that would elevate Colombo to the status of Singapore, Dubai, or Hong Kong, and derided by others as a symbol of Sri Lanka's servility to new Chinese patrons.



Image 4: "I think we should see other people" magazine advertisement alluding to the Port City controversy. Source: Author Photograph, August 2015.

The government that came to power in January 2015 was faced with a difficult decision: maintain the Port City project, one of many ambitious projects carried out by the Rajapakse government with Chinese aid, or suspend it, in keeping with election promises. The new government, a hybrid comprised of a President

(Maithripala Sirisena) formerly of Rajapakse's own SLFP party who defected, and a Prime Minister (Ranil Wickremasinghe), longstanding leader of the opposition United National Party (UNP), faced an unenviable dilemma. The UNP, just as guilty of fomenting nationalist unrest in the past as the rival SLFP,¹⁰ nonetheless appeals to a voter base made up of ethnic and religious minorities, as well as Sinhala-Buddhist urbanites spanning the class hierarchy. Generally seen as pro-business, pro-Western, and cosmopolitan (where the SLFP is socialist, Sinhala-Buddhist, and, under Rajapakse, anti-Western), the UNP's own politics came into conflict regarding the Port City. A UNP-led government would be loathe to be seen rejecting a billion-dollar investment that could become a major landmark for post-war Colombo. And yet, given the source of the money, and the UNP's traditional cooperation with western and Indian interests, presiding over the construction of a major Chinese project with strategic and even military implications could be problematic for Sri Lanka's geopolitical position.

The Colombo Port City project came to represent an overarching conflict between different visions of Sri Lanka's post-war future. The question was not whether the future would be capitalist, but rather what kind of capitalism would be embraced. The two major parties, the SLFP and UNP were actually quite similar in their expressed goals of bringing about rapid development, improving Colombo's infrastructure and drawing more FDI. The question was really about where this FDI should be coming from, and whether or not the Chinese specifically were reliable allies and partners for 21st century Sri Lanka. The intensity of Sri Lankan (Sinhala-

¹⁰ This is one of the enduring puzzles of Sri Lankan politics. The UNP was actually the party in power at the start of the civil war, and presided over the 1981 burning of the Jaffna Library as well as the outbreak of anti-Tamil riots in Colombo in 1983. Yet despite this historical record of ethno-nationalist violence, the UNP of today has many voters from Colombo's Tamil and Muslim communities.

Buddhist) nationalism is well-known; both of the major parties deploy nationalist rhetoric regularly in order to exercise affective pull on would-be voters. What the Port City issue brought to light was how very different, competing claims could adapt nationalist tropes to suit their positions either for or against this major project. Various marketing efforts on the part of the CHEC and Sri Lankan supporters of the Port City reveal the importance of appeals to national identity in justifying the project.

In the spring of 2015, during the time that the Colombo Port City project was on pause, the CHEC embarked on a set of concerted efforts to render the project more appealing to the population. Hoping to cultivate support among Sri Lankans who might in turn pressure the new government to keep going with the Port City, the CHEC became bolder in marketing the project. Beginning in April, I and several of my Sri Lankan friends noticed a significant increase in their social media presence with suddenly active Twitter and Facebook accounts regularly sharing alluring images of the project specs. Around the same time, a group of Sri Lankan bloggers was invited to tour the Port City site and speak with staff, and subsequently to write up their impressions of the project. An early promotional video for the Port City had depicted only racially ambiguous or European people strolling through the malls and promenades of the new city; now, images circulated by the Chinese company replaced some of these with photographs of Sri Lankan faces superimposed onto the computer animated inhabitants and shoppers of the future project.

The efforts of the CHEC to sway public opinion reached their apex with the so-called “Ranbumi rallies for unity.” These were events held in towns and cities across Sri Lanka with much fanfare, often with religious figures in attendance, whose stated purpose was to promote “unity” between ethnic groups - tacked onto this goal was

that of advancing the Port City as somehow constitutive of this new Sri Lankan inter-ethnic unity. The rallies were partially funded by the CHEC, which also pledged money to construct schools in the places where the rallies stopped. At each location, a brick with the name of the city or town engraved was given by the townspeople to the itinerant rally, with the eventual aim of putting all the bricks together to make a Ranbumi monument in Colombo.

All of these efforts had the goal of swaying public opinion in favor of the project, re-casting the Port City as something friendly and Sri Lankan rather than as something foreign and menacing. What emerges in the videos and media accounts of the Ranbumi rallies is their strategic use of multi-ethnic, multi-religious symbols and visual cues to suggest a link between the Port City and the cause of island-wide unity. In one video produced by the television network NewsFirst (which gained notoriety during this period for its staunch support of the Port City) cameras follow the Ranbumi rally to Jaffna, the northern cultural capital of Sri Lanka's Tamil population. Describing the Ranbumi rallies as part of an attempt to build "a nation devoid of communal and religious differences," the video depicts the convoy traveling to Jaffna over the Sangipuddy bridge which the narrator refers to as yet "another endeavor connecting the North and the South" (NewsFirst, 2015). The video then shows cheerful imagery of a crowd of Muslim and Tamil citizens - as well as some Chinese engineers from the CHEC - congregating and celebrating the Ranbumi ceremony outside of the Nallur Kovil in Jaffna, one of the most sacred sites of Sri Lanka's Tamil Hindu population. The sight of minority citizens in Jaffna waving Sri Lankan flags and welcoming representatives of the Colombo Port City project is a powerful example of the kind of all-island nationalism that was important in building a case for the project to go forward.

In subsequent sections of this chapter, I examine more carefully what the grounds for opposition to the project were among Colombo residents. Overall, the reasons people objected were often quite dissimilar, but there were a few broad categories that organized dissent: (1) environmental concerns, specifically that dredging sand for the Port City would erode the coastlines, destroy beaches and enhance the risk of flooding; (2) geopolitical concerns, about China's influence on Sri Lankan politics and fears of Sri Lanka becoming isolated from India and western powers; (3) social concerns about the elite character of the project, its exclusionary nature and the fear that it would favor wealthy foreigners over locals. However, some Colombo residents were very much in favor of the Port City project and I also attend to their explanations and justifications for the project's legitimacy. In the next section, I examine how those critical of the project organized their dissent, and how they deployed notions of Sri Lankan culture and values to bolster their critiques.

Hub: Interrupted

On a sweltering, oppressive day in early March 2015, I joined a group of protestors as they made their way from the main railway station in downtown Colombo, through the city's main business district. Their trajectory aimed westwards, towards the Indian Ocean, near the iconic Galle Face Green where the city meets the waves. Flanked on either side by policemen on horseback, the protestors – students, Buddhist and Christian clergy members, fishermen, trade unionists, environmentalists – shouted chants and slogans in the form of accusation: “all thieves!” (*horu okkoma*) and “foreign octopuses!” (*videshika bowallaya*). Despite the insults and epithets, the mood of the march was generally friendly and carnival-like: street musicians wearing colorful capes played instruments and sang,

people were smiling and joking as we walked. But by the time the protestors wanted to make the critical turn which would take the march towards the ocean and past the Hilton Hotel, things changed. Suddenly, we were met by armed policemen standing in front of metal barriers. An imposing black vehicle, the kind that dispenses teargas as one of my companions told me, loomed just beyond the partition.

I was with the protestors at this critical juncture, just a few steps away from the metal barriers and the Hilton and World Trade Center only a bit beyond. Colombo's business district still buzzed around the surreal scene, almost as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening: men and women in collared shirts and tailored suits were filing out of their offices in the World Trade Center, casting curious looks from time to time, but otherwise carrying on with their days. Some of the protestors began arguing heatedly with the police: why could we not pass in front of the Hilton? Why were we being stopped? Members of one of the trade unions, wearing identical black vests, decided to stop traffic – after much commotion and deliberation, they simply walked into the center of the busy street right behind us and plopped down, cross-legged, in front of the buses and cars. The stand-off continued, a mix of boredom punctuated by occasional moments of tension. The only other person I knew on the march, an ecologist who had invited me to join, turned to me and said sarcastically: “the real question is, who sent the police? The new government, or the Chinese?”

The anti-Port City activists who I joined on the protest march in March 2015 were actually a loose coalition of students, environmentalists, and clergy (primarily Christians of various denominations) who opposed the Port City for numerous reasons, including the damage it could do to the Sri Lankan coastline, and the

dispossession of fisher people living along Colombo's beaches.¹¹ The anti-Port City activists tended to be widely involved with other generally progressive causes and social justice issues, many of which had brought them in direct conflict with the former Rajapakse government. For example, two of my primary contacts in the movement, Father Thomas and Sister Jane, were heavily involved in organizing Free Trade Zone workers in the towns just north of Colombo, and also regularly attended memorial services in the north for Tamil civilians killed by the Sri Lankan Army at the end of the war. Many of the older activists (Father and Sister included) had been involved with, or sympathetic towards, the 1971 leftist youth insurrection against the SLFP government of Srimavo Bandaranaike; others had been threatened by the UNP government's campaign of disappearances and torture of youths in the 1980s, and some had lived in exile outside Sri Lanka as a result of direct threats they had received during this time. The Rajapakse government's white vans - the primary mode of transportation used to kidnap and torture dissidents - were only the latest in a long line of oppressive state mechanisms which the activists had encountered in their lives.

I was often struck by how the activists relied on nationalist, sometimes outright xenophobic tropes to make their points, even as they embraced causes of social justice for ethnic minorities. Even though the activists worked with a variety of marginalized and minority groups, they still tended to make a dichotomous distinction between what they termed "our culture" and "our values" and foreign values, which were always coded as elite, cosmopolitan, pro-business and pro-

¹¹ While the activists were not part of any specific NGO or formal organization before the protests started, they did eventually link their efforts with those of Transparency International, a global NGO with a focus on fighting corruption; the concern over the mystery and lack of publicly available information on the contracts signed with the CHEC provided a clear shared focus between the activists and the local office of Transparency.

capitalist. By contrast, Sri Lankan “culture” was understood to be one of self-sufficiency, close relationship with the land and nature, religiosity and kinship-based community structure. Sometimes these essentialist views of Sri Lankan culture were important for mobilizing people to fight for their rights, and were also useful in overcoming inter-ethnic and inter-religious divisions; but at other times, this sort of rhetoric implicitly played on existing xenophobia and suspicion of outsiders.

The activists were aware of the significant efforts on the part of CHEC and other pro-Port City interests to sway public opinion in favor of the project. The Ranbumi rallies were a source of particular ire. To my activist informants, the rallies represented not a hopeful message of Sri Lankan unity, but rather the ultimate cynical ploy to use Chinese money to influence Sri Lankan politics. “They claim to be bringing peace,” Sister Jane said exasperatedly, “But if this will bring peace, why did we go into this crazy war?” Her question points to a contradiction between the rhetoric of peace and unity and the recent civil war, fought precisely over the issue of maintaining Sri Lanka’s territorial integrity.

Sister looked with suspicion on the presence of the CHEC managers and engineers attending the Ranbumi rallies in poor communities throughout Sri Lanka. To her, the presence of these Chinese corporate representatives was only a way of pressuring poor Sri Lankans to accept the Port City project in exchange for financial support, which, she and Father Thomas believed, would only be used to in service of deepening Chinese influence to lay the groundwork for future harmful projects. She and Father claimed that the Chinese were using the Ranbumi rallies to promise large sums of money to support schools in each community they visited, and with this would fund “Chinese language training, culture and capacity training.” With a sad shake of her head speaking of the teachers and religious figures eagerly welcoming

financial donations from the CHEC and Ranbumi, Sister sighed “they don’t know that they betray their own country.”

One morning in April, the anti-Port City coalition held an event, a “People’s Tribunal” in which they staged a mock trial for the Port City; as part of the conceit, various speakers went up to a podium and acted as “witnesses” delivering their “testimony” about the effects the project would have. As I listened to the speeches and noted down what people said, I could not help but be struck by the quantity of testimonies that drew on crude anti-Chinese sentiment. In one testimony, the speaker cited historical events supposedly going back to the 15th century. He told the audience that China had been engaged in nefarious dealings in Sri Lanka for a long time. This speaker dated the start of Chinese intervention to 1408, when, he alleged, a Chinese emperor had sent ships to Sri Lanka and attempted to steal the sacred tooth relic, one of the holiest artifacts in Sinhalese Buddhism. This seemed to open the floodgates for testimony that had very little to do with environmental issues or geopolitics. Later, another speaker at the same event referred to the influx of Chinese visitors to Colombo – “look at how they dress” he said, gesturing disdainfully at his legs to indicate the short skirts he associated with Chinese women. In a separate interview with one of the layman activists of the anti-Port City coalition, I was surprised to also hear him draw a link between sexual mores and the Port City: “the Chinese will be bringing more prostitution,” he told me with grave confidence. “They are not respecting Sri Lankan culture, they bring their culture here and their women.”

The dichotomy between so-called “local values” and outside influences builds on strong nationalist sentiment which has been well-documented as a feature of Sri

Lankan politics and life for decades. The association of foreigners with sexual and moral laxity has been documented by other ethnographers (for example Amarasuriya 2013); the linking of ethnonationalism with patriarchal control over women's bodies and policing of their sexuality is hardly exceptional. However, while the more extreme elements of Sinhala-Buddhist and Tamil nationalism are well-known, it is worth noting that the activists I describe here were largely Sinhalese Christians; the anti-Port City movement did not necessarily employ classically Sinhala-*Buddhist* tropes in its appeals to solidarity against the project for the simple reason that this would not draw much support from Colombo residents, who are primarily ethnic and religious minorities, and particularly would not go far with the mainly Catholic coastal fishermen who are most likely to be dispossessed and negatively effected by the project. Instead, what I observed when speaking to this particular group of activists was an appeal to a slightly different form of nationalism, one which positioned *all* Sri Lankans as potential holders of "local values."

Let me return to the scene with which I opened this section, that of the protest trying and failing to complete its march towards the Galle Face Green. As I explained, this moment was revelatory of the deep suspicion of Chinese influence in Sri Lanka. My companion's wry remark wondering who sent the police (the government, or the Chinese?) and the chants against "foreign octopi" speak to the enduring importance of nationalist rhetoric in political spaces such as protests. However this ethnographic vignette is significant not only because it reveals deeply-held suspicions of foreign influence, but also because it suggests the intensity of resistance the Port City encountered, and by extension speaks to the charged, difficult nature of bringing about this particular expression of hubness. While the optimistic talk of urban development and beautification that abounded in post-war

Colombo often portrayed the city's transformation as smooth, uncomplicated and inevitable, the scenes of the protest and the People's Tribunal suggest that it was anything but. Rather than a neatly unfolding linear timeline of conception- design- implementation, the Port City project's progress was interrupted by the messy realities of Sri Lankan politics.

The content of people's chants and comments during the march was relevant, but so was the setting. As I mentioned, the protest march was making its way from the Fort Railway station to the Galle Face Green, and was stopped before getting past the Hilton. As we waited in the hot sun amidst a tense stand-off between police and protestors, workers from the financial district tried to make their way around us, on their way home for the evening. Union activists blocked traffic, sitting cross-legged in front of buses filled with people. For a short time, those who professed "local values" and opposed capitalist projects of urban development were able to physically insert themselves into one of places in Colombo most emblematic of finance capital, wealth and power.

The protest stopping in front of the Hilton represented a disruption of the normal weekday flow of people and vehicles in Colombo's most important business district. Hubness as an ideal rests on free movement and circulation. The disruption caused by the anti-Port City protest was a physical manifestation of the larger disruption to the project plans presented by citizens' resistance and suspicion. Interruption, disruption, things not going quite as planned - all of these things, I suggest, might be extrapolated from this one ethnographic moment to the broader moment of trying to transform Colombo into a global hub city. Political maneuvering, social conflict and constraints all played a role in limiting the possibilities for the Colombo Port City project.

Cosmopolitan Rumors

I quickly learned that rumors and speculation about the Port City were easier to come by than concrete details or facts about the project. During the uncertain period of the project's suspension, the Colombo air was thick with different interpretations of its potential effects. Colombo residents wondered both about the Port City's potential impact on the cityscape and their own day-to-day lives, as well as the impact it had for Sri Lanka's standing internationally. Rather than viewing these discussions and rumors as pointing towards a partial understanding of the "true" nature of the Port City, I instead consider these rumors as valuable in their own right.

Many of the rumors and uncertain claims about the Port City revolved around the fact that no one knew for certain what legal arrangements had been forged between the CHEC and the Sri Lankan government. Because the project had been conceptualized and initiated under the Rajapakse government, at a time when transparency was minimal, radically different accounts emerged of who would ultimately own the land being dredged to create the surface area of the Port City, and under what kinds of conditions. Estimates of the Port City's size were given in hectares, and though it eventually became public knowledge that the newly created land would amount to 269 hectares, it was never made clear what proportion of that total, if any, would be given outright to the Chinese, and what would remain under Sri Lankan control. Typically, in Sri Lanka, foreigners are not allowed to own land but are only allowed to acquire it in the form of 99-year leases. Some were convinced that this same rule would be applied to the CHEC, which would merely be leasing the land from the Sri Lankan government; others insisted that no company would accept this, and opined that the CHEC must be given some land on a more

permanent basis as compensation. What would it mean for Sri Lanka going forward if a foreign entity owned part of the island?

Colombo residents did not draw a distinction between the CHEC as a corporation and the Chinese government. As evidenced by the ecologist's remark at the protest about "the Chinese" "sending" the police, in everyday talk the boundary between the corporation and the Chinese government was blurry at best. For those concerned about the Port City, the potential for the CHEC to own land in Colombo was understood as a ceding of Sri Lankan sovereignty to Chinese interest. One genre of rumor about the Port City presented the new landmass as a kind of exclusive enclave that would be off-limits to Sri Lankans. This was a step beyond the common-sense observation that the Port City, if constructed, would be likely to cater to the wealthy and that many of these people would be foreigners. In this particular narrative, the Port City would actually be off-limits even to well-to-do Sri Lankans. It would be a kind of country of its own, floating parallel to the city of Colombo, but governed by foreign laws. Another variation on this rumor was that the Chinese would institute their own passport control mechanisms, policing people who came in and out the same way as if one were entering a foreign country.

These kinds of rumors, even with small variations, underlined the same overall fear: that Sri Lankan people would be kept out, on the basis of their citizenship and color, and that the Port City would be regulated by a totally separate set of laws, placing it outside the Sri Lankan state's jurisdiction. "The Port City will be for the Chinese! You'll need a passport to get in!" said Rashid, a young Muslim professional I spoke with about the project. "It will spoil the whole aspect of Colombo. You wouldn't like it if they came to the US and did this," he said confrontationally. The reference to my own country, the United States, was meaningful. Not only was

Rashid referring to the US in order to gauge my own individual reaction and communicate what he saw as the high stakes of the Port City project, he was also abstractly referencing the differentials of geopolitical power that made this situation unimaginable in a wealthy country, like the US, but very much imaginable in Sri Lanka by contrast.

In part, those who were suspicious of the Port City and the Chinese influence on Sri Lanka grounded their fears in the idea - never confirmed, but never satisfactorily denied - that the enclave would be more than just a center for leisure and commerce, but that it would have military importance as well. One engineer I interviewed, who anxiously asked that I not quote him or tell others we had spoken, told me he had been on an advisory board of scientists, engineers and other professionals under the old government, and had been tasked with reviewing documents about the project. He claimed that the plans had included a partial naval installation, but that perhaps the new government would disallow this, even if the project as a whole were to go forward. Asking me not to record the interview, and also expressing discomfort to see me writing hand-written notes during our talk, the engineer asked me to close my notebook. While we chatted, he grew more casual and visibly at ease - but eventually expressed fear of Chinese retribution for his scientifically-informed criticisms of the project, saying he had been intimidated and threatened during a meeting with the CHEC. After seeing evidence of a naval base, he was concerned that he would be targeted for “knowing too much” about the project. Among activists against the Port City (who did not have access to the same sensitive material as the engineer), a central concern was that of airspace - if the Chinese were given Sri Lankan land, might this also translate into the air above Sri Lanka, and not just the land on which the Port City was constructed?

All of these fears, anxieties and suspicions speak to the continued importance of hard, geopolitical realities. Informants who expressed these kinds of concerns were not only critical of the project because they disagreed with particular aspects of its construction, but because they worried about its impact for Sri Lanka's standing in the world and relations with other countries. The anxiety that would one need to "show a passport" to get into the Port City speaks to a difficult reality many Sri Lankans face as citizens who need visas for all kinds of international travel, and are often faced with barriers to their mobility that people from the Global North can hardly imagine. The idea that the Chinese might own a small part of Colombo and rule it as their own territory was a testament to the deep uncertainty of the post-war future. Allowing the Chinese these kinds of privileges would be a very permanent commitment to the foreign policy forged under Mahinda Rajapakse, which also involved increasingly hostile relations with countries like India, the United States and Great Britain. For many religious and ethnic minorities, as well as more liberal-minded Sinhala-Buddhists and the business community, this was untenable. Rumors about the Port City's "true" purpose as either a zone governed by foreign laws and/or a military installation were direct expressions of the geopolitical anxieties of the post-2015 election era.

Rajesh Venugopal's analysis of the "grease devil" episode of 2011 offers an interesting counterpoint for thinking about rumors in the Sri Lankan context. He discusses a set of incidents in which women (primarily in Muslim and Tamil communities in Eastern Sri Lanka) were sexually assaulted by unidentified men slathered in an oily substance (hence "grease" devil), causing widespread panic. While this might initially seem to be a world away from the raging debates over the Port City, one striking similarity is the fact that both the Port City controversy and

the grease devil scare to different degrees touched on the relationship between Sri Lanka and China. Venugopal reports that in some accounts, the grease devil was thought to be the creation of Chinese doctors looking to harvest the blood of virgins in order to conduct a secret medical treatment on the President. This suggests the anxiety with which many Sri Lankans viewed the relationship between their own government and that of China; the image of stealing the blood of innocent local women is rife with symbolism about inappropriate exploitation and theft of the country's resources. Other explanations for the grease devil crisis sometimes included blaming western powers seeking to destabilize the Sri Lankan government (Venugopal 2015, 628). In both the grease devil and Port City debates, we see the enduring power of xenophobic tropes in shaping political debate in Sri Lanka.

The grease devil and Port City rumors can be read together as examples of the way that foreign policy and geopolitics came to inform how Sri Lankans made sense of the world in the postwar period. Many Sri Lankans are aware that their country's small size and relative lack of geopolitical clout make it particularly reliant on alliances with larger regional neighbors to determine its standing internationally. I have named this section "cosmopolitan rumors" because I wish to highlight the fact that the suspicion, uncertainty and mixed messages surrounding the Colombo Port City project were born at the epicenter of Sri Lanka's largest city, and were powerful among people with high levels of education, political engagement and access to diverse forms of media. The rumors themselves required some level of understanding and concern for foreign policy, and gained currency in a context in which people cared deeply about Sri Lanka's reputation worldwide, either because they traveled frequently or believed strongly in the promise of traveling in the future. The controversy over the Port City revealed that what might be generally called

“nationalism” was deployed by both the pro and anti-Port City camps. Rather than pitting abstract concepts of “nationalism” and “cosmopolitanism” against one another, looking at the Port City rumors allows me to consider how nationalist rhetoric informed many different kinds of discussions about Colombo’s urban development.

“The Chinese Will Arrange”: Pro-Port City Perspectives

Not everyone shared in the critiques of the Port City that were circulating around Colombo. To some of my informants, friends, and acquaintances, the Port City was a big opportunity for Sri Lanka, and calls to halt the project were merely standing in the way of much-needed progress. In this line of thinking, the Port City would “put Sri Lanka on the map,” a phrase I heard repeated many times. Another common refrain was that it would help Colombo become like Singapore or Dubai, not only in the well-rehearsed idea of it becoming a powerful, significant city in the Indian Ocean region, but in having a particularly well-developed waterfront and skyline, which would help it appear aesthetically similar to these model cities. Sri Lankan nationalism came to the fore in these narratives as well; development and progress were framed as worthy goals for the nation as a whole. If Chinese investment could propel Colombo towards greater standing internationally, if it could attract greater wealth and prosperity to the city, then the Port City was good for the country.

It was not at all uncommon for politically savvy, young Colombo residents to simultaneously express excitement about the prospect of the Port City and to be anxious about China’s influence on the country. Consider this blog post from a popular Colombo blogger, Yudhanjaya Wijeratne, who was among a group of journalists and writers invited to tour the Port City, and who shared his thoughts in a

post. It is worth quoting at length, as it exemplifies the arc of many conversations on the Port City that took place in Colombo during the course of 2015:

I personally have no doubt that economically, this is going to be a huge thing. People will live here. There'll be 3.5 kilometers of public beaches. Actual malls will set up shop, and not just micromalls like Majestic City and Crescat. International companies will set up offices here – retail spaces are enough; it's the offices that will really drive change. Sri Lanka has a skilled IT / BPO industry; that will probably blossom. Sri Lanka badly needs this kind of investment if it's to become anything like the massively important hub of the world every full-blooded Sri Lankan seems to think it is. We don't have the money ourselves, and nobody is willing to give it to us.

I was honestly reassured by how utterly profit-oriented the CHEC people seemed to be: between businessmen and politicians, it's the latter that have problems with honesty. However, make no mistake: China is building this port. They're saying they're not here to settle, but they have the right to; there's plenty of space in there for everyone. And I don't know what's in that contract, but I don't think Sri Lanka pulling out will be a painless process. I also don't think that everyone is playing with a straight bat.

For better or the worse, Chinese influence is coming. Whether we end up turning into Singapore or into Hong Kong remains to be seen. (Wijeratne, 2015)

Wijeratne perfectly captures the attitude of many who saw the Port City as a generally good thing, even with some reservations. The idea that “Sri Lanka badly needs this kind of investment” if it is to become a “massively important hub” was the basic foundation of most pro-Port City rhetoric. Both in this text and in my various interviews and conversations, the causal link was never exactly specified between the construction of the Port City and the transformation of the island into a “hub”; Wijeratne makes the most specific link between the two by citing the importance of more office space, though it is unclear why more offices necessarily need to be bundled along with the Port City development. The appeal to “full-blooded Sri Lankans” is noteworthy. Here the politics of “blood” are not employed to index racial or ethnic purity or membership of one particular group, but rather apply to the broader, more spacious label of “Sri Lankan.” Allegiance to a “Sri Lankan” identity

in this reading, however, rests on one's loyalty to development projects like the Port City.

The last two sentences are perhaps the most telling and significant argument of the pro-Port City line: Chinese influence is cast as inevitable, and Sri Lanka's only choice is to determine what form and to what extent this influence will be felt on the island. The mention of Singapore and Hong Kong reference both an ideal outcome (the idea that Colombo would become like either of these cities) but also an important difference: Singapore is an independent city-state with high levels of development, while Hong Kong is a globally important financial center coming under ever-greater Chinese control. Wijeratne's blog post indicates not only the uses of Sri Lankan nationalism in framing the debate around the Port City, but also suggests the challenges and anxieties surrounding Sri Lanka's geopolitical position and its future alliances.

The rhetoric in Wijeratne's blog post was echoed numerous times in real life conversations I had around Colombo. For example, Ashan, a husband of one of my friends, the scion of an extremely wealthy and prominent family of lawyers, politicians, and other white collar professionals, surprised me with his simultaneous concern over Sri Lanka's independence and sovereignty *and* his support for the Port City project. One evening, as I drove with him and his wife through Colombo's darkening streets, he began flipping through radio channels and paused on one; the crackling sound was that of Sri Lanka's new Chinese-language radio station. "Every time I hear it, I can feel a bit of our sovereignty leaving us," he said mournfully. I initially took this to mean that he was against the Port City, and made a mental note to check in with him later about his views on the project.

When eventually the topic came up more explicitly in conversation, I was surprised that my friend was actually not against the Port City at all; as we chatted about it, he asked me my own views. I expressed some doubts over the Port City's actual ability to attract more foreigners, suggesting that most tourists I knew would rather spend time elsewhere in Sri Lanka. To my surprise, Ashan strenuously objected to this and told me that I was overlooking "all the Indian and Chinese tourists who want to hang out in malls. The Port City will give them that." Ashan was making a subtle distinction between the perceived tastes and styles of western tourists versus visitors from neighboring Asian countries. But he also, like many pro-Port City Colombo residents, was suggesting that the Port City would naturally be an attraction pulling visitors from across the region. He too saw it as a way of "putting Sri Lanka on the map."

While many were ambivalent about Chinese influence on Sri Lanka but thought overall the Port City was a good idea, others outright welcomed it. Unsurprisingly, this point of view tended to be taken by those who identified either as strong supporters of former President Mahinda Rajapakse as an individual, or as long time members of the SLFP more broadly (Rajapakse's party). Discussions in this vein tended to draw a link between the Port City project and abstract moral and ethical questions. For example, when I spoke with an upper middle class housewife in Colombo 5, a long time SLFP supporter and member of a politically active family, about the project, she surprised me with her explicit support of Sri Lanka's rapprochement with China. Her reasons were based on the notion that the Chinese were overall more honest in their dealings with other countries, unlike the United States which "forces other countries to do what they say, and only on that basis they will give." By contrast, according to her, the Chinese offered low interest rates on

loans and no conditions at all. “The Chinese are successful because they worked hard to get what they have, India [is also] like that,” she told me. Americans on the other hand “have always had everything and so they have too much...they developed systems like ‘work from home’ they are lazy.” In the course of our conversation, I was surprised that this woman drew on all the well-known stereotypes of the Chinese in Colombo - their supposedly inherently commercial nature, their hard work, “expressionless” (her words) affect and disciplined lifestyle (“they wear the same clothes everyday”) - but cited them not as any reason to distrust them, but rather as evidence of the Chinese being good business partners and reliable investors.

Sri Lankan suspicion and resentment of western powers like the United States, Canada and Great Britain - along with India - was partially a product of what many perceived to be unfair criticism of the country’s human rights record. To many Sri Lankans who saw the end of the civil war as an unequivocally positive step forward, the outcry over the Rajapakse government’s treatment of Tamil civilians was a form of sanctimonious hypocrisy on the part of these foreign countries, which devalued the victory over terrorism. As a result, some in Colombo praised China for never having raised such challenges to Rajapakse’s administration, and saw giving them some land on the Port City territory as “returning the favor.”

As I have mentioned, those who supported the Port City project tended to be rather vague about exactly *how* the project would accomplish the advertised aims of making Colombo a more important regional and global city. While the CHEC’s advertising and the words of government officials who had worked under the previous administration were full of tropes about the Port City being what Sri Lanka “needed”, the actual causal mechanism between the project and enhanced status for Colombo was unclear. This was made particularly clear to me when I had the

opportunity to interview a high-level official at the UDA who had been in his position during the Rajapakse government, and was an unabashed supporter of the former president as well as of the Port City project. When I asked him to talk to me more about the Port City, he said proudly that his agency had done the initial studies for the Port City; when asked about any possible concerns regarding the Chinese ownership of the land, he simply said that “if the Chinese can give all the money the Chinese can have a project here. It will bring Colombo to a higher standard.” He went on to describe the Port City as source of “development” for Sri Lanka, which would bring more investment from other countries. He described it as being similar to the Jumeirah complex (in Dubai) but “in Sri Lankan character.” When I pressed him for details, he answered nearly all of my questions with a single confident answer: “the Chinese will arrange.”

While those who opposed the Port City project sometimes drew on unsubstantiated rumors to make their points (eg. the Chinese checking passports at the entrance) my ethnographic research suggested that pro-Port City Colombians also relied on a mix of facts, rumors, opinions and hearsay to explain their positions. Being for the Port City was often a result of people’s attitudes towards the former government or China. Even those who feared Chinese influence believed that the Port City would bring about development and progress often without very sound explanations of exactly how this would happen. As I have shown in this section, unitary Sri Lankan nationalism came to the fore not only in critiques of the Port City project but also in the accounts of those who supported it. Both sides of the Port City debate had to contend with limited information and facts about the project, and as a result tended to refer back to crude stereotypes, abstract geopolitical claims, or pre-existing social and party allegiances as a way of justifying their positions.

Hub and Nation: Spatial Imaginaries of Development

The debates over the Colombo Port City offer a way of thinking together the spatial politics of hubness and nationalism. In chapter one, “the Politics of Hubness,” I observed that hubness discourse tends to involve some slippage in terms between “Sri Lanka” and “Colombo.” It is often unclear, in official discussions on national and urban development, exactly what relationship Colombo should have to its hinterlands or the rest of the island of Sri Lanka. In nationalist terms, Colombo has long been considered an exceptional space - populated by ethnic and religious minorities, lacking any significance in Buddhist religious writings (Spencer 2015), and often seen as the home of Europeanized, “un-Sri Lankan” elites. This very exceptionalism is reinforced in hubness discourse, but rather than positioning Colombo outside an imagined mono-ethnic, mono-religious polity, it makes Colombo central to dreams of modernity, development and progress. Both the discourses of hubness and nationalism position Colombo as unique and distinct from the rest of the island of Sri Lanka. I would like to suggest that by looking at the nationalist discourse which animated the Port City debates together with the aspirational rhetoric of turning Colombo into a global hub city, we are able to see the contradictions, gaps and occasional overlaps in the various spatial imaginaries shaping urban and national development in contemporary Sri Lanka. Rather than seeing the pro and anti-Port City camps as either nationalist or cosmopolitan, their positions can more clearly be seen as mapping onto different understandings of the spatial politics of development.

The debates over the Colombo Port City highlight the emergence of a unitary - that is, an island-wide, multi-ethnic - Sri Lankan nationalism in contemporary

political discourse. Importantly, my analysis of the Port City controversy suggests that this unitary nationalism was not being invoked only by one side of the pro or anti-Port City division, but rather was deployed creatively by both sides. The unity of the island of Sri Lanka as a territorial entity has been central to colonial and nationalist imaginings, with different effects and valences (Rampton 2011, Jazeel 2009, Sivasundaram 2013). Tamil nationalism presented an existential threat to Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism precisely because it suggested the territorial fragmentation of the island space typically understood to be a unified whole. The Port City project seemed to some people to suggest a similar, but spatially distinct, fragmentation of the unitary island. As one fisherman's wife in Mutuwall, northern Colombo, put it when asked her thoughts on the Port City, "why give the land to the Chinese if it couldn't be given to Tamil people in this country?" Her question was provocative in its flippant reference to the civil war and Tamil separatism. It positioned the Port City as a threat to Sri Lankan unity as severe as that posed by Tamil rebels. Intriguingly, by describing the Tamils as "in this country" the quote hints at greater sympathy for their claim as Sri Lankans, part of the country, than for the alien, outsider Chinese. On the other side of the debate, those who supported the Port City made *also* made this claim through appeals to national unity (as in the case of the Ranbuni rallies) and by suggesting that ultimately the project would be beneficial to the country's development as a whole. How to make sense of these different spatial-developmental imaginaries?

In *Neoliberalism as Exception* (2006), Aihwa Ong writes about the concept of "graduated sovereignty," a way that states in Asia divide their territories and populations, offering different forms of citizenship, regulation, opportunity and forms of sovereignty in the same national territory. Ong traces the shift in

sovereignty from the era of developmental states focused on the *national* economy to what she terms postdevelopmentalism, “a more dispersed strategy that does not treat the national territory as a uniform political space” (2006, 77). She continues:

Market-driven logic induces the coordination of political policies with the corporate interests, so that developmental decisions favor the fragmentation of the national space into various noncontiguous zones, and promote the differential regulation of populations who can be connected to or disconnected from global circuits of capital (2006, 77).

The Port City project is a quintessential example of a “zone” introduced into the urban landscape of Colombo. Note, also, the resonance between Ong’s description of graduated sovereignty and the fear that Sri Lankans would have to “show a passport” to enter the Port City expressed by my informant in a previous section.

The pro-Port City camp in Sri Lanka explicitly champions it as a project that will offer connection to the “global circuits of capital” Ong mentions. Rather than viewing the Port City controversy as an obvious case of nation or nationalism versus capital, the concept of graduated sovereignty allows me to consider these debates as a conflict over what *kind* of sovereignty model the Sri Lankan state should exercise over its territory. Under a system of graduated sovereignty, the integrity of the nation-state need not be set in contrast to the flows and requirements of capital.

The differentiation and fragmentation of space within states described by Ong echoes trends identified by geographers and scholars of urbanism more broadly. As states broadly move away from a focus on *national* economies and *national* development - what Neil Brenner refers to as “spatial Keynesianism” (Brenner 2004), increasingly we see extreme concentrations of wealth and capital in specific cities. One could understand these as “frontier zones” (Sassen 2000) within national territories - in other words, cities become increasingly de-nationalized and “opened up” to global capital. However, unlike Saskia Sassen who speaks of the

deterioration of the national spatiotemporal order in favor of a transnational one, Ong's concept of graduated sovereignty allows us to think through the ways in which the accumulation of wealth and opportunity in cities does not contradict but rather reinforces new forms of statehood and sovereignty in much of Asia.

Activists' appeals to notions of local values or "our culture" were an expression of unitary Sri Lankan nationalism *and* an implicit critique of graduated sovereignty. Rather than attempting to sow divisions between Sri Lankans based on religion, ethnicity or language, activists against the Port City project framed their struggle as one of all non-elite Sri Lankans against the intertwined threats of neglectful and greedy elites, domineering Chinese and rapacious global capitalism. The very same language of inter-ethnic unity and multi-religious cooperation that was used by the Ranburi rallies was employed by the activists to precisely opposite ends: instead of viewing the Port City as bringing different groups together, for the anti-Port City coalition, Sri Lankan culture, broadly understood, was the most solid basis of resistance to such a project. It would be most productive, I think, to see the anti-Port City activists not so much as *nationalists*, which hardly distinguishes them from their opponents, but rather as proponents in other terms of what Brenner calls spatial Keynesianism. Just as I suggested in the preceding chapter that hubness is both a temporal *and* spatial claim, this section has highlighted the intertwining of spatial-temporal imaginaries in understanding various development trajectories.

Conclusion

Shortly after my fieldwork in Sri Lanka concluded, the coalition government decided to reinstate the Colombo Port City project, and construction work resumed. Re-christened as the "Colombo Financial City," the project now had the full support

of the new political leadership and was folded into the Western Province “Megapolis” plan, a comprehensive blueprint for the development of Colombo into a major economic center. Official proclamations around the reinstated project were optimistic and ambitious, betraying no sign of the political turmoil which had led to the Port City being put on hold. Fittingly, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe invoked quintessential hubness imagery in his assertion that “the Financial City being built in Colombo will fill the vacuum for offshore financial services between Singapore and Dubai,” (*The Island*, 2016). Wickremasinghe’s comment, in keeping with the ideals of hubness, makes much of Colombo’s geographic position “between” two major financial centers, suggesting the importance of seizing on any available gaps in the already-existing flows of the global capitalist economy. Financial flows are rendered in explicitly *spatial* and geographic terms.

In the preceding chapter, “the Politics of Hubness,” I highlighted the fact that nostalgia for a pre-war Sri Lankan past combined with excitement and anticipation for a connected, cosmopolitan future manages to relegate the period of the civil war to a kind of detour on the path to development. Hubness discourse draws a connection between the pre and post war moments, leaving a gap, an uncomfortable silence about the conflict itself. As this chapter has demonstrated, however, the project of rapid urban development cannot be fully delinked from the legacy of separatist conflict and ethno-nationalism. Planners and government officials may champion the cause of moving full steam ahead into the postwar future, but both the pro and anti Port City perspectives were influenced by the violence and turmoil that racked Sri Lanka between 1983 and 2009. In suggestions that the Port City might promote ethnic unity and in uncomfortable comparisons between Chinese and Tamil

ownership of Sri Lankan land, in the persistent anxieties about compromised Sri Lankan sovereignty, the echoes of the civil war can still be heard, however softly.

As my ethnography has shown, nationalism played a significant role in framing discussions around the Port City. What my engagement with these debates demonstrates is that rather than strictly *Sinhala-Buddhist* nationalism, the Port City issue has brought to light the importance of unitary Sri Lankan nationalism, a form of nationalism relying on island-wide identification as *Sri Lankan* rather than as Tamil, Sinhalese or Muslim. Paradoxically, it seems that debates over the Port City go a longer way towards accomplishing inter-ethnic unity than so many efforts on the part of politicians, NGOs and international organizations to promote a sense of harmony and understanding between groups. My ethnography has highlighted some of the dangers of this unitary nationalism, especially in its reliance on crude xenophobic tropes and essentialist visions of what Sri Lankan “culture” is or should be. And yet, somewhere amidst these perils are also moments of possibility, opportunities for rethinking what it means to be Sri Lankan, what forms of political organization and solidarity might be possible as the country moves into its postwar future.

This ethnography has highlighted the labor and uncertainty that surround the project of bringing hub cities into being - the process of “putting Colombo on the map,” to borrow my informants’ hopeful phrasing. In the following chapters, I turn to how such efforts are experienced by Colombo’s urban poor. Dispossession lays the groundwork for accumulation, but this is a temporally and spatially uneven process. Projects such as the Port City may experience interruption and disruption in their implementation, but they simultaneously disrupt the lives of coastal residents whose livelihood depends on unfettered access to Colombo’s maritime space.

Global cities do not appear, they are built. This chapter has highlighted one aspect of this controversial, uncertain and ongoing endeavor.

CHAPTER 3: THE UNSTABLE COASTLINE: TEMPORALITIES AND SPATIALITIES OF DISPOSSESSION IN NORTHERN COLOMBO

Ambitious plans for the development of Colombo into a world-class, global city are quite effective in erasing the presence of urban dwellers who do not fit the image of a city trying to compete with Singapore, Dubai or Hong Kong. The dominant spatial and temporal imaginaries of post-war Colombo position the city as a site of luxury, wealth and cosmopolitanism offering a “modern” face of Sri Lanka to the world. But what happens to urban dwellers who do not easily conform to these ideals? What futures are possible for those who inhabit a Colombo that does not match the aspirational images promoted by planners and developers? In this chapter, I explore this question through my ethnographic engagement with the fishing community of Mutuwall, northern Colombo. Ultimately, I argue that through multi-faceted and varied forms of dispossession that unfold over long timescales, such urban residents are gradually being denied a role in the future of this emerging hub city. I consider the ways that the fishermen of Mutuwall constitute a challenge to dominant temporal tropes which center linear progress and development; often considered vestiges of the pre-capitalist past or of a non-urban way of life, the fishers’ presence only moments away from the center of Colombo draws attention to a “field of simultaneous, coeval spaces” (Choy 2011, 50) at the heart of the city. In considering different temporalities suggested by the fishers’ inconvenient and awkward presence in Colombo, I am also able to offer a different temporal and spatial understanding of dispossession itself.

In the previous chapter, I outlined the debates and political struggles surrounding the Colombo Port City project, the yet-to-be-completed development project which would change the face of Colombo by adding a new artificially created island to the city's waterfront. The Port City would be a site of leisure, luxury and business activity befitting Colombo's status as a "global hub." In this chapter, I travel not far from the proposed site of the Port City, a short distance up the coast to a very different part of Colombo. The neighborhood of Mutuwall is a fishing enclave in a ramshackle, dilapidated part of northern Colombo. Mutuwall is home to a diverse community of fishermen and their families, port laborers, garment workers and other members of the urban poor and working class. In the afternoons, the waves of the Indian Ocean lick the boats and even houses of Mutuwall residents, who have built their dwellings right up to the edge of the water. Walkways and narrow paths between the houses are often strewn with garbage and fishing nets in the midst of being repaired for upcoming excursions out to sea. Depending on which direction one turns while standing in the middle of this agglomeration of shacks, houses and boats, it is possible to take in with one sweeping look the sight of the open water, fishing boats and houses, industrial appendages of the Colombo Port complex, and, far in the distance, even the twin towers of Colombo's World Trade Center. Mutuwall is both metaphorically and literally an important vantage point from which to observe the ongoing transformation of the city of Colombo.



Image 5 - Houses and fishing boats in Mutuwall, August 2015. Source: Author Photo.

This image depicting Colombo as seen from Mutuwall from the 19th century has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation

Image 6 - View of Colombo Harbour from Mutwal: Capt. O'Brien's Lithograph, 1864. Source: R. K. de Silva, Early Prints of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), 1800-1900, London: Serendib Publications, 1985: 247.

The striking visuals of Mutuwall - a place that manages to evoke the look of a rural fishing village in the midst of a quintessentially urban landscape - speak to the contradictions and inconveniences of urban development in Colombo. In contemporary Sri Lanka, village life is cast as temporally and spatially distinct from the rhythms and realities of the capital. Both Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist and more liberal and cosmopolitan discourses underscore this separation between village and city life: in nationalist imaginaries, Colombo is a space of ethnic, religious and linguistic mixing, lacking the piety and religious significance of other Sri Lankan towns (Spencer and Amarasuriya 2015). Liberal cosmopolitan narratives, on the other hand, also imply a strong division between village and city, because

Colombo's exceptional status and progress vis-a-vis the culturally "backwards" countryside represents an opportunity for Sri Lanka to compete globally with other countries and the city-states of Dubai, Singapore and Hong Kong. I would suggest that for those who subscribe to neoliberal visions of Colombo's future development, the anxieties caused by the existence of a seemingly rural, and poor, enclave like Mutuwall only a short journey from the center of Colombo operate similarly to the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist's anxieties about overlapping, fuzzy boundaries of ethnicity, language and religion. In both cases, there is little room for a fishing village at the heart of Colombo. Mutuwall represents a collapsing of spatialities and temporalities widely assumed to be separate and distinct from one another.

This chapter offers a fine-grained look at the daily, lived experience of dispossession as it unfolds, slowly, from the vantage point of a peripheral urban community. Urban scholars and especially those concerned with the development of world-class or "global" cities in Asia, Africa and Latin America have long pointed to dispossession as one of the cornerstones of the formation of such urban spaces (eg. Goldman 2013, Roy and Ong 2011, Ghertner 2015), as poor urban residents are increasingly displaced by state agencies enacting agendas of beautification, "slum clearance" or "upgrading" and securitization of city spaces. Evicting and relocating Mutuwall residents is a step towards making Colombo match the ideal images already circulating in marketing materials and urban planning documents which celebrate the city as an Asian metropolis. The use of future-oriented ambitions as a mode of justifying urban evictions and dispossession is well-documented (Roy 2016, Goldman 2013, Ghertner 2015); this chapter draws from my ethnographic fieldwork to analyze how such futures are experienced in the *present* by urban residents.

In this chapter, I consider the patterns of dispossession in Colombo as creating urban surplus populations (Li 2009), rather than necessarily incorporating the urban poor into the labor of building the new global city. Drawing on debates in contemporary Marxist theory which position primitive accumulation not as a one-off historical moment *preceding* capitalism's emergence, I understand accumulation by dispossession and primitive accumulation as ongoing processes which occur simultaneous with other phases of capitalist urban development. I question the formulation "accumulation by dispossession" and focus instead on the second part of that construction - dispossession - as not necessarily leading to accumulation. Like Li (2009), I consider the disjointed spatial and temporal effects of dispossession. In other words, I take seriously the idea that while capitalist accumulation is facilitated and underwritten by acts of dispossession, the disconnect between where and when accumulation and dispossession are experienced is a major part of how global cities are brought into being.

In what follows, I offer context for the situation of fishermen in contemporary Sri Lanka, showing the ways fishers contradict Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism which values agrarian - but not necessarily maritime - forms of labor. In the following section, I draw on various strands of Marxist theory to suggest that the fishers of Mutuwall are best understood as a form of "surplus population" (Li 2009) at the heart of Colombo. Next, I present context about Mutuwall specifically, explaining its situation as a community "on the edge" socially, financially and spatially. The following section explores the threat of eviction posed by various government plans for the area, and describes Mutuwall residents' reactions to these schemes. In the subsequent section, I explore fishers' discourses over the limited, foreclosed futures of fishing as a viable livelihood; this points to the fact that dispossession is

experienced not only through the loss of land and dwelling place, but also with regards to economic activity and forms of work. In the penultimate section, I consider the fragmented temporalities and spatialities implied in my ethnography, and I discuss how this contradicts the dominant way of understanding Colombo's development. I conclude by reiterating the non-linear nature of accumulation and dispossession, arguing for an understanding of these dynamics that takes seriously their disjointed nature.

Ultimately, I suggest that the ethnography presented here offers a way of thinking dispossession not as a linear, organized process with clear outcomes but rather as a complex and occasionally contradictory set of intersecting moments, plans and projects. An ethnographic look at the slow, sometimes confusing nature of dispossession allows for a nuanced understanding of how urban residents actually experience life at the spatial and affective edges of today's emerging global cities.

Situating Sri Lankan Fishermen

Fishermen (*divera* or *malukariya*)¹² in Sri Lanka occupy precarious and marginal positions. This is due to a number of different factors: questions of ethnicity, religion and caste; the uncertain nature of the livelihood which gives them their name; and the growing threat of dispossession and eviction from their lands by the

¹² Sinhala offers at least two words for those who practice fishing as their main occupation. *Divera* is a more polite way of referring to fisherpeople, I was told, and when speaking Sinhala this was the term I used throughout my fieldwork. *Malukariya* translates literally to "fish guys" and I never heard any fisher people speak of themselves using this term – it was only used by others to refer to them. In her ethnography *Shorelines* (2009), Ajantha Subramanian uses the term "fishers" – I interchangeably employ the term fishers, fishermen and fisher people here, as well as simply using the Sinhala words. While I appreciate Subramanian's use of the non-gender specific "fisher," most of my informants were men and thus where appropriate I still refer to specific men as "fishermen." "Fishermen" and "fisher people" were the English terms I used throughout my fieldwork when speaking to others about the community I was interviewing. I keep these terms here in the spirit of maintaining a connection to my own field notes and to the actual conversations I was having while in Colombo.

state and by private corporations. At one of my weekly Sinhala lessons I told my tutor, a middle class housewife, about a trip I had recently taken to a beach town in the south. She asked me whether I had seen any fishermen – “they’re frightening aren’t they?” She went on for some time about their unpleasing, rough appearance: dark, burned by the sun perhaps, and wild, she mused that “no one could help them.” They liked to live by their own rules which, she made sure I understood, were wrong somehow – but it was in their nature to live this way, and they had to be left to carry on as ever. In the Western Province, of which Colombo is part, fishermen are largely Catholic; stereotypes about Catholics merge with stereotypes about the lower classes to produce an image of fisher people as friendly, rough, big drinkers, irresponsible, and somehow constitutionally disposed to unpredictable, roving ways, not easily brought into the fold of middle class respectability and stability.

Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism does not hold a clear place for fisherpeople in its mythos. The central images of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology are the symbols of agriculture and the peasantry – what my informants in Mutuwall might call “land jobs.” The glorification of rice (paddy) cultivation in particular forms the cornerstone of much nationalist discourse in Sri Lanka (Brow 1990; Woost 1993; Tennekoon 1988). Writing about the end of the Sri Lankan civil war and the reactionary forces at work in the new post-war political scene, Nira Wickremasinghe observed that these images of peasant-ness were mobile – they could be evoked and channeled by urbanites as much as by the rural classes:

Nostalgia for the rural way of life was harnessed as a winning political strategy that the ruling party gradually made its own. In recent years, the peasant as projected and represented by state institutions became not simply a man who cultivated the soil expecting help or redress from the state. In the vision of more recent Sinhala ideologues, ranging from those in the regime in power to the JVP, the “peasant” could very well be a businessman who sells his products in rural areas or even a city dweller who empathizes with the life of the paddy cultivator and yearns for rural values. (Wickremasinghe 2009, 1051)

And yet the nostalgia Wickremasinghe describes here is only ever useful as nostalgia particularly for the agricultural, the land-based, never for the maritime. While some of the businessmen or city dwellers she describes may wish, for political purposes or from some sort of genuine identification with “the rural” to present themselves as “peasants” no one would actively try to channel the identity of “fisherman.” The political currency of fisher-ness is non-existent, and makes no sense in a context fixated on land cultivation as the vehicle of national glory and source of Sinhala-Buddhist identity.

The economic and material bases of Mutuwall’s precarious position are also worth noting. Most of my fishermen informants were very clear with me that they saw no future for their profession, and they did not want their children to become fishermen if they could help it. Catches are declining and the coastline is eroding. August is supposed to be the time of greatest abundance and most generous hauls from the ocean. And yet every one of the fishermen I interviewed during this time said this year had been bad, worse than any they could remember. Fishermen try and sell their catch at local markets, or to merchants (*mudalali*) who buy the whole catch and re-sell to customers. The *mudalali* could easily be a “local thug” (in the words of the fishermen) and they would be forced to sell their catch to him at a price of his choosing, with no option of finding other buyers. Given that fish rapidly spoil and need to be sold quickly, fishermen have limited choices when it comes to selling off their catch.

Many avenues for upward mobility, or at least towards greater stability, are closed off. For example, despite being practicing Roman Catholics many of the fishermen and their wives complained - to me and also directly to my priest and nun

companions, Father Thomas and Sister Jane - that their children were being turned away from some of the better Catholic schools in northern Colombo. They told of how the teachers and principals at these institutions made prejudicial comments about the fisher children, worrying that they would be bad influences and too unruly compared to the students from more elite Catholic families. On top of this, the cost of attendance was prohibitive: Father Thomas told me that the entrance fee for a good Catholic school could be between Rs.200,000 and Rs. 500,000 (roughly \$1,400 - \$3,400 USD), more than the monthly cost of renting a luxury apartment in some of Colombo's wealthiest neighborhoods.¹³

Once when I was interviewing an older fisherman, I concluded our conversation by asking whether he had anything else he'd like to say, any opinions, thoughts, stories? How did he feel about participating in my research, was it alright with him? He replied by saying that he was just happy I was here asking questions, that he wanted me to write about Mutuwall because in his estimation "no one cares. No one even knows about us." The comment struck me, and its veracity was borne out in my discussions with basically everyone else I knew of higher class status in Colombo. If a middle or upper class Colombo person thought about Mutuwall and the surrounding area at all, then they would likely have something negative to say about the inhabitants (as in the case of my tutor). But it was altogether more likely that residents of Colombo's wealthier central and southern neighborhoods simply wouldn't have heard of the fishing enclave at all, and wouldn't know the community there existed in the first place. Fishers were thought to be people who lived much

¹³ To give an idea of budgets and earnings in the area, families regularly spoke to me of receiving loans or aid amounting to around Rs. 20,000 or Rs. 30,000 – this was understood to be a significant amount, given that fishermen could buy a used boat for Rs. 40,000. I was told by one of the most successful fishermen in the area that under favorable conditions, he could earn up to Rs.50,000 over the course of three days. However, I came to understand that this was very much out of the ordinary – most of the fishermen earned far less and had access to less sophisticated equipment.

farther away, not inside the city. This kind of attitude speaks to the particular marginality of this set of informants: not seen as “slum dwellers,” the prototypical figures of urban poverty, they manage to escape both notice and consideration.

While fishers in Sri Lanka are generally a marginalized population and face numerous challenges (Menon et al. 2016), this chapter takes seriously the particular ways in which the northern Colombo fishers of Mutuwall face specific forms of erasure, marginalization and dispossession precisely because of their unexpected location in an urban area. Fishers become "bodies out of place" (Puwar 2014), seemingly rural subjects who challenge the aspirational logic of projects like the Colombo Port City, which market themselves by invoking the idea of a fully urban, sophisticated and clean metropolis which naturally must house middle class and wealthy residents who can make use of its services. Even at the level of academic knowledge production, most scholarly work on Sri Lanka that mentions fishers tends to focus on fishing communities in the east, the north, or in parts of the western province outside Colombo (Stirrat 1989, Menon et al. 2016, Lehman 2013, Walker 2010). Colombo fishermen pose a contradiction and challenge not only to Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist imaginaries which center agricultural labor, but equally to the contemporary vision of a world-class, global city.

Urban Fishermen as Surplus Population

My ethnographic engagement with the Mutuwall community initially emerged from a series of encounters with two social justice activists, a Catholic priest and nun (whom I refer to here as Father Thomas and Sister Jane) who were organizing the fishers against the Colombo Port City project. I will return to the Port City in subsequent sections, but here I recall a comment that Sister Jane made to me

one afternoon as we were driving through the streets of northern Colombo on our way to an activist gathering. Sister told me that the government was intent on using up “every bit of land” that was anywhere near a body of water. “Any piece of land with a lake or water on it, they put a hotel on it!” exclaimed Father, exasperated with the developers who built extravagant hotels and resorts which sometimes stayed empty, failing to attract many visitors. As they spoke, Father and Sister situated this over-use of coastal and lakeside land within the larger political economic transition happening in Sri Lanka. In their estimation, the government was only interested in industry, not in agriculture and not even in helping the plantation sector, historically one of the most important sectors of the Sri Lankan economy. The state, they explained, was more interested in building big cities and helping the tourism industry. Speaking of the fishermen, Sister Christine told me mournfully, “these poor [fisher] boys and girls will become the room boys and girls for the tourists.”

Father and Sister’s comments revealed their long-held leftist political commitments and their suspicion of the Sri Lankan state’s economic policies. When Sister spoke of “room boys and girls,” she referred to a process whereby youth from fishing communities would no longer be able to ply the trade of their parents, but would instead be folded into the growing service and tourism industry. Instead of living and working by the ocean, they would work in hotels along the coastline. These images of alienated labor and separation of formerly rural workers from the natural world naturally brought to mind the notion of primitive accumulation advanced by Marx ([1887] 2005) in the first volume of *Capital*. In what follows, I discuss this Marxian concept and the importance of spatial politics for how we understand this concept in relation to development processes in Colombo.

In *Capital* Volume 1, Marx introduces the notion of primitive accumulation as the “original sin” of capitalism (Marx [1887] 2005: 507) in which peasants are expropriated from their land and as a result have to sell their labor power to capitalists in order to survive: “The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil, is the basis of the whole process.” (Marx [1887] 2005: 508).

Primitive accumulation is

the process which takes away from the labourer the possession of his means of production; a process that transforms, on the one hand, the social means of subsistence and of production into capital, on the other, the immediate producers into wage labourers. The so-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as primitive, because it forms the prehistoric stage of capital and of the mode of production corresponding with it. (Marx [1887] 2005: 508)

Though he writes that “the history of this expropriation, in different countries, assumes different aspects, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different periods,” (Marx [1887] 2005: 508), Marx famously used the example of the enclosure of agricultural land in England beginning in the 15th century as his primary case study for investigating the dynamics of primitive accumulation. Numerous Marxist scholars have shown, however, that the concept of primitive accumulation is a fertile one for understanding capitalist processes beyond the specific historical moment analyzed in *Capital*.

David Harvey has most famously re-framed primitive accumulation as *accumulation by dispossession*, noting that it is an ongoing feature of capitalist systems, rather than a phenomenon particular to only one historical moment (2004: 74). Harvey demonstrates that the logic of accumulation by dispossession can be seen in multiple contemporary processes, from increasingly rapacious forms of speculative finance to intellectual property rights regimes to cultural

commodification, and to “the corporatization and privatization of hitherto public assets (like universities) to say nothing of the wave of privatization of water and other public utilities that has swept the world, constitute a new wave of ‘enclosing the commons.’” (Harvey 2004: 75). Harvey’s broad application of the term “accumulation by dispossession” has been echoed in anthropological and ethnographic studies which show how the concept is relevant beyond Marx’s original usage, in current situations of dispossession across different contexts (e.g. Harms 2012, Elyachar 2005).

Though Harvey’s important repurposing of “primitive accumulation” into “accumulation by dispossession” is critical in showing the wide variety of contemporary processes - financial, institutional, cultural - that echo the original concept of primitive accumulation, for the purposes of my analysis, I wish to return to the original *spatial* framing inherent in Marx’s own account. A specific understanding of what constitutes the “rural” and the “urban” is at play in the description that Marx offers in *Capital*. While accumulation by dispossession is a major intervention and allows us to think more flexibly about the forms that dispossession might take, it is critical to remember that processes very similar to the original ones described by Marx are still taking place in much of the developing world. Marx was clear about the links between proletarianization and urbanization; the expropriated peasants in his account would need to find work in urban centers in which they could sell their labor power. The ethnography presented in this chapter suggests that while spatially the dynamics of dispossession may be compressed - that is, the “rural” may in fact be part of the “urban” or at least located very close to it - Marx’s original focus on loss of land continues to be relevant, even for the poor living in the heart of major cities.

Colombo's urban fishermen, I argue, are best understood as a form of surplus population; their situation offers a unique example of how the dynamics of accumulation by dispossession play out in contemporary cities in the Global South among populations that are not easily classed as either fully "rural" or "urban." I borrow the term surplus population from Tania Li, who has applied to it rural communities in Southeast Asia and India who are dispossessed from their land but who are not readily absorbed into capitalist projects. Li argues against those who take an overly functional view of the dynamics of accumulation by dispossession; the populations who lose their land do not automatically find jobs in service industries, in fact it is not uncommon for the capitalist projects doing the dispossessing to draw on reserves of labor quite distinct from the populations they have expropriated (2009: 71). It is only in acknowledging this disconnect between who gets dispossessed and who gets jobs that we can confront the true costs of capitalist accumulation, and the fact that states need to actively "make live" certain populations - otherwise they will perish. As Li puts it, "to assume a link between dispossession, and the (re)production of a labour reserve is not just too linear, it is dangerously complacent" (2009: 70).

Returning to Li's account of accumulation by dispossession and surplus populations, I situate my analysis of the Colombo fishermen within a dynamic she describes: "one in which places (or their resources) are useful, but the people are not, so that dispossession is detached from any prospect of labour absorption" (Li 2009: 69). The distinction between places and people that Li advances is precisely at the core of what I observed happening in Colombo over the course of my fieldwork. Colombo's small surface area means that space is a valuable commodity, more so - as evidenced by Father and Sister's remarks - when the space in question affords an

ocean view. Indeed, field notes from my first visit to Mutuwall reveal surprise on two levels: first, that this small fishing shanty still “counted” as Colombo, given its visual incongruity with the urban landscape of Colombo - seen from a certain angle, it looked more like a far away fishing village than a neighborhood right next to the large industrial port, and, second, that the fishers were actually still there at all. How, I wondered, could fishermen be permitted to occupy what was clearly such valuable coastal land? It was not long before I understood that their very presence in northern Colombo was under threat from numerous directions, something I discuss in the rest of this chapter.

As the preceding discussion has demonstrated, accumulation by dispossession is an ongoing process which retains its relevance for understanding dynamics which continue apace beyond Marx’s own historical account of them. When applied to the acquisition of valuable land occupied by poor and marginalized populations, one effect of these dynamics of accumulation is the creation of “surplus populations” (Li 2009) whose utility is not evident for capitalist expansion. Seen in this light, even the mournful words of Sister Jane with which I opened this discussion may appear too optimistic: urban fishermen would be lucky to find employment in the tourism sector. Their futures may not lie in thankless wage labor, but in forms of destitution and marginality that are harsher still.

On the Edge

The unique position of the Mutuwall fishing community is best understood in relation to the wider spatial politics and practices of post-war Colombo. First, it is critical to emphasize just how *close* Mutuwall is to the downtown core of Colombo, including the city’s World Trade Center, Fort, and other sites of wealth and

accumulation. Its proximity to these locations only serves to make the comparison between Mutuwall and the iconic spaces of the Colombo elite even more stark, and jarring. The increasingly extreme social fragmentation of space within the tight confines of central Colombo today was always rendered particularly striking on my brief *tuk-tuk* rides from where I lived in the inner districts of the city to the northern coastal stretches where Mutuwall is situated.

The northern neighborhoods of Colombo 13 and 15, those closest to the Port, were once areas where elite Europeans and Sri Lankans lived. As the city grew under British rule, however, the wealthy moved farther away from the Port and the more southern and central areas such as Cinnamon Gardens and Bambalapitiya. Today the northern reaches of Colombo are generally inhabited by low-income and working class families; the houses, some of them quite large and clearly once owned by well-to-do families, are dilapidated and run-down. These neighborhoods are typically home to ethnic and religious minorities such as Muslims, Tamils and Christians - it is not uncommon to see Hindu *kovils* right next to mosques or shrines to Catholic saints. Perhaps because of these diverse religious sites, the area surrounding Mutuwall was known by some of my Sinhala-Buddhist informants as a site of black magic and witchcraft. Other negative associations emerged as well: many of my middle class friends and acquaintances had a hard time believing I went to this area regularly, and cautioned me about organized crime and drug-use in the area. Even among working class people from different parts of Colombo, the area surrounding Mutuwall suggested danger - I regularly traveled to the neighborhood with the same *tuk-tuk* driver, who would prefer to drive elsewhere while waiting for me to complete my interviews, rather than linger nearby.

Residents of Mutuwall told me that the beach had started to be settled in the late 1960s and early 1970s; of the families that had been there longer, most told me that when they arrived the beach had been pristine, with far fewer houses. These families tended to complain that the current state of affairs was very different from what they had encountered when they had first come to this area multiple decades ago. Mutuwall was considered something of an ideal location for fishers in this part of the country. Unlike other parts of the western coast where tidal patterns led to rough waters at different times of year, in Mutuwall, one could count on relatively calm waves all year round, which meant it was easier to get in and out of the fishing boats. Because of this, fishers from elsewhere in the Western Province would often travel to Mutuwall and either leave their boats there, commuting there for daily fishing excursions, or they might set up temporary accommodation and stay there for a whole season before returning to their own villages.

Residents of Mutuwall made a distinction between those who were fishermen and those who worked “land jobs.” “Land jobs” often included activities like masonry or carpentry; working to unload goods or drive trucks at the Port of Colombo; manual labor for local firms; or - for women - garment work. There was no discernible status difference between the general situation of those who worked land jobs and those who made their living by fishing, but my fisher interlocutors were generally proud of their status as fishermen. Fishing was understood to provide a favorable contrast to other jobs in which one had to obey instructions and listen to a boss; by fishing, one was engaged in a more independent form of economic activity that effectively made fishermen their own bosses. While fishers worked together in various ways and often went out with multiple men on one fishing boat, they understood it as an occupation that was both inherited through a family history

of fishing, and which conferred more independence and prestige than a “land job.” Women did not fish. In keeping with the observations of other Sri Lanka scholars concerned with fishing (eg. Stirrat 1989), I did see women helping with various tasks related to fishing, such as the mending of nets, but not with the actual act of catching fish. When I interviewed fishermen’s wives, they typically spoke of a desire to work but a need to balance work with other responsibilities like looking after children and elderly family members. If they could earn income by doing something at home while they attended to these household tasks, they explained, that would be the ideal arrangement. The women I came to know who did earn income independently of their husbands tended to be those married to men with “land jobs” - through preparing and selling food, mending clothes or moneylending, some women in Mutuwall were able to earn their own money.

Fishing was simultaneously described as a dying profession and one that was being transformed by technology, with both positive and negative effects. There was a divide in Mutuwall between those who used GPS devices to fish and those who couldn’t afford them or did not know how to operate them. In general, I found that those who owned their own GPS were also the ones who were more successful financially; however not all those who had access to a GPS were able to translate this into economic stability. Fishers sometimes commented that the widespread use of GPS technology was actually lowering the barrier to entry into the fishing profession and making it so that anyone could fish; this was contrasted with older forms of knowledge about the ocean and intuition that had been the only guiding forces for their fathers or grandfathers to catch a sufficient amount of fish. GPS devices were also blamed for overfishing - because fishers shared the coordinates of locations with abundant fish amongst themselves, this caused a lot of competition for fishing in the

same spots and some fishers worried that this left insufficient time for the fish populations to breed, lay eggs and renew themselves.

Mutuwall is steeped in debt. Many of the families I interviewed owed money on their fishing boats, engines, and other equipment; on ongoing home improvement projects; and in some cases had gone into debt to pay for basic utilities like electricity. Because most people in Mutuwall lacked assets to use as collateral when requesting loans, they rarely got bank loans for these expenses; instead, they turned to moneylenders, or borrowed from friends and relatives in the area. I interviewed one of the local money-lenders, a woman whose first husband had been a fisher, but had died, and was now married to a former soldier. She had turned to moneylending due to her own precarious economic position; when she was first widowed, she earned an income by selling marijuana, but as her children got older she was concerned that this line of work would bring shame on them, so she began giving out small loans instead. Some of the more successful fishermen in the area also practiced moneylending as a side job along with their fishing. By charging what were considered to be low or reasonable interest rates - five or six percent per loan - and by lending selectively to those who seemed capable of paying back, these men and women told me they still had cordial relationships with their neighbors in the community. The use of such personal networks as opposed to reliance on bank loans or other formal channels speaks to the self-contained nature of the Mutuwall community.

Despite the negative associations attached to fishermen as a social group, conversations with Mutuwall residents made it clear that fishing as an occupation was understood as prestigious. While those who worked “land jobs” never indicated shame or disappointment at the fact that they did not fish, fishers and their families

did positively value the work of fishing - even as they said repeatedly that they saw no future for this kind of work, and did not wish their own children to follow in their footsteps. Fishing was understood to be simultaneously a noble, admirable, skillful occupation and *also* one that was disappearing and offered very little in terms of future prospects.

Fishing offered freedom. Several Mutuwall fishermen stated that they were proud of their profession because it meant following their own schedule and not having to report to a boss. Land jobs, by contrast, involved work that was less independent, and in which one was accountable to a boss and to a regimented schedule. In some ways, the fishermen of Mutuwall channeled and celebrated the very same negative stereotypes that non-fishers held of them, taking pride in the ability it gave them to come and go as they pleased. In one interview with a group of itinerant fishers who regularly came to Mutuwall for seasonal work, I asked if they might ever consider taking on land jobs, as a way to gain more stability and earn more money if fishing was in fact as endangered of a profession as many fishermen themselves seemed to imply. The group answered vehemently that they would only ever consider such a move if fishing became completely impossible. Otherwise, they preferred to eke out an existence fishing while it was possible, even if it was difficult. This was the only skill they possessed, they told me, and they were willing to fish until they died.

Mutuwall is a place on the edge. As this section has shown, precarity is an enduring feature of life in this part of Colombo - financially, materially, socially, Mutuwall's residents are "on the edge" in that fishing as occupation is an unstable, unpredictable livelihood, one which situates fishers outside of normal rhythms of capitalist production even as they inhabit an urban environment only minutes away

from some of the most emblematic sites of commercial life in Colombo - the port, and the downtown financial district. Mapping onto a spatial imaginary of Sri Lanka in which the agricultural heartland is the core of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist myth, Mutuwall is also on the edge by virtue of its coastal location. Mutuwall inhabitants occupy an edge of urban life: a place literally at the border of both city and nation-state (the shoreline), and one that is at risk of being cleared of its current inhabitants in order to make room for more profitable, aesthetically pleasing occupants in keeping with the vision of a world-class Colombo.

Eviction Imminent

The first time I came to Mutuwall, I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. The reason was that I had immediately put two and two together: the fishing village is so close to the center of Colombo, occupies a place with such a beautiful vista, literally right on the water, that I didn't think the fishermen could be here very long. With the glittering towers of the Colombo World Trade Center visible in the distance, it seems quite shocking that they are still there at all. Remarks like Father's and Sister's about the government's determination to use up any bit of coastal land were simultaneously a commentary on the aesthetic sensibilities of the new global Colombo, and on the financial and economic imperatives of creating more modern, efficient connections between the port and the rest of the city. This patch of land was likely to be considered very valuable one day - even if currently the neighborhood is seen as dilapidated and dangerous - because it offered a pristine ocean view, which might be enjoyed by wealthy tourists. It also might simply need to be "cleared" of people in order to facilitate the construction of any number of urban infrastructure projects. Once again, it is the place, the location, which is valuable, not the people

who occupy it. The Mutuwall fishermen and land laborers who inhabit the ramshackle houses, park their boats and strew their nets are not desirable urban residents but are seen rather as a troublesome, backwards form of surplus population on valuable Colombo real estate.

Accounts of Sri Lankan life after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami have highlighted the ways that coastal land was seized by the government; in fact this is one of the major case studies in Naomi Klein's popular book *The Shock Doctrine* in which she lays out her theory of "disaster capitalism." Similarly, in her discussion of "the securitization of fear" in eastern Sri Lanka, Jennifer Hyndman (2007) analyzes the government's buffer zone policy, describing how the rhetoric of safety and disaster prevention was actually used to dispossess fishing communities who had been living by the sea. Buffer zones were of different widths in Tamil and Sinhalese areas, leading to accusations that Tamil coastal dwellers were being discriminated against on ethnic grounds, kept farther away from the water; businesses in both Tamil and Sinhalese majority areas however were allowed to rebuild where people were not (Hyndman 2007).

The threat of relocation or eviction for Mutuwall residents is not clearly tied to any single project. Rather, the fishermen and land workers of the area are at risk of displacement from a number of different factors, each of which proceeds with its own timeline and logics. The Colombo Port City project, which I discussed in Chapter 2, is one possible driver of relocation. As one young fisherman in Mutuwall told me, if "rich people" began occupying a new luxury island so close to the most fertile fishing areas, they were likely to "call the police" at the sight of fishermen, who were visually marked as lower-class and not proper residents or customers of the facilities on the Port City site.

However, the Port City might cause or contribute to relocation in other ways; many of the fishermen I spoke to were concerned that the ongoing construction and dredging of sand would add to already high levels of coastal erosion, literally making the land on which their houses were built disappear over time. Combined with the anticipated decline in fish populations who would have a harder time laying eggs and reproducing in increasingly murky and trafficked waters, many fishermen were convinced that even without formal orders to relocate, the very act of constructing the Port City would make fishing impossible, thereby pushing Mutuwall residents off their land. The idea of receiving compensation for damages to their livelihood was not appealing to most residents, as they were certain it would never truly reimburse them for their losses. No amount of compensation would replace the way of life that would be lost. In the words of Peter, a fisherman in his fifties and father to three young girls, “we don’t care what they give, we will never leave this area. Our whole life is here, if they ask us not to fish, how can we live?”

Because I had initially come to Mutuwall as part of my research on the Port City project, I initially assumed that its construction was the main reason for fishers to fear eviction. I framed most of my questions along these lines, incorrectly thinking that if the fishers could mobilize successfully against the Port City project, there might be a chance for them to keep their land. I soon learned, however, that this assumption was reductive and incorrect.

A few months into conducting interviews in Mutuwall, I learned that plans for relocation were already underway - or at least, they *had* been underway, before the Port City project was green lighted, and before the change in government of January 2015. My research assistant and I were speaking with Miss Delilah, a petite, attractive woman in her 30s whose husband, a mason, had built them one of the

larger and more ornate houses in the enclave. As she swept her floor and then got around to the task of preparing lunch packets, which she sold every day to the priests and teachers up the hill at the Catholic school, she would periodically urge us on, “*kiyanne*,” (speak), ask your questions. We got onto the topic of politics - “I don’t care, as long as the politicians let us be” was her opinion of the upcoming parliamentary election. And then, almost off-handedly, she said that the previous government was going to demolish these houses and move everybody into high rise apartment buildings. “But apartments are crap,” she told us, indicating that this was hardly an appealing option. By now, word had gotten around: the famous high-rises, designed precisely for moving low-income people out of Colombo’s central neighborhoods to facilitate new, modern structures - often high rises themselves, though with different aesthetics and imagined inhabitants - were of low quality and their residents were unhappy.

The potential relocation of the families at Mutuwall was supposedly motivated by the desire to create a new road to the port (only a short drive away), but nothing actually came of the plan, and after the change in government - and in the state of suspense caused by the uncertain political situation - no one appeared to have any idea whether this would go ahead or not. Many of my informants did not have deeds for the houses they occupied; one woman told me she didn’t have a deed but brushed off concerns about being relocated by saying she possessed a “green card.” However, in a separate interview with a NGO worker who specialized in relocation and displacement, I was told that these green cards, issued by the local municipal council, were not the same as deeds and they would not prevent someone from losing their home. Others told me flat out that they did not have deeds - this included Miss Delilah, who lived in the big, beautiful house. Delilah remarked that

“we don’t mind [moving to a high rise] if we can have a quiet, normal life like here,” since she pointed out “we do land jobs” and thus her family did not need to be next to the water. However, she also told us that they wouldn’t be offered any compensation for moving, and expressed concern over whether a new apartment would even be able to accommodate her extended family of eight people.

The prospect of being relocated was a cause for real concern among other Mutuwall residents I spoke to, mainly those who did in fact rely on fishing as a primary source of income. Interviewing Camillus, a fisherman in his 50s, I asked about relocation plans for the area. He told me that yes, he did remember around two years ago some government representatives came by to talk about it. They put a sticker on people’s doors, those to be relocated (*Hema gedara sticker gatte*), and told them they would get a new house. But that was two years ago, he repeated, and they weren’t informed about which area they would live in, or any details of where the new housing would be. “Look, you can see it right there,” Camillus said, gesturing casually towards his front door, the very one we had just walked through to conduct the interview. I got up and looked for the sticker - it was small, a ragged dirty sticker with a letter “P” on it. It was just one of many stickers on a door littered with them images of Pope Francis and Jesus Christ and some phrases and words in Tamil. “The only thing I know is fishing,” Camillus said when I came back. “I didn’t study. I need a house somewhere close to the beach. After all, I have to take care of my children.”

Meera, a housewife in her forties and former fisherman’s wife, now married to a land worker, laid out other fears regarding relocation. Although Camillus had described the relocation stickers being put on the houses “two years ago” which would indicate sometime in 2013, Meera and Inoka, another friend in the area, stated

they remembered the discussions happening in January 2011. Whereas Delilah said the relocation was planned to facilitate the building of a new road, Meera said it was going to be for new houses in the area - not, however, for the current residents. But she and Inoka didn't think this would really happen, not any time soon. I asked how the meetings with the government representatives had gone - were they intimidating or threatening? No, the women told me, they just explained they would be given "better houses with tiles and better facilities" elsewhere. Meera was, however, clear that high rise living wasn't something she would enjoy (*kaemeti nae*). High rise apartments presented an alien mode of living to people here - she was afraid that children for example could get lost if they didn't remember which floor or apartment number they lived in. She also expressed fear of living around strangers and people of lower social standing. Some high rises, she said, were being given to people from "shanties" - it might be okay to live there if the entire village of Mutuwall could come too, but otherwise people would be afraid, she guessed. As many as five different communities/villages might be transported into one high rise, Meera told us, and this mixing of people was a source of anxiety. She would rather leave Colombo altogether and go to her husband's village if it came down to it.

Relocation is an enduring fear that haunts poor communities in Colombo. The relocation of the Mutuwall residents might not have been explicitly linked to the Port City, as the evidence from my interviews suggests other motivations, but it becomes bound up in the same logic: a project has to be completed, and in order for it to go head, people have to be moved. In other words, displacement becomes a common effect with multiple potential causes, all of them related to the persistent, fervent efforts to develop, beautify and improve the city of Colombo.

My conversations on potential eviction or relocation revealed the extent to which confusion, mixed messages and suspense are part of life in Mutuwall. No one knew why they might be relocated (for a road, or to build other kinds of houses, or because of the Port City's eventual completion, or some combination of the three) and of course, no one cared particularly given that eviction meant eviction no matter the reason. No one in Mutuwall seemed aware that the "green cards" they possessed for their houses were not the same, legally, as *deeds*, which might have helped them build a legal case to fight eviction. State institutions benefit from the confusion of the urban poor and their uncertainty with regards to official documents, which only makes eviction easier to carry out.

The liminal, interstitial space occupied by Mutuwall residents - which I have termed "on the edge" - allows both for their way of life to continue *and* sows the seeds of that way of life's eventual destruction in the interest of constructing Colombo as a world-class city. Nikhil Anand (2015) has described ignorance, rather than precision and measurement, as a way of maintaining state institutions in urban South Asia. Describing it as "as a praxis that takes effort and deliberateness," Anand states that "ignorance actively participates in the production of knowledge, power, and truth" it is "not so much a lack of knowledge as it is a form of not knowing that, like knowledge, participates in the production of meanings, materials, persons, and institutions" (2015: 309). In Mutuwall, residents benefit from authorities' ignorance of their ways of life - occupying land and houses without deeds, finding ways to illegally access electricity and other utilities, fishing in places they should not be.¹⁴

¹⁴ Mutuwall residents regularly spoke of violent confrontations with the police and with the Sri Lankan Navy. Some of these confrontations were recent, but the majority of these had happened during the civil war when a High Security Zone was in place over much of coastal Colombo for fear of attack by the LTTE's naval units. Mutuwall fishermen, lacking any other viable livelihood, would often sneak out to fish despite being formally prohibited from doing so. This is a subject I am exploring in a separate article about fisher mobility in Sri Lanka (Radicati, in preparation).

But at the same time, ignorance and lack of clarity surrounding state plans, the Port City construction, and the ambiguous legal status of Mutuwall residents is precisely what permits their slow but seemingly inevitable dispossession.

Delilah had said the relocations were planned to take place in 2015; in other words, during the time that I was interviewing her, had the January election gone differently - that is, keeping Mahinda Rajapakse in power rather than delivering a victory to the opposition - she could easily have been in quite different circumstances, maybe not living in Mutuwall at all. And yet she, like others, kept on with her daily activities: making, packing and selling lunches; sweeping her house; caring for children and family members; engaging in neighborhood gossip and entertaining the questions of a foreign anthropologist. As Erik Harms observes in his work on urban residents awaiting eviction in Vietnam, “residents go about their normal lives; yet nothing is normal. Nothing is certain. For the time being everything is forever. Someday it will be no more [cf. Yurchak 2003]” (Harms 2013: 352). My ethnographic work in Mutuwall shows that the lived experience of dispossession as it unfolds slowly and uncertainly reflects precisely this enduring normality even in the face of what would be a momentous, destructive change in residents’ ways of life.

Fishing Without Future

In discussion after discussion, fishermen in Mutuwall repeated the same refrain: there was no future in fishing. While no one wanted to lose their home or be evicted from the area as per the government’s original plans, it was clear that many of my interlocutors did not see how fishing as a primary form of livelihood could continue beyond their own generation. Several fishermen I interviewed explicitly

told me that they didn't want their children to become fishermen. Interviewing Darius, one of the more senior fishermen in the area and father of two daughters and a son, he told me "I wouldn't allow my son to fish, to become a fisherman. From this generation on, it's over." Many fishers cited their own lack of formal education as a reason to keep fishing, but would then say they hoped for a different life for their own children. The social stigma attached to fishermen's labor, which I described in earlier sections, undoubtedly played a part in this. But so did the material realities associated with fishing, and with living in Mutuwall. August was supposed to be the time of greatest abundance of catches for fishermen on this part of the island. And yet, while I carried out my fieldwork during this period, I was told by numerous fishermen that they were not catching much this year - each August seemed to bring less and less catch than the one before. The material realities of fishing's hardships became impossible to disentangle from the discourse of making Colombo a global city, which rushes to paint fishing as an outdated and irrelevant form of labor, even as people still depend on the practice to make a living.

My conversations with William, one of the Mutuwall fishermen, effectively illustrate the kinds of struggles Colombo fishers face, and the personal and professional trajectories available to them in the context of rapid urban development. William is a young man, no more than 35, powerfully built and sure of himself. Though quiet, he never appeared to object to speaking with me and my research assistant, and in his methodical, thoughtful way, shared with us the vicissitudes of his life as a fisherman.

One of the few Buddhists in Mutuwall, William was married to one of the Catholic women I had initially met through Father Thomas and Sister Jane. Above their door was an image of Lord Buddha in lotus pose; tucked next to it, a cross

fashioned from palm leaves. William and his wife have three children. The youngest one, maybe about four years old, would grab and climb on William as he spoke with us. William dealt with him good naturally, never seeming to mind, even though he was often busy with a GPS device, a black object he brought out in its plastic case and showed to us before getting to work with it - on my first conversation with him, William had numbers scrawled in pen on his hands and forearms, coordinates of where other men in the area had been recently and gotten a good catch. William was entering the numbers into his GPS in hopes of having luck at the same locations, next time he went out.

William's stories tended to blend together common elements that emerged time and time again in my conversations with Mutuwall fishers: the difficulties of making ends meet, the effects of the 2004 tsunami, seemingly never-ending cycles of debt, and worries about the future of fishing as a viable livelihood. William's family had lost their boat and nets and suffered some damage to their house in the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami. Like many fishers, he expected some form of compensation from the state to help with the cost of getting a new boat, but, also like many fishers here in Mutuwall, quickly found that he had fallen between the cracks of official aid. A man he knew had been given a free boat and was willing to part with it – but only for the price of Rs.10,000. Through a family member, William was put in touch with a German expat who was working to raise money for tsunami-affected families in Negombo and Colombo; the German man's fundraising efforts gave William the Rs.10,000 he needed for the boat and some extra, so that he was even able to buy some jewelry for his wife. But shortly after, the Sri Lankan Navy implemented the maritime High Security Zone around Colombo, meaning suddenly the fishers were legally not allowed to go out to sea. With these restrictions in place, William was

left without a viable option for making money, other than selling the boat he had only recently procured. The German donor and William's relative begged him to reconsider, but in the end, he was forced to sell it. Remembering it with bitterness, William tells us that under normal conditions the boat could have easily fetched a price of Rs.600,000 but because there was so little demand for vessels of that kind due to the Navy's security protocols, he ended up selling it for only about Rs.100,000. Of course, this money depleted quickly – the High Security Zone restrictions were in place for years,¹⁵ and as a result William had to sell not only the boat, but also the jewelry he'd purchased for his wife.

William has also heard of plans to relocate the Mutuwall population, and, like others, is skeptical. He says one version he's heard of the plan would have the fishers moved up to Ragamma, near the Bandaranaike International Airport in Katunayake. But, like others, he has also heard of the idea of simply moving the community into high-rise buildings somewhere closer to the city. To William, both options are bad. Why doesn't the government at least allow them to keep their boats here, as a docking station, he wonders? This would be more practical. They would also need reimbursement for the cost of traveling from their new residences to the waterfront; while he doesn't object to the high-rise idea *per se*, William sees mounting costs and financial burdens that will have to be shouldered by the fishers, who categorically cannot afford it. He adds a rumor that even being relocated into one of the high rises will incur a charge, of Rs.50,000 (about \$300 USD). "I don't have that," he tells us flatly.

¹⁵ Similar to the issue of government relocation, I heard many different accounts of when the HSZ was implemented and how long the fishers suffered as a result of these security regulations. One conversation with the wives of some fishers in Mutuwall suggested the HSZ had been implemented in 2002. However, this would imply that it was already in place before the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami. William dated it to 2006, which would make more sense as this places it *after* the tsunami in keeping with his story.

Like others in Mutuwall, William lives through a combination of whatever earnings he can scrape together from fishing, loans, and occasional illegal activity. With sly pride, he talks about the fact that up until recently he was able to get electricity illegally (*current-eka horeng-ganne*), but was eventually caught and forced to pay a Rs.30,000 fine. He still has an illegal water connection, and will keep it until it's discovered. According to William, some people even have to take loans just to pay for these basic utilities, a practice he is trying to avoid. He already has two loans, he tells me, one for the boat he had to buy after the tsunami, one for work on his house, at interest rates of four and ten percent respectively.

On one occasion when speaking with William, we are interrupted by his wife who has brought us glass bottles of Coke from the neighborhood *kade* (small shop) and offers them to me and Ashan as a sign of hospitality. We take a break from the official posture of the interview, and as we sit and drink the fizzy sweet liquid, William's younger son, the four year old, comes out to play. He sits on a small red tricycle with wheels that light up as it moves. All of us are, for a moment, amused and transfixed by the toy and by the little boy's obvious delight in it. Never taking his eyes off the moving, flashing wheels, William comments that when he was little, his father would never have been able to afford a plaything like that. "I don't want my children, my sons, to become fishermen," he says, heavily. "I want a better life for my kids." He told us that he fears the death of all the fish. "One day, my children will have to eat imported fish," (*piti rata malu*) he says with sad irony. "We used to have enough money to enjoy Christmas, now it's difficult with no more fish to catch."

In June 2016, approximately seven months after the conclusion of my primary ethnographic fieldwork, I was back in Colombo for a follow-up trip. My

research assistant and I visited Mutuwall several times during that month, and though we hoped to talk to William, he was never at home. The door to his house, always recognizable to me because of the combination of Buddhist and Catholic imagery, was uncharacteristically shut in the middle of the day, and there was no sign of his wife or children. We asked some others in the area whether they had heard anything about how William was doing, and when he might be available for an interview. Eventually, the wife of another fisherman I had interviewed told us that the reason for William's absence was a new job: he was working construction for one of the new hotels being built by the Galle Face Green. As a result, instead of following the typical fisherman schedule of going out to sea at night and returning in the very early morning, William was not available in the middle of the day, when we normally visited the area.

On a subsequent visit to Mutuwall, I knew better than to expect to find William at home, but the news of his new job weighed on my mind. Perhaps because I was pre-occupied with it, I made one of the worst errors of my fieldwork, one that still causes feelings of guilt when I remember it. I was interviewing a group of three traveling fishermen, together with my assistant and my friend from the area, Inoka, who is herself married to a fisherman. Though not from Colombo, the group explained that they came to Mutuwall regularly during this time of year in hopes of better catches. They were renting an abandoned shack with a cement floor right by the water, where their boats were docked. Because my assistant was used to helping with Sinhala-English translation, often in settings where there was only one speaker at a time, we fell back into this familiar routine. It escaped my notice that one of the three men, quieter than the others, spoke fluent English; because my assistant was engaged in a lively exchange with one of the other, more talkative men (in Sinhala),

I assumed that Sinhala was the preferred language for everyone in the group. A question came up about fishing versus land jobs. As in so many other discussions, the fishermen before us said they wanted to keep fishing as long as possible, and looked down on construction jobs. In an aside to my assistant Ashan I said (too loudly) in English, that I assumed this meant they would not consider doing what William was doing, and working in construction at one of the Galle Face Hotels? It was impossible to judge whether the three new informants heard my question to Ashan, but the moment the words left my mouth I noticed Inoka wince with embarrassment, and gesture to the fisherman whom I later understood spoke English. I had used William's name, and mentioned that he now worked construction instead of fishing full time - Inoka's reaction immediately showed how shameful this was for a man who only months before still supported his family through fishing.¹⁶

William's trajectory from fishing to construction underscores that experiences of dispossession in this part of Colombo relate to both eviction from dwelling places *and* to occupation and economic activity. It also illustrates the growing sense of futility and lack of opportunity associated with fishing, even as residents continued to fish because it was still a job they knew how to do. Amidst swirling rumors and fears of undue foreign influence in Colombo, especially as outlined in the previous chapter on the Colombo Port City project, William's statement about his children eating *imported* fish was especially poignant. Many Mutuwall residents were concerned that relocation would not only mean living in housing that would be inadequate for their needs, they did not want to be located far away from the ocean, the source of their livelihood. The dispossession of the

¹⁶ On my next visits to Mutuwall, I anxiously looked for William's wife, hoping to greet her and gauge through our interactions whether my slip-up had caused harm to their family or any hard feelings. Luckily, though I did not get to see William, I did see her and she greeted Ashan and me warmly, thereby implying that my mistake had not impacted them negatively.

Mutuwall fishers from both their livelihood and the place they have raised their families and developed social ties represents alienation at multiple different levels. Inoka's reaction to my mentioning William's new work in construction suggests the social costs of leaving fishing, even though everyone recognized that fishing hardly offered a promising future.

William's story operates as a kind of exception that proves the rule; in this case, the exception being that he actually managed to find work that directly related to the construction of the infrastructures and spaces designed to make Colombo a global destination. On one level, this might seem to contradict the argument that the Mutuwall fishermen are a form of "surplus population" without future in the new Colombo. However, William's story sticks out precisely because it appears so exceptional in the context of my ethnography. While other fishermen did mention occasional work in "land jobs" at times when they could not fish due to the security situation, they always emphasized that as soon as they were able to return to the water, they did. Though everyone was in agreement that there had been a noticeable decline in fish populations, on my last visit to Mutuwall all of my other informants were in fact continuing to go out to sea everyday. Once again, Inoka's reaction to my mentioning William's new job suggests that not fishing may have been seen as shameful, and thus the refusal to work in construction or other jobs might be understood as a "cultural" barrier rather than offering much in the way of an economic critique of Colombo's development. However, cultural and social alienation is one aspect of dispossession - the fact that Colombo fishermen are so tied to their identity through longstanding social practices and forms of community and now stand to lose this very identity is itself a form of dispossession.

All of the people I spoke with about relocation plans for the area reiterated their fear of being away from the water, and their lack of education or training to do other jobs. No one mentioned the government officials who had come to speak with them raising the possibility of training for other forms of work that might be done far from the shoreline. This omission is reflected in state discourses and planners' brochures and reports, which tend to emphasize, among other things, Colombo's prime real estate offerings and ocean views and its "friendly" "highly educated" population, without explaining what role the urban poor have to play in the future of the city. Here again, as Li observes, it is *places* which are valuable, not people.. Rather than being incorporated into a new globally-oriented service economy, Colombo's poorer residents are more likely to be relocated to high rises where they will need to find creative ways to fend for themselves and adapt to lessened economic opportunities. In the case of the Mutuwall fishermen, this means that their training and knowledge of how to fish is rendered useless. For the fishers, a spatial shift away from the shore represents an irreversible act of dispossession.

On Coevality

The Mutuwall fishermen themselves are aware - and they repeatedly told me - that no one knew of their existence, "no one cares." This is doubly a function of their low-status occupation and their location. While traditional social imaginaries of Sri Lankan society might locate fishermen in more distant rural settings, there is no room for them - metaphorically, but increasingly, literally as well - in contemporary Colombo. The fishers' repeated assertions that no one cared about them were echoed by my middle class friends and acquaintances who tended to not know where Mutuwall was located, and expressed surprise when I described the large, active community of fishers and other laborers who occupied that particular stretch of

Colombo coastline. The presence of the Mutuwall community represents a contradiction at the heart of Colombo's contemporary development. A "backwards" community coeval and simultaneous with the dazzling new high rises and shopping malls of the city center.

In his ethnography of environmental politics in Hong Kong, Tim Choy refers to the scientific and popular focus on "endangerment" as "anticipatory nostalgia," and observes that this anticipatory nostalgia "illuminates a great deal when the loss it forecasts is remembered to be both spatial and temporal" (Choy 2011, 49).

Discussing the original meaning of the term nostalgia, Choy points out that its exclusively temporal register is in fact not the only way in which the term can be understood; the Greek usage of the word means simply longing for home, which can be taken as either spatial or temporal in meaning. Interestingly, Choy's analysis is drawn from another urban fishing village, that of Tai O in Hong Kong, which, a bit like Mutuwall, is located close to major infrastructure (in this case, the airport) thus providing a startling juxtaposition between images of Hong Kong's global future and its supposedly local past.

However, Choy's point about nostalgia being both temporal and spatial is designed to question this very positioning of his research subjects as belonging to some mythical Hong Kong past. Instead, Choy argues for what he calls "coevality"; thinking critically about nostalgia, endangerment and preservation, Choy suggests a "conceptual shift, one that moves endangered forms of life from a timeline on which they occupy the slots of the old and bygone to a field of simultaneous, coeval spaces" (Choy 2011, 50).

Dominant visions of Colombo's urban development make use of powerful temporal and spatial imaginaries to appeal to citizens. The future is a point on a

discrete timeline, but it is also currently existing *right now* in other places far away: Singapore, Dubai, Hong Kong, the most often-cited examples of what Colombo should aspire to be. The very presence of fishermen is a challenge to both the dominant spatial and temporal imaginaries of Colombo as a global hub. Understood as relics of the “past” located uncomfortably close to the sites of Colombo’s future, the fishermen provide a spatial and temporal interruption to linear, unified visions of the state and of planners. Thinking about a “new field of political coequality” (Choy 2011, 50) provides a way to think about the fishermen as citizens with the right to their land and livelihood, rather than assuming them to be living anachronisms.

Fishermen’s lifestyles and rhythms set them apart from typical regimes of capitalist time. Unlike workers in most other professions who might have to commute on crowded public transport (buses) through the packed streets of Colombo two times a day, morning and evening, working primarily in daylight hours, fishermen have a wholly different schedule. As I have alluded to, most fishermen I knew in Mutuwall would go out into the ocean either late at night or in the early evening, and return in the very early hours of the morning. Sometimes I would conduct interviews with my friend Inoka while her husband lay sleeping only a few feet away, having returned exhausted from his most recent trip out to sea. At both the macro-level, as representatives of premodern or pre-capitalist Sri Lankan life, and at the micro-level of their daily habits, fishermen seem to offer a stark contrast with the temporalities of state agencies, urban planners and private corporations reshaping the Colombo landscape.

And yet, it bears repeating that Mutuwall is home to people other than fishers - to masons, drivers, dockworkers, garment workers and domestic servants who do have to abide by the timelines and schedules of more typical capitalist activity. In this

way, Mutuwall itself is not so much an *exception* to Colombo proper, standing fully outside of the larger city's temporal rhythms, but rather a testament to the multi-faceted and overlapping social forms and habits which can coexist in a city like Colombo. To proponents of Colombo's global city trajectory, the existence of multiple and coeval temporal rhythms provide just as much anxiety and unease as the notion of ethnic and religious hybridity for the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist. Neither of these master narratives - liberal capitalism or ethno-nationalism - can properly account for the world of Mutuwall.

The spatio-temporal imaginary of hubness, as laid out in Chapter 1, is rooted in the notion of flexibility, flows and free movement. But as I made clear, these concepts only ever seem to apply to capital, or to the movement of elite subjects. However, the urban poor have their own practices of movement and mobility, which are too often elided in official state discourses. The fishermen themselves are hardly stationary or static beings. Not only did my informants in Mutuwall frequently reference journeys to and from all parts of Sri Lanka - whether to visit their home villages, for holidays, or for religious pilgrimage - many of them had family members who had migrated abroad, either permanently or as laborers in the Gulf countries. It was also not uncommon for the older fishermen I spoke with to reference formerly nomadic lifestyles in which they had grown up circumnavigating the island in search of better catches. Not only that, but the contemporary, day-to-day practice of fishing itself involves significant movement in and out of Mutuwall, meaning that - contrary to the lifestyles of many poor and middle class residents of Colombo - fishermen are by definition mobile, well-practiced in travel and navigation of the city on itineraries unimaginable to inland residents. The slow dispossession of the fishers and other residents of Mutuwall makes starkly clear the

exclusive, elite nature of the official hubness promoted as the primary aspiration for 21st century Colombo.

One afternoon in November 2015, after months of fieldwork in the Mutuwall community, I had a chance to interview Lawrence, a well-known media figure and an English-speaking member of the Colombo elite whose television network was engaged in actively promoting the Colombo Port City project, together with the China Harbor Engineering Corporation (CHEC). I explained to Lawrence that many of the fishermen I had come to know in Mutuwall were very worried about the project going forward and its eventual effect on their livelihoods. I said that the Port City project was leaving them behind - it seemed as if it was going to mean the end of a way of life for a considerable group of people in coastal Colombo. To this he casually replied, "Show me one example of progress that doesn't" and smiled at me, expectantly. Check mate. There was no possible reply to my interlocutor's quiet assurance that "progress" needed to be valued above the preservation of fishing, which, as my own informants made clear, did not seem to offer much of a future. This sentiment was echoed by most of the businesspeople, government officials and wealthy elites I spoke with during my fieldwork. To them, like to my Sinhala tutor, fishermen represented a backwards social group, not easily integrated with the contemporary visions and ambitions for a global Colombo. But even if they were right at least about fishing as a form of labor, I wondered what else my informants could reasonably do? What possibilities existed for people whose livelihood and lifestyles seemed so clearly to defy the idealized notion of life in a global city? I never received a clear answer from any of the businesspeople or state representatives

whom I interviewed as to what exactly would be done to provide other forms of income and sustenance to people like the Mutuwall fishers.

On the other end of the spectrum, for social justice activists like Sister and Father, fishermen represented a traditional way of life that should be prized and valued; like other clergy-members and activists, Father and Sister were proponents of people producing their own food, living without most typically “urban” commodities,¹⁷ and cultivating independence from work in various service professions - in other words, they viewed positively the fishers’ ability to largely live outside the capitalist forms of labor and production visible elsewhere in Colombo.

Staunch anti-capitalists like Father and Sister and wealthy businessmen would often level critiques at the other in implicitly *temporal* terms: for someone like Lawrence, the fishermen represented a vestige of the past that would naturally die out in order to build the Colombo of the future. “Progress” always moved only in one direction, and it naturally had to leave behind those incapable of “catching up.” On the other hand, for people like Father and Sister, fishers *also* represented some link to the past, a time before what they viewed as the twin evils of urbanization and capitalism - but it was precisely this location in another time which, to them, made the fishers valuable and in need of saving, of preservation. Somewhere between the romantic discourses of defending traditional livelihoods from capitalist encroachment and neoliberal discourses of modernizing and globalizing the cityscape are the fishermen themselves. As this ethnography has shown, the fishers

¹⁷ It should be noted that, unsurprisingly, the fishermen themselves were much less inclined to live without such commodities. My field notes from my time in Mutuwall mention several houses as having large screen televisions similar to those owned by upper class acquaintances. Some fishermen I knew who were able to earn more money also frequented chain restaurants like Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken on special occasions or for family outings, which, in Sri Lanka, are considered to signal more “urban” tastes and are also quite expensive by local standards. Unfortunately, the nuances of the disparities between activists’ expectations and fishers’ lived experiences cannot be fully explored here.

are not able to view themselves in such reductive or idealized terms - they continue to live and work in the place they have inhabited for decades, even as their prospects for survival and security seem to be dwindling.

Conclusion

Marxist concepts of primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession assume particular spatial and temporal relationships between the dispossessed and the dispossessors, between labor and capital. Spatially, as in Marx's own original account laid out in *Capital*, primitive accumulation tends to assume the transfer or movement of rural populations to urban areas where, having lost land, former peasants must now sell their labor power to capitalists. Because Marx viewed the agents of revolutionary change as industrial, largely *urban* workers, he did not say much on the role of peasants or those whose livelihoods placed them on the periphery of capitalist systems (Glassman 2006). As seemingly rural subjects engaged in not-strictly-capitalist forms of labor but living in an obviously urban environment like northern Colombo, the Mutuwall fishermen force us to consider how we might complicate the taken-for-granted spatial understandings of primitive accumulation. Following urban scholars who have used David Harvey's (2004) influential "accumulation by dispossession" concept (eg., Goldman 2013, Harms 2012, 2013 and 2016, Elyachar 2005), this chapter has examined ongoing processes of dispossession not at the spatial/geographic peripheries of capitalist systems, but in the heart of an emerging global city. Rather than view the Mutuwall inhabitants as either peasants or urban proletarians, the ethnography presented in this chapter uses the ambiguity of spatial location to examine how dispossession unfolds in a community "out of place" (Puwar 2004) in what is supposed to be a modern Asian metropolis.

Certain strands of Marxist theory, especially those concerned with the Global South, have shown that in contemporary capitalism, primitive accumulation is an ongoing process, not one that can be relegated to a historical moment before the arising of capital (Glassman 2006, Harvey 2004, Sanyal 2007, Luxemburg [1913] 2003). My analysis follows in this tradition, showing that the dispossession of the Mutuwall fishermen is not a *precondition* for the construction of a global hub city, but rather a process that unfolds alongside and simultaneous with, the capitalist development of Colombo. Rather than view their dispossession as a neat example of “proletarianization” or incorporation of labor into new capitalist systems of production, my ethnography highlights the fuzzy, unclear nature of the timelines of dispossession. Accumulation by dispossession does not necessarily proceed such that the accumulation step is immediately or clearly visible.

Attention to coevality (Choy 2011) might provide a useful corrective to overly neat Marxist accounts which occasionally risk reproducing liberal and capitalist arguments about the supposedly linear march of progress. Rather than suggest that the dispossession experienced by the Mutuwall fishers be viewed as a *fait accompli*, this chapter has highlighted their enduring, continued presence despite the many factors weighing against them. As I have shown, the Mutuwall fishers’ presence is troubling to many narratives of development on both spatial and temporal levels: spatially because it suggests a collapsing of village and urban worlds which contrasts with images of a modern, contemporary city. Temporally, because the fishers are often implied to be “pre” modern or “pre” capitalist subjects, a holdover from earlier times and living anachronisms in the modern cityscape. The multi-faceted character of Mutuwall – its mixing of occupations and forms of labor, ethnic groups, religions, and temporal rhythms – provides an example of an urban setting not fully outside

modernity, capital or the city, but rather a powerful challenge to any monolithic vision of contemporary Colombo's urban character.

As Tania Li's work on surplus populations shows (2009), in many parts of the Global South today, a traditional understanding of dispossession whereby those who lose their land are spatially and economically incorporated into systems of capitalist production is inaccurate and insufficient. Instead, Li points out, dispossession and accumulation are disjointed, often fragmented processes which take place over different timescales and across distant locations. For example, referring to Southeast Asia and colonial labor practices, Li points out that "the people employed...are seldom the people who were dispossessed on site" (2009: 73-74). Mutuwall fishermen do not necessarily find jobs in more straightforwardly capitalist forms of production. While some, like William, might find work in construction, for most others this possibility does not exist. Following Li, this chapter suggests that any understanding of dispossession currently taking place in Colombo today must confront the possibility that any accumulation is likely to take place at a considerable temporal and spatial distance.

As I have shown in my ethnographic portrayal of Mutuwall, dispossession in this part of coastal Colombo does not proceed in linear fashion; fishers and other inhabitants of this enclave are in danger of losing their land and their livelihood and are threatened from multiple angles. Environmental patterns of coastal erosion and decline in fish stock, the construction of the Colombo Port City project, murky government plans - proposed, abandoned, and potentially taken up again at any time - for redevelopment of the area all contribute to the growing sense among my informants that one way or another, they must prepare to leave Mutuwall and accept that future generations will not be able to make a living through fishing. The multi-

faceted nature of their dispossession not only points to the theoretical importance of not assuming clean, linear temporalities, it also suggests the challenges to effective political organizing against such acts of urban dispossession when it is unclear who or what is responsible (Li 2009, 81). When threats are multiple, unified resistance may prove impossible.

By offering a glimpse into the struggles and multiple forms of dispossession facing the fishermen of northern Colombo, this chapter suggests the importance of ethnographic engagements for adding depth and nuance to our understanding of how global cities are being imagined and constructed today. In the following chapter, I turn to another case of dispossession and relocation of the urban poor, this time at the Pettah Floating Market.

CHAPTER 4: STATES OF FAILURE, STATES OF DISPOSSESSION: THE PETTAH FLOATING MARKET

Global city narratives are success stories. Popular accounts of the rise of cities like Dubai, Singapore or Bangalore tend to emphasize the rapid development of these spaces from sleepy, insignificant or provincial locations to spectacular examples of urban wealth and cosmopolitanism. Critical academic analyses of global city-making processes in the social sciences underscore the costs of such efforts; scholars have drawn attention to states of confusion, rising inequality, and violent dispossession carried out in the name of bringing these urban aspirations to life (Ghertner 2015, Ong and Roy 2011, Goldman 2013). Yet, even critical scholarly accounts risk assuming the *eventual success* of global city-making schemes. If dispossession lays the groundwork for capitalist accumulation (Marx [1887] 2005, Harvey 2004) then we are predisposed to assume that dispossession has a purpose or an identifiable end goal (Li 2009). This chapter, by contrast, asks what it might mean when global city plans and projects go awry. How can we productively think about *failure* in the context of building global cities? How might dispossession be experienced in the pursuit of these failures, and what forms does it take?

Looking at failure helps to displace the global city as the supposedly natural end point for all development processes. The now widely-recognized “global city” or “world city” form is a contingent, specific and relatively recent vision of capitalist development. As cities throughout the Global South are marketed and promoted as

the next Singapore or the next Dubai, it is worth remembering that the modern, efficient metropolis was not always the desired product of decolonization. As Vyjayanthi Rao puts it,

If there is anything normative about the imagination of the modern city in South Asia, it is a certain rejection of its specificity as a social space and its portrayal purely in relation to the exigencies of modernization and development. In the nationalist imagination, there was an inevitable contest between a more positive apprehension of the city as an engine of modernity, modernization and development and a more negative one projecting the city as an inappropriate historical trajectory for Indian modernity (2006, 226).

Rao's quote comes from her essay, "Slum as theory" in which she interrogates how the slum "comes to serve as shorthand" for the disfunction of the South Asian city in general. The abstract figure of the slum, representing disorder, violence, crime, disease and dirtiness is a powerful symbol of the failure of urbanization in the Global South. Rao's intervention reminds us of the perils that might accompany global city-making. If the global city form is understood now to be the common aspiration of most urban centers, the slum-form can be productively considered its foil. This chapter examines what other forms of urban failure besides slums might be present in today's global cities-in-progress.

Failure, disappointment and disillusionment have been salient themes in academic writing about development and modernization efforts (eg., Scott 1998, Ferguson 1994 and 1999) as well as in discussions on aspiration, class and social mobility under neoliberal conditions (e.g., Mains 2007, Jeffrey 2010, Schielke 2012). Writing on Zambia following years of structural adjustment policies which led to the country's de-urbanization, James Ferguson (1999) frames his study as an "ethnography of decline," in which his informants cope with the loss of material and economic comforts as well as the disappearance of "a certain ethos of hopefulness,

self-respect, and optimism that, many seemed sure, was now ... simply ‘gone, gone never to return again’” (1999: 12). Craig Jeffrey looks to the “shared culture of disappointment” (2012: 639) which characterizes so much of life in urban India for young men who are “compelled to wait for years, generations or whole lifetimes, not as the result of their voluntary movement through modern spaces but because they are perpetually unable to realize their goals” (2012: 639-40). In much of the world today, disappointment, stagnation and decline are themes which structure possibilities for individual lives as well as entire communities. This chapter builds on these scholarly conversations to examine the way failure played out in the context of public space making in Colombo.

As preceding chapters of this manuscript have shown, urban development efforts in Colombo are far from being straightforwardly successful. I have highlighted in discussions of the Colombo Port City and the fishing community in Mutuwall the uncertain, constantly negotiated and ongoing nature of projects to make Colombo a global city. However, while these chapters have dealt primarily with the theme of *uncertainty*, the present chapter looks more closely at outright *failure*, the way in which a project aimed at transforming public space in Colombo did not live up to expectations of the state, the public, or the laborers within the space. What happens when people must contend with certain failure, rather than uncertainty? What happens when eviction and relocation are carried out in the name of a failed project? To what extent might dispossession of the urban poor be embedded in the very mechanisms that appear to be forms of *compensation* for prior acts of dispossession?

This chapter examines the idea of failure in the making of Colombo as a global city by drawing on ethnography conducted at the Pettah Floating Market. The

Floating Market is a public space which opened under the Rajapakse administration in August 2014, before the surprising elections of January 2015. Offering low cost food shops and small stalls selling inexpensive items such as shoes, clothing and souvenirs, the space was envisioned as a low-cost, friendly and aesthetically pleasing alternative to the chaotic shops of the main neighborhood of Pettah, in which tourists and Colombo residents alike could purchase similar wares. Originally intended to be Colombo's version of the vibrant markets of Southeast Asia, in only a matter of months the space was devoid of customers, with vendors finding themselves trapped in a commercial space which yielded virtually no profits but nonetheless commanded high monthly rents.

In discussing the Floating Market and its failure to live up to the hype I highlight the role played by the state in bringing the Market into being. By the state I refer primarily to the government bodies responsible for urban development efforts in Colombo, the Ministry of Defense and Urban Development and its subsidiary body, the Urban Development Authority (UDA), which constructed and managed the space. As my ethnographic explorations demonstrate, the failed enterprise of the Floating Market traces a shifting relationship between vendors - many of whom were staunch supporters of the Rajapakse government - and the state, as relations of dependence and allegiance shifted to relations of exploitation, neglect and suspicion. The role of centralized state planning in bringing about urban development in Colombo is rarely, if ever, questioned. My ethnography demonstrates the complex relations between the urban poor and the state as the very people who form a base of political support in one instance are neglected, overlooked and dispossessed in the service of global city-building projects.

My ethnographic engagement with the Floating Market revealed that it was a disappointment on multiple levels: to the state, to the middle class Colombo public, and to the working class vendors who labored in the Market. The failure of the Floating Market, I suggest, is emblematic of both the predatory relationship of state institutions to working class and urban poor people in Colombo and of the class politics which inhere in Colombo's global city transformation. The case of the Floating Market speaks to the exclusion of urban working class and poor populations from the ideals of hub city-making.

Pettah Stuff: The Spatial and Class Politics of Location

When I asked various acquaintances in Colombo whether they had been to the Floating Market, I was surprised to find that while virtually everyone of my English-speaking, middle class friends had heard of it, very few had actually set foot inside. Given the initial enthusiasm that it seemed had accompanied the space's opening, I was curious as to why the Floating Market wasn't even deemed worthy of a single visit by my friends. What had happened between the opening in August 2014 and the start of my visits to the Floating Market only six months later to render the space so suddenly unappealing?

I first learned about the Pettah Floating Market through *Yamu.lk*, an English-language website targeted at the city's middle and upper classes (and tourists) that reviews and publicizes restaurants, museums, hotels and other sites of leisure in Colombo city and beyond. *Yamu* reviewed the Pettah Floating Market shortly after it opened in August 2014 and provided a rather glowing account of the space, highlighting its cheap prices, the pleasing quality of its architecture, and the beauty of the surroundings and ambience:

The Pettah Floating Market opened on the 25th of August to a lot of hype, and it's worth it. The place is another part of Colombo's fancy urban development plan along with Arcade Independence Square, but much more accessible to everyone. Colombo has never had such an amazing hangout space before, and it's affordable. (*Yamu.lk*, 2014)

After walking readers through a map of the Market space and detailing its various offerings, the review concludes:

The floating market is a combination of Majestic City/Pettah affordability, easy snacks, drinks and *kottu*, tasteful design, and a fantastic location by the lake and the railway tracks. To us Sri Lankans, who in Colombo have only Viharamahadevi Park and Independence Square as free public hangouts (and maybe the Arcade, though the shops there are pricey), the floating market is as *godayata* magic as it gets so far. (*Yamu.lk*, 2014)

The reference to “godayata magic” is a term infused with class and wealth implications. *Goda* or *gota* are suffixes in Sinhala meaning village, as is *gama*. To call a person *gota/goda* or *game* is essentially a way of calling someone village-like, essentially: non-elite, non-urban, unsophisticated. For a young female Colombo resident to use this term when writing in English for one of the city’s most popular publications is intended as a comical and self-deprecating appropriation. It also signals to readers *not* to expect that the Market is an elegant, elite space like the Arcade she mentions, but more accessible and popular.

At some point after the initial review of the Pettah Floating Market, *Yamu* updated its review to include the following sentence, immediately after the glowing first paragraph which I highlighted above: “*Edit*: We dropped in again a few days later and this time around the distinct smell of the Beira lake was far too prominent. In other words, it smelled pretty awful.” (*Yamu*, 2014). This reaction - delayed disappointment, gradual lessening of the Floating Market’s charm - mirrors the sentiments described by many of my other acquaintances in Colombo when I asked them about the space. *Yamu*’s casual addendum to the first review is fairly damning:

it is understood in middle class sensibility that the “prominent” and “awful” smell of a space would overshadow any other elements of the Floating Market. “*Godayata* magic” is curtly transformed into an uncomfortable, too-close-for-comfort approximation of the actual smells and sights of poverty. What could be farther away from the dream of a world-class global city?

I ended up interviewing the *Yamu* journalist who had written the initial review of the space; a young Muslim woman from southern Colombo, I found her to be chatty and opinionated - the perfect interlocutor. Over drinks and snacks at a boutique hotel in Bambalapitiya, she surprised me with her candor about the class implications of the place, and why it was so unappealing. She was, after all, the one who had written the glowing review, so I was surprised that her tone in person was rather cynical. “Why would we go there? You just get Pettah food, Pettah clothes, Pettah stuff” she said, dismissively. If it seems rather obvious that at the Pettah Floating market one would get “Pettah stuff” then this comment requires a bit more explanation. What Sara, my interlocutor, was expressing was not a comment on the *location* of the market, but the wider social implications of the goods to be had there. What Sara was saying was in fact a value judgment on the *quality* of the things available at the Floating Market. “Pettah stuff” in this context uses the name of the neighborhood as an adjective to describe the items on sale as cheap, low-quality, lower-class and undesirable. As she made clear in the rest of our interview, Sara only went to Pettah as a child with her family when they needed to fulfill utilitarian tasks like buying something in bulk, or taking a bus to another part of Sri Lanka. This relationship to Pettah - viewing it as a site of necessary commercial activity, not leisure - was echoed by most of my middle and upper class informants in Colombo. Another informant of mine, Ahmed, a young Bora Muslim man who now has a

successful job in the luxury real estate business, trafficking in Colombo's "global city" appeal, told me that he grew up in Pettah but when his parents were able to, they left and moved to the suburbs. Almost apologetically, he told me that as a consequence of living there as a child, he has "heard the worst kind of filth growing up."

Pettah is one of the older neighborhoods of Colombo, a holdover from colonial times. The name of the neighborhood derives from the Sinhala word *pita* meaning "outside" in this case *pita-Kottuwa* or "outside the Fort"; the Colombo Fort, built by the Dutch was the center of European Colombo, while Pettah, the area outside of the Fort, was the preserve of non-European or "native" trade and commerce (*Sunday Observer* 2007). But if the native-European divide in South Asian cities is hardly new, having determined urban planning and development during the colonial period across the region (Kaviraj 1997, Zaidi 2016), the category of "native" itself requires some unpacking. The question of who is "native" in Sri Lanka is fraught with racial, ethnic, and political implications. The "natives" of Pettah are not the "natives" as envisioned in a wider Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist imaginary, they are primarily Muslim traders of diverse backgrounds, including "Sri Lankan Muslims" and those with connections to other minority Muslim groups from India or elsewhere in the region.¹⁸ Pettah, then, represents something beyond just the "native" in any easy sense of the word. It also represents a zone of ethnic mixing, of non-Sinhala-Buddhist-ness, of commerce and mercantile sensibility. While most of Colombo is

¹⁸ Nile Green's monograph *Bombay Islam* (2011) highlights the diversity of Muslim communities in Bombay during the colonial period. Green shows that "Muslim" hardly denoted a homogenous, uniform group of people; rather, as a hub city in the western Indian Ocean region, Bombay was home to Muslims from a wide range of places throughout the Middle East, Africa and Asia. A similar point could be made about Colombo Islam: Muslims in the city are not necessarily all from one community, but rather from a variety of distinct communities including Bohras, Memons, etc. "Muslim" then becomes a complex and multi-layered label.

populated by minorities, Pettah's place in the urban imagination as a heterogeneous, gritty and decidedly non-middle class space is particularly salient. Paradoxically, Pettah is also home to some of the city's most important architectural and historical sights, leftovers from the colonial period. Pettah represents, then, a kind of "other" to the Colombo of the future envisioned by the city's wealthier residents.

Even though Pettah is laden with negative implications of dirtiness, filth, and urban decay, the area is simultaneously considered a vibrant, exciting and "authentic" part of Colombo. Although the typical tourist itinerary in Sri Lanka primarily directs visitors out of Colombo altogether towards the beaches, resorts and cultural attractions outside the city, many guides and materials for visitors spending a few days in Colombo recommend Pettah as a place to see the "real" character of the city. As one newspaper article put it,

To feel the pulse of the city, or simply to find an odd souvenir, a visitor need only take a walk through Pettah. It's a thrilling experience that gives an instant insight into what makes Sri Lanka tick, yielding more fascinating glimpses of local life in a morning's walk than does a week's touring the country by air-conditioned bus. (*Sunday Observer*, 2007)

This passage explicitly conjures the touristic value of Pettah for someone new to Sri Lanka; the reference to "touring the country by air-conditioned bus" contrasts this common mode of interacting with Sri Lanka with the more immediate, intimate and "thrilling" experience of immersing oneself in Pettah. But the article makes another important move as well - it posits Pettah (Muslim, non-Sinhalese, non-Buddhist Pettah) as a microcosm or index of the country at large, the key to "what makes Sri Lanka tick." Pettah then rhetorically shifts from *exceptional* to *exemplary*.

Pettah is the entrepot for the whole of Sri Lanka. Villagers come here to purchase household implements, wholesalers store everything from scrubbing brushes to expensive computers, textile traders lurk behind bolts of brilliant-hued fabric piled high on wooden counters, jewellers and gem merchants quietly conduct deals worth a fortune, while fruitsellers shout

about their wares and wayside vendors of junk wait patiently for customers. (*Sunday Observer*, 2007)

In this reading of Pettah, it is the area's economic importance which is highlighted and understood as the basis of its importance for Colombo and Sri Lanka as a whole. This *Sunday Observer* article steers clear of remarking on the fact that ethnic/religious minorities form the backbone of this "entrepôt for the whole of Sri Lanka" focusing instead on the goods to be purchased there. But the reference to "villagers" traveling to Pettah and the range of items described here, including gems, computers, fabrics, fruit and "junk" is suggestive of the centrality of the neighborhood as a place of mixing of different social groups (rural and urban) and also as the concentration of so wide a range of commodities with different purposes and provenances.

Part of Pettah's significance stems from its location within Colombo itself; long before the southern neighborhoods of the city became fashionable, even before Colombo 7/Cinnamon Gardens represented the preserve of the city's westernized, English-speaking elite, power and status in Colombo had to do with access and proximity to the Port. When this changed, in the early 20th century, Pettah and the northern residential neighborhoods of the city gradually fell into disrepair. Now, though Pettah is widely acknowledged as a commercial hub, it is a part of the city in which better-off residents would not actively seek to spend their time.

Ahmed, my acquaintance who had grown up in Pettah, explained commerce in Colombo as a system based on social class and spatial politics. The same goods could be found and purchased in Pettah as in Majestic City or Crescat he said. But, he insisted, a rich person would not *choose* to go to Pettah to buy a car, or a computer. The rich person, he argued, would choose to go to one of the other retail

locations where he or she could park their personal vehicle, maybe even with valet parking, select the item they needed from an air-conditioned shop, and not be bothered by excessive crowds or unappealing sights. In Ahmed's view, Pettah's ability to provide shoppers with needed/desired commodities was not in question, but its symbolic capital, the ability to provide an experience *beyond* the economic transaction at hand, an experience that would be welcoming and appropriate for wealthy elites, certainly was.

It was clear that to my middle class Colombo informants like Sara, Ahmed and others, the Floating Market held very little appeal. The gender dynamics of the space, to which I was particularly sensitive as a female ethnographer, only served to reinforce class anxieties about well-off women being preyed upon by working class men, a dynamic which Anouk De Koning also observes in the context of shifting gender politics in Cairo (2009). The ethnic and religious mixing of Pettah also suggests its troubling of both nationalist Sinhala-Buddhist narratives, while its dilapidation and poverty simultaneously suggests an affront to the future-oriented cosmopolitan project of transforming Colombo into a global city. In what follows, I shift from a discussion of how visitors and customers perceived the space to an analysis of how the laborers whose livelihood was tied up with the space navigated, made sense of and critiqued the Floating Market's failure in the context of Colombo's global city transformation.

States of Failure

"We don't want to be thugs, but we're hungry, we have to think about our stomachs," said Dinesh, a middle-aged vendor at the Floating Market. Dinesh and his companion Chathu were vendors who shared a small floating stall selling *accharu* (a snack of spicy pickled vegetables). Speaking with them one afternoon in

June 2015, the market still partly festooned with leftover decorations from the recent *vesak* holiday, Dinesh's comment was in reference to recent protests against the Urban Development Authority (UDA). Spurred by the disappointment with the Floating Market's lack of customers and disconnection from vehicle and foot traffic, a tense situation between merchants and the government agency had boiled over into violence, with vendors throwing stones and breaking the UDA's windows out of frustration. After numerous meetings in which shopkeepers had complained only to be met with silence or inaction by the UDA, many felt they had no choice but to revert to this kind of protest, Dinesh explained apologetically.

The UDA is the implementing agency for urban development projects in Colombo. Reporting to the Ministry of Defense and Urban Development, created under the Rajapakse government, the UDA is the government body immediately responsible for designing and constructing the Floating Market, as well as managing the space once it was completed: collecting rents from shopkeepers, conducting maintenance work in the public spaces, etc. Dinesh, Chathu, and other vendors whom I introduce below all understood the UDA as responsible for their situation. What had begun as a triumphant state project led by the Rajapakse government to beautify and modernize Colombo quickly soured into a prime example of an unresponsive state ignoring the economic disasters that could be wrought by the project of global city-making.

Chathu and Dinesh, like most people, had had very bad business since moving to the Floating Market when it opened in August 2014. Initially, business had been brisk and they had even had foreign tourists coming by the shop. But now, less than a year later, the situation looked bleak. Entire days could go by with only a handful of customers, making small and inconsequential purchases. The UDA had

told merchants initially that there might be a night market, but this had never happened. By dusk the market was generally empty. Dinesh explained that the issue now was that they simply had nowhere else to go. Relocating to a new spot outside the Floating Market would obviously be better for business, but they didn't have the capital or connections to find somewhere new.

As I got to know them, Dinesh and Chathu clarified that they weren't actually in business together; they were just sharing the same floating platform, and splitting the rent costs. In fact, it was four people sharing the platform - Dinesh and Chathu, a vegetable seller, and a fourth man whose business was never mentioned. The vegetable seller's presence was made known only by the sacks of onions piled up on one side of the platform. Dinesh explained that he didn't really sell anything here anymore, preferring to use the platform as a storage space and selling his wares elsewhere. By the time I met them, it made more sense for vendors like Dinesh and Chathu to simply use the physical infrastructure of the Floating Market stall as a place to keep their belongings, rather than trying to sell those items in the market itself.



Image 7 Empty Market Stalls and Walkway at the Pettah Floating Market
Source: Author Photo

Like many vendors in the market, Dinesh and Chathu were supporters of the former government, and still expressed lukewarm enthusiasm for Rajapakse even as they blamed the UDA under his rule for the poor planning of the Floating Market space. It quickly became clear to me as I conducted my fieldwork there that the Market was more than just an unsuccessful commercial location, it was a powerful artifact: material evidence of the failures, poorly laid out plans and oversights of the former government.

All over the Floating Market, there were powerful reminders of the place's relationship to the Rajapakse regime. For instance, I couldn't help but notice that in the spring of 2015, the Testa Bakehouse - one of the larger and more corporate businesses in the Floating Market - still displayed photographs of Mahinda and Gothabaya Rajapakse *only*, and not the new governing duo of Maithripala Sirisena and Ranil Wickremasinghe. Later, I saw that the pictures of the two newcomers were added, but the Rajapakses' photos were never taken down. When I was

approached by the Bakehouse manager, I was treated to a lengthy monologue about the virtues of the former government and the way that the Floating Market represented ideals of Buddhism which "the people" simply did not understand and as a result, they didn't appreciate the serenity and beauty of the space.

My vendor informants were full of ideas on how things could be improved, and did not hesitate to make their displeasure at the state of things known, as evidenced by the raucous protest Dinesh had described. Even if they were nominally supporters of the former government, most of my interlocutors were very consistent when it came to pointing out the space's deficiencies. Many of the vendors pointed out that the Floating Market had been doomed to not attract customers because it housed no "known brands." By "known brands" they explained that they meant things like Pizza Hut, McDonald's,¹⁹ or PG Martin (a Sri Lankan luggage store). In making these connections, the vendors clearly referenced the types of businesses that were available at more upscale malls in the city, but which were nowhere to be seen here at the Floating Market. They reasoned that if people saw these types of recognized shops at the Floating Market, they would be more tempted to enter the space. In articulating their desire for "known brands" the Floating Market vendors not only showed their own business savvy and an awareness of what would work better in attracting customers, but their statements also revealed the extent to which coding a public space as middle class was important in bolstering its appeal.

States, cities, people - all are categories of thing which can and do "fail" on a regular basis. In accounts of development projects gone wrong as in those of James Scott (1998) and James Ferguson (1994), the failure encountered is that of state

¹⁹ McDonald's in Sri Lanka is considered a relatively upmarket eatery. The food there is generally too expensive for most low-income and working class Colombo residents to afford and the branches throughout the city are located accordingly.

institutions, international financial bodies and global NGOs. In Scott and Ferguson's accounts, these failures draw attention to the problems inherent in ideological systems - "high modernism" for Scott and mainstream development rhetoric for Ferguson - that motivate the projects in question. Individual people, families and communities, however, are those who must most immediately react to and deal with the failed projects often implemented by institutions over which they have no power. This chapter offers an ethnographic portrayal of this reality, in which individuals must navigate the remains of failed state projects.

Failure and other negative affective states have emerged as important sites of theoretical investigation, especially in the domain of queer theory (eg. Cvetkovitch 2012, Halberstam 2011, Berlant 2011). Failing is newly reconsidered not only as an unfortunate opposite of success, but as a domain of potential and opportunity to defy oppressive power structures. Consider Jack Halberstam's assertion that failure "comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair," but simultaneously "provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (2011, 3). Halberstam inverts the usual formula whereby failure of any kind is something to be mourned, and instead offers that failure may contain almost revolutionary potential to deviate from the normative - the "toxic positivity." Certainly, the failure of a project like the Pettah Floating Market challenges the triumphant rhetoric of the Colombo-as-global-city narrative. It provides a powerful affront to the unrealistic, sometimes oppressive visions of rapid development championed by elites and policy-makers. And yet, my informants' stories suggest the enduring importance of unequal power relations and dire financial circumstances. Failure or success are, in this context, matters of survival. Vendors' stories suggest

that in a context of such weakness and vulnerability of regular people vis-a-vis the state, there is in fact little to celebrate in failure.

Dinesh's comment about "thinking about their stomachs" brought to mind what Africanists refer to as "the politics of the belly" (Bayart 1989). The reference to the stomach - one which was made in other contexts in my fieldwork as well - speaks to the real life or death nature of the matter at hand. The Pettah Floating Market was not, for the vendors, simply an experiment in urban planning, it had become their livelihood and its success or failure meant the literal difference between survival and starvation for working class people with very little savings and no other streams of income.

In chapter three, I discussed the situation of the Mutuwall fishermen and their spatial and temporal challenge to the world city ethos of 21st century Colombo. Highlighting the multiple forms of dispossession that the fishers faced - geographic relocation from their neighborhood and environmental destruction of the ecosystem upon which they depend - I underscored that dispossession is an ever-present threat, one that cannot be combatted precisely because it is experienced as slow, creeping and multi-faceted. Dispossession in the case of Mutuwall is a possible, likely future hovering on the horizon. By contrast, this ethnographic engagement with the Pettah Floating Market takes as its point of departure the fact that dispossession has already occurred.

The vendors at the Pettah Floating Market are primarily small merchants who were relocated from other parts of the Pettah neighborhood and directed by the government into the newly constructed space. Having a stall in the new Floating Market was compensation for moving the vendors from other parts of the neighborhood to make room for what was supposedly a road construction project.

However, Dinesh and Chathu's stores had already been destroyed by the time I encountered them - and they told me the proposed road project had never actually taken place. Both wished they could simply return to their old stores, which had been razed for nothing.

Dinesh and Chathu's situation speaks to many themes I encountered with other vendors across the Floating Market. In virtually all the conversations we had, the state was positioned as a powerful actor whose role in establishing the Market was never questioned. But when things went badly, state institutions like the UDA were also roundly blamed for the failure of the space. Stories about a distant, unresponsive UDA and rage on the part of vendors were all too common in the Floating Market. These accounts reveal both the dependence of regular people on the state and their tense relationship with it spurred by economic hardship.

From Caretaker to Predatory State

The failure of the Pettah Floating Market revealed the relationship between vendors and the state to be one based on mutual suspicion, hostility and predation. As revealed by the case of Chathu and Dinesh, the *accharu* sellers, most of the merchants at the Floating Market wished to have their old shops back - and were frustrated to learn that the road expansion project which had sparked their eviction never materialized. But the tense relationship between vendors and the UDA was not only a result of the initial relocation of the shops. Vendors were being charged high monthly rents for their new storefronts, despite the fact that they had virtually no customers. The UDA became a persistent antagonist for vendors due to the

collection of monthly rents which, it became clear, most merchants could no longer afford to pay.

The experiences of Marvin, the manager of *Kottu Spot*, are illustrative of these kinds of challenges. Marvin is a Sinhala-Buddhist, in his thirties, and married. His family comes from Galle, but now live in a suburb on the outskirts of Colombo. Marvin's mother has a "hotel" (colloquial term for food shop) along a busy road in northern Colombo. He had a shop nearby in Pettah before coming to the Floating Market. As a SLFP supporter and admirer of Mahinda Rajapakse, Marvin regularly expressed cynicism and disdain for other politicians from different political parties, but also expressed hopelessness and cynicism about politics more generally: "can't do anything" was a common refrain when I tried to ask him how things at the Market might be improved.

By August 2015, I gradually noticed more and more empty shops - a testament to the fact that vendors would rather leave than stick around in this quiet place, devoid of customers. Marvin, in explaining his frustrations, surprised me one afternoon by speaking quite candidly about the money he owed and his financial predicament. By this point, Ashan and I had sat at his shop and conducted casual interviews numerous times. Marvin had often seemed a little bored, or preoccupied during our conversations, leading me to worry that my questions were too invasive or numerous. But on this sweltering afternoon in August, I looked on in surprise as he brought me invoices and began to break down to me the scale of what he owed the UDA for this shop which was barely staying afloat. He explained that there used to be an informal "union" among the vendors which had encouraged them to band together and not pay their rent until certain demands were met - but the union dissolved, and the main organizers had left, leaving those like Marvin who had

participated in the rent strike in a bad position. The breakdown of the expenses he had to contend with was as follows: for the "key money" (the down payment to acquire the shop), Marvin was charged 1,000,000 Rs. (about \$6,800 USD). He had paid Rs.280,000 of this at the outset leaving a balance of Rs. 720,000 (about \$4,900 USD) to be paid. This was in addition to the monthly rent of Rs. 6795.60 (about \$46 USD), which he was behind on paying as well because of the rent strike.

The first thing that struck me when Marvin explained his finances was how out of whack the initial key money and monthly rent seemed - Rs.1,000,000 was a very hefty sum in Sri Lankan terms. The idea that vendors had been relocated here due to a government project which never went ahead *and* had to pay this considerable sum for the privilege made their complaints appear all the more urgent. The appropriateness of these sums of money being charged to vendors has to be understood with reference to the kinds of things they sold and the prices of the goods available. The Floating Market was not the place for fancy, expensive items. There were a few cell phone accessory shops, some places selling clothing and footwear, and the rest were primarily food vendors. For a food vendor like Marvin who might sell a soda for Rs.75 or a packet of crackers for Rs.50, it was apparent that even the monthly rent of Rs.6795 would be very hard to make, to say nothing of the huge cost of his key money debt. In addition, Marvin told us laughing wryly, there was the matter of electricity for the refrigeration units in his food shop: another Rs.11,000 or Rs.12,000 (\$75 - \$80 USD) per month for which he was responsible. The UDA had offered a one year grace period for vendors to settle their debts, and Marvin didn't seem to know whether this meant he would be soon facing interest fees on the money he owed. Ashan and I both looked over the invoices as carefully as we could

and noticed multiple different dates stamped on them, making it unclear when payment was actually due.

Seeing Marvin's financial troubles laid out before me in the form of official, state-issued invoices crystallized for me the uphill battle facing vendors who remained in the Floating Market, but who found no recourse from a largely unresponsive set of urban institutions linked to the state. While the UDA under the Rajapakses was authoritarian and occasionally brutal in its re-arranging of urban residents to suit the goal of making Colombo "global" the new UDA was perhaps even harder to deal with: reeling from the political changes of the past several months, in August 2015 the policies and plans of the UDA going forward, and how this would impact places like the Floating Market, were totally opaque to people average people like Marvin. All around, the physical and material signs of this state of affairs was evident. I noticed at the end of our session with Marvin that the shop next to him was empty - I could not even tell what had once been sold there. Marvin replied that the man running it had left four or five months back, without paying his debt or expressing any intention of return. When I walked closer to peer inside, I saw the place was littered with UDA invoices identical to those sent to Marvin.

A Desire to be Elsewhere

If the proximity of the bus and train stations to the Pettah Floating Market conjured up images of travel to the rest of Sri Lanka, I found that within the market itself, among the vendors I spoke to, imaginings of places much farther away than Kandy or Galle were also at work. One vendor, whom we spoke to as he packed bright red jelly sweets into plastic, the color staining his hands, described the market as a failure because "this isn't Hong Kong, or Thailand." He didn't stop working as

we interviewed him but added that “this [the Pettah Floating Market] would be fine for those countries, but not here.” The man’s reference to these other countries is not incidental. The Floating Market’s name is an attempt to conjure in the touristic imagination a vision of an attraction similar to the floating market of Bangkok, and others in Southeast Asia. But, as I have made clear, the Floating Market never really came close to achieving the same level of density, centrality and sociality imagined to be part of these neighboring countries’ versions of “Floating Markets.” The power of cross-referencing and comparison in the inter-Asian context (Ong and Roy 2011) was so powerful that these transnational comparisons were used by vendors to make sense of the dilapidated, decaying space in which they worked.

Unsurprisingly, given the prevalence of migration from Sri Lanka in general, I found that almost every vendor I spoke to had hopes of migrating abroad, and/or made reference to family members abroad whose lives they envied and wished to emulate themselves. Various ‘elsewheres’ were thus present in the Market on any given day: the elsewhere that the Market itself failed to emulate, and the elsewhere that the vendors as individuals would rather be.

Ajith, one of Marvin’s employees at *Kottu Spot*, detailed his own itineraries: from a small town outside of Kandy, he had come here to Pettah to work in the old shop before he and the others had been relocated here to the Floating Market. Feeling tricked by the government’s promise and unimpressed with the slow trickle of business, Ajith boasted of his own intention to travel abroad to Malaysia, or Singapore - “good countries” where he could work illegally and make many times what he earned here. Eventually, we stopped seeing Ajith and Marvin told me he had finally decided to try and leave Sri Lanka for Singapore. A few weeks later, we

heard he hadn't made it: he was now working in his home village again, as a carpenter.

The overwhelming desire to be elsewhere translated both into big aspirations for migrating out of Sri Lanka, but also into the more modest wish to simply be able to leave the Floating Market and open a business elsewhere in the city. The harsh terms of the vendors' rental agreements with the UDA, however, made both kinds of wishes for mobility and freedom very difficult. With outstanding sums of money still owed to the state, vendors became confined to the site, stuck in an impossible situation wherein they were expected to honor their original agreements while seeing fewer and fewer customers with each passing month.

The issue of mobility in and out of the Market was relevant at multiple scales. Ajith's dream of traveling abroad where he might earn more money and the sweet-seller's remark that the market failed to live up to the standards of Southeast Asia were powerful reminders of the global. And yet mobility - or lack thereof - was also an issue at the most immediate, local level. When I asked Dinesh whether they got any business from passengers on the buses which stopped nearby, Dinesh said no, without a good walkway from the bus stand to the Floating Market, people would not want to take the time to come to their shops and then have to loop back to the buses. Speaking wistfully of the old shops he and Chathu used to have, Dinesh described their convenient location right on the street, and said passengers used to come there before taking their buses; but this was no longer possible here in the Market.

When I returned to the Market in June 2016, I came upon Chathu still working on the floating platform, but now there was no sign of Dinesh. We spoke a bit and though she explained she only had to pay monthly rent for half of the platform - Rs. 4,500 (\$31 USD), I saw no indication of any other vendor using the space next to her. As Chathu brewed tea to serve us, I noticed little improvements she had made to her shop - she now sold some other items besides *achcharu* and had set up a glass case to showcase her wares, as well as a small shrine to Lord Buddha. She mentioned business had been a little bit better the past few months and as we chatted two different customers approached - one to purchase the *achcharu*, the other paying for a single cigarette which she took and gave him from the glass case. I was impressed to see that she looked more settled and established in the shop, but it was worrying to notice that her companions had by now deserted the platform. The general air of the Floating Market around us was even more disheartening than before.

Our conversation also revealed lingering disappointments and problems with the UDA. She said definitively that now they knew there would be no bridge or walkway constructed to the main road as the vendors had hoped last year. She mentioned that some vendors had gone ahead and set up shops on the other side of the water, in front of the Floating Market and closer to the buses. But their shops had been dismantled by the UDA because they didn't conform to zoning rules and the desired aesthetic of the space. Chathu would rather just go elsewhere where there might be more business, but she explained that she still owed Rs.50,000 to the UDA. It was a burden, but she would pay it back little by little. Chathu was very worried about this money because she wanted to stay in the UDA's good graces -

they might be able to find her later or track where she opened future businesses, so she felt obligated to stay on their good side.

I was pleased to find that Marvin at *Kottu Spot* was still in business in mid-2016 as well. Like Chathu, he had made some small improvements to his shop, with large new signs in vibrant colors advertising the food and drinks for sale. When I complimented him on the signs he laughed and, in typical self-deprecating fashion, told me not to be too impressed, they had only cost Rs.1,700. He pointed to a picture of one of the beverages on the sign, something I'd never heard of, and said he had bought crates of these bottles because he heard tourists liked this drink. By now he hadn't sold a single one. Like Chathu, Marvin confirmed that the UDA wouldn't act on the idea of an improved walkway to the main street. We asked about the UDA collecting payments, and initially he seemed to indicate that he had simply stopped paying the rent - but when we prodded him, Marvin explained that in fact he was doing the best to keep up with the payments, he knew people from the UDA, and also like Chathu, he said he felt obligated to pay. He worried that failing to do so might compromise his relationship with them in the future.

Mirroring the ambitions of Ajith, his employee, Marvin had always been open about his own desire to emigrate to the Gulf, and on my return to the Floating Market, I found that his plans had become much firmer. His wife had given birth to a son six months ago and as he showed us pictures of the baby on his phone, he explained that when the child was one year old, he planned to emigrate to Dubai. He had gone there earlier in the year for about two weeks, and got the idea to set up a Sri Lankan food shop. Foreigners in Dubai were not allowed to own property or businesses he explained, so his plan necessitated connecting with a local sponsor who would help him get his visa and set up the shop and he would pay them back.

Under such an arrangement Marvin guessed he would be liable for about Rs. 100,000 per month (\$687) to these sponsors, but he hoped that with the better economic climate in Dubai, this would be manageable. When a customer approached and Marvin got up to go make him a plate of *kottu*, Ashan turned to me and said mischievously referring to the US elections: "so you guys are going to build a wall - need any Sri Lankan workers?"

I had been surprised, during my follow-up fieldwork in June 2016, to find that Chathu and Marvin were still in business. I was also newly surprised by how grim and uninviting the space appeared, the time away from the site making the emptiness, extreme heat and stagnant water appear even more striking. But as the conversations I have related demonstrate, their presence in the Floating Market seemed to be more a result of lack of options than improved business prospects. In Chathu's case, she made it clear that fear of some sort of punishment by the UDA was what motivated her to remain and try to pay back the money she owed. Marvin appeared less afraid of the UDA than Chathu but still weighed down by feelings of obligation to maintain good relations with them, even though paying back the money he owed was a serious burden. The dream of moving to Dubai seemed to be the main thing motivating him, and the only source of optimism since the store at the Floating Market was clearly a lost cause. Ashan's sarcastic joke to me about Sri Lankan workers emigrating to the United States to build the border wall imagined by Donald Trump spoke to the pervasiveness of migration dreams, not only among the Floating Market vendors but also among educated English-speakers like Ashan himself. The implication of the joke - and this came up numerous times in the course of my working relationship with Ashan - was the idea that almost anywhere at all, any type of labor, was better than staying in Sri Lanka. Needless to say, this

perspective differed greatly from the intense optimism which had characterized the immediate post-war moment, and which had underpinned the rapid construction of new public spaces throughout Colombo, such as the Floating Market itself. My ethnographic research at the Market could not have revealed more clearly the difference in the affects and aspirations of the working urban poor and the outlook of the elites who had envisioned Colombo as a global destination.

Dispossession and Disappointment in the Making of a Hub City

Throughout my vendor informants' accounts of the Floating Market, there is repeated reference to the loss of shops that they had owned in other parts of Pettah before coming to join the Floating Market. In all cases, the vendors spoke longingly of their old businesses and lamented their relocation into a space which was, by comparison, far less commercially viable. Vendors had been given little choice in the matter of relocation: the government was intent on destroying the shops they had occupied in order to complete a road expansion project. The compensation given to the vendors was not up for discussion: they were given shops in the Floating Market and expected to pay rent in accordance with UDA contracts.

In her analysis of ongoing forms of dispossession in Southeast Asia, Tania Li critiques certain Marxist accounts of dispossession which risk being overly neat in their temporal and spatial framings. Li points out that while accumulation by dispossession typically assumes the incorporation of the dispossessed into capitalist regimes of labor and production, in fact it is increasingly common to observe forms of dispossession in which “dispossession is detached from any prospect of labor absorption” (69). Furthermore, she notes that in contemporary examples of

dispossession, it is often impossible to identify who is directly responsible for the situation of the dispossessed, and thus to resist dispossession.

Li's rethinking of the dynamics of dispossession offers some important possibilities for conceiving of dispossession in relation to the Pettah Floating Market. While on the surface, the case of the Market does not seem to be one of outright "dispossession" because the vendors were compensated with storefronts in the newly opened space, the results of this "compensation" are far from adequate in replacing their lost businesses and income streams. Vendors were given no choice in the matter of whether to move, and when they did were essentially trapped in a poorly accessible, low traffic space. The state in turn made money off these same vendors by collecting exorbitant rents - the mechanism of dispossession was a spatial shift/relocation which resulted in the UDA being able to extract value from a population of people newly concentrated in a single, state-owned location.

The case of the Floating Market offers ways to think about contemporary situations of primitive accumulation or accumulation by dispossession differently from traditional Marxist models. Dispossession may in fact be embedded in the very mechanisms through which the urban poor appear to be *compensated* for their losses. Not only is the compensation (in this case, the new stores) insufficient for truly making up for lost livelihoods, the new businesses themselves become a channel for the state to profit off the very people it has just relocated.

The situation of the vendors in the Floating Market speaks to the complex relations between the urban poor and the state in situations of rapid urban development. Writing about urban residents evicted in order to facilitate the building of a new urban zone in Vietnam, Erik Harms writes that "When neoliberalism and authoritarianism mingle, the production of beautiful urban spaces both masks and

reinforces assertions of power” (2012: 742). Detailing the failure of a new urban project promoted for its beauty and aesthetic charm, Harms captures a feeling of failure highly similar to what I have described here with regards to the Floating Market in Colombo:

What began as promises of a more beautiful future eventually turned into a charade of false promises, bungled bureaucratic procedures, and forced eviction. Despite the obvious frustration, in the above statement and countless others like it, residents do not critique the “picture of a beautiful future” originally described. Their anger is directed at the failure to deliver on that promise and, most directly, at the nitty-gritty details of the process—rising land prices, inappropriate compensation levels, and bureaucratic red tape. (2012: 740)

This resonates with the situation of the vendors at the Floating Market. As Harms notes, the object of the evicted residents’ anger is not the initial project or its vision, but rather the way in which its construction was mishandled. The Floating Market vendors, too, lament the failure of the state to “deliver on the promise” of the space, rather than the idea behind the space itself. As shown in my ethnography, the vendors were in large part supporters of the former government, and entered the space with high expectations of the business they could conduct there. When the vendors suggested “known brands” which could be included in order to attract more customers, or tried to dress up their shops to appeal to tourists, this was an attempt to participate in the transformation of Colombo into a global city. Cooperation, rather than resistance, initially characterized the vendors’ attitudes towards the Floating Market.

Asher Ghertner, writing on Delhi, observes that the practices of world-city making rest on shared understandings of the need to improve, beautify and streamline urban infrastructures, and specifically to do away with slums. The common desire to “improve” serves to “naturalize dispossession” (2015: 90) of those

deemed not to belong in a world-class city. Ghertner suggests that what he terms “nuisance talk” is a powerful discursive form, in which urban residents come “to not just agree on an abject object, but to initiate a political and material process of abjection” (2015: 80). Ultimately, Ghertner points out that this way of interacting with and perceiving slums casts them as *causes* rather than *symptoms* of urban decay.

The Pettah Floating Market initially started out as a proposed solution to the overwhelming messiness and intensity of Pettah, deemed a “problem” for foreign visitors and middle class Colombo residents. However, in a parallel to what Ghertner observes about slums, the Floating Market’s failure quickly came to be seen as part of the problem it had originally been designed to address. Despite being a symptom of poor state planning and neglect, the Floating Market was eventually tarred with the same brush as the rest of the Pettah neighborhood, minus its commercial viability: unappealing, lower class, and not meeting cosmopolitan standards. The vendors themselves even had to shoulder some of the blame for their own dispossession and precarity, as evidenced by one UDA official’s remark to me that if the government could start over from scratch they would “choose better people” to staff the Market.

Ultimately, the relocation of the vendors from their original shops in Pettah to the new stagnant market space was an example of the multi-faceted and complex processes of dispossession at play in contemporary Colombo. Vendors eventually heard that the project for which their original shops had been destroyed had never gone ahead after all. Months after concluding my fieldwork, I learned from friends in Colombo that the new government was considering closing the market and simply moving the vendors out, back to another street in Pettah. Rather than being incorporated into a new and different labor force, the Floating Market vendors

simply found themselves trapped. The Market never became a convincing addition to the project of reshaping Colombo into a global metropolis; if anything, it became a forgotten footnote in the larger story of trying to render Colombo a modern hub city. It stands as a powerful reminder that not all forms of dispossession lead to clear examples of accumulation, that not all roads to urban development are linear. Most of all, the Floating Market offers stark evidence that the path to global city building is littered with errors, failed projects and missed opportunities.

Conclusion: Failed Hubness

In chapter one, I developed the concept of the politics of hubness. Hubness implies mobility. The movement of capital and people throughout the Indian Ocean region is central to the imaginary of Sri Lanka's future promoted by politicians, urban planners and developers. However, as my ethnographic engagement with the Pettah Floating Market revealed, immobility and confinement were more central to vendors' experiences than freedom and mobility. And yet, much like the fishers I introduced in chapter three, I also found the vendors to have their own dreams and desires of mobility - dreams that differed somewhat from the elite conceptions of mobility made visible in hubness discourse.

As discussed earlier, Pettah the neighborhood is a hub for Colombo and even Sri Lanka as a whole, a mixing pot of ethnicities, religions, commodities and commercial activities. The diversity of Pettah renders it both attractive and repulsive to middle class Sinhala-Buddhist social imaginaries. Beyond the symbolism of a multi-ethnic urban neighborhood serving as a mini-hub for commerce in Sri Lanka, Pettah's significance also stems from its association with infrastructures of island-wide transport. The Fort Railway station and major bus depot with buses departing

for points all over Sri Lanka are located in Pettah. Pettah the neighborhood is suffused with associations of domestic travel, transit and movement, a foil to the international, trans-oceanic forms of transit championed by the discourse of hubness.

Given Pettah's neighborhood-wide link to places beyond Colombo, it was surprising to me to notice how many of the vendors' complaints rested on the lack of very simple forms of access and mobility - such as a walkway - which would contribute to the commercial success of the Floating Market. The contours of a hub city are being built in contemporary Colombo, but often without attention to relatively small items that would make a big difference in the lives of people like the Floating Market vendors. Rather than being a harmonious unified whole, the emerging hub city is characterized by tensions, gaps and myriad forms of error and failure that pit the needs of the urban poor against the ambitions of planners.

The rhetoric of hubness, like all global-city making discourse, assumes success. The process of transforming Colombo into a hub city is usually portrayed as a smooth, straightforward and self-evident sequence of events unfolding such that people and spaces are neatly developed from poor to wealthy, from backwards to modern. And yet, as evidenced by my ethnography, the path imagined by state agencies and planners are hardly so straightforward. Instead, as shown by the situation of the Floating Market, the urban poor are often subject to complex, multi-layered forms of dispossession and confinement. Hubness as it is being realized in Sri Lanka today includes many examples of exploitation, failure and exclusion underneath the dazzling images and triumphant rhetoric of a new Colombo.

CHAPTER 5: BUILDING AS IF: THE DREAMWORK OF LUXURY REAL ESTATE

Speculation is an important part of the work of building global cities. I understand speculation not purely as a financial technique but more broadly as “the making present and materializing of uncertain futures” (Bear et al. 2015, 387) in diverse arenas. *Present* in this formulation of course is relevant on multiple registers, signifying both a temporal “now” and a spatial “here.” In Colombo, luxury apartments index an uncertain but highly specific, longed-for future. One of the hallmarks of the emerging Asian or global metropolis is its ability to cater to the lifestyles of cosmopolitan and highly mobile professionals, especially through the provision of suitably exclusive and luxurious housing (Ong 2007). As I demonstrate through the ethnographic details in this chapter, discourses surrounding luxury real estate developments speak to labor being done in both spatial and temporal terms. The ongoing construction of luxury real estate complexes in Colombo is one part of a larger process of building the global city, both materially and symbolically.

Arjun Appadurai employs the notion of dreamwork for understanding speculation in the contemporary global economy. Distancing himself from theories which would underscore capitalism’s rationality, Appadurai emphasizes instead the seemingly irrational, illogical aspects of capitalism, “its magical, spiritual, and utopian horizon” (2015, 481). According to Appadurai, “The idea of dreamwork brings together...the space of fantasy, speculation, and the unbridled imagination...and the space of productivity, discipline, and instrumentality” (2015, 483). My ethnographic research among those who labor in Colombo’s real estate industry revealed the extent to which this labor is effectively a combination of *both* of dreamwork’s key elements: fantasy and imagination and its own forms of productivity and discipline. Developers and agents speak in the idiom of global

standards of luxury, and employ charts, figures, waiting lists, and other technologies designed to make luxury developments appear as good investments. However, as I show in this chapter, alongside these techniques designed to project certainty and precision, forms of confusion, uncertainty, anxiety persist: waiting lists for buildings, upon closer inspection, offer only incomplete information; the number of actual buyers and renters of luxury units remains unclear; developments are proposed and marketed, but completion dates hover on an ever-hazier horizon. Colombo's luxury real estate market is an ongoing form of dreamwork.

Studies of global South cities emphasize the importance of changing property relations as well as the arrival and spread of new forms of urban and middle class housing. The question of where people live in emerging global cities is one that draws together complex issues of class, space, land, aspiration, dispossession and speculation (in both its financial and other registers, as above). The rise of gated communities and increasingly securitized middle class forms of dwelling has been a major trend across diverse national contexts, and has drawn attention from urban scholars (Caldeira 2001, Falzon 2004, Low 2001). Home *interiors* are also a key lens through which to understand shifting middle class values and modes of self-presentation, as taste in furnishing and ways of relating to interior space provide an important lens through which to understand both global patterns of consumption and class aspirations (Schielke 2012, Srivastava 2012, Fehervary 2002). In South Asia, the emergence of planned, gated, and luxury residences in cities throughout the Global South indexes a new way of relating to the state based more on private prosperity than collective, social development. As Sanjay Srivastava notes with regards to India, "the bedroom is a window to the world" (2012: 62).

This chapter builds on these conversations about emergent forms of housing (especially in the Global South), however it also departs from them in some ways to emphasize the incompleteness and uncertainty of such projects. Rather than understanding gated, luxury or apartment-style living as fixed forms to be analyzed, in Colombo I emphasize that these things are works-in-progress, concepts which remain aspirational rather than actual. In her work on Dakar, Senegal, Caroline Melly draws an important distinction between “building” and “dwelling”; analyzing the unfinished homes built in the city by the Senegalese diaspora, Melly suggests that this is a context in which “‘house’ and ‘home’ are often disarticulated” (2010, 38). Focusing on *building* rather than dwelling allows for an understanding of housing that takes into account the many divergent actors and temporalities involved in these processes of construction: “building is not passive, but rather is an ongoing and active engagement with physical materials, abstract hopes, available capital, networks of people and spatial constraints” (Melly 2010, 53). Following Melly, I prefer to emphasize the ways in which housing is not exclusively a place in which to dwell but might also index broader goals, aspirations and complex relations of capital, space and temporality; building becomes a useful lens through which to understand luxury real estate in Colombo because it emphasizes the incompleteness of such projects.

In Colombo, luxury real estate developments are understood to be an important part of transforming the city into a global hub. As built forms, high rise luxury buildings “inscribe a calligraphy of global significance” (Ong 2007, 83), allowing Colombo to physically resemble other, larger, Asian metropolises. However, these projects are ongoing and far from complete. While sky scrapers and other world-famous buildings are the material embodiment of the global city form to which

Colombo aspires, it has not yet arrived. Similarly, the ability to draw the appropriate occupants for such structures is not yet fully established, even though real estate agents and developers insist that such buildings meet “global” standards of luxury and appeal to wealthy Europeans, Asians and Middle Easterners. Writing about the already-global situation of cities like Shanghai or Singapore, Aihwa Ong suggests that “expatriates can be said to enjoy a “pied-a-terre status.” This status is “one that identifies the spatial and temporal limits of their link to the city. Despite the turnover, the expatriate community keeps the city in the global game” (2007, 86). As I will show in this chapter, in Colombo such pied-a-terre forms of citizenship facilitated by a critical mass of expatriates is a reality to which many aspire but which has not yet arrived. This gap between the desire for and actual presence of wealthy foreigners is one of the primary sources of uncertainty and speculation amidst the current luxury real estate boom.

As the following sections of this chapter demonstrate, the world of luxury real estate in Colombo is a hinge between the material and symbolic aspects of global city building. It requires both the construction of physical buildings and the immaterial labor of marketing them to buyers and renters, as well as persuading the general public of their value. In seeking to “make present” a future in which Colombo is a global city, developers have hastened to build ever more impressive and spectacular luxury units, but the prospects for their success remain unclear at best. Taking seriously both the temporal and spatial registers of global city building, this chapter considers the luxury real estate boom as an enterprise influenced both by the desire for greater spatial (global) connection as well as one which traffics in images and desires for a future that has not yet arrived.

Work in Progress

All over Colombo, glossy billboards advertising luxury housing developments, along with the sights and sounds of construction, serve as reminders of the city's recent real estate boom. Offering views of the Indian Ocean, 24-hour security, shiny new appliances, air conditioning, and amenities like swimming pools and gyms, Colombo's luxury complexes are envisioned as giving their residents a sanitized, comfortable life wholly separate from the traffic jams, heat and headaches of the city outside. Luxury apartments in Colombo are concentrated in the city's central districts, (Colombo 1-5); to the older set of complexes known among the city's wealthy and expats even during the civil war are being added newer even more extravagant buildings like the One Galle Face, Cinnamon Life or Havelock City. With monthly rents often far beyond what average Sri Lankan families might earn in several months to a year, these developments became a source of curiosity to me as I conducted my fieldwork. Who were these buildings for? Why were upscale apartments such an important feature of the post-war cityscape? What future might these buildings have - to what extent was the surge in construction sustainable in the long term? What might these luxury complexes tell us about people's aspirations and hopes for the future?

Global city making is a process involving both material and symbolic labor. Luxury housing is a pivotal facet of Colombo's global city transformation, as developers offer ever more spectacular and impressive forms of urban housing for the local and global elites they hope will soon inhabit the inner neighborhoods of Colombo. However, such plans and hopes have still not quite come to fruition. As this chapter makes clear, luxury real estate is a largely speculative enterprise, one informed by the hopeful rhetoric of *one day* attracting critical masses of wealthy

foreigners to Sri Lanka, even though they have not yet arrived. Luxury buildings may be better understood as a statement of intent, rather than as a reflection of the consumption habits and desires of the actual Colombo population.

Luxury apartment buildings servicing both wealthy Sri Lankans and foreigners²⁰ are not a complete novelty in the Colombo cityscape. Even during wartime, several such developments existed in central areas of Colombo. What is new is the scale and quantity of such projects; developments are becoming more ambitious and spectacular in design and more of them seem to be under construction throughout the city. Havelock City and Cinnamon Life are examples of particularly ambitious new developments.

This digital rendering of the Cinnamon Life complex has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation

Image 8 Digital rendering of Cinnamon Life complex. Source: cinnamonlife.lk

Havelock City, the project of a South Korean developer and Cinnamon Life, the brainchild of the John Keels Holdings Group, one of Sri Lanka's largest businesses, are compounds in which life can be lived almost entirely separate from the rest of Colombo. Each of these developments boasts luxury residential apartments nestled alongside office buildings, a shopping mall, even 5 star hotels. These are mega projects on a scale not seen during the war years. As I will discuss more in detail later in this chapter, while apartments are not new to Colombo they are also far from being the standard or "normal" form of housing most Sri Lankans imagine when they think of buying a property. Apartment living is typically seen as either an

²⁰ I use the terms "foreigners" and "expats"/"expatriates" somewhat interchangeably in this chapter, reflecting the way such terms were used in my discussions with landlords, real estate agents, developers and others I met through my research on luxury real estate in Colombo. In Sri Lanka I would argue that the term "foreigner" has overall connotations of wealth and privilege, usually used to denote non-Sri Lankan visitors from North America, Europe or Australia, though the term might also apply to Indians and the Chinese. "Expat" tends to evoke, in many countries, a person of some privilege who chooses to live abroad. This is how the term was used by my interlocutors in Colombo, and it typically did not include Chinese and Indian nationals.

example of Sri Lanka's development towards "modern" or "global" urban forms popular throughout the world, or as a practical solution to the need for housing for the urban poor.

Colombo is expensive. Part of the reason for this is the city's small size and the difficulty of getting around, which only increases the desirability of the cramped central neighborhoods. Districts are defined by numbers. Colombo 1,2,3,4,5 and 7 are considered "prime" Colombo and were usually listed by my informants in the real estate industry as the hot neighborhoods where more luxury complexes were being built, with the bulk of them in Colombo 1,2 and 3. Though this chapter primarily focuses on real estate in these prime areas, luxury apartment buildings were also available in some of the city's nearby suburbs. And yet, location matters a great deal when one considers the poor infrastructure and heavy traffic of a city like Colombo. The appeal of the central neighborhoods had to do not only with the cultural cache of proximity to iconic Colombo heritage sites such as the Fort and Galle Face Green, but also with the fact that being farther out meant a long, stressful commute for those working in the city center.

When I interviewed local real estate analysts, they confirmed that land prices in Colombo had always been going up - even during the war. I was surprised to learn that the high cost of living in the city did not seem to be as impacted by the end of the war as much as some promotional materials led me to believe. As one informant working in luxury real estate put it, the Sri Lankan civil war "wasn't World War II." Because the city was largely insulated from the armed conflict raging in the North and East between 1983 and 2009, the property market was not affected to a great extent. Still, the end of the war certainly was a cause for renewed excitement about the prospect of attracting more foreign direct investment (FDI), more visitors and

tourists, and generally modernizing and beautifying the Colombo cityscape. However, the rising cost of owning property in Colombo was certainly not something to be discounted: land prices rose on average by 5 percent in the first half of 2014, with a higher rate of 7 to 8 percent in the more central neighborhoods according to one report (JLL 2014).

Given the long time horizons required for the construction of large projects like apartment complexes (as well as the tendency for projects to take longer than initially projected), my informants pointed out the surfeit of projects with projected opening dates of 2017-2019. The time lag between the end of the war (2009) and the completion of major projects like the One Galle Face, the Cinnamon Life, was a cause of anxiety for some. The uncertain political situation, with a new government elected to power in January 2015, was one source of worry. The other issue was the fear of a general economic slow-down arising from new taxes imposed by the recently-elected government. This was mixed with the fact that Sri Lanka is a very low-debt market - 90 percent of properties are debt-free, and banks do not give mortgages easily (Vox and Co. 2014). While this is a positive on the one-hand, giving many in the real estate sector hope that Sri Lanka would avoid a subprime crisis like the one in the United States in 2008, it also meant that for all but the wealthiest families, actually purchasing one of the new luxury condos being heavily advertised was all but impossible.

The presence of foreigners in Sri Lanka and the need to cater to their tastes fueled much discussion about luxury real estate in Colombo. I will turn later to the issue of their perceived tastes and needs, but the thirst for foreign tenants and buyers on the part of developers and property owners ran into some significant structural obstacles. I was told repeatedly that foreigners faced restrictions in terms of their

ability to buy certain kinds of property, most notably anything below the 4th floor was either not allowed for sale to non-Sri Lankans, or could be heavily taxed. Rumors abounded about the new government “relaxing” these restrictions to make purchasing property more attractive to foreigners, but no one could be sure of whether this would actually happen. A staff member of the new Cinnamon Life development told me that one worry regarding foreign buyers in Sri Lanka was that their purchases wouldn’t be rewarded with citizenship or permanent residency; “they are looking to park money overseas, and Sri Lanka’s not making that appealing to them,” he explained. The following flow chart from a report on Colombo real estate shows the challenges of buying property as a foreigner:

This chart has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation
Image 9: Investing in Sri Lankan Residential Market Source: JLL Research

Essentially as the image makes clear, foreigners face an entirely different property market from Sri Lankan citizens.

As I will explore in the rest of this chapter, the Colombo real estate market is complex and multi-faceted, with many elements of uncertainty. The hopeful, linear narratives of progress promoted by developers became complicated when I delved more deeply into the luxury apartment phenomenon. Based on open-ended interviews and informal conversations with real estate agents, developers, landlords and others in the luxury property market, in addition to my experiences of looking for housing and review of reports and documents offering insights into Colombo’s real estate market, this chapter considers luxury real estate as one key aspect of the speculative work of global city-making.

Global Lifestyles, National Aspirations

“*Real* real estate comes from the heart, it’s about relationships,” Ahmed told me. It was a weekday evening and we were sitting in the Cheers Pub, one of the bars inside of Colombo’s exclusive Cinnamon Grand Hotel. Amidst the plush surroundings designed to mimic a typical British pub with aesthetic and culinary touches equally reminiscent of an American-style sports bar, Ahmed and I were eating dinner with some of his friends and colleagues discussing their work in the Colombo real estate industry. “Real estate isn’t about the nine to five,” he explained: “it’s not typical. It’s fun. You get to go to meetings and not sit in the office all day. We’re lifestyle specialists. We can help you with what kind of lifestyle you want to lead.”

Ahmed is a Bora Muslim in his early thirties, born and raised in Pettah before his family moved to Colombo’s southern suburbs. His father, who moved to Sri Lanka from India as a young man, also worked in real estate, which is how Ahmed learned the trade. But unlike his father, who casually worked as a real estate agent alongside other jobs, Ahmed is dedicated to his own small company, which he dreams of taking “global” one day. Ahmed was successful enough that eventually he could hire friends from the Muslim high school he attended, as well as his own sister, to form a small but competent office staff helping him meet with customers, draft contracts and show properties for rent and sale.

Always polished and extremely cheerful, Ahmed is keenly devoted to the idea of professionalism and to relentless self-improvement. Both in person and through a growing social media presence, he often speaks in corporate buzzwords and self-help terminology that would not be out of place in the Silicon Valley. In our conversations, he would regularly refer to well-known business figures from the US

like Mark Zuckerberg or Steve Jobs as if they were intimate friends, assuming I would know who he was referring to when he called them by first name only.

For Ahmed, real estate was more than just a job, but rather an ethical orientation towards the world, signaling cosmopolitan values and open-mindedness. All of this was juxtaposed with what he viewed as the “backwards” “disappointing” and provincial attitudes of the Sri Lankan masses. In his view, local Sri Lankans needed to be educated to appreciate and understand global standards of living. Ahmed understood wealth and cosmopolitanism not only as forms of financial or symbolic capital wielded by individuals, but rather as markers of an individual’s interior life, morality and value.

The aspirations tied to luxury real estate span multiple scales, bridging dreams of both personal and national improvement. On the one hand, the idiom of “lifestyle” with regards to the property one occupies speaks to the individual client’s subjectivity, her choices, values, preferences and identity and how these things are expressed through her living space. But as my conversations with Ahmed made clear, talking about luxury real estate also became a way of talking about broader issues of urban and national development. Describing himself as “personally disappointed” in the attitudes of people around him, Ahmed often evoked the mentality of *tuk-tuk* drivers, convenient go-to figures in many conversations about class, when he expressed exasperation with the current political situation in Sri Lanka. Drivers and other working class Sri Lankans, he told me, still preferred the “old regime” (the Rajapakse government) to the new governing coalition. They didn’t understand progress or modernity. For Ahmed, the personal preferences and tastes of the majority of Sri Lankans were indicative of how far the country still had to go on the road to development and prestige. He referred to Sri Lanka as being “a

developing mind, a developing nation.” “If the mind is not developed,” he said gravely, “then we are still on square one.”

Despite the beautiful images marketing the luxury properties which Ahmed himself helped to rent and sell, Sri Lankans often emerged in real estate reports and market forecasts as people who had to be convinced, persuaded and *educated* into living in apartments. The understood standard of housing to which most people aspired was still the free-standing house. This seemed to apply to both the urban poor and the most elite sections of the Colombo gentry. Many of the English-speaking elites - including but not limited to some of Sri Lanka’s political dynastic families who make Colombo their home - lived in rambling old estates in Cinnamon Gardens, Colombo 7, one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in the city. For many people from the upper echelons of Colombo society, this was still the ideal form of housing. The Cinnamon Gardens mansion is a trope of Colombo life, indexing the lifestyles and values of the upper classes. How was the 19th and 20th century rambling mansion distinct from the 21st century luxury apartment?

The principle of separation is one of the core tenets of the new luxury complexes dotting the Colombo landscape. New buildings in Colombo seemed to promise ever more exclusive, private and lavish lifestyles with each passing month. The most ambitious developments were not even stand-alone buildings but entire compounds in which the residential apartment buildings would be on the same plot of land as hotels, shopping malls and offices. Entire worlds of luxurious life blissfully disconnected from the rest of the city. This drive to create ever more spectacular modes of living for the wealthy seems to fit very well with broad global trends of increasing inequality and capitalist urban development. However, I also wish to consider the local roots of these wildly divergent modes of living. Writing in

1989 about coastal fishing communities in Sri Lanka's Western Province, Rodrick Stirrat observed that while spheres of activity such as the actual labor of fishing spurred cooperation between different families, the consumption of household commodities in the private sphere gave rise to an acute competition between families, each trying to outdo their neighbors (Stirrat 1989: 108). Stirrat argues in turn that:

The material symbols of another social class, the Sinhalese bourgeoisie, were usurped, wrenched out of context, and given new meanings. Things such as car ports, water tanks and television sets which were becoming integral to the life style of the Sinhalese middle class were here taken out of that context and given a new significance both in relation to other members of the fishing community and to members of the middle class. And the middle classes were not unaware of this challenge. For them the message was quite clear: that either the fishing community was becoming too rich or that they were becoming too poor. A continual refrain on the part of teachers, clerks and others was that they were underpaid precisely because the 'lower orders' could afford such commodities, and that therefore the markers of status were being devalued. (1989, 109)

In this analysis, the internal competitions among much lower class strata actually end up impacting the worldview and sense of security of those in entirely different spheres of life: the teachers and clerks. The postwar, 21st century drive to create constantly *more* luxurious spaces in Colombo can be thought of not only as an effort to catch up with other global Asian metropolises, but also as a way of maintaining local/national class divisions.

Global and Local Imaginaries

One day when we were deep in conversation about his work in the real estate industry, Ahmed observed that, since the end of the civil war “the complexion of Colombo is different.” In hearing these words, I was immediately struck by their multiple meanings. Though Ahmed was in fact talking about the materiality of the

city - newly paved roads and modern buildings - his words also carried connotations about the race and ethnicity of people inhabiting Colombo. Part of the dreamwork of marketing Colombo real estate was entangled with the project of rendering Sri Lanka in general an appealing destination for foreign capital. Not only did many in the government and private sector wish to attract FDI, but many industries in postwar Sri Lanka - not only tourism, but also luxury real estate and property development - actively tried to court foreign individuals as visitors or potential residents. The complexion of Colombo was changing indeed, reflecting the symbolic importance of foreign-ness in giving the city an image of cosmopolitanism, prestige and value.

The desire for emerging cities to attract foreign visitors and investors is a clear trend across the Global South, reflecting the enduring appeal of cities like Dubai and Singapore, supposedly ‘de-nationalized’ sites of wealth accumulation and privileged forms of citizenship. With regards to emerging cities in East Asia, Aihwa Ong notes that “the presence of a significant number of foreign actors is a symbolic image of the city itself, as a participant in the creation and exchange of global signs and values” (2007, 91). Writing on Bangalore, Michael Goldman suggests that the city is gradually becoming delinked from Delhi and national politics in favor of more global linkages: “perhaps more than any time in recent history, what happens in Shanghai, Singapore and Dubai matters to small producers and workers in Karnataka” (2011, 576). As I made clear earlier in this chapter, in Colombo such tropes of denationalization, of urban spaces flooded with “foreign actors,” are still primarily aspirational rather than actual. The development of luxury real estate complexes is an ongoing act of both material and symbolic construction of Colombo as a global city. To paraphrase Goldman’s observations about Bangalore, in Colombo urban residents “are being actively dispossessed as part of the effort to

build up a world city based on a speculative imaginary for world-city investors who may just stay away, and for world-city professionals who have yet to come” (577).

As I learned through my own experiences of trying to rent an apartment in Colombo, foreigners were often treated with a kind of deference that went beyond that accorded to Sri Lankan renters, even as they were often expected to pay relatively large sums of money for their properties. The “right” kinds of foreigners (Europeans, Australians and North Americans) were thought to add a touch of class and elegance to places they might live, thereby making certain properties more desirable simply through being there. The landlady of the apartment Ahmed helped me rent thought expats were likely to be cleaner and more responsible. Ahmed seemed to think expats operated in a different moral field from Sri Lankans - “they have certain ethics, a certain level of decency,” he explained. Even though he often told me stories of unethical or questionable behavior from expat clients of his, these never seemed to impact his overall assessment that foreigners were more trustworthy and easier to work with. Ahmed saw it as part of his job to help landlords, owners and sellers ensure that the people who lived in their properties were suitable and trustworthy. He wasted no time in telling me how he broke down his customers by nationality and religion and used his own theories on their different cultures to help decide whether they were legitimate prospects and to guide them towards one property or another.

In Ahmed’s view, European clients were easy to work with, “friendly, flexible and polite.” He often told me stories about becoming friends with the clients in this group even after the business part of their relationship was over. Next were the Middle Eastern clients – they were harder to work with. “They’re “fussy” and their “culture” isn’t as friendly, they can be very unpleasant to work with,” he

explained, musing that perhaps it was due to “their language” which sounded “harsh.” But, he noted, they have a lot of money. “Asians” were considered less fussy than Middle Eastern clients. Maldivians were a very undesirable category – “they are looked down upon” he said matter of factly. He laughed and told me that if a Maldivian client called, he would say “yes yes we’ll get back to you sir” and then never get back in touch. He gives landlords a “preferred clients” form they can fill out and it will usually say no Maldivians. When I asked why this would be, Ahmed explained that “they are very unclean,” again attributing this to “culture,” and said they will often bring 5,7 or 8 people to live in a single apartment. Chinese and Indian clients “require more screening” but they could be OK. He explained it was a matter of who they were and their budget – for example, he said, if you have a Chinese or Indian family and their budget is Rs. 80,000/month “it can get a little dodgy.” (My own apartment, incidentally, was Rs.80,000 per month, and I considered it the absolute limit of what I could pay).

If Ahmed’s ranking of types of people contains some deeply troubling assessments of people and their “cultures” I think it also tells us something in that it mirrors other trends and ways of thinking in Colombo. The tourism industry seems to make a nearly identical breakdown of desirable clients; Europeans and North Americans at the top, Eastern Europeans and Arabs somewhere in the middle, “Asians” at the bottom, divisions which can of course be mitigated by other considerations like wealth and religion. The stereotypes and images of different groups speak volumes about the political and economic links Sri Lanka has forged to the rest of the world in recent years. Ahmed off-handedly remarked that there were “200,000 Chinese in Sri Lanka” a number I found shockingly high (and which I suspected mixed residents and visitors per year). The suspicion with which these

Chinese people were met clearly echoed the ambivalence many Sri Lankans felt towards Chinese investment in the country and the close ties forged by Mahinda Rajapakse's administration with China. And yet, despite many misgivings about the flow of Chinese money into Sri Lanka, many business people like Ahmed saw these newcomers as an important source of new business, even though they did not have the glamor or symbolic value of Europeans.

The everyday casual xenophobia expressed by many people in Colombo betrays the deep anxieties that Sri Lankans have towards the outside world and their place within it. In discussions about ideal buyers and renters, Sri Lanka is always implicitly positioned as a receiver of foreigners, and it is the job of cosmopolitan, well-informed locals - like Ahmed - to sift through them and rank them. Sri Lanka assumes a passive role in a world in which other groups of people are assumed to be more mobile and wealthier.

Ahmed sometimes spoke of foreigners in Sri Lanka as if they were a kind of precious commodity, and seemed to believe them to be inherently at risk in what he considered the treacherous real estate market of Colombo. "Expats need to get guided into a channel, otherwise they get a bad first impression, they get ripped off," he explained to me once. This comment stuck with me. Just as the luxury buildings I describe earlier in this chapter thrived because of a sense that they provided separation between occupants and the ever-encroaching city outside, Ahmed's remark about "expat channels" implied that foreigners in Sri Lanka needed to be separated from the world around them. But his view of this was much wider in scope than mere physical space. As he made clear to me in various ways, the channels he spoke of were social, having to do with much more than just where expats lived and worked. To him, expat values and lifestyles were so completely

different from those of “locals” that they needed to be inserted into their own special networks. He was happy to accommodate this, and even turned it into a new business opportunity. When I came back to Colombo in June 2016, Ahmed told me with pride that he was now operating an expat relocation service as part of his real estate business. Servicing “high end” clients, including a few CEOs. For a price of \$8,000 to \$10,000 per client, he would work with these high net worth individuals and get a sense of their tastes and preferences then help them get settled in Colombo.

Through this new facet of his business, Ahmed was now involved in new areas of his clients’ lives that went beyond where they lived but came to include their personal and family lives as well. He told me about a recent foreign client who worked for an international shipping company. The client needed to furnish his house but ended up “at the wrong place” and was being quoted exorbitant prices by the Sri Lankan salespeople. Ahmed stepped in and took his client to the “right place,” Damro (a local store, well-known for its home furnishings) and helped the man buy various home appliances for a much more reasonable price. He also became involved in helping clients select an appropriate school for their children, usually one of the well-known international or British schools in Colombo. I listened as he rified for awhile on the differences between the Overseas School and the Colombo British School, talking about them as if they were properties he was marketing. “The Overseas School has AC in the classrooms,” he said by way of explanation for its appeal. He considered this new part of his business a way for him to “build a good network” with what he termed “the upmarket crowd” of Colombo expats. Through real estate dealings and now through client relocation, Ahmed was able to enter new spheres of Colombo society, all of it spurred by the perception that foreigners required special treatment, better facilities, and separation from locals.

In chapter one, I described how the discourse surrounding Sri Lanka's post war development tends to imply that global flows of capital already exist and need to be channeled correctly in order for the country to use its strategic location to its advantage; Sri Lanka has to work to "catch" the flows already existing around it. The way foreigners were spoken about by Ahmed and others in Colombo's real estate market mirrors this rhetoric to some extent. People of a specific kind - ideally white, or wealthy, or both - are seen as valuable resources who, if catered to correctly, can be induced to come to and stay in Colombo. Cosmopolitan locals like Ahmed were able to use their various forms of cultural capital, such as fluent English and familiarity with western business concepts, to deepen interpersonal relationships which in turn were perceived as markers of Sri Lanka's general direction, its relationship to surrounding countries and to the global economy. The construction and marketing of luxury buildings in Colombo was deeply intertwined with imaginaries of the global.

Oversupply and Uncertainty

In my various conversations with Ahmed and other informants working in the real estate industry, I found myself curious about the sheer quantity of new buildings that seemed to be springing up around Colombo. Were all these luxury units really necessary? Who would occupy them? My questions sprang from the knowledge that the monthly rents and also the purchase prices of such buildings were wildly out of reach for most "regular" Sri Lankans. Furthermore, Colombo is not an enormous city and Sri Lanka has a relatively small population. Was it realistic to expect that there would be enough people to come live in these luxurious spaces? Based on cursory observation alone - the visual clues as to the quantity and

size of the buildings springing up in Colombo - it seemed clear that there was a mismatch between developers' expectations and people to buy and rent properties. I soon learned that the industry term for the problem I had identified was "oversupply."

And yet, while nearly everyone seemed to acknowledge that oversupply *would* be a problem, the staff members at different luxury developments always cheerfully told me the companies for which they worked wouldn't be affected by it. One marketing professional I interviewed who worked for one of the major new compound-style developments (still yet to be completed) told me that his company was one of the most reputable in Sri Lanka and that the high name recognition would lead more people to invest in their properties - "we should be OK" he assured me. On another occasion, I visited a show-unit for yet another glamorous development still under construction. The staff member showing me around, a young woman who seemed well-practiced in giving these kinds of tours to foreigners, presented me with a folder full of documents relating to the units for sale. One was an Excel spreadsheet listing the kinds of units and which ones were already spoken for. "The towers are filling up quickly," she said sweeping her hand over the table. But when I looked more closely, I noticed that the blocked off parts of the table only said "interested" not "purchased"; in other words, part of the promotion of these properties rested on displaying potential clients just as much as actual ones.

At the end of our tour, my guide passed me off to another staff member of the development, who answered my questions rather briskly, as if she had heard them all before. I asked her who the buyers of units like the one I had just seen would be. She rattled off the usual reply that it would be "a mix of foreigners and locals." But when I pressed her on the actual proportions of locals versus foreigners, she

confessed that she wasn't "too sure," and then waved off the question, asking if I had anything else I'd like to talk about.

Part of the problem seemed to be a general lack of information and clarity as to what was going on with regards to foreigners being allowed to buy property at all, as well as the general uncertainty of the political situation. Throughout 2015, it was unclear whether or not the new government elected in January would last the year, as former President Mahinda Rajapakse hoped to make a comeback through parliamentary elections that were continuously delayed. One young professional working for the new Cinnamon Life complex told me that between January and August (the month of the long-awaited parliamentary elections) people had not been eager to buy property so market activity had been relatively restrained. He opined that with the new government more secure in its position, there would be an uptick in buying and selling. This explanation certainly resonated with the overall sense of uncertainty I observed pervading just about every aspect of Colombo life during fieldwork, but it assumed that the political situation was merely a disturbance in an otherwise steadily growing real estate market. But what about the issues of supply and demand within the market itself?

Another pair of analysts I spoke to were surprisingly more candid about the issue lying more with the luxury developments themselves rather than political uncertainty. Founders of a website devoted to the luxury real estate market in Sri Lanka (which I call LuxuryWeb), these informants suggested that the problem was Colombo was now "just as expensive as everywhere else." Speaking with some pessimism about the prospect of more developers entering the Colombo market, they noted that Colombo was now a "saturated market": "I mean what can you bring in?" one of them asked animatedly. "We have million dollar apartments with all the

amenities inside, all the luxuries, what more can you bring into that market?” This interview highlighted how, contrary to the rhetoric used in real estate marketing materials about Colombo “needing” more luxury developments in order to attract foreigners, the issue was in fact a *surfeit* of new development projects. Uncertainty was not only political, but also internal to the real estate market - with so many different developers scrambling to establish new named buildings in the desirable parts of Colombo, it was impossible to know whether some project may in fact be rendered superfluous by others finished sooner.

The Colombo Port City project, for example, could be a hazard rather than a boon to the other developers at work in the city: “the Port City’s unknown so suddenly they might come up with 20 different new apartments, so we don’t know what’s going to happen...that’s going to flood the market” the LuxuryWeb analysts told me. Too many actors, sometimes working at cross-purposes; too many luxury units, “saturation” and “flooding” of the market. The picture of Colombo that seemed to be emerging was of a place in which the potential for great leaps in terms of luxury housing was accompanied by the potential for serious economic problems to emerge. “It’s the uncomfortable calm before a very bad storm,” one of the LuxuryWeb guys said, laughing.

Particularly troubling was a report about the Colombo real estate market entitled “Scaling New Heights,” published in August 2014 by Jones Lang Lasalle (JLL), an investment management firm. In a section entitled “How Affordable Is Colombo?” the report seems to answer the question, in a roundabout way with: not very. A table showing various household incomes and what they can afford in various neighborhoods of the city shows the vast majority of Colombo residents priced out of home-owning altogether, with an accompanying text informing readers

that “only the top 10 percent income-earning households, I.e., 8.7 percent of the resident population in Colombo, can buy a two-bedroom or three-bedroom apartment in Colombo” (JLL, 2014: 10).

This chart has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation

Image 10: “Affordability Heat Map” Source: JLL Research

One of the first striking things to note about this table is the obviously overwhelming amount of properties coded as “not affordable” for most of the population. By the metrics used in this report to determine affordability, even the top 10 percent of households cannot afford any of the properties - whether “luxury” or “upper mid” in central Colombo. This certainly flies in the face of the more optimistic rhetoric promoted by the developers themselves. Another thing worth noting is the way the income brackets themselves are broken down. The bottom 70 percent is listed as earning less than Rs.63,334/month (~\$426 USD/month). This contrasts rather uncomfortably with the fact that my own apartment in prime Colombo, which Ahmed nonchalantly described as just “normal” (and not “luxury”) was Rs.80,000/month, in other words, nearly Rs.20,000 more per month than what the bottom 70 percent of the city’s households earned in an entire month.

The text of this section of the report concludes that “apartments in the Central submarket and upper-mid and luxury projects in the secondary submarket rely only on NRSLs, foreigners or HNW RSLs in Colombo.” NRSLs are “non-resident Sri Lankans,” while HNW RSLs are “high net worth resident Sri Lankans.” Reading this is hardly surprising given what we have seen in this chapter so far - the attitude and perception that foreigners and Sri Lankans abroad, together with “high net worth” locals will be the driving force behind these luxury developments. However

this faith in the power of foreigners, diasporic Sri Lankans and high net worth individuals failed to confront two important issues: 1) the relatively limited scope of both of these groups and 2) important shifts in the Sri Lankan economy more broadly, including an increase in VAT, the introduction of a capital gains tax, and the retraction of tax breaks for developers.

My acquaintances at LuxuryWeb referred to the combination of new taxes as a “triple whammy” impacting developers and buyers alike. New actors entering the market would need “guts” to come to Sri Lanka now. While VAT had existed in Sri Lanka previously, the new government had increased it from 11 percent to 15 percent. This 4 percent increase in VAT was a major source of anxiety for my informants all over the city when they talked about everyday purchases like groceries, and its significance was readily apparent for an industry like real estate development where a 4 percent increase on construction costs might translate into rising costs of tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars. What was particularly surprising about this, from the point of view of many upper middle class Colombo residents including the LuxuryWeb staff, was the fact that these new measures were implemented under the new UNP government, which was typically considered more “business friendly.” They predicted that the combination of these new costs and less friendly tax breaks would lead to a notable slow down in the Colombo real estate market.

By investigating the dynamics of supply and demand more closely, I was able to see that the luxury real estate industry in Colombo was in fact a much less straightforwardly successful enterprise than informants like Ahmed would lead me to believe. While those who promoted the lifestyles represented by these structures presented luxury buildings as necessities for the new Colombo, a more detailed look

at the situation of developers and potential renters/buyers implied that there were certain gaps in this narrative - primarily, the lack of *people* available to actually buy enough of these units. The potential problem of oversupply in the Colombo luxury real estate landscape underscored the wishful thinking, irrationality and uncertainty inherent in the capitalist vision of urban development.

Building As If

Through my interviews and informal conversations with real estate professionals in Colombo, I came to understand that the luxury real estate market reflected a great deal about Sri Lanka's place in the world in addition to simply revealing the class divisions within Sri Lankan society. In other words, talking about real estate usually involved two conceptual moves on the part of my interlocutors: it broke up Sri Lanka itself into a stratified space in which potential buyers and renters of luxury real estate were distinct from the rest of the population, and it highlighted Sri Lanka's peripheral, subordinate position vis-à-vis more powerful, wealthier and more populous countries in Asia and the Indian Ocean.

The interplay of these concerns was made clear when it came to questions of oversupply: many of the developers and brokers seemed to assume that even if there weren't enough Sri Lankans who could afford luxury units, waves of wealthy foreigners would come in and make up for the gap between supply and demand. However, there were many indicators that this optimism might not be well-founded, such as the following passage from a corporate report on real estate in Colombo:

However, caution too needs to be exercised with respect to two fundamental market determinants. Firstly, there are a finite number of expat Sri Lankans living in the west who are in the condominium market and since the end of the civil war, this segment has been at the frontline in picking up luxury apartments. The peak levels of expat interest in Sri Lankan real estate maybe fast approaching or even possibly behind us in which case the rate of demand

growth will slowdown. Secondly, any perceived risks involved with doing business in Sri Lanka also tend to play a significant role in the minds of potential expat buyers. (KPMG 2012, 4-5)

This passage highlights many of the uncertainties and potential problems lurking at the edge of the Colombo luxury real estate market. The reminder that there is only a “finite number” of expat Sri Lankans living abroad who can buy these apartments should be relatively common sense given that Sri Lanka has a relatively small population overall, however I came to understand this as a wholly necessary corrective to rhetoric in the market that often presumed a virtually *infinite* demand for luxury units. This passage exposes some of the hesitation and uncertainty at play in the observation that the peak levels of expat demand “maybe fast approaching or even possibly behind us.” The overall impression is one of caution and lack of clarity, rather than boundless optimism.

Reminders about the limits of luxury real estate and its potential for turning Colombo into a global hub city make clear that the construction of these lavish apartment buildings is a highly speculative practice, one which relies on a sense of imminent arrival of buyers and renters, but which is not necessarily responding to an already-existing or established market.

Urban scholars working in other parts of Asia have highlighted the importance of real estate as one of the facets of new global city-building practices (eg. Ong 2007, Goldman 2011). In accounts such as Aihwa Ong’s writing about Shanghai, the presence of expats and the new relations of flexible citizenship/pied-a-terre status of foreigners is *assumed* - it is the foundation upon which the luxury real estate developments she describes are built. In her estimation, “one may say that a megacity is in part defined by the number of mobile professionals and entrepreneurs who make it a long-term stop in their international itineraries” (2007, 86). In this

chapter, I have sought to emphasize that in Colombo, the mobile professionals and itinerant entrepreneurs have yet to be fully secured as buyers or renters of luxury property - but the properties are being built anyway. Rather than already embodying Ong's idea of the global city which exists to service the needs of a burgeoning expatriate class, Colombo is being constructed *as if* these things are already in place.

The gap between supply and demand, between aspiration and reality, in Colombo's luxury real estate market reveals the shaky work of speculation - of "making present uncertain futures" (Bear et al 2015). While proponents of Colombo's global city ambitions and mainstream accounts of urban development seem to suggest a smoothly unfolding, linear path in which the possibilities for the city are virtually limitless, structural limits persist: the lack of clarity on foreigners' rights to buy and own property; the lack of interested foreigners who desire the property in the first place; high taxes and an uncertain political situation; a small local population with limited financial capital, etc. Rather than ever-increasing global city-ness bringing Colombo ever closer to Dubai or Singapore, looking at the luxury real estate developments in the city suggests the false starts and interruptions inherent in the project of global city making.

CONCLUSION: THE ALMOST HUB

Things grasped together: things whole, things not whole; something being brought together, something being separated; something consonant, something dissonant. Out of all things comes one thing, and out of one thing comes all things.

- Heraclitus, Fragment 10

This thesis has sought to give readers a snapshot of life in Colombo during a tumultuous, hopeful and politically significant moment in the city's history. Through this multi-sited ethnography, I have detailed some of the nuances and on-the-ground realities of the attempt to reinvent Colombo as a global hub city in the Indian Ocean region. I conclude by discussing what I believe are the major contributions of this work, before delving more deeply into three key concepts which emerge from this thesis: the idea of the hub city, the role of futurity and uncertainty, and the politics of defining and comparing global cities.

First, this ethnography makes a contribution to contemporary Sri Lankan studies. Particularly in anthropology, Sri Lankanist scholarship has been heavily focused on questions of kinship, religion, village life, rural politics and peasant economies, witchcraft, ethnicity, violence and nationalism. The urban has been remarkably absent from our picture of Sri Lankan life. Strikingly, I am aware of no full-length published ethnographies that focus specifically on Colombo. Two exceptions spring to mind: a chapter on "Tamil Colombo" in Sharika Thiranagama's masterful ethnography, *In My Mother's House*, in which the Thiranagama offers a way of thinking of Colombo as a Tamil space, detailing the aspirations of young Tamil men hoping to come to Colombo as a means of emigrating to escape the threat of violence they face in Sri Lanka. The second is Francesca Bremner's unpublished doctoral dissertation, "'Life of a Street in Sri Lanka: Spatial Practices and Ethnic

Conflict” which explores the lives of slum-dwellers in a central Colombo neighborhood, and their reasons for participating in anti-Tamil rioting. My hope in devoting my research entirely to Colombo has been to build and expand on the work of these two scholars, making Colombo itself the most memorable “character” in this story.

Much is to be gained by attending to the rhythms and logics of Colombo life. Not only is Colombo a fascinating place in its own right for anyone drawn - as I am - to cities, but it affords a vision of multi-ethnic, multi-religious life in a society which has been starkly divided by deeply-felt nationalisms. As I have emphasized multiple times throughout this ethnography, Colombo’s mixed ethnic and religious character place it in contrapuntal relationship to Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist imaginaries. I would suggest that if we take Thiranagama’s view of a “Tamil Colombo” seriously, then it equally challenges Tamil nationalisms as well. Colombo is often cast as an exceptional space for its diversity, but in this exception are real people who daily negotiate the everyday dynamics of living in a multi-ethnic society. I believe looking at Colombo provides a possibility for understanding Sri Lanka’s ethnic and religious conflicts and solidarities in new ways.

In addition, as many of the chapters in this manuscript have made clear, a focus on Colombo is an important avenue for understanding the ways that Sri Lanka is embedded in transnational flows of capital, commodities and people. One can certainly critique the narratives of government officials and corporate elites who would paint a picture of Sri Lanka wherein Colombo comes to stand in for all of Sri Lanka; certainly, different places on the island have their own forms of powerful

global connection and these should not be overlooked.²¹ And yet, it is undeniable that Colombo is the primary point of exit and entry to and from Sri Lanka, that its material and financial ties to China, India, the Gulf and other cities and regions makes it quite central to comprehending contemporary questions of political economy, globalization and migration. I hope my thesis makes some progress towards showing how we can use the experience of specific sites within Sri Lanka – such as various neighborhoods of Colombo – to think more carefully about the island’s global connections. By attending to the politics of and affective investments in Colombo’s development, I not only provide a timely ethnography of post-war Sri Lankan development, I have sought to offer a way of thinking Sri Lanka through the urban.

The second contribution of my research is its showcasing the potential of ethnography for grasping the complex processes of global-city making. Throughout this thesis, I have emphasized incompleteness and uncertainty as primary thematic threads, connecting all of the seemingly disparate sites introduced in this text. In this sense, method and argument have been intertwined: my ethnographic approach, as I discussed in the introduction, placed me in the same confusing circumstances as my own interlocutors, and that very sense of confusion and uncertainty is one of the main points this research has sought to make about the process of urban transformation.

If the notion of hubness is a vision of futurity and flow, each chapter in this manuscript has trained attention on the present - and on that which drags, weighs down and complicates seemingly inevitable or natural processes of urban

²¹ One particular form of global connection that comes to mind outside of Colombo is the powerful link between Jaffna and Toronto.

development. From the protests against the Colombo Port City project to the anxieties over excessive taxation in the luxury real estate industry, my ethnography has offered a counterpoint to the optimistic proclamations of state officials and corporations about the glittering future of post-war Colombo. I highlight these moments of interruption and delay in Colombo's urban development not only to critique the planners and politicians, but to suggest that these moments of frustration, disappointment, failure and anxiety are in fact central to the very process of global-city building.

Finally, this thesis offers an entry point for thinking through the dynamics of urban comparison and cross-referencing, not only in the practice of city planning but also in scholarly discussions of urban theory. I have highlighted in my ethnography how central imaginings of other places are to Colombo life, and the link between spatial and temporal understandings of development. While urban scholars have paid attention to this (eg. Bunnell et al. 2017, Ong and Roy 2011), this research adds needed ethnographic depth to discussions of the power of cross-referencing. As I explain below, I believe this thesis also opens a possibility not for viewing Colombo merely as a "case" of the wider phenomenon of global city-making, but for considering how the dynamics I describe in Colombo might in fact help us understand global cities *in general*.

Hub City

This dissertation has argued that aspirations for Colombo's future are primarily articulated through the language of the "hub." Discussions about Colombo's future tend to foreground its "locational advantage" and strategic positioning between East Asia and the Gulf. Promotional materials for urban development projects, including

the Western Region Megapolis Project, the official city development plan of the current government, emphasize the idea that Colombo will become a regional hub city, often highlighting the importance of its port, airport and other forms of infrastructure that speak to the potential for Colombo to build connections to other places. These assertions and aspirations to what I refer to as “hubness” stem from particular ways of reading and understanding Sri Lanka’s recent history which tend to present the time of the civil war as one of *disconnection* and isolation from the outside world. By contrast, the contemporary post-war moment is framed as one of possibility and potential. That potential is often articulated in terms of what Sri Lanka can offer “the outside world” through the connections forged by tourism and foreign direct investment (FDI). Much has been made of Sri Lanka’s location; different actors, for a variety of reasons, have an interest in representing the island as a unique, bounded, exceptional entity (Jazeel 2009, Sivasundaram 2013), while others, like the current government, seek to present it as a connected, cosmopolitan place, another stop along the way from Singapore to Dubai. What I suggest through a discussion of what I term “the politics of hubness” is that such claims are not ever “just” about simple geography, but that they speak to particular political, historical and economic imaginaries.

Through language that depicts Sri Lanka “emerging” as a new tourist-friendly destination, the country now features in much global media as a kind of undiscovered gem, a rare treasure offering many pleasures for the senses (beaches, picturesque hillsides, exotic wildlife), as well as friendly locals and high standards of luxury. The implied starting point for most of these descriptions of Sri Lanka as tourist destination is the idea that the western reader has no idea about the civil war

and is only now hearing about this island paradise for the first time. An article on travel to Sri Lanka from a 2017 entry in the fashion magazine *Vogue* is typical:

So why is this exotic paradise [just now](#) seeping into the jet set’s collective conscious? Because from 1983 until 2009, the mostly Buddhist island off the southeastern tip of India was embroiled in one of the longest civil wars in recent history, which saw atrocities on both sides during fighting between the Tamil Tigers group—hoping to win independence for the Hindu Tamil-speaking population—and Sri Lanka’s mostly Sinhalese military, representing the majority ethnic group and language. There was also a massive 2004 tsunami to contend with, killing more than 30,000. But ever resilient, in the last half-dozen years Sri Lanka has gone into overdrive re-establishing itself as a mecca for luxury-minded travelers whose interests are far from run of the mill. (Romeyn, 2017)

Note how this excerpt manages to sandwich descriptions of war, violence and tremendous loss of human life between gushing language about the island as an “exotic paradise” and “mecca for luxury-minded travelers.” In the first line, readers are asked to consider why the country is “*just now* seeping into the jet set’s collective conscious” (italics mine); this framing manages to lend the passage a certain sense of urgency: Sri Lanka is raw, undiscovered and new. Even though the passage goes on to explain the reason for this oversight among “the jet set,” the point of departure for this paragraph is the idea that *this moment* is particularly important. The reference to how Sri Lanka has allegedly “gone into overdrive re-establishing itself as a Mecca for luxury-minded travelers” not only glosses over the human, political and social costs of this work (which I will explain more in detail in subsequent sections), its reference to *re-establishing* the luxury sector suggests that this post-war moment is an echo of the past. The language of this article, like countless others written since the end of the civil conflict, traffics in images of death and destruction made better by luxury and sensuous natural beauty, but it also subtly shifts from describing Sri Lanka as “emerging” to “re-establishing” its tourism industry.

Pieces like the *Vogue* article conjure a specific temporality when speaking of Sri Lanka's novelty in the international tourism market. The post-war moment is framed not as arrival, but as *return*. Though easy to dismiss this as a piece of writing aimed at an international audience with very little knowledge about Sri Lanka, in discussion after discussion my Sri Lankan informants tended to also draw a link between the post-war and pre-war periods. Both figured as times of connectedness, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. By contrast, the war itself was presented as a moment of disconnection and isolation. The conflict was responsible for huge numbers of Tamils and Burghers²² (the latter often considered emblematic of Sri Lanka's cosmopolitan, multicultural identity) as well as other ethnic groups leaving the country for Australia, Canada, and Great Britain. In discussion after discussion, my middle class informants tended to ask the rhetorical question of what Sri Lanka would be like had the civil war not happened. A regular feature of these discussions was to imagine how the country might have been "like Singapore"; clean, orderly, with a well-educated population and world-class infrastructure. What is fascinating about the constant Sri Lanka/Singapore comparisons is that they elide some important questions of scale and size: how exactly could Sri Lanka be like Singapore? What parts of Sri Lanka?

Aspirations for Colombo becoming a global hub city are simultaneously deeply entangled with, but also manage to obscure, questions of how the city is related to the rest of the island of Sri Lanka. At what scale is Colombo's hubness to be realized? Is it a *national* hub for the flow of goods and people within Sri Lanka, or a *global* hub on par with Singapore, Dubai and Hong Kong? Of course, the answer is that many optimistic government officials and business people in Colombo

²² Sri Lankans of mixed European and Tamil or Sinhalese ancestry.

would like for the city to be both, the capital city for Sri Lankan trade and commerce while also becoming globally competitive with major Asian and Middle Eastern centers. But in practice, it often seems that the work of imagining Colombo as a global hub tends to paper over how this transformation would benefit other Sri Lankans, what the future looks like for those far away from the state of the art buildings and modern infrastructure of the capital.

Questions of scale and domestic versus global aspirations often lead to disjointed comparisons and mixed metaphors. Is it significant that champions of market-driven development most frequently compare Colombo to Dubai and Singapore, two places which are often described as city-states, in other words - urban entities with a high degree of autonomy, whose hinterlands are either insignificant or non-existent? This dissertation argues that it is significant. I take seriously these comparisons and cross-references and ask not only what they say about dreams for Colombo's future, but about what they tell us about how that future deals with Colombo's relationship to the rest of Sri Lanka. Ultimately, I suggest that such comparisons actually serve to mask the inequalities that endure in Sri Lanka - between rural and urban, and between classes within Colombo itself.

One of my aims in this dissertation has been to delve more deeply into what seems like a perfectly "natural" desire, that of becoming a hub city. The ambition of being a global hub is seemingly so obvious, so normal for a growing city in the Global South, that the idea itself has not been sufficiently interrogated. Becoming a "hub city" offers a very specific vision of the future that hinges on constant movement and circulation. The image of Colombo as hub is reiterated in the rhetoric of state agencies, in city plans, in corporate promotional materials, and in news media. All of these platforms, whether implicitly or explicitly, conjure a world in

which Colombo becomes, in effect, a sort of infrastructure, facilitating the flow of capital and commodities between some places and other places. If we take seriously the idea that “infrastructures are built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space” (Larkin 2013: 328) this allows for seeing infrastructure as more than material; infrastructure facilitates many kinds of flows. Indeed, Colombo currently (and historically) has served as an important physical point in space, allowing for the flow of material goods through its port.

Today, ambitions for the city extend not only to the *material* services it can provide, but to making it an important infrastructure on the global scale facilitating the flow of capital and knowledge through its ability to offer financial incentives and access to its highly educated population of workers. Once again, comparison is key, as in this recent article by a foreign reporter detailing Sri Lanka’s post-war efforts at becoming a global hub, in a piece entitled “Sri Lanka: A dream of becoming India’s Hong Kong”:

The large island south-east of the foot of India is capable of becoming to the subcontinent what Hong Kong is to mainland China. Sri Lanka’s government is easing trading conditions to encourage investment in the hope that following “a new path” could reap dividends. (Mills 2017)

In some ways, the dream of becoming a hub city is actually quite a modest one. Hopeful rhetoric about Sri Lanka gaining importance in maritime shipping and aviation tends to highlight the island as a place facilitating flows, not a destination in its own right. The “new path” this reporter identifies applies, in the context of this article, to the new path taken by the country. But it might equally apply to the paths of capital and power in the contemporary global economy. The path, like the hub, is an image suggesting movement and flow. For Colombo to become a “hub city” in

the Indian Ocean region, new paths must be carved out, which would connect and more deeply entangle Sri Lanka in the web of the global economy. This is the central concern in urban development in Colombo today.

Uncertain Futures

Global city rhetoric is inherently future-oriented. Governments, urban planning bodies, real estate developers and city residents throughout the world are engaged in different urban spaces in the project of bringing about global cities which are inherently/always understood to be a thing of the future, entities that often do not exist yet but *might* if everything goes well. As Asher Ghertner observes, “the world-class city thus operates as a future-oriented technology, shifting collective horizons toward the long run and projecting the norms of appearance and civility of the future city across the existing landscape” (2015, 8).

Daily conversations in Colombo often scanned between the city’s potential future and its recent past, especially the time of the civil war. I observed that the distinction between these two temporal frames was made especially vivid in my conversations with middle class informants and friends, most of whom would take great pleasure in contrasting the security, prosperity and cleanliness of the contemporary post-war moment with the danger of the civil war years. Speaking in this comparative temporal register, many English-speaking elites whom I encountered in Colombo’s central neighborhoods would often blend nostalgia for the way things used to be with a certain admiration and excitement for the city’s future. For people from other walks of life, however, the sharp distinction between wartime and post-war, between past and future, was less evident even as the urban poor and working class too affirmed their relief at the end of the conflict. For the fishermen in Mutuwall whom I

introduced in Chapter 3, for example, while the end of the civil war had the effect of lifting restrictions on their movement around coastal areas and fishing practices, the legacy of intense violence and intimidation they suffered at the hands of the Sri Lankan Navy remained a vivid memory. When discussing potential protests against the Port City project construction, fishers still expressed a fear of the security forces based on their experiences before 2009. Others in Mutuwall spoke in hushed tones about family members abducted by the Rajapakse regime or killed by street gangs thought to be tied to political parties. While the threat of LTTE terrorism was gone, the potential for violence to seep into daily life was very vivid for those who benefitted the least from the glitzy new shopping malls and improved roads of the emerging global Colombo.

As I explained in Chapter 2, hubness is both a spatial and temporal claim. Part of what I mean by this is that, seen from Colombo, the future looks a lot like somewhere else. The future of Colombo is usually explicitly or implicitly framed as the city “becoming” Dubai or Singapore or Hong Kong; the present state of other places is the tomorrow to which Colombo aspires. In a forthcoming article on “the prospect of elsewhere” in Asia, Tim Bunnell and his colleagues observe that throughout the region, “the prospect of being elsewhere gives rise to aspirational futures” (Bunnell et al. Forthcoming, 5). Drawing from various urban sites in Asia, their analysis suggests that “geographies of uneven development are bound up with shifting senses of where the future lies” (13). In Colombo, it is virtually impossible to distinguish the temporal register of futurity from its spatial connotations, as new urban projects are relentlessly promoted through references to the (better) realities of other cities, elsewhere.

My understanding of the project of making Colombo a global hub city is suffused at every level with the importance of futurity, but also with the uncertainty and shakiness of future-oriented projects. By definition, the future is unknowable. Colombo residents, planners and developers fill in the unknown with specific anxieties about the global and national economic situation (see Chapter 5), the potentially disastrous nature of foreign influence on Sri Lankan politics (see Chapter 2) and the yet-to-be-realized possibility of losing land and access to livelihoods (see Chapter 3).

The speculative nature of the projects and plans I present in this manuscript is an example of what Arjun Appadurai terms “dreamwork,” which he defines as bringing “together (in its two key elements) the space of fantasy, speculation, and the unbridled imagination (key semantic associations with the notion of dreaming) and the space of productivity, discipline, and instrumentality (essential elements of the modern conception of work)” (2015, 483). I find the idea of dreamwork helpful for comprehending contemporary Colombo, where seemingly improbable projects are justified, and marketed, based on supposedly “rational” bases of what is good for economic growth and other indicators of capitalist development. Dreamwork helps to make sense of why a small city such as Colombo is teeming with dazzling new apartment complexes which seem disproportionate to the amount of people capable of filling them (see Chapter 5). Equally, it helps shed light on why labor is directed at the construction of new public spaces which fail to live up to either the aesthetic or economic goals originally envisioned (see Chapter 4). Appadurai’s intervention provides an analytical thread for understanding the relevance of Global South cities to capitalism in general, as he wishes to “dispel the notion that speculation, primitive accumulation, and dreamwork are to be found only on the capitalist periphery”

(2015, 485). Indeed, as this thesis shows, forms of primitive accumulation and speculation take place in the very heart of Colombo, the core of Sri Lanka's capitalist system.

The uncertainty of global city-making processes is one of its key features. Rather than proceeding smoothly, in many cities especially in the Global South the attempt to achieve global city status is one fraught with interruptions, delays and setbacks. While the work of scholars like Aihwa Ong highlights the new formations of neoliberal capitalism being actively brought into being in cities such as Shanghai and Singapore - models of the global city to the rest of the world - the view looks quite different from other locations. Urban residents often find themselves caught up in lengthy periods of uncertainty and suspense as they navigate the perils of eviction, the disruptions of partially constructed infrastructure projects and other inconveniences and disturbances (Melly 2013, Harms 2012, Goldman 2011, Mitchell 2010, Zeiderman 2016). As Michael Goldman poignantly observes in relation to Bangalore - one of the emerging but not-quite-yet global cities of the South Asian region: "Indeed, many Bangaloreans are being actively dispossessed as part of the effort to build up a world city based on a speculative imaginary for world-city investors who may just stay away, and for world-city professionals who have yet to come" (2011, 577).

The uncertain temporality of global city building, to be sure, leaves much room for government and corporate abuses. The urban poor are frequently exploited and dispossessed through the very mechanisms of delay and uncertainty which also impact capitalist efforts (see Harms 2012). The future in many soon-to-be-global locations is at once a highly uniform project, typically catering to elites, and simultaneously a zone of possibility and experimentation. These two poles of

futurity are described by Ananya Roy in her article “When is Asia” in which she suggests that “futurity itself is a mode of governing” (2016, 318). The promises of the future can be a very effective tool for regulating populations. On the other hand, Roy also observes that “what is at work is a politics of futurity, one that imagines the future as better than the past and present and that frames such an imagination as a democratic aspiration, an inclusive identity” (2016, 319). The future can be both a mechanism of control and offer the promise of improved conditions and better lives, no matter how far away these ideals may seem.

This ethnography has detailed the gaps between the imagined future and the present. Against the sometimes relentlessly positive accounts of Colombo’s future presented in the official discourses of developers and government officials which suggest the future *will* look and feel a certain way, I have emphasized the ongoing, incomplete nature of the projects aimed at improving Colombo. The future has not yet happened and remains open, even as some groups of people have less ability to influence its outcome than others. Ethnography as a method allows for deep engagement with the present, even though the “present” moment of the text is past by the time of writing. Acknowledging these temporal gaps, I nonetheless hope that my thesis has offered an important glimpse into the constantly negotiated, debated and imperfect present, which is too often elided in elite visions of a future global city.

An Almost Global City

Throughout this manuscript, I have referred to the concept of the “global city” as a way of indexing the collection of aspirations, dreams and goals laid out by many of Colombo’s planners, politicians and residents. The term “global city,” as I use it,

indicates a modern, efficient, clean metropolis which fits with contemporary capitalist visions of cities' roles as centers of consumption, luxury and wealth. Ideally, in the global city paradigm, cities that aspire to become "global" offer some form of benefit or appeal to an elite class of people from all over the world. In a nod to the importance of mobility and transnational flows of capital, "global city" aspirations throughout the Global South usually include projects that attract Foreign Direct Investment; forms of housing that meet "international" standards of comfort and security for wealthy professionals in fields such as finance, law and engineering; and infrastructure such as airports, roads and highways which provide connection to other critical centers of the global economy. Urban scholars have generated a vast archive of examples, experiences and imaginaries associated with the global city (Ong 2007, Ghertner 2015, Sassen 2001, Goldman 2011, Melly 2013). And yet, a concrete indicator or benchmark for evaluating what counts as a global city remains somewhat elusive. I will return to this below.

In thinking through contemporary urban development in Sri Lanka, I have suggested that "hubness" or the "hub city" is the central desire expressed in the projects and plans I detail in my ethnography. Though at times I may use the terms "hub city" and "global city" interchangeably, they are slightly different concepts. For the purposes of this thesis, I suggest that the hub city ambition is a subset of global city aspirations. The global city can be located anywhere in the world, and has certain attributes which are readily identifiable but not readily measured. The hub city, I maintain, is Colombo's specific answer to the broader phenomenon of global city making. The hub city, is the particularly Sri Lankan dream of a global city, spurred by the focus on the island's strategic geographic location. While the hub city concept is, in a sense, subordinate to the broader concept of the global city, I

offer here that the development of the hub city idea itself may help us find new understandings of the global city model in general.

In studying the transformations aimed at helping Colombo to become a global hub city, I have found it critical to decouple “global cities” as an academic category of analysis from “global cities” as an aspirational trope invoked by urban residents and policy-makers. This leaves us with a rather important question: are global cities real? Is Shanghai, often cited as one of the most successful Asian cities to reach “global” status *really* more meaningfully global than Colombo, Phnom Penh, or Bangalore?

The contemporary academic literature on cities is littered with references to places *attempting* to become global. In this sense, Colombo is hardly exceptional among developing-country cities in its ambition. One meaningful and important reaction to this global-city rhetoric on the part of many academics who are sensitive to colonial pasts and uneven relations of power is to point to the fact that many of these striving urban centers are in many ways *already* global. That is, emphasizing their attempts to become global cities elides already-existing forms of connection and cosmopolitanism that exist in these spaces.

However, while scholars do not wish to be ahistorical in their analyses of cities, or to overlook the important forms of interconnection that stem from precolonial and colonial times, it is important to think about why certain cities appear time and time again as figures of aspiration/desire; we have to contend with the fact that while it might seem wrong to say Dubai is “more global” than Dakar, or Colombo, for that matter, it is nonetheless undeniable that Dubai (a) actually figures repeatedly in the urban planning discourses of *other* locations and (b) commands a certain power in the global economy.

This takes us back to what we mean by “global cities.” While the literature certainly provides us some key examples and ways of thinking about the concept of the global city at the theoretical level, I wish to suggest that for understanding Colombo, the most productive approach is not to see it as a place that either is/is not a global city but rather to think of the global city *as aspiration*, as ongoing, as a *process* requiring labor. The global city, I would suggest, exists in the attempts to make it happen.

Saskia Sassen has famously written about global cities as being the command and control centers of the global economy. In her book titled *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, we are offered in the title itself three concrete examples of what (and where) she is talking about. But where might this leave other cities, other places? What room is there for a city like Colombo, not a command-and-control center, but an aspiring newcomer to the global scene?

In his study of Delhi, Asher Ghertner provides a slightly different take on global cities. Unlike Sassen he emphasizes the term *world-class* city rather than “global city.” He provides a more practice-based idea of what constitutes a world-class city:

“The project of world-class city making in Delhi, as in other emerging market contexts, is marked by a strong normative drive to reach globally indexed targets of development: to host prestigious international events, to house Fortune 500 companies, and to offer lifestyles capable of attracting global consumer classes.” (2015, 8)

I call this a practice based definition of global or world-class city because unlike Sassen’s interpretation, Ghertner’s analysis focuses on what it is people think or expect a global city should offer, rather than suggesting a functional relationship between the world-class city and the global economy. His understanding is less rooted in the political economy of the developing city, but relies on a more ephemeral sense of what a city *ought* to be like. Ghertner’s analysis is deeply

relevant for a context like Colombo, in which such aspirations often outrun clear benchmarks or concrete goals. There are very clear notions in Colombo of what a better capital city would do, look like and provide. And yet, in the very act of explaining these aspirations they seem to evaporate under the weight of their own circularity (Harms 2012). How to account for this?

While Ghertner's definition of a world-class city risks seeming circular - "a world class city tries to reach globally indexed standards" - he actually explains this problem in the framing of his study. According to Ghertner, "it is precisely this vague sense of an improved, more beautiful urban future, without planning benchmarks or even mutually agreeable definitional criteria, that gives the world-class city its efficacy" (9). According to Ghertner, consensus around what constitutes a world-class city is built around aesthetic principles rather than solid quantitative benchmarks. These implicitly agreed-upon value judgments about what makes Delhi a world-class city, "give world-classness a sensory self-evidence" (2015, 9). The ethnographic data in this thesis supports Ghertner's point in countless ways. In each chapter we see how "vagueness" - and the confusion and occasional disappointment this causes - is characteristic of efforts to improve Colombo across numerous scales and sites. Benchmarks may be in short supply, but a clear idea, a "self-evident" quality is present all the same.

Thinking Colombo as a global city is an inherently *comparative* move. The global city model is one that essentially relies on the idea of comparing and contrasting models of urban life across national borders. Whether the implicit point of comparison is the London-New York-Tokyo axis described by Sassen or an alternate constellation of Dubai-Singapore-Hong Kong, the fact remains that global city theorizing implies an urban model simply iterated across different locations.

Where does that leave room for us to understand Colombo more specifically? In her essay on thinking comparatively across cities, Jennifer Robinson suggests that

Rather than starting with territorialized cases, imagined as composed of wider processes hitting the ground differently, comparative practices could engage with urban outcomes through tracing their genesis by means of specific connections, influences, actions, compositions, alliances, experiences, across the full array of possible elements of urban life: material-social-lived-imaginative-institutional. (2016, 15)

What Robinson is arguing here is that rather than thinking “cases” as things which happen in specific places and only serve as *examples* of a “wider” phenomenon we want to explain, comparative gestures call for greater attention to the implicit assumptions we make about what concepts, categories and forms can be compared, what is viewed as a “case” of what phenomenon. According to Robinson, we should think more specifically about how things came to be the way they are - what she terms thinking “genetically” - and what is meaningful and unique in each context. In this study of Colombo I try to take in the city in its “material-social-lived-imaginative-institutional” levels, with different levels of emphasis on each throughout my chapters.

The arguments and observations about Colombo advanced in this thesis can certainly be read in one comparative register as simply relating cases to support or refute a “broader” phenomenon of global city making projects across the world. I would not object if my readers took this as the primary message of the ethnography. However, following Robinson’s intervention, I would suggest that much as we can look at Colombo (in its specificity) through the lens of the global city (in its generality), the dynamic can be flipped: Colombo can also be a lens through which we turn back attention on the global city model in all its broadness and think a bit differently about global cities themselves.

Throughout this thesis, I have advanced the idea of “hubness” as a concept. On one level, Colombo is a specific “case” of global city projects in which hubness is a core component or ideal for orienting aspirations. Robinson suggests about cases that “they can be seen as distinctive outcomes on their own terms, not already interpreted as specific instances of a wider process, or a universal category” (2016, 14). She avers that looking at cases in this way can lead to *generative* thinking. Part of what I attempt to do with the hub city/hubness concept is precisely this - to advance an idea that might be generative in nature. In one respect, my case examines the *specificity* of Colombo’s global city aspirations, in part because no one in Colombo actually talked about or used the term “global cities”- instead they articulated the dream of a better future city through the idiom of the “hub.” But in looking at hubness and centering hubness as one of the cornerstones of Colombo’s aspirations, I in turn suggest that hubness might have more to tell us about other global cities beyond Colombo and Sri Lanka. More than ever, the notion of hubness is in fact fundamental to all global city aspirations, whether these belong to Bangalore, Paris or Dubai. What might seem natural - the desire to be infrastructurally, socially and financially connected to other places- is in fact a highly specific way of understanding what a city should be. And what are the already-global cities of today if not hub cities that happened to be successful, that managed to insert themselves into the correct networks and systems of flow? In theorizing from Colombo (the case), a place that is not-quite-yet a global city, I am in fact able to help us think generatively about the very concept of the global city.

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